Adopting Identities

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Adopting Identities

by Thisisentertaining

Summary

No one’s surprised when Pepper suggests an alternative to the Sokovian accords before the councilman can even propose the idea. It’s Pepper after all. Of course, she waits until the councilman leaves before dropping the real bomb. The public needs to see a deliberate, personal movement. They need to see the lives of the Avengers be affected by the losses they leave.

When Peter Parker gets a call from his social worker, he just knows he’s being kicked out of yet another foster home. When he burst into her office to see the Avengers waiting to adopt him, he’s sure that it was their way of inviting Spiderman to join the team. Luckily the Avenger’s like to discuss vigilantes over breakfast. A small tingle of non-spidey-sense-related nerves flutter in his stomach when Tony complains about the lack of cameras in Queens, but it’s only until the heroes start suggesting possible people or personalities for the man behind the spider mask that he realizes he has no clue what’s going on.

Notes
Hey! If you read Help Wanted, I found an amazing beta in Winterscribe and am finally ready to start posting!
This is going to be pretty similar to Help Wanted, but don't worry the second chapter is on the way!
Chapter 1

Many people would look around the conference table assume that Iron Man or Captain America were the most powerful ones in the room. They might think that Black Widow was the most intimidating, or that Scarlet Witch and her mental manipulation was the most persuasive. They would look around the room of heroes gathered almost like a business meeting and assume they knew and calculated all the threats. They would be wrong. A thin smirk sat on Pepper Pott’s lips as her hands rested on their familiar positions on the tablet in her hands.

Pepper knew that she was lacking muscles, lacking training, lacking powers since that horrendous event several months ago when she’d nearly died. That didn’t mean that she had any less skill than any other member of the Avengers team. She ran Stark Inc. even when it seemed as though Tony were attempting to run it into the ground. She maintained contact with S.H.I.E.L.D about the Avenger’s protocol behind her boyfriend’s back until it couldn’t be hidden any longer. She stayed with him, with Tony Stark—through the panic of the Avenger’s, the terror and confusion of the Mandarin, and through the destruction of Ultron and everything that followed. That had almost changed. She had been close, so close to asking for a break. Not necessarily a separation, just a break. She’d almost sent him to do that college presentation by himself but in the end… she hadn’t. She couldn’t say why exactly, he just knew that for all that he put her through, the thought of losing him hurt more than any of the nightmares that kept her up at night. She was strong, and she would not be pushed away.

She was not one to ever be underestimated. Especially in this particular setting. Anyone who dared to oppose the Avengers in this room was entering her world, and she would show them who held the true power of the board meeting. The secretary of state didn’t have a chance.

Thaddeus Ross had barely opened his mouth before Pepper stood fluidly to her feet. Her imposing heals clacked distinctly and confidently against the tiled floor as she took the bulging folder from the man’s hands. “Sokovia Accords, right? I’m afraid we’ll have to decline.” The man immediately pasted on a smarmy, politician smile. “Now, Miss Potts I don’t think you understand-”

“I got an email about it earlier today, I understand completely.”

“Um,” Steve interrupted, his demeanor serious. “I don’t.”

“Yeah,” Sam said with a nod, “Care to share with the rest of the class?”

“Mr. Ross is about to propose a document signed by the UN which would give them the power to choose when, where, and if the Avengers will act. Because the Avengers have had no true regulating force since the collapse of S.H.I.E.L.D., the UN believes that they are more careless. They fear that the Avenger’s anonymity has played a part in the wreckage they-we-leave behind. I’m sure he also has a video or two to attempt to guilt your agreement.”

“It isn’t ‘guilting them’ when the casualties and damages really happened.” The Secretary of State argued, his false smile long gone. “It’s just pointing out the facts.”

The red haired CEO simply waved a hand dismissively. “Regardless, we’re going to decline.”

Tony straightened in his seat, bags under his eyes heavy as his mind replayed his conversation with a distraught mother as he waited for the elevator. “Pep, can we at least think about this a little more? I mean, having some control wouldn’t be-”
“Tony,” She interrupted, briskly but not unkindly, “I’ve worked at the head of a committee since you hired me and refused to set foot in the conference room. Trust me when I say I don’t want one in charge of protecting the world.”

The man frowned and picked up his drink but sat back in his chair without another word. This was Pepper after all, he trusted her far more than he trusted himself. Rhodey however, was much less confident.

“Wait, how many nations signed this thing in the first place?”

“117.” Ross answered immediately, and War Machine’s eyes widened.

“We can’t act like this isn’t important. Not when 117 nations think that it’s a good idea.”

“I agree.” Pepper responded, shocking the room. “Obviously the Avengers can’t have completely free reign anymore, we need a system of accountability. But!” She includes sharply as Steve opens his mouth to argue. “Accountability does not necessarily mean control. F.R.I.D.A.Y, the Sokovian Compromise, if you will?”

Immediately a light blue hologram appeared over the table, displaying page after page of type and charts. Ross, however, simply frowned. “What is this?”

“This, is a compromise. The Avengers agree to inform the leader of a country of the intent to enter, or that there is a possibility that they will have to enter it, prior to arrival. The leader may deny them entry, but the Avengers cannot be held accountable for anything that happens in that country and are free to work with any surrounding countries that give them clearance. If they enter despite a command not to, then the United Nations can vote on a suitable punishment, weighing both the contributions of the Avengers in that country and the leader’s reason for denying entrance. We will also give each member of the UN a direct line to the Avenger’s Tower and ensure that it is constantly manned and protected with the best software Tony can invent. If there is ever a call that goes ignored, I have outlined a procedure that is similar to when the Avengers enter an area without permission.” The woman closed the hologram and handed the secretary of State a flash drive. “Accountability without control. I have already taken the liberty of passing this along to the other members of the United Nations and I look forward to hashing out the final details at the conference this weekend.”

She gave the man a smile, confident as though her plans were not displayed in a hologram but rather set in stone. Ten minutes later Ross was sitting in his car, at a loss to how he had lost control of the situation so completely.

“Sir?” His driver asked, the tone questioning but professionally non-intrusive. Ross scowled and toyed with the drive in his hand, reaching to pour himself a stiff drink from the mini-bar in the limo.

“Take me to my office, see if you can’t call in anyone who’s working today. We have some documents to go over.”

The driver nodded, setting up the divider even as he turned on the Bluetooth sitting in his ear. The car sat for only a moment longer before pulling away, leaving the imposing building behind.

Back in the conference room bickering started the instant the doors closed behind Ross. Though no one was so opposed to the arrangement as to right out argue against it, as in all good compromises no one felt truly content with the solution. Pepper allowed the heroes to gripe for a few moments, knowing that the Sokovian compromise was a firecracker next to the bomb she was about to drop.
“The Accords were only one problem,” She announces loudly, cutting off the heroes’ complaints. “And frankly that one was an easy fix comparatively.” Immediately the room descended into silence as Pepper pulls up one of the many news reports covering the bombing in Lagos. The TV, muted, nonetheless displayed a constant barrage of carnage and angry faces, people holding signs with crossed out ‘A’s and millions of angry blog posts and reviews. The table broke out in groans and Wanda paled as her name appeared again and again. Vision was the first to speak, surprising the room.

“Forgive me, Ms. Potts, but I am not sure we can do anything about the minds of others.”

“Then you’ve never been a publicist,” The woman answered with a smirk. “Honestly, with some of the messes I’ve had to clean up during Tony’s pre-Iron-Man days, this seems tame.” With that she turned to the screens once more as plans and statistics began rising.

“From now on, all of the proceeds from our copyrights on the Avenger’s name and logo, and 15% of the profit from each of your personal names go towards setting up relief agencies, hospitals, counseling, and construction products to help the people and cities who have been adversely effected by danger the Avengers were involved in. Also, S.T.A.R.K industries and several of the companies we partner with are either donating to or creating relief agencies as well, including a number of physical therapy clinics and orphanages. Also, we have nearly all of our grants going towards projects for innovating physical therapy, medical supplies, and construction advancements and have urged others to focus on the same. We are also forming a number of scholarships to help pay for education for those whose family’s livelihood has been damaged. You can choose for yourself what to do with the other 85% of your personal gains, but remember that our expenses as Avengers aren’t necessarily anything to sneeze at. We’re far from being in danger financially, but a nest egg never hurt anyone. Especially not when we’re constantly working to upgrade our equipment.

“In addition to this, I’ve hired a team of lawyers, actuaries, and other experts to form a committee to speak with several large insurance agencies about including a ‘super human’ clause to specifically address the injuries or property damages caused by a fight. The first meeting with GEICO isn’t until next week, but my team seems confident that the only real issue will be determining what should constitute as accidents directly related to an Avengers attack and if other super humans, such as Daredevil and Spiderman, should be included or not. I’ll let them sort that out.”

“Wow.” Sam said simply, impressed.

Pepper cast him a smile while Tony puffs up, proud to be dating the incredible woman. “Of course, this isn’t all.”

“It’s not?” Steve asked in surprise.

“Of course not. This isn’t the kind of problem you just throw money at and hope it gets better. We need to be actively showing that we care, not that we’re willing to pay until the community shuts up. So, first of all, Wanda.” The Scarlet Witch perked at the sound of her name. “I’m sorry sweetie, but you’re our biggest focus right now. First of all, first thing tomorrow you’re going back to Lagos and help clean up the wreckage, visit the families and survivors. Use your powers to help if they’d be useful, but get down and dirty as well. The more pictures that circulate of you gross and sweaty as you help to drywall without air conditioning, the better. Show everyone how much you truly care about what happened. You won’t be able to change the minds of everyone, but I know it would help your conscious just as much as our image.” Wanda nodded in agreement, unable to speak as her heart constricted with pain at the thought of those who were hurt because of her.

“Secondly, and this is going to affect every. One. Of. You.” She enunciated clearly, meeting the eyes of each person in the room one by one. “Everyone that these centers help, everyone who is effected
by this, most of the people protesting, their lives were changed because of the Avengers. Now, I’m not saying it’s our fault, or that any of you should try and take the blame for the people who tried to take over the world, but the fact remains the same. Someone terrifying charged in, with you on their heels, and something happened that impacted people forever. Maybe they lost a loved one, a limb, a home, a job, maybe just the ability to feel safe. They are likely going to have to shoulder that loss for the rest of their life. So, we need to demonstrate that we see how their lives are altered, and show that their losses have impacted us as well. A symbolic but true act of sacrifice, directly linked to assuming responsibility for the losses that these everyday people had to face.”

“I take it you already have something in mind?” Natasha asked, arching a brow. Pepper nodded decisively, but the gesture does little to hide her nervous gulp and her fingers tighten on her tablet as she prepares to give the most controversial news of the day.

“Yes, and I already have a team looking for the perfect candidate. We—as a whole, the Avengers—are going to adopt an Avenger’s Orphan.”

“What!”/ “There’s no way any of us are qualified to watch after a child.”/ “No.”/ “Avenger’s Orphan, is that really a thing?”/ “That’s not happening.”/ “What would possess you to think this is a smart idea?”/ “We’re not dragging some kid into this!”

Pepper just nodded and straightened, waiting for the room to quiet. That was the response she had been expecting anyways.
Hey guys, second chapter is here!! I can't promise that chapters are going to come with any semblance of regularity because of a fairly busy schedule, but I can promise that I am going to finish it and I have it pretty well mapped out so done worry!! Thank you so much for reading and please review!!

Pepper batters away the group’s complaints about her plan effortlessly, but even so she felt a flash of relief when Steve suddenly announced that he had to leave. The relief was immediately vanquished the instant she heard what exactly was in the text, but nonetheless it succeeded to quiet the arguments of the group. The next day nearly half the team left for Europe. Steve, Sam, and Natasha went to attend the funeral and Pepper headed to Vienna to discuss the Compromise with the UN. When the bomb goes off she’s standing at the foot of the platform, waiting for the King to finish his speech. Only luck that she was looking in T’Challa’s direction, and reflexes born from the constant danger of living with Iron Man kept her from meeting the same fate as the Wakandan king.

As it stands, the fact that she was still alive did nothing to mitigate Tony’s wrath for the supposed culprit James Buchanan Barnes, nor his anger at Steve who remained so steadfastly confident in his friend’s innocence. Natasha, Sam, and Steve together nearly manage to get Bucky out, despite the security force sent by the UN and T’Challa’s reveal as the Black Panther, but Tony and Rhodey’s arrival put a stop to it. Fortunately, they were all together when they realized that the psychologist was a fake and managed to incapacitate the Winter Soldier before the asset managed to make off with a helicopter.

Worried about the reaction of Everett, they took the brainwashed super soldier to a secure location. It only took a few horror-filled moments after Bucky regains consciousness for them to realize how dangerous it would be if Zemo managed to awaken the other super soldiers.

Of course, everything truly hit the fan when Bucky revealed his hand in the death of the Starks. It took the strength of all four of the other Avengers to stop Tony from tearing apart the soldier who was still pinned by the arm. Tony had stormed out, furious, Rhodey following to protect his distraught friend. The remaining Avengers quickly left for the tower to pick up Vision and to Lagos to grab Wanda. No one was sure when he’d showed up, but at some point Clint had managed to sneak in as well. Natasha and Sam even suggested stopping for two more, knowing that if the super soldiers were awoken then they would need all the help they could get. T’Challa was perfectly willing to join once it was established that Bucky was not behind his father’s death, and Scott Lang nearly peed his pants when the Avenger’s showed up at his door.

As they land in Siberia, they’re joined by Iron Man and War Machine. While Tony still harbored an intense resentment for the death of his mother, he himself had witnessed the stark difference between the Winter Soldier and Bucky Barnes when the man was escaping from the headquarters in Berlin. So they marched into the compound together, all nine of them, as a unit.

Honestly, after that the whole fight was fairly anti-climactic. Especially when Zemo’s big weapon was revealing how the Stark’s died. Even as Tony struggled to control himself and the rage that burned in his heart while watching his mother be murdered with such cold, unremorseful efficiency,
War Machine decimated the bunker and Zemo was taken care of within seconds. Within the hour of their arrival in Siberia, Zemo was handed over to Everett Ross. Bucky and Cap are headed to Wakanda with T’Challa to put Bucky to sleep until they can be confident that his programming is gone.

In the words of Ant Man as the rest of the Avengers left for the Tower. “Wait, that was seriously it?”

The next week passed fairly smoothly, at least in comparison. Because Lang wasn’t actually seen much he was asked to keep his part in the Avengers a secret, a hidden weapon for when something went really wrong. Honestly the man was so happy to be part of the team he didn’t seem to care, a large smile stretched across the thief’s face for the entire exchange as he enthusiastically shook the hands of each of the Avengers in turn on his way out the door. T’Challa was somewhat of a reserve Avenger as well; living and reigning in Wakanda, but with the promise to help whenever he was called.

All in all, in spite of some obviously hurt feelings and a couple of cold shoulders and pointed silences, the next week was no worse than an awkward family gathering where everyone is bitter about some past slight. Which was why when Pepper called the team into the conference room early the next Tuesday, everyone was present within moments. She waited until everyone was seated and expectant before speaking, a bandage tightly wrapped around her ankle and a sling cradling her arm the only sign of her recent brush with death.

She waved her good arm at the large monitor behind her, the default S.T.A.R.K logo immediately getting replaced by the image a brown haired boy smiling awkwardly in a clearly default school photo. “Meet Peter Parker, our prime candidate for adoption.”

The room immediately broke into complaints and arguments, Tony’s loud voice sounding over the mixed babble of the rest of the team. “F.R.I.D.A.Y, remind me to fire the doctor I keep on retainer. She promised me that Pepper didn’t have a concussion, but obviously something got knocked loose if she still thinks bringing a kid into this is a good idea after everything that just happened.”

“What ‘just happened’ is exactly why it’s so important that we continue with the plan,” Pepper argued. “Zemo wasn’t a mastermind trying to take over the world. He wasn’t even trying to grab power. He was a grieving father, husband and son who lost everything and watched as you all seemed to walk away from Sokovia without a scratch. We tried to keep Quicksilver’s death quiet so that we all, especially Wanda, could grieve in peace without the media kicking up a storm. I stand by that decision wholeheartedly, but it meant that the world didn’t see your grief. They didn’t see you mourn for the lives lost in the horrendous affair. We know that we have mourned, but the problem with being set on a pedestal is that in order for people to see anything, you need to use broad strokes or it gets lost in the distance and height.

“We’re working on doing just that. The relief agencies are well on their way and some of the world’s leading trauma psychologists are working for us as counselors. I even managed to convince Ross to let one of our guy’s handle talking Zemo through his grief. But as I said, throwing around money isn’t going to work. Adoption is our best option.”

“I- I do not know.” Wanda admitted hesitantly, her eyes still clouded in grief from the mention of her brother. “I feel as though it would not be right to put a child into danger such as is common in our lives.”
Pepper nodded, “That’s why we focused on finding an older child. Though he is still young, at 15 Peter will know well enough that if the Avengers say to go somewhere or do something then he should listen immediately. Especially in the case of an emergency. Besides, I’m sure Tony could come up with a few security measures to ensure his safety.”

“Hhm?” The scientist grunted before nodding. “I mean, sure, of course I could. In my sleep probably. But Pepper, you can’t really be serious about this.”

Sam crossed his arms. “Yeah, this kid will be targeted by every enemy we have or could have. Precautions are one thing, but we’re painting a target on his back big enough to see from space.”

The others nodded. Pepper merely fixed them a stern stare. “Yes, he will be in danger, but no more danger than I am in. If you-”

“Yeah, and you’ve almost died how many times now? 5? 6? Or is it more, I’ve lost count.” Tony protested, but the CEO pressed on.

“If you, the Avengers, can’t protect him then how can you claim to protect the world. It isn’t just you and I here in the tower anymore, Tony. We’re together, a team capable of defeating armies. Peter will be made aware of the dangers before I file for adoption forms, I promise you.”

This time Natasha spoke up with an argument, but Pepper shot down that objection as well. The CEO had just finished her counter when another Avenger spoke up with a complaint. It seemed to go on and on, but the woman was always prepared with an answer, just as she had been when they’d made the exact same arguments a week previous. Finally, Steve simply sighed with his head buried in his hands, resigned. Between Peggy, Natasha, Peggy’s niece, and Pepper he wasn’t sure why he bothered to try to argue with women anymore. It never turned out well for him.

“So what exactly is it about this young man that makes him such an ideal subject for adoption?” Vision asked, even his super-processor of a mind was incapable of refuting the redhead. Pepper smirked, clearly proud yet unsurprised at her victory.

“This is Peter Parker. He’s 15 years old, 5’10” and 167lbs according to his last medical checkup. He has brown hair, hazel eyes, and a sob story that would win America’s Got Talent just by standing on the stage. First, he was orphaned 8 years ago when he was seven in an accident caused by Tony’s fight with Obadiah Stane. His parents, Richard and Mary Parker, were a young couple well on their way to being known as great genetic scientists. They were on their way to the airport to meet with someone, it was never determined who, when they were hit by a car swerving to avoid the fight.”

Tony didn’t look up from where his knuckles were turning white from their grip on his drink. Pepper cast the man a sympathetic look, but chose to continue rather than draw out the man’s torture. “His uncle and aunt, Ben and May Parker, took him in afterwards. A few months after the battle of New York his uncle was killed right in front of him. Shot by a man named Martin Crawley. During the Chitauri invasion, both Crawley’s home and place of business were destroyed. He’d had a spotless criminal record before the invasion. We think he’s one of the many New Yorkers who resorted to crime to survive after the attack.”

“After that, Peter’s only remaining family was his aunt. She died a few months ago. She’d been walking to work and was caught in the chaos Ultron created when he tried to escape with the body.” She studiously avoided looking to Vision as she spoke, but couldn’t avoid catching the usually controlled man flinch out of the corner of her eye. “Since then he’s been passed around from foster home and foster home, kicked out every few weeks for sneaking out and getting in fights in the middle of the night.”
Pepper leaned back for a moment, allowing the group to process her words. She was met with hard, steely eyes, downcast frowns, and stares leveled in determination. “Of course, that’s not the only reason why my team and I chose him. Unfortunately, there are hundreds of kids with stories just as tragic. We chose Peter because,” She turned her gaze to Tony. “He has a genius level I.Q that put him on the S.T.A.R.K labs internship mailing list since he started middle school.”

She turned to where Steve and Falcon were sitting. “Which of course made him a prime target for bullies, but that didn’t stop him from standing up for other kids who were being picked on. And now he’s all alone and could really use a friend who knows something about dealing with grief.”

Then to Natasha. “Also, he is apparently stealthy and sneaky enough to capture high quality photos of not only Spiderman, but Daredevil, and even us.” Pictures from the Daily Bugle filled the screen and Natasha rose a single eyebrow and gave a nod in acquisition that the boy had accomplished quite the feat. “In addition, he is old enough to be capable of following any safety protocols and smart enough to know that he shouldn’t deviate and quick witted enough to think through an alternate solution if he is incapable of going through the set protocols.” Vision nods at that, and for a moment silence reigned until Rhodey broke it.

“What, Wanda and I don’t get presents?”

Pepper smirked. “I’m sure you’ll find something.”

Tony stood suddenly, an unhappy look still marring his face. “Well, if that’s all then, I’ll be in the lab, trying to make sure this doesn’t blow up in our faces, possibly literally.”

As the man stormed off Pepper cast a glance at Rhodey, knowing that her presence would do nothing to comfort or help her stressed boyfriend. “Yeah, yeah I’m going. Least I’ll have plenty babysitting practice.”

Vision stood silently. “I will go as well, hopefully my time knowing of the interworking of the tower’s security might be conductive to improving it.”

Wanda stood as well, though she claimed that she was going to pick out a room for the boy rather than follow the other three. Sam and Steve left together, no doubt for the two to talk over the situation while the super soldier destroyed a couple punching bags or something similar. Natasha left without a word, possibly to call Clint or some of the other Avengers not stationed in the tower, however Pepper did notice the woman pull up the Daily Bugle’s website’s photography page as she left.

As the last Avenger left the room, the CEO allowed herself to collapse in the closest chair. “F.R.I.D.A.Y?”

“Yes Ms. Potts?” The automated voice sounded.

“Schedule me for a massage at that parlor I like tomorrow.”

“Would 2:00 be an acceptable time?”

“Perfect.” She had a feeling that she would be a regular before all this was over.
Chapter Summary

Web-head finally arrives!

Chapter Notes

Happy Birthday to me!
For my birthday I decided to give you all another chapter! Finally we see Peter!

_CRunch_, “Uff.” _Crash._

Spider-Man groaned, orange-red dust coating his poorly sewn spandex uniform as he laid winded in the hole of what once was a brick wall. He groaned again as he sat up, though this noise was more frustration than pain as he realized that the crunch had been the sound of his phone shattering. Again.

Honestly, at this point he’d have preferred it if his rib was cracked.

Of course, what he’d prefer doesn’t really matter, but he doesn’t exactly have much time to dwell on that because Rhino was still there and coming straight at him! Spider-Man leapt into the air as his Spidey-Sense screamed, only the supremely helpful power of sticking to walls saving him from being squished like a… well… bug when Rhino charges. As it is, he’s able to use a barely-there grip on an above fire escape to swing up onto the metal landing and gain the upper ground.

“Come on man,” The masked vigilante complained as he perched on the thin rod of the railing. “That was right in the phone pocket. Unnecessary if you ask me. Oh well,” He continued as he jumped down to use the villain’s chest as a springboard, knocking the man back several steps but not enough to truly push him over. The arachnid danced backwards as he continued to speak, well aware that he didn’t have nearly enough room to build up any significant momentum with his web-swinging in the cramped alleyway.

“At least I can say I dropped it or something. When The Shocker fried it I had to tell people I accidentally put it in the microwave. Then of course came the lecture about how if I didn’t stay out so late I would know the difference between a cell phone and a hot pocket. Which, first of all: rude. Second of all, I’m not actually convinced that one has more nutritional value than the other.”

Rhino bellowed and charged him, but Spider-Man simply sent a shot of webbing to the bottom of the fire escape and swung out of reach. “Whoa, sorry. Didn’t know you were a Hot Pocket fan.” Spider-Man called out, climbing to the top of the tall apartment and jumping to land feet first on his opponent’s face. Rhino collapses with a bellow, stunned for the precious few moments it takes for Spider-Man to begin covering the man in webbing. “Can we at least agree that Lean Pockets taste like dirt? Not that you really look like you take much care in eating lean, mind you. Hey, but aren’t Rhino’s supposed to be vegetarian? Actually, I read somewhere that—”
The masked vigilante was cut off as the familiar droning of police sirens began to sound. “You know, you’re just going to have to Google it or something, that’s my cue to leave.” Rhino snorted and struggled anew against the sticky webbing, but Spidey just smirked. He’d spent all week improving his webbing formula. Big, gray, and ugly didn’t have a chance of breaking it before the police showed up. “See ya, wouldn’t want to be ya!” He called as he shot away to the nearest skyscraper. Though, once there he chose to simply run across the rest of the rooftops until he made it back to the library where he left his backpack. There, the masked hero collapsed to sit on the dirty rooftop, pulling off his mask to reveal the floppy brown hair and puppy-dog eyes of 15-year-old Peter Parker.

The teen sighed tiredly as he fished his phone out of its hidden pocket, groaning as he saw that the once whole screen was nothing more than a mess of broken glass. He’d just spent the last of his money on making the improved web fluid, and Jolly Jonah only ever bought pictures of Spider-Man from him every week or so, and there was no way that he could ask his foster parents for money. Not when it was the third phone to break since he moved in with them half a month ago. He halfheartedly poked at the screen, hoping that it could be salvaged in some way, but the glass was too shattered to do anything more than reveal the notifications on the screen. The boy squinted, for once longing for the glasses that he no longer needed as he struggled to read the letters hidden in the cracked and jumbled glass.

8 Unread texts
11 Voice Mails
4 Missed calls from Mrs. Johnson
3 Missed call from Mr. Johnson
6 Missed calls from Mrs. Clearance

Of course. Peter sighed, allowing his head to flop back against the metal piping he was sitting against. He closed his eyes as a choking sadness and helplessness rose in his throat. Of course.

If Mrs. Clearance was calling that could only mean that yet another family had gotten tired of him returning at all hours of the night, bloodied and bruised more often than not. He couldn’t blame them. He did everything he could to avoid being at the houses, avoid sitting around a table and eating dinner “like a family” when it just felt all so wrong, especially when he didn’t have any family left.

His first foster family had been the best about it actually, supportive and firm, but not overly critical. He’d started taking less risks, trying to be back at decent hours more. Then Mrs. Clearance had popped in for a surprise visit after a particularly nasty run in with The Sandman and she’d yanked him and all the other kids out of that house before anyone could blink. Peter had gotten the poor family investigated, they’d even gotten their fostering license revoked, despite many loud protests from all of the kids under their care. It wasn’t until Peter showed up with the same injuries with three other families that they were given the license back.

Now of course, Mrs. Clearance had come to expect his disappearing acts and injuries, had started warning families about it before moving Peter in. The teen was fairly certain that the woman assumed he was in a gang, which he didn’t particularly like but there was no way he was telling her the truth so he had to live with it.

Still, he didn’t have to guess the reason behind the missed calls. With a final sigh the boy grabbed his backpack, quickly switching out his uniform for some normal clothes, knowing well that he wouldn’t have time to return to his hero duties that night. He hefted his overstuffed backpack onto his back. If
he stuck to the alleys he could probably web-sling most of the way and walk the rest. He’d make it to
the office in less than 15 minutes. No reason to head “home” after all. After the fourth house, he’d
started carrying everything that was truly his in his bag. If the foster families wanted him to keep
anything they gave him, they could bring it themselves. He wasn’t going back for an awkward
conversation and ‘I’ll miss you’s that nobody really meant.

The secretary looked up as he entered, but Peter was such a familiar face that she says nothing as he
walks past the familiar hallway, though she did crane her neck looking for the Johnsons that weren’t
there. Peter sighed as he opened the familiar door, looking at his feet meekly. “Hi, Mrs. Clearance, I
just got your messages and- uuuuuuuuhhhhhhh…”

The boy froze, the last confused syllable droning on as his wide eyes take in the small closet of an
office full of people who couldn’t actually be there. No matter how long he stared, the group that
couldn’t actually be there never got any smaller. Three women, each seeming more imposing than
the next and five men were cramped awkwardly in the hard wooden chairs, none of whom belonged
in the dumpy little office with it’s peeling walls hidden by childish scribbles and a barely-there
florescent lighting the crew. No, these people weren’t really there. They couldn’t be. Oh no, he
finally cracked, hadn’t he? The secret identity, the blows to the head, the lame puns. He finally just
went crazy. He knew it was only a matter of time.

“Peter,” Mrs. Clearance’s voice sounds, somewhat shakily. “Where are Sherryl and Kris?”

Peter’s eyes snap away from the crowd to his social worker, his shocked mind blank for a moment
before he finally recognizes the names of his foster parents. ”Oh, uh. I was closer to here then their
house when I got your call and I figured I was just getting ki- uh, that it was the usual.” He
stammered, loath to admit that he commonly got kicked out of homes in front of these people, even if
there was no way such icons were actually here. “So I, uh, just came straight here.” He shook his
backpack for emphasis and the woman frowned, though he couldn’t be sure if it was because he was
already preparing to change homes or because he was “close” to the office that was over 45 minutes
away from his current foster home, alone, after the sun had already started going down.

“Do they at least know you’re here?”

“Um, well…” Peter looked to his shoes and the woman sighed, her eyes straying to the group. Peter
felt like he was failing a job interview or something.

“As you can see, it’s not exactly the usual. Which we could have told you if you had answered your
phone.” She said pointedly.

“Oh, uh. It kinda… well… it, uh. I dropped it and uh…” He pulled the shattered mess out of his
pocket sheepishly, only to jump when one of the men-who-couldn’t-possibly-actually-be-in-this-
office suddenly stood and crossed the room to take it out of his hand.

“Not a problem. We’ll get you a new one. Starkphone of course, top of the line. Maybe better. Hope
you’re not too attached to whatever plan you had, kid.”

“Tony,” The blond man still sitting down says chastising, but the other simply looks at Peter
expectantly.

And Peter is so befuddled by this point that the only reply that comes to mind is “It’s a Tracfone.”

Tony’s—as in Tony Stark. There is no denying now that Tony Stark is currently standing in his
social worker’s office holding his phone like it has personally insulted the man—eyebrows shoot up.
“Really? I didn’t know that those still existed. Or that people other than drug dealers used them.”
Peter opened his mouth to reply—probably something stupid that would incriminate him as a drug dealer—but before he could he was saved by Mrs. Clearance clearing her throat. “Obviously, Peter, I didn’t call you in for… the usual.”

“Uh, yeAH.” And of course, of course, his voice would choose that exact moment to crack. Great, just great. I bet this kind of stuff never happens to Captain America. He thinks, before having a mini mental meltdown as he realizes that Captain America is in the room.

“I’d hoped that Sherryl and Kris could have war—uh, informed you about this before you got here.”

It wasn’t until the words “Uh, what is ‘this’?” popped out of his mouth that a heavy weight of dread and realization lay in his stomach. Whatever this was, it couldn’t be good. Not with his track record. As the social worker began to speak, at last all members of the Avenger’s turned to look at the woman. From the corner of his eye Peter saw a flash of burgundy-red hair as Black Widow finally ceased her piercing assessment of him. The shock of color brought a heavy weight of dread in the young man’s gut as it sparked a memory.

The very night before, the selfsame shock of color had flashed as he took care of a group of men accosting a woman, the color accompanied by the slight tingling of Spider-Sense. After he’d webbed up the men the young hero had followed the sighting, intending to talk to whoever had been spying on him. However, the instant he caught up with the woman she’d handed him his butt. He’d just barely managed to web her hand before she cast him away, and even then she fiddled with her wrist and the webbing crumpled in a way that it usually only did when The Shocker fried it. He’d had half a mind to follow the mystery woman that night, but by that point he’d already been over an hour past curfew and couldn’t convince his throbbing muscles that it was worth it.

In the dark of the New York alleyway he hadn’t been able to recognize his observer, but here in the brightly lit beige office he didn’t have a single doubt that it was Natasha Romanov who had watched him that night. His mouth dried and his already fast heartbeat only quickened more as the implications of a seeing the Black Widow the night before the Avenger’s visited his social worker. There was only one reason why the Avengers would bother cramming into this little office, and it wasn’t to talk to Peter Parker. Or at least, not the Peter Parker who didn’t web sling and take down muggers in his free time.

They knew he was Spider-Man, and they were here to confront him about it. He knew it was only a matter of time, each new stand with Spider-Man merchandise (Which he never got a dime of by the way. He was going to have to find out if you could sue someone anonymously. Daredevil implied that he knew a lawyer, maybe he could ask him.) got him closer to being on the Avenger’s radar. Now they had finally found him, and who knew what was going to happen to him or his alter ego now. Maybe actually listening would help.

“-adoption without first fostering is rare, but the Avenger’s obviously have more than adequate living arrangements. Also, despite som-”

“Wai- Adoption?” Peter squeaked, looking at the group with wide eyes as his mind continued to whirl.

Mrs. Clearance closed her eyes and let out a breath she probably hoped was subtle but really wasn’t, but before she could speak the woman sitting closest to Tony answered. “Yes, adoption. Peter, we—as the Avengers—are here to offer you a home with us. We would like to invite you to be a part of the Avenger’s family, if you accept we already have a room waiting for you in the tower.”

“Really?” The boy gaped, his mind slowly working to fill in the gaps. If they were inviting him—him—to the tower, then that—that meant that they— they were inviting Spider-Man to the Avengers!
This was—this was incredible! He’d replayed the moment the Avengers realized his identity over and over in his mind, outlaying every scenario and possibility. Sure, he’d thought about them inviting him on the team, dreamed of it, but it seemed like a distant dream that you dream while knowing that it would never actually happen. Like the bench warmer imagining going on the court and making 10 points in a row, or the person buying a raffle ticket and imaging that they win the grand prize, or Flash dreaming of getting anything above a B- in anything, ever.

Long story short, he never actually let himself hope to become a member of the Avengers, but here they were. More, they were speaking in code, with words like ‘adoption’, to preserve his secret identity. This was more than he could have dreamed of, and they were acting like it was something he had to think about. Like there was any chance he would be stupid enough to say anything other than “Yes!” Peter blurted, cutting off Pepper Potts' ongoing spiel.

“I mean, uh, yes please. I would- um, I accept?” He cleared his throat, feeling a red blush creep up his neck. “I mean; I would love to be adopted by you.”

“Don’t just give us the answer you think you need to.” Natasha suddenly sounded. “This isn’t something for you to take lightly. If you agree to this, you’ll be putting yourself in a lot of danger.”

Right, right. He spent most of his time taking care of muggers, the people the Avengers face would be a whole new ballgame. But he would be fighting with them, as a team. He wasn’t worried. Much. One arm came up to push back his shaggy hair and rub at the back of his neck. “I mean, I get that. You guys go around the world fighting aliens and killer robots and people trying to create biological weapons and stuff. But, you’re the Avengers! You’re like, the most powerful people on earth.”

“That kinda hurt. Sure he didn’t always get the bad guy, and he came home looking like he was put in a meat grinder more often than not, but still. He didn’t think Spider-Man would be an ‘obvious weakness’. Although, he supposed it made sense. The new guy would always be the weak spot of the team, and there was a lot of footage of him fighting that the bad guys could examine. Still, he was stronger than he looked. He opened his mouth to argue this when Captain America began to speak.

“We would train you the best that we could to defend yourself, but even just agreeing to live with us immediately places you in a very very dangerous situation.”

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“We would train you the best that we could to defend yourself, but even just agreeing to live with us immediately places you in a very very dangerous situation.”

Peter felt his sinking heart begin to soar. Training, yes, training would be amazing. No more breaking fingers because he threw a punch wrong; he would be learning actual fighting techniques. He might even be learning spy-stuff if the look Black Widow was giving him was any indication. More than that, who knew what tricks Tony could teach him about technology? Maybe he could even get a suit that didn’t come from Joanne’s discount spandex bin.

This was incredible! He was so ready to become an Avenger, he could handle whatever villains came their way. He was no lightweight himself, he’d taken care of some pretty significant baddies. He could do this if they just gave him a chance.

Of course he couldn’t say that, not when Mrs. Clearance was still sitting at her desk nearly hyperventilating.

“I get that, I really do. I promise. But… There’s a lot I regret not doing.” Like not stopping that thief, or walking with Aunt May, or… the list goes on and on. “I know that if I don’t do this, it’ll just end up being another regret, another what if. I don’t want that.”
Silence reigned in the room once more as Captain America caught and held the boy’s gaze. For a moment the look held, determined and unwavering, until finally the super soldier spoke. “Ok then. Welcome to the family.”
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Happy late Thanksgiving!!

Peter was pretty sure his jaw hit the floor around the time they drove up to the Avengers tower. At this point they were halfway across the lobby and he still hadn’t managed to close it, not that he was trying very hard. He’d never dared to get close to the tower back when he was hiding his secret identity, as it was too risky. He’d even turned down an internship at S.T.A.R.K labs just to be safe. He’d heard that it was impressive, but he hadn’t expected this. There were huge windows, plants that probably cost more than the house he grew up in, and chairs more expensive than most cars. Holographic images and S.T.A.R.K smart-screens sat everywhere, boasting of the wealth and technological advancement of the owner. And that was just the lobby.

So engrossed in the sheer impressiveness of his surroundings, Peter physically leapt at the somewhat haughty foreign voice that sounded from the… well from nowhere actually.

“Welcome to the tower Mr. Parker.”

“Uh, thanks?” He offered, glancing at Tony and Pepper. The three of them and Rhodey were the only ones in the elevator, the others either opting to use other means or going up using their powers. Just the thought had his hands twitching, eager to scale those pristine reflexive windows and sling from the top of the city’s tallest tower. But, he reasoned, he couldn’t exactly get a tour from the outside and the view would be better in the morning.

Actually, it may be better to wait until he could get a new suit, the one he had was honestly starting to look more and more like a patchwork quilt. The Avengers had money though, they could probably even get him the good material. Oh, and have someone else make them for him. Maybe a sassy small woman like the lady from the Pixar movie. Maybe she was based off a real person. That would explain the lack of capes on the Avengers. Other than, like Thor and Vision but Thor obviously got his outfits from Asgard and who knew about Vision. Anyway, the suit. Maybe Tony and him could come up with some kind of new material, something that could survive being thrown around and stuff. Maybe a poly-carbonate blend of-

“Peter, meet F.R.I.D.A.Y.” Tony smirked as the elevator began to move.

Peter was instantly jarred back to reality, his mind floundering for a moment in an attempt to return to the conversation. Oh right, the magical voice from the sky. “Um, nice to meet you?”

“A pleasure.” The disembodied voice said smartly. “Feel free to call on me with any requests or concerns that you may have.”

“Uh, thanks.”

“Your floor is approaching.” The voice called and Peter was struck with understanding.

“F.R.I.D.A.Y is your AI.”

“Yup,” Tony said, popping the ‘P’ with a smirk.
“Woah!” The teen enthused as the group left the elevator, his head craning back as though another glance at the apparatus would allow him to see the AI more clearly. “That’s amazing! I heard that you had incredible breakthroughs with artificial intelligence tech, but-but to actually see it is-wow. But I thought it was supposed to be called J.A.R.V.I.S or something.”

“Yes well,” A calm male voice sounded and Peter whirled in time to see Vision float through the floor. “I’m afraid that that is me. Or who I used to be, or a part of me. It’s all rather quite confusing I’m sorry to say.”

The younger boy’s eyes bugged at the man’s appearance, bouncing against the floor as though to test its solidity before the words fully processed. “Wait, so that means you’re-” he turned to Tony. “Then you-” He switched back to Vision, “And you’re a… I think I’m going to need the whole story.”

The man smiled softly, his cashmere-clad arms crossing comfortably. “Of course. Another time, presumably?”

“Right of course.” Peter’s eyes cast around the rapidly filling living room. “This is amazing, I can get all of the stories about all of the attacks from the past few years from the Avenger’s themselves. Like, the whole really real truth. Woah.”

Several of the Avenger’s smiled at that, but Tony only snarked “Sure kid, we can give you bedtime stories right after we tuck you in.”

Peter scowled. “I’m fifteen, not five.”

“I should hope so,” The man drawled. “Thirteen and under can’t go in the hot tub, it’s on the label.”

“There’s a hot tub? What am I saying of course there’s a hot tub. Hey, what about a-“

“How about we give you a tour instead of telling you everything that’s in the tower.” Falcon—Sam, he introduced himself as Sam—interrupted. “Especially because it’d probably be easier for you to try and guess what isn’t here.”

“Uh huh,” Tony responded. “I’ll remember that next time you want to soak your shoulders after a mission.”

Sam snorted, but Peter was already eagerly moving closer to the bird-themed hero, eyes wide and eager. The veteran sent Stark a smug grin as he clasped the boy on the shoulder. “Right, so right now we’re on the residential level where are the bedrooms are.”

“You all live on the same floor? This place is so huge, I thought you’d each get a whole level or something.”

Sam shrugged and cast a glance at Tony—after all he hadn’t designed the place—but it was Steve who answered.

“Believe it or not Peter, it’s not easy keeping a team with so many strong personalities together. There have been several times that we have… clashed. Part of the reason that we decided to move in together at the tower is to keep unity and camaraderie within the team. Living separately—even in the same building—wouldn’t help with that.”

The boy nodded, his eyes wide as he stared at the team that appeared to practically read each other's minds in battle and fought as though they were pieces of puzzle just made to be slotted together. Despite Captain America’s words Peter couldn't wrap his mind around the idea of earth's mightiest heroes ever struggling to get along. (If only he knew)
“Besides,” Wanda spoke up from beside Vision, the first words she’d said since introducing herself to Peter. “This tower has anything you could want, only an elevator’s ride away. While our rooms are certainly spacious, we have no need for overly large rooms. We seldom spend time in them.”

Peter nodded in understanding.

“Of course some areas are connected in a less… conventional ways than elevators.”

The boy jumped so high that had he been in Queens, he likely would have stuck to the ceiling, barely containing a shriek as he whirled to face a smirking Black Widow. “HOLY- What the- how long were you-how did you- huh?”

The red haired woman smirked, but made no move to answer the half-spoken questions as the boy slowly regained his wits. As the teen caught his breath, the woman’s words finally connected. “Wait, do you mean like, hidden passages and stuff? Are there hidden passages here?”

“Well that’s for you to try to find, isn’t it?” A sly smile answered him and Peter could only gape in shock until Wanda distracted him by pointing to the nearest door and proclaiming it as her room, allowing him a quick peek inside. The rest of the Avengers followed, though some refrained from opening their doors and the rooms belonging to Thor and Bruce were left untouched.

Finally, they were standing at the door of one of the few unclaimed rooms. Tony smiled, though the expression seemed to be hiding a manic anxiety. “And this, is your room.”

Peter gaped as he entered the room, a warmth stirring in his chest. Like the others it was large, but not comically so like the rich people in cartoons. The whole place was painted a dark blue except for the metallic silver of the doorways. The whole wall across from the entrance was taken up by gleaming windows, the view shaded by what was presumably the bottom of the ‘A’ adorning the building. The whole of New York stretched out in front of him. The world seemed to consist of the glittering windows and dull grey siding of skyscrapers peppered the horizon in a variety of sizes. Storefronts and streets were covered in colors as the crowds ebbed and flowed in an ever-moving display. Taxi’s flooded the streets in bright yellow and the sounds of the busiest city drifted up into his bedroom. His heart swelled at his chest and the boy felt an overwhelming sense of home.

Wanda moved to join the boy as he stared out the window in wonder. “This is the best view.” She informed him, her accent thick and smile sincere. Peter smiled shyly back at her, even as he imagined swinging out over the city from this very perch.

“It’s incredible,” He responded before finally dragging his eyes to the rest of the room.

On one side of the wall sat a silver sliding door, presumably leading to a no-doubt walk-in closet, beside which sat an open door to his own personal bathroom. The layout was no different from the other rooms he’d seen, beside one thing; the bed sat lofted, the high ceilings of the building allowing for a small room to sit below the bed-area, this one with reflective glass windows hiding its insides from view.

Tony interrupted the boy’s gaping as he led him into the room, revealing an area filled with plug outlets, desk space, bookshelves, and technology Peter had only every dreamed of.

Tony’s every present smirk seemed to intensify as Peter stuttered in amazement, seemingly incapable of real words. “Of course, I expect you to do most of your work in the lab with me, but a scientist has to have his own place after all.”

“Y-yeah. Wow- wow. This-this is-thank you so much Mr. Stark.”
The man scoffed, though his smirk didn’t waiver. “It’s Tony, we’re technically family.”

“Uh, wow, I—”

“And he hasn’t even shown you the most impressive part.” Rhodey interrupted before the boy could embarrass himself even more.

“Right. F.R.I.D.A.Y, protocol Smokescreen.”

Immediately all technology in the room went dark, baring a few emergency lights. A handle popped out of a seemingly seamless portion of the floor. Without another word the man pulled up on the handle, revealing a large metal hatch. Peter cast a nervous glance around the room—seeing only gravely serious faces—before following the billionaire down the hatch. The room was compact, but not quite tiny enough to cause instant claustrophobia. The walls were a shiny metallic. Along one wall was a pull down cot secured upright tightly, another wall held a chest locked up tight, though a key was handing on the wall behind it. Another had a chair complete with what looked like dozens of seat belts and straps. The final held a small fridge and what looked like a generator.

“What is this?”

“This is probably the safest place in the entire world. The walls are made of an Adamantium Alloy, the straps on that chair strategically placed to lesson pain from impact no matter what direction. You have a slew of non-perishables, enough for a month of regular eating, or at least 4 if you ration it severely. You also have a generator, satellite phone, and WiFi. I recommend throwing a few books in too. Most importantly, thanks to the Smokescreen protocol, F.R.I.D.A.Y has no record of this ever existing. In fact, she shouldn’t have any idea that it exists at all. It doesn’t show up on any blueprints, all plans I wrote were on paper and have been destroyed. This bunker is completely unknown, completely hidden, and completely safe. Heck, if my calculations are accurate- they are, by the way, they always are- this thing should even be able to float.”

“Um, what is… What is all this.”

“Peter,” Captain America’s voice sounded as the man joined them, his presence making the room feel much more cramped. “We need you to promise, with every fiber of your being, that if we tell to initiate Smokescreen Protocol then you do it immediately. No matter what is happening. I know we already talked about this, but you being associated with the Avengers puts you in more danger than you could know. We haven’t signed the papers yet, because we need this promise first. We need to know that if there is danger and that we think you need to hide; you’ll be smart enough to listen to us. Can you promise us that Peter?”

“I-I mean, I don’t underst- I” This didn’t make any sense, the boy thought confusedly. He was Spiderman after all. He’d fought the Green Goblin, the Lizard, Doc Ock! Sure some of his villains were kind of lame like Shocker and Rhino, but come on! He worked hard, and he’d put some pretty big names behind bars. Why would they invite him on the team just to hide him in a box? Was it because he was too young? Everyone always underestimated him, he could help. He knew he could.

Steve Rogers seemed to understand the boy’s confusion because he looked the teen in the eyes and clapped a hand on his shoulder. “I know Peter, you’re the kind of kid who wants to help. I know you’re smart, and we’ll train you to defend yourself to fight. But the people we are against are dangerous Peter, really dangerous. We need to know that you’re safe, especially now when you haven’t had any training.”

Oh. Well, that made sense. Kinda. They wanted to train him. They probably had no clue just what he could do and were being overly-paranoid. It was… ok it was annoying. He hated being
underestimated all the time. At the same time he supposed it was understandable. And it showed that they actually cared what happened to him instead of throwing him to the wolf-themed super villains which was… nice. It was really nice. He sighed, they probably knew a lot about the villains they faced than he did. He’d just have to hope that he could impress them enough during training to keep him out of the room.

“Ok. I promise. If you call for me to hide, I’ll come straight here.”

“And not come out until we call.” Tony led, and Peter repeated the words with a nod, causing Steve to grin.

“Good. Glad to have you, Peter.” With a grin he grabbed the lip of the bunker and pulled himself up with one arm as easy as standing.

“Showoff.” Tony grumbled. Peter barely noticed, sedately following Stark up the ladder, his mind whirling so hard that jumping up never occurred to him. Even if everything technically made sense, he couldn’t help the feeling that something was… was just off about the whole conversation. As he got to the top however, the boy was quickly led away from the room and the matter escaped his mind, unresolved.

The rest of the tour seemed to both take forever and pass instantly. With each level Peter grew more and more amazed with the size and function of the tower. While they started with the more domestic levels, such as the bar and living room area, the kitchens and formal dining room, etc. They soon delved into the more heroic levels. They had to practically drag the boy from Stark’s labs, then they actually had to drag him away from Banner’s labs as the boy stood practically glued to the microscope slides.

He blabbered genetic theories that were nearly over even Tony’s head all through the boxing ring, gym, martial arts training areas, and exercise rooms. It wasn’t until they took him to the second floor of training equipment that his blabbering came to a stop so quickly it were as though his voice were stolen. Two or three floors had been empty and conjoined to create what seemed to be a conglomeration, of the world’s greatest parkour park, high ropes course, rock climbing wall, laser tag course. It was a seemingly unending mass of ropes and walls, platforms and forts and obstacles, pillars scattered throughout.

Peter was silent as he gazed on in wonder, his sticky hands seeming to tingle with the desire to run up the wall, his mind’s eye already painting the pillars and ropes with webbing. He could see markers designating the beginning and ending points for races, a line drawn through the center as though for capture the flag. His breath caught in his chest at the myriad of possibilities.

“Told you he’d want to play.” Natasha said, and even without looking away from the chaotic masterpiece Peter could hear her smirk.

“Yeah yeah,” Tony drawled, “I finished the Iron Harness last night.”

Harness? Peter turned to protest, but Wanda was already dragging him back to the elevator, excitedly describing the target range in the area above, complete with armory.

“Oh, uh. I’m not a fan of guns.”

Sam snorted. “That’s fine. Between Nat and Clint we have everything from pea shooters to sling shots to potato shooters.”
“I’m becoming a fan of Tasers.” Black Widow smirked, but Peter was already imagining using the range to practice his web shooting.

The tour ended shortly after, finishing in a multi-media room where the team argued for a good 40 minutes about what they should order to eat. Tony wanted to treat the boy to a gourmet meal from the S.T.A.R.K personal chef, but several others argued that it would be a bit much for a kid whose idea of an opulent meal was Olive Garden. Natasha wanted Shawarma, but Steve refused to call when their favorite shop was closed and no one wanted to settle. Finally, they settled on good old pizza was the best welcome meal (though Tony insisted on ordering from a fancy Artesian place to ‘culture the poor child’s taste buds’). After settling in with the comfort food and a movie that took them another 45 minutes to agree on, the group spent their first night completely together. For the first time in months Peter didn’t spend the evening in red and blue tights risking life and limb as he fought through his failings and quipped through his pain. When the movie finally ended and the group meandered sleepily to their rooms, Peter fell asleep with a smile on his face for the first time in a long time.
The thing they don’t tell you about sharing a house with veterans, super spies, kidnap victims, human experiments, and robot-men is that they all wake up early; if they sleep at all. Fortunately, Spider-Man kinda-sorta-maybe fit half of those categories. However, Spider-Man had also never been in a bed nearly as comfy as the no doubt million-dollar mattress he spent the night in and so spent nearly an hour in a content, lazy daze. Only the smell of coffee impossibly wafting into his room could drag him out of his warm and luscious cocoon.

As Peter stood from the bed he looked back at the fluffy comforter sitting in a haphazard lump and considered bundling in its cozy confines as he made his way to find the coffee. The thought was tempting, but ultimately Peter decided that he wasn’t that comfortable with the Avengers yet. With a mournful sigh the boy bid farewell to his nighttime friend and moved to the door with a final waking yawn. He stepped into the hallway only to jump back with a yelp. Shiny metal floors may add to Tony’s whole fancy-high-tech-minimalist look, but they did not conduct heat well at all and he didn’t have any slippers.

Peter sighed as his still sleep-lazy mind debated between going back to put on socks or not. He fell against the wall with a grunt and -huh- the walls weren’t nearly as cold as the floor. And since he no longer had his arachnid-based secret… With a grin the boy jumped to the nearest wall, sticking comfortably against the smooth material. Skittering through the hall and along the ceiling without fear of getting caught by either May or a foster parent was completely novel experience, but not an unwelcome one and the boy even opted to wall-walk along the stairs corridor rather than take the elevator.

Following the scent of coffee, he soon found the team sitting around the couches in the main room. Each had a mug in hand and a plate nearby filled with breakfast delights. The bar in the corner of the room was filled with a breakfast buffet that made the boy’s mouth water from the ceiling. He was just about to drop and begin loading up a plate when the word “Spider-Man” floated across the room.

The boy’s head tilted in curiosity and he moved closer to the group to listen in. Even as a slight pang of guilt stabbed at him for eavesdropping, he ignored it. There was no way he was missing a chance to hear what the world’s greatest superhero team thought about his crime fighting persona.

Tony was folded over a small tablet device, scowling at it with an intently serious concentration. The others however seemed to be deep in a debate over—well—him.

“—not sure. I mean, yeah he’s gone after some big guys, like that lizard thing, but for the most part he seems to stick to muggings, petty theft-stuff like that.” Rhodey said, waving a piece of bacon for emphasis.

“Of course he does” Natasha smirked. “Have you ever even looked at the video files Tony found. Guy doesn’t even know how to throw a proper punch, much less fight. He’d be dead by now if it
weren’t for his strength and what I have to guess is a fairly significant healing factor.”

Peter grimaced. Harsh.

…But Accurate.

“Which means he’s probably not a super soldier,” Sam adds with a nod at Steve. “If he was than it would be safe to assume some kind of training.”

“Human experimentation isn’t likely either.” Pepper cut in. “He seems the type to shut down something like that. Most likely in a very obvious and exaggerated way to draw the public’s eye.”

“You assume he was unwilling.” Wanda interrupted, her hands on her cup tightening as she no doubt remembered the willingness of her and her brother to undergo experimentation for the sake of their country. Pepper inclined her head in a nod of acquisition, but began to point out that if he were willing then whoever experimented on him would certainly either try to keep him out of the public eye more or train him to fight better.

Up on the ceiling a tingling dread completely separate from his spidey-sense began to pool in Peter’s chest. Something wasn’t right. How could they ever assume he was part of a super soldier program? Him? Wimpy Peter Parker? Even the National Guard recruiter who visited his High School hadn’t looked at him twice. And human experimentation? They could just ask, he would tell them. He’d even be willing to give Tony a blood sample if he could look at it with him. In fact, he might ask Tony if they can use all of Dr. Banner’s fancy tech to look at his DNA, but that’s beside the point. They didn’t need to gossip about him out here, they could just ask him about all of this stuff. So why weren’t they?

The tingling dread settled heavier in his gut until it felt like the weight would force the boy off his perch. Something about this conversation—about the words they were using, the phrases—something was off. It wasn’t until Natasha spoke next that the uneasy weight turned into a piercing stab of horror. “Whoever he is, I’d bet clean-up-duty that Spider-Man is a dancer or gymnast in his everyday life.”

Peter nearly fell off the ceiling.

“He’s flexible,” The woman continued, unknowing of the utter turmoil she had inflicted on their new charge. “Extremely so. Unless that all comes from his source of powers, it’s impossible to keep that level of flexibility up.”

“Be easier if he’s younger.” Rhodey cut in. “Rumor is that he’s pretty young.”

Steve nodded. “I would be shocked to hear any number above 25. Probably lower.”

Natasha snorted. “20-21 tops. Try listening to some of the audio Tony has stored of his chatter.”

And Peter… Peter had to get out of there. The boy had nearly sprint-crawled out of the room, dropping silently to the floor in front of the nearest bathroom and locking himself in to freak out in private.

Ok this was… this was not good. The boy drew in a shaky breath, his whole body trembling in fear as a heavy weight settled in his gut and his heart attempted to pound out of his chest. His mind seemed to be a whirlwind of thoughts and emotions as confusion, denial, anxiety and fear swarmed through his body, leaving his hands numb and legs weak. Peter allowed himself to fall back against the locked door and slide to the cool tiled floor.
This… what did this even mean? How did they not know he was Spider-Man? But he-they-WHAT? How was this possible? They had more resources than anyone since S.H.I.E.L.D collapsed. Black Widow had actually stalked him the other night. They adopted him! They had to know! But… but it didn’t sound like a prank. Even if some of them would come up with something like this, there was no way that all of them would agree to go along with it.

No, no this was all too real. It was terrifying. He had voluntarily chosen to live with Superheroes who didn’t know his secret identity. And he thought it was hard hiding from his foster families, these guys had a constantly vigilant artificial intelligence. They were literally a group of trained spies, certified geniuses, and a mind reader.

This whole secret-identity had gotten a whole lot more complicated. Of course things couldn’t actually be getting easier, he had the Parker luck after all.

The knowledge that they had no clue who he really was changed everything. It changed how he was going to train, to interact with the Avengers, it would even have to change how he acted as Spidey. He was going to need to put a lot of safeguards in place just to be able to fight crime normally, forget fighting alongside the Avengers. No one could know he was anything more than just Peter Parker.

Just Peter Parker. Why… why did the Avengers adopt just Peter Parker. Tony mentioned his IQ a couple times, bragged to the others about their “scientist bond” (Tony’s words), but that couldn’t be it. At least, not the whole story. But then why-

The boy’s thoughts were quieted when the aborted click of someone trying to open a locked door sounded, followed by a few knocks.

“Uh- Occupied!” The teen yelped, standing silently and moving to flush the toilet, washing his hands afterwards to continue the ruse.

“It’s fine,” Rhodey’s voice chuckled from the hall. “I forgot there was one more of us. Take your time.”

Peter opened the door to the man’s last words, smile Grimacing in what he hoped played off as normal embarrassment and awkwardness rather than the abject horror and confusion it truly was. “No, uh, I was done anyway. Is, uh, is breakfast almost ready?” He stammered, attempting to hide the fact that he’d already been in the room, albeit from a somewhat unconventional angle.

The man nodded as he maneuvered around the teen, “Ready and waiting. You know where to go?”

“The area with all of the couches, right?” Peter stammered.

“Yes. See you there in a second.”

“Uh, right.” Peter nodded to the closed door. He wondered silently to himself how many cups of coffee the veteran had drunken to be in such a rush, but soon shut down that line of thought and turned to the living room. The vigilante took a deep breath before making his way to the living room the face the heroes.

Funny. He felt much more like the fly than the spider.

With a final steadying breath, the boy crossed the line into the living room, prepared to start dancing to avoid the nearly invisible trap line that lay in every movement and word of conversation. He was greeted with smiles and calls of ‘good morning’ with an enthusiasm and formality reserved for when greeting guests or those you are still getting used to. It was as though nothing had changed from the
night before. Of course, for them nothing had.

The boy smiled and gave a nervous ‘good morning’ in return, his stomach tying itself in knots. Still, even in the deepest recesses of his panicked state, Peter was still a teenaged boy, and one with an advanced metabolism at that. He was distracted almost immediately by the heavenly scents of bacon, eggs, pancakes, and a verifiable bakery’s selection of pastries. “Woah.” He breathed. The pile looked even bigger from the floor.

Light chuckles sounded from the set of couches, and Steve’s voice called “Take whatever you’d like. There’s plenty.”

The teen didn’t have to be told twice, grabbing a plate and piling it high with anything and everything, from the decadent pancakes to the fruit salad littered with fruits he swore he’d never even heard of. He even managed to swipe a cup of coffee, freshly roasted with a name he couldn’t even try to pronounce.

The group very obviously shifted as he awkwardly made his way to the couches, clearing up a seat with the best access to the table. “This, uh, looks delicious.” The boy stammered, attempting to fill the silence. “Do you guys eat like this all of the time?”

“Pretty much, yes.” Wanda smiled, a Danish in hand.

Peter nearly moaned as he bit into his pancakes, savoring the incredible flavor. They tasted like how the pancakes in commercials looked. Light and fluffy, but full of flavor and drenched in actual, real maple syrup. “This is amazing.” He managed in between stuffing another bite in. “Who made them?”

“Chef Marcell works mornings I believe.” Pepper answered before taking a sip out of an oversized mug of coffee. Peter’s eyebrows shot up at the thought of a professional chef cooking just for them, but his mouth was too full of decadent pastry to answer. Luckily, Sam seemed to catch the motion.

“Yeah, threw me for a loop at first too. We tried to cook ourselves for a bit, but cooking for 5-10 people, including a Super Soldier, a guy that turns into the hulk, a Norse god, and Natasha, it becomes a bit much.”

“I burn more calories in a single workout than you have in your entire life.” Black Widow scoffs at the Falcon, but the man just grinned.

“They cook in the cafeteria for the other employees of the tower,” Pepper interrupted. “One of the perks of being employed by STARK enterprises.”

“Wow.” The boy responded as he turned to the perfectly cooked eggs.

“You would have tried their cooking last night but we came back so late that they had already all gone home.” The woman continued.

“I wanted to call them up anyway if you remember.” Tony cut in as he moved his hand in a few definitive motions on the pad. “But I got outvoted. You like breakfast, just wait for dinner. Chef Lorenzo is fantastic. And done. Sorry if the elevator didn’t work kid, I thought people your age liked to sleep in. Had to run a few tests on F.R.I.D.A.Y so all systems were down.”

“Uh, it was fine. I just used the stairs, I thought it would wake me up.”

“Mm.” Tony nodded, still looking at the tablet, but Peter felt a flood of relief. If all systems were down, that meant the A.I wouldn’t have seen his wall crawl. His secret was safe. For a little while
longer at least. “So, we were talking about Spider-Man, right.”

“Um,” Steve responded, looking sideways at Peter as though unsure if they should talk about the vigilante in front of him. The boy suddenly realized that he should have no clue who they had been talking about and quickly forced on a surprised expression, albeit a beat late.

“Woah, Spider-Man cool. Is he, uh, is he an Avenger too?” Do you want him to be? The boy would have preferred to ask, but he didn’t dare.

“Nope.” Tony replied, “Can’t even figure out who he is, honestly. Tried following him around once, but he always disappears into one of the parts of Queens too sketchy to have security cameras up. He changes where he disappears every few weeks too, can’t figure out a real pattern for it and it’s messing with my algorithm.”

Peter realized dully that getting kicked out of foster homes on a regular basis had actually saved his identity.

“We wouldn’t invite him now anyway.” Pepper interrupted briskly before Tony could go into details.

“Wh- why not?” Peter stammered.

The woman grimaced. “PR nightmare. Amazingly, Spider-Man somehow managed to get a worse reputation than us. It would be murder right now.”

Several others rolled their eyes, as though the two were missing out on the most important reasons, but Vision spoke before anyone else could. “I believe you have contributed somewhat yourself to his... marred image, correct?”

“Huh? What do you mean?” The boy asked, mind frantically attempting to remember a time he had embarrassed Spider-Man. Well, outside of the mask.

“Your photography for one of his most critical newspapers.”

“Oh, right. That.” The Avengers all watched the boy carefully, curious as to why the boy who was so eager to move in with a group of superheroes would be so antagonistic to the spider-themed vigilante. “I mean, I guess. I don’t really have anything against him-Spider-Man- or anything.” Quite the opposite actually. Usually. He had his moments.

“I think he’s trying really hard to be a hero even though no one is really appreciating it. Honestly, Jameson was just the only one who was crazy enough to accept pictures taken by a 15-year-old, no questions asked.” He shrugged, more than ready to drop the subject and stop talking about himself in third person.

“I don’t blame him.” Steve nodded, “We looked through some of your work, it’s really impressive.”

Peter’s cheeks heated in a bright blush at the praise, but Natasha spoke up before he could reply. “Yes, very impressive. Some of them were... incredibly detailed. You managed to get very close to him for some of these, didn’t you?” She leaned forward as she spoke, her eyes boring into him intensely.

“Oh, I guess I’m just... sneaky?”

She smirked and leaned back, eyes softening with the uptick of her lips. “Very sneaky. It’s impressive. I can’t wait to see what you’ll be like with training.”
“Really?”

“I took a trip out the other day, to see if you actually had any skill or if Spider-Man was just that unobservant. He made me before I got 100 yards. We’ll have to compare tactics.” She winked at him.

“Oh,” Well that explained so, so much. “I uh, don’t really know if I’m that good or anything. I think he mostly just doesn’t see me as a threat and ignores me.” There. Maybe that would throw them off his scent. After all, he wasn’t quite sure how to be sneaky when it didn’t include being on the ceiling.

“Really?” Sam asked, one brow rising sardonically. “You give the man calling for Spider-Man’s head on a pike 90% of the photos he uses to call the guy a menace, and you don’t think you bother him.”

That… was a really good point. Ok, maybe Peter wasn’t the best liar, but honestly Aunt May was a bit less… hyper-observant and paranoid. “Oh, I uh, didn’t think of anything like that.”

“Were you never afraid that he would be angry about your photographs?” Wanda asked, head tilted curiously.

“No, not really.” OhCrapOhCrapOhCrap. He did not mean to say that out loud, there had to be a better answer he could have come up with. What he really needed was a distraction, but apparently they all loved discussing vigilantes over breakfast. “I mean, uh, he’s not really the scary type.” Wait, he wasn’t the only vigilante around. “Not like Daredevil!” He nearly shouted as inspiration struck. “I was able to get a photo of him once and it was terrifying. The instant I took the picture he looked at me. I swear he heard the shutter, and we were like 200 yards apart and there were bullets flying everywhere and people fighting and everything. I got them to keep my name off of the picture, but I was convinced he’d find me for like, a week.”

Natasha was smiling and nodding proudly, as though the story confirmed her earlier mentioned desire to hone his stealth skills. Most of the others, however, looked horrified.

“Why were you somewhere with ‘bullets flying every everywhere and people fighting’ in the middle of the night in the first place?” Sam asked, his tone accusatory.

“Uh, just the right place at the right time.” As their expressions turned even more panicked the boy quickly corrected. “I mean wrong. Wrong place at the wrong time, of course.” Lies, all of it. Honestly, he’d gone to the warehouse in the first place because he’d heard the same rumors Daredevil had apparently followed, but then he’d gotten there and saw that the hero who managed to get the #1 spot on JJJ’s payout list (Spider-Man used to be on the top, but Peter brought in so many photos that demand was low) already had the situation well in hand and honestly, web fluid was expensive. He’d been jumpy for a couple weeks, but other than a long-haired, somewhat portly man hanging around the school for a few days nothing had happened (And that was probably someone’s relative or something. Peter was almost certain he was just being paranoid. He would have been completely paranoid if the guy hadn’t stared at him so much). Then of course he’d met Daredevil in the suit and while he was pretty sure that the other vigilante had no clue that he was the photographer, the thought of being found out honestly still scared him.

“This photo?” Pepper suddenly asked, bringing up a picture and article onto the large screen facing the couches. The image was an ominous piece, far more solemn than anything he’d ever managed as Spider-Man, taken just as Daredevil decked a man across the face. The gun that had been in the goon’s hand was flying through the air, and the wall behind the vigilante was riddled with small holes. Between the photo and the story was a small caption that read: Photo credit anonymous. After that was a lengthy article accusing Daredevil of being part of the Russian mob… despite the fact that
he was fighting the Russian mob in the photo.

“Yeah, that’s it. I got a lot of money for that one.” He said wistfully. He’d never gotten another photo of the terrifying man, but honestly even that money wasn’t worth the stress.

“Well you don’t need to worry about money anymore, so no more Super Hero Paparazzi for you.” Tony said with a loud slurp of his coffee.

“Huh?” He hadn’t even considered the money… or quitting work at the paper, but it made sense. He didn’t need to work anymore if he was living with billionaires.

Pepper grimaced, but she nodded as well. “I’m sorry Peter, but it really would be best if you quit. It would look… well it wouldn’t look good if you continued to work for a newspaper famous for bashing superheroes after the Avengers took you in. It would seem as if you had been… coerced in some way and were unhappy here.”

“Oh. I-I mean I guess that makes sense.” His heart ached a little, not because he enjoyed his job, but more because it was yet another part of his old life that was fading away.

“If they would even let you work there after this gets out.” Rhodey added. “The Daily Bugle isn’t exactly our biggest fans at the moment.”

“Oh yeah. I-I’m really sorry about that. Some of the articles blaming you so much are just… they’re all just terrible.” He looked Scarlet Witch in the eyes as he spoke, and she smiled softly at him in response, even as her hands clenched tighter around her mug.

It was Steve who responded however. “We’ve all grieved silently for the people who were hurt on our watch.” Tony abruptly move to pour Bailey’s into his coffee, but said nothing. “And because of it the public didn’t see any of it. Now they think that we don’t care about the losses, and they’re angry. It’s understandable, but now we’re working to fix that.” Peter nodded. He’s heard all about the recovery programs the Avengers were starting to put in place. The Bugle was doing everything they could to find a way to make it sound bad, with little success so far.

“And since we’re on the subject,” the living icon continued, “We would all like to apologize and offer condolences for the many losses you’ve had.”

“Um, thanks? But why?”

This time Pepper sighed, glancing sideways at Tony who was now drinking Bailey’s with a splash of coffee, “I’m not sure if it’s ever occurred to you, but nearly every… loss you’ve had, has been related to at least one person on the team, be it directly, indirectly, or even through negligence.” Her guilty eyes softened somewhat and she placed a comforting hand on the boy’s shoulder. “It’s horrible that you’ve had to go through so much, and so much of it was our fault in some way, so we would all like to apologize for your loss.”

Peter shook his head, heart aching as images of loved ones flashed through his mind’s eye. “I don’t…” The boy shook his head as the woman’s words processed further and he realized “That’s stupid. You guys were saving the whole world. You were fighting evil geniuses, and aliens, and robots and saved millions of lives. It- it sucks and it hurts and I know that it’ll probably never stop hurting, but I understand that it’s not possible to save every single person when you’re saving everyone. I never even considered blaming you guys for it.” No, he was saving that blame for himself. The Avengers had protected the whole world; he hadn’t even been able to manage the handful of people that mattered the most. No wonder they didn’t want him for their team.
“Well, not everyone felt that way.” Steve said bitterly, looking out the window and remembering the events a few weeks back. Tony nodded solemnly as he gently ran a hand down his girlfriend’s arm, tracing the area that had been still been in a sling only a few days prior. “That’s one of the reasons why we’re so happy you agreed to live with us.”

The man said something else, but the words seem to fade as several points swirled to the forefront of Peter’s mind, painting a picture that the boy wished stayed a muddied canvas. The Avengers’ bad press… The recovery projects… Trying to take responsibility for the casualties… his family’s deaths, all horribly linked to the heroes… his adoption now, right when they needed the press…

“Is that why I’m here?” He breathed softly, feeling his eyes sting as he looked into the brown of his coffee. “Is that why you adopted me?” He asked louder. “Am I just part of your little publicity stunt to show that you feel bad about all of the people who die? Am I just- just a pity story for you to flash? Is that why I’m here?”

He felt his grip tighten as the group remained silent, the metal mug beginning to dent with the force of his anger and misery. He couldn’t believe he hadn’t figured it out earlier, couldn’t believe he would fall for something like this. Wasn’t he supposed to be smart? Apparently not, since he-

“That is part of it.” A smooth, calm voice shattered the silence, angry hisses of ‘Vision’ sounding after the man’s words. Peter looked up to catch the red man’s calm eyes. “The boy knows, there is no point to lying nor to attempting to hide it. Yes, Peter, that is part of it. Our desire to show a physical example of our responsibility to those who grieve the ones we could not save was our motivation to adopt. However, it is not why you are here. You are here because you are an extraordinary young man. You show a level of intelligence, character, and maturity that few achieve in their entire lives. You have faced great loss, but allowed it to grow you rather than crush you. Perhaps our image was our reason behind looking to adopt, but you Peter, you in particular are here because on paper you seemed an extraordinary young man, and in person proved to be even more so. I hope this answer is sufficient to fight any concerns you may have over your place here.”

Peter gaped. “Oh. Uh, yeah.”
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Happy New Year!! Enjoy some Daredevil and some angst!

Matt Murdock froze from his position in front of the stove, turning it off even though his finely-honed nose said that the chicken wasn’t near fully cooked. He was much less concerned with the scent of raw chicken and much more interested in the sound of a heartbeat that seemed to encompass an entire marching band. Strong, frequent, powerful, and loud, and also, familiar. The slightest slip of a relieved sigh breathed past the man’s lips, even as he gingerly moved to don his nightly uniform. His body was still multi-colored from the battle two nights before, and he was exhausted from preparing for the trial he was going to be in the next day. He’d been planning to go to sleep the instant he’d eaten, but that plan faded from thought as he slipped on the familiar body suit. After all, he’d nearly given up hope of ever hearing that distinctive beat again. Spider-Man had disappeared roughly a week and a half prior, without a single web to be seen since. With the way the Daily Bugle stalked the vigilante, Matt was sure that one of the man’s villains had proven too powerful. He had been silently mourning the other crime fighter, though they hadn’t known one another long and probably never would have been friends in their normal personas, a sort of kinship had formed between the two as Spider-Man appeared in Hell’s Kitchen seeking guidance.

Truthfully, Daredevil had sought him out first, right after that Parker kid had managed to get a picture. The boy had already taken several of Spider-Man, so his interest and paranoia had been piqued until Foggy had given the all clear on Parker. Of course, by that time Matt had already spoken to Spider-Man and had gained the younger vigilante yapping on his heels like a puppy. Younger. It rankled Daredevil that for all his abilities and training, that was the best qualifier he could come up with. The other vigilante’s heartbeat was too irregular, his body temperature too high. Even his breathing had something off about it, almost irregularly healthy. There were no tell-tale creaks and groans of muscles even when the man pulled off the most incredible contortions, but that once again could be because of his powers. He couldn’t get a good enough read. He was clearly not prepubescent, and clearly younger than Foggy and him, but he couldn’t narrow it down any further than that colossal gap.

Costumed, Daredevil stole up to the roof. His steps were so silent that even he could barely hear them, the pain that stiffened his muscles earlier faded into the background as he focused on the vigilante on the roof. He didn’t think that Spider-Man knew that their usual meeting place was the roof of his home, in fact he was fairly certain of it, and he intended to keep it that way. Luckily, or not luck so much as countless trips to the roof to oil the hinges, the door slipped open silently and closed just as quietly.

On the roof he paused, the feel and sound of the air revealing the other vigilante to be sitting on the edge of the roof, swinging his legs. Yet it was the scent that the softly flowing wind brought that interested Daredevil more than anything.

It was Spider-Man, he was certain. The smell of spandex, sweat, and the unnatural scent of the webbing assured him of that. But Spider-Man had always smelled of bargain-brand shampoo and soap, cheap laundry detergent and sub-par cafeteria food. Occasionally he would have the scent of
chemicals as though from a lab, recently he would have a slight scent of secondhand smoke.

That wasn’t what he smelled like anymore. No, he smelled of fresh, healthy food filled with foreign expensive spices, motor oil and the scents of an engineering lab, and the type of shampoo that only the richest of the clients at Landman and Zach had used. Daredevil frowned. He was due for one powerful explanation.

“You’re here early.” He broke the silence, rewarded by a loud yelp as the boy nearly startled off the building.

“Wha- oh! You too! I thought I’d have to wait until night for you to show up.”

“I… heard that you were here and assumed that you wanted to meet.”

“You hear I- woah! Do you have spies all over the city? The Daredevil squad. No! The Hell’s Kitchen Irregulars! Wait, that doesn’t work. It’s supposed to be a street name. What street is this?”

Daredevil rose an eyebrow. The cowl hid the motion, but Spider-Man seemed to catch it all the same because he immediately deflated.

“Sorry,” he nearly mumbled. “I’m a little… stressed.”

The lawyer in him wanted to discuss it, play the charismatic good cop and squeeze all the information he could out of the young man, but he wasn’t Matt Murdock right now. He was Daredevil, and he did things differently. Daredevil wasn’t smooth words and calm but probing questions. He was blunt and brute. That didn’t mean he didn’t know how play a conversation like a violin.

“You haven’t been seen in awhile.” He said frankly, not commenting the other vigilante’s confession.

“Yeah,” Spider-Man let out a heavy, sputtering sigh. “I guess that’s kinda part of it.”

Daredevil said nothing, not moving, barely breathing. Barely a moment of silence passed before Spider-Man began pacing, one hand going back to rub at the back of his neck. “My uh, living situation has kind of changed a lot.”

‘I’ll say,’ Daredevil thought as the motions brought another whiff of insanely-priced hair product to his sensitive nose. Still, he didn’t say that. Spider-Man, for all he seemed immature, was insanely smart. He liked correcting false statements, loved finding and sharing the truth. Knowing this…

“I’m not in the position to be handing out loans if that’s what this meeting is about.”

“No no no!” The boy yelped, just as Matt knew he would. “That’s not the problem. Actually that’s kinda the exact opposite of my problem.” Then, to Daredevil’s surprise, Spider-Man left it at that. Spider-Man never gave so little details, vague just wasn’t in his vocabulary. Unless of course, it was related to his secret identity. Daredevil continued to stare at the boy, curiosity and uneasiness warring in his stomach as he thought through his next course of action. He shouldn’t have bothered. Almost immediately Spider-Man groaned, fiddling with his web-shooting devices in nervous agitation.

“I was approached by… some people as my normal self, and I thought they were going to use me because, I’m me, you know Spider-Man. And so I agreed because it seemed cool that Spider-Man would get to… work with the people. But it turns out they have no interest in Spider-Man and don’t know that I’m me, and so they’re using me for me as in civilian me and it turns out they’re using me for different reasons and I don’t really know if I would have agreed if I knew they wanted Me-me and not Spider-Man-me. Like, if there wasn’t Spider-Man-me then Me-me would have definitely
agreed, but I am Spider-Man and not just me so I don’t know that I should have said yes, but now I can’t back out because they would want to know why and it would be like, insane to not want this, at least for anyone other than Spider-Man, but I am Spider-Man. But with them nearby it’s going to be so much harder to be Spider-Man because they’re going to be a lot better at catching me so I can’t be Spider-Man but I am Spider-Man.”

The boy paused for a moment, breathing deeply as Matt attempted to untangle the young man’s frantic rambling. Hell’s Kitchen’s vigilante tensed as the dots connected. The kid had practically revealed everything.

To be fair, it is possible that someone else wouldn’t have realized it. Perhaps it would have been vague to someone who couldn’t smell the expensive food and toiletries. Perhaps it would have been undecipherable to someone who couldn’t recognize the scent of an engineering lab. But Spider-Man hadn’t gone to someone like that. He’d sought out Daredevil, who put the scents of science and rich together with the idea of someone who might be interested in Spider-Man and came to one conclusion: Tony Stark.

It was simple after that, the boy had come into contact with Tony Stark, probably in the form of a job or internship offer, and had accepted thinking that the offer was a front for getting Spider-Man into the Avengers. Instead, the man simply wanted Spider-Man’s civilian self, understandable; the boy really was incredibly smart. Now Spider-Man was concerned about his secret identity. Still, the young man clearly wanted privacy, and Daredevil could respect that. Besides, what had happened wasn’t nearly as important as what was going to happen.

“Are you hanging up the cape?” The man asked.

“No capes!” Spider-Man replied immediately, his voice high and harsh to imitate a cartoon character. Yet another reason the blind was convinced that the other vigilante was younger.

Never mind the fact that Foggy had said the exact same thing a week ago when he’d used that phrase.

“Uh, Sorry.” Spider-Man coughed, his heartbeat rising as he blushed in embarrassment. “I mean, yes. For a while at least. I have some ideas to help hide my identity better, but it’s going to be a while before I can actually start working on them.” He shifted on his feet. “Do you think you could just… maybe keep an eye out for my area of New York until I get back? Just make sure it’s not going too crazy?”

“… I don’t work in the daylight.” He responded, knowing that the other would understand it as agreement to keep an eye out at night. Just as he expected, the boy sighed in relief.

“Thanks. And thanks for listening. I haven’t been able to really process any of this stuff for a few days. It was nice to talk it out.”

Matt nodded, silently wondering when he became a counselor for a spider-themed-vigilante.

“Hey!” The boy suddenly perked. “This was the last day I’ll be able to do this for a while. Think it’s dark enough to go and find some mobsters to bring down or something.”

He had no clue actually. Still, it was easy to deflect that one. “That doesn’t sound smart. If Spider-Man disappears when… these people approach you, then appears tonight only to disappear again, it may-”

The boy groans loudly. “Yeah, they’d figure it out. This sucks.” He sighs. “What if we were really
really subtle about it.”

“Spider-Man…”

“Yeah, I know. But, but the thing is, if he disappears the day they ad-I mean, the day we met then they might figure it out anyway.”

Daredevil bit a sigh before it could sneak out. That was true. He had to fight to keep a grimace from crossing his features. He really didn’t want to do this, but… the kid would have done it for him. They’d had each other’s’ backs too often for him to be able to just turn the other vigilante away in his time of need. He was going to regret this.

“You have another suit?”

“Oh, uh, not really.” The boy answered, his heart rate kicking up in surprise and confusion. “I-I mean not yet. I’m probably going to work on a new one now that I have the money I guess. Maybe make some improvements…”

The boy’s voice trailed off for a moment as he clearly began to consider plans for what he could do with the new resources at his disposal. After a moment of silence the boy physically shook himself out of his thoughts. “Why?”

“Leave it in the alley when you go. Make sure they see you around at night for the next few days, I’m not going to do this long.” He was going to regret this so much. At least if “Daredevil” laid low for a few days it might get Foggy to relax a little. Though he had no clue how his best friend would react if he found out Matt was fighting crime in… whatever Spider-Man was wearing.

“Wait- you’re going to-really?!”

“Don’t make me regret it.” The younger man let out a shrill screech and launched himself at Daredevil, wrapping the tense man in a hug for a millisecond before jumping away.

“Oh- sorry-I-I just- thank you so much.”

Unsure how to respond to such overt gratitude, Matt simply nodded awkwardly, knowing his cowl would make it seem much more confident, and turned to leave the roof. He waited until the strong heartbeat of the other vigilante had faded into the sound of the city before moving to get to the suit. He wasn’t looking forward to being Spider-Man, but he figured the kid needed all the help he could get.

Peter stopped, shrugging his shoulders in attempt to fix his backpack straps onto his slim shoulders without letting go of the many bundles of flowers in his arms. It didn’t work and he was left entering the cemetery with the straps digging into the crook of his elbows. He’d taken care of the living; asking Daredevil to watch over the city, visiting the library to research the average 15-year-old’s strength and stamina, and getting one last fry at the restaurant where he and Gwen used to hang out. Now it was time to pay respects to the dead. He fell to his knees in front of Gwen’s headstone, the bundles slipping out of suddenly weak arms.

“Gwen.” He laughed wetly, staring at the memorial to the only one who knew both sides of who he was. He lay the bundle of roses softly beside the stone. “Gwen, you wouldn’t believe what I’ve gotten myself into this time.”

He talked for what felt like forever, finally able to bridge the gap between his two identities and speak about Peter’s insecurities alongside Spider-Man’s fears. He could explain the confusing
distress and pride that arrived when he realized they wanted him not for his powers but his intelligence. He complained about the corner of his room that was just begging for a web-hammock that he could never put up. He talked and talked, until his hoarse voice finally petered out. Finally, he let out a shuddering sigh and ran his hand over the top of the gravestone and began collecting the other flowers. “Love you.” He mumbled, an insanely smart, funny, beautiful blonde in his mind’s eye.

His heart grew steadily heavier as he walked through the cemetery to the once-small plot that had grown far too large in recent years. He breathed deeply as he lay down a bouquet of flowers beside each of the four graves. He still couldn’t bring himself to tell them who he was, what he’d done and become. He still couldn’t bring up the name Spider-Man. That’s ok. Peter Parker had plenty to say.

He walked around the four gravestones, laying a bundle at the foot of each stone as he greeted them. “Hey Mom, Dad, Uncle Ben, Aunt May.” His voice finally cracked on the last one. It was too recent, they all were really, but she’d died on his watch. Spider-Man had been right there, helping people, saving them from accidents, rushing them to the hospital. He hadn’t been able to help fight whoever the Avengers had been battling, but he’d done what he could to help others. He hadn’t made in time to save Aunt May. He’d found her, but too late.

She’d died in his arms as he screamed for the paramedics scrambling around the rubble to hurry. She’d died with her eyes unfocused and Peter’s names on her lips, though she never knew that her head was in her child’s lap.

A sob sneaked out of Peter’s mouth as the moment flashed past his mind vividly. “I miss you guys.” For a long moment the only sound in the cemetery was the boy’s heavy breathing as he struggled to control himself. He hadn’t been to the cemetery since Aunt May’s funeral, a cheap affair attended by dozens of people who had loved her.

“I- I’m sorry I haven’t been here a lot. It’s been kinda… yeah.” He laughed wetly, unsure how to continue. It’s been what? Busy? Yes, he’d been running himself ragged every night before the Avenger’s as Spider-Man, terrified of stopping and thinking and remembering. Stressful? Yeah, he’d spent the last week and a half in an intense ‘address the public’ bootcamp that had him scared to say the word ‘hi’ lest it somehow lead to the end of the world. Hard? Yeah. He couldn’t kid himself, he could have made time if he’d tried; if he wanted to. He hadn’t. He couldn’t see another person he loved reduced to a single sentence on a stone. He couldn’t see the fourth marker of loss and know who lay beyond it, know why she lay there. The guilt and grief rose together, making his hands shake as he stood over the shells of those he loved.

He hadn’t been strong enough before, but the Avengers were… helping. Just being around them was helping, making him feel more grounded, more stable. It didn’t hurt that this was probably going to be the last day he would be able to visit them without a bodyguard of some kind. For a while at least.

He took a deep breath and sat cross legged on the grass. “You guys wouldn’t believe what’s happening here right now. The Parker luck I guess. I uh, I got adopted by the Avengers. Yeah, all of them. They were looking for someone whose parents died in Avenger fights and they were, uh, really impressed with me. Especially Mr. Stark. I guess I take after you guys a lot.” He turned to his parents with a smile before then looking to his aunt and uncle. “And it looks like all of those elaborate science fair projects really paid off. I guess…” He trailed off for a moment before hesitantly describing the men he lived with, so alike and different from the heroes on TV. He spoke specifically to Uncle Ben, remembering the man’s excitement and admiration for the heroes who’d saved the world from aliens in the scent weeks before his death. He spoke long past when his voice started becoming rough, until an alarm on his phone reminded him that he had to be back at the tower soon. He sighed and straightened the flowers on the gravestones. “Love you.”
He stood, wiping the dirt and bits of grass off the pants that probably cost more than all of his old wardrobe put together. He was unsurprised when the slightest tingling of spider-sense drew his eyes to a single figure sitting comfortably on a stone bench by the path.

“Sam,” He greeted, shuffling up to the man while pulling up his backpack.

“How was I alone any part of today?” He was, he knew he was. There was no way Sam would be sitting here this comfortably if they found out he was Spider-Man. Still, he couldn’t help a thrill of fear at the question.

Sam, however, simply nodded. “Most of the day actually. Trust me, Nat’s ticked about it.”

A smile flit across Peter’s mouth. “I knew she was following me, but I never actually saw her so I had no clue if I ever managed to lose her.” Without his Spider sense he never would have known.

“You’re about to get some fun one on one time with Black Widow this week.”

“Great.” He said weakly, before perking up. Sure it would be hard work, but he would be training with the Black Widow! How amazing was that? “Wait really?”

The man smirked. “See if you’re that excited after your first session.”

Peter chuckled, but the sound soon faded. “So, uh, if she didn’t follow me how did you find me?”

“I knew you’d be here.”

“Oh.” Once again silence. The two heroes sat side by side, their breathing scarcely heard as they were surrounded by the deafening silence only a cemetery can achieve. Sam’s entire posture was relaxed, he wasn’t even looking at Peter, instead gazing serenely out to the rock-strewn field. Peter could ask to leave at any moment, or he could invite Sam to see his family. The choice was Peter’s; Sam wouldn’t judge him either way. Maybe that’s why the choice was so easy to make.

“Do you want to meet them?”

“I’d be honored.”

The boy led the man through the pathways, walking over well trampled grass to the row of four stones. “Mom, Dad, Aunt May, Uncle Ben, this is Sam Wilson, uh, Falcon. But I guess only you would get what that means, Aunt May.”

Sam glanced at Peter out of the corner of his eye, but the boy was looking to the ground so he knelt beside the nearest stone, Benjamin Parker. “You all raised an amazing boy. If you could see him now, you’d be proud. Heck, I’m sure you’re proud already. We’ll take good care of him, I promise.”

With that he gave a moment of silence, head bowed, before he rose in a fluid motion and clapped Peter on the shoulder. The two left in silence, each trapped in their own thoughts. Finally, when they were nearly to the steps of the tower and the atmosphere of the cemetery had nearly completely melted away, Sam spoke.

“You ready for the press conference tomorrow?”

“Not really.” The boy admitted with a cringe.
“Good.” He ruffled the teen’s hair, ignoring Peter’s indignant squawk. “If you’d said yes I would have marched you to one of those fancy head doctors Tony keeps around to check us for concussions.”
Chapter 7

Why was he doing this again? What possible reason was worth this? The teen shifted uncomfortably in between Tony and Natasha as Steve stood at a nearby podium droning on and on about how sorry they were for the destruction their fights left, and they were working to fix it and bla bla bla. Peter knew he should have been paying attention, or at least pretending to. Pepper, who was standing beside Steve, had drilled that into him enough. He couldn’t though, it was impossible.

How was he supposed to pay attention in an uncomfortable suit that cost more than the mortgage on Aunt May’s house, lights glaring on him, and half the photographers pointing their cameras at him rather than any of the actual celebrities on the stage as they struggled to figure out why a nobody teenager was surrounded by the Avengers? Worst of all he was going to have to talk soon. He was going to have to talk in front of all these people and pretty much anyone in the world that had a TV or the internet.

He was going to barf.

Suddenly Tony’s breath was in his ear. “Calm down kid, you look like you’re going to ruin that suit and your lunch all at once.”

The boy nodded, afraid to open his mouth lest something other than words spill out.

“You remember what they always say about imagining the audience naked?” Another nod. “Yeah, don’t. Everyone out there is either a smoking hot reporter or an overweight cameraman. Trust me, you don’t want to picture either of them naked when you’re trying to focus on talking.”

Peter swallowed thickly, trying to breathe through his nose. He’d spoken to reporters as Spider-Man before, sure. That had been all spur of the moment things though, nothing like this. He never worried about ruining Spider-Man’s reputation; Spider-Man had no reputation. At least, nothing he had to worry about ruining.

“If it helps,” Tony spoke again. “Pepper has about 20 different contingency plans in place in case you mess up.”

That didn’t help.

“Just to let you know though, none of us think you’re going to need any of them.”

That… ok that helped a little. Peter cast a slight smile at Tony and the billionaire grinned and clapped him on the shoulder, almost distracting both of them from Steve’s next words.

“We understand that right now, people have a lot to grieve. Men and women have lost jobs. Families have lost homes. Parents have lost children. Children have lost families. We can’t bring any of that back. We can’t promise that there won’t be another threat, another fight. The only thing we can do is this: we can put programs in place to protect what remains and help those who have suffered. Moreover, while we know that we can’t bring back that which is gone, we can help people heal. With that said, I would like to introduce you all to Peter Parker, the newly adopted member of the Avengers’ family.”

It should be said that the announcement was such a surprise that the room full of reporters was dead silent for a good three seconds, until finally chaos erupted. Peter tripped over air on his way to the podium, the flickering lights and screaming reporters even worse in light of the enhanced senses he was trying so hard to hide.
The noise and movement silenced into an intense, almost palpable concentration as he actually stood at the podium. “Um, hi.”

Chaos. Lights, pictures, yelled questions clamoring for attention. A weight on his shoulder once again as Captain America gave his “I’m-disappointed-in-you” glare at the reporters until they silenced once more without him saying a word. Part of that could have also been the fierce glare that Pepper was sporting, but either way.

“Hi, I’m uh, Peter Parker and I, uh-” He coughed as his voice caught in his throat, hoping beyond belief that Pepper truly did have a million back up plans. “Sorry. Midtown High didn’t offer speech class until Junior year.”

A small spattering of chuckles ran through the crowd. That hadn’t been a joke, but, ok. Peter took another deep breath steeling his nerves. If he could fight giant man-lizards he could do this.

Maybe. Peter somehow managed to stammer though the speech Pepper had been drilling in him night after night, praying that his constant breaks seemed more like he was searching for words instead of trying to remember lines.

He’d finally made it to his closing statement, just one blessed sentence away from being able to escape the spotlight. That was it, all he had to say was ‘The Avengers have given me a new shot at life, and I am proud to be part of their family.’ Cheesey? Yeah. He didn’t write it. Which was probably a good thing actually, the whole speech was completely quip free. Maybe that was why it was so hard to remember it.

Still, he was almost free. He just had to say it; “The Avengers have-“

“Peter Parker!” A voice suddenly startled the words from his throat as one reporter broke through the crowd. Oh crap, Peter recognized him. “Peter Parker, Daily Bugle here, you used to work for an anti-hero newspaper, correct.”

“Uh,” he glanced at Pepper, but she was giving the reporter a steely glare and not looking at Peter at all. “Yes? I did.”

“How did you go from working for an anti-hero newspaper to living with heroes? Why did your view on heroes suddenly change?”

“Oh, I was never, uh, anti-hero. I’ve always been pro-hero.” Wow he sounded stupid, why wasn’t Pepper fixing this? “I just needed money and Jameson paid a lot for hero pictures. So I guess, uh, my position on heroes didn’t change, but my financial position did?” Great, now he sounded like a gold-digger. This was terrible.

Apparently, the Bugle’s question gave the rest of the reporters the push they needed and the room erupted in questions and blinking lights once more. Peter found himself stammering replies, the Avengers remaining silent behind him.

“Peter! Where are you from?”

“Uh, Queens?”

“How old are you?”

“15?”

“Who’s your favorite superhero?”

Tony barked out a laugh and commented, “Told you the kid was smart,” loud enough for the cameras to pick it up.

“Is it true? Are you smart?” One of the reporters immediately asked.

“I guess. I, uh, was qualified for a STARK internship.”

“Is that why they adopted you?”

“Um, it’s-”

“Hah!” The Bugle reporter scoffed loud enough for all eyes to be drawn to him. Peter caught Pepper tensing in the corner of his eye, but the man continued before she could do anything. “We all know why he was adopted. Peter, how does it feel to know you were adopted as a PR stunt?”

The room broke into noise again, though most of the attention seemed to be the other reporters yelling at the unrepentant Bugle employee, who ignored them all, his beady eyes locked on Peter. The teen shifted, his eyes darting back to catch Vision’s calm gaze. Well crap, there was no way he was going to be as eloquent as the alien-computer-magical… as Vision. Uh oh, he was going to say something stupid. It was bubbling out, he couldn’t stop it.

“Sure, when Daddy Warbucks does it, it’s a classic family feel-good story, when the Avengers do it, it’s a crime.” Yep, there it was. Oh man, he could hear Tony and Rhodey laughing behind him, and was that Sam too? No, he wasn’t going to look. Nope. He was just going to stand here getting so red that his spidey-suit was probably getting jealous. “Not that I’m little orphan Annie!” He blurted, only to be hit with the intense desire to bang his head on the podium as the group behind him laughed even louder. There was even a feminine laugh in the mix. Peter desperately hoped that was Wanda, thinking he’d combust if he found out he found out that his stupidity actually got the Black Widow to laugh.

“What I mean is they could have gotten a little orphan Annie. There were plenty of adorable little kids with curly hair and chubby cheeks that would have looked a lot better in the pictures and they wouldn’t have had to worry so much about them saying something stupid. Instead they chose me because I can actually hold a conversation with most of them a-and if the tower is ever attacked or something I’ll be able to follow protocols and stuff. They could have gotten an adorable little kid who’s all smiles and ‘animal crackers in my soup’.” He heard a snort from behind him and a breathless ‘that isn’t even from Annie’ which he ignored. “But they chose me because even if I’m not the best choice for a photo opp, I was the one they thought would be the best choice for the family. So… yeah. I’m not sure how to end that.”

Once more the room clamored into noise, though one reporter’s voice sounded above the rest. “It was implied that one reason you were adopted because of family members who have died as a result of the Avengers actions. If that’s true, how has that affected your relationship with-“

A loud clang interrupted the words as Pepper slammed a heel onto the podium. “That is enough. You will not ask Peter personal questions about his losses.” Her words were rich with scorn and distaste for the man who would dare ask a 15-year-old about the death of his family.

“Um, actually I think… I think I know how to answer this.”

The woman looked to the boy in surprise. They hadn’t expected anyone to be so crass as to actually
ask this question. They hadn’t prepared anything. Still, she simply nodded and stepped aside, tensed and ready for damage control.

Peter faced the microphone once more, nervously clearing his throat. “I don’t blame the Avengers.” He stopped, pausing for a moment as though that were all he was going to say. “My parents first died 8 years ago, the night Iron Man showed up in New York City, in a collision. According to the driver of the other car, Iron Man swooped low and he’d swerved to avoid hitting him, but he didn’t look and ended up killing my parents instead. I don’t blame Iron Man, I blame Obadiah Stane. I’m horrified that Stane was attempting to give terrorists and criminals incredible weapons, not that Iron Man was trying to stop him.

“A lot of people got hurt because of the battle of New York, both during and after it, but I don’t want to begin to imagine a world where they weren’t here. I don’t want to consider a world where all the aliens came through and Loki won. There was so much death in Sokovia, but from how I understand it Ultron was planning to kill everybody. How many people would have died if those people had managed to steal the disease? How many would have died if the bomb went off in the street instead of the embassy? I think, that we shouldn’t judge the Avengers based on how many people they lost, at least not without considering how many they’ve saved.

“That doesn’t make it hurt any less.” His voice turned gravely, thick with grief. “I know that. Thinking about how everyone could be dead doesn’t change the fact that some people, people I loved, are gone. I-It still hurts, so so much. I still miss them every day. I don’t blame the Avengers for their deaths. I blame the villains that forced the Avengers’ hands. My Uncle—” His voice cracked, the sound faltering as it left his mouth and he closed his eyes for a precious two breaths to hold himself together. This was a bad idea, he wanted off this stage. Still, he had to say it.

“My Uncle Ben used to have a saying ‘With great power comes great responsibility’, it’s the responsibility to do what’s right, the responsibility to fight what’s wrong. It’s the responsibility to protect and help those who don’t have that great power. The Avengers have incredible power, unbelievable power, but that also means they have incredible responsibility. If these threats surface and they do nothing, if they save no one because they can’t save everyone, then when the bad things happen it’s on them. They have to fight, because they’re the only ones who can. So, I guess to answer your question: it hasn’t really affected our relationship, because I don’t think it’s their fault. Uh, that is all.”

Pepper leaned to the microphone before the reporters could speak again, “Thank you for your time. Good day.” With a hand on the back of Peter’s back she led the boy away to a flurry of lights and shouted questions. The Avengers moved without thinking, creating a circle around their newest member and blocking the intrusive cameras.

“Was- was that ok?” He ventured, and Pepper scoffed.

“You’re writing your own speeches from now on.”

“How about I never go on stage again? Is, uh, is that an option.” The woman snorted in response, rolling her eyes. “Yeah, I was worried about that.”

Steve’s hand came to rest on the teen’s shoulders. “You can write mine too.”

Tony snorted. “You can only write mine if I get to call myself Daddy Warbucks in it at least twice.”

Peter groaned as they left the building, the door closing to separate them from the still flashing cameras.
“Matt, the Avengers are being blackmailed!” A man with long blonde hair yelled, slamming the door to Matthew Murdock’s apartment open. Matt paused in his reading, his hand midway through a sentence and froze on the single dot of the ‘A’ in agency. He’d heard Foggy rushing towards him from several blocks away, but whatever he’d been expecting the man to say, this wasn’t it.

“Foggy, what are you-“ He was interrupted by a loud gasp.

“Matt, you did not seriously go out again did you? You were literally bleeding out on the couch two days ago. I had to buy you a new couch cover.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Matt smiled innocently, charmingly. “By the way shouldn’t you be going over the case facts for the trial later?” He asked, waving a hand over the braille books and documents littering his coffee table, the like me heavily implied.

“Oh no. You don’t get to do this Murdock. I know this suit was spotless yesterday morning, I dropped it off for you from the guy who cleans it. Now, there’s blood, right on the forearm. And oh look.” The man crossed the room and grabbed Daredevil’s hand. “Oh wow, a brand new bandage on the cut you got the other day.”

“What an interesting coincidence.” Matt replied blandly.

“We’re lawyers Matt. We don’t believe in coincidence.”

A smirk played along the blind man’s lips. “Alright, alright.” Foggy let go of his arms, sitting heavily on the couch and casting his best friend a steely look that Matt couldn’t see but could certainly feel. “But I wasn’t lying. I didn’t go out or get into any fights.”

Foggy opened his mouth to argue but Matt cut him off. “I’m not stupid Foggy. I know when enough is enough.”

“Historical evidence would suggest otherwise,” The other man mumbled, but Daredevil ignored the comment.

“Spider-Man wanted to talk with me. We never even left the roof.”


“Occasionally.”

“Murdock I swear-“

“What were you saying about the Avengers?”

Foggy gaped at him for a moment or two before turning with a huff and pulling his phone out of his pocket. The familiar tone of a news channel’s theme song sounded and Matt frowned. “Is this what you were doing instead of preparing for the trial?”

“I can multi-task. Now shush.”

Daredevil shushed and listened to the clip, a video revealing the shocking news that the Avengers had done a press release announcing that they were adopting a young man whose family had been killed in Avengers related events. Lucky him. Barely a minute had passed before Foggy paused the
clip. “See!”

“No, not really.”

“Matt!” Foggy groaned.

Matt smirked at him before sighing. “What about taking care of orphans screams blackmail to you?”

The blond sputtered for a moment. “Did you not catch the kid’s name? Peter Parker! The kid that sold that picture of you to the Bugle! The one that does the Spider-Man pictures! He must have some kind of dirt on the Avengers, some kind of terrible pictures or something that they want to hide. Why else would they suddenly adopt a random kid? A random kid who sells pictures to most anti-hero newspaper on the planet?”

“So, you saw this article and your first response is that the Avengers are getting blackmailed… by a fifteen-year-old. Really? He could have just asked for money, there was no reason to put a target on his head.”

“He’s a teenager. They don’t always think things through.”

“So your argument is that this kid is smart enough to blackmail the Avengers, but isn’t smart enough to realize that he shouldn’t be publicly seen with a group of people who are on the most wanted list of every criminal organization in the world.”

“… Maybe. Matt, you gotta admit. It’s suspicious.”

Matt snorted. “Find me when you have more evidence. In the meantime, do our opening statement.”

The man’s partner sighed, but dutifully obeyed. As the young lawyer began his vehement and near-perfect statement Matt settled his chin in his hand and allowed his mind to wander. A young, nervous voice played in his mind, a memory of the day before.

I was approached by… some people as my normal self, and I thought they were going to use me because, I’m me, you know Spider-Man… But it turns out they have no interest in Spider-Man and don’t know that I’m me, and so they’re using me for me as in civilian me.

The blind man closed his eyes and breathed a near silent sigh through his nose. Secret identities were sacred, not to be revealed until one was ready to do so. Daredevil would respect the secrecy of a secret identity until the day someone revealed it to him. Unfortunately, Spider-Man… Peter Parker hadn’t gotten that chance. Not anymore at least.

That kid was in a heap of trouble.
The next few weeks passed in a blur for Peter. He was kept under house arrest for the vast majority of it, but he didn’t mind so much now that Pepper’s public appearance boot camp was over. He was pretty sure he spent the most of the first week entirely on the ropes course. He hadn’t been able to use his powers, and had to be strapped in these weird Iron-man harness-jetpack things that stopped him if he was falling. Pepper was currently trying to patent it to sell to rock-climbing gyms and summer camps, and Peter wondered how often he would end up as an unknowing guinea pig.

He’d had so much fun climbing on the first day after the press conference that he hadn’t realized it was lunchtime until he was half an hour late. He’d been preparing to jump down when Natasha materialized, he swears, on the platform next to him with a cooler full of food. He had only his spider-reflexes and Stark’s harness to thank for keeping him from careening to the gym floor for that one. Black Widow had smirked at him over the top of a sandwich. “You’re much easier to sneak up on than Spider-Man.”

The teen had chuckled nervously as he sat beside her and reached for the bowl of chips. The crunch of the home-fried snack nearly drowned out the woman’s next words. “Don’t worry, we’ll change that.” Inhaling in sharp surprise, Peter managed to breathe in the half-chewed chips. He coughed in response, casting the woman a surprised look all the while. The Avenger simply half-smiled and handed the teen a can of soda.

“Are you trying to kill me?” The boy accused teasingly once he could breathe again.

Natasha laughed, “Wait until you begin to train before asking that.”

Peter had groaned at the time, mostly in jest, and the Avenger and the teen had spent the rest of the meal sitting amicably together as they regaled stories of undercover missions and high school respectively. They spent the next lunch the same way, and the four after that.

Of course, it wasn’t all fun and games and climbing walls. Hardly a day went by after the press conference before nearly all the high schools in New York had sent Peter an invitation to enroll. Invitations from schools across the country and world came soon after. After a week of that Pepper made Peter sit for a test that definitively proved that he was operating at a college level or above.

Tony had frowned at the results. “What were you still doing in High School, kid? You probably could have tested out a while ago.”

“We, uh, couldn’t afford college.” The boy admitted sheepishly, before catching the billionaire’s eyes. “Besides, Aunt May and uncle Ben wanted me to be able to make friends my own age.”

Steve’s head shot up at that, guilt clear on his face. “Peter, do you have any friends you’d like us to meet? Or Invite over? We didn’t mean to keep you from them.”
Tony nodded, already mentally planning the fastest way to do a background check and get clearance for whoever Peter named. The boy however, was staring at the ground. “No, I uh…” Cause how do you say that your girlfriend died in Spider-Man’s arms and your best friend turned into a villain without giving away your secret identity? How do you say that other than them, the only people who acknowledged you were those that bullied you without seeming weak in front of your heroes? “No, I uh didn’t. It didn’t really work- I, um, no. I-I don’t have anyone I want to talk to.”

The heroes frowned, but no one knew what to say in response. The room was silent for a moment until Wanda had jumped to her feet and dragged the boy off, speaking loudly about a game she’d discovered online and wanted to try playing with him. The room remained pensive for several minutes after they left.

Of course, once news got out that Peter wouldn’t be attending high school, colleges from all over the world started sending mail. They didn’t read it of course, but Pepper got calls almost daily from the overwrought mail room that was reluctant to throw away something that may be important for the Avenger’s new child, especially when he hadn’t chosen a college yet.

Finally, after reassuring the employee for what felt like the millionth time that it was fine to just throw all of the offers away, she turned to the sheepish-looking boy avoiding eye contact on the couch across from her. “Peter, how would you feel about officially declaring a gap year?”

“What?” The boy exclaimed, obviously not having considered it.

“A gap year? Taking a break between high school and college.”

“I know what- I-I mean I guess if you want… Just… I-I mean what would I do ?”

“Just, take some time to settle in.” The CEO said kindly, “Consider the new direction your life is going in.”

“Get used to your celebrity status,” Stark added with a grin.

“Get used to this Avengers nonsense.” Sam smirked.

“Allow yourself to de-stress and get comfortable.” Wanda smiled.

“Think through your options carefully.” Rhodey put in.

“Learn what a school will never teach you.” Natasha grinned.

“Come to understand who you wish to be.” Vision contributed solemnly.

Tony smiled before speaking again. “And if you get bored with all that, you can come and tinker in the lab as long as you don’t touch my music.”

“Oh.” The boy had said softly. “Um, ok then.”

The public was up in arms about the Avengers ‘keeping a poor child from proper education’ within a week. Pepper managed to nip that one in the bud with a few well-placed quotes and a couple of videos of Peter, but it had still been shocking to discover how invested people he didn’t even know seemed to be in his future.

It wasn’t long after that before his house arrest was somewhat removed. He wasn’t able to go out alone, but the Avengers began sneaking him out on day trips in the best and most foolproof disguise
that the world’s mightiest heroes could come up with: a hat and a pair of sunglasses.

Yeah. Peter was skeptical. It seemed to work ok though, for a while at least. Inevitably someone with a phone would recognize them and post it to the @Avengers_spotted twitter account and wherever they were would be flooded with people with cameras and action figures and sharpies. (Peter’s own account, by the way, had gone up to be over 2,000,000 followers since the press conference. Much better than his previous 3.)

That still gave them an hour or two of uninterrupted time to do something outside of the tower. Since the tower held almost anything anyone could ever want, the ‘something outside’ almost always seemed to be something to do with shopping. They took him out to get T-shirts, running shoes, suits, books, room decorations, workout gear, casual clothes, you name it. And no matter what, no matter what store they were at, every single one somehow smuggled Avengers gear into the cart. Every time.

Peter had suddenly found himself privy to a lot of information about the Avengers. Information that the general public simply didn’t know. However, the thing that was most surprising of all: they were all major trolls. If there was any way, any way at all to get under each other’s, and the media’s, skin they would find it and pick at it. Apparently, Peter being caught in Avenger’s gear was one of those things.

The first time, he hadn’t even realized that the jacket had Captain America’s shield on the back. He was just going ice skating with Steve and Wanda and wanted to be warm. Then the papers had caught sight of it and gone crazy. Every tabloid in the world seemed to be bragging about finding Peter’s favorite Avenger. Tony had legitimately been sulking when they made it home that day. That day, apparently, had been the start of a war. Plain ballcaps would be traded for ones with the red M that came to symbolize the Scarlet Witch as he headed out the door. He would open up his wallet to pay somewhere only for it to be decorated with cartoon versions of War Machine. One morning every shirt he owned was gone other than the one with a picture of Falcon on it. He still had no clue how Tony was keeping him from changing his ringtone away from that “Iron Man” song. The text tone was even the sound of his suit blasting something for crying out loud. One day, Natasha somehow managed to change the Vision shirt he was wearing to a Black Widow one without him noticing. It was, frankly, terrifying. Steve was the worst though because he somehow decided it was his solemn duty to make sure Peter had not only Captain America gear, but Bucky Barnes gear too. This was made especially impressive because they had stopped producing Bucky gear around the time the war ended and it wasn’t like anyone was selling Winter Soldier stuff. Peter had no clue where the Bucky Barnes StarkPhone case came from, and he was frankly scared to ask.

So, when the day finally came that the Avengers decided to risk going out as a complete team, Peter was unsurprised to find that every single article of clothing he owned had been replaced with some form of Avengers gear. He was honestly quite terrified to see the Iron Man boxers for fear that Tony would find some way to reveal them so that he wouldn’t be the odd Avenger out. Still, with an indulgent sigh the boy slid them on along with the black jeans with the Black Widow symbol stitched on the back pockets. Then he slipped on the Captain America converse (and Bucky Barnes socks) and War Machine T-shirt, though the latter was mostly covered by a Falcon jacket with stylized wings on the back. The look was completed with a pair of Scarlet Witch sunglasses and a beanie that was supposed to look just like Vision’s head. In all, he looked like an obsessed hero fanatic who had no fashion sense who had been given a free gift card to Hero-Con.

He looked like an idiot.

Still, he was searching his room for an Iron-Man watch (a vain attempt to avoid a pantsing from billionaire Tony Stark) when an idea flashed into his mind and made his lips curl with a smirk. After
all, the thing that few people know about Peter—*but* everyone knew about Spider-Man—is that he was a bit of a troll as well. As was his Avengers-appointed bodyguard/chauffeur Happy, who would be driving him to the Shawarma shop since they had decided that it would better not to arrive in a group. With a slight smirk the boy sent off a few texts to the friendly man, grinning when Happy’s replies seemed nearly too enthusiastic.

However, the instant he received a picture of the very supplies he had asked for, a pit of dread began to fester in the teen’s stomach. This was probably a bad idea. No, it was a bad idea. He was trying to lie low, not rock the boat, keep his identity secret. This wouldn’t help. He should back out.

Yet when Happy appeared living up to his namesake, gripping his prize and enthusing about wanting to see everyone’s reactions, Peter just didn’t have it in him to mention his misgivings.

So, this of course all led up to Peter stepping into the small restaurant dressed not in the angry conglomeration of colors that his caregivers had set out for him, but rather an outfit consisting only of bright red and blue, with the occasional bit of black webbing.

Pepper, Steve, and Vision had all grinned so hard that Peter thought their faces would split. Natasha had nodded at him with a broad smirk that was somehow both approving and immensely amused. Sam, Wanda, Tony, and Rhodey laughed so hard they were recognized and they’d had to flee the restaurant before the press got there.

Peter hadn’t even gotten any Shawarma.

Of course, a few days after that he got his first glimpse at the true downfall of living with the Avengers: torture training.

“Jogging is not torture, Peter.” Sam rolled his eyes as he prodded the panting boy to pick up the pace.

“How can I remind you that I was a nerd before you guys took me in?” Peter groaned as he sped up slightly, dutifully ignoring Natashas ‘oh honey, don’t worry. You’re still a nerd now.’ “And also that it’s 6 o’clock in the morning.”

“You were already up,” Sam pointed out as he turned.

“On your left,” a familiar, and increasingly aggravating, voice called as Steve quickly passed the trio for the third time. Natasha rolled her eyes and picked up the pace a big to end up somewhere in between the inhumanely fast super soldier and the slower duo.

“I don’t know that I ever actually fell asleep.” Peter admitted, knowing that he had been up nearly the whole night trying to figure out a way to store web-shooter schematics on F.R.I.D.A.Y without Tony being able to find them. He’d just nearly found something useful when Sam had come in and threw a pair of running shoes at him.

“No, bad. See, that’s exactly why we’re doing this. One Tony is enough, trust me. Now, straighten your spine, try and copy my breathing.”

Peter dutifully did as told, only half listening as the flying hero began to drill him on proper running technique. He was too busy trying to figure out at what point he should start really breathing heavy and slowing down. He’d researched the athletic skills of the average teenager, but he couldn’t figure out if he should be a little under average because he was a nerd, or a little over average since his foster families and social worker all assumed he’d been getting in fights. A slight tingling of spidey-sense told him that someone was coming up on him from behind.
“On your left.”

Peter cast the smirking American legend a glare as he passed, only a vindictive little voice in the back of his mind reminding him that he would have been able to keep up if he were Spider-Man keeping him from sticking his tongue out or doing something equally as juvenile. The teen shook his head and forced himself to focus. They’d been jogging for probably around a mile and a half, about 15 minutes had passed, so at this point he should be lagging a bit, but he hadn’t done any activity really since he was adopted so would he be out of shape yet? Should he be lagging more than usual, it was the first day after all and he’d hadn’t gotten any sleep, but how much should that be affecting him. Crap, what if he’d already gone too far for too long, he couldn’t suddenly quit; he’d just started panting after all. Maybe he could- the slight tingling started again and Peter grinned. That could work.

“Saaaaamm, I’m tired,” He complained, moving slightly to the left and almost stopping completely.

“On your- oof!”

Peter yelped as he was nearly trampled by a super soldier, the Avenger’s reflexes catching the motion just in time to slow down before he literally ran the kid over. As it was, the man couldn’t stop his momentum completely and the two ended up sprawled on the sidewalk.

Steve shot up immediately, somehow still managing to appear graceful and he pulled Peter to his feet with a litany of apologies.

“I’m fine.” The boy said with a grimace-smile. “Promise, no, uh, harm done or anything.” He winced theatrically, “So is that it for jogging for today, or…” Sam snorted and even Steve smirked at him. Natasha rolled her eyes as she made her way to the group.

“How about this,” Captain America offered with a wink, “I know of a pretty good donut shop nearby, and,” He looked to his watch. “Their next batch should be coming out of the frying pan in just a few minutes. Think you can make another half mile.”

Peter perked, “Just point me the way.”

They were just getting back from a jogging session nearly a week later (Where Peter was making age-appropriate improvements) when a familiar voice made Peter stop in his tracks. They were in the back hallway of the building, making their way to the elevator, but he could still hear the shrill words carry and he found himself making his way to the lobby without consciously thinking it.

“-filled out the forms, and you said I passed the background check. Why can’t I just give them to him?”

“Ma’am,” The secretary began professionally, “Any packages must-”

“Mrs. Watson?” Peter interrupted, calling out to his and Aunt May’s old neighbor. The woman whirled around, a bright smile stretching across her face. Peter grinned as well, hurrying forward to give the woman a hug even as security personnel stepped forward. Steve waved them off as he made his way to the two, but Peter barely noticed as he greeted the nearly-elderly woman.

Mrs. Watson had lived next to Aunt May and Uncle Ben’s for as long as Peter could remember. She was significantly older than his aunt and uncle, but she had been a good family friend. She and May had been especially close, bonding over recipes and trashy TV. He hadn’t seen her since the funeral, honestly hadn’t really expected to see her again.
“What are you doing here?” The teen asked, wonder in his voice. The woman huffed in annoyance, a tone the boy well-remembered from when she had been used as a last minute babysitter when he was younger.

“Well Peter dear, I saw you on the television and wanted to send you a gift, but I’m afraid security here is much stricter than I prepared for. Why, I had to wait nearly a month just for a background check so I could bring it here and now they need to run it through more checks. I’m so worried the technology will ruin something.”

“Gift?”

Her smile broadened, “Yes! I was there when they were clearing out your old place, and found this in the stuff they were going to throw away.”

She moved to grab a box off the counter next to the blank-faced secretary, only to jump back with a startled “oh!” when another pair of arms reached out before she could touch it.

“Allow me ma’am,” Steve said with a smile as he lifted the box, surprised to find it much lighter than he expected. Still, he angled himself between Peter and the box as he moved to open it, just in case. However, below the lid simply sat a collection of cardboard cases with blocky titles.

The living legend took a moment to read them as Peter approached. *Peter’s first Christmas, Halloween 2004, Parker Wedding.*

“Our home movies.” Peter breathed, his voice coming out hoarse.

Mrs. Watson nodded, a soft smile on her lips. “I managed to nab the Parker photo album too. I’m sorry I wasn’t able to save more.”

“No.” Peter shook his head, hands trembling as a flood of unidentifiable emotions racked through his body and mind. “No, this is amazing. Thank you so much.”

He swept the woman into another hug, which she returned fiercely. Steve took several steps back, as did the other Avengers returning from the run, all loath to intrude upon the moment for Peter. Finally the hug ended, Peter trying very hard to hide his watery eyes as they separated. Sam took the opportunity to step forward, giving the teen a moment to turn and wipe his eyes in private.

“Would you like to join us for breakfast?” He offered, even as the nearby security personnel stiffened.

The woman simply shook her head. “I appreciate it, but I’m afraid I have an appointment I have to attend. Trust me, had I know I would get to actually see Peter and not just dropping off a box I would have given myself much more time.” She sighed slightly and looked back to where Peter was crouched over the box.

“Another time?” He offered.

The woman nodded. “Please. You take care of him now, Peter is a very special boy.”

“Mrs. Watson,” Peter moaned as he stood, cheeks red.

“No no, it’s true. In fact, your aunt and I had been trying to find a way to set you up with my lovely niece.”

“Oh, uh,” Peter stammered, not knowing how to politely point out that there were probably few
ways to get a date that were lamer than ‘our aunts set us up’. That is assuming that any girl other than Gwen would want to go on a date with nerdy Peter Parker.

The old woman simply laughed and enveloped him into a final bone-crushing hug. “I know, I know, so shy! Stay in touch, yes dear?”

“No.” Peter promised, and with a final regretful glance the woman hurried away to catch her appointment.

Peter was left in the lobby of STARK industries, surrounded by a handful of Avengers and a large cardboard box. “So… what do you think the chances are that Tony actually has a VHS player somewhere?”

While Tony did not, in fact, have any piece of tech so ancient as a VHS player, it took him less than an hour to build a device that would not only play the old movies, but would download the content into the computer as they watched. Peter spent the time in the media room, clutching the first scrap book with one hand so tightly that his knuckles were turning stark white. The other hand rested on top of the open book, brushing over the pictures and turning each page with deliberate care, treating the sheets of plastic as though it were an ancient artifact liable to crumble at any hint of roughness.

Wanda sat curled up next to him laughing at funny pictures, and teasing him about the pictures of baby Peter getting his first bath. Sam sat on his other side doing the same, though he seemed more interested in hearing stories about what was happening when the pictures were being taken than anything. Rhodes, Steve, and Natasha were sitting in the row of chairs behind them, leaning over the backs of the comfy chairs to look at the pictures as well, occasionally pointing out something that interested them. All of them laughed at a grey-blurry mess that Peter confessed to be the very first picture he ever took, far from his current publishable quality. Eventually though, Peter’s voice started to falter and grow rough with grief as he spoke and the last half of the book was looked at in near silence.

Peter lingered on the last few pages with pictures for a long time. The book had been neglected in recent years, only being added to on special occasions: Peter’s first day of High school, a significant birthday, a photo Aunt May took of Peter going to pick up Gwen on their first date, the yearly Christmas photo. On the very last page sat only two photos: a selfie taken last Christmas, and one taken the year before that. The last Christmas Peter spent with Aunt May and the last one he’d spent with Uncle Ben. With shaking hands he turned a few pages back and gently pulled out the photo of his parents and him at their last Christmas when he was seven years old. Barely breathing, Peter placed it on the same page as the last two, so that the three pictures would be together.

He ran his hands over the three slips of paper, almost feeling numb at the sight. Absently, the teen ran his finger up the side of the book, feeling the still empty plastic sheets, the sheets that would likely remain empty forever more, the family memories cut off far too soon.

He jumped when a figure suddenly appeared in front of him. Natasha. He hadn’t even heard her move. Her face blank, the woman carefully turned the page in the book, not moving it from Peter’s lap. The other Avenger’s in the room watched her silently, with bated breath, waiting to see what she was doing. The spy smoothed out the blank page, and carefully placed a newly printed picture on the clear plastic.

It was a photo of the press release, the one that went viral, with Peter blushing on the podium as the
Avenger’s laughed behind him, Pepper standing by his side with an amused expression on her face.

“Only if you want to.” She said softly.

Peter smiled shakily. “Thank you.” He said softly, carefully tucking the photo into the book. Suddenly the blank pages looked more like expectation than loss.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Sorry this one took so long! Be prepared for some ANGST!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Peter gently stroked the photo that lay in the book, laughing when the other Avenger’s scrambled to pull out their phones, showing Peter picture after picture of mornings joggings, evenings in the lab, in the entertainment room, and all over the tower. Him and Natasha were laughing on the ropes course. Rhodey had said something to make him laugh and Tony was nearby, looking annoyed. He was holding the Captain America shield, Steve smiling behind him while Sam said something snarky to the side. Wanda’s hands were a blur of movement as Peter was held above her head in a web of red. Him listening, enraptured, as Vision spoke. Each picture was another memory.

Peter smiled broadly, surrounded by the warm fuzzy joy of being surrounded by friends, by family. He was saved from having to say much more when Tony suddenly burst into the room, proudly brandishing his new invention. Pepper made her way in while they were setting up and choosing a video, followed soon by the chef pushing a cart full of cookies, cupcakes, and freshly popped popcorn. Within moments seven heroes, one CEO, and one young vigilante were nestled into the couches and seats around the room, snacks in hand and lights dim as they began a video simply dated with Peter’s Birthday.

Immediately the face of a young man who looked strikingly similar to Peter covered the screen. “I can’t believe it, I’m going to be a dad!” The man informed the camera boldly. “This is the most incredible day ever, it’s magical! It’s—” Whatever the man was about to say was cut off with a pained yell and the camera whirled around to a woman in a hospital bed with her face contorted into a grimace. “Oh honey, you’re doing so great! You’re amazing. Say hi to your Mommy, Peter, isn’t she beautiful?”

Peter breathed deeply, his breath coming in with a heaving shudder. Sometimes it seemed as though his memories of his parents were nothing more than wisps or dreams, but seeing them here seemed to bring the memories flooding back.

A glowing red tissue floated up to his face. He gripped it tightly and cast a smile at Wanda, but was torn from his memories when the screaming on the video got louder and his father dropped the camera on a table so that it was forced to stare at the wall as Richard called for the doctor.

“Fast forward fast forward fast forward!” He begged. “I don’t want to hear this!”

Tony smirked and brandished the remote teasingly, but before Rhodey could snap it from his hands, the ever-present F.R.I.D.A.Y. took control and skipped forward. The group watched the screen, Tony teasingly complaining at getting ribbed by the others. Peter said nothing though, his eyes locked on the screen, only the slowly depleting battering sign in the corner of the screen indicating that any time as passed. Finally, the screen went black as the cheap camcorder ran out of battery. F.R.I.D.A.Y brought the video back to normal speed just as it began recording again, obviously several hours later. Richard and Mary were both on the screen this time, though the camera was...
obviously held by someone else. Richard was half-sitting on the bed where Mary still lay, both
gazing down at a bundle in the woman’s arms.

“He’s beautiful,” a familiar voice said from behind the camera as Aunt May stepped forward. The
camera zoomed forward a bit to land on a scrunched up face peeking out of the bundle.

“He’s a Parker alright.” The cameraman said. Uncle Ben.

“Awwww, itty bitty baby Peter.” Rhodey said teasingly, the other soon joining in with comments
about his chubby cheeks and widdle eyes.

Peter laughed at their teasing, grinning at the team. His heart felt heavy with grief, but it wasn’t
overwhelming. It wasn’t horrible. He could get through it, which was more than he could have said a
couple of months ago, so that was something.

The video ended soon enough, and without moving Wanda used her powers to put in the next
movie. Peter glanced at her slyly. “Hey Wanda, can you grab me a cookie.” One appeared. “Ooh, I
could get used to that.”

“Yeah, I could get used to that.” Tony said with a smirk. “How about a soda?”

The Scarlet Witch rolled her eyes, but within a second one of the cans in the mini-fridge began
glowing red. She brought the can up to the man, used her powers to give it several large shakes, then
dropped it in his lap. “Enjoy.”

Tony grumbled, but made no more comment as the next home movie started. The team spent a good
majority of the day in the room, cooing as little Peter stumbled his way through Halloweens,
birthdays, Christmases, first days of school, terrible school recitals and plays, up until one of the
videos ended with his seventh birthday.

“That’s the last one.” Peter said softly. “Aunt May and Uncle Ben were never really good with
cameras, that was more Mom and Dad.”

“Peter,” Tony suddenly began in the silence that followed. In his hand was a decanter of liquor, the
fifth he’d had since the videos started. He seemed to be unable to look the boy in the eyes. “I- I really
can’t even begin to say how sorry I am for-“

“Mr. S- Tony.” Peter said firmly, even as a hand rose to awkwardly scratch at his neck. “I meant
what I said the other day. I don’t blame you at all, I promise. Not now and not ever. Even right after
they died, I never blamed you.”

“Maybe you should have.”

“No, I shouldn’t. You shouldn’t either. Great responsibility, remember?” When Tony didn’t respond
Peter sucked in a deep breath and closed his eyes. He hated to think about this, but it had to be said.
“Tony, even- even if Iron man hadn’t been there, my parents would be gone.”

“What do you mean?” Rhodes asked with a frown.

“My parents- they, uh, they were on the way to the airport. Someone wanted to buy their most recent
invention, or was trying to steal it or they had decided not to sell it or… or something. I don’t really
remember, I was too young to really understand it or care. But, uh, obviously they didn’t make it to
the airport. Even if they had, their plane crashed- hijacked by some terrorist group. No- no survivors.
S- so even if you hadn’t been there, I guess, I uh guess it was just their time. Or something.”
A hand landed on his shoulder and Peter turned to see Sam’s kind and understanding eyes. The man said nothing, simply lending the comfort of contact. Peter smiled at the flying hero but ultimately dropped his eyes to the ground.

“At least, uh. At least I never had to wonder what if, I guess.”

There was a long, tense moment of silence, broken only by Steve’s desperate attempt to divert from the tension. “Wait Peter, I think we missed a few of the movies. What about these?”

He reached forward to pull out a couple VHS tapes, each labeled EX: followed by a serial number and a date. Peter felt a thrill of fear at the sight of the top tape. “Oh, ah no no no! Those aren’t, uh, home videos. They’re recordings Mom and Dad made of their notes for different, uh, experiments and inventions.” And that top one was his Dad’s attempt to made an ultra-strong, versatile, lightweight, extremely adhesive substance that Peter eventually perfected and fit into wrist dispensers that allowed him to swing all over town as a vigilante. “Yeah, um, most-most of them aren’t even complete. Dad didn’t like to keep everything together like that. Whenever he finished a project he’d memorize half the formula, take the half he hadn’t memorized to the office and leave the other half at the house. So… yeah, incomplete.”

All except for the webbing which had never been finished in the first place because he thought he’d found the cure to cancer and had forgotten all about his super-material.

“Well come on,” Tony leaned forward, a smile on his face even as his eyes appeared haunted. “Let’s see one. I bet between the two of this we can figure this out.”

“What do you know about biology and chemistry?” Rhodes asked, knowing well that the man was more concerned with physics and engineering. Banner had more in common with the Parkers. Well, usually.

“As much as I know about anything. Which is, more than most can hope to. Go ahead, put one in!”

Steve moved forward with the dreaded tape. “No!” Everyone’s heads shot to the boy. “I-I mean they’re eight years old and-and that’s practically decades old in the field of science and- and-”

The Avengers continued to look dubious, Natasha’s eyes had even dropped into a suspicious trick. Peter nearly sighed. He didn’t want to play the Batman My-Parents-Are-Dead thing, but… “And I just… I promised myself I would figure them out myself. It makes me feel closer to them.” Not really a lie. He wasn’t planning to work on any of their other projects any time soon, but he never felt closer to his parents then the day he got the web shooters operational. Regardless, it was the best thing to say. All the eyes in the room softened and even Tony fell back into his seat.

“Of course, of course. And now you have your own personal lab in your room to do it.”

Peter smiled broadly and clutched the box to his chest, snatching the web-shooters tape from Captain America’s grasp. He mentally promised himself that as soon as he made it back to his room he would hide it in the box in the secret bunker thing that housed the cup he’d dented on the first day. (Though honestly Steve broke cups at least once a week)

Tony leaned back in his seat, swirling his drink in contemplation. “Want to complete your father’s projects huh? Peter, did I ever tell you about the time that I discovered that my father had started creating a new element, put clues in the STARK expo, and it ended up being the exact thing I needed to keep the arc reactor from poisoning me?”

“Oh that mess.” Rhodes mumbled with a grumble, but Peter was already gaping. The box was
carelessly put on the floor as he moved back to his seat, turning the rotating chair around to face the hero.

“Gather round kiddos,” The man commanded as all the chairs swiveled towards him. “Story time.”

“I still think it’s cheating.” Peter complained as red enveloped one of the jenga blocks and carefully placed it on top of the tower.

“It is using your strengths,” Wanda protested patiently as she lowered her hands.

Peter sighed and examined the teetering wooden monstrosity from all sides, drawing on all his reserves of physics and engineering knowledge to find the optimal block to remove. The boy moved slowly, carefully, prying out the block with the concentration of a brain surgeon. The tower swayed a little as it lost the small amount of support, but ultimately held firm. Peter shot Wanda a triumphant grin and moved to place the wood safely on the top of the structure, only to yelp and jump as a red and silver face phased through the wall.

“No!” He nearly-shouted as the block slipped through his surprised fingers and landed heavily on the unstable side of their tower, making the whole structure come tumbling down.

“Oh!” The Vision exclaimed in surprise. “I apologize. I didn’t mean to…”

But his words could barely be heard over Wanda’s cackling laughter. Peter sent the two of them a mock glare before chucking as well. With a sight the boy began to scoop up the blocks of wood from the floor, only to see them glowing red and neatly arranging themselves in their box.

“Cool,” He breathed, glancing up to catch eyes with the still-smiling Wanda.

“Want to watch a few hours of some show on Netflix?” The girl offered, and Peter nodded with a smile.

“Oh!” Vision exclaimed as he joined the two on their way to the media room. “Might I suggest Chopped? It is fascinating.”

Wanda cast the other hero an extremely fond smile. “You know, those shows will not improve your cooking.”

The red man simply shook his head. “I am nearly certain that I could make a bread pudding. It seems as though the only difficult aspect is…”

Peter smiled comfortably as the other man droned, his gaze turning to the screen as F.R.I.D.A.Y cued the show. Try as he might, he couldn’t wipe the small contented smile from his face. He wasn’t sure that any of the Avenger’s could ever really feel like parents, but he felt without a doubt that he had gained fantastic siblings. The rest were probably all crazy cousins or aunts and uncles or something.

“We should have a game night sometime.” Peter smiled.

“Sure,” Rhodes smirked as they walked past him. “As soon as you find one that will entertain a fairly large group of fully grown adults, with no pop culture references that confuse Steve, nothing over analytical that Vis here will get in an instant, without relying on bluffs or secret keeping that Nat will destroy in five minutes, economic strategy that Pepper will dominate, or anything physical
whatsoever. They just finished repairs from the time we tried to play spoons.”

“Cards against humanity?” Peter offered weakly and all three heroes gave the boy a ‘look’.

“Do you really want to try to play that with Tony Stark?”

“Never mind.” He replied quickly. “I’ll think of something though, I swear.”

“I’ll hold you to that.” The man said with a kind smile, moving to continue when F.R.I.D.A.Y suddenly sounded on the speakers.

“Boss is requesting that all Avengers meet in the conference room.”

“What about me?” Peter asked.

“I’m afraid that Avengers only have the clearance to hear the content of this meeting. I apologize Peter.”

“That’s okay.” Peter mumbled. “I’ll just, head to the media room I guess, catch up on some shows or something.”

The heroes all cast the boy apologetic glances as they walked down the hallway, but none promised that they would return soon because they had no way of knowing if that were true.

Peter sighed as he listlessly scrolled through Netflix. He and May never could afford it, but now that he had it he couldn’t even concentrate over the steadily growing weight in his stomach. This was the first time they’d had ‘official Avenger business’ since he’d arrived. That he knew of at least. There were a few strangely silent days during his PR boot camp. However, this was the first time he’d been knowingly excluded.

He didn’t like it.

A swirling, heavy pit had settled in his stomach. If they were being called for Avengers business, a mission, then they would be going into danger. They could get hurt. He couldn’t… he couldn’t imagine them getting hurt, dying, while he sat in the cushy tower watching TV in a massage chair. It would be like with Uncle Ben all over again.

For the very first time since realizing that the Avengers didn’t know he was Spider-Man, he considered just… telling them. It honestly hadn’t occurred to him that day at breakfast. He was too used to keeping secrets, hiding who he was. In his mind Spidey and Peter were so separate that he the notion of bridging the gap never even occurred to him in the least.

It wasn’t as if there hadn’t been ample opportunities to make the realization. The Avengers talked about Spider-Man often. A lot more often than Peter would have ever dreamed. If he knew how much the Avengers talked about him before he moved in with them, he may have fainted.

Although, to be fair most of the chatter was Tony ranting about how Spider-Man was “purposely messing with his data”. According to genius, Spider-Man had changed his location to be more Hell’s Kitchen centered and completely changed his fighting style just to mess up Tony’s algorithm.

In hindsight, having Daredevil be Spider-Man for a few weeks probably wasn’t the best thought out plan, but Peter thought he would at least use the web shooters or something. Although, they were pretty hard to aim so maybe he just didn’t have enough time to practice. Per the internet, he had tried to… quip like Peter usually did, but the humor was lacking. As in nonexistent. His ‘Friendly Neighborhood Spider-Man’ notes weren’t the best either, his handwriting was atrocious. So, all in all
Peter wasn’t sure how useful the whole thing actually was. At one point Natasha had even taken it upon herself to try and follow the vigilante, but Daredevil was somehow even better than Peter at detecting a tail so Peter wasn’t worried.

Of course, Daredevil couldn’t be Spidey forever and recently most of Tony’s complaints had been centered on how now Spider-Man had just disappeared into thin air. He would be coming back of course, Peter was sure of that considering he was Spider-Man, but he couldn’t let Tony know that.

Even now he wouldn’t. No, he couldn’t tell his secret, couldn’t let the heroes unto this aspect of who he was that was wholly private and his. He couldn’t say why, couldn’t put any actual words to the feeling, but he just couldn’t break the self-imposed seal of secrecy.

It turns out that he couldn’t have that day even if he wanted to. He was still deep in thought several minutes later when F.R.I.D.A.Y’s voice sounded. “The Avengers send their apologies, Mr. Parker, but they have been called out on an urgent assignment.”

Suddenly the feminine voice was replaced by Tony’s. “Sorry, squirt. Pepper says we have to behave since it’s our first official mission under the Sokovia compromise.”

“Is Pepper still here?” Peter asked.

“No, sorry sweety.” Pepper’s voice sounded. “Since the compromise was my idea I have to meet with the people who made the call.”

“Happy should be there in a few though.” Tony again.

“We will tell you all about it when we get back and it is no longer secret.” Wanda this time.

“Alright.” Peter sighed, the sound echoing slightly in the large room.

“We shouldn’t be more than a few days.” Steve reassured. “Promise.”

Before Peter could reply there was a soft knocking sound on the doorway and a familiar stocky face poked through. “Hey Peter.”

“Sounds like Happy made it,” Tony announced, “Say bye everyone.”

The was a clash of muddled ‘goodbyes’ from the group before they were abruptly cut off by Tony ending the transmission.

“Hi Happy.”

“Hey Pete, how’s it going?”

The teen shrugged. “Alright.”

The man hummed. “Sucks to be left behind, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Wanna watch a mindless comedy?”

A small smile flit across Peter’s face. “That sounds… that sounds pretty good actually. Mind if I work on something while we watch?”

“Go ahead.”
Peter rushed to his room to grab some old-fashioned spiral bound notebooks and the tablet that was hooked into F.R.I.D.A.Y. Finally he had a chance to work without Tony breathing down his back. The man was constantly questioning why the teen would choose to use paper when he had the glory of hundreds of computer screens and holographic imaging devices surrounding him. Peter had given him some crap line about ‘transitioning’ and how he wasn’t used to computer screens yet. Yes it was terrible, but it was the only way he could keep his work secret. After all, there was no way he was using computers connected to F.R.I.D.A.Y to keep notes about how to keep secrets from F.R.I.D.A.Y. For now he would stick to using his tablet to look at the coding and his notebook to take notes.

By the time he made it back to the room There was a movie paused and fresh popcorn in the popper. With a smile at his bodyguard Peter settled down into a chair. “So, is this all we’re going to do until they get back?”

“Nah, I got a couple ideas.” Happy grinned, “But those can wait till tomorrow. Although I do say we order in from that place Tony hates for dinner.”

“There's a place Tony hates?”

“Yup. He can’t stand it. Sometimes I get food from there and eat it in front of him just to tick him off when he’s being annoying. Works every time.”

Peter chuckled and turned to his work as the movie started, listening with half an ear and managing to laugh at the jokes even as he came closer to tapping into the code that kept his bunker a secret. If he could just isolate that and find a way to modify or replicate it, or even just put the same protection around a single monitor or file…

Three movies later he was almost certain he found the secret. He was just writing down the last of his suspected modifications in his book when he was hit with Spidey-Sense so hard he fell out of his chair, clutching his head in agony as Happy rushed to him and yelled his name. Peter had the mind to cover the frantic bodyguard with his own body.

Then there was nothing but noise, fire, pain. A flash of red.

Darkness.

Chapter End Notes

And also a cliff hanger. Muahahahahahahaha.
ha.
Ha haha.
ha.
Ok bye.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

So, in the spirit of a late Easter present, I will end the suffering of those waiting on the cliffhanger early!! So, this chapter’s coming a lot sooner than usual!!

Also may be a bit of a wait for the next chapter due to finals.

Peter’s first waking thought was something along the lines of: ow.

His second was less of a conscious thought and more of a fuzzy coming to awareness. He hurt. There had been an explosion. He couldn’t move. He was tied down. He was sitting up, his head lolling forward uncomfortably, but he hadn’t woken up nearly enough to have the muscle control to move it.

His third was a blinding rush of terror when he felt a brush of cool wind flow around his face. They had unmasked him, they knew who he was. Nononononononono! He woke the rest of the way with a rush and began thrashing in his bonds.

“Well well,” An accented voice sounded and Peter dimly realized that the wind had come from an opening door. The boy’s head shot up to look to his captor and his mind… stopped. It was as though it blanked, wiped clean by the sheer impossibility of the scene before him. Staring back at Peter with a cold sneer stood a man that the teen had only seen grainy photos of in history books, he was supposed to be dead. Steve had just spent the other day telling Peter how Captain America had defeated him. Yet even so, Peter was left to stare incoherently as Red Skull took stepped closer to his bound form. “So, the Avenger-child finally awakens.”

With those words, conflicting tides of terror and relief flooded through the young man’s body so overwhelmingly that he felt almost floaty. Finally, the events leading to the explosion aligned in his mind. He’d been watching TV with Happy. This wasn’t about Spider-Man, this was about Peter Parker. He hadn’t been unmasked by any of his villains.

On the other hand, holy crap this was about Peter Parker. He’d been captured by one of the Avengers’ villains. Not only that but he’d seemed to be captured by Captain America’s first major villain. Who was supposed to be dead! He was going to die. The only bright spot that existed in the whole situation was that Peter had friends that Spidey didn’t. When Spider-Man was captured, he had to figure out a way to save himself if he wanted to survive. Peter… Peter might be able to wait for a rescue.

“What’s going on? He tried to ask, but his dry throat and heavy tongue made even the single syllable he managed seem completely incomprehensible. His throat convulsed as he attempted to wet his mouth, but the man simply chuckled.

“The Avengers claim you are smart,” he says, words coming out accented, though fluent. But they sound… off. “Do not play stupid. You know why you are here, Avenger-child.” Wasn’t Red Skull supposed to be German? He worked with Hitler, right? This man didn’t sound German. He sounded more like… more like Natasha when she swore. Natasha always swore in Russian. “You are the cheese in a mousetrap of my design. The Avengers’ necks will snap the instant they come to claim
A trap. Duh, of course it was a trap. He was bait, he couldn’t just sit back and wait for the Avengers to save him, that’s what the bad guys wanted. He should have already figured that out. Peter shook his head, grimacing when the movement worsened the steady pain burning through his head. Concussion, maybe. That wasn’t good. This whole mess was a heap of ‘not good’.

“I-I-“ Peter began, a quip on the tip of his tongue about how ‘the second mouse gets the cheese’ and how ineffective classic spring mousetraps really were, but between the dull throbbing throughout his body, the pain in his head, and the desert in his throat the words died before he could get them out.

Red Skull simply sneered, the stark white of his teeth contrasting terrifyingly against the bright red of his face and the black pit of his nose. He settled in a chair across from Peter, obviously enjoying the stuttering boy’s suffering.

Peter closed his eyes and took a deep breath, choosing his words carefully as he might not get any. “W-w-who are y-you?”

A derisive scoff, loud in the bare room. “I would have thought you paid better in your history classes, young genius. Especially-“

“No- not Red Skull. Not real.” Red Skull was dead and German, this man was alive and Russian.

The villain stared at the boy in silence for a few moments, and Peter got the sensation that were it possible the man would have cocked an eyebrow at him. As it was, he apparently didn’t have the necessary facial muscles. Or an eyebrow.

“Impressive. No, I suppose that is true. I am not the Red Skull, the one the history books demean and your dear papa America tells you about in bedtimes stories.”

“’m no’ five.” Peter protests, but that’s ignored as the man stood to his feet.

“But someday he and I will share a legacy, only mine will be greater, far more grand than Schmidt ever dreamed.”

Legacy? Peter frowned, a pit of dread settling in his stomach. “HYDRA.”

“Yes!” The man gestured wildly, making the captive teen jump. “HYDRA! We were once great, on the verge of forming an empire, embedded even in the very organization created to tear us down. We were a name to be feared. ‘Cut off one head and two more will grow in its place’ they said. Bah! Now look at us, scattered. Nearly every member in hiding, jailed, or killed. Yet out of these ashes we will rise, a new birth from the flames.”

I think you’re mixing up your mythology. Peter wanted to say, but he bit his tongue. He had to choose his quips carefully, he had a feeling he wouldn’t be getting many.

“I will re-create HYDRA anew! And what better way to do that than by honoring the very man who created the beast in the first place! Soon, the Avengers will be gone and news of the Red Skull’s revival will spread throughout the world! Our mantra will not be only whispered in jail cells and written on headstones; it will be yelled for all to hear!” He leaned in close until his face was mere inches away from Peter. “Hail HYDRA.”

They say that there is a very fine line between being brave and being stupid. Being Spider-Man, Peter had done a lot of brave-stupid things in his life. Trying to spit in Red Skull’s nose-hole took the cake. The Russian villain reared back in surprise and Peter used the little moisture that was left in his
mouth to croak "Long live the Avengers!" Before wincing at how lame it sounded.

Skull glared at his captive, a gloved hand rubbing across his face to wipe away the saliva as one booted foot smashed down on Peter’s ankle where it was tethered to the chair. The teen cried out in pain, noting distantly that the nose-hole wasn’t hollow like he’d thought.

“For that, boy, I won’t kill you. Not until you’ve seen the death of each and every Avenger, the only pitiful excuse for a family you have left.” The man’s evil sneer turned even crueler. “Or maybe I’ll get even luckier. After all, last time I tried to kill your family they died before they got into my trap.”

Peter stilled completely as his blood ran ice cold. ‘What?’ he wanted to ask, but it was as though he had lost all air, as though he couldn’t get his body to follow any commands. Skull laughed, the sound like breaking glass clattering to the ground. “Oh, your parents were brilliant Peter, absolutely brilliant. Too bad the fools weren’t smart enough to realize what they should have used that brilliance for. They had the ability to create masterpieces! Weapons that could level the world, super soldiers that would have Captain America begging for mercy, but no! No, they focused on silly string and curing cancer.” The man’s last words were dripping with contempt, with scorn. Peter could only gape, his mind for once empty of any reply or quip. “Curing cancer, now that was the big one. It’s impressive. People have tried for decades to create a super-soldier, and yet they managed to do it on accident while attempting to wipe out a disease.”

“What- what are you-“ Peter managed and to stutter and the villain laughed. Taking large strides across the room, Red Skull delicately picked up a clear container filled with a strange, but familiar black goop.

“And suddenly Peter did. Ben had found it in his dad’s stuff when they were cleaning out his home lab after the accident. Peter had been begging for a lava lamp for months and so they’d assumed that his father had been making him one. It had sat at his bedside for a few weeks, but eventually was thrown in storage after it started giving him nightmares. To this day Peter swore it was making faces.

“I see that you do. This was your parent’s attempt to… enhance the body so that it could fight off cancerous cells. Instead, it enhanced everything. Strength, power, hunger! If your father’s notes were to be believed it created an insatiable hunger, one that took over any semblance of sense. It could only be mitigated by consuming human energy, otherwise it would consume its host. Could you imagine what HYDRA could do with this power? We offered to buy it from your parents, even told them that we were interested in furthering their cancer research. I don’t know how they found out who we were, but next thing we know they’re sending their kid—that’s you—off to live with relatives and booking a flight to the other side of the country.

“We had a HYDRA Agent and a bomb on their flight before their seats were booked. Of course your parents couldn’t even be bothered to show up, dead before they made it near the airport, all of their notes lost in the collision. Seven years later and we’d nearly forgotten about the incident until a familiar last name showed up in the obituaries. Parker. We started making plans to break into your house and search it for anything your parents left behind, but then your aunt was kind enough to die without us lifting a finger. Your old landlord was only too happy to have volunteers come and empty out your old place. The neighbors may have pilfered a bit, but I got what I wanted.” He held up the goop. “And now I have you as well, the son of the man who started all of this. It’s almost poetic, no?”

Placing the beaker on a table with a tap, Red Skull suddenly stood. “Now, unfortunately I have lost my best hackers due to the actions of your Avengers and some other… pests, and so Stark will undoubtedly be listening in very soon.” The villain grinned at Peter, bone-white teeth stark on his
face. “Let’s give him something to hear, hm?”

That was the last thing the man said before stepping back and gesturing with one bright red hand. Men seemed to melt from the dark corners of the room to surround the boy. Red Skull stepped back and folded his arms, an extremely satisfied smug smile covering his face. The villain’s presence seemed larger than life, looming over the HYDRA agents surrounding Peter.

Peter saw a flash of black glove and a glaring sneer as his face erupted in pain. Even as the teen moaned one of the men struck out again, landing a blow to the boy’s stomach. Again and again the blows continued, rapid and painful. Blood dripped into his mouth, into his eyes. He refused to make a noise beyond the involuntary gasps and grunts the flooded his mouth. He refused to beg for mercy. In all honesty, a part of his mind was relieved at the treatment. The adrenalin and pain was distracting him from the pain, grief, and horror growing in his chest. Yet as the beating continued, Peter found the relief dimming and his resolve failing. His gasps and groans seemed to increase in volume, occasionally interspaced by miserable whimpers.

The binds holding Peter down were weakening each time an agent landed a blow, until the hero had to consciously keep himself from snapping the ropes as he struggled. The last thing he needed was for a man armed to fight the Avengers to find out that he was Spider-Man. At the moment it was best to wait, to hope the Avengers arrived soon. Yet with each punch, kick and blow, Peter’s resolve crumbled more and more. He wanted to be able to help in the battle to come, but with each blow to the head his mind got foggier. With each punch to the stomach it got harder to sit up. Blood from who knows where was dripping into his mouth and he couldn’t open one eye. His Spidey-sense was uselessly yelling at him, nearly overwhelming his overloaded mind. If the Avenger’s didn’t arrive soon he wouldn’t be in any shape to fight.

Eventually the boy had decided he’d taken enough abuse. Spider-Man was coming out to play in five more hits, secret identity or not. He didn’t want to do this, didn’t want to give up his secret this way—well he didn’t want to give it up at all—but he couldn’t let this go on for much longer.

A sucker-punch to the stomach. A low whine escaped Peter’s mouth. One.

A strike to the jaw, the teen’s head snapped to the side. His mouth tasted metallic and teeth wiggled when he touched them with his tongue. He didn’t bother trying to straighten his neck, instead allowing it to hang loosely. Two.

A booted foot rose to strike him in the side, sending the chair careening to the side. Peter grunted at the feeling of falling, but his descent was stopped by a kick on the other side that landed on his hip. The chair creaked and groaned at the treatment. Three, four.

Peter tensed in his binds. The chair was barely holding together, he could feel it. It would fall apart the instant he applied his spidey-strength. He pulled his lolling head up to his chest, glaring up at Red Skull’s looming figure through floppy, sweat-soaked bangs.

The villain wasn’t looking though, he had one hand to his head, where his ear would be. Suddenly one gloved hand rose, and the men immediately froze and rushed to the shelves surrounding the room. There was a loud clattering and the sounds of weapons powering up. The respite allowed Peter to breathe. His super-natural hearing caught the sounds of battle far away, gunfire and smashing walls, Iron-Man blasts and the metallic ring of Captain America’s shield.

The teen sighed in relief, preparing to break through the chair and lend some spider-help. It wasn’t how he would have chosen to reveal his identity, but he had to help. He couldn’t let them do this on their own, even if they were the Avengers.
Yet before he could make a move he was stopped by a fist gripping his hair. He could see a blur of red in the corner of his eye as a voice spoke. “I don’t know what you’re thinking, child, but I wouldn’t move unless you wanted to be the one to kill them yourself.”

The man dangled the jar in front of the teen’s face, the goo inside twisting and jarring against the side of the glass as though it were trying to get to Peter. A chill of horror rushed through him, freezing him in pace. If that stuff got on him, if it turned him into a monster… that wouldn’t turn out well. Skull thought he was threatening a scared kid, but he wasn’t a scared kid. Or, at least that wasn’t all he was. He was Spider-Man. His powers plus whatever that gunk did? That was a… horrifying thought, especially considering he couldn’t be sure the Avengers would fight their hardest against him.

The genius’s mind flashed in a million different direction, trying to find a way out that involved avoiding the murderous goo that was still trying to get to him. Before he could think much further however, the deadly click of a hammer being pulled back sounded from behind.

“You will not touch him.” Natasha’s voice sounded, cold fury lacing her words.

Immediately the room erupted as the henchmen around the room opened fire. Peter yelped, snapping the rope and lunging to the side instinctively, but before he could make another move he was enveloped in a ball of red energy that seemed to ward off the blasts. Scarlet Witch appeared in the doorway, using her powers to shred the remaining ropes as Peter was lifted free of the chair.

“W-Wai-“ Peter stammered, but the words came out stammered and illegible through his aching jaw and parched tongue. He struggled to stand, desperate to help, but the bubble that protected him also confined him. Within moments the rest of the Avengers flooded the room, filling doorways and blasting through walls.

Red Skull had somehow slipped out of the main part of the action, slinking to the corners and watching the chaos unfolding in the room and waiting for his target. He didn’t have to wait long. Within moments a blast shook through the wall and Iron Man flew through, Captain America jumping through a moment later. He froze, staring in confused horror as he locked eyes with the villain he thought he had long since defeated. Red Skull took advantage of the pause and moved, throwing his jar with perfect aim at the only Avenger who would rather deflect it with his shield than shoot it out of the sky. The only one who would let it nearly touch his body.

“N’!” Peter shouted, reaching out desperately, fingers reaching for a web-shooter that wasn’t there. He watched in despair as the goo sailed steadily closer to the hero, fear thudding through his heart. Yet, as though hearing the boy’s cry, Falcon was already diving forward, cradling the jar delicately as he swooped through the air. Peterragged, feeling lightheaded as relief coursed through him. He felt dizzy as Scarlet Witch’s bubble pulled him from the room. The last thing he saw was Captain America pulling himself back into action and rushing at Red Skull, then it was only walls and defeated men slumped along the floor. Before the boy knew it, he was in the semi-familiar environment of the Avenger’s plane, being placed on a gurney.

“Wh-.” He protested, attempting to rise as the red dissipated around him.

“Do not move,” Wanda commanded as the ship began to shake and rise.

“W-. Ah c’n h’p.” Peter rasped, but even he could barely hear the words. Even as he continued to struggle to rise he knew it was useless. He had grossly overestimated his healing powers. Or greatly underestimated the HYDRA agents’ strength. Either way, the Avengers wouldn’t be getting any spidey help. Especially not with Wanda gently holding him down and yelling at the driver to hurry.
By the time it occurred to Peter that he could possibly reveal his powers they were already well into the air. A few seconds later and the world faded to darkness and the sound of Wanda yelling at him to stay awake.

Red Skull grinned as his fist connected with Captain America’s head, only to fall back with a grunt as his opponent landed a kick to his side.

“How are you here?” Rogers grunted as they fought, Skull sneered but said nothing, knowing that his voice and accent would immediately give him away. Still, he continued to fight, knowing that this was truly only a distraction. His men were smart. They knew that in a situation like this that getting the symbiote was the number one priority. Half his men were focusing on Falcon.

“How did you come back?” The hero shouted, but still Red Skull didn’t speak. The man rolled out of the way of a bone crushing stomp of the Captain’s boot, narrowly avoiding broken ribs as he manage to pop to his feet. He continued to duck and nod around the original Avenger, avoiding all contact but also never going in for an attack. He ignored Roger’s constant prattling of ‘who are you’, ‘you’re supposed to be dead’, ‘I’ve killed you once and I’ll do it again’, ‘truth justice and the American way’ or whatever he was going on about. Skull was more focused on avoiding the man’s attacks and finding the child than on listening to his rambling. He sought Parker, only to growl in anger when he realized that they had already gotten him out of the room. He couldn’t send men after the boy, not without giving away the very secret he was trying to protect. Besides, they were focused on getting the symbiote back and he himself had slightly more pressing matters in the form of a super soldier with a grudge.

“How-“ Captain America shot out a punch, narrowly avoiding Skull’s head. “Are-“ A kick to the stomach barely avoided “You-“ Skull just barely had time to jump over a sweep of the legs. “Here?” A thrust of the shield to Skull’s chest, this time landing solidly and sending the villain flying into the wall across the room.

Immediately some of the men who had been shooting at Falcon turned on Captain America, and the man was forced to crouch behind his shield rather than go after his enemy. Skull stood from the rubble and picked a nearby weapon off the ground. The material he used to make his suit was protective, one of HYDRA’s greatest inventions, but it wouldn’t withstand an onslaught from Captain America for long. It was time to go on the offensive, until they got the symbiote back at least. With a yell, Red Skull advanced, meeting Cap head on. He was no match for the man’s superior strength one-on-one. They had never managed to replicate the serum used to create the hero, and while Red Skull was certainly enhanced, it wasn’t nearly to the degree of his namesake. Not yet at least. Only the protective nature of his suits, his own considerable fighting skill, and his men’s occasional pot-shots as the living legend kept him from getting obliterated.

His strength lay with intellect rather than brute strength, and even as he knew that his plan would have to be put on hold—the element of surprise had been an integral element and it would be beyond foolish to force the symbiote onto a man he was already battling, especially when so many of the weapons designed to control the beast were lying shattered on the floor from where they had been
used to fight the Avengers—he had a contingency plan to at least help him escape.

He growled, even as one of his men managed to shoot out one of Falcon’s wings. He hated the thought of retreating, but he was also learning from his namesake’s mistakes. He would not let pride reign over strategy. HYDRA agents swarmed the fallen Avenger, but Sam Wilson was much more than a man with wings. He was a fighter. It took several more moments for one of Skull’s men to rise victoriously with the jar.

Immediately that man found himself face to face with Black Widow. She struck with ferocity and intensity, but the instant the man emerged with the symbiote every other agent moved to protect him. The men moved as whole, as one organism, as they fled. Those with the greatest weapons on the edges, keeping the Avengers at bay as much as they could be. Men fought left and right, shooting at Black Widow and Iron Man, struggling to find a way to fight against Vision, clashing against Iron Man and War Machine in suits of their own.

With the jar in sight Red Skull froze, allowing Captain America to send him flying back with a kick so that he could have the few precious seconds he needed to pull the gun he held out of it’s hidden pocket. Rogers rushed him, obviously. The man was so predictable when he got emotional. It was sad, really. He fired two shots into the Captain's, point blank. Just as he knew the man managed to dodge impossibly quickly, sending the fatal shots into his arm instead. Perfect. Red Skull didn’t want the man dead, he had plans for the ‘hero’ that had destroyed his organization and killed its founder. The wound was enough to send the man back though, enough to slow him down, enough to give Skull the chance to drop from one of the craters in the floor the fight had caused and make it to his getaway, the agent with the jar close behind him. He knew the rest of his men would be scrambling to escape as well. Those who lived would meet him in a few weeks. Those who were captured would ensure that they wouldn’t live to be questioned.

The fight had simply been delayed, it wasn’t over. Not by a long shot.

Hail HYDRA.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Thanks to everyone who gave well wishes on finals! I think they went well and now summer is here WOO HOO!!
No more homework!!
Now it's time for normal work! (Sobs)

So, something of a transition chapter, but hopefully you'll like it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Peter awoke to a fuzzy mind, and an irritating beeping. He groaned and flopped one arm around pathetically in attempt to turn off the alarm, only for his wrist to be caught in a familiar grip, callused from screwdrivers and soldering guns.

“Careful, you’ve got an IV in.” Tony’s disembodied voice warned. “And Cho gets very scary when you try to take them out, trust me it’s not worth it.

“Mr. St- Tony?” the young man mumbled, blinking blearily as his vision came into focus, “Whe’m’l?”

“Avenger’s facility. Super secret, not like the tower. The tower is more public, this is more hush hush. Meant to take you here before but we kept on forgetting.” The man shrugged unapologetically, but his grip on Peter’s hand remained firm and his eyes were worried, haunted almost. They were at complete odds with his relaxed demeanor. “But this is where the real magic happens. Including some actual magic, but mostly just science. Right Doc?”

Tony turned as a woman in a lab coat entered the room. The doctor rolled her eyes before ignoring Tony entirely before turning to her still-groggy patient. “Hello Peter, how are you feeling?”

“I…” Peter took a mental catalog, surprised to find much less pain than he remembered. Much less pain than he should be in, considering the beating he took and how fast pain pills went through his enhanced metabolism. “Okay.”

Dr. Cho smiled at him softly before shining a light into his eyes with a studious expression. “That’s good. You’ve been out for a little less than a day, but you’ve been doing a lot of healing in that time so you may not be up long. We’ve given you a couple of injections of serums that we’ve created that
should help the healing process along considerably.”

“What?” Peter exclaimed, nearly leaping out of the bed, but the doctor pushed him back gently but firmly. “Wh-what’s you give me?”

The woman quirked an eyebrow before launching into a list of chemicals, steroids, and compounds that the boy genius could barely follow, exhausted as he was. By the time the woman was done the boy was exhausted, but was reasonably sure that nothing they gave him would react weird against his spidey-powers.

“’K.” He mumbled, barely moving as the woman checked the discoloration of his stomach.

“You’re reacting to it extremely well. Healing at a rate nearly double that of even our best test subjects. At this rate you should be good to go in a matter of days.” She punched at her tablet a few times before frowning. “Your blood results were strange, part of that may be because of the serum, but there are irregularities that I haven’t seen in any of our other test subjects. Peter, did Red Skull give you anything? Inject you with anything at all? Was there ever a funny smell or anything like that?”

Peter nearly groaned. He’d love to quip something about the whole of Hydra smelling fishy, but he just didn’t have the energy. He could barely find it in him to shake his head. “No, but I w’s out fer a while.”

“He’s been in the labs with me a lot.” Tony cut in, still gripping Peter’s hand.

Cho nodded thoughtfully. “There are a number of chemicals and elements in your lab that produce various forms of radiation. I’ll just take note of it for now, but as you are healing so well I doubt there’s reason to be concerned.”

Peter tried to nod, but only ended up snuggling deeper into his pillow as he labored to keep his eyes open. Finally he allowed himself to lose the battle and his eyes slipped closed. His last waking thought was that maybe the weird blood results were because he was Spider-Man. He should really tell them about that. The thought was barely fully formed before he was deeply asleep.

When Peter next awoke, it was to the sounds of arguing. Which wasn’t exactly an uncommon thing to wake up to when living with the Avengers. More specifically, he woke to the sounds of Tony and Steve arguing. Again, not exactly a rarity.
“an’t build him a suit. He’s too young. I won’t let you put him in danger like that.” Steve was saying.

“I’m not saying I’m going to build him a suit so he can fight. I’m building him a suit to protect him.” Tony countered.

“I don’t care what you build it for. If you make him a suit, he’s going to try to help. He’ll think that just because he looks like Iron man and War machine, he should be on the front lines. You know that! Have you met the kid?”

“Have I met- I spend more time with him than you! And I-“

“Then you know that building him a suit will just encourage him to fight!”

“So, what, are you going to tell Natasha she can’t teach him self-defense because he’ll want to fight?”

“There’s a difference between helping someone defend themselves and giving them advance weaponry! Furthermore-“

“Furthermore? Excuse me, furthermore? Who even says that?”

“Don’t try to change the subject, Stark, I-“

Peter was dimly realizing that he was the ‘he’ they were arguing about-Tony wanted to make him a suit? Awesome!—when the bed he was laying on dipped slightly.

“Uh Oh,” Wanda’s accented voice sounded as she settled next to him. “Mother and Father are fighting again.”

“Well now you’ve got me curious.” Natasha added as she lounged at Peter’s other side. At which point Peter finally realized he was lying in a huge bed in the middle of an unfamiliar room. “What does that make Rhodey and Sam?” She nodded at the arguing men with a smirk, and Peter turned to
see each man standing beside their friend, arms crossed and sporting matching glares. Occasionally one of them would interject with an argument or comment, but for the most they simply supported the two quarreling Avengers. Which only left… Oh, there Vision was, standing beside the headboard.

Peter chuckled, “It’s like they’re tag team arguing.”

The girls smirked in amusement, even chuckling when Vision began narrating the fight like it was some sort of pseudo wrestling match. His calm, lightly accented voice made it even funnier.

“Oh, and excellent point by Tony, but how will Steve counter. Ah! An ironclad defensive move, but no attempt at an additional argument, how will Tony react? Oh but wait, Team Captain America gets another lick in as Sam cuts in before Tony can reply. Oh my, an excellent move from Stark, both a defense and offence in one, but how will Steve react? Oh ho, an excellent reply, the ball is back in their court but- oh, great response by Rhodey. Foul on Tony! Personal insult, that’ll be a five point penalty unless- oh nope, Steve responded in kind, no penalty given.”

Peter chuckled, but he could feel his eyes growing heavier, still exhausted and lulled by Vision’s smooth voice. Still the argument continued, Steve insisting that Peter was too young to fight and Tony insisting that he didn’t want Peter to fight, he just wanted him safe. Peter frowned drifted off, silently resolving once more to keep his secret identity a secret, even as he was too out of it to really make the connection why.

Peter was much more coherent the third time he awoke, this time the room was thankfully devoid of yelling. However, he was no less confused.

“Where am I?” He wondered aloud, eyes roving around the unfamiliar room. He’d thought he’d seen every room the tower had to offer, even the secret ones that he wasn’t supposed to know about, but this room—huge and open with a huge bed and walls lined with monitors—was completely foreign to him. It didn’t look like a med bay exactly, for one there was only one bed. For another it was simply too… welcoming. It lacked the cold clinical vibe of the tower’s mini hospital.

“Hey Pete, how you feeling?” A voice said just as Rhodey popped into the room.

“Oh, good?” Peter shook his head, thoughts jumbled as he attempted to align his last waking memories with the room in front of him. “I mean, pretty great actually. You know, considering?”

The man’s easy grin faltered at Peter’s last words, and his face looked grim. James opened his mouth as though to speak more, but before he could say anything the room was flooded with the other Avengers. They all clamored for his attention, each one leaning against the large bed and asking him
how he felt and what had happened. The barrage only stopped when Dr. Cho finally made it into the room.

“Enough.” She commanded. She didn’t yell, barely rose her voice, but the power and expectation that she would be obeyed cut through the noise like a knife. She smiled then, rolling her eyes at the heroes filling the room before turning to Peter. “How are you feeling?”

“Um, better than before. Pretty good actually. Those, uh serums you gave me? They, um they work really well.” Shaking his head to clear it, the boy fuzzily recalled an earlier conversation. “Oh, hey, about that. The base chemicals would cause a protein deficiency, and deplete blood sugar. I know you added insulin in the second waves of injections, but how do you counter the protein problem?” The teen then proceeded to rattle off a string of suggestions and questions, each one with a more complicated chemical formula, asking about the possible side effects of each.

The woman smiled wryly. “Well, I suppose I don’t have to worry about asking you the date or about your short-term memory. How about we save the medical talk for another day? I can let you read through some of my reports.”

“Really? Wow, uh, thanks.” Peter followed through the woman’s instructions, letting the light shine in his eyes and breathing deeply when ordered. Finally Dr. Cho gave him a clean bill of health before stepping back with a wink.

“He’s all yours.”

Immediately, before the doctor had even finished her sentence, Natasha was there, gripping Peter’s hand tightly. Her eyes were as intense as ever, and for the first time in a long time, Peter saw her as Black Widow instead of Nat.

“You start training Monday. I will let you recover, but we have waited far too long. You will not be helpless again.”

“O-okay. Thanks?” The woman nodded seriously, her grip tight. Peter gave the hand a squeeze, an attempt at comfort. Nat caught his eye and nodded once.

“I am glad you are ok.” Wanda said sincerely, her eyes haunted and sorrowful. They reminded Peter how recently she had lost her brother, how close she had come to losing him.

“T-thanks. I am too. Your shields are cool.”
The girl grinned, laughing even as her eyes got a bit wetter. “I like them too.”

“How is it you’re whining less about this than you do about morning jogs?” Sam asked with an amused smirk.

“Ugh,” Peter moaned jokingly. “Now that is true torture. They should have gotten tips from you.”

“Uh huh.” The man rolled his eyes.

“Well,” Steve began, a smirk on his lips. “I can-“

Suddenly Peter surged forward with a loud gasp, eyes nearly popping out of his head. “Happy! Where- what happened to Happy? Where- Is he ok? What-“

“Relax,” Tony interrupted. “Happy’s fine. A lot better off than you were. A couple of burns and small bumps and bruises from the explosion, but they didn’t take him. He’s going to be out of commission for a bit, but he’s fine.”

Peter sighed in relief as guilt seeped out of him, coupled by a feeling of stark relief. “Okay, good. Good.”

Steve cleared his throat awkwardly. “Peter, I’m sorry to ask this of you, especially now, but we need to know what happened, as best as you can remember.” Peter nodded, right. But Steve wasn’t done. “Especially about Red Skull. How is he here? I saw him practically disintegrate. How did-“

“It wasn’t him” Peter interrupted.

“What?”

“It wasn’t Red Skull. I mean, like, not the original guy? He was Russian, said he was trying to restart HYDRA. He thought pretending to be Red Skull would make people follow him more or something.”
Rhodey snorted something about over-dramatic pains in the butt. Tony smirked, and waved a hand at the wall. Immediately the monitors showing Peter’s vitals were replaced with a black screen.

“F.R.I.D.A.Y, you know what to do.”

A series of mugshots and data flashed through the screen, and Peter watched with his mouth gaping. “You have a database of people in HYDRA?”

“The important ones at least. Russian you said, right? Don’t worry this won’t take long. There aren’t a lot of HYDRA agents left. I’m not sure who’s killing them, but I’m not going to complain.”

Even as he finished speaking the screen froze on a single face.

“Albert Malik.” Natasha read aloud.

“Hm,” Tony hummed. “He hid out in Algeria during the worst of the fighting it looks like. Got quite the following among the Russian underground. No ties to HYDRA until close to the end, probably how he managed to stay under the radar until now. F.R.I.D.A.Y, get me a list of any recent purchases or credit card information, list of known associates or business partners, anything you can get.”

“Of course boss.”

“Okay, good.” Steve began decisively, “Now we need to find out what he’s planning and get ahead of him.”

“Um…” Peter began, and all eyes went to him.

Steve sighed, the sound fond. “Why don’t you tell us what happened first?”

“Right.” Peter attempted to tell the story as calmly and clinically as possible, but he couldn’t help squeezing Natasha’s hand tighter as he mentioned the man’s part in the deaths of his parents. At one point Sam grabbed onto his other hand and Wanda’s fingers began carding through his hair. The team members were a firm comfort at his side as he stammered through the story, uncertain. It occurred to him rather suddenly that for all of the fights he’d been in, all of the injuries he’d sustained, this was the first time he was really talking about them. Sure, he’d talk to Gwen
occasionally, but he’d been vague, and it was for purely storytelling purposes. It wasn’t like this, telling the Avengers to prepare them for the future. This was reporting, not talking. It made everything more serious. The trauma seemed more traumatic, the injuries more perilous. It was just… different.

Yet he managed to stammer through it, answering all questions the Avengers shot at him. Finally, the room descended into silence.

“I still can’t believe your dad gave you a genetic experiment as a night light.” Sam admitted for the third time. He was rather caught up on that detail.

“I don’t think he actually did. Uncle Ben found the sludge in a jar and I guess we just assumed…”

“Still, creepy.”

Peter smiled shakily. “Yeah.”

“How you feeling, kid?” The man continued, watching him seriously. “And remember, it’s ok if you’re not ok. That must have been pretty freaky.”

Oh, right. Peter Parker shouldn’t have already faced stuff like this on a bi-weekly basis. How would a well-adjusted person respond to something like this. “Um, yeah. It- uh- it was pretty scary.” Probably not like that.

“Well, if you want to talk about it, remember we’re all here for you. Any one of us.”

“Right. No, no I get that. Right now I guess I just…”

The man nodded. “That’s fine. Just, it’s ok if you don’t feel 100 percent for a while ok?”

“Uh, right thanks.”

“And we’re going to make sure you’re a lot safer so nothing like this happens again.” Tony said
earnestly from his spot near Peter’s bedside. He pulled up a tablet and proudly showed the boy the screen, schematics for a suit clearly visible.

“I get a suit?” He asked excitedly, fuzzy memories of the last time he awoke solidifying in his mind.

“Sweet!”


“Purely defensive. As soon as it’s ready I’ll be giving you a watch with a hidden button. Any time you’re in danger, you press it and the suit will be on you in seconds and we’ll get a distress call. It’s designed to create a protective barrier around you and is pre-programed to get you to one of 5 already mapped out safe zones. I call it the Iron Turtle, cause of the shell.”

Peter had the fleeting thought that between this, Natasha’s training, and his own powers he was turning into an actual Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle. Then he decided that the drugs hadn’t worked themselves out of his system as much as he’d thought.

He was just about to argue and ask why he couldn’t get a real suit when Steve spoke up. “But we understand if this was a bit… much for you. It’s one thing to agree to assume the risks of living with the Avengers when nothing’s happened yet. It another to be faced with that same decision now. There are safe houses and families all over the world who would be more than willing to take you in. You could live under the radar, safe. Even Clint said he’d love to have you?”

“Hawkeye, really? He’s so cool! Uh, I mean, thanks Steve. I get that, I really do but, my place is here, with you guys.” Even as he spoke the boy looked around the unfamiliar room uncertainly.

“Um, actually where is ‘here’?”

Tony barked out a laugh, but it was Vision who answered. “We are currently in the Avenger training facilities. It is a much more secure location, especially as the tower is still being repaired.”

“Oh.” The boy looked out the window, mesmerized by the miles of trees and forest. For a boy whose idea of the wilderness was Central Park, the image was incredible and daunting at once.
“And, uh, where is that.”

“Classified.” The group said together, in monotone.

“O...kay then. Where’s Pepper?”

“Currently,” Tony asked, “I think she’s chewing out the president of Finland for calling us in on something that was an obvious distraction. I mean, it was a HYDRA lead distraction, but it was still just a distraction.”

“Oh.”

“She wishes she could be here.” Rhodey added.

“No, yeah I get that. I just wanted to be sure she’s okay.”

The men nodded and for a moment the room was filled with comfortable silence, everyone simply content in the knowledge that they were all alive. The moment was only broken by a low grumbling.

“Ugh,” Peter moaned. “I’m so hungry. Please tell me your super secret base still has a chef.”

Tony snorted, “Nope.”

Vision smiled at Peter as the boy moaned piteously once more. “Perhaps we could order some pizza?”

“Wait this place gets takeout? How does that even work?”

Chapter End Notes
Albert Malik is an actual character from the comics according to the Wikipedia Red Skull page, of course his story is vastly different, but I'm trying to base this from him.

Also, I tried to reply to comments on my old fics, so since it's summer I'm gonna try and resume doing that! Hopefully.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

In which I indulge in my headcanon that Sam and Natasha are bros, despite little canonical evidence, and Peter gets one step closer to donning his tights.

Also sorry if his training is underwhelming, I wanted it to be exciting, but Peter really needs to learn the basics, unfortunately. Should get better in the future.

Peter let out a low whine as he slammed into the floor, automatically mentally checking for bruised ribs or broken bones. He tried to scramble up, only for his tired arms to refuse to hold, a weakness he knew his opponent would see and exploit immediately. He let out a low groan, even as he determined that nothing was seriously injured. “Alright, I get it. You win!” He called to his pursuer.

Spidey-sense suddenly tingled, and with a move born purely from heightened instincts the boy’s eyes shot open and he dove to the side, just in time to see a fist… stop, an inch away from where his face had been.

“At least your reflexes are good.” Natasha commented, leveling a kick to Peter’s chest that the boy had to scramble to avoid. He knew that the kick, just like every single move the perfectly controlled Nat had made, would have landed on the protective pads covering his body, but he still had no desire to add to his growing list of bruises.

“Wait, I said you win! I yield! Parley, parley!”

Sam started snickering from his position watching the spar, but said nothing.

“There is no yield in battle.” Natasha replied with a scowl, but stopped her onslaught none the less as she helped the teen up. “You should have figured that out by now. You were kidnapped less than a week ago.”

Peter groaned exaggeratedly as he stood. “I know, and honestly, I expected at least three more days of being pandered to.”

“I’m trying to keep you from dying. This is me pandering.” Natasha deadpanned as Sam finally made his way up to the pair, a water bottle in each hand. Peter accepted the waterbottle gratefully, guzzling half of it in one gulp. He’d had to tone his strength down quite a bit, and hold back from sticking to the walls, but honestly he hadn’t held much back in terms of flexibility or speed, and he was exhausted. And that was with him being on the defensive literally the whole time without even thinking twice about trying to fight back. Natasha was honestly terrifying.

“Blame Stark.” Sam said with a genial grin. “That always works best for me. He did give you that crazy healing-serum. If it wasn’t for that, you’d still be in bed helping Steve work through his Netflix queue.”

“Lucky me.” Peter said with a forced laugh, brain scrambling to find any topic of conversation better than the fact that despite being much more injured than Happy, he was completely healed while the bodyguard was still stuck on a bed, despite both of them receiving the same “crazy healing-serum”.

No one other than the doctor had mentioned it, but he definitely wasn’t keen for anyone to start thinking about it long. Especially not when he was semi-convinced that Dr. Cho had kept a sample. “I, uh, I doubt Dr. Cho would have cleared me for training if she knew it was going to be this though. I thought you said you were just teaching me some moves.” Peter winced, hearing the whine in his own voice. Before he could take it back though, Natasha was smirking again.

“I had to know what we were starting with. You have some decent reflexes and speed, but other than that...” She shrugged. “Have you ever even seen a punch?”

“Well- I don’t know that- I mean Flash Thompson- but he probably didn’t- I guess-”

The woman smirked and rolled her eyes. “Alright, to the punching bags.”

“Wait!” Peter blurted, drawing two sets of eyes on him. “Can we stop for a snack break. I’m hungry.” Healing took a lot out of him, and Natasha wasn’t kidding when she said her workouts were intense.

Nat simply walked to the bags. “You can eat once you’ve perfected the basics.”

Sam gripped the teen shoulder commiseratingly. “I tried to warn you.”

Peter sighed in mock dismay, a small smile playing at his lips. As tired and hungry as he was, training with THE Black Widow would never not be cool.

______________________________________________________________

“Hey, not cool!” Tony complained, coming into the kitchen only to see half of his sandwich in Peter’s hand, the other already gone. “Come on man, I left for literally less than a minute.”

Peter hastily chewed and swallowed before speaking, eyes wide and apologetic. “S-sorry Tony. I just finished training with Nat. I was starving.”

Stark staggered back exaggeratedly. “Alright, alright. Just stop it with the bambi eyes. We should weaponize those things. Pair it with Steve’s ‘I’m disappointed in you’ voice. Crime would stop overnight.”

Peter simply smiled in victory and took another large bite of the sandwich, already mentally debating what he was going to put on a second. With the ingredients in the Avengers pantry a single sandwich cost more than an entire family dinner with Ben and May, and Peter intended to exploit that fact as often as possible. He was trying to decide on the bread, (ciabatta vs. foccacia, words he’s not sure he’d ever even heard before his adoption) when Tony suddenly straightened.

“Wait! Did you say you were training with Nat?”

“Uh, yes?”

The man stared at Peter, seemingly dumbfounded. “But she promised she’d let us know! I can’t believe she would keep your first training session all to herself like that!”

“Sam was there.”

“Of course he was.” Tony groaned theatrically. “We were all going to come to cheer you on. I was going to take a video!”

“Uh-huh.” Peter murmured, before turning to look into the ceiling. “Hey F.R.I.D.A.Y., could you
please remind me to send Natasha a gift basket. Um, of knives if those exist.”

“Of course, Peter.” F.R.I.D.A.Y replied, her robotic voice fond.

“Yeah, yeah, laugh it up.” The man rolled his eyes and moved to make himself a new sandwich. Peter perked up and began following the inventor. He hadn’t been this hungry since his first week of super-hero-ing, before he’d realized why he suddenly needed enough food to feed a small army. He flexed his fingers as he stepped beside Tony, the pair joking as they made their lunches. Natasha had taught him technique for an hour or so after they finished the pitiful excuse for a spar, and he had no doubt that even with his advanced healing he would have bruises on his knuckles if it weren’t for the padded gloves.

It felt good though, learning how to fight. It was amazing how the smallest movement mattered, the slightest difference in position could mean the difference between a win and a beat down. He could already imagine pairing what he’d learned with his heightened flexibility- and all he’d really learned were a few basic punches. It was well worth any hunger.

“If it helps,” Peter offered, assembling a sandwich beside Tony. “I’m sure you can come tomorrow and watch me stand around and hit a bag until my hand turns to liquid again.” He shook his throbbing hand in emphasis, contracting and spreading his fingers.

“Aw, that's cute.” Tony smirked. “You think you have until tomorrow before Nat drags you back down there.”

Peter looked up at Tony in not-entirely-mock horror. “Oh no.”

As Tony’s chuckles petered out, the two delved into a comfortable silence as they ate their lunch. “Hey, uh Tony?”

“Yeah?” The genius licked a smear of mustard off his thumb.

“Why didn’t F.R.I.D.A.Y. tell you that Nat was training me when she knew you wanted to watch?”

“Good question. Fry?”

“Miss Potts has informed me that you did not need to know.”

“Traitor.” The man mumbled fondly, though it was unclear if the comment was directed at F.R.I.D.A.Y or Pepper.

“W-what does that mean?”

“Well, a traitor is one who betrays. Examples include-”

“Tony!”

Stark laughed. “It’s a special backdoor I made just for Pepper. If she tells F.R.I.D.A.Y that I don’t need to know something, then she keeps it from me.”

“Really? Wow.”

“Well, it’s typically just used for emergencies or things I really don’t need to know. I trust her. Or at least I did,” The man continued good-naturedly. “But after this treachery I’m not so sure.”

“Shall I contact Ms. Potts so that you can have this conversation to her face?”
"Ah, no no no, that’s-"

Peter tuned out as the man bickered with his AI, his mind whirling. Despite his assumed breakthrough before the attack, he’d really not gotten anywhere close to actually finding a way to sneak out. Sure, using the codeword for the safe room was working well enough now for short but frequent visits to his personal lab to work on his suit and web shooters, but it would backfire if any of the Avengers ever asked where he was. It just wasn’t practical for actual crime fighting, when he could be out for hours and come back to spend even longer licking his wounds. Besides, it would be nice to find a way to store schematics and notes on one of the dozens of billion dollar computers in the lab instead of the 10 cent spiral bound notebooks filling the trunk of the secret bunker.

If there was one thing that the Hydra attack had done, it was make him realize how lax he’d been. It had been weeks since he’d done anything to try to get back to crime sighting, besides some half-hearted attempts to get through the code. He needed to kick it up a notch. Or ten. Or a hundred.

Training with Nat helped. The first session had been pretty much solely focused on the basic punch, but even so he was learning things he’d never even considered.

Working in the labs with Tony also helped. They’d just sensitized a material that should withstand rips, tears, and friction 1000x better than spandex, but should still be just as flexible and comfortable. He just had to find a way to create enough of it for a suit, make it the right colors, sew it into a suit, troubleshoot the eye-slits so he didn’t have to rely on those stupid funnel things--how was Daredevil dealing with those? He probably had to tear them off. A normal person would have been practically blind--then he had to make new web-shooters to work with the new suit, find a way to disguise his voice even when his mask was half off just in case, and finally figure out how to sneak around a team of trained super spies, soldiers, an ever-present AI, a psychic, and… whatever Vision was. Right. Maybe it would be awhile before Spider-Man webbed again.

It made him anxious. Daredevil had stopped going out as Spider-Man a while back, and the longer Spider-Man was missing, the more his return would be noticed. If he got noticed too much… it wouldn’t be good. He would just have to work harder. He could do this. He would figure something out. He wasn’t going to be caught helpless again, as Peter or as Spider-Man.

Not that it mattered for the next few weeks. He still had no clue where the heck this place was. Any time he asked, they would just tell him it was confidential. F.R.I.D.A.Y. was blocking any attempts to find his location using the internet or his phone, but he was pretty sure it was far from New York. He knew upstate New York was supposed to be pretty woodsy, but the surroundings just didn’t look right. Even if he was completely ready to go out, it would take a while for the tower to be rebuilt.

It probably would have been cool to be somewhere new if he could enjoy it, explore or something, but they were under essential house arrest for the time being, to keep things super secret. Wanda said that they were being especially careful because of the Hydra threat, but Peter doubted that they ever spent much time hiking around their top secret base. Not that he was a big hiker considering the closest thing to wilderness he’d ever seen was central park, but the point stands.

Honestly he was still just confused how the Domino’s guy had made it a few nights back. He’d decided not to question it.

"-isn’t that right Peter?"

“Huh?” Peter started, staring at Tony with wide eyes. He’d honestly forgotten that he’d been speaking with the man, so absorbed into his own little world. “Um, I mean uh…”

“You weren’t paying attention?” The man asked in exaggerated offense.
“I, uh, I may have zoned out a while back.” He admitted sheepishly.

Tony sighed, but sent Peter a smirk. “It’s fine. I know children have limited attention spans.”

Peter sputtered indignantly. “I’m 15, not 5.”

“So, what? You were thinking about girls instead of juice boxes?”

Peter perked and “ooh, what kind of juice do we have” slipped out before he could stop himself.

Tony laughed loudly before stretching and getting to his feet. “No juice kid, sorry. I’ll put it on the list.”

“Already done, Boss.” F.R.I.D.A.Y. spoke, and Peter grinned to the ceiling. Tony smiled as well before offering a hand to Peter.

“What do you say we head to the hot tub until Nat finds you again. The jets will do wonders with your muscles.”

Peter jumped to his feet. Though he was slightly stiff, he knew it was nothing compared to how he should be feeling. Still, he rarely said no to the hot tub. In a flash he was in his newest room, turning his closet and drawers upside down looking for a pair of trunks.

They turned out to be Iron-Man themed. Of course.

Nat didn’t show up for some time later, nearly dragging a protesting Peter out of the water. “You can stay in the hot tub as soon as you’re good enough to fight me for the right of staying in the hot tub.”

The teen sputtered, but followed the woman without real complaint, trying to ignore Tony as the man called for the others. It turned out to be disappointing for everyone as the woman simply marched the teen to the punching bags yet again.

“O-oh.” Peter mumbled, trying not to let his disappointment show even as he got into position. “I-I thought we would be, you know, doing something-- uh different this time.”

“You want this to be fun. Interesting.”

“Um, y-yeah.”

“Well, it won’t be. Not yet at least. You have a long way to go. Is that where your elbow should be?”

Peter started as the last words turned sharp, immediately correcting his position as he threw another punch.

“Good.” She said, pleased. “You learn fast at least. Five more good ones and we can move on to another form.”

Peter nodded and moved to action, ignoring the Avengers watching around the room. Immediately after the fifth punch, Natasha was by his side working him through a side kick. Peter followed the motion hesitantly, making corrections as the woman told him to change his stance, the angle of his leg, how he distributed his weight, until she was satisfied. Then she made him stand normally and get into stance again. And again, and again, and again.

At one point Steve moved silently to stand next to Natasha, Peter hoped it was to give him reprieve, but he was wrong.
“That’s… weird.” The super soldier muttered as Peter moved on from standing to actually kicking.

“What?” Peter asked, pausing, his leg halted at an angle that would be awkward for anyone else.

“Kick!” Nat commanded, staring Peter into obeying as she turned to Steve. “You saw it too then. Sam and I discussed it this morning, and I’m sure Rhody noticed as well.” She nodded to where the man stood, watching Peter with a furrowed brow, and if confused. Tony and many of the others had gotten tired of the ‘let’s watch Peter hit a punching bag in the way over and over again’ show, leaving only the members trained in the fighting hand to hand. Sam and Rhodes seemed to notice the two talking and moved closer to the group as well.

“What?” Peter asked, this time not halting the rhythm of his kicks. Thud. Thud-thud.

“You’re going to need more work than we’d thought.” Nat said bluntly, and Peter grimaced. He’d known he was inexperienced, but he had no clue it was that bad.

Thud. Thud-thud.

“When we were coming up with a plan, we were assuming you’d fight like someone with little to no experience.” Sam cut in, reading the teen’s expression.

Thud. Thud-thud.

“But you don’t.” Rhodes added with a shake of his head. “You fight like someone who’s fought plenty, but without training. Like someone who’s relied on superior strength to win fights.” The adults paused, their gazes lingering on Peter’s thin arms and general lack of visible musculature.

Thud. Thud-thud.

“Which seems odd.” Sam finished tactfully.

“Actually,” Steve continued and Peter--still kicking in the same constant pattern, Thud. Thud-thud. -had to fight not to make a quip about them all finishing each other's sentences. Physical exertion made him quippy, go figure. He figured it was some kind of pavlovian response or something. “It’s making me think… Peter, before we adopted you, we heard that a lot of families had issues with you sneaking out at night. It hasn’t been an issue here yet, so we haven’t commented on it, but if there’s anything you need to talk about, we’re here.”

Thud. Thud-thud.

Rhodes suddenly nodded, face grim. “Heard you came back all kinds of beat up, too.”

Thud. Thud-thud.

“Oh, you think I- oh- no! That was uh- that was just Spider-Man, um stuff.” Thud. Thud-thud. Oh crap oh crap. Never mind about the quips, where were his comebacks now? Oh crap, why did he say that, what a stupid way to reveal-

“Your pictures?” Natasha asked, one perfect eyebrow rising.

THUD. THUD- THUD.

“Yes!” Peter leaped at the out. “N-no fighting, nothing like that. Just pictures! And sometimes crashing buildings, and rubble, and villains and stuff. Right.”

THUD. THUD-THUD.
The four snorted. “No wonder you can’t fight.” Rhodey smirked to the the other three, “He learned from watching Spider-Man.”

**THUD. THUD-THUD.**

Black Widow turned to the boy, eyes sparkling with wicked amusement. “You couldn’t have followed DareDevil around? He at least knows how to fight.”

**THUD. THUD-THUD.**

“No thank you, I wanted to live.”

**THUD. THUD-THUD.**

Sam grinned, “Well, you could have-” **THUD. Poof. Psssssssssst.**

The man cut off, all eyes turning to where Peter’s foot was embedded in the punching bag up to the ankle, sand pouring from the hole. Peter was frozen. He’d stopped paying attention to his strength way back, stupid, and now he’d actually kicked *through* the bag. There was a moment, a bare space of pure silence. Then, three voices speaking as one, “*STEVE!*”

“Huh?”

Captain America was rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly. “Sorry, Peter. This is probably my fault. Even these punching bags can only hold up to my strength for so long. I try to keep my stuff separate, but sometimes after a good workout I forget. I thought I’d packed everything away last night, but… wouldn’t be the first time.”

Peter let himself wonder for a moment how his strength compared to Steve’s, like who would win in a tug of war, before carefully moving his foot out of the hole. “Oh, so uh…”

“No, living with the Avengers did not magically give you super strength.” Sam chuckled. “Sorry kid.”

“Right,” He chuckled nervously. “That would be crazy, haha. So… is that good, are we done for today?”

Natasha was thoughtful before she nodded slowly. “You kept your form throughout. I suppose we can be done with the punching bag for today.”

Peter sighed in relief. Honestly, even if this wasn’t really straining his enhanced body, this was stressful. He was tired of having to control his strength.

“We can move on to weights.”

Peter moaned. Of course.

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Peter slept deeply, the world numb as he rested fully, dead to the world.

Suddenly, fire. Heat seared into his body, creating a point of pain at the tip of his nose. The boy yelled in pain, instinctively jerking back even as he struggled to awaken, hands forming instinctive fists. Substance of some sort crumbled in his right hand, and the hot pain flowed with the movement, washing over his hand and up his arm.
Finally, finally he managed to get his eyes open, scanning the room for threats that… weren’t there. Peter eyes the room blearily, seeing only the Avengers relaxing with breakfast, watching him with varying degrees of amusement or concern. Peter looked down to see a crumpled cardboard cup in his hand, and coffee soaking his arm.

“You ok?” Rhodes asked, eyeing the boy.

“I, uh, I think I fell asleep in my coffee.” He admitted, accepting a washcloth from Wanda and sparing a moment to be thankful that Tony had gone out for coffee that morning. He had no clue what he would do if he squished another cup, the one from his first day still hidden in the tower. At his comment however, amusement left nearly everyone’s gaze, replaced totally with concern.

“You have not been sleeping well.” Wanda began carefully, but Peter cut her off before she continued.

“I don’t need to talk to anyone, I’m fine.”

It was obvious that she didn’t believe him. No one did. They all assumed the bags under his eyes were caused by nights of tossing and turning from nightmares about Hydra. They weren’t, but he didn’t need another thing, like therapy, added to his list of never-ending things to do. Training had been going well, but it was a never ending stream of hard work and exhaustion. Not to mention that any time he wasn’t punching things with Nat, he was working with Tony in the lab, trying to perfect their new material. Any alone time he got was devoted to combing through F.R.I.D.A.Y.’s systems or creating voice modulators and web shooters, not that anyone could know about any of that.

Still, they assumed he was working himself to the bone as a coping mechanism, a way to ignore the trauma of the kidnapping. They were wrong. The attack had done nothing more than reminded him that he couldn’t afford to be helpless again, and he was determined to make sure that didn’t happen.

He was making good progress too, despite his exhaustion. The voice disguise was nearly completed, inspired by binge-watching The Flash on Netflix (which, by the way there was little more entertaining than watching superhero movies with real heroes, they complained the whole time about miscommunication and how things could have gone a million times better if they took two minutes to think. Peter had heard the real stories behind some of their battles and wasn’t sure they had room to talk, but he said nothing). He’d fashioned it to vibrate his vocal cords like in the show. The difficult bit was getting it strong enough to make a change, but not so bad that it would hurt or distract him. It took a while, but he’d finally gotten it and had a working model ready to be sewed into a costume as soon as the material was finished. The web shooters hadn’t taken long at all, but he couldn’t wait to use them. With Tony’s tech, he got twice the amount of webbing into a device a quarter of the size. He was itching to get back into the city where he could stretch his maze of webbing across skyscrapers, creating a highway in the sky that only he could use.

He missed it.

“Maybe we should cut training in half today, give Pete some time to rest.” Sam suggested to Natasha, face concerned. Steve nodded beside him, casting an imploring look at the woman. The two had become a constant fixture in Peter’s training, with Rhodey joining in occasionally as well. Surprisingly, despite Steve’s position as a somewhat leader of the Avengers, he seemed fairly content to defer training to Natasha.

The woman nodded after a long moment, and Peter had to fight not to just melt in relief. “Fine. I was planning on doing something different today.”
Peter perked. “No punching bag?”

The woman just smiled enigmatically, “Different.”

“Well good, because he’ll need time to pack.” Tony suddenly interrupted, standing to grab Peter a normal cup of coffee as the teen tossed his crushed cup to the trash. “I brought this in as a celebration! Pepper says construction on the tower should be done today, and we should be good to move back first thing tomorrow.”

The group cheered before, in eerie synchrony, they quieted and turned to Peter. “Uhh…” The boy mumbled, looking to the Avengers uncertainly.

“Peter,” Wanda began, eyes wide and kind as they usually where when talking to the younger boy. “Will you be comfortable going back to the tower?”

“Huh?”

“You were attacked there, someplace you were supposed to feel safe. We would understand if you need some time away.”

“Oh.” Sometimes, Peter thought it was sweet how worried they were about him. Most of the time it was annoying. This was a little both. “I- I’ll be ok. I mean, this kinda stuff happens to you guys all the time.”

Tony snorted. “We have a bit more experience with this than you kiddo.”

“Sometimes even we need some space.” Sam cut in immediately afterwards, sending Tony a look.

Peter took a moment to think, picking his words carefully, before deciding to go with the simple truth. “I miss New York. I want to go home.”

The team smiled at him warmly at the boy for a moment, before Nat stood fluidly to her feet. “In that case, we’d better get training so you can pack. We’ll make your last lesson here special.” She winked.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Okay, so how amazing was Spider-Man: Homecoming, amiright? So cool!!!!!! That being said...

PLEASE NOTE:

This story was begun, planned, and partially written before Spider-Man: Homecoming came out. Therefore, certain events and characters will be vastly different than they were portrayed in the current MCU. For example, there is unfortunately no Ned. Other characters will also be different from in Homecoming. So. Expect this to be canonically appropriate only up until Civil War. Please and thank you. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Peter breathed deeply as he stood in the center of the training area, clearing his mind of the million different thoughts flashing around. Bits of code, engineering theories, plans for hitting the streets and a dozen other half-formed thoughts fading away to a clear emptiness that only came to him when he was preparing to battle. He was getting ready to react before thinking, focusing wholly on the fight. Not that this was a fight, it was just training. Though, Nat was currently slipping on a pair of hand pads, so maybe he should re-think that.

Sam and Steve stood leaning against the walls of the gym, as usual content to simply observe Natasha’s instruction. They tended to only really interject to give advice about his stance or posture. The other Avengers popped in from time to time, but Tony relied more on his suit than fighting prowess, Wanda had her magic, and Vision… well, was Vision. Their presence was more of a moral support than anything else, typically mixed with a good amount of teasing and good-natured ribbing. Rhodey came fairly regularly, however as the team ‘Tony-wrangler’ with Pepper back in New York, he was sometimes indisposed. Especially now as they prepared to move back into the tower. Steve and Sam were near constant fixtures though, always watching, always… looming.

Peter never thought he’d use Captain America and looming in the same sentence, but there it was.

It wasn’t all bad though. He’d gotten to throw the Captain America shield as a reward for going up a few pounds in the weight room. It was so awesome it almost made him feel guilty, considering he could have lifted the weight with one hand. In his sleep.

He caught a bus once as Spider-Man and had gotten a hate-article from Jameson defaming him as an enemy to all forms of public transportation. Peter Parker squatted 100 lbs. and got to play with the most iconic weapon in America. Go figure.

A blur of red and a tingle of spider-sense brought Peter out of his thoughts. He yelped and almost bent himself in half to avoid a punch from Natasha. The woman smirked at him as he scrambled to straighten.

“Paying attention?” She asked.
“Um, yes. Now I am, yes.” He nodded.

“Good.” She held up her hands. “Uppercut!” She commanded.

Peter moved almost instinctively, sending his fist into the pad she had lifted to the side of her face.

“Scissor kick!”

He redirected his energy to his leg, sending his foot to her other hand where it lay beside her hip.

“Left cross!”

His arm swung, landing solidly in the pad.

“Right cross!”

Directly in the other.

“Again!” She commanded, moving her arm in a zigzag pattern so he didn’t have a clear, predictable target. He swung at the apex of a movement and she nodded at the connection.

“Push kick!”

He obeyed, but before he could connect she suddenly dropped her hands and straightened, making Peter falter and nearly fall. “Is that correct form?”

Peter looked down and was surprised to find that as he punched, his legs had gotten awkwardly tangled. He moved around until he was standing in the right position. “Push kick!” And he moved. This continued for several long moments, the woman calling out commands and making Peter attack increasingly complex targets, occasionally correcting form or giving advice. At one point she stopped, holding the pads beside her head at prime attacking height.

“Harder!” She commanded at his punch. “Harder! These pads aren’t to protect my hands, they’re to give you a bigger target. Harder!”

At each cry Peter pushed a little harder, going from approximately 25% strength, to approximately 26%, to 27%, 28%. It was excruciatingly difficult, holding back as much strength as he could while attempting to show progress. Exaggerating each movement and thrust. Even when Nat started nodding, believing that Peter’s strength had peaked he was barely making an effort.

“Good.” She finally said with a nod. “Now get ready to dodge.” And she dropped and swept a kick at his side. Peter yelped and leaped to the side, feeling the blow glance against his skin as he moved. She struck out a fist to the left, he leaped to the right. She punched to the right and he scrambled to the left. She kicked again, an exaggerated, sweeping thing coming from the side.

“Jab!”

And, conditioned by days of constant repetition, Peter’s arm shot out even as he jumped back. Natasha kick sailed an inch from his stomach, but his punch landed against the pad with a dull thud. He looked up with a surprised ‘O’ of his mouth, finally understanding the exercise. Natasha aimed a punch to his head and Peter leaned to the side hard, and before she could say a word he responded with a side kick to her left. She caught it easily with the padded hand, but nodded approvingly.

She sped up after that, and Peter focused landing blows. He’d always been good with dodging, even in their first miserable excuse for a spar. She’d been impressed with it, honing certain movements and
pushing him through a series of gymnastic and aerobatic maneuvers to improve his flips and jumps. (Though of course even with this instruction Peter Parker was not nearly as limber as a certain web-slinging vigilante. Of course not, why would he be) Still, while Spidey-sense helped him to avoid blows, it didn’t help much with the offensive, winning part of fighting. That was what Nat was helping him with in this exercise, taking the defense that he knew instinctively and combining it with the offense she had been drilling into him.

She moved fluidly, purposely. She knew exactly where each blow she struck out with would land. Peter was certain that even if he couldn’t avoid a hit, she had enough control that to pull it back so that he wouldn’t so much as bruise.

Assuming that she didn’t want him to bruise. She gradually increased her speed as they moved, Sam and Steve occasionally shouting out advice on what kind of move to use or where to aim. She was using half of her strength and a quarter of her skill, moving at a fraction of her speed at well, constantly calling for him to hit harder, kick stronger, and Peter had to fight to control his strength. She was incredibly skilled, but every time he connected it seemed so fragile. It was like when you were playing with a puppy, swiping at them and wrestling, knowing that even when they tried their hardest, you were barely trying.

Of course he had no doubts that she would kick his butt in milliseconds if he ever said absolutely any of this out loud.

Natasha suddenly dropped into a low crouch, an elegant kick moving to sweep his legs out from under him. In a movement, much to smooth to belong to Peter, the teen avoided the attack with a graceful flip. Mid-jump he panicked, realizing his slip, and flailed. He landed on his butt, but the awkward flounder did what all of his practiced moves could not, and the side of his foot connected with Natasha’s unprotected face.

“Uh, sorry.” He managed and she smirked.

“A little unorthodox, but I suppose it worked.”

Suddenly Steve was there, offering the teen a hand up. “When we get back to the tower we’ll work on your landings. And getting up when they fail.”

“Uh, right.”

The man suddenly looked up to Natasha. “Care for a round?”

Her only reply was to shed the pads and move to a ready position. Sam grinned at the pair as he handed Peter a bottle of water. “You’re going to want to stick around for this.”

“Showing Peter a real fight?” The woman smirked.

“Showing him what he could look forward to, with some practice.” Steve replied. And then, as one, they lunged.

It was… mesmerizing, so different from his “spar” it was like comparing a wolf with a chihuahua. They fought with a ferocity that he’d never thought he’d see between friends. A chaos of ordered, precise attacks and dodges. As he watched Steve caught the woman’s punch and threw her over his shoulder, but she landed on her feet and actually used the momentum to land a kick to the back of his knee. He fell, but moved forward, turning it into a roll and jumping to his feet, ready, a few meters away.

Peter had been kidding himself earlier. Natasha hadn’t been using a fraction of her skill against him,
she’d been using a fraction of a fraction. She’d been moving in slow motion. She’d been wrestling
with a puppy, not the other way around, no matter how strong he was. As far as Peter knew she was,
genetically, the same as anyone else. There had been no super soldier serum, no radioactive spider.
Just her, and hours upon hours of grueling hard work. It was amazing.

She was flexible where he was sturdy, fluid where he was solid. They were both as fast as light, but
she seemed able to contort her body in imaginable ways to land a hold or the upper hand. Peter
found himself clutching his fists, imagining a hero with the strength of Captain America and the
flexibility of Black Widow, imagining the hero he could be.

He could be great.

Sam put a hand on his shoulder and began pointing out moves and strategies, explaining how this
move or that was related to what he had been learning. Expanding on the moves he knew and
explaining how they became the violent dance before him.

Peter committed each word to memory.

He would be great.

Albert Malik could feel a bead of sweat running down his face and desperately wished he could take
off his mask. Or his gloves. Or his jacket. But no, sacrifices must be made for Hydra to be reborn.
The Red Skull could withstand a little heat in order to see his empire rise. His plan had failed,
fantastically so. He’d failed to eradicate the Avengers, had failed to even kill a simple child. He had
told the boy too much, nearly everything. He’d been a fool, full of the pride that had caused their fall
from power. He would not make the same mistake twice.

For now however, he had to hide, return to the shadows that Hydra had always thrived in. Even if
that meant crouching in this savage land of overwhelming heat and staggering humidity. He would
hide, and he would wait until the time was right.

Until the time was right to enact his new plan.

Cut off one head and two more will rise in its place.

Wanda was in the kitchen when Peter wandered in for his post-training meal, working on a stew.
Peter was practically drooling before he even cleared the doorway.

“Did you make extra?” He asked pleadingly. She barely looked up at him as she ladled the thick
broth into a bowl.

“No.”

He deflated.

“I made just enough for two.” She turned with a smirk, a pair of bowls in hand. Peter grinned back at
her, grabbing a pair of spoons before sitting next to her at the small bar attached to the kitchen.

“You are my favorite Avenger.”
She laughed brightly, and the two lapsed into silence as they enjoyed the meal. “You are handling this very well.” She says finally and Peter winced.

He’d been expecting this for a while, honestly. She’d been very… attentive since his kidnaping, there every moment that he wasn’t training, like he would get in trouble the instant she looked away. Like she thought that it was only her protection that could keep him protected. He knew a conversation like this was coming. That didn’t mean he had any clue what to say.

“Um, yeah. I guess it just hasn’t like, sunk in yet, you know? I’ve been, uh, keeping myself busy.”

She nodded, like she knew all about keeping busy so that she didn’t have to think. “It is ok to be afraid Peter. We often are. There is no shame.”

Peter squirmed in his seat. “I, uh, I guess it wasn’t so bad because, uh, because I knew you’d come for me.” He’d been up against enough enemies without anyone to rely on to know that that wasn’t something to take for granted.

Wanda stared into his eyes silently for several long moments before slowly leaning forward to envelope him in a firm hug. She mumbled, barely more than breathing, “Just be careful Peter. You’re like a brother to me.”

Peter’s breath caught in his throat as he heard her words, and everything she didn’t say. By the time she leaned back she was smiling again. “Come on, eat up. I know you want to explore the woods at least a little before we go. There is a pond a while out. Perfect for skipping rocks.”

Peter shrugged, it wasn’t like he had much else to do. Packing would be useless as Tony had probably already completely replaced his wardrobe at the tower. “Ok, but no powers, that’s cheating.”

She laughed brightly. “I do not need to use powers to beat you at skipping rocks, city boy.”

“Oh yeah? Just watch, it’s all about the physics.”

There were many cool things about living with the Avengers. Eating breakfast with Captain America: Cool. Training with Black Widow: Very Cool. Tinkering in the lab with Iron Man: Extremely Cool. Getting his butt kicked in a stone skipping contest by Scarlet Witch, a little less cool but still more cool than Flash Thompson would ever experience in his life. (Knowing physics did not help him skip rocks. He felt very lied to, Hollywood.) But one of the coolest things had to be riding in Tony Stark’s private jets. The seats were the comfiest things he’d ever sat in, the food was incredible, and there weren’t even pilots, just computers.

Now if only he could get used to flying.

Somehow, while he jumped off of skyscrapers on a daily basis and had actually jumped onto a flying plane with nothing but his spider-hands keeping him from falling off, he still jumped at every other jolt of turbulence. It didn’t make much sense, but honestly he blamed his spidey-sense. It didn’t like the altitude or the pressure, and the occasional bursts of movement just made it worse. Still, it was worth it to see this view of the city, one that he hadn’t even gotten as Spider-Man.

“This is amazing.” He breathed, eyes glued to a window.

“This your first time being in a plane?” Rhodey asked with an amused smile.
“It is actually. Or,” He frowned. “I guess it’s the first time I’d been in a plane when I was conscious.” The air turned stilted, awkward. “I mean, uh- I don’t.”

“We get it kid,” Rhodey said, “It’s fine.”

“Right.” Peter resumed staring out the window, watching the city that he knew and loved fly past. There was the statue of Liberty, the block of apartments where he and Aunt May had lived, his school, the hot dog cart that always gave Spider-man free hot dogs because it made the tourists practically swarm.

He saw more and more details as the plane descended, until finally he looked up to see Avengers tower in all it’s glory, shining out above the city, the giant A proudly displayed as if in defiance of the earlier attack.

Peter had seen pictures of the tower after the attack. The whole left side had been little more than a pile of rubble. The only thing left of his room at all had been the panic room, which had been completely, incredibly intact. Now, it barely looked like it had been touched. Not a single window was smudged as far as he saw. It was amazing.

“It looks just like it did before… everything.” He says, amazement clear in his voice.

Tony shrugged, “A few enforcements, extra security measures here and there. You can never be too careful.”

“That’s amazing. It’s only been a few weeks.”

The man simply shrugged, not nearly as impressed as the boy who had to wait three weeks once for the landlord to fix the plumbing. The plane landed on the designated pad on top of the tower, and as the doors opened the familiar sounds of New York filled the plane: honking horns, loud music, yelling. There was a lot of yelling actually. Had there always been this much yelling in New York? Probably.

This however, seemed really… close. The boy leaned over the side of the building to see what looked to be a mob of reporters swarming the better half of the building. As he looked over the side the yelling increased and dozens of flashes went off. Pepper grimaced as she made her way to meet them, wrapping Peter in a firm hug.

“Sorry about that. People have been pestering us to show you since the attack. We wanted to give you some time to relax before throwing you to the press, but it only made them more determined to see you.”

“You probably made some other budding photographer a lot of money leaning over like that.” Sam joked. “Hey, maybe you could even sell your old boss your own selfies.

Peter laughed awkwardly to keep from admitting he’d basically done that before anyways. As they made their way into the house he wondered if pictures of him paid out better than pictures of him. Er, that is pictures of Peter Parker and Spider-Man.

“So, uh, do I have to make a statement?” He asked, mostly to change the subject. Pepper grimaced.

“Sorry sweetie, but we need to let them know you’re alive. I have a few big names waiting in the conference room. We can make it a quick in and out.”

“Right. So, uh, do you have a statement for me to say or…”
“Nope.”

“Wha- No?” The boy all but yelled, looking to the woman incredulously.

She smiled, but continued leading the teen down the hall. “I trust you Peter. I know you won’t dig us any holes. At least, none I can’t get us out of.” She cast an exasperated look at Tony as she said this, but the man simply shrugged unapologetically. He actually took some pride in having occasionally put his foot so far in his mouth that even Pepper hadn’t been able to take it out, but he’d never tell her that.

“Wha- but I- I mean what should I- Are you sure?”

The woman stopped and looked Peter in the eye, her expression both serious and kind. “I’m sorry Peter, but right now the best thing for our image is just for you to be, well, you. Your authenticity in the first interview gave us a better boost than anything I could have done. The last thing we need right now is America saying that we’re putting words in your mouth.”

Well, when she put it like that. “O-ok. It- uh- it’s not going to be great.”

She smiled warmly. “As long as it's you, I’m sure it'll be amazing.”

And the next thing Peter knew, he was being ushered into a room full of yelling and flashing lights. Pepper quieted the reporters in moments, and suddenly all eyes were on Peter.

Peter cleared his throat awkwardly, wondering why simply talking was so much less intimidating than fighting super villains. He’d almost rather still be in Red Skull’s chair. “Um, hello,” He began, trying desperately to remember how the heck he had done this when he’d first been adopted.

Nope, he’s got nothing.

“So, uh, as you can see I’m okay. No, uh, no damage from the attack or anything. I’m alive and, uh, unharmed. Not even a bruise left so…” He left that thought to trail on for a moment before coughing awkwardly. He had no clue what else to say. Great. Maybe he should quote Shirley Temple again or something.

He winced before finally admitting, “I’m not sure what exactly I’m supposed to be talking about.”

That was the wrong thing to say. The room absolutely dissolved into chaotic yelling and questions, and Peter barely caught brief snippets of each one, but enough were similar that he knew exactly what they wanted him to say. “I, uh, I guess you’re wondering if I’m staying with them, and why and stuff.”

This was a disaster.

“I am, definitely. They, uh, they’re my family now and I’m not leaving them. I’m not sure how to answer, like, why because- uh because nothings changed. I mean, the Avengers made sure that I knew about the danger and stuff before they would sign the paperwork. We went over it a million times. I knew what I was getting into, I knew that stuff like this was possible and I agreed anyway. I’m, uh, I’m not going to go back on that just because the stuff that they warned me about came true. That would be like, seeing that warning sign on the iron that says not to iron clothes you’re wearing, then trying it anyway and getting mad when you get burned. Kinda. I just, nothing’s actually changed. These past few months are the best I’d had in a long time.” Since Aunt May died. “And no super villain is going to change that, or chase me away. The Avengers saved me. They’re putting in even more safety protocols than the million they already had. I trust them. And uh, to answer the rest of your questions: No, I don’t regret this-any of this. Not for a second.”
He looked around. “Ok, uh, is that good? Are we good? Can I go now?”

Pepper nodded and he all but sprinted out of the room, more than willing to let her deal with the aftermath.

Tony smirked at the kid as he escaped the conference room. “I am never going to get tired of listening to you try to talk to the press. Honestly, I’m thinking of making a ‘best of’ video for youtube.”

“Ha ha.” Peter says sardonically. Tony just clasps him on the shoulder and leads him deeper into the building.

“Alright, now that the media knows you’re alive, why don’t I show you to your room? You can see the changes we made. And then: a feast! Lorenzo really goes all out when he hasn’t seen us for a while. You didn’t hear this from me, but a little birdie told me that he’d even gotten out the pasta maker.”

“Yum.” Peter hummed. The teen smiled as he caught the city skyline out one of the windows. It was good to be home.

Peter’s made a large, obnoxious yawn as the credits start to roll on the movie they’d been watching. “I’m wiped.” He complains lightly with a stretch. “I think I’m, uh, I’m gonna head to bed.”

Natasha smirked at him. It had been a week since they’d returned to the tower, and since then the training had only gotten more and more intense. She’d started working gymnastics and aerobatics into some offensive moves rather than just using them defensively as he had been, and was obviously taking pride in the fact that he was worn out.

“Want someone to tuck you in?” Tony asked, “Maybe a bedtime story?”

Peter rolled his eyes. “I’m 15, not 5.” He complained before making his way out of the room to a chorus of ‘goodnight’s.

He exaggeratedly yawned and rubbed his eyes all the way to his room, and had to fight to keep himself from slamming the door shut the instant he arrived. Immediately his face lost all hints of tiredness, and he was making his way to his mini-lab. Once there, he made his way to the bunker and sat in the lone chair before reaching into one of the nearby storage compartments and pulling out a swath of blue and red fabric.

He ran his fingers along the material. It felt as soft as silk but he knew it was tougher than leather. He’d modified the designs he’d been working on with Tony, personalizing it to fit Spider-Man’s specific needs.

He tended to get thrown into walls more often than shot, so he’d prioritized making it friction resistant rather than bulletproof. He’d relaxed the tightness of the weave too, so that it would be even more flexible, though that came with the unfortunate side effect of making it less temperature resistant. Someday he would find a way to make it waterproof- he ended up in the Hudson far too often- but for now this would suit his needs (hehe, suit his needs). Best yet, because it was completely synthetic, he could make the material on his hands and feet nearly microscopic. With the Spandex he’d had to cut holes at the fingertips and feet so that he could stick to the walls and ceiling, but with this he could get the material so thin that he didn’t have to worry about it. It was amazing.
With the modifications he made, he could even hope that Tony wouldn’t be able to figure out it was his if he ever got a piece of it somehow. Maybe. He could hope.

He’d finally finished the voice modulator to, his own design that would actually vibrate his vocal cords to distort the sound of his voice. It felt a little weird at first, but he was getting used to it.

Add in the new lenses he’d made that he could control the size of and Spider-Man was a whole new hero. It was pretty awesome, he felt more like a proper hero than ever. He’d even, uh, “borrowed” some of Tony’s designs to use pieces to make his shooters even stronger, more powerful. They could shoot double the distance now, and they should be almost three times as sticky.

So, suit done. Completely and totally amazing, courtesy of Tony’s lab and credit cards, check.

Awesome new ninja-fighting skills, courtesy of Natasha, check.

Captain America shield, courtesy of Steve, no check. But how awesome would that have been?

Now there was only one thing left to do. Armed with several strings of code picked from different elements of F.R.I.D.A.Y’s programming, he was going to try to hack the most sophisticated computer of the known world.

Oh boy.

With a final deep breath the boy pulled out his notes and grabbed his tablet before making his way out of the bunker and calling the command that would bring F.R.I.D.A.Y.’s presence back into the room before plugging his StarkPad into the computer counsel in the mini lab.

Here went nothing.

He made his way into the inner workings of F.R.I.D.A.Y easily. He’d talked about it with Tony enough after all. He was almost overwhelmed by the complexity of it, but complex or not, F.R.I.D.A.Y was still a computer and it only took a few moments for him to find a spot to attach his code. It was simple in theory, banking on the fact that the ‘Pepper keeping secrets from Tony’ was simpler and less suspicious than having F.R.I.D.A.Y completely erase all of his Spidey activity. Really what he was doing was a combination of that, and flagging all of his Spidey data as unimportant. F.R.I.D.A.Y was always watching, but she wasn’t always paying attention. If this went well, anything he did after saying the codewords ‘This is our secret F.R.I.D.A.Y.’ would be no more significant to the AI than a recording of an empty storage room. It wouldn’t be deleted and leave gaps, but it also would never be considered important enough to bring it up. Then, even if she did start to realize it was suspicious, additional codes should keep her from telling anyone.

Peter held his breath as he inserted the final string of code. There was a moment of silence, then the ever-evolving computer created a new code to follow Peter’s, as if to negate all of the teen’s hard work.

The boy immediately moved, adding in more code to protect from any and all weak or ambiguous spots. After a moment, F.R.I.D.A.Y. responded again, forcing him to once more react. It felt more like a conversation than programming or hacking; like an argument.

F.R.I.D.A.Y, ignore this.

I am to tell Boss of significant things.

This is not significant.
It reads as significant.

But look, it isn’t really.

On and on it seemed to go, the AI’s arguments getting less forceful each time as Peter’s codes battered them away. Finally, finally, a long pause lasted several moments after he input a command. Then, *alteration accepted.*

Peter stared at the computer dumbly for a long moment, unable to believe his eyes. Then he shot to his feet. “This is our secret F.R.I.D.A.Y!”

A moment of silence, then reluctantly as though fully knowing something was off, “Of course Peter.”

The teen grinned, feeling absolutely giddy with relief and accomplishment, and tugged on the new suit. He reveled on the felt-more-like-second-skin-than-clothing and did a spontaneous flip. The suit contorted in ways that his old clothing could not. His web shooters felt like a heavy comfort on his wrists, reassuring and familiar. It felt *perfect.* Nearly shaking with anticipation, the vigilante eased open the window to his room. He couldn’t do this often, couldn’t make a pattern of hanging around the tower, but tonight wouldn’t do any harm. Not when the Avengers were all in the windowless media room and the world below had long since stopped looking to the sky for Spider-Man.

Clothed in new suit and new skill, the friendly neighborhood Spider-Man stood crouched on the window to Avenger’s tower, looking out at his city—his domain—his territory to protect. He breathed in the New York City air as he stood in the tower that dwarfed the nearest skyscraper.

Then he jumped. He was back.

Chapter End Notes

**PLEASE NOTE:**

This story was begun, planned, and partially written before Spider-Man: Homecoming came out. Therefore, certain events and characters will be vastly different than they were portrayed in the current MCU. For example, there is unfortunately no Ned. Other characters will also be different from in Homecoming. So. Expect this to be canonically appropriate only up until Civil War. Please and thank you. :)
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Are you guys ready for some Spidey?!?

I know I always am!

Per COMMENTS. school has started again, so I will no longer be replying to ALL comments, just the ones that I feel like I have something to comment on in them. I am still super super super appreciative of all the comments I get and please don't stop sending them, even if it's just to say hi! I LOVE hearing from people and plenty of you have actually given me ideas to improve the story :)

TRIGGER WARNING: At the end of this chapter their is the somewhat cliche 'girl getting cornered in an alleyway by a bunch of thugs'. Nothing happens, and there is nothing to indicate that it is anything more than a mugging, but I just wanted to put this because I never want someone to be blindsided and I would never want something I wrote to upset or hurt someone. Also, even a mugging seems pretty trauma inducing to me. So yes, be warned of that.

Hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Peter reveled in the freedom of the fall, giving himself over to gravity and feeling the wind rush past his masked face. He simply fell; for a moment. Two. Three. Then with a mighty twist he shot a strand of webbing at the skyscraper nearest his window at the tower. He jerked as the web caught, the shooters much more powerful than he was used to.

He landed on the wall of the nearby building with a light thud, feet sticking soundly to the smooth material. He grinned and flexed his toes, crouching against the side of the building at a 90 degree angle.

“Ok, come on Spider-Man.” He muttered, looking to the next building. He took deliberate aim and shot, grinning broadly as the strands of white shot across the expanse and sticking soundly to a building that his old designs didn’t have a dream of hitting. With a whoop he released his grip on the building, swinging across the street with a wide grin stretching over his masked face. Just as he reached its zenith, he shot a web across the street. He sailed across the city like that, across office buildings and construction cranes, billboards and street signs, fire escapes and awnings. He crossed the New York on a highway of his own design, far above the heads of those stuck on the ground, a highway of white web, gravity and adrenaline.

That is, until he overestimated a shot and ended up crashing face first into an umbrella at an outdoor cafe. He groans as he forces himself to his feet--sparing a moment of gratitude that it is an awkward time of night--late enough that most of the day-time people had gone home, but the nightlife hadn’t really kicked in--so there wasn’t really a lot of people around to see that.
Other than the group of tourists covered in ‘I ❤ NYC’ shirts and oversized cameras.

Great. That was just what he needed: Spider-Man returns, first action is a major fail.

He gave a jaunty wave at the still-gaping tourists and shot at another nearby building, swinging away with what he hoped was more grace than his landing. Okay, so priorities. He shouldn’t be out too late, not this first time. So, there’s that. But he obviously needs to practice with all the changes he made to his suit. Especially the shooters, he didn’t want those failing in the middle of a fight, that would be embarrassing.

Oh, and dangerous, but seriously- embarrassing.

He should probably talk to Daredevil too, before he went back, but Horns usually didn’t show up for a few hours.

The teenager hemmed and hawed for a little bit, but after accidentally sticking to his third building because he’d forgotten that his feet were practically bare instead of covered in thicker spandex, he decided to make his way to a loading dock/warehouse district up near Hell’s Kitchen. The place was huge, mostly abandoned at night, had plenty of tall and oddly-shaped building and structures, and best of all Daredevil was known to kinda haunt the place. He probably wouldn’t even have to go looking for the older vigilante, Double D would find him.

That decided, Peter changed course, swinging in a wide arch over a nearby street corner and turning away from Queens and towards Hell’s Kitchen. He sent a backwards glance behind him, where his old home lay. He wasn’t really to see any of that anyway, not without May.

He was at the loading dock in moments. The teen gazed around the expanse with anticipation strumming through him. The buildings seemed to echo with emptiness, only the sound of his footsteps echoing amid the alleyways piled high with crates and boxes. He was alone, surrounded by towering buildings, boxes, cranes, and trucks; a playground for a parkour-spider. With a broad grin he shot towards a wall, and stuck, then immediately shot a web to a nearby crate and tried to swing, only for the empty box to fall off the stack and come careening down to his head. Peter yelped, “Oh crap, oh crap, oh crap!” But managed to land on the ground in time to catch it before it could smash against the concrete. Carrying the crate up the tower of similar boxes took a little more finesse- especially since the crate was several times larger than himself- but he managed it. Thank goodness for sticky spidey-fingers.

That’s ok, that’s why he was practicing in the first place. The teen took another deep breath. Ok, here we go.

Daredevil paused in his patrol, going stock still on the rooftop of a rundown apartment building near the dock. A scowl formed over his already surly expression as he confirmed that he really was hearing a ruckus happening amid the warehouses. He immediately changed course. Very little good came from the docks, and none of it came in the middle of the night. No, at this time of night activity at the dock could only mean one thing: trafficking. Whether it was human trafficking or drug trafficking he didn’t care. He was putting a stop to it.

The vigilante paused on the roof of a warehouse one building away from his prey. Without his sight, turning the corner wouldn’t really do anything to help him figure out what was going on, and there was no need to alert them of his presence. The air was saturated with an odd scent, a mixture of chemicals that was vaguely familiar but not completely, like when a prepackaged food producer
attempted to change to a cheaper recipe and hope no one noticed the difference. It was just barely
changed enough that he couldn’t remember what it was.

It was, strangely, just one person. They muttered to themselves almost constantly, and their voice
was... off. Strangely empty, seeming to vibrate harshly against echoing space, unnatural. And their
movements sounded odd as well, there was no swish of fabric, no slight jangle of a zipper or buttons.
No one would ever be foolish enough to be here, in the middle of the night, naked. Or at least, no
one sober and from what he could hear, this individual was very deliberate in their movements,
unlikely to be drunk or high. That could only mean one thing.

The man grimaced, distaste overtaking the deep scowl for a single moment. A “supervillain”.

He hadn’t faced many of them originally. No, he’d fought with men like Fisk and organizations like
The Hand. He hadn’t fought with costumed freaks who gave themselves cute nicknames until he’d
dared to cover for Spider-Man. That kid’s villains had issues.

… Said Daredevil as he crouched on a rooftop in a full red bodysuit. The vigilante shook himself a
little, ruefully reminding himself that he couldn’t really cast judgement, not when he had the
proverbial log in his own unseeing eyes.

His point remains; he couldn’t imagine facing those idiots every day, and now they were invading
his territory.

The man smiled grimly as he clenched his fists. He would make it clear that Hell’s Kitchen was not
an attractive target. Taking off silently, the man sprinted across the remaining building separating him
from his prey. He leaped through the air, landing nearly on top of his foe, one fist already pulled
back to strike before his feet could even touch the ground. Like a cobra he struck, fist plowing
forwards at an incredible speed, hitting with-no. He wasn’t hitting anything. This man had...
deflected his hit, sending an answering jab of his own that sent Daredevil flying into the wall of a
nearby building. Matt was scrambling to his feet, ready to attack once more, when he finally heard it:
a strong, steady, unique heartbeat.

He froze. “Spider-Man?” He gasped out, and heard the rush of air as the younger hero suddenly
relaxed.

“Daredevil!” The boy exclaimed, running to the man. “Oh- oh no, are you okay?” The boy rushed
over, patting the other man frantically as if that would magically help him find some sort of injury.
Matt couldn’t help the tiniest shudder when the other vigilante’s hand brushed his bare chin.
Whatever Spider-Man was wearing felt nothing like any material he’d ever experienced. He didn’t
know that any type of cloth could seem so foreign.

“I’m fine.” He protested gruffly, battering the hands away. He nodded his head up and down slowly,
as if he were observing the boy.

“Oh yeah!” Spider-Man said excitedly, “I got an upgrade!”

“I can see that.” Daredevil hesitated a moment, casting his senses out until he was certain they were
alone. “Peter.”

Matt had debated revealing to Peter that he knew the teen’s secret from the minute he’d learned it,
but in the end he knew that guilt would eat him alive if he lied about something as sacred as knowing
the child’s identity. He knew the boy was likely to deny it, to get angry or defensive and lie, but
Daredevil had to let the boy know that he knew, if only because he hoped he would do the same if
the position was reversed.
Spider-Man jumped, voice going even higher through the strange voice changer. “Peter? Who's that? Weird name if you ask me. Nope, don’t see anyone by that name here and…” The teen deflated. “Yeah. I guess I knew you would figure it out with everything I told you last time. I mean, you’re not an idiot.”

Matt nodded, a smirk playing beneath his cowl. No, he was not. He also had no intention of indulging in any sort of tit-for-tat and telling the boy his identity. Not only was he loath to endanger his friends by linking the name to Matthew Murdock to Daredevil in any way, but the boy tended to… babble to put it nicely. He didn’t need any slip of the boy’s tongue to land the Avengers at his door. That would be a nightmare.

He began to realize that the slightly unfamiliar smell was the web-fluid, probably improved by some of the stuff in Stark’s labs. The boy’s fighting had improved too, by a lot. Yes, he'd always had incredible reflexes, but in the past he would have simply dodged his hit, not expertly deflected and answered with a blow of his own.

He had true confidence in his movements now. He’d always had some measure of confidence, but it had been more like a young man’s bravado. He fought with all of his strength and heart, as though that alone would make him the victor. He fought like someone who did not realize he could lose, like someone who never realized that sometimes the good guys didn’t win. Sometimes they died. (It was especially odd because Matt knew with certainty that Peter knew that.)

Peter now fought like someone who could actually fight. His confidence was born of comfort with his body and intimate knowledge with how it moved, what to expect from it. When Matt had been observing him, tracing his movements to prepare an attack, he never would have paired the precise movement with Spider-Man. He was glad that the boy was getting trained. He'd been toying with the idea of teaching the younger vigilante for a long time, but had always dismissed the idea for two reasons.

First: their styles were simply too dissimilar. Matt was a boxer at heart, and for all of his ducks and weaves, for his flips and twists, the very foundation of his fighting style would always be solid. He was a rock. You couldn't move him unless he wished to be moved, a barrier firmly standing in his opponent’s way. Peter was much more... flexible. If Daredevil was a rock, then Spider-Man was a river, cascading and swirling around his opponent in confusing and dizzying tides until they didn’t know what way was up.

He could have taught him the very basics, yes, but not in a way that would truly fit the boy.

Secondly: every time he considered it and allowed himself to picture training the vigilante, he’d hear an echo of Stick’s voice coming from his mouth. He never wanted to be like him.

With a hard blink that did nothing to change his vision, Daredevil brought himself back to focus. He nodded to the teen, indicating his changed look and improved moves. "I take it they know now then?" Suddenly the teen’s heartbeat quickened in anxiety.

"Um, not exactly. And, uh, by that I mean: No, not at all.”

“They don’t know. The ‘world’s greatest defenders’ have a teenaged hero living in their home, and they don’t know.” The vigilante said flatly, a bit of Matt Murdock slipping into Daredevil’s usually stoic demeanor. He was suddenly very worried for the world.

“Hey, I’m pretty good at hiding it!” the teen said defensively, and Murdock wondered how it took him so long to realize that Spider-Man was a child. “You, uh, you helped a lot with that by the way.
Thanks for, uh, for covering for me I guess."

"Not a problem." He replied, and it was true. In fact, it had been fairly fortuitous. Foggy had gotten mad at him for going out injured, and had actually managed to sneak into Matt’s house and steal his suit while going on a “bagel run” for the office. His best friend had been so proud of himself for finally finding out a way to keep Matt from vigilante-ing, at least until Clair had called him to get a concussed Matt off her couch while he was still in the suit.

Foggy hadn't been happy.

"Hey, uh, about that," Peter added. "Do you still have the suit. I-I know that it's not great, an-and I have this super cool one now, but I mean, that one has, you know, sentimentality, and I made it myself and I'd just-"

Murdock held up a hand to quell what he knew was building into a full ramble from Spider-Man. "I don't have it on me." He said, the word obviously floating in the air. "But I can get it back to you, if we plan a time to meet."

"Uh, yeah, that's gonna depend on whether or not they caught me sneaking out. I think I covered my bases, but..."

"You're living with some of the most vigilant and well-trained men on earth?" Matt concluded dryly.

"Yeah, that."

Daredevil nodded sharply, taking a moment to imagine what the Avengers would do if they discovered their ‘son’ had donned tights himself. A large part of Matt wanted to ask why he hadn't told them, but he already knew too much about the kid’s identity. He didn't want to pry into the business that he had no reason butting into. No matter how tempting it was.

Besides, it wasn't unusual that they would teach Peter Parker to defend himself. The attack on the tower had been all over the news.

Daredevil realized absentmindedly that Peter had somehow managed to keep his identity a secret throughout the kidnapping. He must be extraordinarily good at hiding his identity.

Or Peter Parker looked extraordinarily weak and unassuming. Both were likely.

He could admit to giving into the temptation of researching Peter, setting news alerts on the kid and such.

Not that he needed to.

For some reason Foggy was just as interested in Peter as Matt was, and he brought the kid up every time he was so much as mentioned in the news. Matt could only blame himself for that for sending Foggy to Peter’s school to stake the kid out after he’d managed to take a picture of Daredevil fighting some mafia members.

He’d heard the click of the camera´s shutter, but with the distance and all of the gunfire he hadn’t been able to hear the boy’s heartbeat. At the time he’d had no reason to believe that he would be able to distinguish Peter from the hundreds of other kids milling around the school. So he’d asked Foggy. And now the man apparently felt like he had some sort of emotional stake in the boy. That or he was trying to make up for accusing him of blackmailing the Avengers.

Or he still thought Peter was blackmailing them. It was hard to tell with Foggy sometimes.
If he were Matt Murdock right now, he might have brought up the pictures, teased the boy a little. But he was Daredevil. So he simply nodded, sharply once.

"Keep a low profile tonight, until you're sure you got away with it. I can give you the suit back when we have a better clue of what's going on."

"Right. Low profile. That's the plan, my profile is going to be the lowest."

Daredevil moved his head around the open yard, where he could sense what was likely miles of the teen's new webbing.

"Right." He said, and melted into the night, silently just relieved that he didn't have to try to deal with lizard-men anymore.

Predictably, the teen’s profile did not stay low for long. If you were to ask Peter, he’d say that his low profile lasted exactly as long as it should have. Which is to say he threw it out the window the instant he heard a terrified “Leave me alone” from an alleyway at two-in-the-morning. The scene he found was laughably predictable, common in New York. They had been less so when he had his frequent patrols, but with Spider-Man gone for a few months criminals had gotten brave again. Okay, not brave. They were cowards. They had gotten more overt.

So he wasn’t terribly surprised when he followed the scared voice to see a girl backed against the brick back of an alleyway, clutching her purse to her chest, surrounded by three barely-intelligent looking thugs, each one brandishing a wicked looking knife. Well, that wouldn’t do.


In seconds the men were unarmed. They whirled in anger to see Spider-Man crouched horizontally against the grimy brick wall, mockingly holding out the pocket knives. “Oh sorry, did you guys lose something? You know I-” Suddenly he paused, catching sight of the decal on one of the knives.

“Seriously? You’re sticking people up with a Captain America pocket knife? Really?” He swung down to the alley floor, landing in a classic hero pose. “Why don’t we save you guys some more embarrassment, and save me some webbing and just chill out until the cops show up.” He tossed the shield emblazoned knife in a twirl and caught it again. “I could even listen to your Avengers’ fanfiction while we wait.”

The four in the alley were still gaping at him. “Spider-Man?” One of them blurted incredulously. “We thought you were gone.”

“So I take a couple weeks vacation and the city turns to madness. Good to know.”

As he was speaking, rage crossed over one of the men’s faces and he reached down to grab a broken bottle that had been lying on the trash-strewn street. “You’re not the real Spider-Man, I don’t believe you.”

“Um, was the whole sticking to walls and webbing thing not a good enough hint?”

Another grabbed a second makeshift weapon from the ground, a bit of wooden crate with nails still sticking out of it. “I don’t care who you are. There are three of us an’ one-na you, we can still kick your butt.”
The third finally got with the program and grabbed a broom from where it was leaning sadly against the wall, snapping it across his knee so that the head was gone and only shards of bare wood remained. Then, as one, they rushed him.

Okay, rush was an overstatement. After fighting with Natasha for weeks, these guys were slow. It felt like they were barely moving, and after the initial attack, none of them knew how to fight together. It was… frighteningly underwhelming. The one with the broom handle got to him first, thrusting his weapon out like it was a joust. It was nothing for Peter to grab it and use the man’s own momentum to cram the but of the makeshift staff into his stomach, making him drop the handle in order to gasp for breath. With a casual sweep towards the other two, he knocked the weapons out of their hands, leaving all three unarmed. Of course, that didn’t stop them. Thug 1 swung for Peter’s head with a meaty fist that the teen caught easily. He flipped the man over his shoulder and came up in time to kick at the stomach of thug 2 as he charged for an attack. By then thug 3 had caught his breath and made the admittedly somewhat intelligent attempt to tackle Spider-Man at the knees. A simple dodging jump sent the man crashing to the ground and actually knocking over thug 1, who had finally made it to his feet.

Peter whirled on thug 2, who was still fighting to catch his breath from the blow to the stomach, but the man simply raised his arms in surrender, clearly seeing that if all three of them couldn’t fight the vigilante off whole then he certainly wouldn’t be able to do it alone and injured. The man actually went over to kneel beside his trounced comrades, and Peter looked around to see that the victim had already escaped. Figuring that laying low was no longer an option, the boy covered the criminals in webbing, and left his usual note, happy to be signing off as the ‘Friendly Neighborhood Spider-Man’ once more. By the time he was done, sirens had begun sounding in the distance, clearly heading his way.

Peter glanced at the thugs once more. This time last year, he wouldn’t have been able to walk away from a fight with three armed men without at least five distinct bruises. That fight had lasted less than five minutes. He grinned broadly. The Avengers were helping more than they knew.

He suddenly frowned. The Avengers. He needed to get back before any of them found out he was missing, Tony sometimes used F.R.I.D.A.Y. to make sure everyone was safe when he had nightmares. (He had discovered it while searching for code, he didn’t think anyone else knew). And no one ever knew when Vision would pop in. He should be going back.

Still, he stayed on the top of the storefront that made up one side of the alleyway, watching his city just a moment longer. The men didn’t move, didn’t make a sound beyond the occasional groan. The sirens got steadily louder, the lights growing closer. Finally, after getting his fill of the familiar, smog-filled air, the teen turned back to the tower he now called home.

By the time the sun rose the whole city would know: Spider-Man was back.

The Avengers would likely know well before that.

Chapter End Notes

ALSO! Because I think I'm going to get questions about it: No, I don't have Daredevil freaking out about Peter being super young.
For me, even with his hatred of Stick, he was still drafted into training to be a warrior when he was like, 10. Elekra was a child soldier almost her whole life. And his whole thing with Elektra when he was older happened when he wasn't that much older than Peter. I also very highly doubt he sat on his hands in the years between. He likely kept practicing, kept fighting.

Because of that, I think that Peter being a child would not be as.... irregular to him as to others because since meeting Stick it would just not seem out of the ordinary. He's used to seeing people fight when they're still very young. Even when he's angry at Stick wanting to kill Black Star, he's more angry about the thought of killing a kid than being surprised that the ultimate weapon is a kid. He'd kinda accepting of the thought of a kid as a weapon, just not with killing them because of that.

I know a lot of fanfictions and authors have him freaking out about Peter's age, and I get it, but in my interpretation of the character he just... doesn't.

So, yeah, to stem off a ton of questions about that, though I'd still love to discuss it if anyone wants to comment!
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone!! I'm back! Sorry for the long wait, school is killer (Senior Year WOOT WOOT helpmeimdyingineedsleep) I'm definitely NOT going to give up on this fic. I have it all planned out and I am super excited for it, but the chapters will take a while. I won't abandon you though!!
Thank you to everyone who commented, sorry I didn't reply to many, but I love you all and reading your reviews gave me so much joy on stressful days!!!

Also be prepared for Surprise!feels that popped up when I wasn't looking.

Hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Peter froze several stories below the window to his room. It didn’t really matter. If they realized he left the day that Spider-Man resurfaced, then the ruse was over. They would know. So, it didn’t really matter if they actually saw him in the costume or not. He was found out whether he someone was in his room already or not.

Still, he couldn’t make himself take those final steps up the side of the tower. He couldn’t make himself travel the last few feet to his window. With every step he took, he could only imagine the faces of the team catching him in the act. Steve sitting on his bed, a disappointed look on his face. Or maybe it would be Tony, ranting before he even got the window open fully. Vision, phasing into his room as he was working to take off his uniform, his strange eyes going wide as he tried to compute the scene before him. Natasha would be sneaky about it. She would wait until he thought he’d done it, hiding in some dark corner. Then, as soon as he was preparing to fall asleep she would jump out, scaring him half to death.

Wait, if he were missing then they would be panicking, right? There would be alarms, Avengers covering the skies, a man hunt.... Right?

He paused, looking into the window he was clutching. It was mirrored, completely impossible to see through. Which should mean that it was the window to the gym. They were designed to be incredibly dark, protecting the team’s training secrets and moves from any prying eyes.

Maybe…

Spider-Man pressed himself against the wall. He couldn’t see inside, but his senses were far better than the average human. If anyone was in he should hear them. Everyone in the tower had visited the gym in the middle of the night at some point in time, attempting to push themselves to exhaustion to get any form of sleep.

He heard nothing.

Slowly, the vigilante slid the window open, grunting as he worked to silently open the large wall of glass. The young hero kept a close check on his Spidey-sense, but felt nothing.
He slipped in, quick as a whisp of blue-red smoke.

Empty. Thank goodness.

He relaxed, shucking off his uniform and replacing it with some basic workout gear he kept in a locker in the corner of the room. Tying the uniform around his waist like he was a tourist tired of wearing an oversized sweater, the teen tucked it into his loose tank and shorts.

He took a deep breath, hitting the swinging punching bag a few times for good measure. His cheeks were flush from the wind, his body covered in a light sheen of sweat. He was the spitting image of someone finishing up an intense workout, he could see it clearly in the mirrored windows. With a sigh of relief Peter grabbed one of the strategically placed sweat towels and swung it over his shoulders to complete the look. Perfect.

“F.R.I.D.A.Y. this is no longer hidden.” The teen called, quoting the codeword he’d installed earlier.

Another long hesitation, just like the one when he’d first started. Then, a reluctant “Of course, Peter.”

The teen sighed, a stunned relief coursing through him. He did it.

...probably.

Assuming he got to his room without Natasha jumping out from the air ducts.

Taking a deep breath, Peter slipped out of the room. His bare footsteps seemed to echo across the hallway, ending only as he made it to the front of the elevator, which opened the instant he arrived. Peter grinned at the ceiling. “Thanks Fry.”

“Of course.” The voice responded, sounding much warmer than it had when he was using his backdoors.

“Hey, uh, can you take me to the team kitchen?” Web slinging was tiring, he would kill for a midnight snack.

He wasn’t avoiding his room. Nope, not at all. The elevator slowed to a stop and the doors opened with a quiet ‘woosh’. He padded softly to the fridge, only to freeze when he spotted a lone figure lit up by a StarkPad sitting on the bar counter.

The boy jumped in surprise. He’d seen almost all of the Avengers wandering around in the dead of night when he--and they--couldn’t sleep. But he’d never seen- “Pepper?”

The woman’s head shot up, her silky hair cascading around her shoulders, her eyes wide. “Oh! Peter, what are you doing up.”

“I, uh, I guess I went to bed too early. I woke up and couldn’t get back to sleep, you know? So, uh, I was just-” He indicated with the sweat towel. “Gym.”

She smiled softly and indicated to the seat next to her, a plate of cookies settling on a strange tray beside her. Peter grabbed a glass of ice cold milk and settled beside her. The tray was keeping the cookies comfortably warm, just hot enough that the chocolate chips were still melting. Some of Tony’s late night inventions were truly wonderful.

“What about you?” The teen asked, dunking his treat into the milk. “Why are you still awake?”
She grimaced down as her StarkPad. “Thaddeus Ross.”

“The… secretary of state guy?”

“Yes. Also the Sokovia Accords guy. He was never… fond of my compromise. Ever since the Avengers tower was attacked while we were on mission, he’s been trying to say that the compromise has failed.”

“But that was weeks ago.”

“I know.” She grimaced. “It’s foundless, of course. The UN would have sent us on the distraction even if the original accords had been in place. I’ve managed to knock him down a few pegs there, but now he’s trying to kick up a fuss that if the Avengers… let’s say misbehave, there is no one who isn’t on the team who is powerful enough to enforce any form of punishment.” She rolled her eyes. “So now, I’m stuck insisting they will abide by any corrective measures without resorting to force.” Her eyes twinkled softly with mirth. “It would be a lot easier if I believed half of that I was saying. Oh, they’ll listen to reason, after the threat is taken care of. Before it, not so much.”

She shared a soft laugh with Peter, before turning back to the screen. “I guess I just wanted some time to work out some arguments when it was quiet. I have the legal team looking into it too, but sometimes… sometimes you just need to see the city at night.”

She looked out the window, but Peter could only picture the city lights stretching out under his feet as he crested through the air at the top of an arch, his webbing holding him high over the rest of the city, the lights of the buildings shimmering below, echoes of the stars hanging far above.

“Yeah, I know what you mean.” He reached for another cookie, dunking it into the ice cold milk.

Suddenly the woman gasped. “Peter, your watch!”

Peter jerked, grimacing when he looked down to see empty skin. Tony had made him the watch a few days before they returned to the tower. It was similar to his watch gauntlet, except that when activated it would expand to cover key vulnerable parts of his body while calling for the rest of the Iron Turtle. According to Tony, he could be perfectly safe within five minutes anywhere in the world, less than a minute if he was in New York. Unfortunately, it wasn’t just activated manually. There was what Tony called ‘an air bag’ and Peter called annoying. If there was any specific sudden movement, then it would activate automatically, just like an airbag suddenly inflating in a car.

Supposedly that would help if he got caught up in an explosion again.

There was a standby he could put it on during training so that didn’t set him off, but the finely crafted sensors would have never let him get away with taking the abuse dealt to Spider-Man on any given night.

Testing that had been fun though. Peper had made him swear a million times that he would never reveal that Tony had let off ‘small controlled bombs’ near him to test them.

It had been awesome.

Still, there was no way he was wearing it crime fighting. Even ignoring the fact that it would activate, that thing could probably track him to the centimeter.

“Oh, uh, yeah. I just took it off, cause I mean, everyone's here. And I was just sleeping. Yep, me asleep. In the room. Here in the tower.”
“Peter,” She sighed wearily. “I know that this probably feels… smothering. But you need to wear it, even when you’re sleeping. We just want you safe.”

Peter nodded sullenly. “Yeah, I know. I’m just…”

Pepper smirked. “Sick of hearing that? I know how you feel, trust me I do. I’ve been hearing it for years.” She shook her wrist, proudly displaying a delicate-looking bracelet that Peter knew functioned identical to his watch. “ Doesn’t make it any less true.” She looked into Peter’s eyes solemnly. “Peter, you don’t know what you’ve done for this team. I know you can’t see it, you weren’t here for the worst of it, but this…” She gestured widely. “Avenging, it’s stressful. Not being able to save everyone, knowing that you barely made it and might not next time, having the literal weight of the world on your shoulder… it gets to you. The team was getting… destructive, volatile. Sometimes it seemed like we were just waiting for something to happen, a rubber band stretched to the max. Now… Peter, not even I can make Tony smile like you do, and I thought nothing would ever make Sam, Steve, and Rhodey see eye to eye. I think Wanda is finally starting to really work through her grief, and Vision is just completely doting on you. Not to mention Natasha coming out of shells I thought would never crack. When I put in the plan to adopt you, I knew you would be a good fit but… Peter the team needs you. You’re like a puzzle piece that we never knew was missing. So please, don’t take unnecessary risks, ok? Try to stay safe.”

Peter watched the woman with wide eyes, his chest feeling heavy but warm as her heartfelt words resonated through his mind. Slowly he nodded, unsure how to say that he needed them just as much, no more, than they could ever need him. Finally he just ducked his head, “O-okay. I’ll make sure to remember that.” An involuntary yawn bit into the last word, and he looked at Pepper sheepishly but the woman was smiling fondly at him.

“Sounds like you might be able to get back to sleep.”

“Uh, yeah.” He yawned again, exhausted from a full night of Spider-ing. “G’night Pepper. Good luck with the… the thing.”

“Thank you Peter, sleep tight. And put on your watch!” She called out as the elevator doors closed around the boy. Peter slumped against the wall. Even with Pepper’s speech, that just wasn’t going to happen. He’d have to make sure that Tony didn’t make it permanent somehow though, or create an alert when it was taken off.

He yawned once more as the elevator slowed to a stop. That was a problem for the morning though, he was ready to sleep.

The bars in New York City alway got louder the later it got.

That was a universal truth, they didn’t quiet until rays of sunshine indicated that ‘late’ had turned into ‘early’. Now, well into the middle of the night when all reasonable men and women were well asleep, the bars had descended into the underground. Chaos and instinct ruled amid the rough crowd, a cacophony of screams, boasting and coarse mating calls. Kraven the Hunter lived for this time of night, when the dens of man mimicked the chaos of the animal kingdom, when the watering hole of the jungle matched the local ‘watering hole’. This was when he felt alive.

Usually.

Now, however, he felt nothing but contempt for the men surrounding him. Contempt and boredom.
He was *bored*.

He was the greatest hunter in the world, he’d taken down every creature in the animal kingdom. The strongest elephant, the fiercest lion, and the fastest cheetah. He’d taken down a grizzly with his bare hands, strangled an anaconda, and tracked a single beetle the size of the head of a pin halfway through the Amazon. *He* was at the top of the foodchain.

That was the problem. He had bested everything. There was no more challenge in life, nothing could beat him.

What was a hunter without his prey?

Even man provided no challenge for him. He was too strong, too good, too smart. He was superior in every way.

He’d considered fighting the Avengers, but that was no true hunt. The world knew where they were nearly every moment of the day. They couldn’t take two steps without a million social media sites posting their whereabouts. There would be no tracking, no thrill of the chase. A great battle, maybe, but not a good hunt.

So now, without a prey in sight, he could only sit in this crummy bar, glaring at anyone who got close and attempting to rest on laurels that already felt inadequate.

No. No no no, this was all wrong. He should not rest. There must be something more, some novel prey that he could find, something worthy of yet another hunt.

But no, there was- His head shot up as a familiar red-black mask covered the corner of a nearby television screen. He straightened in his seat, leaning towards the newscast now airing.

On it a man stood in a dock in Hell’s Kitchen, surrounded by streams of white rope that seemed to stretch absolutely everywhere, a picture of Spider-Man added to the top corner of the screen.

“Turn up the volume.” He growled to the bartender.

“There's closed captioning.” The man grunted back, moving to grab an empty tankard.

Kraven *moved* and a shiny knife, 10 inches long, stuck into the wooden bar top so close to the man’s hand that it trimmed his nails.


“Yeh, yeh I got it.” the man grumbled. He made his way to the other side of the bar and slowly the sounds of the newscast began to fill the air.

“Lighting all over Hell’s kitchen and throughout the city. Sources tell me that a trio of muggers have been found tied up in a classic Spider-Man fashion in an alleyway near where Queens meets Manhattan. Has our city web-slinger returned? Where has he been? These questions and more remain. This is Aiesha Brady, back to you Tom.”

“Well Aiesha, Spider-Man has always been a somewhat controversial figure around the city. I’m sure the Daily Bugle will have plenty to say about his return and his absence. Of course many fans will be happy to hear of the local vigilantes return. In other news-”

Kraven grinned, chugging up the last bits of lukewarm ale before slamming the empty cup onto the counter with a mighty crash. The Spider’s fans wouldn’t be the only ones happy to have him
Peter awoke to an annoying, incessant beeping and instantly wished he was still asleep. He'd only just gotten to sleep a few hours ago, falling asleep instantly after he'd hidden his suit in the safe room. He wanted nothing more than to sleep until well into the afternoon, but he couldn't do that. No, as tempting as it was to turn off the stupid beeping on his custom Falcon watch and go back to his dream about hitting J. Jonah Jameson in the face with a pie, he couldn't let the first night he'd ever slept in late be the same exact night as Spider-Man's return. That would be stupid even for him.

So instead he forced himself to his feet and slowly, hesitantly made his way out of the room.

His oversized comforter was bundled around his shoulders like a cape, the days where he was too shy to bring it long since gone and honestly he could use any and all excuse for any kind of "armor" against the vernal battle sure to be ahead.

As it was, he'd barely gotten off the elevator before he'd heard the word his name being mentioned.

Well, not his name. The name of his alter-ego. Which is technically still his name, but not…

He'd heard them say Spider-Man, alright?

More specifically, he heard Tony ranting about Spider-Man. Which, is pretty much how Tony always mentioned him.

"He's back now, seriously? Spider-Man has been gone for months and now, what, he's just back?"

"Spider-Man?" Peter asked loudly as he came back in, feigning obliviousness.

"Yeah, good news," Rhodes began, his voice projecting equal parts sincerity and sarcasm in a way that only he could pull off. "Your vigilante buddy is alive."

Peter frowned, an inexplicable chill running through him at the words. "Some, uh, some people thought he was dead?"

"Kid, everyone thought he was dead." Tony snorted. "There was a memorial service."

"What! Where was I? I mean, uh, why didn't I hear about this? I-I mean I would have thought…"

"It was when we were still at the base." Sam interrupted Before Peter could go on a full on ramble. "And we didn’t tell you about it because we knew you would want to go and… we weren’t sure fans would appreciate…"

Peter winced, understanding flooding him. “It was a no Daily Bugle people allowed kinda thing.”

“You would not have been well-received.” Vision added and Peter grimaced.

“Yeah, I guess.” Maybe Peter Parker wouldn’t have, but he could have made sure that Spider-Man made an appearance. Where was Daredevil in all of this? Probably beaten up. He was usually beaten up.

“Not important.” Tony interjected. “Doesn’t matter. He isn’t dead. He’s webbing up criminals and half of Hell’s Kitchen with them.”
“So Spider-Man is back?” Peter fell back onto his faux-surprised script he’d been mentally practicing the whole way up the elevator.

"It’s all that’s been in the news all day." Wanda nodded to the television and F.R.I.D.A.Y instantly started raising the volume.

"Back it up to the start of the segment." Steve commanded as Tony grumbled and paced, typing furiously at a tablet. The screen shifted to a man in a crisp suit sitting as a pristine desk.

"Now we finally get to the news that all of New York is talking about: the apparent return of our friendly neighborhood vigilante Spider-Man. After months of silence, Spider-Man is back and more arachnid than ever. Julie, what do you have for us?"

The video cut to a woman who was clearly standing outside, wisps of her hair playing in the wind. A familiar loading dock sat behind her and Peter could have groaned. Right, he'd spent half of the night webbing up Hell's kitchen. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

"Thanks Mark. We at channel 8 news, like every other news station and police department in the city, are no stranger bogus Spider-Man sightings. We've gotten calls based on copycats, false alarms, and even hallucinations, but for the first time in months," She gestured to the white threads covering the yard. "we might be seeing a return of the real deal. In addition to several eyewitness accounts claiming to see the vigilante, workers at this local loading dock arrived to see the entire area covered with Spider-Man's webbing. Finally, we have reports that a woman called 911 reporting that Spider-Man had saved her from a mugging, and news just came in that the police have admitted that that is consistent with the evidence found at the scene. It looks like this may finally be the real deal! I'm here with the owner of Stan's, a small bistro in Manhattan, and one of the many Spider-Man sightings. Can you tell us more about what exactly you saw?"

The camera panned to an elderly man with prominent sunglasses and a neatly trimmed mustache. "Well Julie, there I was, sweeping up my café for closing, all peaceful then BAM, BOOM! I turn around and see Spider-Man’s crashed into one of my umbrellas! The things barely hanging on to the table, bent in half. Tourists are gawking, taking pictures. He gives ‘em a wave, bends back the umbrella stem like it's a pipe cleaner, and swings off again!” The man reached off-screen to produce a decorative cafe umbrella, a seam near the center a clear indicator that it had been bent then fixed. “Come on down to Stan’s and you can see it yourself! And get today’s special Spider-Man soup, fly not included.”

The man laughed loudly at his joke, while the reporter plastered on a smile so false it bordered on grimace as she took the microphone. “Is Spider-Man back for good? Why now? Why did he disappear? Is this even the original or is the originals protegé just learning the “webs”? We’ll keep you updated as we know more. Back to you, Mark!”

The screen cut back to the newsroom and Peter groaned aloud when he saw a familiar figure sitting beside the anchor. “Thanks Julie, I’m here with J. Jonah. Jameson, author of the Daily Bugle and, arguably, the man most interested in Spider-Man’s return. Your thoughts on the matter John.” The polished anchor’s distaste at interviewing the editor of the equivalent of a superhero tabloid was obvious even past his smarmy smile, but Jonah seemed to take no mind as he immediately launched into the damage that ‘the menace’ was sure to bring to the city.

“You can fast forward past this clown.” Rhodes commanded F.R.I.D.A.Y before turning to Peter with a smirk. “Want to bet that he forgets all about your adoption and is begging you for pictures within the week?”

Peter grimaced. “I'm actually afraid to check my email. He’s probably already flooded my inbox.”
Snorts of amusement and derision sounded throughout the room, as the heroes took in the silent figure raving on the screen in double speed. Movement happened in the corner of Peter’s eye and he startled, whirling to see Vision standing beside him with a heaping plate. The man-thing smiled down at Peter kindly. “I understand that you are excited to see Spider-Man’s return, but you must not neglect eating.”

Peter smiled back at the hero with true fondness. For a being that could not eat, Vision was surprisingly fixated on food and making sure the Avengers ate well. Honestly, he reminded Peter of grandmothers in memes, always asking if you’d eaten and stuffing you the moment you walked through the door. It was, in a word, adorable.

In a second word, it's awesome! He amended as he bit into a slice of bacon and began loading some hash onto his fork. Even with the cookies last night, he was starving.

Wait a second, what was he doing! The Avengers are talking about Spider-Man! He’s supposed to be panicking!

…. Well, no use panicking over an empty stomach, really. He was just starting on the fruit salad when a bright red and gold drone flew in from the open patio Tony had modified to remove his suit when he was Iron Man.

“Finally!” The man in question exclaimed, finally ceasing his pacing to make his way over to the small robot.

“Wazzat?” Peter asked around a full mouth, and Tony whirled to grin at the teen.

“Oh kid, you’re going to love this. I sent ID10T down to Hell’s kitchen.” He seemed almost giddy as he forced his way onto the couch next to Peter, displacing Wanda in his haste. He opened a compartment on the drone and revealed a pile of white stringy material. Familiar white stringy material. Peter cautiously reached out with a finger, and his worries were confirmed when he felt the slightly sticky adhesion of webbing several hours after use.

“I-is that…”

“Yep! Spider-Man webbing, straight from the source. C’mon, I’m clearing out my whole day to analyze this. Underoos won’t beat me this time.”

Peter rose unsteadily to his feet. Stupid, Stupid. Why didn’t he think about the webbing? He didn’t put any weird, Stark only chemicals in it right? No, nothing you couldn’t get from a good chemical supplier. Still, this was a huge improvement from his earlier designs, what would the genius think about the changes?

Peter wasn’t sure if the heavy pit in his stomach was fear that he would be found out, or the worry of showing your idol your masterpiece and not knowing if they would approve.

“Stop!” Steve suddenly commanded, and both Tony and Peter whirled to the man, but he wasn’t looking at them at all. His gaze was locked onto the television screen encompassing the wall. The screen was much darker than it had been a moment ago, the bright studio lights and million dollar cameras replaced with a grainy, black-and-white security camera feed. “Go back a few minutes.”

There was a slight lull as F.R.I.D.A.Y wound it back to the studio, and the team watched as the, obviously bored, newscaster interrupted J.J.J mid-rant. “Sorry Jameson, but I’ve just received urgent news, that absolutely everyone is going to want to hear: a local convenience store owner has just submitted to the network their security feeds, which happened to catch the fight.” He nodded and the
screen faded to reveal the scene Steve had stopped them on earlier.

Peter couldn’t believe no one else could hear his heart, it was beating so fast and hard.

The video wasn’t the best. In fact it was pretty bad; a cheap security camera across the street from the alley, relying on a nearby lamppost for light. Still, if you squinted you could kinda figure out what was going on. Ish.

Tony grunted in disgust. “F.R.I.D.A.Y, see if you can steal that and CSI it up.”

“And already working on it boss.” The woman’s calm voice sounded. There was a moment’s pause, then the screen changed. It was clearly a few seconds earlier than where the news station’s clip started. F.R.I.D.A.Y. had managed the crisp up the video, play with contrast and brightness, reduce a little of the pixilation. It wasn’t as miraculous as it seemed on crime shows, but it painted a much clearer picture of the scene. You could clearly see the Spider-man-blur land on the nearby building. It wasn’t clear enough to see Peter yank away the knives, but there was enough motion to get the sense that he did something. He jumped from the building to land on the ground. Tony scowled at the blurry scene while Spider-man talked with the thugs.

“Ugh. I hate inferior technology.”

“Isn’t everything inferior compared to Stark tech?” Peter joked back.

Tony grinned and opened his mouth to reply, but before he could say anything, the three men charged. The room was silent throughout the fight, short as it was, and for several moments after.

Everyone simply looked contemplative, but Peter felt as though tension was building, compounding and becoming heavier. It didn’t seem like anyone else felt it, but he couldn’t stand it any longer.

“Wish I had gotten a shot of Spider-Man disarming those guys.” He blurted, just to say something. Ok, and to maybe brag a little, but mostly the tension thing. “That looked pretty cool.”

Nat snorted derisively. “He got lucky. That trick wouldn’t have worked if they all had similar sized weapons. He relied too much on what they did. The rest of the fight wasn’t bad though.” She mused to herself. “Not professional but certainly far improved from his last appearance.”

Sam nodded. “He got training of some kind.”

“His tech improved too,” Tony muttered, poking at his drone now that the clip was over.

“It seems that Spider-Man had taken a sabbatical for some self improvement.” Vision said musingly.

“No kidding,” Steve responded as F.R.I.D.A.Y automatically set the clip back to the start of the fight and they watched it again. The team spent several moments going over the barely-visible clip, pointing out different moves and proposing different theories, but none of them looked at Peter any more than usual, so the boy let loose a silent sigh of relief. Only once everyone had gone silent did he dare to turn to Natasha and ask, “Can you teach me how to disarm someone?”

The woman looked at him sharply, her eyes narrowed.

“Uh, you know. Just cause I thought Spider-Man did a good job, but apparently not. And- if- if I can’t even recognize a good disarming, I’ll never be able to actually do it, you know.”

She continued to watch him steadily, but slowly the woman nodded. “Only once you can get out of all 7 basic holds.”
Peter grimaced, now that they were done with the basics, Natasha was making sure he could get away when someone grabbed him. If he thought controlling his strength when he was punching was hard, it was nothing compared to moves you were supposed to put your whole body into. “Whose hold?” He asked plaintively. The woman smirked before looking over all of her usual assistants.

“Sam.” She answered finally. He wasn’t a behemoth like Steve, but he was bulkier than both her and Rhodes, especially in the arms because of his suit. He would be a significant, but not impossible, challenge.

“Nuh uh!” Tony said suddenly, jumping to his feet. He cradled the drone with one hand and pulled Peter to his feet with the other. “I call custody today. Come on Peter, let's go science.” He turned and strode purposely toward the labs, and with a soft smile Peter soon trailed afterwards. He had to make sure Tony didn’t discover too much about the webbing after all.

Chapter End Notes

Also this fic will not correlate with defenders... or even season 2 of Daredevil. It kinda existis in the limbo of time when Foggy knows, but Karen doesn't and Punisher and Elektra hasn't happened and stuff. Like, that time period is about 4 seconds in the show but...... yeah....
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

So this chapter ended up a lot fluffier than I intended..... I think I now write fluff when I'm stressed. Which is better than my middle school days of writing angst/dark fics so.... Also, sorry its been so long, I've been very busy, hence the stress, hence the fluff. Good news is I landed a fantastic job for after I graduate!!! So yeah, hope you enjoy! Next chapter should have a lot more action!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was hard living a double life. Always had been. Even before he'd become Spider-Man and his second life simply involved cage fighting, he'd felt a sinking feeling deep within his gut. The feeling had only increased when he'd been lying to Aunt May, coming home every night bruised, never being home. He'd hoped, perhaps foolishly, that he wouldn't have the guilt this time. They were the Avengers after all. The fact that he was able to keep this from them was incredible. He was sneaking around super spies, outsmarting geniuses. He should feel thrilled, exhilarated.

Instead he just felt guilty.

He'd felt guilty standing beside Tony in his lab, watching the man's excitement as he analyzed the webbing while he could do little more than paste on a happy face to hide his increasing dread.

He felt guilty when the team spent their meals idly speculating about the vigilante's return, suggesting possible characteristics for the man behind the mask. It felt almost like a mirror of that first day, only now he was actively keeping secrets from them, not accidentally.

He felt guilty when Natasha was training him to disarm someone. She said nothing about it, but Sam, Rhodes, and Steve had seemed surprised that she deviated from her usually set-in-stone training plan. She was training Peter Parker, but Spider-Man would benefit from it. It seemed cheap somehow, like he was re-gifting some personalized present without a second thought.

He felt guilty when--actually no, that was a lie. He'd felt giddy to actually receive a call from J.J.J, asking why there wasn't already a picture of 'that menace' on his desk. He'd played the --7 minute long-- voicemail on speaker for the team's amusement. He'd never seen Wanda laugh so hard, with Tony right behind her. Most of the other team had laughed as well, a notable exception being Vision, who only stared at the StarkPhone in a near horror. “Surely no one is truly this foolish. His own newspaper wrote about Peter not 2 months ago.”

He did feel a little guilty when the conversation naturally turned to his photographs of Spider-Man and Tony got F.R.I.D.A.Y. to pull up all of his photos, both the ones he’d sold to the bugle and the smattering of pics he’d posted on Redbubble and other art sharing websites. He’d never made much off of selling prints on those sites, but he’d done ok. It was better than nothing.

Or at least, he’d thought so. Now he had to sit surrounded by the Avengers and make up stories about how he’d heard of this fight, or where he’d been standing when he took that picture, or how he managed that angle.

He was just lucky that there were dozens of pictures from dozens of fights that all took place in the
same general settings. ‘Oh, that angle would have been impossible? Must have been a different random alleyway with Ringer, my bad.’.

He’d finally gotten them to just stop asking by pointing out that his camera had survived the attack, and was sitting in his room just waiting for an Avengers photo shoot.

Vision had practically disappeared at the words, returning barely a moment later with the camera in his hands. Wanda and Steve scolded him mildly on going into rooms without permission, but Peter paid them no mind as he worked on adjusting the lighting and focus of the camera. His secrets weren’t just sitting out, they were hidden deep enough that Vision would never know to look for them.

He hoped.

The photo shoot was… supremely awkward. At least at first. The lighting never seemed right, the poses were just weird, smiles plastered on. It just looked… card catalogue-y. Everyone was stiff and forced, and nobody seemed to know what to do with their arms. Peter grimaced, looking at the team abashed as they moved forward to see the pictures.

“Uh, they are really…. I mean they just… I’m, uh, I’m a lot better with, you know, action shots then with planned pictures.” He finally admitted, not knowing how to tell them that usually he just got lucky with the timer.

As soon as the words left his lips, Natasha didn’t hesitate, immediately whirling around and slugging Steve in the chest. Or, at least she tried to. Steve had managed to jump out of the way, nearly colliding with the slower Sam who hadn’t managed to catch the movement.

Sam fell into a fighting position as Steve instinctively kicked out high, Natasha bending nearly in half to dodge under it.

Peter clicked.

Immediately Natasha stood, a smirk playing at her lips as Steve and Sam just looked at her in bewilderment. “Did you get it?”

Peter grinned and turned the camera around, proudly displaying the screen. The team crowded around the tiny, old camera, ‘ooh’-ing and ‘aah’-ing at the image on the screen. Suddenly, Peter found himself being dragged to the gym, where he furiously shot pictures of Sam swooping and diving, Wanda throwing items around with her magic, Vision shooting laser beams out of the gem on the top of his head, Natasha shooting her tasers, Steve throwing the shield, Rhodes flying in his suit, guns on full display. Thanks to some begging and a little help from Wanda’s force fields, he even managed to get a shot of Tony firing a blast right at him, the camera clicking milliseconds before the blast impacted the ball of red protecting the teen and he rocked back from the impact, safely held aloft by the “iron harness” Tony had made for ropes course.

Of course, they’d forgotten about the watch. Peter was still laughing when the links imploded, the metal stretching incredibly thin and moving to cover his neck and heart. By the time these vital points were protected, the rest of the armor was shooting into the room. Strong, Stark-tech plates covered his body, starting with the chest and head and ending with his limbs.

“WA-” He began, but the armor was already whisking him away. He was in the bunker before he’d even had a chance to get the rest of the word out. “-IT!” Once safely in the bunker the armor dropped away, leaving Peter alone in the reinforced room.
The reinforced room covered in Spider-Man notes and canisters of web fluid lying all over the place. The reinforced room with his suit laid stretched across the table, wires still hanging out of the voice disguiser from when he was making alterations earlier that day. The reinforced room that was about to be flooded with Avengers coming to make sure he was ok. Or laugh at him. Most likely the latter.

The boy yelped and jumped to attention, shoving everything he could into the storage compartments around the room, shoving stores of food and water out of the way to cram in beakers and bottles and leftover fabrics. He’d just managed to hide the last of his notebooks when Vision materialized in the room, an amused smile playing at his lips.

Peter frowned, momentarily distracted from his panic. “I’m not sure how safe this place is if you can just pop in and out like that.”

Now Vision outright smiled. “I assure you Peter, there is no one quite like me that you have to worry about.”

Peter thought for a moment before shrugging. That was fair. He still wasn’t entirely sure what Vision was, but from what he’d heard he was pretty sure it would be impossible for there to be another one, so he wouldn’t worry about it. “Uh, ok got it.” He shifted awkwardly. “So, uh, did you do the release?”

Vision nodded, the smile still playing at his lips and the teen went with a sigh to pull the secondary release. When the watch sent him to the bunker it was considered an emergency situation, in which case an Avenger had to open the bunker from the outside before he could from the inside. If there was ever an event so catastrophic that no Avengers could come to let him out, then he would be released in 2 months, after the rations left out. Of course, if there was ever a danger so great that no Avengers were left at all to let him out, it wouldn’t be much of a world left for him to go back to.

Vision knelt down beside Peter and helped him to gather up the various pieces of armor that had released. Tony would have to reset it. Once everything was sufficiently gathered, Peter fake groaned and pulled himself out of the hatch just as the team flooded into the room. “We really need a light to go off or something so that I know when I can escape.”

“Noted.” Tony staid with a smirk, accepting the handfuls of metal.

“You dropped your camera,” Wanda said regretfully, then pulled it out from behind her with a smile. “But I managed to catch it. My fastest reaction time to date.”

Peter smiled at her in gratitude as he grabbed the worn plastic, his fingers fitting nicely on their usual spots in the plastic, slipping the well-worn strap over his neck. He didn’t doubt that if anything had happened Tony would be right around the corner with a camera 50 times more expensive, but he couldn't imagine any of them being better than the camera in his hands. It had survived were countless phones crumbled. It had stayed with him through the deaths of Uncle Ben, Gwen, and Aunt May. It had stayed by his side throughout all of his foster homes, providing him with the only means of fixing his costume and buying web fluid. It was his.

“I, uh, I think that’s enough pictures tonight.” He said softly, and the heroes nodded, though Tony insisted on taking the memory card to print out the pictures. When Pepper finally showed up that evening, looking exhausted, Tony insisted on showering her the pictures despite Peter’s hesitance. It worked, the woman looked lighter than she had in days as she flipped through the glossy images. She even began talking about using them for promotional material, saying that they were better than any of the professionals had ever managed. She even mused that maybe the fact that he had shot them would make the pictures even more exciting. Apparently he had a following.
The woman refused to talk about what happened at work, but for those moments she seemed lighter, which really made the whole day worth it.

He felt mostly guilty at night, when he was dressed in full red and blue with his web-shooters at his wrist and his watch noticeably absent. He’d spent his limited free time tinkering with the web fluid formula. He’d underestimated how potent the new formulas would be. The webbing was supposed to be gone in a few hours, but no, instead the docks at Hell’s kitchen had looked like a kids party had attacked it until well into the next afternoon and they had gone through three bottles of Goo-Gone at the police station just to separate the men. Peter was pretty sure he hadn’t gotten any brownie points with them over that.

He hadn’t gone out the very next night after Spider-Man’s return, or the second. But by the third he was slipping down the tower, his form no more than a shadow that could be a trick of the moon or the ever-changing city nights.

The first few nights back were quieter than most, full of petty criminals, muggers and burglars rather than the villains that had once plagued him. Not that he was really complaining about that. The world always needed someone to stand up for the little guy, and he would never complain about his villains actually staying in jail. That was mostly thanks to the Department of Damage control extending their reach to all super-human related instances instead of just Avenger’s related issues. Even before Peter had been adopted, Pepper and Tony had been working with them to form more effective prison systems for enhanced humans or other types of supervillains.

So finally the New York prison system wasn’t a rotating door for anyone in a costume. Of course, Peter knew that they would likely find a way to escape soon enough, but as he stuck yet another car snatcher to a wall, he could only be grateful that there didn’t seem to be any supervillains out and about in New York for now.

Less than half an hour later Kraven the Hunter would appear in that same alleyway, face screwed in distaste. He was a master tracker, but Spider-Man had been back for over a week, and still he was no closer to finding his prey’s nest. One could usually find a spider by tracking the flies it left in its web, but this arachnid seemed to be a master at disappearing the instant his prey was felled. Worse there was no pattern to it. Regardless of who he was behind the mask, as Spider-Man the creature seemed to be entirely nomadic. Today stopping a mugging in Queens, yesterday a robbery in Brooklyn, tomorrow a heist in Manhattan.

It was… frustrating. Invigorating.

This would be a hunt he could truly gloat of.

Peter Parker grimaced as the television screen displayed a surprisingly clear cell phone video of him getting nailed in the back of the head by a trash can lid thrown by one of the five thugs he’d been fighting. The team chuckled as the off-balance hero squeaked and fell flat on his face. He’d managed to keep hold of the suspicious briefcase he’d taken from them at least. (It was full of drugs, which was a relief. He’d once taken the briefcase of an actual businessman who just liked black
trenchcoats, and he really didn’t want a repeat of that). The crowd could be heard through the tinny phone speakers jeering and cheering in spades and the video jerked as the drunk clubgoer holding it was jostled.

Peter made a mental note to avoid doing embarrassing things in front of nightclubs or other places where a million phones could post it online within an hour.

The Spider-Man on the screen quickly jumped to his feet and defeated the criminals, the whole fight fast enough that it could have been on someone’s snapchat story, but the damage had been done. Peter had to mentally keep himself from rubbing the back of his head. That had hurt for hours last night.

The team mostly went back to breakfast as the newscast went on, though a thoughtful look remained on Natasha’s face as she slowly sipped her coffee. Even Peter turned the newscaster’s droning voice out as he stared Sam down over the last cinnamon roll. It wasn’t until he had the spicy-sweet treat in hand that the news report slowly filtered back into his hearing.

“... while the streets have been undoubtedly much safer at night, recent surveys suggest that daytime criminal activity has increased 17% as both Daredevil and Spiderman are working only at night. Will this trend continue? Tune in at 3 to hear a behavioral scientist's opinion.”

Peter almost dropped his cinnamon roll. He hadn’t even thought of that! Before, he’d been swinging every afternoon as school as class got out, now he was lucky to go out before 11:00. By this point it had been about 2 and a half weeks since he’d first gone back out as Spider-Man, and he had noticed that it had been slow the past few days, but he’d never imagined… What was the point of being Spider-Man, of wearing the mask when he could only go out at night? He needed to do more, help more, he needed to-

Suddenly a large hand clapped Peter on the back, nearly sending the boy face first into his scrambled eggs. “-Managed to flip me over his shoulder yesterday.” Rhodes said jovially, and Peter had to fight not to grimace when the team congratulated him.

That had been an accident. He’d gotted distracted thinking about the night before-he could swear someone was following him, but whoever it was never got close enough for him to really tell-and when Rhodes grabbed his shoulder he’d just reacted. He’d barely realized what had happened until the man was on the ground groaning. Peter had looked around, helplessly, but Natasha had simply raised a brow and sent him an approving nod. Steve congratulated Peter on the move as he helped the soldier to his feet. Sam had been leaning against the wall laughing, so he hadn’t been much help. Now the team was going on and on about how fast he’d been making progress.

He’d tried to hide it. He’d done hours of research trying to figure out how quickly he should be improving, but… it was hard. Not even olympic trainers worked like Natasha did, and she worked Peter hard. Recently she’d been working him even harder, refusing to give in when he thought a normal teen would have been passed out. It was somewhat terrifying sometimes, but he couldn’t argue the results. He was better at fighting than he would have ever dreamed of before. He’d like to see stupid Red Skull come after him now, the overrated halloween decoration wouldn’t know what hit him.

Suddenly Peter perked up. Actually… “Since I’m getting so much better at the self defense classes, does that mean I could start leaving the tower? You know, without a…” Babysitter. “Entourage?”

“Aw, don’t you like us anymore?” Wanda fake pouted, though her eyes were amused.

“No, no. I-I do! It’s just, you know, all the time and it was fun at first, but it gets a little..”
“Annoying?” Tony flicked a blueberry at Sam who flicked it to Rhodes.

“Irritating.”

“Aggravating.” Rhodes added, sending the berry back once more.

Natasha caught it in the air smoothly and crushed it between perfect teeth. “Obnoxious.”

“Overwhelming?” Vision interjected diplomatically.

“Um, I was just going to say a bit much, but sure.”

Steve chuckled and reached out to ruffle the teen’s hair. “I understand. I’m not going to tell you some of the stuff I did back in the dorm just to get out of the barracks for a few hours. I remember one time—”

Tony groaned exaggeratedly, “Way to go kid, you got Grandpa talking about the war again. C’mon Cap, call him a Whippersnapper.”

Steve, well used to this behavior from the genius, simply rolled his eyes and continued his story, Peter listening with rapt attention. The tale was a long one, and by the time he finished the coffee had long gone cold.

Natasha rose to her feet nimbly, prompting Sam, Steve, and Rhodes to follow her example, a somewhat reluctant Peter right behind them. The spy smirked at the teen. “Well, if you’re going to go out on your own again, we need to work on your situational awareness. All of the self defense training in the world won’t help you if you land flat on your face every time someone taps you on the back.”

Peter groaned good naturedly, though a clear smile was playing on his lips. At least until Natasha turned back to the table. “Who wants to throw stuff at Peter while he spars?”

Immediately the entire team was standing, glee stretched across their faces. Peter moaned. “I remember when I liked you guys.” He grumbled.

“Please,” Wanda said with a smile. “You know you love us.”

“I do.” He allowed. “And if that isn’t proof that I need Tony’s special head doctors then I don’t know what is.”

“Remember, every part of your body is a weapon.” Sam advised.

“I know.” Peter replied.

“Do you have us all on speed dial?” Rhodes asked.

“Of course. Wanda’s number one.” Peter grinned and high fived the Sokovian hero.

“Happy will be monitoring you, just to be safe, and I swear Parker if you take off that watch I will weld it to you.”

“I got it, I got it. You guys do realize that I’ve been going around the city by myself since I was like, 11, right?”

After about three days of “situational awareness training” Natasha had finally deemed him ready to
leave the tower by himself, and now he was preparing to venture out into the big city in the best
disguise the World's Mightiest Heroes could conceive of: a baseball cap and some sunglasses.

Seriously, that was it.

He’d complained about it to Natasha, but the woman had simply shook her head, completely serious.
“About a few years ago, S.H.E.I.L.D collapsed. Steve and I were on the run from H.Y.D.R.A, a parasitic
evil that had taken root in the best intelligence and surveillance entity in the world. Do you know
what my disguise was?”

“Um… A hat and some glasses.”

“No. That was Steve’s. My disguise: some bubblegum, and a hoodie. A disguise is not just what you
are wearing. It is in how you present yourself, how you walk, how you talk. We can hide more
easily with a simple cap and glasses, than some with full cosmetic masks. Do you understand?”

Peter felt his mouth go dry, and he could only nod in silence and accept the proffered items.

He had the hat and glasses on firmly now as he prepared to leave. For once, none of his clothing was
hero themed, yet another attempt of separating him from the Avenger’s Orphan.

“Is that all? Okay, I’m going now.” Peter sighed in relief as he finally managed to slide into
the elevator, the Avenger’s faces fading from view. He knew they were playing it up a little, or a lot
depending on the person, but he swore the Avengers were the worst mother hens he’d ever seen.
Even worse than Aunt May had been that time with the chicken pox and- Peter felt his chest grow
heavy and quickly cast the memory away. He shook his head as he stepped out of the Avengers
tower. He swore he could almost feel the eyes of the team still on him as he made his way onto the
sidewalk, the feeling persisting until he was well out of eyeshot of the grand building.

Peter’s finger’s itched to put on his suit right away, to show criminals that he was back whenever he
was needed, but he had to play it smart. Natasha taught strategy with self defense, and tales of
battles, both recent and ancient, were teeming with advice and knowledge. Merely spending time
with the Avengers was giving him more tools to hide his secret than he would have dreamed of
before.

Which was kind of ironic if you thought about it.

Whatever, what he would do the first day, maybe the first few days, was find a nice, safe, well-
traversed area that would make sense for him to go to. He wouldn’t go anywhere suspicious or
sketchy, just in case they were still watching him. Somewhere popular, somewhere central… like
Central Park maybe? Yes, that would work perfectly. It was even close enough to the center of the
city that he should be able to hear if someone really needed his special brand of spider themed help.

Course decided, the boy made his way through the city, stopping occasionally at tourist-y food
stands that he never would have wasted money on before. By the time he got to the park, his arms
were laden with snacks and desserts, and he was searching frantically for an unoccupied bench to
lay it all down. He sighed in relief as he spotted a free seat in one of the many chairs surrounding the
Delacorte Theater stage. The stage was set and decorated, and Peter hummed as he bit into a kebab,
distantly remembering that one of the local fine arts high schools always preformed Junior
Shakespeare in the park during this time of year.

With an uninterested shrug, the boy dug into his bag and pulled out a scientific journal. He’d
managed to nab it before Tony could see it had arrived, and he was pretty sure that one of the articles
featured had just what they were looking for on the most recent project they were working on
together. Even if it didn’t, Dr. Richards was always an interesting read.

Within moments he was fully engrossed in the formulas presented on the page, so much so that he didn’t even notice when the seats surrounding him began to fill and music started playing from behind the stage. His eyes remained on the paper even when two of the play’s main characters took to the stage.

Mary Jane Watson was in her element on the stage. She excelled there, she loved it there. In the moments when the lights were on her, she wasn’t M.J. from Queens. Instead, she was Katherine of the Taming of the Shrew. She loved acting, and she’d put month of hard work, time, and rehearsals into this showing.

Which was why it was so irritating that the kid that took the best seat in the place wasn’t even watching the play. No, instead he was sitting in the prime locale, nose stuck in a science journal like it was the most captivating thing in the world. Well, she’d show him.

While remaining in character, Mary Jane let her voice grow louder, more boisterous. Soon enough the nerd in the front row was scowling as he attempted to read, obviously getting distracted. As she grew louder her fellow actors grew louder as well. Still, he still wasn’t paying attention. She grew louder still, and finally with a look of irritation the nerd looked up and- ooh, make that cute nerd. Happy that she’d gotten her way, the teen sent the audience member a quick wink before delivering her next line. She found herself hoping he’d stick around for the meet and greet.

In essence, while the molecular imbalance would be a detriment to some, my calculations predict that with a simple stabilizing agent fused through the method of-

“If I be waspish, best beware my sting!”

Peter held back a growl. He’d just been getting to the good part. With a scowl stretched across his face, the boy lifted his head to see what was making so much noise- oh.

Oh, wow.

Chapter End Notes

As a disclaimer, This will definitely be Mary Jane, not Michelle Jones. I LOVE Zendaya and I think her MJ is great, but I planned this long before Homecoming came out, so I had the more traditional actress/outgoing/overuses-the-nickname Tiger MJ in mind and the awesome but loner and broody Michelle just wont fit into the scenes I have.

So, yeah, disclaimer over. Hope you guys liked it!

Also I know nothing about science. I just kinda put a bunch of words together.
And I don’t intend to bring the Fantastic 4 into this, but there’s no reason not to throw Mr. Fantastic a little shoutout. Mostly cause he’s awesome.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Sorry if the formatting is weird. It wouldn’t put the spaces in automatically so I had to do it manually and it doesn’t look perfect, sorry!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Peter felt his mouth go dry as he locked eyes with the gorgeous girl on the stage, then she winked and he flushed so deeply that his face turned redder than Vision’s. The girl turned back to the other character on the stage to deliver the next line, but Peter couldn’t look away. In that one moment the girl had captured his full attention. His journal lay abandoned on his lap, untouched for the remainder of the performance. He could swear that she kept looking at him, glancing his way and smiling every once in awhile when it wouldn’t mess with the scene. More than once Peter looked behind him for whoever she was actually winking at, but he couldn’t imagine she was sending those looks to the tourist who kept having to pull toys out of a diaper bag to keep his kids entertained during the show.

So she had to be looking at him!

Although, that couldn’t be, could it? No one looked at Peter Parker like that. Other than Gwen but… no, he didn’t want to think about her.

Maybe the girl recognized him, despite the “disguise”. Somehow though, he didn’t think that was the case. He knew how people looked when they spotted celebrities like the Avengers, had seen it plenty when going out with the team. Fans had a particular glint in their eyes that this girl was lacking.

Well… he did ditch the glasses a while back…

And the clothes Pepper got him had price tags so large it physically hurt to see them, and she insisted that people could see the difference.

He wasn’t quite as scrawny as he had been before, with the Avenger’s never ending supply of carefully balanced food, and the constant training. He was actually growing visible muscles.

Maybe it was finally starting to show.

Was he actually thinking about this?

Could he really just go up to a girl as gorgeous as that and start a conversation? What would he even say? ‘Hi, I’m Peter’ - argh no, that was lame.

Maybe he should-

His thoughts were cut off as he heard the drone of a siren in the distance, clearly heading away from the park. He was slipping off his watch and stuffing things into his bag without another thought, locking the watch around the leg of the bench as he knew that no one but him would be able to get it.
off. There shouldn’t be any danger in the park this time of day. As long as none of the Avengers got overly protective, they should have no reason to check up on him.

...he should try to make this fast.
He wasn’t planning on putting on the suit on his first foray into the world but, well, duty called.

The girl was coming back on stage as he stood to leave. They caught gazes and though Peter could have been projecting, she seemed almost disappointed. Still unsure that he wasn’t just imagining it all, Peter mouthed the word ‘tomorrow’ to her before turning and running away.

It was strange, he thought as he slipped on the suit. Here he was preparing to run into battle and he felt like a coward.

He pushed the thought out of his head as he crawled up the side of one of the buildings that made up the alley he’d used to change. He followed the police car, swinging from building to building until he was able to hear a large commotion in the direction they were headed. Quickly overtaking the traffic-logged squad car, he swung out above the shocked faces of tourists and locals alike. Which, he really had been gone for too long if he was surprising New Yorkers.

It didn’t take long to find the source of the panic. Police officers had surrounded the bank, all furiously gesturing inside. The blinds were all down, but it was easy enough to guess that whoever was in there wasn’t there to make a deposit. The officers were obviously struggling to find a way in without much success.

Luckily for Peter, there was almost always roof access, even if that meant crawling through the dusty vents. Even better, the boy thought as he swung to the top of the building and spotted a door leading into the building.

The teen slid silently through the door, slipping down the stairs with all the noise of a breath of air. He clung to the wall as he neared the bottom floor, then moved onto ceiling when he reached the final landing. He took special care to open the door without making a noise, and grimaced as the instant the door cracked the air was filled with the sound of villainous ranting.

Oh great, it was one of those types.

Slowly, he opened the door fully from his perch on the ceiling, sticking it to the wall with a bit of webbing to make sure it stayed open. Moving gingerly, the vigilante crept into the large, open room, trusting his spot on the ceiling to keep him mostly out of sight. People never thought to look up.

Ugh, not only was the bad guy ranting, he was pacing. Honestly, how lame could you get? Don’t answer that. Peter had long since learned that his villains could always get lamer. This guy though, he was something else. The man was dressed head to toe in a gaudy green costume decorated with yellow-gold lightning bolts.

Peter smirked and crept forward. This shouldn’t be too hard. Then he froze, Natasha’s voice ringing in his ears, insistent that he never jump into a fight without knowing as much as possible about his opponents (“Not that you’ll be going into a fight,” Steve had protested at the time with a stern look, “because we’re teaching you this for self-defense, right?” Natasha had simply rolled her eyes and sent the man a smirk. “Of course”). This guy, he wasn’t a normal bank robber, he couldn’t be. People didn’t dress up in costumes like that unless they had some kind of power or tech that made them worthy of being a ‘villain’ as opposed to a normal criminal.
Which meant this guy had some kind of ability that Peter didn’t know about yet. He was sure he could adapt in a fight but… He looked down to where a crowd of around twenty customers and seven employees sat huddled on the floor, three of them children. He couldn’t risk it. Let the man pull all he wanted from the vault, the people were more important.

The man’s back was turned, and Peter figured it was now or never. One of the patrons was crouched a bit separated from the others, a somewhat large teenager half-hiding behind a chair. Peter maneuvered so he was just over the young man. He’d only ever done this to bad guys, but… Quick as a whip he let himself fall to the floor, keeping a hold of a single stream of webbing connecting himself to the ceiling. In one smooth movement he grabbed the teen, covering his mouth to keep him from yelling out, and climbed back up to the ceiling. He was back to the door before the boy could even process that anything had happened.

“Shh Shh Shhh!” Peter quietly soothed the frantic man, who began thrashing in fear as his body processed that he was taken. Wild brown eyes met the white of Peter’s mask, and the teen abruptly stilled. With a sigh of relief Peter released the hold on the boy’s mask.

“Dude, you’re the Spider-Man!” The boy whispered.

“Yeah, yeah that’s me. Look, if you go up two stories there’s a fire escape on the west side of the building, I saw it on my way in. I need you to do whatever you can to get the attention of the police, got it? Let them know more people are coming.”

“R-right! Of course, Mr. Spider-Man, sir. Um,” The teen tightened his grip on his backpack. “Can I just say that I am a huge fan. It was an honor to get rescued by you. Oh man, I can’t believe it, I got rescued by Spider-Man, this is the best day ever.”

“Happy to help.”

“Ok. Ok um,”

Peter turned back, preparing to go in for another victim when suddenly the larger teen spoke up again. “Hey, do you need a sidekick or something? Like a guy in the chair?”

“A what?”

“You know, the guy in the movies with a million screens around them that they have to keep turing to, telling you what to look out for or where to go. The guy in the chair! I-I know I look young, but I promise I am super good with computer, like crazy good I promise.”

“No! No, I don’t need a guy in the chair. Just, get safe!” He turned back around, ready to go back into the fray when he paused. “Actually, I do have a one time only sidekick gig open if you’re looking to apply.”

“YES!”

“SHH!”

“Sorry, sorry! I mean yes, Mr. Spider-Man, whatever you need!”

“Ok,” Peter stretched his enhanced hearing, and could hear no sign that anyone in the room had realized the teen was missing yet. “Ok, so I’m going to take you back to where you were before. I need you to get the attention of the people closest to you, show them that I’m here without scaring them so they scream. If you can do that I’ll take it from there.”
The tan young man paled a little at the thought of going back into the room where he was being held hostage, but nodded nonetheless. Peter clapped him on the back proudly before silently bringing him back into the room. The stranger worked quickly, silently and subtly getting the attention of the mom in front of him and pointing to where Spider-Man was crouched on the ceiling.

Tears were dripping down the woman’s face when he took her daughter from her arms and carried her to the stairway, and they only increased when he reunited them in safety a moment later. After repeating what he’d originally told the teen, Peter made his way back into the room to help whoever was next.

Luckily, the villain was much more preoccupied with ranting and emptying the safe than paying attention to his hostages. It helped that he was within sight of the main entrance, but Peter was sure it was just supervillain arrogance convincing him that no one would ever dare attempt escape from the mighty what’s-his-name.

The hero cursed silently. He should have asked the kid earlier what the guys powers were. Oh well, too late for a conversation now. Getting the other hostages out had actually gone amazingly well, considering his track record with that kind of thing. One guy’s lighter had fallen out of a pocket and clattered across the tile floors, and a baby dropped his pacifier just before the doors and started fussing in Peter’s arms, but luckily the villain hadn’t reacted to either noise.

Only three people, other than his temporary sidekick, were left, and two of them already knew he was there and were simply waiting there turn. The Spider-kick tapped on the last unsuspecting hostage, a large man with impressive facial hair. The man jumped at the touch, and he gaped when he turned to see that the room was nearly empty. The teen pointed to Spider-Man and the man’s countenance shifted. His look of fear melted into joyous relief. The teenager grinned at being able to complete his task.

Peter could only watch in horror as the large man clapped loudly in the empty room, shouting out “Yeah Spider-Man!” to boot.

For less than a second the room was silent, the mortification of both teen’s seemed almost palatable. Then, Peter’s spidey-sense went off and he dropped off the wall, falling to the ground in a smooth roll that Steve had taught him, just barely in time to avoid what looked like a bolt of lightning arcing to the very spot he had just been hanging.

“GO GO GO!” He shouted, and the remaining hostages hastened to obey as the villain rushed out of the vault. The green and yellow man skidded to a halt at the sight of the masked teen, paying no mind to the escaping hostages as a wide smile split across the bit of face under his mask.

“Ah, Spider-Man so you’ve come to show yourself in the light of day at last. I should have known that my presence would draw you out. The common man cannot hope to best me, and you would of course realize that. I should have expected this, should have known you would come when they began to scream my name.”

“Right…. So, who are you again?”

The man growled, and sent another arching bolt of electricity through the air, leaving Peter to leap to the side to avoid the attack. Another bolt made Peter fall to the other side, a constant game of jumping left, right, back, up at the electrical onslaught continued to chase him around the the echoing room.
“I am Electro! I am a human capacitor! Electricity runs through my veins like blood, arcs of pure power that is just waiting to be unleashed by my hands. I am power! I am-”

“Yeah, yeah.” Spider-Man interrupted, doing a flip over one attack and shooting out a web that covered the villain’s mouth. “Look buddy, sorry to break it to you, but I think you need a different schtick. My quota of electricity-based-villains is already filled with The Shocker, sorry. Maybe I can recommend a different hero for you to bother? Like a referral thing?” Electro shot another arch of lightning at the hero, and Peter skittered along the wall with a shot of webbing that the villain disintegrated in mid-air. “I know Daredevil pretty well. Granted, you’re not his usual type, but I’ll put in a good word for ya.”

Electro zapped the webbing covering his mouth and peeled it off with a scowl.

“Shocker.” He scoffed dismissively, “A fool relying of gauntlets and inventions.” With a wave of his hand he sent out a shot of electricity so fast that Peter couldn’t avoid it. The white-hot stream struck the teen in the chest, and he flew back into the wall of the bank with a cry of pain and a crash that created a crater in the marble. “I do not use electricity, I harness electricity. I am electricity!”

“Well, I am bored!” Spider-Man quipped, sending out a string of casing to the hand the man favored for sending out his electricity.

He followed the streme seconds later with a second, a third, several to the other hand, to the arms, legs, mouth, body. In moments, Electro was in a cocoon of webbing, but already Peter could see strands frying and flaking off, gaps appearing and widening. He needed to think of something different. He needed to- there! In the corner of his eye he spotted the block of silver of the lighter that the hostage had dropped, still sitting on the floor of the bank.

In one fluid motion Peter kicked the webbed villain and stuck him to the ground directly under a sprinkler for the fire system. Using the irate villain as a springboard, he leaped onto the ceiling and shot out a web out to snatch the lighter. He’d read somewhere that sprinkler systems didn’t work like in the movies, didn’t come on all at once or when the alarm was pulled. But if he could get the sprinkler or sensor hot enough.

Click- Clickclick. For the love of- why were these things always so hard to get right? Click-fwoosh.

Finally a small flame flickered to life, hovering around the metal sprinkler head. “Come on…” Peter whispered. “Come on…”

Below, Electro was fighting tooth and nail to get out of the webbing, even as Peter’s other hand worked to patch up the cocoon, Electro was zapping through the layers faster and faster. “Come on…”

Peter glanced at the feeble flame wavering weakly against the sprinkler, “Hurry up.” He whispered before looking down to see one masked eye and arm freed from the webbing and pointed right at him.

With a yelp Peter jumped out of the way as the lightning bolt shot up… right into the sprinkler head. Electro cried out as the water flooded over him, shaking with slight convulsions as he shorted out, and in seconds he was lying unconscious, lightning arcing through the water and over his body. With a sigh of relief Peter pulled the prone body out of the water’s spray. After checking to make sure that the man was well and truly out of it but still ok, he made his way to the doors of the bank, where dozens of officers and hundreds of spectators stood attempting to peer through the windows and doors in any way.
He swung the doors open, calling out to the waiting police. “It-Its ok, he’s down. You might want to get him into a rubber cell or something… like, something non-conductive if possible. And that’s not a word.” He said the last bit quieter, to himself. “Way to go Spider-Man.”

Suddenly the crowd roared. People were screaming and shouting so loud that Peter’s enhanced senses hurt, and he could barely concentrate as the police made their way past him into the bank. He had the presence of mind to climb up the side of the building before one of the officers got the idea to arrest a vigilante along with a villain, but once above their heads he was once again struck by the cheering crowd. The crowd cheering for him. He knew he’d been getting a following, the articles lamenting his “death” had been sign enough of that. He never imagined though…

Tourists decked out in iconic T-shirts and Spider-Man hats cheered alongside the locals who had stopped to stare at the spectacle. News vans filled the areas, mingling with the emergency vehicles as reporters and EMT struggled to talk to the hostages and ignore the others’ presence. The kid who’d helped him was sitting on the back of an ambulance with one of the bank workers that looked like she might be his mother. The guy who broke their cover by yelling was already talking animatedly with a reporter.

Cameras were flashing, phones were waving, people were screaming, cheering, catcalling, crying. Sure, there were a couple ‘boo’s in the crowd, he was still the Daily Bugle least favorite hero, but for once the majority seemed to be supporting him. It was amazing. It was- it was getting late!

The sun was beginning to set in the distance, and he didn’t trust anyone not to check in on him if he came close to missing breakfast. Preter waved to the crowds, which prompted a loud cheer, before shooting a web to the nearest skyscraper and swinging away. He had to hide a wince as the movement pulled at the burn he could feel etched into his chest. This was not going to be fun.

He landed in central park in moments, feeling a vague disappointment that the theatre troupe was already gone for the day, not that he would have time to stay if she-the troupe- if the troupe had still been there. Grabbing his bag, the boy quickly changed in a densely wooded area hidden from the beaten path. He took a slight detour to retrieve his watch, and he was on his way back to the tower.

He was bombarded the instant he stepped foot into the building, swarmed with Avengers asking how his day was and what he’d done. Peter stammered through replies, mentioning his stop to the park and the dozens of food stands he’d stopped at, hoping that mentioning the journal would do enough to account for where he’d been all afternoon. They seemed satisfied enough, especially when he threw in a bit about just wanting to rest in the sunshine.

During dinner that night he received a surprise that eased a weight he hadn’t realized had been festering in his chest and even seemed to soothe the pulsing throb of his burn.

“Wait, so you mean no training? At all? For the whole week? Seriously!”

“You’ve made a lot of progress.” Steve said with a broad grin. “The last thing we need at this point is you burning yourself out, or coming to resent training.”

“We’re proud of you kid.” Sam added, “You’ve worked hard, you deserve a break.”

"We expected Nat to put up a huge fight about it.” Rhodes cut in with a nod to the woman who sat serenely cutting into her meal. “But she was actually pretty open to it.”

The woman rolled her eyes and stabbed her fork into a bt of pork chop. “Peter has been an excellent student. I know better than anyone the dangers of extending a body beyond its limits. He deserves this break. Especially considering what I have planned for next.”
Peter mock groaned, but shared a laugh with the rest of the team. The conversation soon turned to other things, including Spider-Man’s bank rescue. The Daily Bugle article was especially interesting: “Webbed Menace Attempts to Kidnap Bank Patrons and Employees During Robbery, Victims Able to Escape the Duo of Villains Through Open Window and Fire Escape”. That really got the team going. Peter was nearly doubled over laughing until the lightning burn cut it short.

He really needed to find a way to hide his injuries from them in the future, but for now he would just enjoy the meal and start planning on what he would do the next day. After all he had hours at his disposal, unimaginable amounts of money thanks to the “allowance” from Tony. The whole of New York was at his fingertips.

Funny how the only thing he could think of was going to see Shakespeare in the Park.

She was there again. Center stage, same character. This time Peter didn’t even bother with the journal. It was sitting at home, on the table of his personal lab. He could swear she smiled when their eyes met.

He was going to talk to her after the play, he swore it.

Sirens called him away midway through the second act.

The next day she had only said a few lines before he was gone.

The next, he made it to the beginning of intermission, but had to leave before the second half began.

The next day… the next day was the last performance, and Peter was determined to stay through the entire show, no matter what.

Peter wasn’t the only one who was paying close attention to the supervillain attacks. Kraven the Hunter was taking careful note of the hero’s movements, tracking them on a map of the city using pins and yarn and notes until the map seemed to be overlaid with a spiderweb.

This was a web of Kraven’s doing, an intricate layer of traps and deception. One that the spider wouldn’t simply skate over, no. This time the Spider would be ensnared by a greater predator. This web would lead Kraven right to his prey.

You could find a predator’s nest by tracking their kills, how long it took them to get to their hunting grounds. For a long time there had been no rhyme nor reason behind the Spider’s movements, but now… Now a very clear pattern was forming, one centered on Kraven’s favorite part of the city: Central Park.

A feral, animalistic grin stretched across the villains face. He was done tracking. He had found his prey’s nest, now it was time to set the trap. He looked down to a strip of newspaper article that boasted an interview with one of the many people Spider-Man had rescued from the bank. He even knew what to use as bait.
Knives filled sheaths, arrows crowded in his quiver, his net was thrown over his shoulder and his spear was in hand. He was ready.

He grinned at a picture of Spider-Man that sat on the table on his lair. It was time for the hunter to be hunted. The Spider would soon see who was predator and who was the Prey.

Chapter End Notes

WOOp WOOp, look who made an entrance!!! I love Ned!!! He probably won’t really be much of a reoccurring character though, especially since it would be weird without using Michelle. But he kinda snuck into this chapter hahaha.

No regrets!

Also, Im not planning on going on hiatus or anything, but the next 8 weeks of school are going to be insane. I’ll try to write as often as possible, I just wanted to let you all know!
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

I LIIIVVVVEEEE!!!

My horrible 8 weeks of craziness are over and I should have much less work this second half of school, which means more time to write! Thank you to everyone for being patient with me! I really really hope you enjoy this chapter, it was one of the first scenes I thought of when planning the story.

Peter was practically vibrating in his seat. According to the program, the final scene had just started and, miraculously, he was still there. The play was nearly over and yet no matter how hard he strained his super senses, he couldn’t detect any trouble. There were no sirens, no screams or cries, not even a car alarm. New York was as peaceful as it ever got, and there was literally nothing that could get in his way of actually meeting the girl.

It was terrifying.

Come on, Peter mentally begged. This is New York, how is there no crime?

At this rate he may actually have to man up and talk to the girl. He felt like he was going to be sick.

What if he’d been imagining it? What if he hadn’t been? What if she laughed at him? What if she smiled at him?

What if she thought it was creepy that he came everyday to watch her. Oh no, she thinks he’s a freak. This could not end well, not well at all.

Honestly, it was almost a relief when a net shot out of a tree and covered half of the second row. There was a moment of stunned silence, even the actors too shocked to continue their lines, then screams as a tattooed behemoth of a man stepped out from behind the tree, clothed in teeth and skins and weaponry.

The fearsome man’s face twisted into what could have been a facsimile of a smile, or could have been a feral bearing of teeth. “Yes, scream. Call for your protector. You pathetic mice aren’t worth my time, I desire a true opponent. I want the SPIDER-MAN!”

Well… crap.

Peter joined the crowd that was running away from the scene until he was able to slip into a public restroom stall. Slipping the watch into his backpack along with his clothes, the teen glanced around the absolutely disgusting restroom. He couldn’t leave his bag there. But what was he going to- “I won’t be patient long, Spider-Man!”

Jumping, Peter simply swung the backpack over his shoulders, pulling the straps to ensure that the bag was snug against him. That would have to do.

Kraven was standing over a net of sobbing, terrified victims when Peter emerged. The man’s sharp eyes were vigilantly searching the crowd, his spear held aloft in one hand as he sought his prey. The
man’s dark eyes connected with the white of Spider-Man’s mask. A grin stretched across his face, somehow making him even more frightening as the curled lips revealed fangs etched into his teeth. The villain’s eyes moved over Peter, assessing him, and Spider-Man shuddered at the weight of his gaze. "Magnificent, a fine prey. You have managed to elude me for far too long, but as always if you kick the bush then the birds scatter and reveal themselves."

Peter frowned behind his mask. "What does tha- Wait, does that mean you were following me? Newsflash, I wasn't hiding from you, I didn't even know you were there!"

Kraven's grin only widened. "That is because as fine a prey as you are, I will always be a superior hunter." The man made a throwing motion, and suddenly a blade was flying at Spider-Man. The hero leaped to the side, only to hear a scream from behind as the knife flew towards one of the gaping tourists who had frozen on the spot at the villain's arrival. Peter cast out a web, stopping the blade inches from the bystander. He turned back to Kraven just in time to roll to avoid a weighted net.

"Wait, you were hunting me? That's just wrong." His Spidey-sense was going crazy. This man was dangerous.

And crazy. Seriously, who hunted people? Peter jumped to his feet as the man began talking once more.

"I am Kraven the Hunter." The man yelled, yay for the villainous shouting-your-name-at-the-sky bit. "The greatest hunter known to man or beast. I am the ultimate predator and you… you are my next trophy."

"Wow, that was really something there Krave-y. But I think you could do better. Why don't you try a second take, really focus on the creep factor this time." He shot out a web that connected with Kraven's shin and pulled, toppling the man to the ground. Kraven grunted as he fell, but he was already moving. A large, serrated bowie knife was in hand almost before he hit the ground, and the villain didn't waste a moment between landing and bending forward to cut through the web.

The hunter stood, a patch of white webbing on his leg the only evidence of Peter's efforts. Kraven moved, charging at Peter with his spear held aloft and a manic glint in his eye. Peter ducked the spearhead, moving in to attack only to receive the butt of the weapon into his gut. The vigilante flipped away, sweeping out with his leg in a move Natasha had taught him, but Kraven expertly jumped over the attack.

"You know, I finally figured out who you remind me of!"

Peter cast out another web, this time aiming for one of Kraven's hands, but once more the knife made a lightning fast appearance and cleaved through the sticky-tensile material. Then the hunter was back, spear in one hand and knife in the other. The different sized weapons should have been awkward and clunky, but Kraven handled them expertly. The spear attacked Peter at a distance, while the knife swiped at him whenever the boy attempted to get within his reach as Natasha had taught.

"Did you ever see that show Danny Phantom?"

Any attempt to web the man was met with the cool silver blades cutting through the webbing. The firm material didn't cut easily, but Kraven was practiced with slicing through bone, tusk, and horn and so he managed it.

"There'd that one guy, Stalker or Sulker or something, had this whole 'ghost zone's greatest hunter
In one move Peter attempted to web both weapons at once, but with his hands occupied he was left open for the punishing kick Kraven leveled at his chest. The villain had cut through the webbing by the time Spider-Man got to his feet.

"Of course he never actually caught anything, always trying to go against the hero and all."

Kraven was strong. *Not as strong as Steve.*

"Wow, that was almost creepy, it's almost like they were predicting future you."

He was fast. *Not as fast as Natasha.*

"Oh, wait, not that I was threatening to turn you into a ghost or anything."

He was deliberate. *Not as deliberate as Sam.*

"Wow that analogy really went off the walls, huh?"

And he was disciplined. *Not as disciplined as Rhodey.*

"I blame you, I need some feedback Krave-y, work with me here."

Peter didn't want to think about what the battle would have been like before the Avengers, for even with his training he was struggling to gain the upper hand. It wasn't because of the weapons, though they certainly played a part, but it was the man.

"Maybe you're just not a Danny Phantom fan."

He fought more like beast than man, with the ferocity of a lion, the wildness of a grizzly, the desperation of a cornered beast. He was intuitive and skilled, every move made it clear that he had indeed fought his way through the animal kingdom.

"How about the classics? Can I call you Elmer Fudd?"

Kraven responded to the question by landing a blow that sent Peter flying until he lay sprawled in the grass a good twenty yards away. The teen immediately jumped to his feet, instinctively scanning for a high point he could swing to in order to gain the high ground.

"News flash, it's wabbit season, not Spider-Man Season."

Nothing. Kraven had chosen one of the few areas in New York that wasn't surrounded by skyscrapers and tall apartment buildings, and the trees weren't quite tall or sturdy enough for him to really use them like he wanted. From the grin on his face, Kraven knew it too. Had planned it.

"Really, still nothing? With that introduction I really expected you to be more vocal."

That tree there might be tall enough, but the top branches wouldn't be strong enough to hold him without bending.

"You know nothing of hunting." The man sneered. "Noise is useless once you have flushed out your prey. I am stealth while you are a warbling bird, foolishly displaying proud colors that will not help you to hide."

But what if he *used* that. Maybe if he built up enough momentum…
"You're the one in the leopard leotard, Elmer, but sure stealth."

If he used that branch there… and could turn his arm into the fulcrum… switch to the second tree and use the potential energy… with gravity at 9.8 m/s… with the stage maybe… yes! He ran, jumping as high as he could and running up the side of the stage. A hand shot out, shooting a web at his chosen tree as he swung into an arch and feeling the bend as the tree gave way. He twisted, facing another tree to act out the second part of his plan, only to suddenly realize he was falling. In what felt like slow motion he looked up and caught sight of a thin silver blade flying past his web, as though it had cleaved the thin strands in two.

The hero let out a scream as he crashed into the prop trailer sitting behind the stage. The momentum nearly flipped the camper, only the presence of a large tree keeping it from falling over completely. As it was the front half of the camper was almost completely crushed. Peter groaned, sitting up from the wreckage. He looked blearily to Kraven, saw the man standing with a grin and a second throwing knife in hand, and immediately jumped to his feet. His Spidey-sense surged and he dodged just in time to avoid the knife that embedded itself into the tree behind him. With a grimace Peter prepared to fight. No more Mr. Nice spider.

He was totally asking Nat to train him against projectiles though, as soon as he could figure out a way to do it without mentioning the whole Spider-Man thing.

When Mary Jane Watson stepped onto the stage that day, her only thought was finding a way to talk to Cute-Nerd. Honestly, if he disappeared again, she was prepared to jump off the stage and follow him.

Ok, not seriously. She respected her fellow actors too much to abandon the set for a guy, especially one she had never even talked to, but she was tempted. She couldn’t figure out why he would come, eye-flirt with her then disappear. Every. Single. Day.

So she was especially pleased to see him in the crowd as the play started winding to a close, even if he started looking progressively more nervous with each passing moment. The play was going great, Edgar even finally remembered that line he could never get, Cute-Nerd was still there, she felt like she was on top of the world.

Which of course was when everything went insane.

At first she couldn’t comprehend what was happening, had only frozen on stage in complete bewilderment as the front row screamed and writhed in the net that had suddenly appeared over them. Then the man stepped out, dressed in leopard furs and strapped with so many weapons that she was honestly surprised that he was able to stand under its weight.

Then he started to yell about Spider-Man and hunting and she decided that was her cue to disappear. Sure, the hero had been showing up more during the day apparently, but there was no way he’d show up right a-

"Magnificent. A fine prey."

Curious, Mary Jane couldn’t help but turn around. She gaped to see Spider-Man already there and yelling something back at the villain. Then Kraven threw a knife and Spider-Man not only dodged it, but caught it with his web. He said something else and then they were fighting and… it was just so gorgeous. The movements flowed, happening so lightning fast and seeming so effortless. The
Peter realized, belatedly, that the first thing to do when fighting an armed opponent is probably to try
to disarm them. Which… he hadn't actually tried to do yet.

Yeah… sometimes he didn't think things through very well.

Flipping to avoid an attack, Peter kicked out a leg that Kraven didn’t bother to avoid as it was obvious that the hero's foot wouldn't connect. However, the kick landed on the bullwhip tightly coiled on his belt and sent it flying. With a double thwip Peter shot out a web, bypassing the hunter's limbs and the weapons in his hands and instead pulling the knives from their sheaths at his waist. Boomerangs, dart guns, bolas… Spider-Man danced around the hunter, staying out of range as he took away the villain's weapons one by one. "Yoink, yoink, yoink!" He yelled after grabbing each weapon.

Finally Kraven stood with only the knife and spear in hand, Peter panting a few yards away. The hunter had managed to get in a few hits with the spear, but while Peter could almost already feel the bruises forming, the new material had done its job and stopped the blades from cutting into him.

Peter shot out another web aimed at the knife, but this time Kraven was prepared and the instant the web connected he used his superior size and weight to pull the boy forward, thrusting his spear at the hero's throat. Spider-Man ducked smoothly under the weapon, just barely avoiding the pointed blade at the tip. Immediately Kraven jabbed forward with the knife as he had done before, but this time the blade was dulled by the webbing coating it and it simply skid across the teen's protective suit. Kraven grunted, and whirled his spear around, wielding it like a staff as he realized the hero was too close for him to use the point.

The rod whipped around, flying to his leg but Peter reached down an arm lightning fast and blocked the blow. Another shot aimed at the teens face, but he ducked down with a dodge. Kraven shifted his grip, grabbing the staff with two hands and thrusting the bar at the heroes chest, an attempt to knock him off balance. Peter, however, contorted his body, bending back in an angle that seemed nearly impossible as his arms hit the ground, back arching so that his legs kicked up powerfully to land squarely on the spear at the exact moment Kraven thrust it forward. His kick landed with a loud smack, followed by a distinctive crack as the spear split in half.

Kraven stumbled back, put off balance by the move. He gaped, fury igniting through him at the sight of his beloved and trusted weapon laying broken in his hands. With a feral snarl he flipped the two ends, so that the point of the blade was pointing to the hero with one hand, and the broken jagged end of the bottom half sat in his hand like a shank. He roared. He was going to end that pesky bug for this.

But it was too late. If there was one thing about Peter's fighting style that truly changed with lessons from the Avengers it was this: do not hesitate. Do not give the enemy a chance to regroup. One second can be the difference between victory and defeat.

Or less than one second when Natasha was concerned.

Even so, where before he may have laughed at the stunned expression on the villains face and then moved in, now he was moving forward even as the hunter stumbled back. He sent Kraven flying back into the theater's seats before the man's angry call could even fade from his ears. With furious movements of his wrist, the teen completely covered the man in webbing. Kraven yelled and thrashed, but with his weapons gone the webbing held, and Peter let out a sigh of relief, clutching his side where Kraven had managed to land a hit with his knife. The blade had been dulled with his webbing, but it would leave a nasty bruise for a few hours until his healing kicked in.

With a sigh of relief the teen pulled his backpack off of his shoulders and rooted around the bag for a piece of notebook paper and a pen.
He signed the note with a quick doodle of a spider and carefully stuck the piece of paper onto the white cocoon. "Well, this was fun, thanks for the workout, Elmer. Better luck next time."

With a wave he turned and thwipped away, aiming for the same large tree he had tried to use during the battle. He glanced morosely at the slightly damaged stage set. So much for definitely talking to the actress today. He would probably never meet her again, especially since he was about to be grounded forever for not using the watch. Speaking of, he needed think of some kind of excuse for why he was still there and get changed into normal clothes now.

He scanned the area for a private place to hide and change. Oh, that would work.

With a fluid movement he dropped down through the skylight of the partially smashed trailer behind the stage.

Mary Jane sat slumped on the floor of the trailer, half covered by costumes as she idly played with some of the props. She wished again that she hadn’t left her phone on the bus. Even if people couldn’t have rescued her right away, she could’ve found some sort of social media account that was live streaming the fight so she would at least know when it was over. Sure it hadn’t been long since she’d gotten trapped, but there was no way to know how long this was going to take. She’d heard of Spider-Man fights that took 2 minutes and fights that took hours, and the hunter dude looked tough, who knew if the hero would even win. He could-

She was drawn out of her thoughts by a quiet thump and a light shudder of the unstable trailer. M.J. looked up and was met with the sight of Spider-Man standing less than five feet away. She gaped, but before she could say anything the hero reached up and with one smooth motion pulled off his mask.

It was Cute-Nerd!

She screamed. He screamed, whirling around on her with huge brown eyes.

“Y-you’re Spider-Man!” She shrieked. The hero was frantically shaking his head., quickly shedding the revealing uniform as though it would make her forget that she ever saw it.

“No, no, no I’m not. Not Spider-Man, no.”

“Y- you’re naked.” She stammered, as Cute-Nerd held out his hands placatingly, left only in his boxers as the costume pooled at his feet.

The boy yelped, his face so red that it put his uniform’s bright colors to shame. He scrambled to pull up his costume to cover himself, then seemed to realize that it wasn’t helping the whole ‘I’m not Spider-Man’ bit. He dropped the suit then jumped behind the clothing rack, before belatedly realizing that he’d left his backpack behind. Instinctively he popped around the rack, fingers curled in a familiar pose and wrists pointing at the backpack. Suddenly he froze and glanced guiltily at Mary Jane, who was staring at his hand with undisguised curiosity and interest.

“Uh, could you uh, hand me my….” Peter trailed off as Many Jane’s expression turned flatly unimpressed. The hero sighed, deciding to give up. At this point there was no use denying it. He shot out a stream of webbing and nabbed the bag, rooting through it for his normal clothes.
“Cool.” Mary Jane muttered.

“Ok, so, I know that I’m not going to convince you that I’m not… you know…”

“Spider-Man.” The girl supplied helpfully, and Peter winced.

“Uh, yeah. But, look, Mary Jane I need your word that-”

“How do you know my name?”

Peter felt himself flush deeply. “It was in-the-the pamphlet thing!” He stuttered, tongue-tied.

“You memorized my name from the program?” She smiled broadly at the embarrassed boy, pleased to know that her flirting had been reciprocal. “That’s adorable.”

“What? No!” Her smile dropped. “I-I mean yes, If-if that’s not creepy. Or I guess I did even if it is creepy, but it wasn’t… I mean I just wanted-not that I expected… I mean…” The boy groaned, sliding to the ground and hiding his face in one hand as he stuffed his uniform in his backpack with the other. “This conversation literally could not be going any worse.”

“I don’t know,” M.J. said slyly, fighting against the urge to go around the clothing rack until she knew he was fully dressed. “I just found out that the cute guy whose been eye-flirting with me at all of my performances actually had a good reason for ditching early, so I’ve been enjoying it. The hero thing is kinda a bonus too.”

“You think I’m cute?” Peter asked, sounding shy, and M.J’s smile went from sly to fond. This boy…

However, before she could reply there was a loud crunch and light streamed into the trailer as someone forced the crumpled door open. Peter looked up to see Happy standing in the doorway, using some kind of high-tec Stark Jaws of Life to force the door open. The man was looking at Peter with a mix of relief and rage. “What are you doing in here, kid? Did you somehow miss the super-villain fight 20 yard away? You know you’re supposed to use the watch the instant something like this happens. Do you know what would happen if you got hurt, Peter?”

“Your name’s Peter?” M.J. chirped, perking up despite the strangers tirade. Happy, who’d only had eyes for Peter, jumped at the unexpected voice, and in less than an instant he had his weapon in hand and pointed at the speaker.

M.J. froze and Peter tensed, but Happy relaxed almost immediately when he saw that there was no threat. “Oh.”

He lowered his gun, then blinked as his brain fully caught up with the fact that the other person in the trailer was a young girl. “Oh.”

The man’s eyes roved over the two teens, lingering on Peter’s hair (sticking out haphazardly from pulling off the mask) and clothes (rumpled from their time in the backpack), and on Mary Jane’s lipstick (smared from when she had thrown up an arm to ward off the makeup studded air). “Ooohhhhhhh.” He said knowingly, smirking at the Peter and sending the teen a wink.

Peter blinked, then fully took stock of both himself and Mary Jane. He turned bright red and began stuttering “Ah, n-no it’s not what it- I mean it’s not…” He trailed off when he realized that he had no other alternative to explain the situation other than a) admitting to being Spider-Man, or b) letting Happy think he’d spent a super-villain attack making out with an actress. This was not good. “Please don’t tell Tony. Or Steve, or anyone.”
“Oh kid, don’t worry. I won’t say a word. You however, are going to tell the whole team when we get back.”

She wasn’t sure what it was, but at some point between the man with a gun busting in, to the names Tony and Steve, to the word ‘team’, to the vague sense of familiarity she’d always felt around Peter, all of the pieces slotted into space.

“Oh my gosh, you’re the Avenger’s Orphan!” She frowned as even more pieces fell into place. “Wait, is that why they adopted you? Because you’re-”

“Lunch!” Peter suddenly interrupted, eyes frantic as he scrambled for a way to keep the girl from finishing the sentence. “Tomorrow. Anywhere you want, my treat. Just uh, stop talking now so that we can talk more about it then. Without, uh, Happy being here.”

M.J.’s eyes narrowed suspiciously, but there was no way she was walking away now, not when something was this interesting. “Okay… fine.12:30, meet you in front of Rollio?” She nodded in the direction of the pizza place not far from the park.

“Yes, yes that sounds great. I will be there, on time, and we can meet there and talk then so no need to talk about anything more now. I will see you. Tomorrow. There. Ok, I gotta go, there are a lot of superheroes that want to yell at me.”

He grabbed Happy’s hand and physically drug him away from the supremely-amused looking girl. The bodyguard smirked. “Girl didn’t even know who you are, maybe Sam was right and you have been spending too much time with Tony.” Suddenly he laughed. “Oh man kid, I cannot wait to see you tell the Avengers about this. I don’t think I’ve ever been so glad that Friday records this stuff.”

Peter groaned. He almost wondered if it would be less embarrassing to just admit to being Spider-Man.
As weird as it may sound, sometimes Peter could almost forget that he was living with a team of superheroes that had saved the world and kicked evil butt dozens of times. Not forget completely. Intellectually, he was always aware of it. It was hard to forget when Natasha sparred with him, or when he was working with Tony in the labs, or listening with rapt attention to the true stories behind what the media revealed about supervillain attacks. Their Avenger-ness was staring him in the face every moment he looked out the window of his room, framed by the giant ‘A’ that declared who they were, every time he saw their faces on action figures and T-shirts, every time he went out hidden by a ball cap and sunglasses. He always knew it intellectually, but the human mind can sometimes turn the most spectacular of instances into regular life. The mind can sometimes normalize the most bizarre situations.

He was bit by a spider and got super powers? Ok, this was his life now.

He was living with the most powerful people in the world? Well at least the dinner conversations are interesting.

So, while he always knew that Natasha was Black Widow and Steve was Captain America, et cetera, sometimes he didn’t really realize it.

Which is why it was so shocking to walk into the tower and not be met with the group of kind-hearted adults who he’d lived with day-by-day, but instead to come face to face with the Avengers.

They weren’t in uniform. There was no sight of the Ironman or War Machine suits or Falcon’s wings. Steve was in loose sweatpants and a T-shirt, and even Vision was still in his ‘civilian’ clothes. There was nothing visually to set the moment apart from any other day, but the atmosphere was charged with an energy that sent his Spidey-sense buzzing, even around those he trusted and loved as his instincts acknowledged the raw power held within those in the room.

The team stood in a loose semi-circle within the main room, every eye locked onto the elevator from the instant the doors slid slowly open. Black Widow stood at one end, her hands on her hips as though resting on holders, and her stance ready and combative. Scarlet Witch stood beside the spy, constantly flexing her hands and rotating her shoulders as though longing to use her powers. Beside her stood Falcon, his arms held in loose fists at his sides, a ready stance bourn from wearing the heavy winged harness strapped to his back. His expression is stern, more intense than Peter had ever seen before. Captain America stood in the center, with his feet shoulder width apart and his arms crossed over his chest in a way that seemed to highlight the bulging muscles along his arms. His hands flexed as Peter entered, as though searching for his shield and his expression showed not disappointment, but a stern fury. Tony stood beside the Captain, not in his suit but Iron man all the same, his jaw clenched with steel in his eyes. War Machine was next to Tony, as usual, but where any other day the man would likely have a calming hand on the billionaire’s shoulder, not the man stood with his arms crossed and lips pursed. Vision stood at the end of this side of the semi-circle, floating a few feet off the ground with his arms held loosely at his side. The jewel that sat at the man’s forehead seemed to be shining brighter than usual.

The sight was imposing, dangerous, and Peter couldn’t help the shiver that flowed through him as he stepped into the room. He couldn’t figure out how any villains who came face to face with the Avengers didn’t just run home the instant they saw this sight. Peter was reasonably sure they liked...
him and he just wanted to go and hide under his bed.

“Um, hi.” He says meekly.

“Hi?” Ironman says. “Hi? That’s what you’re going with, really?”

Peter gulped and held up his hands as though in surrender. “I’m sorry, I messed up. I know—”

Stark’s eyes caught on the watch sitting on the teen’s wrist. “Oh, so you still have that. That’s wonderful to know, especially when I traced the GPS and got the lovely surprise of seeing you in the middle of a supervillain attack!”

“T-Tony, I—”

“So what gives, Peter? I know it works, I created it. I was halfway in my suit heading over when Happy called.” This wasn’t the first time Ironman went on a rant like this, he was prone to angry tirades, but normally one of the others would have stepped in to calm the man long ago. Now however, the team was behind the hero in solidarity, and Peter knew he messed up big time.

Captain America shook his head, his eyes still steely. “I’m disappointed in you Peter. We agreed before we adopted you that you would follow protocols if you were ever in danger. You swore to us that you would use the watch the instant something went wrong. We trusted you with your safety when we let you go out alone. We considered that a very important responsibility and you ignored it and allowed yourself to be put in danger.”

War Machine nodded behind him. “We trusted you to hit the button. You swore up and down that you would listen to our safety protocols. So when there was danger and you were still there… we didn’t know what to think, kid.”

“You scared us.” Scarlet Witch said, her voice hard and stern, but it trembled just a little and Peter completely deflated. He was ready for anger, and lecturing and fury. He got it, but with that last admission he felt only guilt. Even Happy shifted uncomfortably behind him, his earlier mirth a thing long past.

“I’m sorry.” He says softly, sincerely. “I-I’m really sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you guys.” His voice had grown hoarse, choked in emotion and guilt. Like magic, the Avenger’s were gone and his family was back. Tony was roughly rubbing at his face and moving towards the bar in the corner. Steve rubbed his hands over his face roughly.

Sam’s position didn’t change, but his face softened considerably. “What were you thinking, Peter?” He asked, but the words were beseeching, not accusing. “Why didn’t you use the watch? We need to know.”

Peter swallowed thickly. He’d had the long trip over to think of a viable excuse, at least when he wasn’t being mercilessly teased by Happy. “I just… Kraven was so focused on Spider-Man and I didn’t think… I wasn’t really in any personal danger, not more so than anyone else at least. I-I guess I just figured that… if I could run away and be safe without using the watch then it would be better to wait until I was really in danger, like keep it as an element of disguise and not let the villains or whoever start planning ways to try to get around it or something, you know? I’m sorry, I guess I was so used to being in the thick of things to take pictures and stuff that I didn’t really think about you guys knowing and freaking… er, and getting worried. I’m sorry.”

Tony downed the drink that he’d been pouring, and when Sam nodded at him he poured three more. “What about you Cap?” He asked, “I’ve got the Asgardian stuff?” He didn’t bother asking the
others. Nat rarely drank, she didn’t like to be at anything but 100% awareness. Wanda didn’t drink frequently either, though Tony wasn’t sure if that was due to her powers, her age, or just her personality. He knew her well enough to know that an offer now wouldn’t be accepted or appreciated. And Vision… was Vision. Steve looked interested once Tony mentioned the Asgardian Ale, but ultimately shook his head as well. Coming back to the group, Tony handed one of the glasses to Sam and the another to Rhodes, who took it one

Rhodey pinched the bridge of his nose. “Alright kid, okay. That’s not bad thinking, but why didn’t you get further away so that we could see that you weren’t in the thick of things? Or, I don’t know, call us.”

At this question Happy let out a little snicker, and Peter felt himself blush so deeply that he almost matched the suit hiding in his backpack. The blush stretching across Peter’s face was almost like a ball being held up in front of a group of dogs, each member of the Avengers team shot to attention. Even Natasha, who had spent the entire exchange completely expressionless, now leaned forward in interest.

“Well this looks interesting,” Wanda said, her voice sly and her expression gleeful.

“I-it, no it was just, uh,” He glanced at Happy but the man was simply grinning at him, offering absolutely no help. Peter coughed awkwardly. “Well I was running, uh, behind the stage thing that they set up for Shakespeare in the park, and there was, uh, there was this girl.”

Wanda practically squealed, her eyes alight with warmth and mirth, and Tony actually let out an Oooooooohhh. Like a elementary school student hearing about their friends crush. Steve had a proud, that’s-my-boy type smile stretching across his face. Sam rolled his eyes at the other’s reactions, but he was smiling too. Vision had a soft smile as well, and his eyes lit with interest. Rhodes looked surprised, as though that was not what he was expecting. He seemed to be the only one still thinking about how Peter hadn’t called to tell them he was safe and a flash of disapproval crossed his face, but as he glanced around his excited teammates he couldn’t stop a smile as well. Peter had no doubt that they would return to the lecture at some point, but maybe it wouldn’t be so bad after their tempers cooled.

Natasha grin had a mischievous tint to it as she stepped forward to drag Peter to the large couch taking up a portion of the room. “I believe a debriefing is in order.” She proclaimed as Happy chortled behind them.

Wanda immediately sat next to him. “I agree.”

The rest of the team shortly followed, amused.

“It- uh- it’s not that big a deal!” He squeaked, somehow going even redder than before.

“Spill, Parker.” Tony said as he dropped onto the couch, his grin gleeful. “Just imagine you’re in some kind of teen drama chick flick.”

“Um, I don’t think I’ve ever seen one of those? Nor do I want to.”

Tony snorted, “Your loss.” Though it was clear he was joking.

“Why don’t you simply start at the beginning, Peter.” Vision suggested, looking bemusedly at the other Avengers, as though their strong reaction were a curiosity.

“W-well she’s one of the actresses, for the-the high school Shakespeare in the Park thing? She played the lead.” He couldn’t help the fond pride that seeped into his words.
“Aww.” Sam cooed, half genuine and half teasing.

“Wait,” Tony interrupted. “Is that why you’ve gone to the park every single day since you started going out alone.”

“I-I-I mean…”

“Oh honey, no.” Natasha said, the word ‘honey’ dripping with sarcasm.

“No no! She- she winked at me, the first day I went. And-and she kept making eye contact with me on stage and smiling at me and…” This time several of the Avengers ‘awwed’.

Rhodey grinned at the teen. “This whole time we thought you were feeding ducks and you’ve been meeting up with an actress. Maybe you have been spending too much time with Tony.”

Peter shifted uncomfortably. “Well meeting may be… a little generous. I was always, uh, got too nervous and left before the play ended because I didn’t know what to say to her.”

Steve nodded commiseratingly. “I’ve been there.” Peter grinned. For a current national heart throb, Steve had a surprising number of bad date stories from before the serum. Compared to him, Peter had game.

Tony shook his head. “I have not. But, continue.”

“Well, so, today was the last day, you know, so I was like ‘I have to do this now, no matter what’, but then the crazy guy popped out, and he started yelling about Spider-Man so I decided not to use the watch because- you already know.” He skipped over that part, not wanting to give them time to dwell on it. “So I was running away, but then I saw her run into the prop trailer, and I just… followed her.”

“Oohhhoooh.” Tony said suggestively.

“Its- we didn’t- we just talked. That’s all.”

“Uh huh.” Happy said dryly. “You talked so much that by the time I got there she didn’t even know your name.”

“Peter!” Steve exclaimed, looking mock scandalized.

“I-it just didn’t come up! Mary Jane and I-”

“Mary Jane, huh?” Happy suddenly interrupted. “So tell me kid, how did her name come up on conversation and not yours?”

“She didn’t tell me her name I knew it from the program!” Peter defended himself, and Tony burst out laughing.

“Please tell me you didn’t tell her that you had memorized her name.”

Peter flushed.

The team burst out laughing.

“Oh no, oh no kid.” Rhodes said breathlessly.

“You poor hopeless…” Same muttered.
“Even I know that’s bad.” Steve laughed.

“She thought it was adorable!” The teen squeaked, his voice breaking. The team only laughed harder.

Wanda shook with the force of her laughter. “That may be either the best thing I’ve ever heard, or the worst.”

Peter moaned. “I know! It was bad, I know! But… but I think she liked me anyway.” He said the last bit softly, a small smile playing at his lips.

“You really are adorable.” Natasha said, rolling her eyes as though the very notion of adorableness was ridiculous.

“Mary Jane, eh?” Tony asked, “F.R.I.D.A.Y.?”

“Already on it, Boss. I have found the social media of a Mary Jane, M.J., Watson involved in the New York Junior Shakespeare Troupe.”

Suddenly the windows across from the couch were monitors covered with an image of a smiling redhead in a flowing period dress. Peter felt his mouth dry. “That’s her.”

The team made approving noises, proclaiming that she was pretty or seemed nice. Tony unashamedly scrolled through her social media accounts in the kind of basic internet stalking common to nearly every high schooler or college student with a crush. Peter was worried at first that the genius would go farther, attempt to sneak into private information, but he stopped once the social media accounts were full.

“So Peter,” Sam said, “Do we need to give you ‘The Talk’?”

“NO!” Peter exclaimed, terrified to even consider what the Avenger version of ‘The Talk’ might entail. Especially if they let Tony stick around. “Nope, I am good, so good. My Uncle gave me ‘The Talk’ a long time ago. No, I do not need any version of that from you guys. Please no.”

“Well gee Peter, you almost make a guy think you don’t want to have this conversation with us.” Sam said dryly.

“That is accurate.” Peter replied vehemently, and Wanda laughed.

Tony wiped off a fake tear. “I’m just so proud, a girlfriend already. They grow up so fast.” He gave a loud false sniffle.

“I have dated before. I had a girlfriend even!” He proclaimed petulantly, before being hit with a surge of grief. Mary Jane was the first girl he’d been interested in since Gwen. He knew that she would want him to date again, she would probably even like Mary Jane if she was half as cool as that one conversation and her social media made her seem, but it still caused a sharp pain in his chest to be reminded of her. The rest of the team seemed to sense his mood and the group sombered somewhat. “Not-not that Mary Jane is my girlfriend. We only had the one conversation.”

“Conversation, right.” Happy snorted, and the mood broke somewhat.

“Speaking of, Peter.” Steve said, his expression suddenly stern and the teen shrunk somewhat, knowing that he hadn’t completely gotten away with sticking around when Kraven was attacking. “Mary Jane seems very nice, but meeting a pretty girl is not an acceptable excuse for ignoring protocol.”
“No matter what Tony says.” Rhodey said with a smirk.

“So, so what does that mean?” Peter asked. The team shared a glance, and Peter wondered if it was hard coming up with punishments when there were eight of them, and Pepper wasn’t even there. However, as leader of the team Steve took point.

“You’re grounded. One month, though you could get some time off for good behavior since you had some good reasoning. You need to call next time though, ok.”

“I will.” Peter promised, though he rubbed at his face nervously. “What does grounding entail?”

“No going out alone.” Steve replied immediately. Peter opened his mouth to protest, but Sam spoke up before he could.

“Jogging every morning.”

“Twice a day training,” Natasha added.

“I believe chores are typically involved.” Vision offered.

“I have some not-so-fun stuff around the lab you can do.” Tony said.

Neither Wanda nor Rhodes had anything to add, and they all looked at Peter expectantly. “Can-can this start tomorrow? Please? I promised Mary Jane that I would meet her for lunch. I don’t have her phone number yet so I couldn’t cancel. Please? Just this one last thing and I promise I-I will not complain about anything else.” He had to talk to her, had to convince her to keep his secret somehow. If she ended up trying to find him and let it slip that he was Spider-Man… He just needed to meet with her.

The team shared another look around, and Peter cast Steve the best, most pitiful puppy dog eyes he could manage without looking ridiculous. “Fine.” The leader replied, you can go and have lunch with her, but you come back as soon as it’s over.”

Peter jumped up and gave the man a hug. “Thank you thank you thank you.”

Steve stiffened at first. No one on the team was especially tactile so the movement took him by surprise, but then he melted, his gaze softening to an expression of immense fondness as he ruffled the boys hair. “Of course kid.”

Pepper smiled softly as she exited the elevator, seeing Tony in the exact spot she’d expected. They’d gone to sleep together, but when she woke up and the other half of the bed was empty, she knew she’d find him in the lab. He was surrounded with holograms and monitors displaying rows of text and pictures of a pretty teenager.

“Is that Peter’s Mary Jane?” She asked, and Tony didn’t even flinch. They’d been in these same positions too often for him to pretend to be surprised when she followed him into the labs at some ungodly hour.

“Yeah.” The man said with a brusque nod. “I’m just… you know, checking.”

“Mmmhh-hmm.” The woman smiled, leaning down to wrap her arms around his shoulders in a loose hug. “I’m surprised you lasted this long.”
Tony shrugged, his eyes never leaving the screen, though Pepper couldn’t tell if he was attempting to hide his emotions or if he was really that focused. “I didn’t want to do it around the kid. He shouldn’t have to think about stuff like wondering if his girlfriend is a villain in disguise trying to get information on the Avengers. Or a gold digger. He’s 15. He should be able to just… have a crush.”

Pepper hummed in agreement again. Tony wore fatherhood better than anyone would have expected. She kissed him on the cheek. “You’re a good man, Tony Stark.”

The man didn’t reply to that. His face tightened a bit, but his posture loosened at the words, as though they relaxed and stressed him simultaneously.

“Did you find anything?” She asked.

“Nope. Girl’s clean, kid choose good.” He shut down the program and rose to his feet.

“Coming back to bed then?”

Tony hummed. He hadn’t done a complete run through of F.R.I.D.A.Y.’s system in a while, not since the attack in the tower, so it was about due. Though honestly, the desire to check was more a by product of his paranoia following everything with Ultron than any belief that there was an actual threat. So he could put it off. Again. Peter was planning on joining him in the lab to start on the chores after his meeting with Mary Jane, he should be awake for that. With a final sigh the man closed down the programs, saving the information but storing it in such a way that Peter shouldn’t be able to find it.

“Yeah, let’s go.”

While the Avengers and their child slept soundly in their tower, across the city Kraven paced in his cage, seething with fury. He growled and snarled at the guards, sounding more animal than man in his rage. This was not how the hunt went. He was not the one who ended up in a cage.

The guards paid him no mind. As per protocol, supervillains spent even the time before their bail trial in the specially designed ‘enhanced persons’ section of the prison, so the guards here were used to a litany of odd and disturbing behaviors from their charges. This only made Kraven more incensed. In the nearly empty, sterile cell he had no way to act on his anger, and so he could only sit and stew in his fury. He paced throughout the night, never ceasing, never slowing as the others caged in the criminal menagerie slept on.

Like a caged fighting dog, by the time his cell door opens he is jumping at the bars, ready to tear into anyone who has the misfortune of catching his eye. At the moment, his fury is centered on the guard, those who dared to keep him confined. He’s running at a guard the instant the cage door opens, a roar in his mouth, but there are barriers preventing that exact type of attack and he is unable to get within 20 feet of the men. The guard he’d been targeting even dared to roll his eyes at the man’s attack.

“Yeah yeah, I know I know. I will rue this day forever, how dare I try to keep the mighty whatever-your-name-is locked up, you will have your revenge, bla bla bla. Keep walking, if you want your breakfast.”

Kraven snarls again, and smacks a supernaturally strong hand against the wall, but turns to stalk away. He is not a beast, he is a hunter. He knows how to play the long haul, to wait and plan so that the hunt is even better when his prey falls into his trap. He is the predator here, he can wait.
Even with this in mind, the man’s temper boils internally, and he can’t help but slam the tray of slop down onto the table as he drops into a seat. Almost immediately someone slid into the seat across from him.

“Beat it.” He growled out. Stabbing at the yellow-ish mush that might be eggs with his fork and longing for his hunting knife.

“I would, but I believe I have something that may interest you. You’re Kraven The Hunter, right? The man who attempted to hunt Spider-Man but ended up in the same cage as all of us.”

The hunter looked up, eyed the man sitting across from him. The man was portly, with thick glasses and a truly unfortunate haircut. Kraven had spent hours studying his prey’s fighting and hunting techniques. He’d spent days reviewing the hero’s battles, but it still took him several moments to place the man sitting across from him as Otto Octavius, Doctor Octopus. It was strange, Kraven mused to himself as he surveyed the room and spotted other villains he’d come across in his research, they seemed so different once their powers were stripped away and they were all forced into the same orange jumpsuits. Like a peacock becoming a sparrow after molting season.

In response to the man’s question he simply grunted. He didn’t enjoy being reminded of his failure, but he was curious why this pathetic man would dare risk the hunter’s ire.

Otto grinned, his smile oily and insincere. “We saw the fight on the news. You have many… unique skills, skills that we believe may be useful in squashing that annoying insect for once and for all.”

Now that got Kraven’s attention. He didn’t often enjoy hunting in packs, but with a prey such as this perhaps… His eyes narrowed. “Who is we?”

Immediately, as though waiting for that cue, the seats at his mostly empty table were filled and trays covered the table. Kraven’s eyes roved over the new men, hesitantly identifying them from his studies. Electro sat next to him, nearly completely covered in a thin rubber suit meant to keep him from using his electricity. Shocker sat at the farthest spot away from the other electricity based villain, shooting the man a glower. Vulture sat beside the cephalopod-themed villain, his eyes glinting with intelligence and approval as he sized up the Hunter. Finally, next to Shocker was the Sandman, already digging into his meal without sparing the other men a glance.

Vulture smirked and answered for Otto. “We’re just a group of concerned individuals who are tired of the bug meddling in our business. We have a plan for getting out of this place to make that happen. You in?”

The hunter glanced around the group, considering. They seemed formidable. This pride might be disorganized, but none of them were likely to contest his desire for a trophy to commemorate the hunt. However, he knew these types. Lions that shook their manes as if that meant something, when they couldn’t even bring down an antelope. For all of their talk, they were still behind bars. “If your plan is so great, why are you sitting around here now?”

This time Octavius replied again, with a grin that looked positively sinister. “Until now we’ve only had 5 members. For this plan to work, we need 6.”

Chapter End Notes

A note on the Sinister 6!
I did a lot of research trying to figure out who should be on the Sinister 6 because apparently it changes every time someone sneezes. Seriously, there have been a LOT. I ended up going with some of the characters that are on it pretty frequently such as Doc Ock, Sandman, and Vulture, and characters that I had mentioned before like Kraven, Shocker, and Electro. All of these characters have been a part of the 6 several times, but I don't know if this exact configuration ever happened.
That is all, thank you!
Chapter 20

I'm BACK!! So, after Infinity Wars, finals, and finally reading a book series that I became completely obsessed with (Stormligh Archive fans what's up??!!) I have finally managed to write the chapter.

I'm Graduated from college now though!! Woop Woop!!!! I've got a grown up job starting in August, and a summer of studying for the CPA exam. And writing this fic!!

So, I hope you enjoy!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Peter’s palms felt sweaty as he walked down the city streets towards the restaurant he was meeting Mary Jane at. He wasn’t sure why he was so nervous. Despite the Avenger’s teasing, he knew he shouldn’t be thinking about a girlfriend. He’d forgotten somehow when they’d eyed each other during the plays and when they spoke in the trailer, but the reminder of Gwen the night before had been like a bucket of ice water thrown into his face.

Gwen was dead, and she died because of Spider-Man. Because of him. Just thinking about it, thinking about how much potential her life had, how much of a *future* she’d had, all to be destroyed because of him… He felt his hands shaking at the thought of it, grief welling up in his throat.

Peter shook his head forcefully, as though that would dispel the heart wrenching thoughts. He wiped his sweat-soaked palms on the legs of his pants as he forced his mind away. It didn’t really help- the wiping the hands part. The pants were some kind of fancy business-y material rather than his typical jeans.

He wasn’t exactly happy about it, but when you wake up to a team of superheroes arguing about what you should wear for a date that isn’t even really a date, you don’t complain. Tony of course wanted something extravagant. He would have had Peter going to the pizza parlor in a three piece suit if he had his way. Sam maintained that he shouldn’t look desperate if it wasn’t officially a date, and was offering his usual nerdy pun T-shirts. Natasha’s idea of an ideal date outfit mostly comprised of how many pockets she could sneak weapons into “just in case”. Rhodey didn’t really offer an opinion on what he should wear, he was mostly trying to convince Tony that “No, really, Peter does not need to wear a tuxedo on a first date to a pizza parlor”. Steve didn’t offer an opinion either, though he looked like he was taking notes on practically everything that was being said. Sam just laughed and laughed and laughed. Vision and Wanda said surprisingly little, though they shot each other small, happy glances every once in a while that Peter was sure were silent promises to never tell the rest of the team if they ever went on the date they both so clearly wanted.

Thank goodness for Pepper, she was the real MVP. In the midst of all the chaos she somehow managed to sneak Peter out of the room and press a new outfit into his hands while they were still arguing. It was a little more formal than he was used to, with the fancy non-denim pants, but it was probably as much of a happy medium as he was going to get, with a nice button up and slacks. By the time he’d changed and come out of the bathroom the team had congregated and Tony was pouting, but no one argued at least.
The whole thing kind of reminded him of the fiasco with the Avengers themed clothing, but even that minor prank war reaped unexpected benefits. It seemed to actually help hide his identity, oddly enough. The Avenger's Orphan never stepped out of the tower without wearing at least 3 different pieces of Avengers-themed gear. He had seen countless social media posts that started with 'I saw the brown hair and the Avengers shirt and…' Half the time those posts were combined with pictures of people who weren't even him and the other half of the time they then went on and on about seeing the Avengers without mentioning him again.

Still, if nothing else it provided yet another layer of difference between the Peter Parker in the news, and the one that walked the streets with hunched shoulders, timid steps, and a baseball cap and sunglasses. For that he was grateful. ...and a little insulted. Was he really that unrememberable?

He’d been musing about it, in deep thought, when Tony had popped up out of nowhere and sprayed him with something, making him cough as his surprised gasp drew the liquid into his mouth.

“What is that?” He’d asked, hacking.

“Royal Mayfair by the House of Creed.” The man answered, then sighed when Peter just stared at him blankly. “Cologne, kid. Come on, it’s the first date that doesn’t involve hiding from a supervillain. You have to put in a little effort here.”

So all in all, he was pretty grateful to get out of it in the outfit that he did, even if it didn’t allow for the Spider-Man suit to be worn under it. He wouldn’t go out today anyway. That would be beyond stupid, even without the babysitter that pricked at his spidey-sense.

After the Avengenger had finally agreed on his outfit, there had come the arduous task of promising yet again that he would actually use his watch if something happened, or at the very least call them. That transitioned into Peter's own after-school-special Captain America lecture about safety and keeping them informed that reminded Peter of the cheesy videos they made him watch back in High School. Then they announced that they were sending Natasha to tail him. Peter had sputtered, his eyes blown wide. This was supposed to be his chance to explain that the Avengers didn't know about him being Spider-Man. How was he supposed to do that with an Avenger there? That would kind of defeat the purpose. "I-I don't need a chaperone! W-we're just going to get lunch and talk!"

But Sam was already shaking his head. "This isn't about you going on a date, Pete. It's about us needing to know that you're safe."

"Don't think of it as a chaperone," Tony said sardonically, "Think of her as a babysitter."

Peter squawked. "I'm 15, not 5!"

Natasha rolled her eyes, but stepped forward until she caught the teen's gaze. "Don't worry Peter, I won't infringe on your privacy. I have no desire to listen to a pair of flirting teenagers. You won't even know I'm there."

Peter hesitated, but he knew this was a battle he couldn't win, not with the previous day's events still so strong in everyone's minds.

"Fine." He grumbled.

"You will be texting us updates though, right?" Wanda asked Natasha, humor and mischievousness in her gaze.

"What? No!" Peter exclaimed.
"Of course."

So now, with a babysitter on his back and the pizza parlor just a few blocks away, Peter couldn’t manage to get his hands to quit sweating. It seemed no matter how often he wiped them off, they were wet again the next instant. Then his hands would start sticking to his pants, (which he’d thought he’d gotten a handle on years ago) and he had to pay attention and make sure he didn’t accidentally rip them off or anything.

Mary Jane did not need to see his underwear. ...again.

Speaking of sticky, the boy stopped at a storefront with a particularly mirrored window and ruffled his hair to free it from gelled the awkward-looking slicked back style Wanda had insisted on. Then he pulled the shirt out from where it was tucked into his pants and unbuttoned it so that the dark button up contrasted smartly against his undershirt. When it was done he studied himself critically in the window. He still looked nicer than usual, but he felt more like himself, more comfortable. This conversation was going to be uncomfortable enough, he didn't need his clothes adding to it. He really hoped that the sweat marks on his pants from where he wiped off his hands wasn’t as noticeable as he thought it was. Peter jumped when his phone vibrated in his pocket. It was a text from Natasha. Quit wiping your hands on your nice pants. This date was not going to go well. No, not a date, he couldn’t do a date. Not another Gwen. This was just a meeting of potential friends. A social interaction.

This social interaction was not going to go well.

Peter took a deep breath. He was a block away from the restaurant, when he turned this next corner it would be in sight. It was a minute or two before they were supposed to meet, but there was a very good chance that she would already be there.

One more breath, then he turned the corner and-there she was. She was leaning against a light pole next to the door to the restaurant, her legs seeming a mile long in skinny jeans and her coppery red hair shining in the sunlight. A slight smile played at her lips as she people watched, her eyes constantly roaming the busy New York streets. It was the first time Peter had seen her out of costume, and somehow seeing her in normal clothes made her seem more real, more here and now.

She was gorgeous. But the smile she cast his way when she noticed him was even more beautiful.

“Peter, hi!” She called, and Peter felt a blush begin to spread through his cheeks.

“Hey, Mary Jane.”

The redhead rolled her eyes. “Call me M.J.”

“M.J.” He confirmed, then grinned. “You look so different when you’re not dressed like you're in the 1600s.” Wait, that sounded bad.

“I hope that was an awkward way of complimenting my outfit.” Peter nodded, too mortified to reply, but M.J. just laughed and the two of them entered the restaurant. They got the pizza to go. It was nice out and they were right next to central park, where they lightly bickered about the food, Peter poking fun at the truly bizarre pizza*.

Mary Jane rolled her eyes before grabbing a piece, carefully rolling the uber thin crust pizza over the vegetables. “My friend had been going on and on about this place for weeks. I wasn’t going to try it, but when a billionaire's son owes you a favor…” She shrugged, but her eyes grew sharp, the
comment obviously an invitation for Peter to begin talking about more serious matters.

“Uh, right. I’m still not really, uh, used to that.” There was a moment of silence, MJ waiting for the teen to continue and Peter picking at his food, still loathe to have the conversation. Peter wracked his brain, but he couldn’t think of how to begin explaining the mess of a situation he was in.

“I… I don’t really know how to start.” He admits, and M.J. snorts, though it seems more fond then mocking.

“Really, after seeing all of your press conferences I would never believe you get awkward when you have to talk.” The words are sarcastic and Peter groaned.

“You saw the press conferences? Those are horrible. Pepper doesn’t let me use the speech writers anymore, she says people love my ‘authenticity’. I think they’re just getting worse and worse.”

“I may have googled you last night.” She admits. “Both… yous. It was interesting, to say the least.”

“Tony may have pulled up your facebook page.” Peter offers in turn.

“Wow, that’s embarrassing. At least I don’t have meme pages dedicated to me.”

“Ugh, don’t even mention those. Spider-Man memes are the worst. And it’s worse because I actually took half the popular pictures. I am embarrassing myself all over the internet.”

Her laugh was bright, bell-like. “Yeah, the Spider-Man memes are pretty brutal, I like the Avengers Orphan ones though.”

Peter paled. “Please tell me you’re joking and those don’t actually exist.”

“They do, cross my heart.” She laughed at the stricken look that crossed his face before schooling her expression to something more serious. “I’ll send you some links later, but I think that’s enough deflection for now.”

Peter grimaced. “Yeah, deflecting is kinda my specialty. Most of my fights involve me just quipping at the villains until they get so annoyed they mess up.”

“Peter…” M.J. rose an eyebrow, effectively staving off that rabbit trail before it had a chance to go anywhere.

“Right! Right, sorry. I’m just… nervous. Um, I still… I’m still not really sure what… Is there anything you like, specifically want to know? Just to, you know, get me started?” There was so much he had to explain, so many things he needed to talk to her about. It was overwhelming, he didn’t know when to start. It was like when you have 5 homework assignments, 2 tests, and have to clean your room, and you don’t know what to do first so you just take a nap.

She was silent for a moment, taking a bite of her pizza. Then she took a deep, shuddery sounding breath. “Am I going to get memory-wiped or something?”

Peter spit out his drink, “What?”

“Well I don’t know! You interrupted me when the… the guy came to get you. If I’m going to get neutralized for knowing your secret identity, I’d like to know! Not that it would matter after the fact, I guess.”

“No, I uh… I actually interrupted because uh… they don’t really know.”
“They don’t know what?” she frowned.

“You know,” he lowered his voice. “That I’m… you know.”

Mary Jane blinked at him blankly for a moment before comprehension dawned. “WHAT!” she shrieked, and dozens of heads turned towards the pair.

“Shhhhh!” Peter flapped his hands ineffectively, feeling a tell-tale buzz from his pocket that was no doubt Natasha asking what he did to freak her out so much so fast.

“What do you mean they don’t know that you’re you?” She hissed, quieter, her eyes wide with shock. “They adopted you for crying out loud! I’m pretty sure that was supposed to be a hint.”

Peter groaned, dropping his head into his hands. “I know! I thought so too, but that was just a super crazy coincidence. They have no clue.”

Mary Jane was silent for a moment, seeming to need a moment to absorb the information. “I mean… are you sure they don’t know? I mean, these are the people that fight super spies and aliens and secret organizations and stuff. Are you sure they aren’t just humoring you or something?” She said the last bit softly, as if worried about offending him, but Peter just sighed, remembering how Tony and he had stayed up till 4 AM the other night trying to reverse engineer the webbing that Peter had invented in the first place.

“Trust me, I’m sure. They try and guess who Spider-Man is like once a week.”

She breathed out, looking over the park instead of at Peter as she processed. “That’s crazy. I suddenly worry for the fate of the world.” She said the last bit jokingly, though she still seemed preoccupied.

Peter laughed, “You’d worry even more if you had to share a bathroom with them.”

MJ laughed aloud then, relaxing at the joke. She shook her head when Peter offered him more pizza, then watched as he polished off the rest of the food himself. “So… why haven’t you told them? I mean, they’re the Avengers.”

“I know, I just… at first, it honestly never even occurred to me to tell them, you know? I had just been keeping the secret for so long, lying to everyone even--especially-- the people I cared about. It just… keeping it a secret was so natural. It’s not really like I decided to lie, it just didn’t cross my mind that I could tell them the truth. Not for a second. And now…”

Mary Jane leaned forward, riveted by the teen in front of her.

“Now it would just be so awkward.”

The reasoning startled a laugh out of the girl. “What?”

“No, I mean it! I’m in too deep now, what am I going to do, go down for breakfast tomorrow and be like, ‘hi everyone, by the way I’ve been lying to you this whole time. I’m actually Spider-Man. Why haven’t I told you before now? Oh, I don’t actually have a good reason, I just haven’t because I’m not good at talking’. Really?”

“What, so you’re just going to try to keep it hidden your whole life? What if you get hurt? Or you’re with them and need to ‘go spider’, or they end up actually asking Spider-Man to join the team, or the literally million other things that could and probably will go wrong?”
“I know.” Peter said miserably, cradling his face in his hands as she stared at him incredulously. “My plan right now is to, kinda, wait till I’m 18, and act like I was worried that they wouldn’t let me fight because I was too young. Which is a thing! They argue all the time about me wanting to fight, even though I’ve never even mentioned it! They almost didn’t want me to do the self defense stuff Nat’s been teaching me because it would encourage me to put myself in danger or something. They are so overprotective!” He brandished the watch on his wrist. “Ever since I got kidnapped a few months ago they’ve made me wear this watch that turns into like, Iron Man armor when I’m in danger. But not like, cool Iron Man armor that lets me fight. It just helps me run away. And even that took an hour long fight between Tony and Steve! It’s ridiculous.” Peter huffed as he finished, but he felt something in him loosen. He hadn’t had anyone to talk to about this. It was nice.

Mary Jane blinked at him. “Ok, I know that you probably just gave a lot of legitimate complaints, but I’m still just in awe that I’m talking with someone whose on a first name basis with the Avengers. That’s pretty awesome.”

“Well, you’re on a first name basis with Spider-Man, that’s kinda cool too, right?”

“You’re right! I’m awesome.” She smiled, then shook her head. “And I guess it makes sense that they’d be protective. Peter Parker probably seems so fragile compared to all their… ‘Avenger-ness’.”

“Yeah. But if I wait till I’m 18, then they can’t argue because Wanda is on the team and she’s around that age! I’m actually not entirely sure how old she is, now that I mention it.”

M.J. mouthed, ‘Awesome’, before responding. “And you think you can do this for, what, 3-ish more years? Really?”

“2 years and a couple months.” He sighed. “Honestly, I have no idea. I mean, I’ve only gone back to Spider-manning for a few weeks and all this happens. But… I’m going to try.”

Mary Jane took a deep breath. “Becoming Spider-Man, living with the Avengers… man Tiger, you really hit the jackpot.” She smiled. “I guess I might as well help. All aboard the bad-idea train.”

Peter smiled, but then his expression faltered. “M.J. I don’t… I don’t know if us doing this is actually a good idea.”

She frowned. “What do you mean? We aren’t doing anything.”

“Just us being… something. Anything. If, I mean, if you were even interested in… I don’t mean to assume, I just-” He sighed heavily. “My last girlfriend died because I was Spider-Man. She was the only one who I told about my secret identity, the only one who knew. Then a supervillain went after her, threw her off the bridge and… I wasn’t able to save her. She died because of me. Because she was interested in Peter Parker and ended up with Spider-Man.

“And-and it would be even worse for you. Even Peter Parker isn’t safe anymore, with the Avengers stuff. I mean I got kidnapped a few weeks ago and I hadn’t even started Spider-Manning again at that point. You… you would have a target on your back, no matter what. Being seen with me, either like this or as Spidey, could literally put your life at risk. I can’t let anyone else be in danger because of me.”

His words were dry in his mouth, and he couldn’t look at the girl beside him. She was silent for a moment. The bright brevity of the beginning of the meal, the fun playfulness of their previous flirting had dimmed in the suddenly solemn air that surrounded the teens.

Peter awaited her response with bated breath, but he didn’t rush the girl. He’d said his bit, given the
speech he’d mentally memorized the entire way there. Now it was up to her.

“Okay,” She finally began after several moments of terse silence. “I… Peter I’m not going to say ‘who cares, I’ll totally risk my life for you even though this is the second conversation we’ve ever had and the first one barely lasted five minutes’. I just- that would be stupid.”

Peter nodded, even as his heart dropped into his chest. This was good, this would keep her safe. It was a good thing. He just had to keep repeating it until he believed it.

“But,” She said suddenly, and his head jerked up, mind alternating between ‘but, what but’ and ‘no, there shouldn’t be a but’. “But you look like you really, really need a friend. Or someone who knows, that you can talk to about all this.” She flapped her hand, indicating the world at large.

“But-” Peter argued. She cut him off and he was almost glad, he wasn’t sure what his argument would have been.

“No buts! Peter, you honestly look like you’re going to snap any second now. You have since I first saw you, honestly.”

“That may have been influenced by you, um, smiling.”

M.J. grinned at that, and the warm feeling it caused in her chest, but barrelled on. “Living with the Avengers, lying to them pretty much all the time, not having anyone to talk to, that seems pretty stressful. I mean, does anyone know who you are?”

“Daredevil does, but he’s not really chatty. And he kinda scares me.”

“So cool. Anyway, I do know about your secret. And I like you a lot. I’m not going to say that I’m going to die to date you but… but maybe I can give you my number. We can text or snapchat or whatever. Vent, tell funny stories that you don’t want to tell the media, make fun of them for not seeing who they are, whatever. We aren’t seen together. No one knows about me but you and the Avengers. Maybe someday, we’ll meet in person again or I’ll come to the tower. In that case… well, I’m an actress. I know a thing or two about going out in disguises. This doesn’t mean we’re dating. You… had a lot of points that I’ll really need to think about. But for now… for now I’ll be a willing ear. That’s all I can offer you right now.”

“That…” That was amazing, more than he had hoped for, more than he’d even considered. He’d planned to do whatever he could to chase the girl away without risking his revealing her identity in anger or spite. But instead she was offering this friendship, this way of possibly having a friend who knew who he was but was in little danger. It was… magnificent. But how to say all that. “Thank you.” He settled on, the words coming out as earnest and heartfelt as he’d ever said them.

She smiled at him warmly, before cautioning. “Just so you know, I don’t think I’ll really be ready to meet again for a couple weeks. Not till I’d really…”

Peter shook his head. “No, I understand. It’s a lot.” He hesitated, uncertain if now was the right time to deflect but, well, it was what he did. “Besides, I’m grounded for the next month.”

M.J. gave him a look, obviously weighing whether or not she was ready to end the old conversation, but there wasn’t much more to be said. So instead she went along with the change. “Grounded? For what?”

“For not calling them when Kraven attacked.”

“But you were fighting.”
“But they can’t know that.”

She grinned. “That sucks.”

“Yeah. I give them a couple weeks before they cave though. They’re not as strict as they like people to think.” She laughed, and Peter relished in the sound for a moment before getting to his feet. “Want some ice cream? I think there’s a shop near here. I’ll tell you all about the Avengers some other time, but I’m kinda… tired of talking about myself. If, uh, if you don’t mind I’d love to hear a bit more about you.”

M.J. grinned and nodded. She began to tell a story about how she’d gotten the part in the play that he’d seen, then how she got into acting in general. Peter felt the warmth of fondness in his chest as he listened to her, marveling at the fact that he might still have a change to get to know this girl. His grin felt like it was splitting his face.

Deep within a prison’s bars, a group of six sinister men were waiting to strike. They couldn’t escape immediately, time could move slowly in prison and it may be awhile before they could get their hands on the supplies they needed. But it wouldn’t be long. Soon the bribes and threats and force would do their jobs, and they would be free.

They would be free to go after the one that dared cage them.

Red Skull cursed as yet another group of men came bearing little news. He knew what he needed to do next, he knew where the best prey lay. He just couldn’t get to them, not yet anyway. He wasn’t worried. His force may be much smaller than the HYDRA of old, but a smaller group meant that he had a much better grasp of their training. They were good soldiers, intelligent and well trained. They would find a way to get him what he wanted.

No, he wasn’t worried; merely impatient.

“Sir!” A scout ran to the clearing they had bunkered down in. “Sir, something is happening!”

Red Skull grinned. Finally.

Thaddeus Ross eyed the file given the spot of glory in the drawer of his desk. His desk was filled with state secrets and confidential information so vital, that an unqualified individual could be arrested for life for daring to glance at it. But one special file stood out, sitting on top of the other files as it had been for weeks. He hadn’t had the chance to reveal its contents yet, but the time was coming. This would require a delicate hand and precise timing. Still, it shouldn’t be long now.

“-and I’m standing there in what’s supposed to look like an 18th century dress, except it’s neon green, teal, and hot pink, but…”
Peter laughed as the girl continued her story, his hands fiddling with the phone that already had her number programmed into it.

Life… life was pretty good.

BONUS! Because you were so patient as I took so long to post.

Steve looked over as Peter groaned. The teen had come back from his date in good spirits, but now he laid out across the couch, staring at his StarkPad as though supremely disappointed.

“You ok there, kiddo?” Sam asked from where he sat reading on the other side of the couch. Most of the Avengers were in the living room, silently doing their own thing, together. Something that never happened before Peter came along.

“M.J. sent me the Avenger’s Orphan meme blogs. She was right, Peter Parker memes are way cooler than Spider-Man.” Steve moved to look over the couch, and caught sight of the picture on Peter’s tablet. It appeared to be a very sloppy edit wherein the Avenger’s faces were placed on the faces of a trio of dinosaurs, and Peter’s face was pasted onto the body of a man standing in the middle with his arms up as though controlling them.

“I’m... sorry?” Rhodey said uncertainly as Tony snorted.

“I mean, it’s not bad I guess. It’s just that I took the Spider-Man pictures, but he’s like a super-hero bad luck Brian and I’m more like the superhero most interesting man in the world. How did this happen.”

Now even Tony looked lost. Peter looked around at the blank expressions, noting that Wanda and Vision—one of whom was young enough to know memes, the other once actually connected to the internet—were both absent. That they were both absent together was another matter, but for the time being Peter just groaned and started texting M.J. “Why are the Peter Parker memes so dank!”

Tony gave the teen an odd look. “It’s like he’s trying to speak to me, I know it.”

Steve smirked. “Now you know how I feel. All. The. Time.”

Chapter End Notes

* So, two chapters ago when I was looking for a date place, I just googled 'Pizza places near Central Park'. Then I was looking into it more while writing this chapter in attempt to get an idea of what the restaurant looks like, and apparently it's this ridiculously thin crust pizza and you roll it over some arugala or bean sprouts. So it's like an inside out lettuce wrap. It sounds amazing, but it was so not what I expected when I used it in the previous chapter.
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

PLEASE READ:
So, as I’ve mentioned, I planned this story a long, long time ago. It was plotted out before Spider-Man Homecoming, Black Panther, and Infinity Wars. Therefore, this will not be completely accurate to the current marvel cinematic universe. I am trying to give nods to the movies, for example, Ned's cameo a few chapters ago, and this chapter has a lot to do with Black Panther. However, for plot reasons some things will be different. I hate to give this disclaimer because it has spoilers for future chapters, but it is necessary. So, currently the major difference between MCU and my fic is:

IN THIS FIC BUCKY IS STILL FROZEN IN WAKANDA, THEY HAVE NOT HEALED HIM OR WOKEN HIM UP.

Again, sorry for this, thank you.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Being grounded by the Avengers was every bit as anticlimactic as Peter had been expecting. More than anything it’s like he want back to the few weeks right after the first attack, only with a few more chores. But, Avenger chores were things like cleaning Natasha’s guns, or testing Tony’s repulsors for loose wires. It’s stuff that most people would pay thousands for the opportunity to do.

Steve had even had him buffing and polishing his shield. As “punishment”. Yeah, the team was a little out of touch, but Peter didn’t mind.

Texting with Mary Jane made it better too. She freaked out at the picture of him polishing the shield and responded with the appropriate amount of ‘lol’s and rolling eye emoji’s as he told stories of the Avengers related antics.

They purposely steered clear of any Spider-Man related news. Peter wanted to make sure that Tony wouldn’t be able to see them first, but he was hesitant to hack the StarkPhone. Unlike with what he did with F.R.I.D.A.Y., Tony was sure to notice when Peter kept the texts hidden, and he didn’t want the man to have reason to suspect that Peter could hack into the genius’s technology. M.J. knew that he was trying to figure something out, so until he gave the all clear they were both being very careful about what they sent to each other. For instance, she didn’t mention at all the fact that Spider-Man continued to roam the streets after Peter’s grounding, though she was insanely curious about how he was pulling it off.

Instead they spoke about movies, and about what Peter did for training. Peter told funny stories about Steve battling modern technology and Wanda and Vision’s ever increasing flirting. She called him once or twice to listen to her read lines from the next play she was trying out for and he detailed the Tony-approved inventions he was working on. It was peaceful enough, but as the days grew on, tension seemed to linger.

Mary Jane asked about his health in the most roundabout way possible the day after Spider-Man narrowly avoided getting shot by a thug in an alley. Peter had a story about how he’d actually
panted a guy with his webs half typed before he’d remembered to erase it. Each day it seemed more and more important that Peter find some way to protect his phone.

The solution came from an unexpected source. A third-world country was revealed to have been hiding access to the greatest technology, medicine, and weaponry known to earth. Wakanda, which was once thought of as simple farmland in the middle of inaccessible Africa was suddenly all over the news revealing that they had access to Vibranium, a near-magical metal with limitless potential.

The earth shattering news was delivered by the king of Wakanda, who the Avenger’s apparently knew and had actually been the black-cat costume guy from the videos that had leaked of what had happened the last year. The last part wasn’t actually revealed to the press, but that was ok. One mind-bending revelation was enough. Peter, along with most of the others on the team, soaked up every one of the newscasts. Steve had apparently visited the country once and left his friend Bucky in their care. The man answered Peter’s endless questions the best that he could, but he’d been preoccupied at the time.

Natasha was frequently attempting to call the king, though T’Challa was usually too busy to answer, until finally almost a week after the reveal Natasha had made her way into the common area and announced: “He’s on his way.”

Peter, who had been reading on the couch, looked up at the words idly. “Who’s on his way?” The teen asked, flipping the page in his book.

“T’Challa.”

Peter blinked blankly before surging up. “T’Challa, like, the king of Wakanda? Like, actual royalty T’Challa?”

“That’s the one.” She smirked.

“And he’s on his way, now, as in he will be here in the near future?”

“Congratulations,” Sam drawled, “You have a grasp on the English language.”

Natasha smirked at the man, but answered Peter. “More like in the next few minutes. When I hung up they were preparing to land on the tower’s launch pad.”

“What?” Peter jumped to his feet, running his fingers through messy hair. He glanced down to see that he was wearing a pair of jeans and a T-shirt that was simultaneously a pop culture reference and a science pun. He was even wearing socks that looked like slices of pizza. This was a sitting-at-home-chilling outfit, not a meet-one-of-the-suddenly-most-influential-leaders-in-the-world outfit. .

“I can’t meet a king like this!” His voice came out so high pitched it ended on a squeak. “I-I’m wearing this and I didn’t brush my hair after training and my room is a mess and—”

“What does your room have to do with anything?” Natasha asked, rolling her eyes. “I guarantee you nobody has any interest in going anywhere near it.”

“I-I—“ That was a good point. Aunt May and Uncle Ben would have him clean his room spotless for the cable guy installing wires in the living room only, and Natasha didn’t even see the point in tidying up when an actual king was coming over. Sometimes it was startling clear how different the lives of the Avenger’s had been from his. “Oh… I guess that’s true.”

Rhodey snorted. “It’s just a thing people do, Nat. But you probably don’t have to worry about it Peter.”
“Besides,” Tony interjected from where he’d been messing with the coffee maker in the kitchenette. “You don’t really have any time.”

At the man’s words the lights over the elevator lit up, revealing that it was being ridden from the roof access.

“W-wait! Do I- Am I supposed to supposed to bow or something.”

“Yes.” Rhodes said immediately, “Of course you do man, show some respect he’s royalty.”

“No.” Steve interrupted, “You do not.” He gave the other man a look that was one part stern and two parts amused. “You don’t need to do anything special Peter. T’Challa is a friend. Just give him the same respect that you would give anyone else.”

“Ok, ok I can do this.”

Steve nodded. “He may be a bit more formal than you’re expecting. When I met him, he seemed very dignified.”

“I like your shirt, nerd.” An unfamiliar voice sounded from the elevator, and Peter whirled. Despite the ‘nerd’ at the end, the words seemed genuine. Even the insult sounded amused and warm, more like the comfortable mock-insult of a friend than something meant to be offensive. The voice was female, smooth with confidence and a hint of an accent.

When Peter finally faced the elevator he gaped in surprise. Three people were moving through the doorway and into the main room. There was a tall, bald woman with steely, intense eyes who carried herself proudly. Next to her stood T’Challa. The man had been a famous face in the recent news, and was instantly recognizable. Where the woman seemed to ooze strength, he exuded power. He carried himself comfortably and proudly. Next to him stood another girl, obviously the speaker from before. She was the only one not in black, instead she was in a loose tank top adorned with a myriad of different types of jewelry. Where the other two were proud and intimidating, with an aura of confidence that would make them stick out at any crowd, the younger girl wouldn’t have looked out of place walking down New York’s more fashion forward streets.

Peter gaped at the trio, unable to formulate a reply. His spider-sense tingled softly, not truly anticipating a threat, but recognizing the power within the room. It had taken weeks for the spidey-sense to stop low-key buzzing near the Avengers, but even they hadn’t worn their power so obviously, not around the tower at least. Hopefully it would calm down when they did.

Finally it occurred to Peter that the girl had been talking to him, and he stammered out a “O-oh thank- thank you.” That made the girl smirk in amusement. During the exchange the other Avengers, who had been lounging around the room had risen to their feet and were making their way over to the newcomers.

“King T’Challa,” Natasha greeted with a smile, shaking his hand firmly but kindly. “Thank you for coming. I know that things have been busy for you recently.” She exchanged a professional nod with the tall woman flanking the king.

“Oh, where’s that?” Sam asked, shaking the man’s hand as well.

“California.”
Falcon rose an eyebrow. “That’s not far out of your way?”

T’Challa smirked. “Not with my ship.”

“Your ship?” The younger girl asked, smirking up at the man. “And who designed this ship? Hm? And who drove it?”

T’Challa rolled his eyes and it was like a spell was broken, turning the royal king into an exasperated older brother. “Fine, Shuri’s ship.” Then he continued. “Regardless, the current conflict within the United Nations, both because of my revelation and the after-effects of the Sokovian Compromise that we still see, I thought it might be best to speak with you all again in person.”

The man’s eyes then landed on Peter. “As well as meet the son that I supposedly somehow acquired.”

Peter ‘meep’ed. Was that true? Was that a thing? If T’Challa was an Avenger and he was technically adopted by ‘The Avengers’ did that mean that T’Challa was really his guardian kinda? Was Peter a prince?

There was a moment of silence before Tony snorted. “The teenager currently imitating a mime is Peter Parker, the Avenger’s child.”

Holy crap he might be a prince.

“He’s very excited to meet you.” Wanda added, amusement in her gaze.

“Hi!” Peter managed to say, finally broken out of his thoughts. “I-I mean greetings, your majesty-highness- um… Black Pantherness.”

“Hello to you as well, Peter. Though T’Challa will do.” The man said, warmly. Even the terrifying woman at his other side was softening as she watched the stammering boy.

“Right! I-I can do that.”

“Since my brother does not seem inclined to do introductions,” The younger girl drawled. She pointed at the scary woman. “This, is Okoye, the head of the king’s guard and one of Wakanda’s most formidable warriors.”

Peter could easily believe that. “Hi.” He waved weakly, and a smile pulled at Okoye’s lips as she nodded in reply.

“And I,” She began, her many bracelets clattering together and sounding almost musical as she gestured to herself. “Am Shuri, T’Challa’s sister and the leader of scientific advancement in Wakanda.”

Aaaaannnnndddd Peter was back to gaping. That was amazing! He’d spent the last two days reading about some of Wakanda’s scientific advancements, and they honestly blew his mind. And that was just what had been leaked to the world at large, who knew what all they had actually discovered.

Even Tony perked up at that, standing at attention. “Oh good, come with me.”

“Excuse me?” The girl responded, her voice midway between cold and incredulous, and suddenly it was clear that even overshadowed by the two warriors, she held plenty of power. She was royalty. Tony didn’t seem to notice as he beckoned her on. “Come on, it’s not every day I talk to someone
who might be smarter than me. I need you to come to my lab and tell me what I’m doing wrong.”

The girl’s head tilted as she considered that, and several Avengers snorted. Then she nodded. “It will likely take longer than one night to point out you all you are doing wrong.” She began to follow Tony. “But I can start with that last sentence. It is not that I ‘might be’ smarter than you, I am smarter than you.”

“We’ll see.” Tony said dryly, but he was looking at the girl like she fascinated him. Peter almost vibrated in his seat as he moved to follow, he couldn’t imagine what the genius would say when faced with Tony’s lab. Peter always thought it was incredible, but if what he’d heard about Wakanda was true…

He paused though, looking back at T’Challa and Okoye, uncertain if he should stay or go. However the king shook his head.

“Go, I hear you are interested in science as well.”

“We can meet up for dinner.” Sam added, as Natasha began to suggest a tour of the building. That was all Peter needed to run after the two inventors.

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Shuri. Is. Awesome.

The instant she steps foot into the lab, her eyes roll over the dozens upon dozens of Iron-man suits and partial suits and helmets and she mutters, under her breath, ‘look at all those chickens,’* and Peter bursts out laughing despite Tony’s befuddlement. She smiles at him and then immediately begins pointing out inferior designs and mistakes; and that’s when she’s still at Tony’s ‘these-are-my-impressive-suits-bask-in-their-glory’ section before she even gets to the works in progress. Tony, who started the tour with his usual proud bluster, had at first turned grumpy and taciturn but had gradually become impressed with the teenager criticizing his greatest work.

It helped that Shuri was nearly as snarky as Stark, and the two had started going after each other after every comment, sarcastic barbs that had somehow started off pointed and were slowly becoming banter-y. Normally, Peter would have been in the middle of it, but seeing the two bicker was more interesting than most TV shows he’d seen recently.

“Tsk.” Shuri shook her head and tapped at an arc reactor in the center of one of the suits. “I’m surprised that you rely on such an… inefficient energy source.”

“Right, right, because I’m sure in Wakanda you can power a city with something the size of a grain of rice.”

The girl smirked but didn’t deny it. Tony noticed it as well, and blustered.

“Well, sorry that my work attempt to create completely clean energy is a little clunky.”

“Hmm. I suppose it is impressive considering your limitations.”

“Yeah, well not everyone can have access to magical metal.”

“Yes, let’s pretend those are the limitations I was talking about.”

Peter snorted and the girl cast him a genuine smile before moving onto the next thing. Eventually,
she made her way to their current works in progress, the stuff Peter and Tony were working on together.

“Oh, uh-“ Peter stammered as she poked at their most recent attempt to recreate Spider-Man’s webbing. It was close. Tony should have made sure the chemicals were 15 degrees warmer before attempting to mix them, but other than that the man was frighteningly close. Not that it would be necessarily bad if the man figured out the compound. Peter made sure that there was no way to connect it back to him, but it was the principle of the thing. “That’s not really, um, perfected yet.”

Shuri smirked. “Nothing is perfected. The instant you think something is perfect, you have fallen behind.” She poked at the sticky substance with one of the tools on the table, looking delighted when a strand of the goo stuck to it. “Fascinating. This is an attempt to copy from the Spider-Man, correct? I’ve been wanting to get my hands on some of that webbing for ages.”

“Really?” Tony asked, his voice scoffing. “My nanobots were passable, but you’re just burning with curiosity about goop.”

The woman cast him a smirk. “It’s not the actual composition that’s fascinating. I’ve found seven different ways to replicate it from Wakanda using images. However, it is extremely innovative. It acts so differently from most substances. It is sticky, but not so sticky that it sticks to whatever device used to shoot it, able to be compressed densely, dissolving after a few hours, it is almost like a mix between a liquid and a solid. I had not considered attempting to create anything similar until I had seen images of it. It makes me wonder how this Spider-Man thought of the idea.”

She looked at Tony, as though he may know the answer since the vigilante was local, but the man just shook his head. “Trust me princess, I’ve done more to study Spider-Man than anyone, other than maybe his top photographer, but that man is a mystery.”

Her brow furrowed. “Photographer?”

Tony nodded to Peter, who waved one hand weakly. This… could really only end poorly. “I, uh, may have made money selling Spider-Man pictures before the Avengers... you know.” He coughed awkwardly. “As for the, uh, webs, I guess I just assumed he came up with the spider theme first and then wanted webs to go with it? And it went from there?” Not really true. The spider theme was more of a result of circumstances than choice, what with the spider bite giving him the powers in the first place. The formula for the superliquid had been partially in his father’s notes. He’d just worked the formula until it worked and put it in webshooters. Yeah, it hadn’t exactly been easy and it had taken a lot of tweaking, but it certainly wasn’t as impressive as the new repulsor designs she’d just tore into. Then again, she seemed to be more focused on engineering like Tony, maybe chemistry was different enough to be intriguing.

“But why the spider?” She mused, asking Peter intensely as if she really expected him to know. “I assume if the webbing is synthetic, his ability to crawl on walls is as well. The strength and dexterity is unlikely to be fake, but who sees that they are strong and flexible and immediately thinks ‘Spider’. “

“Batman named himself after a bat because they scared him in some of the storylines.” Peter offered, wincing. That was lame, now she would know that he was a major nerd.

“So, you think Spider-Man is an arachnophobe?” Tony asked, looking skeptical.

“Maybe?” Peter squeaked. “I mean, I’ve never seen him near a spider, have you?” They both gave him an odd look at that, but he just shrugged. Honestly, photographer Peter Parker would have no reason to know anything more about Spider-Man’s origins than anyone else. Was he playing it too
clueless though? Should he know a little more? Was it actually suspicious that he knew too little? “I uh, did find out that someone that they assume was him did, like, cage fighting and fight clubs and stuff using the same nickname.”

Shuri cocked her head in interest. “Do you know if he used the webbing or climbed walls in these fights?”

Peter shrugged. “I-I don’t know. It was hard to get a lot of information about fight club because… well you know.”

“The first rule.” Shuri nodded sagely and Tony snorted.

“Pop culture references aside, I doubt anybody was too excited to tell a kid like you about anything. Still, if he did use the webbing or wall climbing devices, it would probably be a lot more common knowledge.”

Shuri nodded, looking thoughtful. “He likely started using them when he began his vigilantism. I doubt that cage fighting is the ideal environment. Also, his costume probably improved significantly during that time. That may have been when he inserted the devices.” She looked at the webbing and snorted. “I can’t believe how much time you’re spending on that webbing, when his wall-climbing devices are so much more impressive. I haven’t been able to sufficiently copy them, not to an extent that I’m happy with at least.”

There was a reason for that. Mainly that they weren’t devices, just weird Spider stuff, but he wasn’t about to interrupt. Peter tried not to look guilty as he fiddled with some of the lab equipment. He couldn’t look at them anymore and keep a straight face. The scientist continued.

“Yes, I have manipulated friction and found ways to make people stick to the tops of moving cars and could easily make it so they could scale walls. However, my inventions do not seem to have a fraction of the flexibility and strength that he has somehow achieved. Even if I could, I do not see how he could maintain such control. His suit is obviously not technologically enhanced, but he has perfect control, able to stick or release as he wishes.”

Peter hastily put his hand behind his back when the soldering gun he put down didn’t leave his hand. Not perfect control.

“I have seen pictures of him holding to the ceiling with three fingers with his suit nearly shredded.”

Peter had taken that picture. That had been after fighting Sandman where the constant movement of the grain of sand had actually worn away the spandex like sandpaper wore at wood.

“I can’t figure out how he’s done that. You cannot imagine how much that irks me.”

Tony smirked at her. “Join the club. Trust me, the more you study Spider-Man, the less he makes sense.”

That was a relief. And somewhat insulting, but Peter was choosing to focus on the former. However, he wanted to turn the topic away from the wall climbing before they realized that copying him with a machine actually was impossible. “So, uh, how do you know so much about Spider-Man?”

Her eyebrows rose. “What? You think that in Wakanda we don’t have the internet?”

“I- no, I didn’t mean that. Just, why Spider-Man specifically. I mean, I know that the Avengers are famous, but he’s just…” Suddenly a thought occurred to him, born from the earlier ‘chickens’ comment. “Oh no, not the memes, not you too?”
The girl laughed, but nodded, a bright grin stretching across her face. Tony smiled as well at the boy’s mock distress, before frowning slightly. “Too?” He asked.

“Oh, uh,” Well crap, of course memes would ultimately be his undoing. He’d always suspected it. “When I told M.J. about taking photos, you know, of Spider-Man -Spider-Man photos- she only knew about them because of the memes.” That was weak. Luckily, Tony didn’t have long to dwell on it before Shuri cut in.

“Ooohh, who is M.J.? It looks like someone is blushing.” She mock whispers to Tony. Peter, who had been flushing at his own stupidity more than anything else, blushed brighter at the girl’s words. Tony, amused, smiled.

“She’d Peter girlfriend .” The last word was drawn out in a sing-song tone.

“She-she is not! Not yet, we’re just friends. We’re talking. We have a lot to figure out and…”

Shuri raised an eyebrow. “Go on, keep protesting, that is certainly making you more believable.” Peter groaned but the girl just smirked. “It is ok to be embarrassed. You should see my brother when he is around his girlfriend. He completely freezes.”

“I did not freeze.” T’Challa’s smooth baritone sounded in the lab. Tony jumped, though he was the only one. Peter was aware of the man’s presence through his enhances senses, and Shuri was simply used to her brother’s flair for the dramatic.

“No?” She smirked. “Why don’t I call Okoye in here and ask her?”

“That will not be necessary.” The man replied. It was said at the same speed and tone as everything else, but somehow Peter got the impression that it was the equivalent of rushing and flailing for the unflappable king. The man shook his head. “Dinner will be ready soon. I wanted to see your labs before we ate.”

“Of course!” Tony began his tour anew, leaving the two teenagers at the table.

“So…” Shuri began. “M.J., huh?”

“We, uh, we really aren’t dating. We just, with the Avengers, and the media, and the villains there’s a lot to figure out, you know?” The girl nodded thoughtfully, and Peter had a sudden stroke of pure brilliance. “And it’s even worse because, you know, we can’t really talk privately because Tony has more access to my phone than I do! I mean, I’m sure that he can see all of my text, and I bet somewhere he has all of my calls recorded, just in case. Do you think you could, uh, maybe…?”

“Hmmm, I feel like that would annoy Tony… so of course. Give me your phone.” She grabbed some various tools surrounding them and somehow connected the phone to one of her holograph-creating-bracelet-beads, so cool. “This shouldn’t take long, and…” She fiddled for a few more moment. “Done. Now, even if he somehow manages to get into your phone, which will not happen, anything that you have sent privately will be completely erased. As payment, you will keep me updated on how this is going.”

“Deal!” The boy grabbed at her phone, grinning at it. He was almost giddy with relief that he could soon text M.J. about everything. That would have to wait though, he had guests. He glanced at the girl. “So, uh, do you get youtube on those? I could show you the vine compilation I made.”

Shuri grinned. “I want to play mine next. Then we can compare.”
Peter almost didn’t sneak out that night. It just seemed extra dangerous with the three Wakandans sleeping in the tower, T’Challa in the room Tony had set aside for him and the others in guest rooms. Dinner had been amazing, filled with stories of Wakanda and promises to let Peter visit. Steve had seemed upset at the beginning of dinner, which Sam whispered to Peter had something to do with some treatment his friend Bucky Barnes was going through in the far away country. Apparently it wasn’t progressing as quickly as they hoped.

As the meal progressed the captain slowly regrew his normal temperament, and by the time dessert had arrived he was challenging the king to a race through the obstacle course. T’Challa had agreed surprisingly quickly, and Peter started to see that the composed man wasn’t as serious as his formality suggested. Okoye had rolled her eyes at the suggestion, but Peter caught her making a bet with Natasha under the table. The race itself had been mesmerizing. Both men were incredibly strong, tactical marvels, and extremely flexible. Yet somehow, despite these similarities they seemed polar opposites in the ways that they moved. T’Challa moved with the natural grace and instinct of the jungle cat he was named for. He moved with the ease of one born to fight. Steve moved with ease as well, but his spoke of a man who had simply spent hours upon days at hard practice, moves drilled into them when they did not come naturally. They were given no set course, simply a starting point and goal, so they both went different ways. Steve reached the goal first, but the margin was so small, and he was so familiar with the course while T’Challa wasn’t, that Peter gave more credit to the king.

That is all to say that between T’Challa’s skill, Shuri’s intelligence, and Okoye’s pure intimidation, Peter almost didn’t risk going out in costume. However, the others had had a point earlier. There was no reason for them to come to his room, especially in the middle of the night. It was no more likely that he would be found out that night than any other, so he slipped out the window as normal and slowly climbed to the street.

The first thing he did was snap a selfie of himself in costume, crouched on a streetlight, and send it to Mary Jane. The reply came almost immediately.

M.J.: I take it you figured out how to protect your phone? I hope?

Peter: Would you believe that the Princess of Wakanda did it for me?

For a few moments Peter watched the ‘three dots’ of someone typing appear and disappear as the girl typed out replied and deleted them. Finally she simply sent:

M.J.: Your life is so weird.

Peter laughed aloud at her reply before sending back:

Peter: I’m pretty sure she stole your number while doing it. :P

M.J.: My life is weird too.

Peter chuckled, but his Spidey-sense tingly, so he sent her a quick ‘g2g’ and closed the messages. He had work to do.

Back at the tower, Shuri was getting to her feet. Until recently, she had never had to sleep outside of Wakanda, and she was finding it more difficult than she had anticipated. On near silent feet she
found her way to the Avengers living quarters. She didn’t glance at her brothers room. She’d sooner toss on her bed all night than admit to him that she was having problems sleeping. Instead, she stopped equidistant between Peter and Wanda’s doors. The other girl was closer to Shuri’s age, and she had been fun talking with at and after dinner, but she didn’t quite appreciate meme culture the way Peter did. Tonight she needed something stupid and fun to occupy her time. Maybe they could slip down to the media room for some video games.

Decision made, Shuri moved to knock on the door, but paused before her hand touched the wood. “F.R.I.D.A.Y.?" She said softly, “Is Peter asleep?"

There was a moment of silence before the AI replied. “No, he is not.”

For a moment the reply sounded off, but Shuri shrugged. AI’s were complicated, it wouldn’t surprise her if Tony’s bot had a few bugs, even if the man was fairly smart. She would never say it to his face of course. She knocked on the door once, then louder a second time when she got no reply. Finally she knocked a third, loudest time before bursting into the room.

It was empty. Her brow furrow. “F.R.I.D.A.Y.? Why isn’t Peter in his room?”

There was a long, long moment of silence, then, distorted, “There is no unusual activity in Peter’s room at this time.”

Shuri’s blood ran ice cold. No no no no nononono! She ran to the nearest monitor in the room, sliding into the AI’s coding like she had built it herself. She gasped at the sight of a somewhat clunky, foreign coding that she immediately knew was not Tony’s work. Someone had taken Peter, right from under all of their noses. She rose to her feet and strided purposely across the room, pulling up her phone. “Does Peter have his cell phone on him?”

“Yes, he is carrying it.” For the first time that night the AI sounded confident.

“Yes.” She hadn’t fixed his phone with the intention of hacking it later, but she was now glad that she knew the system inside and out. She hacked her way into the teen’s phone as she made her way across to her brother’s room. Peter had just sent out a text a minute ago, a picture less than five minutes ago. Maybe that could-

Her hand froze inches from the door handle to her brother’s room. Was that Spider-Man? But, it almost looked like a selfie. The sinking feeling in her gut slowly lessened, and a small smile began to flit across her face as something occurred to her.

She looked to the recipient of the texts. M.J., the girlfriend. “Alright Peter,” she breathed to herself. “Let’s see what you really wanted to hide from Stark.”

It took less than five minutes to access the data hidden by the clunky coding, and when she did, it was all Shuri could do to keep herself from bursting out laughing. All of that time spent in the lab talking about Spider-Man, and it had been Peter the whole time. Oh, what she wouldn’t give to examine that suit. Except, one of the videos had Peter climbing up the walls without the suit. So, did that mean he was always wearing the devices, or was it actually natural? She would make him let her examine it either way. If it was natural, maybe it could lead to an invention that mimicked the abilities if she could just study them enough. He could probably even...

The girl paused, biting her lip and leaning back in the teen’s chair as she considered. Well then, what should she do about this. Peter obviously didn’t want the Avengers to know, didn’t want anyone other than this girl to know, apparently. He was clearly capable, more so now that the Avengers were unknowingly training him. It was dangerous though. She was loathe to tell the heroes about it
though. It was clear that they were protective of the boy, and they would certainly not appreciate his vigilantism. Beyond that, it was really Peter’s choice and she liked the boy. He was smart and brave, she thought he deserved to be able to make the decision whether to tell them or not.

So, she decided, she would keep his secret from the Avengers. It wouldn’t be hard, they were leaving in the morning and T’Challa was unlikely to bring up Spider-Man once they were back in Wakanda. So that left Peter. Should she tell him that she knew? She could help, make the coding hiding him more sophisticated, send him gear, study the devices that he had made. Or…

Or she could not tell him that she knew, but occasionally ask ‘innocent’ questions about Spider-Man to make him squirm. She grinned. Well, the second option certainly sounded more fun.

Chapter End Notes

* This is a reference to a vine in which a child is looking at a large flock of ducks and goes ‘look at all those chickens’. I quote it far too often. I've also never referenced vines and memes this much in anything I've ever written

PLEASE READ:
So, as I've mentioned, I planned this story a long, long time ago. It was plotted out before Spider-Man Homecoming, Black Panther, and Infinity Wars. Therefore, this will not be completely accurate to the current marvel cinematic universe. I am trying to give nods to the movies, for example, Ned's cameo a few chapters ago, and this chapter has a lot to do with Black Panther. However, for plot reasons some things will be different. A better author than I would have found ways to include the changes, but I like the story I originally intended and don't want to change it. I hate to give this disclaimer because it has spoilers for future chapters, but it is necessary. So, currently the major difference between MCU and my fic is:

IN THIS FIC BUCKY IS STILL FROZEN IN WAKANDA, THEY HAVE NOT HEALED HIM OR WOKEN HIM UP.
Again, sorry for this, thank you.
In addition to being anti-climatic, Peter’s punishment was also over long before the full month was up. It took several more lectures, but eventually the team decided that Peter would be allowed out on his own again, as long as he promised to keep them informed whenever there was an emergency. Peter wasn’t exactly sure how to hold to that promise and be Spider-Man, but he was thinking about it.

He wasn’t coming up with anything, but he was thinking about it.

However, his early release was probably less due to his good behavior or the push-over-ness of the Avengers and more because of the press release. Pepper, growing ever increasing with Ross’s continuous passive-aggressive (and aggressive-aggressive) attacks against the Avengers, had arranged for a press release to overview the programs that the Avengers and Stark industries had put in place around the time that they’d adopted Peter. It would be a little going over what they were doing to fix the problems, a lot of pointing out their successes, and a smidge of showing off.

Which was exactly what made the day perfect for wandering around the city, apparently. According to Pepper and Natasha, when there was an event involving the Avengers or Stark industries that was open to the public, the majority of the Avengers fans and tourists would be at the events to see the heroes standing stiffly in uncomfortably suits as someone talked.

Peter didn’t see the appeal, but he was a special case.

Regardless, most of the people who were really interested in the Avengers would be at the event. However, this release, like most, didn’t require for all of the Avengers to be present. Which meant that those who weren’t there would be able to avoid the die-hard fans easily. Additionally, anyone not watching the event would assume that all of the the Avengers were there. So, Wanda could be walking down the street, and anyone who was like ‘hey, isn’t that the Scarlet Witch girl?’ would then think ‘No, that’s ridiculous, the Avengers are at that event. She must just look similar’.

So, in all, there was no easier day to walk around town undetected then a day that Pepper planned an event that you didn’t have to be at. Peter probably should be at the event, but he technically was separate from the reconstruction plans, and Pepper didn’t want people confusing the two or thinking too much about the fact that Peter was initially adopted to help their image, so he was politely asked to stay away.

Tony had to go because of Stark industries, and Wanda went as well because the programs were put in place partially as a response to what happened with the Wakandan embassy. Vision went to be with her, obviously, and Rhodes went to round out the group. Nat, Sam, and Steve had decided to use the opportunity to go out for drinks together, to allow Peter to do his own thing. Peter partially thought they just wanted to be downtown in case something went wrong.
Which it 100% definitely will. Peter knew his own luck well enough to admit that. However, he was going to do what he could have a good time with Mary Jane before that became an issue.

He already had the suit on under his clothes though, as a precaution.

Feeling a buzz in his pocket, the teen paused to reach for his phone in case it was M.J. changing where they were meeting or telling him she would be late. He winced slightly when he saw that it was actually from Shuri. Not that he disliked the girl. On the contrary, she was very close to being the best friend he’d had. (Not counting M.J., and that situation was complicated). The day and a half that she was at the tower was awesome, but she had a way of texting that gave him heart attacks.

Less than a day after leaving the tower she had sent him a famous Spider-Man meme where he had half of his mask off to eat a hot dog. The caption was from the original meme, and was uninspired, ‘I always knew New York hot dogs tasted like bugs’. Other renditions had been funnier, but she was obviously going back far. That part hadn’t freaked him out, not after how much she and Tony discussed his alter ego. The truly terrifying bit was the text she sent with the picture: “this is you isn’t it?”.

His heart had almost stopped, mind running a million miles an hour attempting to figure out how she had figured it out, how he should reply. Then the next text had come in. “You took this picture, right? You are a really good photographer.”

It was like a vice was unclenching it’s grip on his chest and he could breathe again. He had taken that picture, using a little cleverness with his napkins, a drink cup, and the cart umbrella he managed to snap the pic without anyone noticing. She hadn’t figured out who he was, she was just asking about the photo.

A few days later she had started a conversation with the text, “Are YOU afraid of spiders?” It was clearly a reference to their conversation in the lab, and if the emphasis had been on the ‘are’ instead of the ‘you’, he would have been completely freaking out. As it was, he still had a slight foreboding whenever he saw a message from her. This one, however, was harmless. It was just her wishing him luck with seeing M.J. again.

Peter smiled at the text, glad that the Avengers had been too busy with all the things they had been planning to really pay attention to his second “date”. He got away with somewhat more casual clothing than last time, though he still looked nicer than he would for lounging around the tower. As always, he had the hat on, and some thick-rimmed hipster glasses as protection against being noticed.

Mary Jane had insisted that they meet at a specific Ben & Jerry’s, saying that she had something amazing to show him, and actually insisting that he meet her a couple blocks away. He was early, and this time he’d actually had to wait for her, pulling up a live footage of the press conference and smiling at the sight of Wanda and Rhodes attempting to hide their boredom. No one else would be able to notice, but he could tell. It was an interesting sensation, being so intimate with the people that so many, including himself, idolized.

“Hey there stranger,” A voice said in his ear, and the teen jumped, letting out a yelp and only holding onto his phone by virtue of his spider-fingers. He looked up sharply and met the mirthful eyes of Mary Jane. He melted into a smile. “Oh, hi.” He stood awkwardly, not sure what the protocol would be for this meet up. Even if they were sticking with just friends, he’d never really had many female friends before. Or many friends at all really.

Luckily, M.J. was much more confident and drew the boy into a firm, friendly hug. “It’s great to see you.”
“Y-you too. Sorry it’s been so long.”

She shrugged understandingly and pulled at the straps of her bulging backpack. She would have to go to practice a new play in the evening, but they had most of the day to spend together. “I wasn’t the one that spent the last few week on house arrest. You probably had it worse than me, tiger.”

“It wasn’t that bad. Mostly I trained with Nat or worked in the labs was Tony. Later I’ll have to show you these super cool listening devices I made. Is it weird if Spider-Man uses bugs or is it on theme?”

Mary Jane blinked. “I forget, your punishments are every other kid’s dream come true. It's ridiculous.”

“You only say that because you’ve never been scolded by Steve Rogers and Tony Stark team up, with some other Avengers thrown in for flavor.”

Mary Jane laughed, though she inwardly shuddered at the prospect. She linked her arm with Peter’s. “Ready to go? Before the ground opens up and we’re attacked by mole unicorns.”

“See, you’re saying that jokingly, but now you’ve jinxed us and at some point evil unicorn moles are going to be a thing.”

She laughed brightly and the two began to make their way to the ice cream parlor. Peter took the time to study the girl and realized with a start that she looked different from the last time they met. Not horribly different, but a little bit. She was wearing a large floppy hat and sunglasses to hide her identity more than last time, but it seemed more than that. He stared at her, trying to figure out what it was.

The girl noticed his scrutiny and laughed. “Well, you said when I called the other say that I should try to disguise myself when we went out together, so I used this as an opportunity to use some stage magic. It’s too subtle for the actual stage, but it should be enough for film. Just a little more creative makeover than normal.”

Oh, that was what it was. Peter nodded. “I-I didn’t think you looked bad. Last time or this time, you look very nice. I mean pretty-I-I mean-”

“Don’t sweat it.” She laughed again, “I get it, Peter.”

He was glad. It really wasn’t any more or less pretty than the last time they met, just different. Like when you saw an actress in one movie that you were used to seeing in a tv show years back. She must have been talented to create the effect. He looked back ahead and almost stopped in his tracks.

“Oh. No.”

M.J. burst out laughing. “Oh yes!”

The storefront was covered in tacky, promotional posters of the Avengers and ice cream, with streamers and balloons and a cut out of Iron man that they had photoshopped to look like he was holding a shake in each hand.

“What is this?”

“They’re coming out with Avengers themed flavors. And today, since they’re doing the big speech, it’s taste test day. Now, are you ready for some free ice cream in the name of crowd surfing.”
“This is going to end poorly.” Peter responded, but he felt like his face was going to break his face in half he was smiling so hard.

Otto Octavius’ face nearly split in half he was smiling so hard. Half of the city’s best officers, detectives, and heroes were going to be at the same press conference in the middle of the city.

A press conference where, ironically enough, they would be going on and on about what a great job they were doing containing the supervillains in prison. They were practically begging for a prison break.

Well, ask and you shall receive. The right men were bribed, the right equipment was adjusted. Already he could feel the hairs on the back of his neck rising up in response to Electro’s returning powers. Kraven’s fingers drummed on the table, one of his hands out of sight as he favored the simple bow Otto had fashioned out of silverware and other odds and ends. Sandman was on the other side of the room, hunching to hide the extra bulk he’d amassed during their time outside. He couldn’t see Vulture or Shocker, but knew they should be in their spaces.

Vulture’s main contribution to the group was the friends he maintained on the outside. If they did their part, gathering Vulture’s wings and Otto’s arms, then everything should go smoothly. Shocker already had his gloves on under his prison orange.

The guards moved in their positions overlooking the criminals, moving to change shifts. Silently, Dock Ock moved, the timer began.

Mary Jane groaned, dropping the small spoon in her hand to the table. “How? How are you still eating? I was ready to tap out three flavors ago. And it’s Ice cream! I never thought I’d have enough ice cream.”

“Enhanced metabolism.” Peter said smugly, reaching over to steal the rest of her sampler. Scarlet Velvet Witch. Not bad, it wasn’t as good as the Scarlet ice cream Sand-Witch snacks they were also sampling. “At first I considered making millions in eating contests before I decided on the whole hero thing.”

The girl rolled her eyes before making a mark on the scorecard they were being asked to use to rate all of the flavors. “At least that was the last one. At least until they wise up and make a Spider-Man flavor.”

Peter snorted. “I’ll pass. Some of these are ridiculous. Rocky Rhodey? Tony Stark Raving Hazelnuts? Tony hates hazelnuts.”

“Well they couldn’t let a thing like flavor or preference get in the way of a pun.”

“They didn’t even try with Steve, just tried to make them all red, white, and blue. At this point I’m worried they would make mine bug-flavored.”

“I was hoping for marshmallow ‘webbing’, personally. Spider Sense-ational s’more.”

Peter snorted before reaching for his own card. “Well, I’m voting for the Black Widow’s Black Cherry, she at least likes her flavors.”
“I still like Vision in White Chocolate best.”

“He doesn’t even eat!”

She laughed, “Alright then, smarty-pants. What flavors would you have done?”

“First of all, Tony’s would be blueberry flavored. He loves blueberries. In fact, the first time they formed the team, he-”

Suddenly, the mellow, upbeat music permeating the ice cream shop was interrupted by dozens of phones blaring the same startling, irritating emergency notification. M.J. and Peter shared a look before each of them reached for their phones. Well, it was nice while it lasted.

M.J. looked at her watch. “You know, that was 15 minutes longer than Suri expected we would get. She now owes me some authentic Wakandan textiles. She offered tech but I decided walking around with vibranium was stupider than I was willing to be.”

“Y-you text her?”

“Of course. If we ever have a falling out, I’m keeping her.”

Peter sputtered, but before he could formulate a response the cheery radio station permeating the ice cream parlor was switched to a news broadcast about the emergency.

‘-plosion at the enhanced individuals wing of Rikers Island prison, leading to the escape of several prisoners. The criminals were last seen headed towards Randalls and Wards islands. There is speculation that the group has a final destination of Manhattan and it is recommended that all individuals in the area seek shelter and-”

Peter stood immediately, feeling the slick material of his suit under his clothes. If he moved fast he may be able to catch up before they hit the more populated city. He could ditch his clothes on a roof somewhere, hide his phone-his phone! This was his first day out after getting punished for not texting them during an emergency, they would kill him if he did it again, but what-

“M.J.!” He exclaimed, thrusting his phone at the girl. “Can you text the team and pretend to be me? Go to a safe zone or somethings and tell them you’re with you. I-I mean that I’m with you, but you’re pretending to be me, so-”

“Just go,” She laughed, taking the phone and the watch that he handed over a moment later. “but you’re in trouble if they try to call. You remember where I’m going for rehearsal?”

“Yup, meet you there,” Peter called, joining the rolling exodus of the parlor as tourists and locals alike moved to the safe zones. Mary Jane smirked at his retreating back. Things were certainly getting more and more interesting.

She took a deep breath as the phone in her hand let out the sound of an Iron Man blaster. Here she went, Mary Jane, actress extraordinaire preparing for her biggest role yet.

Spider-Man swung above the fleeing people, his ears trained to point him to the nexus of screams as he went towards where the broadcast indicated. As he swung through the city, he came to the realization that he would never make it on time to meet the villains at Randalls and Wards where there was less people. Technically, Peter was at a greater advantage in the city, where there were
alleys, skyscrapers, and walls. The open spaces didn’t lend well to his particular powers. It would have been worth it to give up his advantage if it kept people safe, but he wouldn’t have time to make the choice.

Even as the teen realized this, he began to see a silhouette in the sky, a large figure with wide, mechanical wings stretching out at his back; the Vulture. Peter let out a deep breath. He hadn’t known who was had escape, and there were some real baddies in that prison, but he’d defeated Vulture before. That had been before his training with Natasha and the improvements he’d made to his suit too, he should be able to do this easily.

However, just as the thought formed in the teen’s mind, another figure appeared beside the Vulture. The newcomer was a behemoth of a man, a giant that seemed to be shifting and changing forms. Peter’s heart thudded quickly in his chest. The Sandman, that wasn’t good. Come to think of it, hadn’t the emergency broadcast said that more than one person had escaped? It would be difficult to fight the two at once, but hopefully Peter had improved enough that it wouldn’t be impossible.

However, as the teen neared the criminals, his heart only sunk deeper and deeper into his chest as he heard the unique sounds of The Shocker’s gauntlets, then the harsh scrape of Doc Oct’s metal legs against the gravel. Light flickered ahead, identical to the branching lightning-like sparks of Electro in the bank. Peter felt his heart pound as sweat formed, unbidden, on his brow. Just how many of his villains had escaped? Could he really do this? Did he really have a hope of defeating so many of his enemies at once when he’d fought tooth and nail to defeat them alone. Training and tech could only do so much. Did he even have a chance at doing this?

He looked down and caught sight of the many people flooding the streets as they fled to safe areas. Some of them paused when they saw him, taking a moment to take a picture or let out a cheer.

He had to at least try.

Kraven stepped out from behind a building and grinned as he met Spider-Man’s eye, hefting a new spear to point to the hero in challenge. The beast of a man let out a bellowing war cry and the two villains in the sky whirled to face them. Peter took in a deep breath. This was going to end badly.

He charged.

Despite the spear, it was clear that Kraven hadn’t managed to completely restock his ridiculously large arsenal. There were no throwing knives, no nets, no arrows, only the spear and a dagger strapped at his waist. That didn’t make fighting him any easier. When Peter was too far to attack directly, the man held the spear by its head and pulled the dagger out of the sheath. Whenever Peter attempted to use his webbing to steal one weapon, the man would cut through the web with the other. He had learned from his earlier encounter with Peter and would not let the hero disarm him again.

Peter had learned too. When attacking from afar quickly proved ineffective, he went in for a more direct route. Kraven predictably blocked his rush by stabbing out with his spear, nearly grazing the teen despite his incredible reflexes. Spider-Man dodged to the side, and grabbed the spear, sticking his feet to the ground as he did so that when Kraven attempted to pull it back, it was stuck firm in Peter’s grasp.

The hunter responded to the additional resistance quickly, angling the staff so that when he stabbed forward again it would go straight to the hero’s chest. As the man thrust, the teen jumped, experly
landing onto the thin shaft of the spear itself. (Thank goodness for that part of the Avenger’s obstacle
course that involved jumping or running across dowels.) The weight, pushing straight down, made
Kraven drop the weapon. He reached for the dagger at his hip, kicking out at Peter, but the teen was
already in motion.

He jabbed at the man, a quick punch that required little movement. If he could push the man back
and stun him for just a moment, he could web him down and it would be one less criminal to deal
with.

He never got the chance. The instant before the teen’s fist connected, a jolting wave of what felt like
pure energy shot him across the alleyway. The teen cried out at the impact as he rolled down the
street, going a significant distance before he was able to control himself enough to sick to the ground
and stop his mad fall. Shocker stood beside Karaven as the hunter reached down to reclaim his spear.
The newcomer’s gauntlets sat intimidatingly, clearly ready to be used.

Peter began rising to his feet when a spark of spidey sense urged him to roll away instead, narrowly
missing one of Doc Oct’s arms as it crashed into the pavement beside the teen.

“Wow,” the young hero said, finally finding his voice. “Is this the Spider-Man fan club? You know
I’m honored, but really some fanmail would have sufficed.”

Doc Oct grinned beneath his large goggles. “Oh, but you see, meeting your heroes in person is just
to die for.”

“Wow, that was bad. Really forced, but hey keep trying, I’m sure someday you’ll actually have a
good one-liner. I mean, not today, but some-a-Agh!” Peter leaped to the side again as Vulture
swooped down, nearly clipping him with the villain’s large wings. “How many people do you even
have?”

Otto grinned, his many arms raining in preparation to advance. “We are a coalition of the greatest
villains you have ever faced.”

Peter made a weak, ‘so-so’ movement with his hands, despite the truth in the statement.

“We are your worst nightmares made real. We are the fight that you cannot win. We are the Sinister
Six!”

Lightening filled the air at the proclamation, heralding the arrival of Electro, Peter dodged the blasts
desperately but never stopped talking. “Wow, that’s a pretty lame name after all that build-up. Here’s
a newsflash ‘alliterations don’t actually make things more impressive’. I’m sorry to disappoint you, I
know it’s not your fault. The media industry has lied to you about it and I apologize.”

He danced around the attacks, taking a few minor hits but never managing to score any of his own.
As Sandman appeared it was officially six against one, and he was getting overwhelmed. His spidey
sense was screaming at him, but wasn’t specific enough to be of much help with such a constant
barrage of attacks.

Doc Oct managed to get a hit in, flinging Peter into a wall. However, the slight moment that he was
finally separated from the rest of the villains was all that the teen needed. He managed to snag a web
on Vulture’s boot as the man rose to the air and was able to escape the middle of the fray. He
dropped almost immediately, landing on Doc Oct’s back, which he hoped was high enough in the air
to stop the earth-bound criminals from getting to him. He gripped one of the legs as the scientist took
a moment to process what had happened, and had it half off before the scientist managed to recover
enough to respond. One of the other robotic arms rose to throw Peter off the man’s back, like a
horse’s tail swatting at flies.

The hit never landed. Seconds before it could, a wall of solid sand washed over the two, making the teen cry out at the impact. Thrown to the alley floor, Spider-Man got to his feet quickly in a move Natasha had drilled into him just in time to see a face appear in the sand that was still coming his way. He didn’t have time to dodge as the villain overwhelmed him, burying him under pounds and pounds of fine grains. Peter struggled, flailing frantically until he managed to disturb the sand just enough to see which way was up. He jabbed a hand out of the sand and shot a web at where he thought a building was, hoping against hope that he didn’t miscalculate.

He did, but not by much. He managed to snag a street sign that was just strong enough to pull him out of the sand without bending. Peter crouched on the sign and coughed, attempting to clear his lungs. Distantly, a part of him recognized the street name, despite the fact that he rarely traveled to that part of the city. However, that wasn’t nearly as important as the battering ram of Sand rising up to charge straight at him.

Peter tensed his muscles to attempt to jump over the powerful weapon, but before he could something flew through the sand, disconnecting it from its source and making it fall limply to the ground. The six villains whirled on the foreign object, shock clear in their expressions as the projectile impossibly began to curve and go back towards its origin.

Suddenly, Peter realized where he’d heard the street name before. It had a bar on it that Sam was particularly fond of.

A hand reached up and snagged the shield as it flew back, the red, white and blue becoming clear when it was still. The Avengers had arrived.
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the long wait. I just moved from Nebraska to DC to start my first ever adult job!!! Updates may be slow until November-December time because I'm heading into busy season at work but I'll try my best!!

As one, the seven figures in the fight, one hero and six villains, turned to follow the majestic arc of the shield as it was caught in a well practiced hand. Steve, still sporting a t-shirt and jeans, grinned in a way that would seem a smirk on anyone else but on him simply looked like a confident smile. Natasha stood next to him, the loose hoodie Peter saw her leaving the house in had been discarded, underneath she had been loaded to the gills and she already had a gun in hand. Sam was nowhere to be seen, but Peter figured he would need a moment to put on his suit.

Steve took a deliberate step forward, pushing his shield out just enough to draw everyone’s attention to it. “Looks like you could use a hand there, Spider-Man.” He was talking to him! Quick Parker, say something smooth and hero-like. “Ohmigosh this is awesome.” No. Bad Peter.

Natasha-No! Black Widow. He had to think of her as just Black Widow or he was going to mess up. Who was he kidding he was going to mess up either way. Somehow fighting with the Avengers was a hundred times more amazing than living with them. He’d basically given up on ever being able to fight with them since the moment he realized they didn’t know who he was. He’d never dreamed he would get this chance.

On the other hand, voice changer or not he spent nearly every moment of every day with these people. They taught him every actual move he knew. Sure he pretended to be worse at it when he was being Peter, but they were sure to recognize the moves. Why did the single coolest moment in his life also have to be the most stressful?

Black Widow rolled her eyes at Peter and turned her attention to the still stunned villains. “We’ll give you one chance to give up now that you cowards can’t fight six against one. Answer carefully, it’s the only chance you get.” She didn’t seem to expect them to take it. A stranger would never notice, but Peter saw it in the way she grasped her gun, the bend in her knees. She wasn’t just prepared for a fight, she expected one, just like last Friday when-no! Don’t think about that, don’t mention it.

To the villains credit, they were all either brave, desperate, or foolish for those words seemed to break a dam in them and the fight suddenly resumed.

Peter jumped out of the way as Sandman sent another blast of sand at him and almost jumped straight into Kraven’s spear. Electro and Shocker had both run to battle the Avenger’s, and within seconds a shockwave filled the air as Shocker tried to blast Captain America’s immovable, unbreakable shield. Natasha had attempted to use her wrist tasers against a laughing Electro, then kicked him across the
street when he began bragging about it.

Vulture took to the sky and began to swoop towards the woman, but as he streaked to the ground Falcon appeared out of seemingly nowhere and the two clashed in the sky like a pair of actual birds in a nature documentary. Kraven, Sandman, and Doc Oct kept their attention on Spider-Man, who was babbling even more than normal, nervous about the nearness of the Avengers. He was just glad that he’d had the idea to make the voice modifier back when he’d first returned to being Spider-Man. It was going to get a workout this battle. He jumped to avoid a swing of Kraven’s spear, then was forced to grab onto Doc Oct’s attacking arm to avoid being thrown into another building.

“Wow guys, you’ve got three of the freaking AVENGERS here and half of you are still focused on little old me? I’m touched, truly.” He swung through the constantly churning and coiling octopus legs like they were the world’s most dangerous monkey bars, occasionally finding a weak spot and pulling bits of the legs apart. “However, I am also seriously questioning your judgement here. Like, really? Captain America is over there. He’s like saved the world a dozen times. I tripped putting on pants this morning.”

A shock of sand rushed up Doc Oct’s legs, tripping the villain and making him scream in anger, but also succeeding at dislodging the spider-themed hero. Peter scrambled up a building to avoid the grains. “Like seriously, this is overkill. I mean, you.” He nodded at Kraven as the man jabbed the spear at him at lightning fast speed, narrowly avoiding the attack. “Have some kind of weird, animal based fixation on me, so you kinda get a pass. However,” He caught the silver leg of Doc Oct and used it to throw the man into a nearby building. “I am seriously going to have to pass on whatever school gave you a doctorate degree if you honestly think that I’m the bigger threat here.”

Vulture and Falcon crashed to the ground near Peter, and suddenly sand began to coil around the both of the heroes. Sam struggled against the grains covering him until a drone shot out and momentarily disconnected him from the swarm. Falcon shot to the sky again even as Vulture struggled to regain his bearings. As the hero flew away Peter shot out a string of webbing at the man, using the Avenger’s momentum to pull himself out of the sand. “Taxi!” He called out as Falcon stumbled, not expecting the extra weight. When the flying hero saw his passenger he corrected quickly and pulled both of them away as the villains pursued. Captain America had already dispatched of Shocker, the man sat dazed against a wall, but Electro was still holding his own as they had to be careful about how where they laid their shots as touching the man’s skin could electrocute them.

Peter let go of his webbing and dropped into a crouch, facing the Avengers. “Um, hi! I’m Spider-Man. You guys need no introduction, obviously. I-I mean everyone already knows who you are and-“ Suddenly a tingling compelled Peter to dodge to the side. As he jumped, Captain America raised his shield, and Peter just got a glimpse of a bright shock of lightning hitting the shield as he dodge-rolled. Amazingly, the bolt seemed to actually reflect off the vibranium and strike the spear of sand that sandman had sent their way, instantly turning it to glass. Peter gaped. He needed to get Shuri to give him some of that. Doctor Octopus had caught up by then and was stabbing at Peter with his legs, but Peter dodged them almost automatically as he gaping at the other heroes. “I swear, your shield doesn’t even pretend to follow the laws of physics! That should never have worked, is it all the vibranium or is it the shape and hold of it as well? How much does how you hold it actually play into everything? Is it-”
“Kid,” Falcon said dryly as he began picking at Sandman. “I don’t know how many fights you’ve been in, but they don’t usually involve this much talking.”

Peter could feel himself begin to flush behind his mask, but before he could apologize Doc Oct said, “Unfortunately, his always involve talking. A good deal of talking without anything intelligent being said.”

“I would like to point out that you talk just as much as I do, so ditto.”

Steve let out a single barking laugh as he threw his shield and created massive dents on two of the villain’s legs. Kraven, lacking his projectile weapons and unable to get close to the teen hero weaving around Otto, turned on Natasha. The two clashed, Kraven’s larger size and augmented strength allowing the man to hold his own against her perfected skill. The two had very different styles, but both were well practiced and talented as they matched skill.

Doc Oct grabbed a large truck laying on the side of the road, crunching the frame where his claw gripped it. With a roar of anger the man threw it at Falcon, who was again locked in combat with Vulture though neither had made it back to the sky. Falcon saw the large object from the corner of his eye, but could only jerk his arms up to cover his head before the truck was upon him. Or, at least it would have been, if Spider-Man hadn't been there. When no impact came, the man hesitantly lowered his arms and opened his eyes to see the red and blue hero standing in front of him, holding the truck up like it weighed no more than a box of ornaments he’d pulled out of the attic. The teen set it down carefully, conscious of the fact that the owner was out there somewhere and would probably prefer if it was left in one place.

Sam gaped at him even as he rose into the air to go after Vulture yet again. “Dang kid, how strong are you?”

“I've never really tested it?” Peter responded, snagging Vulture by the ankle with a web to keep him from getting too far from Falcon. The villain was stopped in his tracks, even with his momentum and the massive power of his wings, he didn't gain an inch until Peter let go of the web to allow Sam more access.

The winged hero whistled lowly, kicking out one of Vulture's wings. “He may be stronger than you, Cap.”

Captain America crashed through a wall of sand to land a solid punch to the humanoid-portion of Sandman before turning to look up at Falcon, incredulous and almost disgusted. “What?”

“He just caught a truck.”

“I once stopped a helicopter!”
“You ever stop a helicopter, Spider?”

“Never had the opportunity.” Peter webbed Shockers arms together, but before he could capitalize on the move one of Doctor Octopus’s legs hit him from behind. “I did once hold onto the outside of a plane, but that wasn't really strength per say.” He grunted as he grappled with the metallic arm.

Suddenly, the resistance against Peter stopped, and he looked up to see Doc Oct glaring at two quickly approaching flying figures, one gold and red, the other grey and black. Iron-Man and War Machine had arrived. However, Doctor Octopus wasn't quivering in his boots, he was preparing to attack. The villain was crouched behind a pile of rubble, hidden from view of the suited Avengers. Tony and Rhodes would have no clue that he was there, and Peter didn't have any communication devices to tell them. The rest of the Avengers we're too busy to notice. It was up to Peter, he had to find a way to distract the villain.

With a wicked grin he shot out a web and pantsed the scientist, cackling as he did so. Otto let out a shriek, followed by a string of curses as he struggled to both control his legs and pull up his pants.

“You know Doc, if you're going to have this many legs, I suggest investing in belt or something to make sure your pants stay on. Or maybe suspenders? You seem like a suspenders kind of guy.”

It was then that Iron-Man and War Machine entered the scene proper, and somehow the featureless masks of the suits seemed to radiate 'unimpressed'.

“Wow,” Ironman said, his face mask tilting in a way that suggested he was eyeing Peter speculatively. “I knew you were young, but you are actually an infant, aren’t you.”

“For the last time, I’m-“ Peter stopped himself. Hard. A familiar rebuttal played at the tip of his lips. The retort of ‘I’m fifteen, not five’ that Peter shot at Tony several times a day almost slipped out of Spider-Man’s mask. “Why do people keep saying that?”

Natasha let out a snort of laughter as she dispatched Kraven, sending the man into a wall where he groaned once and no longer moved. Peter’s heart was thudding in his chest, the near slip had made fear course through him. A single moment of not watching his tongue and he’d almost completely given himself away.

“They say it because you sound like a character on Disney Channel.” The man said, shooting out one of Doc Oct’s few remaining legs, causing the man to topple to the ground. Peter was on him instantly, webbing the man to the ground before he could get to his feet to escape. The six villains, or well the conscious ones at least, were starting to realize how outmaneuvered they were. Vulture had apparently split a long time ago, Peter couldn’t see him, and Electro suddenly turned tail to run.

“Wha- but- how do you- You have no clue what I sound like, I’m wearing a voice modulator.”
War Machine gave chase after Electro, but the villain shot a bolt of electricity at the man that shorted out the suit and sent him careening to the ground. Luckily he was flying too close to the ground to cause any serious damage.

“It’s more about the content.” Tony said, strategically shooting at debris in attempt to trap the electricity-themed villain, but Sandman knocked the projectiles off course.

“Been watching a lot of Disney channel recently?”

Tony opened his mouth to retort in reply, but before he could Sandman let out a roar and attacked all of the Avengers as one with a giant wave of sand. There was a moment of chaos, filled with nothing but crushing grains and a desperate desire to breathe battling with the knowledge that it would be disastrous to open one’s mouth. Peter was the first to break through the crushing grains, but even so he only saw a clump of sentient sand disappearing into a grate. He looked around, noting that the three villains they had managed to capture were still there, and a couple of the Avengers were pulling themselves out of the sand. He hurried to where he could hear Sam’s wings struggling to expand through the heavy sand and pulled the man out. Falcon burst out with a gasp, nodding at Peter but the teen was already rushing to where he could hear Natasha struggling to dig herself out. She was the last one to get out, and it was clear the others were looking for her, but Peter was the only hero present with enhanced hearing and so the others didn’t know where to look.

Peter stuck his arm into the sand and immediately felt a hand grip his wrist. He quickly caught onto what the woman was suggesting and wrenched backwards, pulling her out of the sand in a single powerful yank. She nodded at him, brushing sand off of her face. The police arrived moments later to take custody of the three villains that the team had managed to catch, and Peter could hear Steve debriefing them and while Tony commanded F.R.I.D.A.Y to scan the area to keep an eye out for the others. Of course, the one time he actually gets to fight alongside the Avengers and he lets half the villains get away. Well this was a great first impression.

Peter sat back in a pile of sand, lifting his mask slightly in attempt to brush out some of the grains that had sneaked under the material. He sputtered for a moment, attempting to get the grit out of his mouth. He was still frantically spitting and sputtering when Rhodes made his way over to him and Black Widow. The man was walking somewhat stiffly, but didn’t seem actually injured.

“You actually fought those freaks before?” He asked Peter, the faceplate coming off to reveal his exasperated expression.

“Yes, but they were a lot easier, uh, one at a time.” Peter rocked back on his heels then forward again. “Thanks, by the way. I… I was the one who caught them all the first time, and they were obviously gunning for me. So, you may have kept me from going splat.”

“You did a decent job yourself.” Steve said as he made his way over, along with the rest of the Avengers who’d joined the fight. Wanda and Vision were noticeably absent, probably still at the event with Pepper.
“Yeah, pretty good Junior.” Tony said, with a nod. “So, 50% accuracy. Not our best guys. Still, not a complete failure. I say we celebrate with Schwarma so that I can get out of going back to that meeting.”

Sam nodded. “I could go for a bite.” The others all nodded or agreed, leaving Peter standing awkwardly until Rhodes turned back to him.

“What about you? Coming?”

“I-really?” Seriously, his voice chose then to crack?

“Why not? You like Schwarmas?”

“I like just about everything.”

Sam was frowning. He whispered to Steve, low enough that anyone else wouldn't be able to hear, but Peter’s super senses picked it up. “Hey should we be… I know Pepper wasn't sure about him for PR stuff.”

Peter deflated, but Steve was already shaking his head. “We’ve already fought with him, not like lunch will do worse.”

Peter brightened again, and Tony watched him carefully. “So, super senses too, huh?”

“Uh, noooo?”

Rhodes snorted. “Just how many powers do you have?”

Peter puffed up his chest and attempted to pitch his voice lower-an action completely negated by the voice modifier. “That's classified.”

Tony snorted. “Infant. C’mon, my treat. I'll even let you order off the big boy menu.”

Peter was very careful to peel the mask up only to the bridge of his nose, revealing as little of his face as possible. He was very conscious of the fact that Tony was probably scanning his face with some kind of tech. He could only hope that he wasn’t giving the man enough of a view to use against him. The large bruise forming on his cheek from one of Kraven’s lucky hits would probably help too. The fact that it would also be on Peter’s face was a problem for the future. He had too many problems to worry about currently to really give it much mind. If any of the Avengers recognized him, no one jumped up screaming and pointing, so he was pretty sure he was safe. Tony did snort when he saw the bare chin.
“You really are younger than we thought, huh?”

“I-it’s hereditary.” Peter said defensively. “No one in my family has a beard!”

Sam was grinning, half teasing and half honestly amuse. “Sure it is Spider-boy.”

“It’s Spider-Man!” Peter insisted. And of course, his voice cracked. Can vocal chords have a sense of irony? Because he was pretty sure his did.

Tony opened his mouth to reply, eyes alight with mischief, but before he could say anything he was interrupted by the arrival of the food. The team had ordered a variety of menu items, and by the time all of the food had arrived there wasn’t a spare inch on the table. Steve took the distraction to interject. “Lay off him Tony, he did good work today.”

“Wow, really, you think I- wow thank you so much.”

“Did a lot better than you used to, that’s for sure.” Rhodes said with a smirk. Tony had dragged him into the lab many an hour to show him videos of the vigilante and rant about trying to discover his identity. Often, the only parts of these ‘debriefings’ as Tony called them, or ‘tantrums’ as Rhodes thought of them, was watching the hero swinging into a wall or falling flat on his face. They had gotten much less entertaining as of late. Luckily, Tony now ranted at Peter, so Rhodey was off the hoof. “So, what? You take a sabbatical and come back like a boss.”

Peter almost choked. He had been the one to tell Rhodey about that meme. He wasn’t using it perfectly, but the effort was touching. Then the words processed and he took a huge bite of the Schwarma to give him time to think as he chewed. Then he got distracted because that was amazing. He almost took another bite, because it was delicious, then realized that would probably be rude with the whole table waiting for his answer.

“Oh, uh I just realized that I wasn’t doing so hot, you know with fights. I wasn’t losing a whole lot, I guess, but I wasn’t exactly doing well either.” Technically true, mostly because he’d been having a hard time sleeping with how often he switched homes, not to mention the stress of sharing a room. Plus, he’d had a hard time getting the money to buy materials to make his webbing, so it had been getting more and more difficult to restrain the villains. Some had even managed to get away. He always got them the second or third time, but it really had been getting more difficult. “So I decided to take a break, get some training and stuff. I think it was a good choice, I’ve gotten a lot better.”

“You must have had a good trainer.” Steve said appreciatively. “You held your own well out there.”

Don’t look at Nat. Don’t look at Nat. Don’t look at Nat.

When Peter looked over at Nat he saw that she wasn’t paying any attention, instead she was wholly
focused on carefully loading a pita up with toppings. “Yeah, they were really good.”

“Was it Daredevil?” Tony asked, eyes alighting with interest.

Peter jumped, not expecting the blunt mention of the other vigilante. “No, not his style.”

“You mean it’s not his fighting style, or that its not his style to teach someone to fight?

“Uh, both?” Peter crammed the rest of his Schwarma into his mouth and reaching for a plate of grape leaves.

“So, I’ve got a question.” Sam began, pointing a fork at the vigilante. “What was with the whole ‘faking your death’ bit? I mean, taking some time off is one thing, but you could have at least showed up for your funeral.”

Peter groaned, grabbing another sandwich. “I didn’t even know that was happening until it was already over, I was out of town. Trust me, if I had known then I would have swung over. Uh, pun intended.”

“I can’t believe that you didn’t hear about it. It was a whole citywide thing. You should have seen Peter’s face when we told him about it, like he had been punched in the gut.”

Peter wasn’t sure what his face had done in that exact moment, but it must have been expressive, because suddenly Steve was leaning forward with a stern look on his face. “Peter is a good kid. I know your impression of him may not be the best due to his connection the the daily bugle, but I can assure you-”

“No no no!” Peter waved his hand somewhat frantically. “No, Peter’s cool. I mean, have you guys seen the pictures that rag is using now that he quit? It’s horrible. Nope, no grudges against Peter here, no siree.”

Was he protesting too much? It felt like he was protesting too much.

Suddenly Tony slammed his palms on the table with a curse, drawing all eyes onto him. “Nobody tells Peter about this!”


“We’ve been promising to bring him here for months, if he finds out we brought Spider-Man here before him, we’ll be in the doghouse.”

Peter quickly bit into schwarma to hide his grin as the others all agreed. They hadn’t had time to plan
a trip back since that time that he’d worn the Spider-Man themed outfit a few months ago, and they’d had to flee back then because they’d been recognized. Technically, Peter hadn’t been there with the Avengers yet. Conversation was casual after that for a while. Peter found himself slipping in well, though he had to catch himself once or twice to keep from revealing that he knew more about the Avengers than an outsider should know. Time passed comfortably, until Peter was stuffing in his fifth sandwich, to Sam’s wonder.

“He isn’t just stronger than you, Cap, he can eat more too.”

Steve scowled playfully and moved to deliberately grab a fifth Schwarma for himself. “He is not stronger than me. Have you ever lifted a steel beam several times your own size?”

“Uh, I caught a bus once?”

“What about-”

“Allright, alright. No need to get testy.” Tony interrupted, his eyes wicked with mischief. “There’s a quick way to settle this right here, right now.” He began piling the empty platters and bowls into a heap and waved frantically to the teenager clearing tables to get them. “Arm wrestle, right here, right now. I bet the last piece of Baklava on the kid.”

“Really Tones?” Rhodes sighed heavily.

“I’ll take that bet.” Sam said, “The last of the hummus on Cap.”

“Falafel on Spiderman.” Natasha said definitively.

“Seriously?” Rhodey asked, rolling his eyes. “Fine, guess I’ll even it out. Grape leaves on Rodgers.”

Steve rolled his eyes but put his arm on his table, the position seemed to make his muscles bulge under his tight shirt. Peter gulped as he mimicked the pose. His own arm looked… underwhelming by comparison. Steve smirked at the younger boy’s thin arm, already deciding that he wouldn’t give it his full effort. The vigilante was stronger than he looked, Steve would let it seem like a fight to give him his pride.

Peter gulped when he gripped hands with the national hero, trying desperately not to stick to the man, because that would be awkward. He was so focused on keeping his hands from sticking, that when Tony called out “3-2-1 Start!”, only half of his mind was on actually arm wrestling. The hands didn’t move. Both men, giving a fraction of their actual strength, were at a standstill. Both heroes looked at their hands in surprise, then, as one they began to apply more pressure. Then more, and more. The hands teetered back and forth minutely as the both put more and more force into their arm wrestle.
The rest of the Avengers watched with rapt attention, gaping as the teen’s thin arm battled equally against Steve’s vigorous muscles. Finally, the arms skewed into a definite direction, the team gaping as one arm forced the other closer and closer downwards, the two battling heroes grunting with exertion. Then, miraculously the other rallied from a few centimeters away, pushing their hand completely straight again then towards their side.

CRACK!

The table split. The thin, café table, with one central leg rather than four legs on each corner, couldn’t hold up to the amount of force the two heroes were pushing on it’s opposite sides and completely broke. The two separate sections collapsed onto the heroes’ laps and for a moment there was stunned silence, broken only when the owner burst out of the kitchen, angrily yelling in their original language. Tony got to his feet, immediately promising to cover all charges and then some.

Peter frowned, focusing on letting go of Steve’s hand. “Well… that was interesting.” He glanced at the watch on the Avenger’s wrist. Crap, Mary Jane would be getting out of her theatre thing in less than half an hour. “Um, sorry to destroy and run, but I have a thing happening soon.”

Steve nodded, flexing his hand. “Rematch sometime?”

“Awesome.” Peter breathed, and swung away, his heart pounding in his chest. Had that really worked?
Peter made it to Mary Jane's rehearsal just as it was ending. He even got to see the last few minutes of it before the director called for a meeting to discuss the next practice. Not much was happening, they were still on the early planning days so it was more script reading than anything else, but Peter loved it anyway. MJ was so in her element, so confident. He could watch it forever.

Which was probably really creepy and stalker-ish now that he thought of it. Probably best not to say it out loud.

The girl smiled at him brightly when she spotted him, then her face creased in horror and she rushed forward, cupping his chin and eyeing the large bruise that still throbbed along his cheek. Peter had been grateful for it during lunch because it helped protect his identity, but the girl's focus on it brought it to his mind once more and it started to throb with pain.

“What happened?” She asked, eyes locked on the purpled skin.

“Kraven.” The teen responded. “He got me with his spear.” He flailed, a weak impersonation of the man swinging his weapon, but MJ just tsked.

“Looks painful.”

“It's not so bad. I heal pretty quickly, it'll be gone by tomorrow?”

“Hmm.” The girl suddenly took his arm and started dragging him towards the nearest table.

“Where are we going?”
MJ pushed the boy into one of the chairs and plopped her backpack down in the other. She pulled a variety of cases and bags out of the backpack, so many that Peter was questioning whether she had powers herself. She opened one of the bags to reveal a variety of brushes in various shapes and sizes, and one of the cases to show what looked like an artist’s pallet if the artist was only interested in beige.

“If you go home like that you’ll never get to leave the tower again. I should have a base here that’ll suit you. Now, try not to scrunch up your face too much.” Peter held still as the woman worked, skeptical that it would actually be convincing. Maybe he should think of an excuse. He got pushed by someone hurrying to a safehouse? An elbow to the face from a frantic tourist? A-

“You're lucky the Avengers showed up when they did.” Mary Jane said softly as she spread a paste-like substance over the side of his face. “You could have gotten a lot worse.”

“You saw the fight?” He asked, embarrassed. It wasn't one of his best showings. Well, at least the pre-Avengers part wasn't his best. He liked to think he did pretty well once they showed up to help. She hummed. “Some idiot live-streamed it on YouTube. I have a Spider-Man alert so …”

“That's not safe. They should have-”

“Really? They're not being safe? Really?”

“I have powers. And training now. I never stood around to watch a supervillain fight when I didn't have powers.”

“Yeah right. I bet you would have been right there with a camera even if you weren't Spider-Man.”

Peter opened his mouth to argue and found that he couldn't. It paid too well, and it was pretty fun to get the action shots. He even missed it now that he couldn't take the pictures. “Okay, but consider this: that doesn't mean that it's not stupid.”

The girl laughed. “Okay I'll give you that. I mean, today alone should be evidence enough that you and stupid go hand in hand.”

Peter winched, making the girl tsk as it messed up the makeup she was carefully applying. “I know it was stupid. I didn't realize how bad it was until I got there, and by then it was too late to go back.”

“You wouldn't have turned back.” She said. It wasn't a question. Peter had no clue how she'd come to know him so well but she was right. They were his villains, he never would have left them free to wreak havoc. He wouldn't have left anyone to wreck havoc.

“No. I wouldn't have. I'm sorry.”

She sighed heavily then, expression conflicted. “Don't- don't say you're sorry. Don't be sorry for who you are, you're amazing. I wouldn't want you not to be you but… but I'm still going to be worried.”

That was… fair. “Okay. I'll text you to tell you I'm ok from now on?”

“Be kinda hard to do without your phone.” She said dryly, pulling his cell from her pocket. Before handing it over she took a picture of his face, turning it around to show him the screen.

Peter jumped, eyeing the picture critically, but try as he might he couldn't spot the where the makeup began. He took the girl's actions to be a way of closing the conversation, and gaped freely at the picture.
“Holy- Is that the right cheek? How did you do that?”

“A lot of practice with my friends’ hickies.”

“Not your own?”

“Not yet.” She smirked and Peter blushed a bright red. The boy felt his mind stutter to a stop, and he scrambled to change the topic. “So, texting the Avengers went ok?”

Her smirk grew into a grin, as though she knew exactly what he was thinking. “It was fine. You're lucky they went to help your sorry butt so they didn't have much time to text. I swear Shuri almost gave me a heart attack.”

Peter hummed, scrolling to find the Wakandan's text chain first. The first one after that would have come after the attack started was a screenshot of a news article about the prison escape. The message was simple. “Bruh.”

The next was a screenshot of the live stream that MJ had mentioned, captioned with “BRUH! What about your date???”

Then, less than a minute later “I hope that bunker is romantic.”

MJ had replied to that one, saying “it would be if there weren't a million people here.”

It sounded close enough to what Peter would have said, and he smiled at the girl appreciatively as he skimmed the rest of the short conversation

“Yeah, she does that. The dangers of having a friend who sends one text per sentence instead of sending it all at once.”

MJ hummed at that, but as she was also prone to hitting send before she finished a thought, she couldn't complain. The texts to the Avengers were all pretty standard. She had sent the ‘I'm safe and headed to a safe zone with M.J’ message almost immediately after they separated, preempting any questions from the team. Steve and Sam had both given single word replies on their way to the battle, Nat hadn't bothered and neither had Rhodes. Tony had apparently been chatting with ‘Peter’ the whole time he was flying to the fight, stopping only when he'd been distracted by Spider-Man. Which was ironic when you thought about it.

MJ had done a good job, and Peter grinned as he read through the messages, so focused on them that he didn't notice when Mary Jane sombered.

“Peter…” She began, in a tone that nearly sent his Spidey-sense tingling. His eyes went to her almost immediately, but she was looking down, fiddling with the last brush she'd yet to put away. “I think we're being stupid… about all of this.”

“What?” Peter felt his heart fall.

“It doesn’t really matter if we say we’re just friends, it's not like that actually makes me any safer as if any villains or paparazzi or anyone saw us together, they would just assume we’re dating. And even if they don’t, or if we convinced them that we aren’t, then what? Are they going to be like ‘oh, you’re not dating, you’re just friends. I won’t bother you then, I only care about kidnapping girlfriends’. Dating, not dating, it’s not going to make any difference.”

“Oh.” Peter looked down, doing what he could to hide the fact that his heart was breaking. This was good, it was smart even. She would be safer this way, and that was more important than- then she
was kissing him.

Peter leaned into the kiss for a moment, savoring it, then he pulled back, utterly confused. “I thought you just said…”

“That there was no reason to pretend to just be friends when we both clearly want to date each other? Yes, that’s exactly what I said.”

“But… but all those points you made before…”

“They were true… at the time. We’d barely met, I was still processing everything, and honestly everything was just going very fast. I don’t typically exchange secret identities until after the second date.” She smirked at him for a moment before growing serious again. “But then… I know we only met in person once, but we text every single day, have been for over a month. I know things about you that no one else does, and you know more about me than my ex and two of my closest friends combined. I… this is still all moving so fast, but it just feels right.”

Peter shook his head roughly, warring at himself. He wanted this so badly, but in his mind’s eye he still saw Gwen falling, felt her weight at the end of his web. “It’s so dangerous, M.J. I’m… I’m scared.”

Her hand gripped his shoulder, and she said a her next words shook him to his core. “You aren’t alone anymore. You have a weird, dysfunctional family that would drop everything the moment you needed help. Between you and the crazy superheroes that love you, I feel bad for any villain who tried to go after me.”

It was like a whole world opened to Peter at the notion, at the realization that he had connections now, both as Spider-Man and as Peter. There were heroes who might have his back if he was in over his head, people who were waiting for Peter to come home and would panic when he didn’t. Other than his strange relationship with Daredevil, Spider-Man had never had that. Peter hadn’t had it since May had died.

More than even that though, greater even than the realization that he finally had people he could call upon, was the hidden implication behind M.J.’s assumption that The Avengers would help Spider-Man rescue Peter’s girlfriend, the implication that if she was ever in trouble and he needed help, he would give up his identity before putting her in danger. And she was right. It wasn’t an assumption made in hubris or self-absorption, it was a statement made by someone who truly knew Peter, who understood him enough to be know what he would do when his back was to the wall. M.J. was right. They had only known each other for a few months, had only met thrice, but had gotten to know each other well enough through constant texts and daily phone calls to be something more.

It just felt right.

“Ok.” He said, with a soft smile, and if their next kiss was slightly salty, and his eyes shining wet, well neither of them mentioned it.

Peter practically danced into the common room later that day. He was grinning from ear to ear, with a spring to his step and his phone blowing up with texts from Shuri, the first one he’d told about their relationship becoming official.

His good mood dropped when he came into the common room to see Steve clenching and
unclenching his hand awkwardly as the large screen displayed the same livestream both Shuri and M.J. had showed him. Most of the Avengers were scattered around the room, watching. Wanda and Vision seemed to be especially enthralled since they were the only ones not in the fight. Tony wasn’t in the room, which was surprising, but Peter knew the team well enough to know that this wouldn’t be the only showing of this particular fight.

Sam was the first to notice him, and the man grinned. “Hey Pete, how did things go with M.J.?”

Suddenly a bit of Peter’s good humor returned and he couldn’t stop a smile and blush from simultaneously slipping across his face. Suddenly all eyes were on him, Peter’s love life apparently much more interesting to them that Spider-Man’s fight.

Peter wasn’t completely sure their priorities were really in line, but he wasn’t going to complain.

“We’re uh, we’re officially dating now.” He said shyly, and the entire team cheered, the sound filling the room as the heroes all split into smiles. In a matter of seconds Peter was the recipient of a number of congratulatory black slaps and hugs which would have probably sent a normal kid flying, and in the midst of his happiness he managed to spare a thought to be grateful that they hadn’t actually adopted a normal kid.

Steve clapped Peter’s arm, slightly overzealous, and smiled at the boy. “We’ll need to meet her of course.” He said, reminding Peter of just how old fashioned he was. Not that it was weird for your girlfriend to meet your family, but the way he said it seemed to invoke an earlier time. Peter could only gape at the heroes surrounding him.

“Um… that may be a little… overwhelming.”

Natasha smirked. “We’ll invite her to game night. It should be… fun.”

Peter swallowed thickly. “I uh, I thought that game nights had been cancelled since you broke the tower playing spoons.”

She hummed. “Very fun.”

Oh no, what had Peter gotten her into? Before Peter could reply, Tony burst into the room carrying a box that was littered with holes.

“Oh, kid you’re here. Good, you see this?” He gestured to the scene on the screen, which was currently showing the moment Spider-Man webbed Vulture and kept him from flying off. The scientist was clearly too distracted by the Spider-Man mystery to catch the unusual atmosphere in the room. Then again, Peter was often surrounded by excited Avengers when he was in the common room, so the man could be forgiven for not noticing.

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“Underoos?” Peter questions, momentarily too distracted by the nickname to notice the rest of Tony’s words. They hit a moment later, and panic rose in his chest as Stark gestured wildly at Steve, trying to convey that the man should explain.
The blonde nodded, “His hands weren’t… sticky, not like that webbing that you guys like to play
with. At first it felt like just a normal hand, but then it started to feel… weird. When he let go, it
reminded me more of… pricker bushes, more than something sticky.”

“Exactly!” Tony exclaimed, setting the box down gently on the table and opening it to reveal the
*biggest* spider Peter had ever seen. Rhodes cursed and jumped back, and Steve recoiled. Peter leaned
forward, trying to get a better look at the small beast. Wanda jumped at first, but joined Peter a
moment later. Sam and Natasha both just rolled their eyes. The inventor gestured at Steve. “Let
Beatrice here climb on your hand, tell me how it feels.”

Steve’s nose scrunched in disgust. “What?”

“C’mon Cap, don’t be a baby.”

“You do realize he’s not actually a spider, right?”

“Do you realize that Princess Wakanda and I have spent hours trying to figure out how he sticks to
stuff? We assumed he used similar technology to his web-shooters, some kind of adhesive solution.
If he actually replicated how insects and spiders stick to stuff, that’s a game changer. Are you really
going to let your squeamishness get in the way of science.”

Peter tried to ignore the cold feeling in his chest that always grew when someone on the team seemed
to be getting closer to discovering his secret. To try and keep his face from giving something away
he focused on the spider, gently stroking the large thorax. The tarantula, clearly domesticated,
accepted his touch calmly and Peter marveled at the bristly fuzz.

“Come on man,” Tony cajoled. “Look, even the kid likes her.”

Steve sighed, sounding extremely put-upon, and held out his hand. Tony tipped the cage slightly,
prompting the spider to scurry forward.

“How did you even get a spider so fast?” Natasha asked, leaning forward as well, though she was
watching Steve’s grimace rather than the arachnid.

“Money.” Tony answered easily.

Beatrice hesitantly began crawling onto Steve’s hand, though she only got 3 legs up before the man
suddenly yanked his hand back. “Yep, that was it. Just like that, magnified.”

Tony’s eyes seemed almost manic and he grinned. “Yes! Now I just need a working prototype and I
can rub it in her face! ‘Limitations’ she said, I’ll show her.” He whirled on Peter and Wanda, who
were both still cooing over the tarantula. The arachnid was waving a leg up at Peter, eyeing both of
the teens with its multiple eyes. “Nobody tells Shuri. I’m going to win this time.”

“This time?” Wanda asked. “When did you lose to her before?”

“The instant she stepped foot in my lab.” Tony admitted with a grimace.

“Can we keep Beatrice?”

Rhodes shuddered at the questions and Steve grimaced when the spider began crawling onto Peter’s
hand, but Tony just nodded with a wave.

“Sure, sure. Peter, this is an amazing discovery, it changes everything. He isn’t sticking to things,
he’s gripping them. How strong is this? How does temperature affect it? Can he stick to anything?
Would he stick to a non-stick pan?” It took every ounce of self control Peter possessed not to immediately go into the kitchenette to check. “I have a million theories, come on Peter, to the lab.”

“Later.” Natasha said firmly and Tony let out a noise that was between a huff and a whine. “Now, we have to plan a lovely evening to meet Peter’s official girlfriend.”

Immediately Tony lost every hint of nervous energy as he completely focused on Peter. “Girlfriend? When did that happen.”

Peter grinned as he made his way to his room, Beatrice had crawled into his hair during the night and seemed to like hiding in it. Tony had ordered a Tarantula environment as they talked, and as he’d said earlier ‘money’, so it was already in his room by the time he went in for the night. He carefully extracted Beatrice from his hair and set her in the sandy cage. He watched her wander around for a bit before pulling out his phone and snapping a picture to send to MJ in the morning. She’d said before they’d separated that she was going to bed early that night because she had an early morning the next day, which also meant that he had a few more hours before he had to invite her to what would probably be one of the most fun yet stressful nights of his life.

And yes, that was taking his crime fighting into consideration.

The Avengers had been far too enthusiastic when planning the future game night, and Peter knew it would have gone far into the evening had the team not been called away by a pale Pepper to a confidential meeting. Peter was dying to listen into the meeting. It had to be about the fight earlier that day. Did they want Spider-Man to join the accords? Did they think he was a criminal and want to arrest him? Did they want the Avengers to really try to figure out who he was? He would give anything to be a fly on the wall of- his new listening device! Hadn’t he just been bragging to M.J. about it? Finally he had a chance to try it out!

With a last smile at his new friend, Peter slipped into the hidden bunker beneath his bed. He shook the suit lightly, wincing when it caused a puff of sand to poof around it. He had a feeling this would be a lot harder to wash than his old suit.

Turning the suit around, his heart sank when he found the spot where he’d hidden the listening devices to be empty and bare.

He slumped into the room’s only chair, disappointed. He’d worked really hard at that, spent several nights staying up late to create ways to make it move, enhancing it’s range, getting rid of white noise. Now it was just gone, lost in the midst of a fight he would have lost were it not for the Avengers.

The teen sighed, fiddling with the receiver just to give his hands something to do. He’s been in such a good mood only a few minutes ago, now he was just… grumpy. It was a pretty busy day, filled with ups and downs. He could probably be forgiven for-

SHHHHahhheerrrAHHHHSHHHHHAHHHHSKKKECCCKCKCK

Peter jumped back, pushing the transmitter away from him at the shock of the loud noise. He scrambled, arms flailing as he attempted to lower the volume. He recognized that sound though, he’d heard it with sand muffling his ears when his mouth and eyes were full of grit. His listening device was in the Sandman, it must have fallen off when the villain had swarmed him.

This was actually great! He didn’t have a tracker on the device, hadn’t had time to install one yet, but maybe he could get some hints to where the baddies were hiding out.

Peter closed his eyes, focusing intently on the bug. He used the techniques Daredevil had shared
with him so long ago, once he’d discovered Peter’s enhanced senses. He filtered through the jarring, ceaseless white noise, fighting beyond it. It took a while, but finally he was able to focus on the bits and pieces of an actual conversation on the other side.

“-d to find a way to swat that spider for once and for all if we’re ever going to get any peace.” Vulture. He sounded furious, like he was ready to come after Peter with a rolled up newspaper that instant.

“That didn’t work out so well last time.” It was harder to hear these words, as the sand seemed to shift and move in time with the voice, which meant that it was probably Sandman.

“Don’t you have anything?” Shocker asked, sounding disdainful. Peter strained to hear the next speaker, hoping that he would be able to distinguish who they were. That might help him find them.

“If I did,” A grumbling voice replied. “Then I would have defeated him myself. I can improve on your weapons, but I do not have anything guaranteed to kill the pest.” The Tinkerer. What was with all of his villains being buddy-buddy all of a sudden? Though, this one made more sense than the rest as he and Vulture had teamed up in the past. Well, the good news was, Peter was pretty sure that he was holed up in Queens somewhere, and it would be hard for four villains together to lay low. If he patrolled in the area, he was pretty sure he could- “Although… I might know of something that might.”

Peter felt himself grow cold. Something ‘guaranteed to kill the pest?’ what could it be?

“It’s called a Spider-Slayer,*” Pepper pulled up a rough sketch of a robotic weapon onto the screen. “The CIA pulled it when they raided one of the remaining S.H.E.I.L.D bunkers in Jersey a few weeks ago. They’re still holding them in a warehouse in New York, for now.” That happened occasionally. S.H.E.I.L.D, which had remained operating illegally in the shadows ever since their HYDRA roots had been revealed, still excelled at remaining hidden. Every once in a while a branch or bunker was discovered, but no one was fooling themselves into thinking they would ever stamp them out completely.

“Spider-Slayers?” Sam repeated, one brow raised. “As in, the bugs or the kid in spandex whose butt we just saved?”

“According to the data they were able to decipher, the blueprints were started shortly after Spider-Man began growing notoriety on social media. They wanted a way to combat his powers if he should prove to be a threat. The CIA agents didn’t find any prototypes, likely because Spider-Man proved himself to be a hero, but-”

“But this thing is tricked out.” Tony said, frowning and flipping through the scant notes Pepper had provided. “Extremely durable, incredible horsepower and firepower. This weapon… this is hardcore. I would say it was overkill, but…” He glanced at Steve, but the soldier was already nodded.

“But he’s much stronger than me. He was about to destroy me in that arm wrestle when the table broke, and that’s not even considering his other enhancements.” The man grimaced. “I’m… glad he isn’t our enemy.”

“Well,” Pepper interjected before they got distracted. “These blueprints, geared towards defeating someone more powerful than Steve, are now in the hands of the U.S. Government, and Ross is angling for them to begin building them.”
“Why?” Natasha asked, her eyes hard.

“Because we didn’t get official clearance to fight. Now, the council agreed that you stepping in was warranted and welcome, but Ross is still kicking up a fuss. He doesn’t like the fact that his plans didn’t get the Avengers in his pocket. But of course he can’t say that. Instead, he can only try to point out when something doesn’t go to plan. He’s claiming that they need something strong enough to contain and fight you guys if you ever, quote, go rogue. He’s been saying that since I first presented the compromise, but now he has what he thinks is enough of a precedent to actually get his way. More than that, he has something that might actually work.”

She gestured to the blueprints, and the room was silent. No one dared to speak, remembering the arguments that had surrounded the team when the Sokovia Accords question was first raised. Finally, Rhodey spoke with a sigh. “Now, you all know that I was one of the stronger proponents for the Accords since the beginning, but everything I’ve got is telling me that Ross should not get his hands on this thing.”

Immediately the room rose into a clatter of agreement, until it was broken by a single question from Wanda. “What are we going to do to stop it?” The room was immediately silenced, all eyes turning to her as she continued. “Those blueprints are in the hands of the CIA. They aren’t going to just hand them to us, and if anyone finds out that we stole them, then we’re just proving him right and who knows how they will react.”

“Well,” Sam drawled. “Now sounds like a good time for us to call in an experienced thief with no official ties to the Avengers, doesn’t it.”

Pepper smiled, looking relieved. “How long do you think it will take Lang to get here?”

Tony, who was already on the phone with a charter air company in San Francisco, replied. “Six hour flight, but my buddy on the phone here thinks he could make it in five.”

Sam nodded, calling the shrinking hero. “If Lang is as good as he says he is, we’ll have those blueprints tonight.”

“We’ll move tomorrow.” Vulture said definitively, and none of the others argued. “We need time to plan, but we have to move quickly, we can’t be the only ones who know about this. We’ll meet in the morning. This thing will be ours by this time tomorrow night.” The others mumbles their ascent, and soon there was nothing but the static-y sound of shifting sound coming from the transmitter. Still Peter didn’t move, could barely breathe. He felt nauseous. Someone had invented some kind of super-robot for the sole purpose of killing him, and if these things was as impressive as they sounded, they would work.

Peter let out a deep shuddering breath, closing his eyes. When he opened them again his eyes were hard, determined. The villains weren’t going after the blueprints until tomorrow? Fine, he would move tonight.

And by move, he meant sit at his computer and try and figure out where exactly the blueprints were being held as it wasn’t something that came up as the villains were talking. It took a while because it was hacking the CIA, but couple of hours later he finally had the location. Now he just had to get there.

Standing firm, Peter donned his suit for the second time that day. Exhaustion pulled at him, but he
knew that his night was far from over.

He really hoped that this went smoothly.

He doubted it would.

Chapter End Notes

*Spider-Slayers are a real thing! They are in the Ultimate Spider-Man comics (The only ones I’ve read all the way through). They were invented by S.H.E.I.L.D. when Fury wasn’t sure if Spider-Man was a good guy or a bad guy yet. They were specifically created as a way to take down Spider-Man, but I figure since Peter was so strong, the other Avengers wouldn’t want to face it either.

Also... Peter, what are you doing. You weren't supposed to KEEP the spider.
Hey guys!! Hope you had a great New Year! Sorry this chapter was a little slow, holidays were busy. And unfortunately, the next one probably won't come out too soon either. The company I work for had decided that since my office was now in its super slow period, and pretty much every other office was going to be in their busy season, some of us could go work for another client for a second busy season. YAY! I knew it going into the company, so it's not like they sprung it on me, and they're paying for my hotel, rental car, flights, and perdiem, so it's not bad, but I still don't have much time for writing, unfortunately.

But take heart, this fic will not be abandoned!! Chapters may not come out often, but I promise they are coming. I have a definite plan for this fic., I know what I want to happen, and I love writing it. It will come, but... not necessarily super soon...

With that said, enjoy some fluff!!

This was the coolest thing to ever happen to Scott Lang. It was even cooler than when Pym gave him his suit, cooler than going subatomic, cooler than defeating Yellowjacket. This was an actual mission for the Avengers. Sure Sam had called him when the whole Sokovia thing had happened, but he hadn’t actually gotten to do anything, hadn’t had the chance to show off his many skills. Now, all he had to do was break into a top secret C.I.A. storage facility and steal a computer chip with the blueprints for the big-bad-Spider-Slayers that had the Avengers all worried.

No big deal, he’d stolen from a S.H.I.E.L.D. base before, this couldn’t be that much harder. In no time at all the Avengers would think he was a master thief who totally deserved more action. Yep, easy peasy.

He’d spent the entire flight trying to convince himself of that and still hadn’t quite managed it.

The storage facility was quiet, almost suspiciously so. Taking a deep breath, the man looked down to the ant he was riding.

“You ready for this?”

The ant’s antennae waved in agreement and Scott urged his small army onward.

The first sign that something might be wrong was the open window that they used to enter the stronghold. Not cracked, open- as in wide open. It was a security threat if Lang ever saw one.

The next sign was the security guards. They weren’t patrolling, in fact they weren’t even mobile. The halls were littered with the evidence of a fight, and the guards were prone on the ground, tied up by some kind of rope, though whatever battle had just happened had damaged the lights too much for him to get a good look at it.

Taking a deep breath, Ant-Man sent the command to his ants to be prepared, even as he pressed the button to return to normal size. Looked like someone else had the same plan as the Avengers, likely
with much less noble goals. In any case, he knew he wasn’t getting out of this without a fight.

Assuming he wasn’t already too late. The heavily fortified door to the vault hiding the bunker’s more valuable objects hung half-open, the other thief clearly not afraid that they’d missed any guards. They likely hadn’t, if the number of human-shaped lumps he’d seen before were anything to go off of.

Gripping a Pym Particle disk, Scott charged into the vault, seeking the villain that dared tried to steal the thing he had come to steal.


The blue and red clad figure whirled from where was he crouched over a display case, a very obvious computer chip in hand. The vigilante's head cocked to the side, seeming inhuman in his suit. “Um, Yeah. I am. Who are you?”

“I’m Ant-Man!”

“Ant-Man.” The vigilante deadpanned, and even through the mask Scott got the impression that one brow was raised skeptically. “Really?”

“Spider-Man.” The thief replied in the same tone. “Really?”

The hero on the podium shrugged, but inclined his head as though to give Scott a point. “Well, this was a fun conversation and all, but I’ve got places to go, people to see, sleep to sleep..” He tried to swing through the open door but Scott moved to block his way.

“Like who? Miss Mary Muppet?” Lang had always been on the ‘hero’ side of the Spider-Man debate, but he knew how dangerous that chip was and there was no way he would let a possible menace get away with it. And even if he did trust Spider-Man, he couldn’t fail his first real Avengers mission. No way. He was finally in the cool club, and there was no way a this guy was getting him kicked out.

Spidey jumped back. His head turned to the side as he observed Scott and the doorway beyond. He looked up, to the vent in the ceiling. With a ‘thwip’ he shot a piece of webbing to pull him up. “Well, have fun ruining a picnic or something, but I’m off.”

No sooner had the red-clad hand touched the grate than the black metal was painted red with the bodies of thousands of fire ants. Spider-Man actually shrieked and dropped the webbing, landing in a heap on the floor. He looked up at Scott in confusion. The honorary Avenger puffed out his chest in pride.

“Ant-Man.”

Spider-Man looked back to the swarming mass protecting the grate. There was a note of awe in his voice when he spoke. “Wish I could do that with spiders. Crime in New York would drop to zero in like, one night.” Then, he somehow went from a crumpled mess on the ground to actually flipping to his feet. That was so cool. The younger hero glanced from the door to his adversary. Scott grinned from behind the mask.

“Don’t get me wrong. I’m a big fan, but you’re not leaving here with that chip.” And then he charged.

Peter managed to jump out of the way nimbly, leaping again as Ant-Man continued the assault. The
teen eyed his villain warily. He didn’t know who this guy was, or how he somehow team up with ants, but these blueprints could destroy Peter. They were made to destroy him. He needed to find a way past this guy without giving up the chip. “You do realize that spiders eat ants, right?”

Ant-Man stopped, horrified. “Are you threatening to eat me?”

“Wha-no! I just mean that, you know, according to nature I’ll win.”

“Ok good. Honestly things are getting so weird these days, cannibalism wouldn’t even surprise me. Though, I would really rather it not come from someone whose face is on my daughter’s favorite shirt.” Speaking of, he couldn’t wait to tell Cassie about this.

“I need to find a way to get royalties from that.”

“I think Tony Stark already owns you.”

Spider-Man tensed unexpectedly at that, giving Scott time to get a lucky hit in, before simply muttering “Of course he does,” and jumping away again.

“Also,” Scott held up the chip, smirking like the pick-pocket he was. “I now “own” this, so if you’ll excuse me.”

“Hey!” Peter shouted, shooting a stream of web to grab the chip, but Scott yanked it out of the way.

Peter scowled before suddenly smiling, turning to the door and covering it liberally in webs, covering the whole room in white, adhesive silly string. The flying ants were stuck to the sticky substance, a maze of white surrounding the area around the two men.

“Come into my parlor,” Peter smirked at the seemingly trapped man confidently.

“I think that poem was about a fly, not an ant.”

Peter shrugged. “Lit was never my favorite subject.”

“Of course. Menace-ing. The only reasonable response to failing English.”

“I said it wasn’t my favorite subject, not that I failed.”

“Uh huh. Cause stealing stuff from a creepy warehouse in a weird outfit totally screams honor roll.”

“Dude. Look at where you are and what you’re wearing.”

“… Okay. Point Spiderman.”

“Yes!”

“But-“ And Scott turned to the door, began running at the webbing even as Spidey behind him yelled that he couldn’t break it. At the last second, he shrunk, slotting perfectly between a handful of strands. He regrew when he made it to the other side, smiling back at where Spider-Man was openly gaping. “I got this. So, a thousand points to Ant-Man. I win! Better luck next time, itsy bitsy. Again, big fan.”

With that, he shrunk once more, disappearing into the rough ground surrounding the warehouse as Peter stood gaping still, momentarily trapped by his own webbing.

“What the heck just happened?” He asked the room, but there was no reply beyond the faint buzzing of the wings of the stuck ants.
“It’s Wednesday, my dudes.” Peter groaned, the sound mixing with the strangled scream that came from the Vine Shuri sent to wake him up once a week. He smacked his hand on his phone unenthusiastically, feeling exhaustion simmering. He’d only gotten back from his escapade a little over four hours ago. Then he’d had to take off and hide his suit, then came an hour of silent panic that some unknown stranger had made off with the weapons specifically designed to kill him. All in, he would be survived if he had managed to sleep more than an hour or two.

With a tired groan the teen rose to his feet, his tired mind so muddled that he didn’t even consider the fact that there was no reason why he couldn’t stay in bed. He didn’t bother changing out of pajamas or brushing his hair, only taking the time to grab Beatrice before heading down the breakfast room. He needed the emotional support.

At some point during the long, defeated trek back from the CIA facility he’d realized there he was out of options. If the Spider Slayers, weapons specifically designed to defeat and kill him, created by the most prestigious secret agents in the world, were in the hands of some villain, this wasn’t something he could handle alone. His secret wasn’t worth his life, he had to come clean to the Avengers and ask for their help.

A coldness formed in his chest, a ball of anxiety and dread that served to wake him up as he waited in the elevator. Would they be mad at him for keeping this a secret? Would they hate him? They seemed to like working with Spider-Man, but what if they decided they still didn’t want to be associated with him publicly?

The thoughts followed Peter out of the elevator and into the breakfast nook. What would it mean for Peter if they didn’t want to be seen with Spider-Man and they actually knew who he was? Would they still want to train him? Would they— who was that?

Peter blinked sleepily at the strange man sitting at the table, his plate laden with orange slices and pastries, for some odd reason. “Um…”

Suddenly the man turned to him and brightened, though he had distinct bags under his eyes. “Hey! You must be Peter!” He jumped his feet and came in to shake Peter’s hand, which the teen accepted unthinkingly. “Eh,” The man said. “I’m more of a hugger.” The man drew Peter into a hug, for which he was grateful for, as he had no clue what his face was doing at the moment because…

“Scott Lang,” Sam said, nodding at the man as he released Peter from the hug. “Master thief, electrical engineer, and reserve Avenger known as Ant-Man.”

Yep. That’s who Peter thought it was. “Ant-Man?” His hazy brain questioned, still far from comprehending what the supposed villain from the night before was doing in his home. “Reserve Avenger? Like T’Challa? How many of those are there?”

“Hm, I think you know all of them now.” Natasha said, as though disappointed that the team didn’t have more secrets.

Scott was still smiling at Peter brightly, and Peter’s tired brain was slowly working through the fact that technically the Avengers had stolen the blueprints the night before, not a villain. He was so relieved he found himself grinning back. “It’s, um, really great to meet you.”

“Yeah, same! My daughter,” Crap, the daughter who has a Spider-Man shirt? No, he didn’t have to
give up his secret identity anymore, please please don’t say anything. Even if you figured it out, please don’t. “is like, super interested in the idea of me technically, secretly having a son I’ve never met. She put a google alert for you on my computer labeled ‘Cassie’s Brother’.”

“She sounds awesome.”

“Oh she is. Here, look,” He began to pull out his phone, but before he could get it fully out of his pocket Sam pushed at him lightly.

“Go sit down and eat, let the kid get himself some food.”

Scott nodded, bobbing his head so fast he looked like a cartoon character. Peter, his mood rapidly improving with the realization that he could keep his secret and wasn’t in any danger (well, at least no more than he typically was on a day to day basis) loaded up his plate quickly with protein rich foods and an extra large cup of coffee. He made a point of sitting next to Scott, who also had a large mug, though his was almost empty.

Scott brightened when Peter sat next to him, and the teen looked around the room to see that Tony, Steve, and Vision were all gone. Wanda, Sam and Natasha were chatting with Scott, though Rhodes and Pepper were sitting slightly apart, speaking in low, serious tones, too low for the others to hear, though Peter could hear them clearly. They were discussing a potential fallout with the secretary of state, which Peter realized probably had something to do with stealing from the CIA.

Peter wanted to hear more, but his face split into a large yawn. Wanda smirked at him. “Stay up late talking to Mary Jane? Is she excited about game night?” One of the best things about hiding things from the Avengers was that they were all forward-thinkers, which meant that they typically gave him excuses before he even had to think of them.

“Um, I haven’t asked her yet. I stayed up all night trying to think of a way to invite her.” Which probably would have been true if he hadn’t spent the night trying to, you know, not die.

Wanda grinned at him. “Aww.”

“Who’s MJ?” Scott asked through a full mouth, mischievousness lighting in her eyes.

“She’s um, she’s my girlfriend.” Peter turned bright red as he said the word out loud, though he couldn’t stop the small hint of a smile curling at his lips.

“Awwww. You’re adorable.” He reached forward at the carafe of coffee sitting on the table.

“Game night?”

“My suggestion.” Natasha said gesturing up with a piece of bacon, and Sam nodded.

“We thought it might be less stressful than a fancy dinner.”

Natasha gave a dismissive hum. “How someone plays a game can tell you more about them than one would think.”

“Wait, is that why you suggested game night? So you can like, super-spy analyze her? Oh man, this is going to be a disaster.”

Natasha waved a hand dismissively. “She won’t know.”

Peter spluttered incoherently at that, which made Wanda laugh. However, any actual response he may have had left his mind as Sam jumped up with a large curse.
“Scott, what did I tell you about letting your ants around the food?”

Peter looked over and didn’t have to fake the marvel on his face as he watched a pair of ants drop sugar cubes into the man’s cup.

“Woah,” He breathed, still as completely enthralled by his control over the insects as he had been during the fight.

“Sorry Sam, I forgot.” The insects scurried off the table, and Peter followed them with his eyes as they disappeared into the carpet.

“Woah.” He repeated, turning to look at Scott. He’d clearly seen the ants the night before, but it somehow seemed more impressive in such a mundane setting. “You can control ants? How?”

“Science-stuff. I’m lead to believe you’re smart enough to understand it, but maybe not over breakfast. Or when I only had like, three hours of sleep and some serious jetlag.”

“Oh,” Peter’s heart beat in his chest as he realized that he had an opportunity to talk about the night before, potentially without revealing that he’d been there. Hopefully. He was pretty tired, but he was also tired enough to ignore how bad of an idea this was. “What, uh, what happened? Why are you so… tired. Unless, unless it’s a secret or something.” He amended when all other eyes turned to him.

Pepper sighed heavily. “I’d really rather not tell you and save from having to lie, but…” She closed her eyes and breathed deeply through her nose. “But you may be asked some questions and it would be helpful if you had the right answers, and honestly, I’d rather tell you now than wait for Tony and Steve to argue about it for an hour.”

Rhodes pursed his lips, and Wanda and Sam shared a glance, but no one actively argued. Natasha even nodded. Scott didn’t offer an opinion, his expression reminiscent of when you were at a friends house waiting for their family to finish a discussion.

After a beat of silence Pepper nodded. She gave Peter a quick run-down of the situation, and he felt a knot in his chest as he realized that he had an opportunity to talk about the night before, potentially without revealing that he’d been there. Hopefully. He was pretty tired, but he was also tired enough to ignore how bad of an idea this was. “What, uh, what happened? Why are you so… tired. Unless, unless it’s a secret or something.” He amended when all other eyes turned to him.

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picture, as it was impossible for the chefs to keep up with the erratic schedules of the Avengers. Sometimes Steve or Natasha came to breakfast after a three hour morning workout. Sometimes Sam woke up in the middle of the night with nightmares and went for a jog instead of going back to sleep. Sometimes, everyone on the team woke up five minutes before breakfast and not really hungry. The egg pan was a compromise for when members found themselves suddenly in need of extra protein in the morning. The fridge in the kitchenette was always primed with cartons of eggs and omelette ingredients, ready for an Avenger’s use. That wasn’t what Peter was interested in at the moment however. The egg pan was non-stick.

Tony’s words from the night before rose into his mind, but half the Avengers were in the room, it would be idiotic to test it out now. Of course, within the last 24 hours Peter had fought six of his most powerful visions, started officially dating the girl of his dreams, told the Avengers about dating said girl, broken into a CIA facility, fought another superhero, and became a spider parent, all on a few scant hours sleep. So, he wasn’t exactly thinking straight as he slid over and, as subtle as possible, pressed the palm of his hand onto the pan. The cooking implement lifted cleanly and easily, just like any other pan. It was almost funny how anticlimactic it-

“Whatcha doing there?” Scott’s too-close voice asked, and Peter whirled. Spinning so fast that Beatrice, who had been happily nestled in his hair, practically went flying, and only Peter’s supernatural senses kept her from going splat on the ground. As it was, he managed to flip the pan behind his back and grab the handle just in time to catch her with the pan, and he even managed to kept it behind his back as he turned to face Scott.

“Oh, I just-” He scrambled for an excuse, but Lang was right there, and craned around to see behind him. The man jerked back with a slight yelp, but then immediately started to grin.

“Woah, is that a tarantula?”

Peter reluctantly brought the pan our in front of him, then realized that once again the universe had cut him a major break. The day after he’d had to fight six of his heroes at once. He had the weirdest luck.

“Um, yeah. This is Beatrice. She’s my… uh, Tony got her last night as part of an experiment to try and discover who Spider-Man was, and he let me keep her. I, uh, you know, you’re Ant Man, so I didn’t know how you’d feel about… about spiders, cause they sometimes eat ants and…”

“Oh man, that reminds me so much of something Spider-Man said last night!”

Well, the universe couldn’t save him from his own idiocy it seemed.

“What’s this about Spider-Man?” Tony’s voice sounded as he entered the room, beelining straight to the buffet. “Tell me everything.”

This… could either be yet another lucky break, or a disaster. But then again, pretty much every other moment could be defined the same exact way.
Ant-Man was awesome. Peter’d had to bite his lips to keep from correcting the man's somewhat exaggerated retelling of his battle with Spider-Man, but if anything his rendition made it even funnier than it had felt at the time. When Tony, ever the Spider-Man fanboy, insisted on an extremely detailed play-by-play of the fight, Scott had simply grinned or laughed whenever they had pointed out that certain parts didn't completely align with the earlier story.

“If you think I'm bad, you should try talking to my friend Luis.” He'd said, and Sam groaned. Apparently he remembered Luis.

The Avengers eventually agreed that it wouldn't have been the end of the world if Spider-Man had gotten the blueprints, but they were much happier to have them safely stored in the tower.

Peter wholeheartedly agreed.

The conversation soon turned to how Sam and Scott had met, and Peter nearly busted a gut at the back and forth storytelling as both men constantly interrupted each other to protest. “No no no, don’t believe a word of what Tiny here says, Sure, he shrunk right in front of me and it threw me off for a second-“

“Heh, way more than a second, thank you very much!”

“But then I scanned the grass and found him, and I-“

“You tried to stomp me like I was a cockroach, is what you did. Stomping all over like a person in an old cartoon trying to squish a mouse.”

“Excuse you, I was the paradigm of grace.”

By the end of it Peter was in stitches, and was very relieved to know that he wasn’t the only superhero Scott had managed to steal something from. Scott then demanded a rematch, and soon the whole team, including Pepper who had taken a rare personal day (likely so that she could have time to figure out what to do about the inevitable temper tantrum from Ross) were rushing to the obstacle course. Natasha set up the course on the ropes course, Rhodes set up some obstacles along the track, and Tony worked on programming the padded basic drones that they used as practice enemies. Peter simply stood on the viewing platform with Steve, Vision and Wanda. Vision held Peter’s phone at his request, video app open. He could get the best angles with all of the flying, though Peter’s trusty camera was in the teen’s own hands as he practically vibrated with excitement.

Sam and Scott lined up at the starting line, grinning broadly and jesting with one another. Within a few moments of Scott’s challenge, all of the Avengers, sans the two competitors, were leaning forward on the obstacle course eager to watch. Peter recalled doing the same thing when T’Challa had come to visit, and idly wondered if he should talk Tony into emptying out a level of the building...
Tony was currently reclining in one of the seats on the viewing platform, a drink already in had and glee in his eyes. He looked to Peter almost like the caricature of a Roman emperor looking over the gladiator ring, though without all of the bloodlust. “Alright, F.R.I.D.A.Y.,” The man called, lifting his glass in a toast to no one as the rest of the Avengers cheered. “Count ‘em off.”

“One… Two… Three.” Horns blared, and the two men ran. Neither bothered with climbing up to the platforms for the ropes course. Sam’s wings stretched out and Scott shrunk and rode an ant. Sam got there first, obviously, but per Natasha’s rules they had to actually maneuver the course, not simply fly through it, and Scott had worked more on his flexibility and… parkour for lack of a better word. The two were almost even running through the track, jumping over objects and obstacles left and right, but Scott passed the finish line well ahead of Sam, sneakily evading the ‘enemies’ as his opponent systematically defeated them.

“Nuh-uh!” Sam shouted as he crossed over as well. “No way man, you just shrunk down and skirted around the enemies, you didn’t even try to fight ‘em. Cheat!”

“That wasn’t in the rules!” Scott sputtered.

“It wasn’t- it was implied.”

“Who?”

“Everyone!” Wanda yelled down, a smirk on her face.

“I want a rematch.”

“He called next!” Steve yelled out, and Peter had a surreal moment as he heard the voice of the great America calling ‘next’ like a couple of teenagers fighting over a fooze ball table.

“I called winner.” Natasha said easily, which then set off a clambering of calling ‘next’ and fighting over who would go against who. Peter simply grinned and flipped through the pictures on his camera. This was the best. These were some of his best work.

Vision silently handed Peter his phone and the two shared a smile as the others continued to battle. However, after handing the device off, the man rose to be above the others’ heads.

“I propose…” He said in his calm, serious voice, a voice that seemed to echo out regardless of what he said. “Capture the flag.”

There was a moment of silence. Then, from Tony, “Oh heck yes.”

Tony actually hired people to come in to set up the whole floor. Or rather, he called Happy and Happy was the one to actually call in and oversee the crews, but regardless the team was soon waiting excitedly in the main area, chattering as the entire training floor was converted into a battle scene to rival the most prestigious summer camp.

Happy had offered to let Peter hide the ‘flags’, since ‘he can’t play’.

That had been the wrong thing to say. He’d received the glare of no less than four Avengers.

“And why can’t he play?” Rhodes had asked.
“I’ll tell you why.” Tony responded. “Because he is the strongest one among us. His power? Those big brown eyes that none of us can say no to. We are all defenseless against it.”

Peter rolled his eyes, willing his heart to stop beating as he remembered Arm-wrestling with the strongest Avenger present.

Rhodes rolled his eyes, gesturing at Natasha, Sam, and Steve. “We’ve been training Peter for months. We’re not sending him out to fight supervillains, but trust me, he’s plenty good to play.”

Sam and Steve nodded at this, while Nat simply smirked. Peter gaped. Was this real? Was he, as Peter Parker not as Spider-Man, being deemed competent enough to play a game with the Avengers? This was the coolest thing ever.

“Woah,” Scott breathed, “trained by the Avengers, that’s amazing.”

“It’s Awesome.” Peter agreed, giddy with excitement. “Like, the coolest thing ever. When it’s not incredibly tiring and painful, which it usually is, but it’s still awesome.”

Natasha snorted. “Don’t let Peter fool you, he was reckless, sneaky, and following superheroes around long before we got a hold of him.”

“Oh yeah, the picture thing.”

“Yeah,” Peter nodded, turning the camera still in his hands around to present the display screen to the hero. He flipped to one of the better photos he’d taken of the fight. He’d gotten lucky and caught the moment he started to shrink, the movement causing a blur that made it clear what was happening. In another picture Sam and Scott were neck and neck running through the track, and their forms were beautifully clear.

“Wow, this is fantastic.” Scott admired, and Peter blushed, but smiled back.

Pepper frowned at the picture. “Peter, these are absolutely lovely, as always. Unfortunately… you can’t distribute these. We are doing what we can to make sure nobody knows about Scott’s part on the team, for now we still have the element of surprise and he can’t be traced back to us.

“No, no. I… I know. I just…” Peter lowered the camera.

Pepper smiled. “I didn’t say not to take pictures, I just wanted you to be aware.”

“Right, right.”

Scott cut in then. “You know, Mr. ex-spider-man photographer, I have a daughter who would absolutely love a one of a kind picture if you have any.”

Peter brightened. “Yeah! I had some really good ones I was saving for when I really needed the cash.”

Somehow, showing Scott the pictures transitioned into telling highly edited stories of things ‘Spider-Man’ did, which turned into Scott’s heist stories, which turned into non-heist stories, which simply transitioned into chatting.

Scott was actually surprisingly attentive as well. They had just gotten lunch, maybe an hour or so after stopping with the obstacle course, when he suddenly turned to Peter and suggested “You know, if you haven’t texted the girl about the game night yet, I suggest making it seem casual, like, not a ‘meet the Avengers’ thing, more like a ‘meet the parents like thing’.” The man then frowned. “Actually, that might have made it less casual. Ignore that. I’m just saying, if you like this girl, then
she must be pretty awesome. And you’re awesome, and the Avengers are obviously awesome, no question about it. You all have that in common, so don’t stress out about it too much.”

“Oh, uh thanks.”

Scott had then turned away to say something to one of the others, but the comment had made Peter pause and pull out his phone. He stared at it for a moment before taking a deep breath and sending, as Scott had suggested, a simple straightforward text.

*Hey M.J., I told the Avengers about what we talked about yesterday. Man he was glad he was texting, he would have stuttered like five times if he’d had to say that before. They want to meet you. Would you be interested in a game night sometime this week?*

He was rewarded with an almost immediate reply.

*Would I be interested in a game night at Stark towers with my amazing boyfriend and his super-family? Um, yes! Also, my aunt wants to have dinner with you. I know that you already knew each other, but she wants an ‘official meeting with my boyfriend’.*

*I wouldn’t miss it. Peter replied. Oh, and now you can finally meet Beatrice!*

*Beatrice?*

Peter startled slightly and quickly sent the picture he’d taken to send to MJ… wow, had it only been the night before? A lot had happened last night. Like, a lot. *Tony got her to… you know what, a lot happened last night. Like, a lot a lot. I’ll call you tonight if you’re free. I would right now, but Ant-Man is visiting.*

*She’s so cute! <3*

*Ant-Man? Who the heck is- Never mind, yes you better call me tonight Tiger. Have more information about that game night while you’re at it.*

*Will do! Can’t wait.*

Peter smiled at his phone as he tucked it away. Some of the Avengers shared sly looks but no one actually called him out. The rest of lunch passed smoothly, until Scott admitted that the security firm he’d founded with a few of his ex-con friends played a certain Avengers themed battle-royale style video game whenever clients were low. Sam had immediately jumped to his feet and disappeared into the elevators, arriving a moment later with the game in tow.

Scott jumped to his feet. “Now that’s what I’m talking about!”

“Yeah, yeah.” Tony waved his hand and made his way to the seating area, calling for a hidden panel to open underneath the large screen that took up half the wall and reveal a gaming device. Several of the Avengers grinned and soon half the team were making their way over, the exceptions being Pepper, Vision, and Rhodey. The three situated themselves to more comfortably see the screen, but none may any more to actually join the gameplay.

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Peter almost felt sorry for Scott as they all moved into their normal positions. The game developers had actually given the game to the team as a present a few weeks before official release, and it had certainly been used.

“Nobody can play as themselves!” Wanda shouted the familiar decree, immediately snagging Sam’s
avatar. She liked playing as characters that flew. Sam, who was one of the first to the game, immediately chose Natasha.

“This is going to be Awesome.” Scott crowed, and selected Steve’s character.

Steve for his part selected War Machine, and Peter had to stifle a grin. He wished he could say that Steve defied expectations and was an amazing video gamer despite being born in the past, but unfortunately it just wasn’t true. He didn’t suck per say... but it was always better if he could get a character with extra defenses or armor of some kind.

Peter chose Tony, and Nat went for Vision, which left Tony with Wanda. He usually picked Wanda when he was first anyway, so it worked out nicely enough. The next hour was a battle royale the likes of which video games had never seen. The Avenger’s reflexes were so fast the game couldn’t keep up, and each member was so intimately aware of each others powers that they used them seamlessly.

Trash talks ebbed and flowed, growing violent and full of quips and personal insults.

Steve and Peter were the only ones left on the most recent round, the two suits battling it out and Steve, who so seldom won, was getting more and more worked up.

He growled, “You can kiss my star-spangled-”

“Boss,” F.R.I.D.A.Y.’s infinitely calm voice sounded, no inflection to her tone. “The Secretary of State is here and demands a meeting with you.”

Pepper tensed, but Tony, invested in the battle, waived a hand absentmindedly. “Bring him here, might as well be comfortable for whatever lecture he has planned.”

“You might want to shrink down, tic-tac.” Sam advised, not turning his eye from the screen as Peter successfully pulled off a combo move that finished off Steve and Ross stepped into the room amidst loud, boisterous cheers.

That didn’t help his mood.

“Good to know that committing felonies is so exciting for you all.” He snapped, angry, and all eyes turned to him. Peter glanced down at the controller next to him, where Scott had been, and saw a figure no taller than a half inch using the joystick like a chair. Ant-Man waved to him and Peter had to stifle a grin.

“Felonies?” Natasha asked, voice inflection perfect to display her confusion, skepticism, and irritation. “Ross, what are you going on about now?”

The man snorted. “Don’t try that with me. We both know that you’re the ones that stole the Spider-Slayer plans last night. Pretending otherwise is an insult to all of our intelligence.”

Tony hummed. “Pretty sure the only intelligence at threat here is yours, because we have no clue what you’re talking about. Sure, Pepper told us about the Slayers, but as far as we know you have them locked up tight.”

Natasha suddenly shot to her feet, eyes hard. “Are you telling me that you lost the blueprints to advanced S.H.E.I.L.D. technology capable of taking down someone stronger than Steve?”

Steve’s lips thinned, but the arm wrestling match had been proof enough, or would have been if they’d been able to finish it.
That only made Ross angrier. “So I’m supposed to believe that Spider-Man conveniently decided to steal the Spider-Slayers on the very day that you were seen in public with him, is that it?” He spat the words like they were poisoned barbs, and they stunned the room, though not for the reason Ross would have hoped.

It was at that moment that every Avenger in the room realized that the man had no clue that Scott had been involved at all. The guards had been taken down by Spider-Man, Spider-man had covered most of the cameras, and the whole compound had been covered in webbing. Scott wasn’t in any trouble.

Spidey probably was.

Peter however, had already realized this, and was not as shocked as the other team members. Additionally, he was functioning on very little sleep, a great deal of stress, and over half an hour of serious trash talk. Because of that, the words slipped out before he, or anyone else, could stop him. “Right, because Spider-Man would have no reason at all to want to protect something called ‘Spider-slayers’.” Immediately Peter covered his mouth with both hands, eyes blown wide and embarrassed.

A moment of silence, then Tony started snickering, followed by Wanda and Sam. Pepper stood up then, but said nothing, only raising an eyebrow in challenge.

“The day that I propose using it against the Avengers? What fortunate timing.”

Natasha rolled her eyes. “Peter, you want to cover this one too?”

“Same as last time please.” Tony added.

“Um… That also happens to be the exact day that the Spider-Slayers, uh, became public record.”

Ross grew so angry that his face started turning red, and Pepper rolled her eyes, hard. “Come with me, if you honestly feel the need to continue this conversation, there is no need to bother the others.” She led the man away, and the rest of the team let out a collective breath.

“Sorry.” Peter peeped out, and Scott grew to full size, laughing uproariously.

“Did you see his face? That was the best thing I’ve ever seen.”

Peter’s lips slowly twitched up into a smile as Scott’s mirth infected the rest of the team and they began laughing as well.

The laughter only died when a soft beep sounded from Tony watch, informing him that the preparations for the capture the flag game were finished.

“Uh, is that a good idea?” Peter asked timidly, craning his neck in the direction Pepper and Ross had disappeared to.

Sam ruffled Peter’s hair. “After the smackdown you gave him? Guy probably wouldn’t come sniffing around us today if you paid him. He doesn’t enjoy being embarrassed.”

“Which is a shame,” Tony added, “Since he’s so good at it.”

The group chuckled, but with the matter decided, the conversation almost immediately turned to the game.

Tony and Steve had, of course, both independently come up with a determined set of rules for how
the game should be played, and of course, they were not at all identical. They wasted another half an hour simply debating the rules before finally coming up with a finalized list. It would, for the most part, be similar to a normal game of capture the flag, but instead of a boundary in the center, anyone could “tag” the other team anywhere, other than a few pre-determined safe spaces. To win, you had to bring the opponent teams flag- a red or gold banner about the size of a dishcloth-to your own team’s safe ‘base’.

Additionally, they were playing by flag football rules where everyone had three flags tied at their waist that they had to protect. Get one stolen, and you had to go to ‘jail’ (Where you would stay for 10 minutes or until someone broke you out). When all three were stolen, you were out of the game.

Wanda and Vision weren’t allowed to use their powers on the flags directly, Scott had to grow to normal size to grab them (though he was assured that sneaking up on people while small was still ok), and they couldn’t be ‘shot’ off, they had to be removed by hand.

Additionally, some adjustments were made to the Avengers typical weaponry so that it wouldn’t cause as much damage as they would normally.

Tony made Peter wear one of the Iron Harnesses in case he fell off a platform. He wasn’t too happy about it.

To make up for it, Tony let Peter pick one of the teams, with Scott picking the other because he was a guest. Scott immediately chose Steve, apparently a big fan. Peter chose Tony, because they were Science Bros (also because he had no clue how the two men functioned when saving the world, but whenever they played games they bickered so much that it was an unspoken rule around the tower to do whatever was possible to make sure they were on different teams. Tony and Steve weren’t aware of the rule.) Scott chose Wanda next, which meant that Peter chose Vision just to make it fair. The entire pick went similarly to that, with Peter choosing mostly in response to Scott’s choices, but to be honest he didn’t really have a team in mind when he’d started. These were the Avengers, there was literally no way he was going to end up with a bad team. Unfortunately, there was an odd number, but Nat quickly solved that by volunteering to be something of a double agent, able to ‘tag’ anyone, but not going after the flags or breaking anyone out of prison.

Of course, she added, it would also give her more time to focus on Peter’s progress. She reasoned that this would be a good way to see how he’d really been progressing in her trainings.

“Depending on how well this goes perhaps we can include more... Games in our future trainings.” She allowed, and Peter vowed to himself that he would be capturing Scott’s flag himself.

If he was also still slightly bitter that Ant-Man had gotten away with the blueprints the night before, well, no one had to know.

It ended up with Peter’s team of Tony, Vision and Rhodey against Scott’s team of Steve, Wanda, and Sam, each team decently matched and prepared to battle.

“Alright, Fri!” Tony called. “Give us ten minutes, then count us down.”

“Of course boss.” The AI responded, and both teams scattered in opposite directions to hide their flags, strategizing as they went.

“Ok, Vis,” Tony began, as they scoured for a good spot. “You good for defense? You’re our best chance if Wanda tries for our flag.

Vision nodded in agreement, suggesting a small hollowed out hole in the wall that was used to scale
the wall. Peter shook his head. “Too close to jail. If someone in jail spots it they could ome steal it as
soon as their penalty time is up.” Vision looked to see their team’s ‘jail’ area only a few yards away
and nodded.

“Pete, I’m going to have you on offense.”

Peter gaped, staring at the man. “Wha- really?” He squeaked, and the man nodded.

“No offense kid, but I don’t know that you’d be able to take anyone out if you were attacking them,
but Nat seems really impressed with your sneaking abilities, and she’s hard to impress.” Rhodes and
I will be obvious targets in the sky, but maybe you can do some back-door-ing.”

Peter nodded, mentally noting that his spider sense was going to get a heck of a workout.

“I vote,” Rhodey began, “That we hide the flag somewhere high up. Steve doesn’t fly, and Scott… I
mean, sure he can ride an Ant, but they can’t be faster than us.”

Tony nodded. “You and I do our best work when flying, Vision flies, Peter would be out of luck,
but tactically its a smart plan.”

They hid their flag in the top corner of a slanted parkour platform, wedged between the wall and the
platform and mostly hidden from sight. They had just reconvened on the ground when

“Attention Avengers. The game begins in Three… Two… One-” The one was interrupted with a
loud foghorn and the heroes took to battle positions. The game had begun.

The teams scattered, Tony and War machine taking to the sky and Peter scrambling to climb across
some of the lower platforms. The platforms had been strategically painted a mix of grey, black, gold
and red, and Tony and Rhodey disappeared surprisingly easily. Unfortunately, that meant that Falcon
would likely disappear just as easily.

Peter ducked behind a platform, peeking out just enough to see if he could spot anything in the
crowded mishmash of a training area. It was difficult, there were flashes of movement in the distance,
but not enough to determine who exactly he was seeing. He marvelled again at the sheer
impressiveness of the Avenger’s training area. It was hard to believe such an expensive place was
somehow located in the middle of a New York City skyscraper.

Peter shook the distracting thought away. He needed a plan. Luckily he’d gotten used to climbing
around the area when he’d spent nearly a full week on the ropes course that first week after his
public adoption. Sure, it’d be easier if he’d had his web shooters and could climb up the walls, but
Peter Parker could competently maneuver around without causing suspicion.

He should definitely stay away from the top levels, that would be where all of the flyers were, which
would be dangerous. The ground floor would have the best covers and hidey holes, but Peter’s
flexibility and arm strength would be advantageous in the ropes course.

The middle level then, he decided, moving above and below as necessary. He began climbing
through towards the other team’s side of the arena. He made sure to duck between platforms and
hide behind any cover that he could find.

He ducked down whenever his spider-sense gave the smallest bit of a tingle, refusing to move until
he felt completely safe. He was on the ground level, crouched under a small inclined ramp leaning
against the wall that was supposed to be a launch pad for someone to take a jump off of. There were
slats in the ramp, just barely wide enough to give him a peephole, where he had a great view to see
Steve’s shield flying straight at Tony. Iron man avoided it deftly, but just as it flew past Scott seemed to just, appear in midair, growing from where he’d been hiding on the shield. He grabbed one of Tony’s flags, yelling ‘Yoink!’ as he went past.

Tony let out a loud curse as Scott grabbed onto a leg, both of the men slowly floating to the ground.

Peter gaped. Awesome.

Tony landed, complaining and laughing with Scott as he was ‘escorted’ to jail. Neither noticed Peter stealthily following, far above their heads. He moved silently, outpacing them at times as he knew where the ‘jail’ area was. Most of the Avengers wouldn’t risk getting Tony out right away, they would attempt to plan, expecting the other team to be building up a defense. They would want to plan every avenue, anticipate the other team’s move. Spider-Man (and by extension, Peter) had always been a little more… spontaneous.

He clung to a small, swing-like obstacle that hovered above their jail. The hanging obstacle swung, and was just wide enough that Peter probably wouldn’t be seen by those directly below. Luckily, no one was looking up, assuming that they had a few moments before War Machine or Vision came to stage a jailbreak.

Peter took a deep breath, double checked that the Iron Harness was secure, and dropped. For a moment, he felt the thrill of falling, the rush of adrenalin that came as he swung his webs over the city. Then the harness kicked in and slowed his decent until he felt like a piece of litter flying in the New York wind. Unfortunately, the harness also let out a soft buzzing sound that was just loud enough to draw the eyes of everyone standing below.

Tony, whose mask had been retracted, grinned as it covered his face once more. “My man!” he called, as Scott yelled “Peter!”

Swinging his legs, Peter made sure to land almost directly onto Tony’s back, yelling “Go Go Go!” as his legs crossed across the suits metallic stomach and he gripped the broad shoulders. Immediately, Iron Man obeyed, shooting into the air as Scott yelled. “Wait! Peter! Tony!” Then, “Sam!”

Tony cursed as a silver-red figure started streaking towards them. Tony attempted to weave through the ropes course, but it was difficult with Peter still clinging to his back like a limpet.

“We need to split up.” Peter said, as Sam’s fingers brushed his flags, just shy of managing to grip them.

“If you have any ideas, I’d love to hear them.” Tony grunted, diving sharply under a section of a rock wall that hung between two pillars. Peter didn’t respond, but his mind was moving quickly. There was a long, decently wide platform directly ahead, cut in half by intricate rope latticework creating a net of sorts. If Tony continued his course than he would… Tony cut into a sharp turn right above the platform, Peter tensed and at the crest of the turn (the slowest Tony would be without actually stopping) he jumped. He landed on the platform cleanly, the momentum pushed him forward but he turned it into a neat barrel roll, ending up brightly on his feet.

“Woah! Nat, did you see that? I did that barrel move you taught me! I- oh no!” He jumped to the side as Sam banked sharply, choosing to come after Peter rather than pursue Tony’s second flag. Sam dove, and Peter scrambled, managing to squeeze between the gaps in the rope netting bisecting the platform. Sam’s wings flared as the man glowered, the large gadgets keeping him from slipping through after the teen.
“HA!” Peter teased, dancing away from the border separating them. Suddenly his spider sense flared, just as the platform shook. He whirled, catching sight of Steve’s fingers gripping the top of the platform. With a forceful, ‘huff’ the man heaved himself onto the platform. He landed into a crouch, then rose slowly in all of his Captain America glory. With a gulp, Peter took a step back, only to whirl when his Spider-Sense flared in warning that Sam was directly behind him, reaching for his flag.

Peter yelped, looking in between his two opponents. This… was not good. He glanced back, but he had really backed himself into a corner, there were walls on each side of the platform. The only way out was either past Steve, or on the other side with Sam.

Well, goodbye flag.

Steve smirked at him. “You going to make this easy for us?”

“You’d be disappointed if I did.” Peter quipped, and Sam laughed behind him. Steve grinned.

“True enough.” And he charged. Peter frantically worked to dodge the larger man’s attacks, moving as quickly as he dared. He didn’t attempt to fight back, knowing that in the heat of this moment he wouldn’t be able to appropriately meter his strength.

The two weaved in and out of each other, but Peter was used to protecting only himself, dressed in a skintight suit. While he managed to dodge the attacks, he failed to protect the thing that actually mattered: the flag.

Soon Steve held the flag high overhead in victory, with Sam cheering in his corner and Peter groaning as he panted exaggeratedly. Unfortunately, the two men were so focused on their victory, that they failed to notice the figure hidden in the darkness of the platform’s corners and within seconds Natasha had Sam’s flag in hand. She reached for Steve’s, slipping through the rope netting easily, but Steve jumped back and smoothly jumped to a platform below, trusting Peter to make his own way to jail.

The teen did, unable to hide his smile despite being captured. Unfortunately, there was no way that they would risk coming to get him right away like he’d attempted, not when his ‘just wing it’ plan had failed so definitively. That meant he potentially had fifteen minutes to do a whole lot of nothing.

No, not nothing. He could use this time as an opportunity, an opportunity to think and to plan. Wow, his thoughts were sounding more like Natasha each day.

Now, where would Steve’s team hide their flag? Steve tended to be a little more offense-oriented than Tony, so he would probably want to devote as many resources to the offense as possible, so he’d want to make defense easy.

Peter perked. There were only two things that needed defending in this game, the flag and the jail. Sam had obviously been defending the jail, with how quickly he’d swooped into action when he’d broken Tony out, and Steve had intersected really quickly. It was almost as if, Peter realized suddenly, he was trying to get Peter dealt with quickly so that Sam didn’t have to stick around, so that Sam could get back to his post. But no one had been in jail at the time, which meant…

Peter grinned. Of course. Steve was just the type of person to try and put the jail and flag close to each other so that one person could defend both, and everyone else could focus on the flight.

The teen was momentarily distracted by a flurry of noise sounding from the other side of the arena. Objects covered in a glowing red haze, and Vision floated above them, seemingly locked in battle
with Wanda. Peter gaped for a moment, but before long any actual battle was lost in the maze of ropes and obstacles.

He reluctantly brought his mind back to the matter at hand. He was almost certain by now that team cap’s flag was very close to the jail, probably within sight, Sam was in jail, Wanda was on the other side of the court, and Steve was likely still battling Natasha. Scott could be in the area, guarding things at least until Sam got out, but Scott was also one of the best choices on that team to break Sam out. Peter could very well be very close to the flag with no one there to protect it.

And he still had seven whole minutes to sit still doing nothing. This sucked. Suddenly a shadow appeared overhead, and Peter looked up to see Rhodes dive bombing at him. Peter grinned, jumping to his feet, but before the man could get close enough to help, Wanda—wherever she was—noticed and threw a red barrier up over the jail, making Rhodes pull up sharply to avoid it. He gave Peter an apologetic wave, but flew off lest he be attacked.

Peter grimaced, but then grinned. Wanda was on the other side of the court still, he was almost sure of it, but for her to intercede, it meant that there was no one else actually here defending him. Peter bounced on the balls of his feet, grinning wickedly. His eyes bounced around the space around the jail, focusing on any dark pockets or convenient crevices until he had five spaces that would be really good places to hide a flag. He focused on the areas closest to the ground. Team Iron man was composed of mostly flyers, and if Rhodey or Tony were forced to fight Steve on the ground, they would be at a severe disadvantage. Sure, most of the members of Steve’s team could fly, but they didn’t rely on it like Tony, Rhodes, and even Vision did.

He poised himself at the jail entrance, adrenaline rushing through him as his jail time counted down. There was a large screen handing in their air, like the screens at the center of a sporting event, which counted down the minutes remaining in his sentence. Sam’s name was still on the board, which meant that Scott hadn’t managed to break him out. Peter had been captured a few seconds before Sam, and he had a few more seconds before Sam made his way over to this corner. It wasn’t much time, but it should be enough to get him to a good hiding place. As long as he-

The clock reached zero and Peter shot out of the jail, bee lining to a hiding place nearest spot that he’d marked as the most likely hiding place. He’d just tucked himself away into his hiding spot when a tingle of Spider-sense and the familiar sound of swooping wings gave evidence that Falcon had returned. Even as it caused a shot of adrenalin to go through Peter, it also made him almost giddy with relief. For Sam to come back and guard an empty jail, it meant that Peter must be right.

So, so carefully, keeping strict track of his spider-sense, Peter ventured from his hidey hole to check the first potential flag-holder. Empty. He went back into hiding for several agonizing moments, occasionally hearing a bust of activity or curses as the game continued around him. At one point Natasha’s flag was stolen and she’d been sent to jail. As a double agent, she had no one to burst her out and had to wait for the full fifteen minutes. Peter had had the extra challenge of her being right there as he moved from spot to spot until her time was finally up.

He kept to this strategy for a long while, remaining hidden for long stretches with a few quick bursts to check a spot, then back into hiding.

It was agonizing, and so very different from his typical MO, which made it even worse. However, it was working, kinda, so he kept at it.

At one moment he crouched, hidden under the very platform that Sam was perched on. Every few moments the wood would creak as he shifted his weight. Peter’s senses were extended as far as he could manage, using all of the advice Daredevil had graced him with during their occasional meet-ups. Suddenly the platform above Peter buckled, Sam flying off to do… something. Peter used the
opportunity to sprint across an open area to his next hiding spot, sticking his hand into a crevice in hope of coming out with a flag, but it was empty. With an empty curse he ducked into another hiding spot, scowling. There was one other location that he’d thought of as being highly likely to contain the flag, in fact he’d tagged it from the very beginning as being the most likely.

Unfortunately, it was also the most dangerous. Peter hunched in on himself as he stared at it, it was one of the walls to the room, long since converted to a rock climbing wall. Peter knew from experience that one of the larger rocks was actually hollow, like a basin stuck to the wall. It would be the perfect place to stash… well anything, but especially a flag. Unfortunately, there was at least 10 feet surrounding that section of the wall that was completely bare, without anything Peter could hide behind or use as a barricade. He would be completely exposed.

Unwilling to reveal himself if he didn’t have to, the teen silently climbed up a nearby rope to an elevated platform. From there, he was at the perfect angle to see a small slip of blue nestled inside the rock. Peter groaned, his fingers moving to use webshooters that weren’t there, his wrists tingling in desire for the familiar weight.

What now? It would be nearly impossible to get there without Sam seeing him. Maybe he could…

Suddenly his enhanced hearing caught his name. “-Peter?” Was that Rhodes?

“Don’t know.” Tony replied. “Haven’t seen him since his prison time ended.” They were pretty close.

“We need to regroup, we-“

Of course! He had a team now. He could tell them that he had found the flag, they could come up with a plan and- Suddenly, there was a noise the likes of which Peter had never heard before. He whirled, catching sight of Scott growing, growing, growing until his head almost touched the ceiling.

“Ok, tiny guy is big now. Tiny guy is big.” Rhodey said, confusion mixing with amusement.

Peter’s only reply was to yell “Holy S-“ As the now larger-than life man reached into their high up hiding space and pulled out their red flag.

Rhodes dive bombed the man, but Ant-Man simply swatted him away like he was a large bug. Tony grabbed one of his- somehow also oversized and Peter really needed to learn more about the physics of that-streamers and attempted to pull it off. Vision flew up to help, but Scott simply flicked the flag like a child flicking away a booger, and Sam shot out of nowhere to grab it and begin flying it to base. Peter, no longer having any reason not to, ran forward and scooped up the other team’s banner, running with it and hoping that maybe having to fly through the obstacles would slow Sam down enough that Peter could make it to his base before Sam make it to theirs. He jumped over platforms and boxes, swerving around ropes and ladders and climbing obstacles, until- the flag was encased in a red field and ripped from his hands.

“Hey!” He shouted as a laughing Wanda appeared, “No fair!”

Wanda laughed. “We said I could not use my powers to send people to jail. We did not see anything about this.”

Peter opened his mouth to protest but before he could, Sam made it to their base and the Captain America team burst into cheers. Slowly, the rest of the Avengers made their way over. Tony grinned and shook hands with Steve. “Best two out of three?”
Chapter 27

Hey guys,

Sorry for the extra-long wait, please take an extra-long chapter for my apologies.

PLEASE NOTE: Though its taking me a while to write, I planned this story long before Black Panther and Infinity Wars, so there will be significant inconsistencies.

I added a link with instructional videos to the various games, though some of them have explanations in the fic! Also, you can try to play along with the last game, Codenames.

Also, thanks to everyone who gave me game suggestions!! I wanted to add a lot more, but this chapter got soooo long. I am planning on doing a series of oneshots in this verse after the story is complete, and I intend to add many of them then!

Peter stared in despair at the chaos before him. “What are you doing?” he squeaked, voice high and panicked. “She’ll be here in like five minutes!”

Steve grimaced apologetically, standing beside Peter as they both gazed into the Avengers’ general area. The usually sparse room was now cluttered, filled with tables from various other rooms, covered in games set up and prepared. Along one wall was a verifiable buffet of snacks and junk food, finger foods that could be eaten while the games were being played. The only clear space was an area in the corner were a game of Twister had been set up. Why anyone would assume that wouldn’t end in a disaster was a mystery to Peter.

The team had played the occasional game together, but it was difficult to find any one game where everyone was on a level playing field. Peter doubted that they would find that magical game any time soon, but tonight was for getting to know people and having fun, it wasn’t for competitiveness.

He really hoped the rest of the team remembered that.

“No no,” Tony, no doubt the mastermind of the whole thing, interrupted. “No, this is good. Look, we finish one game and move on to the next! It’ll be great!”

Peter only gaped at the man. “How long do you expect game night to last? A year?” Peter groaned, burying his face in his hands. “This was supposed to be a casual thing, this is going to scare her away.”
Tony shook his head. “If this is enough to scare her away, she isn’t going to last the night.” But even so, he turned. “Ok, ok, kid says we need to tone it back.”

“I told you so.” Wanda said from where she was levitating a few game pieces.

“Everyone told him so.” Sam replied dryly, idly messing with a novelty timer before moving to help as well.

Peter started to help, but before he got far F.R.I.D.A.Y.’s voice sounded. “Happy has just pulled into the garage if you are ready to join him Peter.”

Peter took a deep breath, smoothing down his expensive button up and looking around the room. The Avengers were each dressed in casual but smart outfits, mostly button-downs and sweaters. The room was quickly growing less cluttered as they put away most of the tables, though the snack buffet along the back wall was still standing proud and sending delicious scents coasting throughout the room.

Somehow, this was more nerve wracking than when he’d gone to meet her after she’d discovered his secret identity. Crap. Secret identity. If the Avengers started asking about Spider-Man… Peter spared a moment to be thankful that his girlfriend was such a fantastic actress. Then he spared another hoping that she was just as good at improv.

“Okay.” He said with a nod. “Okay okay okay okay.” Then he turned and rushed out the door, practically sprinting into the elevator. F.R.I.D.A.Y. immediately started lowering the elevator to the garage level. Peter rocked back and forth, excitement and nerves battling within him. He hoped Happy had been nice to her, hadn’t teased her about finding them in the trailer. Peter had wanted to pick her up with Happy, but the Avengers had agreed that they didn’t want his relationship with MJ to become public knowledge just yet, and Happy was much less likely to be recognized than Peter.

It also gave Peter the chance to make sure things were going well at the tower, because if he thought he was anxious, it was nothing compared to the rest of the team, all of whom were dealing with meeting MJ with an odd mix of perfectionism (Tony), nerves (Steve), and an odd manic energy (everyone else).

He was half afraid that Natasha would be interrogating the girl at some point during the night.

Make that whole afraid.
Peter allowed himself one final deep breath as the elevator doors slip open and- and Mary Jane was right there. She was standing in front of the elevator, Happy beside her, and the way she brightened when she saw him was breathtakingly beautiful.

“Peter!” She said happily, slipping into the elevator to link arms with the boy who was so stunned he had yet to say anything.

“MJ” He responded warmly, smiling at the girl and completely missing Happy’s fond eye-roll as he stepped into the elevator as well. “I’m uh, glad you could come.”

“Wouldn’t miss it. Shall we go meet the family?”

“Well, I mean, I’ve already met them so…”

She laughed and punched his arm, but Peter could see nerves hidden in her eyes. Peter snuck a glance at Happy, but the man was studiously ignoring the two love-struck teens and was instead typing furiously at his phone. Peter took the moment to gently kiss his girlfriend’s forehead and stare into her eyes seriously. “They are going to love you.” He said softly, confidently. “How could they not? You’re Mary Jane Watson. You’re amazing.”

The girl smiled at him, then her eyes grew mischievous and she drew him into a proper kiss. Which was of course the exact moment the elevator door opened. Wolf whistles sounded from no less than three Avengers, and MJ immediately pulled away from Peter with a blush that went covered her entire face.

“Wow, I really thought that elevator ride was going to take longer.” She said with a comically large wince.

“The marvels of modern technology.” Tony said with a smirk, walking forward to introduce himself. Peter glanced around the room to see that it was significantly less excessive, which was a relief. MJ tucked a lock of hair behind her ear as Steve stepped forward. His muscular hand dwarfed hers when he offered it to shake.

“Steve Rogers.” He introduced himself, by which time the girl had managed to compose herself. She shook his hand, portraying confidence despite her nerves.
“Mary Jane Watson. My friends call me MJ.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you MJ.” The man nodded, and was replaced by Sam, who introduced himself similarly. They went around the room for a moment, with MJ holding up well despite the natural stress that would come from any instance in which you were in a room full of super-powered celebrities, much less one in which you were meeting them as their son’s girlfriend.

However for all of her grace under pressure, by the time everyone had been introduced Peter could see that MJ was starting to get overwhelmed, by both the grandeur of the people in the room, and the sheer number. Peter thought back to his first day, where even in his excitement and literal hero-worship, his Spidey-sense had thrummed steadily in the back of his mind in reaction to the sheer amount of power in the room. Hoping to help the girl before she got completely overwhelmed, Peter took her hand and began pulling her to one of the tables without bothering to look at the game before offering her a chair. The girl accepted it with a smile, a glance out of the corner of her eye revealing that she knew exactly why Peter had done it. She gave his hand a quick squeeze, a reassurance to comfort him as the others moved to join. While the team had done away with most of the tables, the games were still out, clustered haphazardly on the table. The box on top of the pile at this table was familiar, a red box with a white silhouette head on it and Peter sighed in relief to see a relatively well-known game.

“Has everyone played Scattegories before?” He asked, prying it from the top of the precarious pile. There was a mix of yes's and no’s and ‘yes but I don’t remember’s, and MJ surprised Peter by explaining it to the team as Peter started handing out the slips of paper and mini pencils. Steve looked cartoonish with the small, three inch golf pencil in his large, muscular hand. Pepper snorted, nudged Wanda and pointed to a cup full of properly-sized pens sitting on the kitchen counter. The girl nodded, and soon the cup was encased in red and floating to the table. MJ’s words faltered as she openly gaped at the display of power. Wanda smirked, using her power to take the pens and pencils out one by one to float in front of each member of the team.

“Now you’re just showing off.” MJ said, but she sounded delighted and amazed, and Wanda’s smirk melted into a genuine smile as she gave MJ a pen and set the cup down. MJ took the pen with wonder, but quickly shook herself and went back to explaining the game.

“So, basically we have a list of categories,” She pointed at Peter as he handed out the booklets holding the lists. “No! Don’t look, that’s cheating.” Steve shut the booklet with a snap, looking chastised. “We also have this die with a bunch of letters on it. Someone will roll the die, and whatever letter it lands on, we try to think of something in each category that starts with that letter. But you only get a point if your answer is unique. So, for example, if the letter is ‘D’, and one of the categories is ‘Dog breeds’, I might say Dalmation, and Peter might say Doberman, and Wanda might say daschund, but if Sam also said Daschund, neither of them would get a point.”

“What if I said ‘Dog’?” Tony asked with a smirk.
MJ grinned wickedly. “Then we argue. We take a vote about whether it should count, and majority rules.”

Natasha straightened at that, looking more interested. “Why would we vote to give someone a point?”

“To set a precedent for when you give your own ‘well it’s not wrong’ answer.”

The woman nodded, glancing around the group assessing-ly as if she could already hear and counter their arguments.

“English only.” Pepper commanded, inciting arguments from Wanda, Nat, and even Vision whose unique origins gave him a thorough understanding of a myriad of languages.

The rest of the team, however, clamors to agree with Pepper and the three admit defeat.

Peter winces, glancing at MJ, but she’s just watching the others and grinning wildly, excited for the game ahead. Peter almost wishes that he could warn her, yet again, at how insanely competitive the team could get. As though the fact that they almost came to blows while discussing the rules of a game his history teacher used to use as a pre-test study game wasn’t evidence enough.

MJ grabbed the timer. Tony snatched the die. Everyone else prepared their pens and books.

“C’mon lucky… something.” Tony shouted as he threw the die. MJ turned the timer and the game began.

It was about as disastrous as one would imagine. Though technically English, Steve had no problem with using slangs from his time period, using ‘Liberty Dogs’ as a type of animal and arguing fiercely that it had been the name for German Shepherds during the war, a tidbit that F.R.I.D.A.Y. had been called in to verify. Tony used technical engineering or otherwise scientific terms for half the words, but then so did Peter so they ended up cancelling each other out more often than not, as did Sam and Rhodes who both tended to favor military jargon. Pepper strategically went with the most simple, obvious answers, knowing that everyone else would overthink them. She actually managed to be in the lead with that strategy, tying with Natasha who seemed to excel at not only coming up with answers, but guessing what everyone else would think and avoiding it.

Vision, with a near limitless vocabulary managed to be in the lead as well. Wanda was surprisingly struggling in the game, though as the only one who learned English as a second language, maybe it shouldn’t have been surprising. Or perhaps she was preoccupied with thinking about how much
simpler the game would be without the strict no-mind-reading rules that were a standing instruction.

MJ held her own decently. Though as a whole, the team seemed to enjoy arguing about whether answers were valid than actually answering the questions, to the point that by the beginning of the third round, it seemed that the game of the goal had shifted to ‘give the most well-you’re-not-wrong’ answers possible. Debates turned to bickering, which turned to arguing, which soon turned to light, friendly wrestling. It didn’t surprise Peter. The Avengers were surprisingly tactile and he’d known board games to turn to fake wrestling before. The only problem was, these weren’t pre-teen boys. They were trained soldiers, assassins, and heroes, and their fighting was a little more dangerous. Oh well, at least MJ wouldn’t have to wonder why each room had so many empty chairs.

Then the girl put ‘water’ as something that was wet, and when Rhodes argued back vehemently that “water couldn’t be ‘wet’ because it was water. It can’t be wet if it can’t be dry, you couldn’t make it any more or less wet, it got to the point that M.J. slammed on the table and jumped to her feet, looking for all the world like she was about to throw down with War Machine.

Peter grabbed her waist to hold her back and meekly suggested switching to a different game. They played Headbanz next, a game which again resulted in a fair amount of arguing and yelling, though it was significantly more jovial. They attempted to play Catchphrase too, but the team were just too close, had too many inside jokes. At one point Wanda had simply leaned forward and said ‘Chicken Soup’ and everyone except Peter and MJ had shouted “Morocco!”, even those who weren’t on her team. When Peter had tried to ask what that meant, they just said it was classified. Unfortunately, the moment was distracting enough that Peter held onto the device too long, and he lost the team’s last point. The team agreed afterwards that it would probably be best to switch to something else.

Tony hummed as they looked over the stack of games for their next adventure. “We probably have about half an hour or so until Chef Lorenzo brings some of the hot snacks. Try to find something that takes about that, doesn’t take too long, or that we can stop in the middle of.”

MJ perked and grabbed a deck of cards, carefully pulling out 10 specific cards. “Have any of you heard of the game Mafia?” Peter nodded, he had played it at a camp a few years back, but the others all shook their heads. (*So, every place I have played Mafia has had slightly different rules, which is probably a result of it mostly being a game passed around by people playing it at summer camps rather than a formal written-down game. So, this may not completely align with how you play Mafia, if you are familiar with the game. Just a warning.)

“It’s a pretty simple game but I have a feeling you’ll like it. There are 4 different characters you can play as. You could be a Mafia,” She held up two aces. “A Sheriff.” She held up the king. “A Doctor.” A queen. “Or a villager.” She held up various number cards of no particular number or suit.

“I guess there are technically 5 types of characters, with the storyteller, but I’ll take that role since no one else has played before. Now, each round I’m going to have everyone close their eyes, or ‘go to sleep’, and the mafia have to agree silently on someone to ‘kill’. Once they agree they’ll close their eyes along with everyone else and the doctor will ‘wake up’ and without knowing who was killed,
has to choose someone to save. Then, the sheriff gets to point to someone and I’ll let them know if that person is in the mafia or not. Then, everyone wakes up, I’ll make up a story about who the mafia attacked and how, and if the doctor saved them. If the mafia kills you and the doctor doesn’t save you, you’re out of the game. Then, you can accuse people of being the mafia, and the accused can make a defense. When there are two accusations we have a vote over who everyone thinks the mafia is, whoever gets the most votes is out, regardless of if they were the mafia or not.”

“What all does the storyteller have to do?”

“Um, they’re the only ones who know who everyone is, they make up the stories, regulate the accusations, and tell people when to wake up and go to sleep.”

“So… nothing that F.R.I.D.A.Y couldn’t do so you could play?”

M.J. blinked before grinning broadly. “Nope!” She said happily. “Are you up for it, F.R.I.D.A.Y?”

“Of course, Miss Watson.”

“That is awesome.” She began giving the AI more detailed instructions as Peter added a third Ace and shuffled the cards. He fanned them out and let people grab their own cards, held down so no one could peek to see what they were getting. The Avenger’s faces might have been made of stone as they looked at their cards, determined to give away nothing. Peter peeked at his own card, struggling to keep his face from giving anything away. He was the Sheriff.

He saw others glance his way then quickly look away, knowing that his face had done… something. This was why he wore the mask.

“Has everyone seen their cards and understands their role?” The team mumbled their affirmative, eyes darting back and forth to watch each other.

“Then please, villagers go to sleep.”

The team closed their eyes and bowed their heads, and an unmistakable tension filling the room. After a beat of silence, the calm feminine voice commanded “Mafia wake up.”

The room was eerily silent, not a hint of rustling cloth to betray those that had raised their head.

“Who do you want to kill?”

After a silent beat, Peter's Spider-sense surged, and he had to fight from shuffling himself. He was in no true danger, but his heightened senses could read the room, and he just knew that he had been the mafia's first victim.

Calmly, F.R.I.D.A.Y said, “Mafia, you may sleep. Doctor wake up. Who would you like to save?”

There was a moment of silence, then a simple, “Doctor you may sleep. Sheriff wake up.”

Peter rose his head, completely silent in a way only years of speaking around as Spider-Man could master. He glanced around the room, wishing that he’d thought ahead of time about who he wanted to accuse. It was hard when everyone was being so completely silent, no one daring to move lest they indict themselves, all striving to hear the slightest hint that someone else was responding to the AI's summons. Who was he supposed to accuse? Any one of them was as likely as the next, though of course with his luck… oh. He pointed at MJ, and immediately a holograph appeared in front of the girl. Peter didn't bother to flinch, Tony had installed the projectors all over the place. Peter was
almost sure if he asked Fry could make one appear in the bathroom.

The holograph consisted of a large glowing blue arrow, with text underneath reading “Would you like to accuse Mary Jane Watson?” Peter nodded and the holograph immediately formed what looked like a wanted poster bordering the girl's face, the word Mafia appearing at the bottom. Peter had to bite his lip to keep from laughing. The AI had used the font from the *Santinos*. Seemed she was getting into it just as much as everything else.

“Sheriff you may sleep.”

He closed his eyes and the AI waited a beat before commanding. “Townspeople wake up.”

Everyone’s eyes opened, and suspicious looks were cast around the room as F.R.I.D.A.Y. began the story.

The sounds of a crowd and a lion’s roar sounded, creating a background noise for the feminine voice. “A member of the town had found themselves on the bad side of the local Mafia, and so the mafia decided that it was in their best interest to remove them. This individual had chosen to spend the day at the zoo.” The sounds of wildlife increased momentarily before fading back. “They were in the reptile house when the mafia struck. With extreme care and skill, they enraged one of the vipers and put the victim in its path.” The sound of a hiss and a rattler’s rattle. “And they were bitten by the venomous creature. Luckily, a doctor happened to be visiting the exhibit as well and worked quickly to counter the effects of the poison until the antivenom could be found.”

“You know you can say who the victim was.” M.J. offered.

“I believe the game at this point would be most interesting if I did not at the moment.”

The girl shrugged. “Okay.” she shot Peter a look and the boy knew that she was impressed by the AIs personality. Then the girl grinned, wicked.

“I suspect Peter of being in the Mafia!” She declared proudly, and Peter knew he was gaping like a fish.

“What, no! I'm not in the Mafia!”

“Pardon Peter, but I believe Miss Watson must expound upon her reasoning before you are permitted to give a rebuttal.”

“Thank you.” MJ grinned at the ceiling. “Now I suspect that Peter is the mafia because he is well known for enjoying the zoo, especially the reptile exhibit. Everyone knows that the tarantulas and the reptiles are in the same building, he was probably talking to one of the zookeepers about the best way to take care of his venomous pet spider.”

“Leave Bea out of this!” He exclaimed as the girl smirked.

“Besides,” She continued her argument. “We all saw his face when he looked at his card.”

Peter wanted to groan, and from the looks everyone shot each other, his face was making that clear.

“Your rebuttal, Peter?” F.R.I.D.A.Y. reminded.

“Oh, right, uh- isn’t it- I mean why would I be at… if you think about it, that makes me seem more like the victim, right? Cause I just happened to be at the zoo because of Bea, not for malicious-”
“So you admit you were at the zoo!” Wanda suddenly shouted, and Peter’s cheeks went red.

“No, I- but the zoo part isn’t even re-” He looked around and it was clear that no one believed him in the least. He could feel it plain as day, he was going to lose the vote. Well, if he was going to die anyways, he might as well go for it. “No, I’m the sheriff, not the mafia! That’s the reason I made that face! MJ’s the real mafia.”

The girl was looking at him flatly, unimpressed. “Really Peter? Like, claiming to be the sheriff isn’t a bad move, but accusing the person who accused you? A little transparent, don’t you think.” Peter gaped, how did her lying seem more genuine than his truth?

“Well,” Tony interrupted. It sounds to me like we have two accusations. What do you say Fry?”

“I agree.” The calm, feminine voice sounded. “All who believe that Peter is the Mafia, please raise your hands.” Everyone did, save for Natasha and Steve, and after a beat of seeing that he was alone, Steve sheepishly rose his hand as well. “Peter, you have been eliminated.”

“Aw man.” Peter slumped. Pouting exaggeratedly as the AI commanded everyone to go to sleep. He didn’t bother closing his eyes, it wouldn’t matter anyways. M.J. was indeed one of the Mafia, along with Vision who simply smiled at Peter mischievously as they selected Natasha as their next victim. It was smart. Peter had no doubt given himself away when looking at the cards, and they knew he was either the Sheriff or Doctor and had to be eliminated, but after that, Natasha was their biggest danger, she was too good at reading people.

The AI called for a Sheriff who would never wake up, then for the Doctor. The Doctor ended up being Steve, which would explain why he was the only one who believed Peter. The man mouthed ‘sorry’ to him before choosing to save Wanda.

Peter rose to get food once the villagers were awoken, deciding he didn’t want to be near when Natasha discovered that she had been killed- by getting hit with an ice cream truck apparently. The police tried to investigate, but it was determined to become a ‘cold case’. Yeah, F.R.I.D.A.Y was definitely having fun with this.

Pepper was eliminated that round after being accused by Sam, and with two Mafia to four townspeople, it was looking more precarious by the moment. The game quickly grew heated. Vision and MJ tried to take Sam out next, but Steve luckily chose to save him, and the managed to accuse and eliminate Vision. Then Steve was taken out the next round by MJ, the man was never one to save himself over others so he never even considered choosing himself. The girl survived the next vote by one vote, but ultimately Rhodes was eliminated. Tony was picked off by MJ next, and Steve couldn’t save him so he died immediately, leaving only Wanda, Sam, and MJ. The younger girl managed to convince Sam that Wanda was the enemy and secured herself the win.

As expected, the Avengers had loved the game and insisted on playing again until the food had arrived. The second time Wanda and Sam were the Mafia, with Rhodey and Natasha being the Doctor and Sheriff respectively, and they finished the game though the food arrived mid-way through. As the game ended Tony good-naturedly complained about never getting a role, while Pepper ribbed Wanda for killing her off first.

Half the players left the table to load up some plates with food, the excitement and intrigue whetting their appetite. Others went to the restroom, or to the bar to get a drink. Everyone was grinning, even as they bickered and complained about the game.

“That was brutal MJ,” Peter moaned, piling snacks onto a large plate. The teen’s girlfriend just hummed in response, busy looking over the feast set in front of them. It felt like it held every meal
known to man, heaped with sliders covered with different toppings, wings and at least 7 different sauces, ranging from a traditional buffalo sauce to a truffle-pecarino-parmesean sauce that Peter happened to know was Chef Lorenzo's specialty. There were at least 17 bowls scattered around the table, filled with salsa, hummus, and dip and surrounded by homemade chips, bread, and pretzels. Freshly made pizza pockets with a variety of flavors- including each member of the team's favorite-crowded the table, as well as the occasional tray of fresh fruits and veggies. The far end of the table was littered with brownies, cupcakes, cookies, parfaits, and dessert bars, along with a few bowls of mixed nuts, dried fruits, and candy perfect for a homemade trail mix.

“This is insane.” She breathed, even as she began loading up her plate. “Were they cooking for an army?”

Peter looked around the room exaggeratedly, lingering on each of the ‘Earth’s Mightiest Heroes’ getting food. “Kinda.” M.J. punched his arm lightly with a laugh, snatching a cookie off of his plate.

“Hey!” Peter protested. “That one had the most peanut butter cups in it!”

“I know.” The girl took a large bite of the treat, smiling victoriously.

Tony groaned. “Ok, no more desserts for anyone else, not even our dental plan will cover the amount of cavities we’ll get listening to those two.”

Wanda lightly threw a piece of pretzel at the inventor. “Boo, I was enjoying that.”

Sam snorted. “You’re just happy that you and Vision are finally out of the ‘Avenger’s cutest couple’ hotseat.”

“Wait wait, hold on. That’s a thing? Since when is that a thing? Even if it were a thing, why aren’t Pep and I in the lead?”

“Because you’re part of it, honey.” Pepper said with a smile, dipping a homemade tortilla chip into some guac.

“Excuse you, I’ll have you know that I am adorable.” Tony responded quickly, sounding honestly offended.

MJ burst out laughing, along with many of the other team members. These heroes, the defenders of the world, they were… people. When you got down to it, past the powers and the smarts and the tech, they were just people, like everyone else. It scared her, somewhat, like when you hear your friend was going to medical school and you remembered that the people that performed surgeries or doled out medicine were just as human and fallible as the store clerk that forgot to ring your chips so you got them free. It also humbled her. She was amazed that she was getting a glimpse into this world, into the lives of these people.

She glanced at Peter. It made a lot of mysteries surrounding him makes sense. Surrounded by these goofballs, she could believe that they would miss that Peter was Spider-Man. She could believe that they would be so focused on doting on him and their family that they could miss him buying the materials for his suit and sneaking out at night. They were a family, with all of the care and confidence and drama and dysfunction that came with it.

Peter caught her glance and frowned in concern. “Are you okay?”
MJ shook her head slightly and smiled. “I like your family.”

Peter grinned, “Thanks, I like them too.”

Hand in hand, with their plates held in their free hands, they made their way back to the table. Natasha had used everyone’s distraction with the food to set up one of her favorite games, Codenames. Peter nodded when he saw it, it was a good game for the moment. As long as there were two fairly even teams, it didn’t matter how many people were playing, and it would give one team time to eat while the other team took their turn.

“Nice.” Rhodes complimented as he sat down, clearly thinking the same. Natasha took the moment to grab a plate herself, as the man proclaimed “Peter and M.J. go first.”

“I’ve never played this one.” The girl admitted, though she didn’t hesitate to slide in the spot at the head of the table beside Peter.

“It’s fun.” He promised, pointing at the table. 25 cards sat on the table, making a square grid 5 cards high and 5 cards wide, each one with a word on it. In front of Peter there was also a pile of red cards, and in front of MJ sat a pile of blue cards, between them there was a pile of beige cards and a single black card.

Peter pulled yet another card off of a stack, and showed it to her. On the card was a picture of a grid, similar to the grid on the table, though the grid on the card was color coded, some red, some blue, some beige, and a single black spot.

“We are the only ones who get to see this, so we are the only ones who know what tiles should be what color, and we are going to give hints to help our teams figure out which cards belong to our team. For example, I’m the red team,” he pointed at the red cards on the table. Then he moved to the grid of cards, tapping the ones that correlated with the red spots on the card he’d showed MJ. “So I am going to use the words on these card to give them a one word clue to try and get them to guess which cards are red. For example,” He pointed at three cards. “These say ‘ball’, ‘Hydrant’, and ‘bone’, which all make me think of dog, so I might say ‘Dog, 3’, which lets them know that there are three cards that have to do with dogs, and they try to figure which ones I mean. But, look, there’s a card over here that said ‘walk’.” He checked the card with the grid again. “Which, uh oh, is a blue tile. So if they think that I meant that card, then you get a point. As soon as they guess incorrectly, our turn is over. You see the black card, that means instant death. So, if they for some reason though that ‘theatre’ had something to do with dogs and touched that, then we would automatically lose.”

MJ listened intently as Peter went into the more specific and nuanced rules, until she was reasonably sure that she understood what she was supposed to do. Nat quickly switched out the cards that Peter had used as examples with new cards, and Peter grabbed a new ‘grid’ card, with a completely
different pattern. By the time he was done explaining and everything was set up, the rest of the team was back and had arranged themselves into decently evenly-matched teams.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Side</th>
<th>Onion</th>
<th>Egg</th>
<th>Vinegar</th>
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<td>Tree</td>
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<td>Lift</td>
<td>Handcuffs</td>
<td>Sanctuary</td>
<td>Desert</td>
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Peter took a moment to look over the cards and make a plan before simply saying “Preserve, 3.”

M.J. looked at the cards that were supposed to be red and nodded. “Nice one.” She said as the Avengers on his side of the table started to bicker.

“So, MJ, what do you do for fun?” Sam, who was on MJ’s side along with Nat, Tony, and Vision, asked.

The girl startled at the abrupt, impromptu question. Peter saw it and explained, “The people at the head of the table aren’t allowed to give hints with their facial expressions, so when we play we usually have the opposite team distract them. It can be really hard to keep a straight face sometimes. Like when someone on the team says one of the words you were thinking, and everyone else dismisses it. It drives me crazy.”

“Or,” Vision added, though his eyes were on the table, obviously trying to find Peter’s answers despite being on the opposite team. “Such as the time that my hint was ‘Water, 2’, with the intention that it was the clue for ‘Melon’ and ‘drink’. However, I failed to realize that I also had the word ‘glass’, so they guessed two of my words correctly, but one of them was not the word I had intended.”

M.J. laughed, her head tilting as she realized how many ways things could go wrong in this.

“This is a really interesting game.”

“Yeah, it’s great. There’s an Avengers themed one too, but we always use too many inside jokes or confidential information when we play that one.” Peter replied.

MJ opened her mouth to answer, but before she could Steve called for Peter. MJ watched with interest as Steve deliberately touched ‘Lemon’, ‘Vinegar’, and, after hesitating for a moment, ‘Sanctuary’. Peter happily placed a red tile over each card as they touched it.
Mary Jane turned deliberately to her team. “Metal, 4”.

“Medal, or Metal?” Tony asked.

M.J. hesitated. “Is he allowed to ask that?”

“Yes,” Peter responded. “But you don’t have to answer.”

“Then I won’t.” Natasha cast the girl an appreciative glance.

M.J. listened for a moment, but soon found that Peter hadn’t been exaggerating about it being hard to keep a straight face. She took a large bite of her snacks and turned back to the other team.

“Peter tells us that you act?” Pepper asks.

“Oh, yeah! I’ve always loved it, even when I was little. I’m in a summer theatre program for now, and I’m going to try out for my school play once the next semester starts.”

“Do your relationships always start with people stalking your shows?” Wanda asked, winking at the slowly reddening Peter.

The younger girl just laughed. “Nope, Peter the first to try that.”

“Did he really have your name memorized from the pamphlet before you met.”

Peter groaned in embarrassment, but M.J. just laughed and gave him a quick peck on the cheek. “No need to be embarrassed, I thought it was cute. What you should be embarrassed about is running away before the end of the play every afternoon so I couldn’t talk to you.”

The team laughed, but before Peter could retort Tony called for their attention. One by one he touched the only three items in the cards typically made of metal, ‘scalpel’, ‘handcuffs’, ‘bleachers’, then when MJ had confirmed those answers as correct, he also touched ‘champion’, “because they get medals.” He said as a grinning MJ placed a blue tile on that card as well.

Peter looked at the board. She was up by one, so he had to get at least 2 here if he wanted a hope of being ahead, but a single card lead wouldn’t do much. “Swamp, 3.” It was a bit of a stretch, ok a
huge stretch, but he hoped it would work.

M.J. Turned back to her team, racking her brain for their last conversation. “So you guys play with Avengers-themed stuff? That’s adorable.”

“They usually give us a sample before it’s on the market. We have enough Avenger’s media to make a shrine of ourselves.”

“That reminds me,” Pepper said, breaking from her team’s discussion over what the third word could be. “I got another email for a pitch of an Avengers-themed cartoon. I’m considering letting them, they’re the first ones who haven’t objected to having some of our PR team review the episodes before they’re made. In fact, they suggested that I said someone myself to be on their team of writers.”

“You should have Peter be on the team to review them.” MJ suggested. “They could even advertise that and get more ratings, and you’d know they weren’t putting anything too bad in.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” she said speculatively, but before she could say more Rhodes cut in asking her opinion about the card they were thinking of going with.

“There you go Peter,” Sam said with a chuckle. “If you ever need extra cash, just take a picture next video-game night.”

“We play a lot of Avenger’s Conquest.” Peter admitted to a confused MJ. MJ laughed. “Isn’t that the game with the bootleg that was a million times more popular than the actual game?”

“That’s the one.” Tony admitted.

“Well, I suppose you can’t blame them. You can play as a lot more heroes in the bootleg, like Spider-Man and stuff.”

“Peter,” Wanda said, then pointed to ‘Alligator’, and ‘moss’. Peter immediately covered those with red tiles. She hesitated a while before finally tapping a third card, ‘desert’. With a sigh Peter checked the grid card and laid a beige card over that last one as the team began arguing about what the correct answer should have been. He knew it was a stretch, desert wasn’t a bad guess, they were both types of ecosystems.
MJ looked at the board. Darn it, if only Peter gave them a hint for ‘Onion’, then she could say-Oh. Onions, Ogres, Shrek, Swamp. Wow Peter, that was a stretch.

“Tie, 2.” She finally said. “So, what were we talking about?”

“You were talking about meeting Peter?”

“Oh yeah, I had stayed behind because I wanted to watch Spider-Man fight, cause the villain wasn’t really focused on civilians, but then I realized that was stupid and went to hide, and we ended up both hiding in the props trailer. Then it got crushed so we couldn’t escape and…” She shrugged in an ‘the rest is history’ way.

Peter snorted and shook his head. “She’s lying, she didn’t go in to hide, she was looking for a sword to give Spider-Man.”

Rhodes let out a single loud, barking laugh. “A sword?”

“Ok, ok we got it!” Sam interrupted, pointing at ‘suit’ and ‘rope’.

Peter scowled at the board, eyes roving over his tiles. “Cry, 2?” He tried, and almost immediately Tony was vying for M.J.’s attention.

“So you seem pretty into Spider-Man. Watching his fights, playing his video games… is that a crush on him I hear?”

The girl glanced at Peter out of the corner of her eye. He was shooting daggers at a seemingly unconcerned Tony. Lip curling up in mischief, the teen sighed. “I don’t know, selfless, brave, smart, kind, always doing what he can to help people… why would I have a crush on Spider-Man when I have a guy like that?”

“Awww.” The team crooned as one, as Peter turned so red that he would have matched his suit.

Tony clutched his heart. “Ack, ok I give, I give. Interrogation over.”

“So, M.J., Peter said you didn’t realize who he was at first, I thought he was fairly well known by now, how did that go?” The implication was clear, Tony’s interrogation was over, but Natasha still
had a long way to go. However, after living with her for months, Peter could see what others may have missed. He saw that despite the somewhat harsh questions, Natasha continued to eat, continued to watch the game, both subtle signs that she was relaxed, that she didn’t really expect a fight. He saw the other teammates lightly rib both redheads as the questions turned into verbal sparring. Natasha was winning without a doubt, but they seemed impressed with how M.J. held up just the same. He saw the encouraging glances shot both to him and to the girl, he saw-

“Peter?” Steve interrupted his thoughts. Peter startled and turned to the man, seeing him tap ‘Onion’ and ‘Tissue’. Peter grinned and placed both tiles.

M.J. However, was grinning even harder. “Salad,3!” She said confidently, and didn’t bother distract herself as the team quickly settled on the three she needed to win the game, ‘Side’, ‘Egg’, and ‘Ranch’. Peter grinned as Steve and Tony replaced them at the top, everyone else moving to reset the cards. He gave his girlfriend a quick peck on the cheek, but only shook his head when she looked at him curiously. He was too happy to explain it. Life was good.

Albert Malik's cheek twitched under the thick rubber of his mask. He had long grown used to the bright red covering when he look in mirrors, but it still grew bothersome in the heat.

Red Skull carefully tilted the reinforced jar, watching with grim satisfaction as the black sludge inside avoided the parts of the jar that touched his fingers. Though he seethed with anger that the Avengers had thwarted his earlier plan, he had to appreciate how he had used the free time that plan B had necessitated. He’d spent every spare moment working with the Symbiote, training it, teaching it to give into his whims less it face a lash of electricity- the only weapon he’d found that would actually harm the beast.

He’d known that when facing the Avengers, of course. He’d had dozens of men nearby ready with cattle prods and stun guns, but that would have been shaking a stick at a wild animal to scare it in the direction you wanted. Now, he was a lion-tamer, a circus performer cracking his whip and knowing that his creature would obey.

And what a beautiful and deadly creature it was. It was a parasite, it soul purpose to suck the life force of those that he bonded with in order to make itself stronger. It would drain them dry, and once its current meal was over it would simply switch hosts, always searching for a stronger shell. It was one of the reasons why it was such an effective tool, a tool worth fighting for. The creature’s very nature enabled it to-no, necessitated that it would find and bond with the strongest opponent, leaving only those weaker than its host to fight back.

Rising to his feet, Red Skull stood imperiously among his men, his strict, firm stance betraying none of the anticipation and anxiety whirling around inside. This was the day. No different than any other day, truly, except for the fact that there was no more reason to delay. He trusted the Symbiote, it was his men that were causing him concern. He once more heard whispers among them, questioning his plan. He had to fight back a sneer. He was surrounded by lackeys and fools. They hadn’t managed to take down less than ten men, and they thought they had the ability to overthrow an entire nation of warriors.

No, Red Skull didn’t seek a people to rule- not yet at least. He wanted only a host for his pet, and
King T’Challa was the perfect man for the job.

Getting into Wakanda had been tough, but they had been lucky, and Wakanda had opened its borders even as they had made plans to break past them. Hydra of the past had never dared to enter the kingdom, afraid of its power and unwilling to kick at the nest of hornets so very content to stay within their hive.

This generation would be different, Albert would make sure of that. They would not know fear.

Once the Avengers were gone, they wouldn’t have to.

He looked at the two men suited up. This was a recon mission, at least getting in was. He put the pocket held the jar with the Symbiote. Getting out shouldn’t be a problem.

One of the men, the more outspoken of the two, grunted. “There will likely be many makeshift weapons in the lab. It is a dangerous place to corner him.”

That was true, but... “It’s the only place he goes without a bodyguard or escort. It is the closest to being alone the king will ever get.”

The men nodded. They clearly didn’t like the idea, but they would be obedient when it mattered. What’s more, they were the stealthiest men in his employ. That was vital. The trek through Wakanda was as perilous as he expected, with highly vigilant men and women at every side and lining every corner. It only got worse when they finally entered the palace, the sleek rooms giving little space to hide, and guards constantly patrolling. However, they had been planning the break in for months, and though there were far, far too many close calls, they managed to make it into the lab without notice with the help of the wide, extensive ventilation system that the hot African climate necessitated.

Red skull grinned when they finally made it to vent to the lab, eager to get off his now-aching knees and out of the situation that made him feel like he was in some children’s spy movie. The lab was empty at the moment, though if the men who studied the King’s schedule were correct, the man would be in at any second. The men dropped from the grate, separating strategically to box in anyone who entered to room and easily hiding amid the many experiments.

Red Skull carefully extracted the jar, holding it in his hands as he waited for his prey to enter. The Symbiote was agitated, constantly moving in its jar, as though it could sense the tension in the air. The King did not leave them waiting long. As expected, T’Challa entered the room without his guards, only his sister with him. The girl was keeping the man’s attention, talking animatedly about something Red Skull couldn’t care less about. The two went almost immediately to a well-lit surface. It was similar to a table, but with a clear, doomed top and white sides. To Red Skull, it looked almost like a coffin, but whatever it was, it had captured their entire attention.
Silent as a wraith and twice as deadly, Red Skull slipped across the room. However, somehow the girl noticed him. Maybe his shadow had darkened the strange container, maybe his face had been mirrored in one of the room’s many reflective surfaces.

How she saw him didn’t matter, as she let out a sound that was part surprise, part alarm, and part warning. Her hands snatched forward, grabbing a pair of gauntlets from a nearby table. Red Skull had reacted in time with her cry, throwing the jar at the whirling man. The girl was faster however, and a blast of energy shot out of the gloves to hit the jar at the top of its arch. The glass shattered, but it didn’t stop the Symbiote within. Rather, freed from its prison the creature seemed to reach towards the man with even greater intensity.

T’Challa’s necklace seemed to be bleeding out an inky blackness that was solidifying across his chest, claws were forming at his fingers as he whirled to face the new threat, but his suit hadn’t even gotten past his pecs when the dark mass of the symbiote crashed into him. The man let out a grunt of surprise that was quickly muffled as the monster took over his body. There was a strange, warping texture that appeared across the man’s torso as the creature fought with the vibranium attempting to cover the man.

“Brother!” The girl yelled, shooting out again with the gauntlet. The energy blast landed solidly on the man, and for a millisecond the creature drew back, revealing a glimpse of a pain-filled T’Challa as he screamed in pain from the close-quarters blast. That threw the girl, if only for a moment. A moment was enough for the Symbiote. It was enough for it to assert it’s control over the Black Panther once more, enough for it to look at the girl, who had now harmed it twice, as an enemy that needed to be ended.

The creature swung out, his arm miraculously growing in a barrage of inky-black and swiping her into the wall. A crack climbed up the wall where she crashed into it, and the girl didn’t move from where she landed. The creature however could still sense life in her and stalked towards her to finish the job. Red Skull stepped forward, thrilled that his plan had worked and eager for the show. As he passed the strange structure he idly looked in it, curious about what had taken their attention so fully.

He froze when he saw what was in it, mouth going dry and eyes widening in wonder. His men ventured towards him, seeming equally amazed.

“Is that…” One of them breathed, and Red Skull couldn’t even find it in himself to nod.

“Symbiote!” He barked harshly. “Leave it. Time has suddenly become a much more important resource.”

The creature growled, but the man responded by simply pressing the button on the cattle prod he kept at his waist. The being flinched at the noise, now painfully familiar with the sound from the
man’s ‘training’. He reluctantly slipped away and joined the three men as they worked to free the container.

Red Skull was grinning broadly, grimly. That Avengers brat may have cut off one head, but the two that are growing in its place are even stronger than Red Skull himself would ever have imagined.

He reverently placed a hand on the clear portion of the container, right where long brown hair met the stub of where an arm used to be.
Wakanda was in chaos. The halls of the palace was lined with gouges and scars, dyed red by the blood of those who attempted to fight a monster they had never before experienced. Though novelty was not something that would make any Wakandan hesitate, the creature proved formidable. It’s skin was a viscous, almost liquid texture that did not seem to be harmed by any cuts or jabs, but when they used any energy or electricity-based weaponry, the slimy black covering would seem to melt away, revealing a glimpse of T’Challa’s face, seeming pained and worn. The surprise would be just enough to make them hesitate or pause for a single moment, and though they would have been prepared to fight again in the next, the creature did not give them the opportunity.

Now the king was gone, his sister was injured and unconscious, and the people were abuzz with confusion and panic. In this time of confusion and fear, M’Baku had stepped in to gain control. Though his initial relationship with T’Challa had been strained, the two had grown much closer since the man had aided in the battle against Killmonger, and M’Baku had become one of the king’s most trusted advisors. The move wasn’t that of a power hungry man attempting to seize power from himself, rather that of a competent man stepping in to do a job that needed done.

However, the man was vastly different from T’Challa, and was much less likely to turn to outsiders for help. He did not consider it himself, and when Okoye brought up the Avengers, he insisted that they try to solve it the Wakandan way first, and turn to others only if they were unable. They got far in their search. The creature left destruction in its path and it was easy for the men and women of Wakanda to track in in the familiar forests. However, they soon followed the tracks to an empty and abandoned clearing, one just big enough for a skilled pilot to land a helicopter. The search took on a different tone at that point, though it was no less frenzied. The scientists and programmers of Wakanda took to their computers, tracking flight information, radar, even traffic cams.

However, Hydra had always excelled at hiding. Sometimes in plain sight, sometimes out of sight, but always well hidden. This new reemergence of Hydra was even better. Without the reach of the old Hydra, the judges and officers in their pocket, the resources to pay off those who weren’t, the new smaller branch had to be even more careful to remain in the shadows.

Search as they might, there were no answers to be found, until days had passed and even M’Baku admitted that it was past time to call in reinforcements.

The man sat, glaring at the phone held in his large hand and gritting his teeth. He would do this. He would put his pride aside and make the call to ask outsiders for help. He would do it for Wakanda, the one thing that would be worth it.

Okoye stood beside him, her eyes hard and her lips curled in a stern expression, worried about T’Challa and angered that she was unable to find him herself. Nakia was still out searching for the king, leading the many search parties that had been formed. However, with both members of the
The girl had been hurt badly by the creature, thrown into a wall. Though there had been no doubt that she would live with little to no ill effects thanks to the medical prowess of Wakanda, head wounds were always tricky, always dangerous. The doctors and surgeons had been forced to move slowly, wary of doing anything that would cause harm.

However when the man made it to the hospital wing, he could see that the wait hadn’t been in vain. Shuri was sitting up in her bed, fully alert and cognizant. She was already interrogating one of the nurses over the status of her brother.

Okoye sprinted into the room and knelt beside the girl’s bed, grasping her hand. She didn’t ask Shuri if she was ok, she didn’t have the time. Almost before the warrior reached the bed, Shuri was asking “Have the Avengers been contacted?”

“No yet.” M’Baku said as he came to stand beside the bed

The girl, who should have seemed weak in the pale hospital bed, seemed to rise up in fury. She gestured at the nurse she had been questioning when they enter. “What? Rimka says that I have been unconscious for days. If my brother is still gone, every second counts.”

“We wanted to solve this internally first if possible, but were were just moving to call when we heard that you had awoken.”

The girl huffed in irritation, and Okoye got the sense that she was moments away from rising to her feet herself. “You don’t see? She told me that they took container 34XB-09. The took the White Wolf. This was not an enemy of Wakanda, it was an enemy of the Avengers.”

Okoye let out a long stream of Wakandan curses. She had known that they had stolen the man, but she had forgotten his significance. She hadn’t been involved much in the chaos that was Sokovia, T’Challa had chosen to go alone for the most part. It had been too easy to think of the man as only one of Shuri’s many projects. She had been a fool.

As though the world was waiting for the girl’s announcement, one of the technical engineers rushed into the room. He, along with most other computer specialists, had been given the task of scouring the internet for any and all news of T’Challa. “We’ve found the creature! He’s been spotted in New York City.”

It was unfortunate how long it took to travel when one needed to stay below the radar. Even with their own private vessel, it took days for Albert and his men to arrive back in the states, but somehow, miraculously it seemed that the Avengers had not been alerted. Or, if they had then they had remarkable little concern for both Barnes and T’Challa. They showed no signs of distress or concern, did not spend all hours researching and searching for the two missing men. Rather they lived as though in domestic bliss, relaxing in their home and doting on that child.

The element of surprise was an unexpected gift, but one that he would cherish regardless.

Venom was growing restless. T’Challa’s energy was not enough, he needed to feed, he needed more. Red Skull looked at the creature consideringly. Well, he doubted they would have the element
of surprise much longer anyway. The Avengers would soon see the power that he held as a pet; the terror that had been only delayed by their last match, and not stopped. Then, they would cease seeing anything at all.

He eyed the rooftop of the building his men had painstakingly staked out. They had arrived in New York exactly when planned, right in the middle of an exclusive convention boasting not only the New York elite, but several prominent politicians as well, including several members of the committee appointed to handle the Avenger’s affairs and approve of their assignments. The fools were now enjoying a cocktail on an opulently decorated hotel rooftop, practically painting a target on themselves. There would be no better way to ensure that the heroes arrived quickly.

He turned to the creature, tapping his cattle prod in a pattern that he had perfected over the past few months, obtaining the monster’s complete attention. The Symbiote shook its head, the sound likely almost deafening between its proximity to Red Skull and the transmitter that Albert had embedded in the monster’s viscous skin. He hoped to use it to control the creature when they were apart, to call it to heel when needed.

He pointed at the far rooftop. “Dinnertime.” He said darkly. The beast only stared at him for a moment, then the words seemed to sink it and it grinned a gruesome grin, revealing teeth that stretched long past the middle of its face. The Symbiote turned and ran, jumping from the roof without fear and sinking its claws into the wall of the building across. Immediately, the beast set to crawling up the outside of the building, claws sinking deep into the walls.

The Symbiote had grown the claws himself while they had still been in Wakanda, sharp black points on each finger. It had also formed small, pointed tufts on the back of its head, the white splotches that had always adorned it had shifted in a mimicry of the necklace that Black Panther once wore, until the entire beast looked like a warped facsimile of the Wakandan hero. Red Skull wasn’t sure how the creature knew what the Black Panther looked like, perhaps gleaming it from the mind of its host. He did know that the combination of the Black Panther affectations and the split jaw lined with wickedly sharp teeth and tensile tongue was the stuff of horrors, of nightmares.

Screaming started on the roof opposite Albert and his men. The nightmare had arrived.

Peter took a deep, steadying breath. He squinted as he looked through the oversized magnifying glass to the minuscule soldering gun held in hands that he was putting conscious effort into keeping still. Tony stood behind him, a hand on his shoulder, though he said nothing. The only sound in the lab was the loud rock music that Tony constantly had blaring. The genius’s presence would have once made Peter tense and unsure, but by now it was familiar and comfortable.

Peter carefully connected the last wire and leaned back with a gusty, satisfied sigh.

“Perfect!” Tony said, quickly moving forward to grab at the large, mechanical wing. He splayed it out, pressing a few buttons and watching the device spread and contract appropriately. “This will cut down Wilson’s banking distance by 20 percent, and should almost double his banking capability. Just in time for his birthday, too.”

Peter frowned. “That’s like, six months away.”

Peter did some quick mental calculation. “That was last week.”

The man sighed, running a finger over the intricate feathers. “You can’t let me have any fun, can you?” Then the two shared a familial grin. Tony moved to place the wings on a different table. “We should do a few more tests, but we should be able to give them to him later this week. That was smart thinking with the joints, it gave us much more flexibility than my plans accounted for.”

Peter blushed, warmth rushing through him at the praise. May and Ben had lauded his scientific achievements all the time, but it was different with Tony. He really knew what he was talking about, he was praising Peter as a professional as well as a parent. It didn’t mean more than when Uncle Ben had posted 20 pictures of his science fair project on Facebook, but it was different.

The man ginned. “Now get outta here. Your girl is showing up in an hour, right? You might want to put on a shirt with fewer grease stains. And puns.” He added as an afterthought, gesturing as the shirt that proudly displayed a petri-dish full of green globs with the words ‘I Have Culture’ displayed below.

Peter glanced down. “M.J. likes my puns.” He said proudly, though he did stand. Wanda had gotten him a shirt the other day that she swore brought out his eyes and had insisted that he wear for their next date. Though, he didn’t really know if this could be considered a date. The Avengers cartoon had sent over their rough draft of the first episode as an attempt to convince the team to let them do the show. Pepper had mostly agreed, though she was planning on bringing up M.J.’s idea to have Peter be a consultant. With how popular Peter seemed to be with the press, she doubted that they would have any objections.

The cartoon was sure to be mostly clunky line art since it was still just a draft, but M.J. was excited to watch it with the team.

Peter had only just stepped out of the room when F.R.I.D.A.Y.’s voice sounded from above. “Pardon Boss, but you are urgently requested in the conference room. I apologize Peter, but this is a strictly confidential meeting.”

Peter frowned, but nodded.

“Sorry kid, you okay to stick around here by yourself for a bit?”

“Can M.J. still come?”

Tony shrugged. “Sure. Just give her a quick run down of the protocols for if there’s an emergency.”

Peter nodded with a grin. A part of him- a large part- wished that he could be going with them on whatever adventure they were about to go on, travelling across the world to save people and bring justice. More and more he considered why he was keeping everything a secret, then Tony would do something over-protective, or they would ask him his opinion on Spider-Man and he would remember yet again how awkward it would be to finally come clean.

Put out, the teen went to prepare snacks for him and M.J. The team had been called on many assignments since adopting Peter, and none of them had been nearly as eventful as that first one where he’d gotten kidnapped. By now, it felt no different than when May had occasionally been called into work at odd times.

M.J. showed up early, only a few moments after the team went to be briefed. Happy didn’t stick around as he normally did when the team was gone. Pepper needed an escort to some event for Stark industries that was so dry that even Tony had refused to go to. She had been planning to leave early.
to watch the cartoon with the team, but with them on a mission she would likely choose to stay for a few hours longer.

Reluctant to watch the show without the rest of the team, M.J. confessed that she really wanted to play on the obstacle course and they moved there instead. Peter insisted that she wear the iron harness, and even wore one himself lest F.R.I.D.A.Y. yell at him, but before they could finish putting on the harnesses Peter was distracted by a familiar chime sounding from his hip pocket.

Peter frowned at the interruption, however when he opened the phone he sighed in relief.

“Who is it?” M.J. asked. Slowly making her way over to him.

“Shuri. I was kinda worried about her. It’s Wednesday, she almost always wakes me up by sending me that one Vine, you know the guy in the Spider-Man suit and goggles? But she didn’t this morning she must have forgot.”

He pressed the green button to accept the call.

Sam was done. Absolutely, 100% done with this Avengers crap. Fighting Hydra? Sure, point him at the corrupt muscle men with guns and weaponry he’d never heard the likes of before. Shrinking people? Okay, a little weird but sure, technology was advancing every day, he could handle shrinking men. Killer hive-mind robots? Sounds like a lame ‘B-movie’ plot but, fine. You know, fine whatever.


Heck, he’d even made his peace with the fact that he would probably have to kick some alien butt before everything was said and done.

Slime monsters with a mouth bigger than his head, a tongue that could wrap around his waist, with semi-solid limbs that seemed to grow and shrink at will?

Done. He was done.

He forced his wings to flare, and while it didn’t affect the creature as much as he wanted it did manage to cut deep scratches in the tongue that was wrapped around his stomach. Apparently, the cuts were painful enough that the creature released him with a loud roar. He dropped to the ground with a grunt and managed to quickly roll away. Luckily, Wanda used the opportunity to throw some of the heavy furniture at the monster using her powers. The area was littered with heavy chairs, tables, and the leftovers of drinks and snacks. A small handful of dead bodies were scattered with the rubble, men and women who looked as though they had been drained of every part of their life essence.

Iron Man shot out a blast, nailing the creature in the chest and the monster let out a sharp cry. The heroes on the roof watched in a suspended moment of time as the charred black flesh of the monster bubbled and moved, until no hint of the injury remained.

Tony let out a loud curse.

“Language!” Steve yelled as the non-flying team members finally made it onto the rooftop battle scene. The monster turned at the sound of his voice, throwing out a punch that extended far beyond what its reach should have been. Steve had to leap to the side to avoid the appendage, but it simply curved at an angle that would have been impossible for a creature with bones and continued
following the man. The monster seemed to be wholly focused on Steve now, barely paying attention to the other combatants.

The monster made contact with the supersoldier, and the man let out a startled yelp as the goo that formed its body began to cover his chest. Wanda rushed forward, making precise gestures with her hands that caused a translucent red wall to form in between the creature and the avenger, severing its arm but allowing Steve to leap back to safely.

Steve however, was frozen for a moment, staring as the monster regenerated its arm with an angry roar. That thing wasn’t just attacking Steve, it was like it was trying to take him over, control his body. Sam suddenly had the vivid memory of bright brown eyes shining as he stammered out a report, describing a weapon that could supposedly turn one of the Avengers into a monster without control.

“It’s the nightlight!” He suddenly yelled, “Peter’s nightlight!”

The Avengers faces grew grim, understanding. Fists clenched and scowls deepened. They weren’t just fighting this beast. They were fighting Hydra, fighting the man who’d killed Peter’s parents.

Suddenly, Sam was no longer ‘done’. Game on.

"Hey Shuri," Peter said with a grin, M.J. coming closer. Shuri had added her on social media, and they had texted before when she was covering for Peter, but she had yet to actually talk to the girl.

"Peter." Shuri said and immediately the teen's smile dropped, shuttering into complete seriousness at the girls tone.

"Shuri, what happened, what's wrong?"

"My brother, he's been taken, turned into a monster by a black goo." A chill went through Peter as he was reminded of Red Skull and his monster, something that he hadn't thought about in weeks. "It's taken control of him, he doesn't know what he's doing."

Peter was rushing to the door, eyes blown wide in surprise and no small measure of fear for his dear friend. "Okay, okay. Don't worry Shuri, we'll figure it out. I'll tell the team and we-" He froze, cursing in a way that would have shocked Steve.

"They're on a mission, but this has got to be priority. Tony always takes my calls, I can-"

"Peter." The girl said, tension clear in the forced calmness of her voice. Her fingers were clenched around a bundle of the hospital blanket as she watched news coverage of a team of multi-colored heroes battling a black beast. "The team is already there. But I- I thought I lost my brother once, I can't lose him again. I need all hands on deck."

Peter tensed, knowing from deep within his soul the words that she was about to say, as certainly as if they had already been said.

"I need Spider-Man."

Peter couldn't move, stunned at the girl's revelation, chill running through him. He opened his mouth numbly, perhaps to deny it, perhaps to ask how she knew, but before he could say another word M.J. took the phone from his hands with an expression that made it clear that now was not the time to talk.

"He's on his way."
The monster was furious. It roared, furious as large, powerful hands slammed against the wall. Wanda grunted, attempting to throw up another barrier to actually trap the thing, but it was difficult with the onslaught of the existing barricade. The creature grabbed a couch that was behind him and began hitting the force field with it. The couch made no more impact than its hands had, but it revealed a cowering man who had no doubt been hiding behind the seat. The man whimpered in fear, drawing the monster’s attention to him.

The Symbiote considered the hiding figure for less than a moment. The pathetic man would be little more than a snack, and there was much more exciting prey around, but that prey was proving difficult to catch. The Symbiote had no doubt that he would eventually get a bigger meal, perhaps even a new host in the form of the blonde man whose life force flared even brighter than the Black Panther he was currently leeching off of. However, the creature ran a long tongue over it’s dagger-like teeth. A snack may give him the energy to get that meal a little quicker.

He stalked toward the quivering figure, only to erupt in a pained roar as Rhodey shot of series of mini-rockets into its back. Angry and petulant, the creature chose to forsake his meal in favor of throwing his snack at the man as hard as he could.

He missed, but War Machine immediately whirled around to try to save the man. The Symbiote watched the annoying pest fly away, and immediately turned to one of the corpses he had made earlier to repeat the procedure when Sam made a dive for him. The body was dead, but the hero didn’t know that, and similarly rushed to the figures rescue.

The being moved to another corpse to do the same to Tony, but was stopped again by a barrier of Wanda’s design. The monster whirled, unable to see where the strange energy was coming from, and Vision used the distraction to shoot out a beam to begin slicing into the creature, but it was was fast; too fast. The man couldn’t get more than occasional slices and nicks, and those were soon healed by the creatures bubbling skin. Wanda abruptly dropped the shield, her eyes going glassy as she made her way into its mind, but before she had been in it for more than a moment she was screaming out in pain, clutching her head.

The monsters mind was nothing like she had ever experienced before, a mix of animal and parasite and man and something wholly foreign. It had been like being screamed at from a million different sides, as uncomfortable as sandpaper running down one’s skin. In the midst of it all she thought she heard a familiar voice calling for help, but was so over-stimulated that she couldn’t trace it. Vision stopped his attacks at her cry, crouching down beside her to make sure that she was okay as she grit her teeth and struggled to process the information she had received. She had pulled out of the mind, but it had left her scrambled.

The monster took a step towards the two figures, attention drawn to the woman’s cry of pain. He began moving towards them, but Steve acted first.

“Oh no you don’t,” He gried, grunting with effort as he put all of his strength into a throw of his mighty shield. However with a sick, disgusting ‘thunk’ the shield, rather than hitting and reflecting off of the creature, stuck fast to the viscous skin along its back. Black sludge, moving as though it had a mind of its own, dribbled forward as though aiming to cover the shield, assimilating it into the being. One by one, the red, silver and blue bands on the shield were consumed by monstrous black. The creature didn’t even seem to notice. He had turned on the impact and now it’s entire attention was consumed by the super soldier.

Tony shot what felt like a battalion of small missiles at the monster, but it managed to contort its body
so that nearly all of the blows ricocheted harmlessly off the shield that it was absorbing into its skin. Without his shield, Steve was left bare handed when the creature descended upon him. However, he was far from defenseless. The man, with the full force of his strength, threw a punch that landed squarely in the being’s stomach. Unfortunately, rather beating the monster back, the man’s hand sunk deep into its skin just as the shield had. The creature seemed to grin with the face-splitting mouth, revealing dagger-like teeth as the creature’s skin once more bubbled.

Steve cried out as the monster’s black skin moved in a frighteningly life-like way, travelling up his arm like a sentient shadow. A smaller figure seemed to appear from the monster’s center as Steve was consumed more and more.

Steve let out a yell, half due to pain and half due to the effort he was making to pull away. Vision rose, but Steve was so intertwined in the whirling mass of the creature that he couldn’t be sure that any action he made wouldn’t harm Captain America as well.

Suddenly, slim white ropes connected themselves to the bit of shield still visible in the monster’s back, and Spider-Man was with them on the rooftop, grunting with effort as he pulled on his webbing.

“Hey Ugly, I think your Flubber Cosplay is a little off.”

The shield was so deeply embedded in the monster’s back that the small hero was actually able to pull the monster back and away from its prey. It lasted only a moment before the creature released the shield, but it was enough.

As the monster was pulled away from Steve, Vision used the moment to use his stone to slice the beast away from the Captain, and Tony swooped down and grabbed the man, ferrying him away from the creature. Steve looked up instinctually just in time to grab his shield, Spider-Man on the ground below in a position as if he’d just thrown it.

The man nodded his appreciation at the vigilante, then looked back to the monster to see that white had formed on the creatures back, a series of circles growing smaller and smaller, with a star in the center.

The Symbiote had turned to this new annoyance, then froze. His senses were screaming at him, an instinct that ran to the very center of his being-to his very DNA was crying out. He watched the red and blue hero with large, disconcerting eyes.

He let out several large, panting breaths. “... heir.”

The hero’s head cocked to the side in confusion. “Air? Can you not breathe?”

A low grumble started in the creature’s chest, a mix between a growl and a pur. “Heir... MINE!” It howled, rushing at the vigilante who yelped as he twipped out of the monster’s path. He landed near where Vision, Scarlet Witch, and Black Widow had clumped together. Vision used the moment to send a laser at the creature’s core, going across the monster’s stomach like a laser in a James Bond movie as the monster moved with single-minded determination at Spider-Man.

“No stop!” Peter yelled as Vision neared the monster’s middle and bright red mixed with the bubbling black tar. “Thats King T’Challa!”

The hero stopped immediately, and the four had to quickly jump out of the way as the creature lunged at them. Peter and Natasha ended up jumping the same direction. “What?” The woman questioned.
“I was contacted by Shuri.” He said succinctly, Spider-Man didn’t stammer like Peter did. “That thing is King T’Challa, she asked me to help save her brother. He’s in there somewhere.”

The woman frowned and touched her ear. “Did everyone get that?”

Peter’s senses caught everyone saying a different version of affirmative.

The team immediately began to make a plan, but before they could say much more, the monster was once more attacking Peter, and he had to jump away to avoid it. The monster followed the hero as he jumped around the rooftop. The rest of the Avengers did what they could to attack or distract it, but the monster had fixated on Spider-Man and not even Steve, who had held its attention so completely before, could draw it away. Peter was finding it increasingly difficult to escape the somewhat cramped rooftop, jumping away in the nick of time each time, constantly blabbering quips about ‘The blob’ and ‘Slimer’ and ‘tar pits’.

Desperate and cornered, Peter shot a web at a nearby building, but the moment he took to do that was all the creature needed, it latched onto the young hero. From its terrifying maw was a litany of ‘heir’ and ‘mine’.

Suddenly Peter was filled with pain, and the monster let out a horrifying pained screech. It retracted for a moment, seizing, but it lasted only a moment before it turned to where Natasha was standing, her widow’s bite embedded clearly in the monster’s skin. Unfortunately, the stun gun lasted only a few seconds and the monster threw her off the roof. Sam dived down to grab her, and Peter used the moment to swing to another rooftop.

The monster screeched from the other top, pacing back and forth along the roof edge. A large, stylized white spider took up his chest. Suddenly, the monster’s face broke into a fearsome grin. It’s hands made a mimicry of Peter’s web slinging and a stream of it’s odd viscous black skin shot out of its wrist and attached itself to a spot on the wall next to Peter.

“Oh nope nope nope, that’s a whole lot of nope.” Spider-Man grabbed the fake webbing, attempting to rip it, but the string held firm and the monster soon followed. Tony, Rhodes, Vision, Sam and even Steve all had the same idea and the ‘webbing’ was soon shredded by a series of mini-missiles, bullets, heat rays and a shield, sending the creature to the ground below. The monster let out a roar when it hit the bottom, and began climbing the building to get at Peter.

“Wow short stuff,” Tony said, hovering near the teen. “What did you do to it?”

“Maybe he was offended when I said I’d sneezed stuff scarier than him.”

Suddenly the creature cocked its head as though it were listening to something no one else could hear. It was silent for a moment, then it roared as though to argue. However after a moment, it jumped to the ground and ran away. The flying heroes rushed to follow, and Peter took a moment to breathe before doing the same. He’d promised Shuri after all. But when he caught up with the others, the creature was gone and Tony was cursing up a storm.

“Did we lose him?” Peter asked, dismayed. Sam turned to him with a tight nod.

“Hydra grabbed him. Tony’s working on it, but in the meantime they’re pretty good at hiding.”

Peter realized after a beat that he wasn’t supposed to know about Hydra. “What? Hydra! They’re back? No way!”

That was not good. Sam, one of the few who had fought the Hydra agents within Shield, nodded. “They’re back. Not for long though.” He said darkly.
Wanda watched him carefully. “How did you know about King T’Challa?”

“Hm? Oh, I-uh, I have this, um, forum, like a fan forum? But sometimes people will post that they need help? And I keep an eye on it so I can help them?” There were way too many questions in that for that to be at all believable.

The Avengers agreed, if their expressions were anything to go on. He sighed, but suddenly an idea popped into his head. He was embarrassed to say it came from an Avengers-OrphanXSpider-Man fanfiction that MJ had sent him a few weeks back. She’d tried to call him about it, but had been laughing too hard to get a single word out.

He was also very embarrassed that there was Peter Parker fanfiction, but that was another matter entirely. Spider-Man fanfiction had been around for several months, and somehow that wasn’t as bad.

“He didn’t really want you to know about this, but I gave Peter a way to contact me a while back.”

The worst part had been that the fanfiction had actually been really good. It would have been much easier to ignore if it had been bad.

“He, uh, he got into trouble a lot when he was taking pictures. I couldn’t get him to stop wandering into dangerous places, so I just made sure he had a way to call for help.”

It was a slow burn fic, more than 155K words.

“I made him promise to keep it a secret, especially when I heard he was adopted by you, so don’t get mad at him!”

He’d read the whole thing in a night.

“But Shuri called him and he passed it onto me.”

He wasn’t proud of it.

The Avengers seemed to think this was much more plausible, though that may have been because Nat was hardly paying attention, wrapping a cut on her arm she’d gotten when the creature had thrown her, and Tony was in a deep conversation with F.R.I.D.A.Y. trying to track down Hydra.

Tony cursed suddenly. “I need more screens than this mask. Let’s head back to the tower and make a game plan.”

The tower? The tower where Peter was supposed to be? “Right, uh, I have some stuff that needs doing, people to save, muggers to catch. Uh, I’ll keep my eye out for any like, explosions or anything and head over to help.”

“Or we can ask Peter to contact you.” Vision said reasonably.

“Right! Right, cause that is a thing that you can do now. Yes, I will be eagerly awaiting your call.”

And he swung away before he could say anything stupider.

The men were ready, the asset was ready, but was the Symbiote? The creature was moving anxiously, staying close to the ground. He had received a hearty punishment for following that
annoying vigilante rather than fighting his commanded prey.

Red Skull scoffed as the creature flinched away from him, looking much weaker than the villain would have liked. Mighty though he was, it seemed the Blank Panther would not be strong enough to sustain the Symbiote much longer. Red Skull doubted that anyone, even the great Captain America, could hold the creature long.

The Villain watched the being, considering. Though the symbiote had consumed a good deal of energy at the party before the Avengers had arrived, the creature had also expended that much or more energy in the fight. It was likely still ravenous. If he waited, King T’Challa would likely be dead by the end of the night, ridding him of a nuisance, but the man had the power of the Panther, even still. If they were able to keep him alive and heal him, he could one day be a decent host once more. Deciding on the latter, Red Skull made the command to free the soldier from his frozen slumber.

Though T’Challa may someday be a decent host, today was not that day. Red Skull, no Hydra, needed a creature who would go after the Avengers not that annoying whelp. They needed a creature who would follow out orders without deviation. They needed a creature that would obey. One that didn’t have the choice not to.

A cloud of cold mist lifted when the door to the cyro-chamber was opened, The Winter Soldier’s form still and pale where he lay. The Symbiote immediately rose, though the battered form he was attached to could not. The beast rose from above the prone form of it’s previous host, stretching up in a sensuous, semi-liquid stream. Red Skull took a step back, ensuring that he was not in between the monster and it’s next meal. The man licked his lips, mind running through a series of words he had long since memorized. He didn’t need books or journals, he knew exactly what to say to make the soldier, and by extension the Symbiote, obey.

The Soldier’s face scrunched, face muscles twitching as he was reluctantly drug to wakefulness. Squinted eyes slowly rose, then widened at the sight of a shadow dark as night lunging at him. The man let out a short yelp that was almost immediately muffled.

Immediately the man and parasite writhed, fighting for control of the body, the air was filled with a mix of human yells and animalistic screeches. T’Challa, breathing heavily and barely conscious, watched in horror as James Barnes struggled with the creature that had nearly killed him. He attempted to pull himself forward, not knowing what he could even do to help, but his exhausted arms refused to budge. Red Skull stepped towards the writhing mass, and spoke a single word, in Russian. “Longing”, then another “Rusted.” The man’s yells grew more panicked and desperate as he continued, but Red Skull did not stop, repeating word after word as the man’s struggles grew both weaker and more desperate.

“Freight Car.” He said, self-satisfaction spanning across his face. The man’s struggles abruptly stilled, the Symbiote rising to his feet. “Are you ready to comply?”

Red Skull turned to face what was left of Hyra, not waiting for the man’s conditioned reply, pure triumph resonating from his face. “This!” He exclaimed, “Is the future! This is how Hydra will rise, the Winter Soldier will once more bring glory to Hydra, the Symbiote will bring rise to a new world! The-“ Red littered the ground, as black talons tore through the man’s neck. He fell to the ground, face still twisted with that victorious malice even in death.

The Symbiote roared in it’s victory, the body of a man who knew pain too well to allow fear of it to control him, and the mind of a creature who would not be ruled by words. He lunged for the nearest Hydra agent, feasting on the man and destroying the fools that had tried to control such a dangerous beast. He was the insidious creature, the being that destroyed the body from the inside out. He was
poison. He was Venom. And he needed to find the heir of the man that created him.

Chapter End Notes

.... It's about to get real.

And in case anyone is wondering, Venom fixated on Steve because he was the host with the greatest physical strength available. Wanda and Vision could certainly do much more damage, but their energy isn't the type I really picture him feeding on.

Also I think this is my favorite chapter to date.

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