A Different Kind Of Homecoming

by PlushyRobot

Summary

Spider-Man had vanished from the streets of Queens. He'd been a flash-fire sensation, quickly forgotten except for a few choice clips immortalized on YouTube. A wannabe vigilante, abandoning the gig when things proved to be too tough.

At least, that's what everyone thought.

So when Spider-Man suddenly returns and nearly blows himself up trying to stop a handful of robbers, Iron Man takes it as his personal duty to tell the kid to focus on his homework and leave the crime fighting to the adults.

Yeah, if only things were that easy.
“What the hell, man?! Since when did Batman move into town?”

The dramatic lighting from the moon must be doing wonders for Peter’s intimidation factor. He swings between buildings, herding the two muggers toward the dead end of an alley up ahead. They’re practically tripping over each other to avoid his shadow like it’s a game of tag — one of them keeps looking over his shoulder so frequently that it's hard to believe he's only run into a dumpster once.

“Oh, crap—!”

Make that twice, Peter notes with a wince, as Twitchy pinballs off the corner of another dumpster and careens into his partner in a tangle of limbs and profanity. He nearly knocks them both down again when he turns in a jerky circle.

“You might wanna put that away before you hurt yourself.” Peter ducks when Twitchy shouts and lashes out with the small penknife in his hand. “Seriously, you’re just gonna poke you and your buddy full of holes.”

“Wh—what the hell! Who’re you? You here to rob us?” The penknife wavers in Peter’s direction.

“I—what? No! Why—”

“Ya sure?” The other man, whose legs look to be only a third of his full height, gives him a once-over. “Really look like it, kid.”

Peter looks down at himself, at his ratty jeans and black hoodie, and lets out a muffled sigh through his balaclava.

“No,” he repeats, “I’m here to stop you guys.” They stiffen at his answer and he gives a pointed look to the shorter of the pair. “Not really sure that purse goes with your outfit. I’d be more than happy to return it for you, though don’t expect a refund.”

Predictably, they try to bolt. With a flick of his wrist he has Twitchy webbed to the wall, Stumpy soon joining as Peter strings him upside down from the fire escape in one smooth motion.

“Wow, you guys don’t take fashion advice well, huh?”

“Holy shit! What th’hell are you?! Some kinda spider-kid?” Stumpy’s stumpy legs thrash from where they stick out of the top of his snug cocoon.

“Spider-Man, actually,” Peter corrects, turning to retrieve the gun that had flown from Stumpy’s hand. His eyes narrow from behind tinted goggles as he studies it, then webs it onto the opposite wall. “Hey, you guys always use normal guns when doing crime?” He turns back to them, making sure to ask loud enough so they can hear him over their bickering.

“Wh—what?” Twitchy asks from where he’s stuck to the wall, looking like a monkey from a barrel. “I—yeah? I—I mean, we don’t actually use it, just flashing it is usually enough to get people to hand their stuff over—ow!” Somehow, Stumpy manages to get enough momentum to slam his head into Twitchy’s gut.
“Hey shut up, will ya? Don’t confess to nothin’!”

“So you guys don’t use any sort of alien tech?” Peter presses. “No crazy laser rifles? Sonic-pulse bombs? Neuroparalyzer rings?”

Twitchy’s face scrunches up so tight he looks like he’s sucked on a lemon. “Neuro-what-now? What’re you talking about? We just stick up loners for their change. Don’t need any crazy laser-whatevers for—” Stumpy’s hard head collides with him again and he deflates with a pathetic wheeze.

“The fuck did I just tell ya, ya idiot!”

They get into it again and Peter hangs his head with a sigh. If nobody’s called the cops already, the two partners-in-crimes’ arguing will certainly warrant a noise complaint. He pushes his goggles up to his forehead and rubs his eyes with his thumb and forefinger.

Great. Another fruitless night. There’s been a mysterious weapons dealer flooding the streets with alien tech and the number of leads he’s found so far is a big fat zero. Granted, he didn’t really expect much luck with the few small-time robbers and muggers he’s taken out the last couple nights, but it’s no less disappointing.

Peter decides to make the most of it. He tugs his goggles back in place and approaches the squabbling duo, pulling his webbing out of the way to get at their pockets.

“What the hell, kid? Thought you said you weren’t here ta rob us! What’re—” Stumpy’s words are cut short when he gets a mouthful of web, Twitchy receiving the same treatment as Peter doesn’t spare a glance from the wallet he’s rifling through. He pockets a few bills and silently returns the empty billfold from where he got it.

With an elegant backflip, Peter lands atop the bottom railing of the fire escape. “Cops should be here soon. You guys’ll be able to sleep nice and easy in a jail cell tonight. Until then, hang tight!” There’s a muffled groan from Stumpy and Peter gives him a wave before vanishing to the top of the building.

As soon as he’s out of sight, the goggles and mask are gone, along with the last of his energy. Every night is the same thing: patrol the city, chase down criminals, interrogate for leads. Rinse and repeat until the crack of dawn. But it’s been quiet, at least in the “Alien Weaponry Destroying New York” category. That should be good news and yet Peter’s mind is still rebelling at the thought of calling it a night. He knows he’s chasing shadows, and if he runs himself ragged now he might not be ready when something does pop up — when it’ll count.

He’s back on the streets again, at least. Like he always should have been.

The full moon makes his vision blur as he blinks blearily. It wakes him up just a little bit, though, and he gives himself a moment to readjust to the darkness of the rooftops before making his way across town.

Empty old warehouses are a dime a dozen along the Manhattan harbor. Peter clambers through a busted window on the third floor of one and lands lightly on the dusty ground. Piles of debris and trash make the place a maze, but he easily weaves his way through to a far corner that’s partially barricaded by an overturned file cabinet. From one of its missing drawers he retrieves a backpack, punching it a few times before slumping over to use it as a pillow.

Peter glares at the brick wall and takes a deep breath in an attempt to will away the choked feeling in his throat. When it releases on a shaky exhale he pinches his eyes closed and curls into a tight
ball, cutting off a barely-there whimper.

He’s exhausted. He needs to get some sleep.

As usual, it takes its sweet time to arrive.

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It’s dark. Empty. Peter isn’t sure where he is — he can’t feel or see anything.

The darkness isn’t all-consuming, like he assumes nothingness would be. It’s more like he’s peering through a hood over his head and the faintest light is trying to reach him through layers and layers of cotton obscuring his vision. His breath echoes in his ears as he looks around, and then the blackness shifts like smoke.

He can hear something — somebody — else. There’s a voice reaching him but it’s not making any sense. It’s muffled as if he’s deep underwater where sound is amplified but distorted, and that thought makes it harder to breathe, the smoke thickening as it curls around him. It shifts and swirls again and then there’s a shadow running toward him and he’s terrified.

Not terrified of the shadow, but of the voice.

It’s clearer now and it sounds scared — scared and panicked and pleading and Peter thinks he knows that voice. He tries to run to them but his body won’t cooperate and the shadow is still moving toward him, still calling for help, still impossibly far. When he tries to answer nothing comes out.

And then the shadow’s slit clean through by a bright purple light and bursts into sparks and ashes.

Peter’s left completely alone.

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Consciousness comes to Peter almost as slowly as sleep had. He has to fight through a fog to wakefulness and at first the sensation scares him. But then he’s blinking awake and the terror that’s been building in his gut subsides like a distant memory and he can’t remember why he was afraid.

He rolls onto his back with a groan, half his body flaring up with pins and needles from sleeping on the hard cement floor. Dust motes shimmer and swirl in the morning light and he watches them as he waits for his body to de-zombify. When his stomach gives a particularly violent rumble, he finally sits up to shake out his tingling hand and drags his pillow/backpack into his lap. It’s still early enough in the morning for a meal to count as breakfast and he knows he’s got half a sleeve of peanut butter crackers in his bag.

A small pile of clothes, a dead laptop, and a red tackle box with a broken latch later, and Peter finally hears the unmistakable crinkle of plastic. That sound triggers the same part of his brain as picking up an extra life and he pulls it out with an excited flourish — only to be rewarded with a dusting of crumbs over his meager belongings. He stares down at the empty wrapper with its dancing peanut mascot and promise of an ‘Improved Peanut Butter Flavor!’

So. No breakfast. His stomach gurgles sadly at the realization.

Peter’s hand clenches and shakes around the torn packaging and he pulls his arm back to chuck it into one of the piles of trash. For a moment he stays like that, the plastic giving a sad, faint crackle as his grip slowly loosen. It’s shoved into the pocket of his hoodie instead.
It’s only an hour or so until lunch. He can make it.

In an attempt to distract himself from his rioting stomach, he drags the tackle box to his side and runs a palm over the sticker pasted across the top that warns of ‘Wonderflonium: DO NOT BOUNCE.’ Inside is an assortment of glass bottles, a cloudy and scratched beaker, and a broken stirrer. He pulls out one of the bottles from its newspaper padding; the clear liquid inside barely fills a finger width of the bottom and Peter shakes it by the black screw lid then squints at it as if it’ll magically refill itself. Regrettably, his powers don’t include the ability to conveniently replenish supplies. There’s a moment spared for self-pity at that fact before he closes the case and methodically repacks his bag.

After a precautionary sweep to make sure nobody’s going to witness a teenage boy climb down a wall like a tree frog, he quickly makes his way out of the warehouse. His only audience is a few gulls scanning the cracked pavement for food and Peter fulfills their expectations by bringing out the cracker wrapper and emptying the crumbs onto the sidewalk. They dive for the artificially colored orange flakes in a frenzy the moment he’s far enough away.

It’s got to be nearly seventy degrees out when he makes it to the main streets of Manhattan. Peter makes a compromise of wearing his jacket with the hood up by rolling his sleeves to his elbows and leaving it unzipped. It’s still uncomfortably warm, but he finds it easy to ignore when other people begin to flood the sidewalk around him. His eyes stay glued to the ground.

It feels like everybody’s staring at him; at the skinny kid in torn jeans and hoodie, his shoes sporting two different sized bows since the laces of his left sneaker snapped in half the other week. In the back of his mind he knows it isn’t true, proves it to himself when he gazes up and the countless faces that pass are looking anywhere except at him. This is New York after all, but it still feels like a pair of eyes are boring right into him, piercing his shell and trying to see what he’s hiding under all the grime.

Thankfully the foot traffic thins as Peter enters a walkway and he makes a beeline for one of the drinking fountains lining the sidewalk. There’s only a cooing pigeon nearby to worry about offending with his obscene moan as he takes his first drink of questionably sanitary water of the day. There’s the slightest spring to his step as he continues on his way after that, feeling better now that his mouth no longer tastes like he’s licked the inside of a gym bag. It’s improved even more when he tosses out the traitorously empty cracker wrapper in a nearby trashcan and then he’s back on the narrow, crowded sidewalks lining the main road heading toward 9th.

By the time he reaches the soup kitchen, the line is halfway down the block. Peter tucks himself in at the back, making sure his hood is pulled as far as it’ll go and dutifully stares down at his shoes. When he nears the entrance he can smell the food from inside and his previously dormant appetite roars back with a vengeance.

“Hi Nathan,” greets the small redhead stationed near the entrance of the church.

“Hey. Good morning, Penny.” Pushing back his hood, Peter gives her a small wave. His smile strains when he spots the pitying look in her eyes as they sweep over him.

That feeling comes back — like everybody around him is looking. It prickles at the back of his neck, cold and sharp before spreading through his body like a flash fire. Resisting the urge to burrow back into his hood, he turns away and quickly walks over to the long tables lined with trays of food.

“Nathan! It's good to see you. Laura ordered the wrong pasta, so it's fusilli this week.” Wesley, one of the senior volunteers at the soup kitchen, walks around the table and holds out a tray for Peter to take.
He accepts the food with a weak smile. “Hey, fusilli’s fun. Pastably my favorite.” Peter winces at his own pathetic attempt of a joke. It seems to pass Wesley’s bar, though, and he lets out a bark of a laugh.

“Hey, good one!” He slaps a hand on Peter's shoulder and Peter feels his gut drop and appetite flee when Wesley's grip doesn't leave. There’s a small nudge and he reluctantly allows himself to be guided to one of the round tables near the back of the room.

Peter finds himself completely enthralled with his food as he slumps into a chair. Maybe Wesley will leave if he doesn’t make eye contact. Maybe he’s isolated Peter because he can tell he wants to eat alone. Maybe, if Peter’s ‘please go away’ vibes aren’t doing the trick, he can just hurl all over the guy’s shoes to get the point across.

“Listen, Nathan…” Wesley pulls out a chair and sits down. Peter shovels a forkful of pasta into his mouth in preparation. “I know I brought this up last week, and you seemed a bit hesitant about it all, but I just wanted to let you know I talked to my friends over at the youth shelter.”

Peter squeezes his eyes shut.

He doesn’t want to be having this conversation right now. He doesn’t want pity or help or for any of these adults to talk at him about what he should do or where he should go. But Wesley seems completely ignorant of Peter’s discomfort, going so far as to putting his hand back on Peter’s shoulder when he doesn’t say anything.

“They’ve got everything ready for you, I’ve dealt with most of the paperwork. There’s some personal info that needs filling in but otherwise it’s good to go.”

The hand squeezes his shoulder, as if the motion is meant to be supportive and grounding rather than stifling and irritating. Peter’s hand jerks like his brain is subconsciously telling him to web away from the situation. He takes in a shaking breath.

“Wesley, I—”

“Hey, hey. I know this can be scary, Nathan,” Wesley cuts in, voice so soft it makes Peter want to scream, “but if you want, I can go with you to the shelter.” He smiles, and it seems so plastic and hollow that Peter has to resist the urge to shove him away.

Wesley doesn’t know Peter. All he sees is a charity case that’ll let him add another tally mark toward his selfish benevolence, another good deed for him to brag about with his peers. When Wesley opens his mouth again, Peter knows exactly what’s coming next, has heard it all before.

“You’re young, and I know the city can be a big and scary place. You shouldn’t be out there alone—”

“Don’t.” Peter’s voice sounds too loud, even with all the chatter and clink of silverware that fills the foyer of the church. When he looks over, he sees Wesley’s wide eyes staring up at him. It’s then that Peter realizes he’s standing, his pasta spilling over the edge of his tray and staining the white tablecloth, knocked over from when his thighs hit the edge of the table in his haste.

“Don’t,” he says again, gaze flickering everywhere but back to Wesley. He suddenly feels too hot even in the air conditioning and he rubs his sweating palms against the thighs of his jeans. “I don’t—you don’t need to do that. I’m fine.” Peter stumbles backward into his chair when Wesley’s hand reaches out. “I’m—thank you, but it’s okay. I’m okay.” Before there can be any sort of reply, he turns on his heel and marches to the door.
He isn’t sure if Penny calls after him as he rushes out, or if it’s somebody telling him to watch where the hell he’s going, but right now Peter can’t be bothered to care. He’s back out on the street and walking away from the soup kitchen — and Wesley — as fast as possible.

By the time he slows down to a stop, he isn’t sure how many blocks he’s covered. He’s out of breath, pressed against a storefront with his hands over his ears and his eyes squeezed shut. Everything’s overwhelming his senses and he’s tempted to find an alley so he can fling himself up onto a rooftop, away from everybody and everything. Peter cracks his eyes open and looks around to do just that, but before he can gather his bearings somebody shoulder checks him and he ends up with his face against the cool reflective glass of the window. It takes him a hot minute to realize what he’s seeing when he steps back.

Staring back at him is an exhausted, wide-eyed kid. Matted hair frames his dirt- and sweat-streaked face. His threadbare clothes are spattered with stains of who-knows-what and it’s a mystery how any of it’s clinging to such a scraggly frame.

Peter reaches down to the waist of his jeans to pull them up and watches the reflection mimic the gesture.

After another near-collision and unkind commentary, he’s spurred into motion and slips back into the flow of the crowd, fingers curling around the wad of cash in his pocket.

Finding a laundromat doesn’t take very long. Peter changes into his spare pair of jeans and most respectable shirt in the bathroom and gives his face a good scrub at the sink until his cheeks are stinging and pink. Then there’s a staredown with the change machine, which it inevitably wins when Peter concedes to the fact that he can’t pay for his laundry on hopes and dreams alone. Regrettably, half of his bills are turned into a pile of coins. Mercifully, a box of detergent’s been left by the only other occupied washer in the place. It’s fair game with no witnesses in sight, but the washer still judges by rumbling and shaking threateningly when he goes back to return the plastic scoop.

As he waits for his clothes to wash, he has a three-month-old copy of O magazine propped in his lap. It’s been open on page ten to an enlightening spread on “8 Brilliant Fixes for Crow’s Feet, Puffiness, and Undereye Issues,” but instead of studying up on vanity tricks, Peter’s twisted in his seat to stare out the window.

The streets of Manhattan look the same as ever. They’re dreary and grey, the sun-baked cement causing the air to ripple just the slightest in attest to the heat. An endless stream of people walk by on their way home, or to work, or wherever it is they feel the need to go in such a hurry. Eventually they all begin to blur together, a mass of solemn faces and heavy shoulders that Peter notices but doesn’t really see.

Then a group of kids with Transformers and Dora the Explorer backpacks race by the front of the laundromat and grab his wavering attention. Soon after, a larger gaggle of teenagers meander by. They’re all in groups, laughing and talking and showing each other cat videos or gossipy blog posts, full of such a contrasting energy he can’t look away from.

School must have let out, Peter thinks. Which means it’s September. Summer’s over. His chest clenches with an indefinable emotion at the realization. He struggles to swallow.

The longer he watches, the more students he begins to see in the hard-faced crowd. Many of them disappear down the stairs to the subway or pile into the small restaurants and convenience stores for an after-school snack. All they have to worry about is school and homework, who did what over the summer, or who broke up with who — things that seem trivial to Peter now.
He’s envious of each and every one of them.

An obnoxious buzzing sound causes him to jerk in his seat and the magazine falls to the floor in a flurry of glossy pages and ignored advice. Oprah’s face stares up at him, the new crease decorating the cover distorting her perfect smile into something more contrived. Peter can’t help but think of Wesley and he kicks the magazine underneath the row of washers in front of him.

When he switches his clothes over to the dryer, his one white shirt manages to break free and falls on the dirty floor. He doesn’t even bother to react as he flings it in with the rest of it and sacrifices another chunk of change. It's for a good cause, he tells himself as another $1.50 disappears.

Peter returns to the front of the laundromat and pointedly sits with his back facing the window. After a moment of thought he digs through his backpack and pulls out his beaten laptop. The power cord comes next and he doesn’t bother undoing all the knots before he twists in his chair to plug it into the wall outlet two seats away. He gets it on the third try and his laptop whirs to life with an overworked fan and some concerning clicks from the hard drive.

It takes a few minutes for the fan to calm down and the cursor to stop jumping all over the screen, but eventually Peter’s able to check on nearby WiFi connections. He ignores ‘JIMMY’S IPHONE’ and ‘TellMyWiFiLoveHer’ and silently thanks Starbucks for taking over the world as he connects to their WiFi next door. Or maybe it’s from the one across the street, he isn’t sure.

With missing ‘E’ and ‘L’ keys it’s slow going Googling for any news concerning explosions, alien weapons, and high-tech robberies. Peter’s diligence wins in the end, though, and out of the legitimate results scattered between hyperbole and clickbait titles, there’s only two that hold any credible information and one in particular that he bothers to fully read.

The news article highlights a failed attempt by the NYPD to stop a weapons deal two nights ago near Queens. The sellers, last seen getting away in a windowless white van, sold two large, unidentified weapons to a group of four men. Neither party has been seen since. The public is urged to be on the lookout for shady figures and to alert the authorities of any suspicious activity and blah blah blah.

Huh. Perfect.

If the weapons are as large and high-tech as Peter thinks, they’ll be used for something big. A bank robbery, maybe? But alien weaponry or not, something like that would be more trouble than it’s worth. Perhaps a jewelry store or pawn shop after closing. Regardless, he knows what he has to do.

It’s currently half past three. If he leaves for Queens right after his clothes are finished drying, he’ll get to his hometown right around nightfall. But he hasn’t been back home since—

— a bright purple light, the air swimming with sparks and ashes —

It has to have been several weeks now. Peter’s eyes drift back down to his computer screen and scan the bold text of the article’s title that warns the public of possible deadly weapons on the streets.

With a fortifying breath he urges his fingers to move and spends the rest of his wait narrowing down his search. The beat of the dryer in the background provides comforting white noise as Peter works. He continues to browse the news and forums for information, finding comments and posts by the public much more helpful than any of the official avenues. The owner of the clothes in the other washer comes and goes, taking their slightly lighter box of detergent with them, none the wiser. Before he knows it there’s another loud buzz to let him know his clothes are dry.
Or mostly dry, anyway. His jeans, hoodie, and one of his heavier shirts are all slightly damp, but he stubbornly refuses to use anymore of his change to get them fluffy and dry. He shrugs on his hoodie, ignoring the way it clings to his bare arms and around his neck, and shoves the rest of his delightfully apple mango tango scented clothes into his bag.

With a quick stop at the vending machine by the door, Peter uses the rest of his change to grab two bags of Chex Mix. He shovels a handful of the snack into his face as he begins his trek from Manhattan to Queens.

It takes a combination of swinging, running, and hitching a ride on top of a semi across Queensboro Bridge, for Peter to make it to his hometown just as the sky begins to darken. He’s perched on the top of an apartment building under the rapidly fading light, a stack of moldy deck chairs next to an equally forgotten barbeque grill making the perfect hiding place for his backpack.

“Been a while,” Peter murmurs, walking the lip of the roof as he gazes down at familiar streets. Restless energy thrums through him and he’s pumped and ready to go, but there’s also something darker hanging back that he just can’t seem to shake. It settled in when he took his first step in Queens, and he paces back and forth as if he can leave it behind if he moves around enough.

After a few moments of hesitation, he jumps in place and shakes out his hands. “Let’s see if anybody remembers Spider-Man.” He snaps his goggles in place and leaps from the rooftop with a whoop.

Navigating Queens comes second nature to Peter. He skims around the corners of buildings and skates inches above the pavement under the train tracks effortlessly. It’s exciting and freeing and for a while the heavy feeling in his chest dissipates each time he lets loose another thrilled holler or laugh. He gets a few waves and shouts from those still walking the streets, somebody even yelling “Hey, you’re that spider-guy! From YouTube!” as he vaults between two buildings. Peter corrects them, flourishing his jump mid-air with a flip to their elated cheers. Maybe now they’ll remember it’s Spider-Man, not Spider-Guy.

Half an hour later and Peter’s thwarted an attempted grand theft bicycle, stopped another mugging, and helped a drunk guy hail a cab after he nearly wandered into traffic. It’s much darker now, the perfect time for criminals to start crawling out of the woodwork. He begins to work his way outward from where he is, using the city blocks to map an easy grid as he keeps an eye out for anything suspicious. When a familiar red awning comes into view during his patrol, Peter staggers to a stop.

Delmar’s deli-grocery is just the same as the last time he saw it, the bold white letters on the awning still boasting the best sandwiches in Queens. For some strange reason he feels as if everything should be different, and is shocked when he spots Mr. Delmar strolling through the aisles of his store as he restocks a few of the shelves like everything’s fine.

Life’s still moving on for everybody around him.

— he’s alone, alone alone alone —

Movement across the street catches his eye. Four figures make their way into the Queens Community Bank and that already gets Peter’s attention, but it’s the two large packages they’re carrying that get him to move. He launches himself from the roof and swings across the street just as they each pull a tastefully chosen mask from the back of their pants and don them as they get to work.

All it takes is a flash of silver and bright purple light and Peter’s slipping in through the door
before he can think twice. It’s like he goes on autopilot after that, and any time he thinks back on what happened it replays in his head like a film reel that’s been spliced too many times. He remembers calling out to get their attention — something quippy and light — but it escalates fast and then one of the robbers is messing with tech he doesn’t understand.

There’s a shout, and everything around them explodes.

The first thing that registers in Peter’s mind is the lack of...everything. He feels surprisingly calm for almost being blown up. The glass littering the floor dots his palms as he pushes himself to his feet but he doesn’t notice any pain. There’s a faint ringing in his ears and through it he hears a pained groan to his left, a cough to his right, and it’s like he’s floating as he stumbles to the body by where he’s pretty sure the doors used to be. Just as there’s a puff of breath against the hand he’s shoved in front of the guy’s mouth, he looks up and freezes.

The storefront of Delmar’s is gone. There’s nothing left — it’s just a smoking pile of ruin.

“Mr. Delmar!”

Peter thinks it’s his voice — it has to be, he doesn’t see anybody else around as he runs across the street to the bodega. He can’t tell if it’s the smoke or something else that’s causing his lungs to constrict, but he ignores the blackness clouding the edges of his vision when he spots a hand sticking out from under a pile of plaster.

He’s not moving. The thought’s on repeat in Peter’s mind as he rolls Mr. Delmar onto his back the moment he has him out on the sidewalk. His hands touch and prod and flutter over Mr. Delmar’s body and it isn’t until the man lets out a pathetic cough and groan that Peter finally gasps out a sob in relief.

He’s kneeling in the street with his head bowed over Mr. Delmar’s chest, completely still despite the chaos around him, and then he shoots to his feet with wild eyes.

“Murph.” Peter staggers back into the store the moment he utters the cat’s name.

The poor thing’s huddled in the back corner where the bathrooms stand mostly intact, its orange and black fur masked in ash. Peter crouches and holds out a tentative hand. “Hey, hey Murph. It’s me, Peter.” He shuffles closer but freezes when the cat flattens its ears and hisses. “It’s okay, it’s okay. I got Mr. Delmar out. Let’s get you out, too—” Murph hisses again and bolts out of the store. Peter’s left staring dumbly out into the night where the cat vanished, and then his eyes register movement.

A crowd is slowly filling the sidewalk across the street.

Everything that just happened comes rushing back full force. Peter nearly collapses where he’s still crouched in the smoking remains of the bodega.

He almost got Mr. Delmar killed.

Peter webs out of there without a single concern for all the eyes staring after him. He nearly covers five blocks before he miscalculates a swing and crashes into a rooftop. The moment his body tumbles to a stop he pulls his goggles from his eyes, letting them hang around his neck as he blinks rapidly up at the sky. He can’t breathe and claws at the mask that’s suddenly too tight. It’s torn off with a pained gasp.

The heavy weight that’s been following him the entire night catches up and explodes into sharp relief. It refuses to stay in the back of his mind now, slithering its way down his neck and constricting each limb, shivers wracking them as it passes.
Peter can still smell the smoke clinging to his clothes, feel the ghost of it curling in his lungs. His choked breath sounds more like a sob.

— *can’t move, can’t breathe, can’t scream, why is he always too late* —

He’s shaking, goosebumps making his hair stand on end, yet he can still sense the heat from the fire as it makes his skin sweat and eyes water.

The rubble has long since settled, but his ears are still ringing from the explosion.

When he closes his eyes he can still see it: the laser cutting through the storefront like butter, flaring up like an infected wound before exploding and leaving nothing behind but fire and smoke and dust and destruction.

— *silver and purple and so much red* —

The sound of sirens cuts through the disorienting cacophony in Peter’s head. His heart feels like it’s going to beat right out his chest and he drops the mask and webs away in the opposite direction. The wind whips against his face and it’s a welcome distraction — he gulps down the cold air like he’s drowning. And when the apartment buildings shrink and are replaced with modest townhouses too small to swing from, Peter drops to the ground and runs.

He finds himself standing in the middle of the street in front of Ned’s house when he finally realizes where he is. His wide eyes lock onto the window of his best friend’s bedroom and he’s moving before his brain has a chance to catch up. It’s like he’s having some sort of strange lucid dream: he’s watching himself climb up to the second floor and raise a hand to knock against the glass, vaguely aware that he’s probably making a mistake but not having enough control to stop himself. The sounds his knuckles make on the window reach his ears like a distant echo. Peter doesn’t stop the rapid tapping until the window slides open so fast it rattles in its frame.

Ned's eyes are bugging so wide that the whites are easily visible on his dark face.

“Peter?!”

His brain finally makes its triumphant return by the time he's clambering through the window and collapsing on the floor. But his mouth doesn't cooperate and he kneels there in the dark, sucking in breath after breath as he curls in on himself.

— *the black smoke swirls and shifts and he’s alone in the nothingness* —

“Oh my God, Peter. Are you okay? Where’ve you—are you okay?” Ned is whisper-shouting at him, hands held out as if to touch Peter, but they hover in the air like he's afraid Peter will turn to dust if he does.

“I—I don’t—” *know.*

And he doesn’t. Peter feels like he’s going to shake apart, and if that happens he won’t be able to put himself back together again. It’s taken everything he’s got just to hold himself together this long. But maybe it’s already happened, because there’s nothing around him but darkness, his mind going a million different directions to the point that nothing makes sense anymore—

A light flicks on.

“*Peter, c’mon, look at me.*”
It’s like the words are some magic spell that cuts through the haze. Peter’s head snaps up and he stares into Ned’s dark, concerned eyes. With the room illuminated, his frantic brain skids to a halt as it processes his surroundings.

Part of Ned’s hair is plastered to his forehead. The creases on his cheek must be from where he’d been laying on his pillow and Peter’s fairly sure the slight shine he sees at the corner of Ned’s mouth is from drool. The shirt he’s wearing was from the gift shop at the Alabama Rocket Center they went to last spring break; he got the black one while Peter got the blue. Behind Ned’s head hangs a Rogue One poster, Chirrut Îmwe staring wisely back at Peter. A corner of it’s curling and there’s a small tear along the bottom from when Ned unwrapped it too fast the day he gave it to him.

Eventually Peter’s eyes wander back to his friend. Ned’s lowered himself onto the floor, so close that their knees are barely touching. Peter realizes he can hear Ned's steady breathing, his own having slowed to match it. In fact, all of his overloaded senses have dialed into everything Ned.

Ned’s here. He’s here, he’s here, he’s here.

And Peter isn’t alone.

“Peter,” and his voice is soft despite his obvious panic, “what happened?”

Peter knows he isn’t being asked about what's gone down earlier that night; Ned’s eyes aren’t scanning over his ashy and stained clothes — they’re resolutely trained on his face. Peter’s heart breaks at what he sees in them and he has to look away.

“I—I’m...I’ve been…” — running and fighting and terrified — “Nothing—”

“You’ve been missing for three weeks!”

Peter reels back like he’s been struck, completely caught off guard by Ned’s sudden furious tone.

“Three weeks! After I saw the news I called and texted you nonstop. I left message after message. I even went looking for you, and when I couldn’t find you I thought maybe—” Peter squeezes his eyes shut when Ned’s voice breaks. The silence between them drags on and, when he finally hears Ned speak again, he lets out a breath he didn’t know he’d been holding. “No one knows where you were. I didn’t know where you were, but at school everyone — everyone asks me like I should, because you’re my best friend.”

There’s the faintest touch on Peter’s knee and he opens his eyes. Any trace of anger on Ned’s face or in his voice is gone. Instead there’s worry, and then sadness.

“I’m so sorry about what happened to May—”

Peter’s on his feet and backing away as if Ned’s words burned him. His back collides with something and he faintly hears an object fall and break. It isn’t spared a single glance, his eyes wide and staring down at Ned who’s as equally shocked and staring right back up at him.

“I’ve been taking care of myself,” Peter hears himself blurt. “You don’t need to worry about me.”

Ned’s brows furrow as his anger returns. “Yeah, it totally looks like you’ve been doing a great job at that.” He drags a pointed look over Peter but it doesn’t last long before his eyes are back to bugging out of his head. “Are those burn marks?” He’s on his feet and crowding into Peter’s space, reaching for the front of his hoodie to inspect the holes. “Dude! Were you in a fire? And what happened to your hands?” Ned drops the hem of the hoodie to grab at his gloved hands instead.
Peter stares down at where Ned’s holding onto him, looking over his bleeding hands and not even recognizing them as his own. He jerks free from Ned’s grasp. “I was—there was an explosion, at Mr. Delmar’s. I had to get him out——”

“Ahn explosion? Peter!” Ned’s head swivels as if he’s searching for somebody to share his incredulous look with, but eventually his gaze settles back onto the only other person in the room. “First you disappear for a month, and now you’re running into fires.”

“I couldn’t just do nothing——”

“You could’ve called the police! That’s what people normally do.”

“There wasn’t any time! I was right there so I took care of it——”

“You hardly look like you’ve been taking care of yourself. What’ve you been eating? Where’ve you been staying? You look like you crawled out of a burning dumpster.”

“I just washed my clothes! And I’ve been managing fine, so——”

“You are not fine. We’re not old enough to be living on our own. You shouldn’t be alone, especially after what happened——”

“I’m dealing with it.” Peter snaps, and he almost feels guilty at the distressed look that crosses Ned’s face. “And I’ve done alright so far. I know what I’m doing.”

Ned presses on, tone soft again. “Stay here tonight. We can talk to my parents in the morning and —”

“I’m Spider-Man, Ned! I don’t need help!”

The silence that fills the room is deafening. It takes a moment for Peter to register his own rapid breathing. Ned stares at him, eerily still.

“You’re—you’re—what?”

Peter whips out his hand toward the poster of Chirrut on the opposite wall and a glob of web shoots out to bind the curling corner onto the scuffed blue paint. When Ned turns back his mouth is hanging open.

“I’m Spider-Man,” Peter repeats, eyes hard and voice steady. Cold. “And I’ve been doing fine on my own. I don’t need your parents’ help — I don’t need anybody’s help.”

He’s shoving past Ned and climbing back out the window before he has a chance to stop him.

Chapter End Notes

First off, I started writing this before Infinity War came out. So that one line (you know the one) was a coinkidink. I feel terrible.

Anywho, this is my first major fanfic. I’m an artist, not a writer, but my lovely friend (and beta!) convinced me to run with an idea. It’s been fun! And I hope you guys’ll like it.
Please lmk if there's any additional tags that should be added and etc cause idk what I'm doing.

Thank.
Sunlight wedges its way in the space between the building and billboard Peter had crammed himself into for the night. It dances across his eyelids and he rolls over—

—only to cling to the bottom of his web-hammock like some deranged sloth.

He’s wide awake. There’s no struggling to consciousness like so many other mornings and, despite the rude awakening, he’s thankful. It’s a common occurrence lately, where he wakes up flailing and confused or slow and sluggish, dread leaking from heavy limbs due to some nightmare that keeps eluding him like a shadow at the corner of his mind’s eye.

Peter takes a moment to check his hands once the world’s no longer upside down. It’d taken him a while last night to pick out all the glass. His palms had been pockmarked with little holes and gashes but they’re all healed up now, not a mark in sight. He flexes his hands once, twice, just to make sure nothing’s been left behind and healed over, and then he gathers up his backpack and crawls down the wall.

Everything inside him is saying to leave Queens, to head back across the river to Manhattan — anywhere but where his feet are currently taking him. But his body doesn’t want to listen and soon he finds himself walking down 21st. There’s no smoke curling into the air or sirens filling the street, but he finds Delmar’s soon enough.

It’s been roped and barricaded. Cops are directing traffic around the corner as the lanes closest to the bodega are blocked off. There’s a small gathering of people behind the caution tape, not in any uniform but looking just as important as the police. Peter presses himself more closely to the newspaper stand he’s huddled by as if he’s on a reconnaissance mission behind enemy lines. The seller gives him a dubious look and then slides the carton of bubblegum farther away from the edge of the counter before going back to his business.

Even without all the fire, Delmar’s looks worse than it did last night. There’s a massive horizontal gash through the center of the storefront, detritus from the aisles and coolers scattered all over the floor and sidewalk. Anything that hadn’t been blown away in the explosion is marred with burns and holes. Even the back counter by the deli is slashed clean through.

Peter swallows against the bile rising in his throat. He has no idea how Mr. Delmar survived that —

His eyes meet the hard gaze of one of the cops standing vigilantly on the corner. Peter doesn’t wait to see if she moves or speaks or even really registers he’s there, before he’s stumbling out from beside the newspaper stand and pushing his way through the crowd.

He doesn’t know why he came anymore — all it’s done is cement the guilt and horror he already feels.

The traffic flowing between Manhattan and Queens isn’t as bad as the night before. When Peter disembarks his ride on Park Avenue much sooner than expected, he realizes with some optimism that it’s the weekend. He slips into a 7-Eleven to wash up in the bathroom and change out of his ashy clothes. It’s lunchtime, so he heads to his favorite soup kitchen.
“Well lookie here, it’s Nathan! How you been, man?” Peter’s greeted as soon as he steps through the doorway, catching Jerome’s hand with a laugh as he’s pulled in for a one-armed hug. “Glad you came in today. Jacob really knocked it outta the park with these pierogies.”

“Oh, no way! You’ve been telling me about those forever. I finally get to try ‘em?”

“Not if you keep dilly-dallying over there!” somebody shouts over to them. Peter gives Jerome a wave as he trots off to the long line of steam tables. A tray of food slides onto the counter. “Jake even made the sour cream from scratch, the madman.” The plate of pierogies is topped with a generous dollop of the stuff, and with the sprinkling of green onion on top it's the most beautiful thing Peter's ever seen. He feels his mouth begin to water.

“Hey, thanks, Samantha,” Peter says by way of greeting. He tears his eyes away from the food to look up at the blonde woman grinning knowingly at him from behind the sneeze guard.

“Oh, wow! For a second there I thought you were gonna mix my name up with your new love,” Samantha teases, nudging the tray toward Peter. ‘Go on and eat. I’m sure you’ll have a visitor soon.” She waggles her fingers playfully when he takes it.

Peter already has a forkful in his mouth before he’s seated at his usual table, unable to resist with how incredibly famished he is. When he bites in he has to bow his head to help muffle a groan. It’s amazing, and he doesn’t take very long to finish over half the plate.

“Think you can take a breather there, Nate?” A tattooed arm reaches out from Peter’s periphery and settles a hand on the table. “Dang. Jacob’s gonna have bragging rights all week once I tell him how fast you demolished his cooking.”

“Hey—” Peter says with a smile, quickly aborting it to wipe the sour cream from his mouth, “hey, Marissa.”

“Hey, squirt.” Marissa straddles the bench next to him and a quizzical look crosses her face as she stares. “You’ve, ah…” She makes a vague gesture at her chin.

“Ah! Oh, uh — thanks.” Peter brushes away a bit of cheese that somehow missed his mouth.

“How’ve you been?” he asks. “You take Gabrielle to that bike show?”

There’s a grin at Peter’s question. “Oh, yeah. She absolutely loved it. Pretty crowded, but there were some amazing cruisers. Gabby went full mechani-dork, it was great.” She pulls out her phone and scoots a little closer along the bench as she taps away on it. “There was this gorgeous Triumph Rocket there. Th’guy let us sit on it, took some pictures for us — here,” and she holds out her phone for Peter to see.

On the screen is a photo of Marissa perched on the back of an emerald green motorcycle, the color of it complementing the red-brown sheen of her long hair. She’s got a big grin on her face, all teeth, as she leans her cheek against the shoulder of her wife, arms wrapped around her middle. Gabrielle’s straddling the seat of the bike and she’s looking back at Marissa with a smile. They look like two pieces of a puzzle slotted perfectly together.

Something pangs in Peter’s chest as he studies the photo, something lonely and wistful and maybe a little bit envious, but the smile on his face is genuine when he looks up.

“Did she try to buy it off the guy after she saw how great you two look on it together?”

Marissa makes an undignified snort. “Of course she did — that’s her freakin’ dream bike. Had to bribe her away from it by promising to buy her another batch of deep fried Oreos,” she says, rolling her eyes.
There’s another question on the tip of his tongue but it vanishes when he looks up from his food long enough to meet her eyes. She’s watching him, studying him, and Peter’s insides twist with irritation and shame.

“Not that I don’t enjoy bragging about my lovely wife and family in general,” Marissa says tentatively, “but I’d really like to hear about you, Nathan. How’ve you been doing?”

Slowly, ever so slowly, she reaches out a hand. She’s letting Peter know what she intends on doing and he’s grateful for the consideration. So, when her short, thick fingers wrap around his on the tabletop, he doesn’t jerk or move away. The contact doesn’t make his skin crawl or his stomach roil, like it had with Wesley. Instead it just makes him...sad. He carefully brings his thumb up, resting it along the curve of her fingers to return her touch in the slightest way. The hopeful, tender look in her eyes deepens and he can’t hold her gaze anymore — there’s some feeling growing and bubbling ever steadily to the surface, begging for him to notice it — and so he looks back down at the table.

“I’m, uh...I’m okay,” he mutters at his plate.

It feels like he’s said the same thing fifty-million times in the past couple days. He knows that answer isn’t enough, isn’t what somebody like Marissa deserves, but yet again this is a conversation he doesn’t want to have.

Peter struggles to fill the silence as she watches him expectantly. “Been keeping busy, y’know? Sometimes the days seem to drag but I—I manage.” His free hand comes up to sweep over himself, “Look, even washed my clothes. I think I look pretty dashing.” The smile he flashes her feels fragile and fake, and so it quickly fades.

The words hang there between them until Peter dares to look up again. Marissa nods and smiles but he can see the sadness there; maybe a hint of disappointment, too.

“I’m glad to hear that.” She squeezes his hand then lets it go and Peter finds himself missing her touch immensely. When she speaks up again her voice is back to its bright and cheery timbre. “Alright, kiddo, I’ll let you go. I should probably make myself useful and help Samantha load up more trays. See you next weekend?”

“Yeah!” The reply comes too fast so Peter gathers up his tray and allows his mind a second to rally. “Yeah, of course. Gotta get my weekly update on your two terrors,” he says, trying again for a smile.

“I think it’s more like my three terrors. Gabby can be just as bad as the kids,” Marissa laughs at her own joke and takes Peter’s empty tray. “Don’t worry, I got this. You be safe now, okay?” She leaves him there, giving a quick wave over her shoulder that Peter returns.

At first he’d been relieved when he avoided giving her a straight answer but now, as he watches her go, he misses her company. Marissa’s one of the few, maybe only, people he’s alright with talking to since it all happened. But the thought of opening up, of answering her questions truthfully...he doesn’t think he could handle it.

Peter shares goodbyes with the others on his way out and then he’s back in the bright sunshine of Manhattan. He walks aimlessly for several blocks with no real destination to head for. It’s not like he has school or a job to go to and the seconds always slowly tick by during these long, boring moments of the day. Yet, right now, he finds himself not minding at all — it’s hot and crowded and the streets smell vaguely of garbage, but he’s in the best mood he’s had in a long time.
But then there’s a shout and crash as a trash can falls in a nearby alley and suddenly Peter finds himself choking on smoke that isn’t there, the sun burning his skin like heat from bright flames. He closes his eyes against the overwhelming sensations and all he sees behind his lids is Ned’s face, his eyes wide and sad and piercing.

“I’m so sorry about what happened to May—”

Peter’s eyes snap open and he stumbles down an alley to get away from the people walking by, all of them completely oblivious to the turmoil going on in his head. The rough brick wall scrapes his palms as he catches himself and it feels like glass.

— a flash of silver, a bright purple light, and then — alien weapons, huge and dangerous and unfamiliar — a group of careless thugs wanting some quick cash —

“Told you it was worth it!”

The robbers.

Peter latches onto that memory like a lifeline. As he tries to remember what they’d said, when they were ignorant of his presence while he watched from the door, he slowly becomes aware of his bag digging into his back and the way his fingers have threaded through his hair. He pulls, and the pain in his scalp helps ground him.

“Man, good thing we bought this shit right when they got new stock, yeah? This thing’s amazing!”

The weapons...the weapons they bought were new. Whoever they got them from should have a lot to sell, which means they’ll be more active in an attempt to hawk off their tech as quickly as possible. He needs to find them. That’s what he’s been after this whole time, all these weeks he’s been out on the streets. He finally has a lead. He can start looking for them, keep himself busy.

After a steadying breath he rejoins the crowd on the street, attempting to look like everything’s fine. When he nears another corner something tickles the back of his neck. There, in the window of a storefront, he spots the reflection of a sleek black car. It’s a ways behind him and he loses sight of it when he rounds the corner, so when he makes it halfway down the new block he spins on his heel and pretends to shout at somebody who walked past. There’s the same black car cruising down the street behind him.

He doesn’t know how long it’s been tailing him.

There isn’t a second of hesitation. Peter makes a break for it, deftly avoiding the people around him as he sprints down another block and a half before turning into an alley. He leaps over piles of trash and a dumpster like his shoes are spring loaded, clearing them easily to burst out onto another street. There’s no telling who the car belongs to. Maybe it’s somebody from the weapons ring, or social services, or just some freaky stalker who spotted a lone kid. Each thought that goes through his mind while he zigs and zags through the streets becomes more outlandish than the last.

He eventually ducts between two buildings and juggles his backpack and web-shooters in shaking hands. Once both are secure he leaps halfway up a wall and begins to climb — if he hasn’t lost them yet, he’ll love to watch them try and follow him on the rooftops.

With a heave Peter jumps over the side of the building and onto the roof. He breaks into a sprint before he’s even had a chance to right himself—

—and nearly faceplants into Iron Man’s chest.
“Holy—!” Peter pinwheels his arms, skidding to a stop. The shiny gold and red armor begins to shift and change, panels folding and flipping and sliding away, and then Tony Stark is standing in front of him, in the flesh.

The superhero breaks the awkward silence first.

“C’mon, kid. I know spiders like flies, but I’m pretty sure your whole gimmick doesn’t go that far.”

Peter closes his mouth. “I’m—uh—I don’t—”

“You’re Spider-Man. I know. It’s why I made the joke.” He sighs. “Listen, don’t hurt yourself trying to think of excuses.” Stark takes a few steps forward and Peter backs away.

“Spid—Spider-Man?” Peter huffs a laugh, crossing his arms only to immediately drop them to his sides. He settles with a hand on his hip, the other scratching his head in a perfect show of nonchalance. “You mean that spider-guy that swings around New York, stopping petty criminals and helping old ladies cross the street?” He shrugs and shakes his head, arms crossing back over his chest. “Sorry, Mr. Stark, but you got the wrong—”

“This is you, isn’t it?”

Stark holds up his phone. A holographic video plays of Peter dressed in his old Spider-Man suit, one where he swings by and webs an attempted car thief without missing a beat. Then another, of him diving in front of a van and stopping it with his bare hands before it can t-bone a bus. The final clip is security footage of the fight from the bank. It cuts out in a brilliant flash of light.

The smile is gone from Peter’s face.

“Gotta say, I was kind of a fan of the red and blue onesie but this whole back in black thing is quite a look,” Stark says, smug. “Listen, Peter — is it alright if I call you by your real name? — this whole denial thing isn’t gonna work with me.” He takes another step and when Peter tries to back away he collides with something solid and unmoving.

The glowing, inexpressive eyes of the Iron Man armor stare down at him when he cranes his head up.

“Aw, c’mon, that’s not fair—”

And then Stark’s hand is darting out, grabbing Peter’s wrist and bringing it up so he can pull back the long sleeve of his shirt.

The next three seconds play out like slow-motion. His web-shooter goes off, Stark jerking back just as the long line of webbing zips past his surprised face. It fractures and spreads at its apex like a party popper and catches on the wind, not getting far before it tangles with a satellite dish on the rooftop.

They look back at each other at the same time.

“Do you always have the safety off on these things? Y’know that’s dangerous—”

Peter rips his hand free from Stark’s grip with maybe a little more strength than necessary, sidestepping out from between him and the armor. He turns away and hurriedly pulls his sleeve back down.

“What do you want, Mr. Stark.” It comes out like an admission of defeat rather than a question.
He hears Stark let out a breath, shuffling somewhere behind him but not getting any closer.

“You were there last night, at the explosion in Queens,” Stark says, cutting right to it. “Just doing your Spiderly duty with those ATM robbers, I know. But they had some dangerous tech with them that you should really be leaving for the professionals to deal with—”

“Professionals?” Peter turns around and is in Stark’s face before he has a chance to react. “Like who — you? Some guy with a fancy suit?” He gestures to said suit with a hand and the bewildered look on the genius’ face is so satisfying.

I should stop now, some small, easily ignored part of Peter’s conscience screams.

Here stands Peter Parker, high school sophomore and part-time vigilante, talking back to Tony Stark, genius billionaire and full-time Avenger. Yet, despite knowing that, he can’t stop. He’s angry, and not the trivial sort of angry of a teenager being scolded by an adult — it’s the kind of angry that one responsible party feels toward another when they’ve both failed but the other doesn’t see it.

The kind of guilt-ridden angry somebody feels toward themselves when they’ve turned a blind eye once before and then suffered for it.

And so, Peter continues.

“Or you mean the lady who can fling a car twenty feet with her mind? Or maybe you’re talking about the super soldier who can lift a bus over his head — y’know, sorta like I can do? I have powers, Mr. Stark. I know how to use them. So if I see trouble I’m gonna—”

“You’re a kid.” Stark slashes a hand through the air, the motion mimicking the hard snap of his voice.

All the fire that’s been burning in Peter dissipates instantly and he falls silent. He stares up at Stark — who looks absolutely furious — and is mortified.

“You shouldn’t be anywhere within fifty feet of that sorta stuff. You spot something like that happening, you turn and you run the other way. No one’s gonna shame you for that.” Stark pauses to take a breath, straightening from where he’s been looming over Peter. He gives him a studious look. “You’re, what, fourteen—” and Peter's too busy shriveling under Stark’s scrutiny to correct him, “—all you should be doing is making sure your homework’s done and that you’re home by nine with your aunt who’s probably worried sick about you!”

Peter visibly flinches at the admonishment. He closes his eyes and waits, but when nothing else comes he slowly looks back up. There’s an unreadable expression on Stark’s face. Just when Peter decides to ask if he’s alright he hears a soft, intrigued ‘huh.”

“You’re coming with me.”

Stark’s back in the armor and hefting Peter into his arms. They’re suddenly in the air and Peter flails and wraps his arms around the neck of it. It’s only a few terrifying seconds until they’re back on pavement, but he thinks he may be sick by the sudden lift then drop coupled with the nonstop anxiety he’s been feeling since Tony Stark’s grand entrance.

The suit folds away and flies off after Stark manages to gently extricate himself from Peter’s iron-like grip. Then he’s ushered forward and into a sleek black car — the same car he’d been running from before all this nonsense happened.

“I’m—what—Mr. Stark—” Peter’s faintly aware of Stark nodding and saying something to the
driver and then they’re off. It’s the jolt of the car that causes his brain to finally settle enough to wonder what the hell is happening. He turns toward Stark, who flops back into the seat next to him, and opens his mouth to ask just that—

“Hey, Peter, you hungry?”

And Peter’s brain is back to flip-flopping around in his head.

The car’s pulling over again after only three blocks and one turn and Stark manhandles Peter back out of it. By this point he’s given up trying to figure out what’s going on. Stark’s talking to him, he can tell that much, but it may as well be Simlish with how much sense it makes to him. Peter lets himself be guided through the incredibly fancy restaurant, Stark’s arm around his shoulders like they’re the best of buds.

It’s when the waiter’s leaving with the menus after Stark’s ordered for them both that Peter finally, finally gets his mouth to work again.

“Mr. Stark, what’re you doing?”

He stares like Peter’s sprouted a second head.

“We’re getting dinner,” Stark answers. He looks to the front of the restaurant, where the street’s still brightly lit with the sun high in the sky, then down at his watch. “An early dinner. Is there a word for that, like brunch? Dunch?” He squints like he’s offended at what just came out of his own mouth. “We’re eating,” he finally decides, “and we’re gonna discuss that fascinating tech you’ve got there on your wrists. I’ve managed to get samples of your webs — the tensile strength is off the charts. Who manufactures it?”

Peter blinks, mind still in a haze. “I do.”

The look that comes to Stark’s face isn’t shocked or disbelieving — it’s truly and utterly impressed. That’s all it takes for Peter to completely forgive and forget everything that’s happened up to this point.

Well, mostly.

He still isn’t sure how Mr. Stark went from reading him the riot act on the rooftop to asking him about his web-fluid over dinner (dunch, he reminds himself). But his emotions have been a whirlwind the last few days and, frankly, having a world-famous engineer seem sincerely interested in his questionably-created high school science experiment is a huge highlight to his day. Week. Month.

“So, you gotta tell me. Why the whole spider-shtick?” Tony swirls his hand in the air, encompassing Peter’s entire person with the motion, “The name? The webs? The wall-crawling?” There’s a beat, and Peter thinks he can finally start answering, but then Stark’s loading on more. “How d’you do that, by the way? Adhesive gloves? Shoes? You made quick work of that wall, kid. You take a note from Ghost Protocol and create some IMF-worthy hand- and footwear?”

Peter gives it a good five seconds of silence before he answers.

“Long story, actually,” he starts, then just as quickly stops.

At first he wonders how good of an idea it is to share the events leading up to his newfound powers. He hasn’t told anybody since it happened. But then remembers this is Iron Man — the guy who flies around in an armored suit that was conceived in a cave, fighting alongside secret agents and aliens and questionably-manufactured androids — and decides his origin story really
can’t be that absurd.

“Happened about eight months ago, during a field trip to Oscorp,” and if they’d been eating Peter would have worried that Stark choked on his food, judging by the face he makes, “and I kind of...got bit...by one of their genetically enhanced, radioactive spiders?”

Now that he’s said it out loud, he feels like it ranks pretty high up there beside “synthetic android with crazy mind powers created by technical android dad.”

He looks up then and has no idea if Stark’s got a comment or five on what he’s just heard, because the waiter decides it’s the perfect time to return with their food.

Or his food, anyway.

A huge plate is placed delicately in front of Peter and, despite having just eaten maybe an hour ago, he knows the thick-cut rib eye steak with all the trimmings won’t survive through the next ten minutes. He must make a noise at the sight of it because the waiter — Francis, Peter vaguely remembers hearing — pulls a face, quickly morphing it into a smile when he turns to Stark and pours him a glass of wine. Francis leaves just as quickly as he came.

Stark doesn’t look away from Peter when he grabs the wine bottle by the neck and drags it to his side. Peter’s fingers dance along the edge of the table because now Stark’s staring into his glass like it holds the secrets to the universe.

“So you got bit by a spider. And now have spider-powers.” It’s not a question.

“A genetically enhanced spider, yeah.”

“Don’t know what I was expecting.” Stark takes a long sip of wine.

“I mean—well—” and now Peter’s scrambling to continue like he got caught red-handed in a lie, “—I got really sick, first. Like a fever. By the next morning my blankets kept getting stuck to my hands and feet and I didn’t need to wear my glasses anymore. I also, um, kind of accidentally tore the doorknob off my door.” The sad explanation is accompanied by wild gestures and, in an attempt to prevent himself from causing an accident with his frantic hand waving, he grabs at his napkin-wrapped utensils and methodically begins to free them. “Kinda put two-and-two together after that, found out what I could do. Just sorta made sense, uh, at the time, to make the webs? And the—and the name.” His voice is barely a whisper by the end and he becomes intimately familiar with the salad fork as he spins and slides it between his fingers.

“Spider-Man.” The way Stark accentuates the second half of the moniker is unmistakable and Peter can’t help his scowl. “Well, age-appropriate pseudonyms aside, you’ve made quite a rep for yourself with your heroics. Even if said heroics are ‘stopping petty criminals and helping old ladies cross the street.’ You’ve done good.” The smile he gives Peter then fills his insides with joy at being acknowledged.

Peter’s just becoming aware of his starstruck stare bordering on uncomfortable when Stark clears his throat and says, “Eat. And don’t try skipping out on your vegetables by shoving them around the plate, I know all the tricks.”

The rest of the meal passes in relative silence. Peter doesn’t think he could politely carry on a conversation anyway with how fast he’s shovelling food into his mouth. When they do talk, Stark gets back to his line of questioning about Peter’s webs. Then his web-shooters come up — but getting onto the topic of inventions between Tony Stark and an energetic, curious teenager with a love of robotics and a bad case of hero-worship inevitably leads from one thing to another.
By the time Peter’s finished his steak, potatoes, vegetables, an entire basket of bread, and is starting in on a slice of chocolate mousse cake that seemingly materialized in front of him, he’s the one dominating the conversation with question after question. At the end of it he’s learned that the Iron Man armor is made from nitinol, can reach speeds up to Mach 3, and has a built-in filtration system for urine. Which, after his initial surprise, makes perfect sense. And is kind of awesome.

Then, when his plate looks like a crime scene with nothing left but a few crumbs and a smear of mousse, they’ve moved on to the Avengers. Stark still replies, but his answers are more vague and clipped. Peter assumes it’s just because it’s top-secret hero business and tries to get as much info out of him as possible — it feels like a once in a lifetime opportunity to do so and he’s not going to miss out on his chance.

He’s just getting into an in-depth analysis of Thor’s hammer and the qualities of being worthy enough to lift it when a strange look crosses Stark’s face. It’s fleeting, but Peter swears he looks sad and stutters in the middle of his sentence.

“Here you are, Mr. Stark. Thank you so much for dining with us.” And there’s Francis again, sliding in like a shadow and startling Peter so much that his fork clatters onto his dessert plate. The small tray Francis presents only holds Stark’s black Amex, which he takes with a smile and nod.

“I think I got full just watching you eat,” Stark says after Francis vanishes, easily switching topics and glossing over their interruption. He’s grinning at Peter as he slips on a pair of sunglasses, all perfect composure again.

“O—oh, yeah…” Peter hadn’t really paid attention to everything he was eating, or how much of it. It’s been so long since he’s had such a large meal and even longer since he’s had more than one in a single day. So he ate like, well, a starving teenager. His head suddenly snaps up and he stares with wide, sheepish eyes. “Mr. Stark, thank you for du—er, the meal. It was probably really expensive, I’ve never eaten somewhere this nice before. So uh, thanks. I don’t know how—”

“I’m gonna stop you right there and pretend you weren’t gonna say what I think you were.”

Realizing belatedly he was just about to tell the billionaire that he didn’t know how he could pay him back, Peter shuts his mouth so fast his teeth click.

“How about we head back to the car before you fall into a food coma?”

Peter’s spared from ruminating on his embarrassing word-vomit fiasco by being herded back out of the restaurant. The car’s already waiting for them at the curb and when Peter ducks into the backseat a heavy, dreadful feeling settles in his gut.

Mr. Stark’s done with him. They discussed Peter’s tech and powers and now there’s no point in keeping him around, he doesn’t have anything else to offer. This whole thing began with Stark scolding him, anyway. Spider-Man’s no Captain America or Hulk or Scarlet Witch — he’s a kid from Queens who runs around in a mask and hoodie, beating up glorified bullies.

He’s a nobody.

“Happy, take us to the Tower, yeah?”

The words bounce around in Peter’s skull, severing the connection between his brain and mouth as he gapes at Stark.

“What?” Stark asks, the epitome of calm. One dark eyebrow arches over the rim of his sunglasses. “You think I went through the trouble of tracking you down and interrogating you on your ingenious tech with no interest in taking a closer look?” He scoffs. “We’re going to my workshop
— if that’s okay with you.”

“Wh—” Peter’s mind has imploded. “I mean—yeah? Of—of course.” Stark’s watching him with clear amusement on his face. “Of course it’s—like, Avengers Tower?”

“Yeah. I think that’s the one.”

The drive is a blur. Peter can’t remember the last time he’s spent a car ride bouncing in his seat like an excited little kid, except maybe on the bus ride to Oscorp his freshman year. Or when he went to space camp when he was nine and all he wanted was to be an astronaut. Then there was also his first trip to Disney World.

But none of those even compare to how he feels the moment Avengers Tower comes into view. He nearly has his face pressed against the window as he stares at it, still trying to believe it all.

“Listen, Charlie Bucket, I promise you’ll get to go in. Just please lay off the glass, Happy hates it when people smudge the glass.”

Peter whirls around in his seat and snatches his hands from where they’ve been clinging to the door. For one petrifying moment he catches Happy’s disapproving stare in the rearview mirror, only for it to be broken as he pops an illegal U-ey and pulls the car to a smooth stop at the front of the building.

“Sor—sorry.” Peter hurriedly wipes at the window with his sleeve before Stark manages to tug him away by the elbow.

Once they’re on the sidewalk, Stark motions to the Tower. “Go ahead, take another look if you want, but you may wanna save the rubbernecking until you get inside. Anybody can see it on the streets, but the view from the top...” The sentence hangs and Peter finds himself trying to spot the giant ‘A’ at the top as they walk through the front doors.

The lobby is pristine. It seems to glow, the vaulted windows allowing in plenty of sunlight that bounces off the white marble floors to illuminate the entire room. Throughout the place, technology and artwork intermingle as paintings and sculptures are framed with massive screens and holograms, each showcasing their own kinds of artistry. It’s elegant and modern, flashy and high-tech — it’s obvious who the building belongs to even without seeing the outside.

It’s everything Peter had expected and more. So much more. It still doesn’t seem real, even when he’s led through security and to a private elevator that opens without the use of a button.

“Workshop, FRI, if you’d be so kind.”

“Taken on a new protégé, Boss?” a feminine, disembodied voice asks.

Peter stares up at the ceiling, then at Stark who grins as he tucks away his sunglasses. He holds Peter’s dumbfounded gaze as he says, “Just gonna tinker with my new pal here. FRIDAY, Peter. Peter, FRIDAY.” He makes the introductions between Peter and the air like it’s just another Saturday afternoon. Which, seeing as he’s the one who lives here, it is.

Peter gawks at the ceiling again. “Whoa! Is that—are you an AI?”

“I’m a natural-language user interface—”

“She’s an advanced UI,” Stark butts in, correcting Peter. “Seriously, FRIDAY, you don’t need to embellish your job title. Kid’s mind’ll be blown either way.”
As it turns out, FRIDAY’s only one of many instances where Peter’s mind will be blown.

Everybody knows of Tony Stark's many feats and inventions, from renewable energy to the discovery of a new element. Peter’s learned about him in school, watched segments about him on the news, even studied him in his own free time. He’s got Stark’s contributions to science and robotics memorized A to Z — but there’s a big difference between reading about it on the internet and being able to see where the magic happens with his own two eyes.

Even Stark’s ‘bots — Dum-E, U, and Butterfingers (all of whom Peter instantly falls in love with) — are a marvel. They're out of their charging stations the instant Peter walks out the door, gears humming as they roll across the floor to surround him.

“They’re so cool!” Dum-E rolls out of sight and Peter runs a tentative hand over Butterfingers’ arm — its rotor lets out a pleased whirr as its claw spins. “Are they programmed to do this to people? Oh! Um, hey there.” Peter leans back to avoid bumping his nose into the camera lens U’s curiously shoved in his face.

A sharp whistle cuts through the workshop, followed by a clap. “Nah-ah! No harassing the kid! Bad ‘bots, get back to bed.” Butterfingers and U bump into each other in their hurry, Dum-E trailing after them. Peter doesn’t know if personifying robots is as looked down upon as it is for animals, but he swears they look absolutely crushed.

“They’ve got basic learning algorithms,” Stark explains. “They like to figure new things — faces — out. Can’t say they’ve learned much about personal space, though. Hey! Not yours.” He grabs a pair of goggles from Dum-E and holds them up to his eyes. “Really? Can you even see out of these things?”

The open flap of Peter’s backpack flops around behind him when he spins in his spot. Sliding it off, he holds it in his folded arms defensively. Stark’s pulled the goggles on over his head and is giving Peter a large, goofy grin.

“Yeah, I can,” Peter says, face burning with embarrassment. “They help—ever since everything happened, it’s like all my senses are dialed up to eleven. They help cut down the input so I don’t get overloaded. Same with the mask.”

“So you got the whole package with the super-spider bite, huh? Strength, sight, hearing, speed?” Peter nods. “Not to mention the wall-crawling thing. Probably your main quirk.” Stark ‘hmmms’ to himself and pushes the goggles up onto his forehead.

“Reflexes, too,” Peter adds. At Stark’s intrigued look he elaborates. “I kinda...sense things? Right before they happen — or right as they happen. I’ve managed to dodge or catch stuff without even looking.”

Stark’s eyebrows rise in interest and he plops onto a stool, finally removing the goggles. “Alright, Parker,” he pats the nearby workbench, “show me your stash. You got those chemicals with you for your webbing?”

When Peter sits down and starts to dig through his bag, he’s all nerves again. He’s in Tony Stark’s personal workshop, where never before seen gear and technology is developed for an elite team of superheroes, and he’s pulling out a busted tackle box that holds his stolen chemistry set. He feels like he’s brought a Lego kit with half the pieces missing to an engineer convention — and that analogy really isn’t far off the mark, here.

Once again Peter has to explain himself as he pulls away the wadded newspaper to reveal the busted glassware beneath. “It’s—there’s a lot missing. Kinda hard to get this stuff on—as a kid,
y’know?” He bites his cheek, hoping his slip goes unnoticed.

Stark hooks a finger over the lip of the box and slides it over, pointedly ignoring Peter’s weak protests as he starts to pull out vial after vial. “Salicylic acid, toluene, methanol—” He lists off the names that are scribbled onto the sides in sharpie.

“It’s nylon-based,” Peter interjects again as he twists the newspaper in his hands. “They — the webs — need to be strong. Obviously. Flexible, too. I’ve been trying to figure out a way to get them to naturally dissolve after a while.” There’s shredded newspaper littering the top of the workbench when he looks down and he quickly drops his hands to his lap. “Still haven’t gotten it right, but I do have a solvent in case of emergencies. Kinda learned the hard way that I’d need it, after the first time I, uh, tried them out.”

Mercifully, Stark doesn’t ask Peter to elaborate the story. Even without a prompt he almost does so on his own anyway in a desperate attempt to fill the silence. Stark cuts him off in the middle of his breath.

“Web-shooters. Gimme.” The demand is accompanied with a matching grabby-hand motion. Peter dutifully rolls up a sleeve and unclips the shooter from his wrist to hand it over. It’s spared a glance before Stark holds up a small silver capsule. “Repurposed air rifle canister. Smart. Efficient. Reusable. How you fill ‘em?”

“A, uh, air pump.” It’s clear it’s been modified from its original use for blowing up basketballs when Peter pulls it out of his backpack. He begins to fiddle with the rubber tubing of the pump, then remembers the fate of the newspaper and quickly drops it. “The web-fluid doesn’t solidify until it mixes under high pressure with the CO2 and oxygen—” and then Peter’s going into detail of how he’d modded the pump, how much web length each canister is able to produce, and how he’s able to manipulate his web shapes with such a “basic and rudimentary spinneret nozzle.”

Stark’s words, not his.

After the investigation into Peter’s tech is done, Stark seems to flip a switch and is all motion and energy. He’s interested in upgrading the web-shooters, which takes Peter by surprise. FRIDAY makes a scan of the cuff to produce a hologram and Stark blows it up with a motion. Peter’s mind blows up with it.

Improving the schematic doesn’t take much time between the two of them. The nozzle is the first thing that’s reworked with a new mini-turbine and (soon-to-be) patented Spinneret Nozzle Array, courtesy of Stark. Peter can now “spin six different web combinations, you’re welcome.” Then they move on to actually building the thing which, if Peter was surprised before, he’s completely dumbstruck now. Stark drags him over to another workbench while he stutters as his brain restarts and they begin to make the casing to house everything.

Working on tech makes conversation come easily between them. It’s mostly science and some engineering technobabble, but every now and again Peter gets into talking about school and his hobbies like robotics club and his dumpster diving escapades, and doesn’t realize just how much he’s sharing. A few of Stark’s stories from his one year of high school has Peter in stitches while he attempts to seal the battery compartment. They end up having to grind down the steel frame and try again.

Peter’s busy staring down at the brand new Stark-Parker produced web-shooters on each of his wrists, overwhelmed with excitement and disbelief to the point of silence, when he hears Stark shout, “Think fast!” and a foot-long leveler is flying at his head.

They both stare at where it’s dangling from the ceiling in a snug, teardrop shaped web-coon.
“Hey, nice shot! Real glad you weren’t exaggerating about those reflexes.”

Stark’s grinning when Peter meets his gaze and he mirrors it, but it could never accurately reflect the giddiness bubbling inside. He feels like a kid on Christmas day who just got a new bike. That can hover. A hoverbike. But like ten times cooler.

“Thank you, Mr. Stark,” Peter says quietly. “This is...this is probably the greatest day of my life.”

Something strange twists Stark’s grin but it stays. “Glad to hear it, kid.” There’s only a split second of hesitation when he lifts his hand but then he grips Peter’s shoulder — it causes that pleasant feeling of pride to tingle under his skin. “You feel like pizza?” And then the touch is gone as Stark crosses the workshop to the elevator.

“Wait — what?”

Stark picks up a rag and rubs his hands with it, not meeting Peter’s eyes. “Pizza. Y’know, the Italian dish? Bread, sauce, any kind of toppings you want — except pineapple, unless you’re a heathen,” he says, tossing the rag at Butterfingers. There’s an eager grab for it, but it misses its claw and flutters to the floor. “Time flies while you’re having fun. Pretty sure it’s past your dinnertime. Thought we could eat before I let you swing off into the night.”

It’s then that Peter notices just how late it is. Unless the workshop’s clock is wrong it’s well past eight.

He doesn’t want to leave. Not yet.

“Oh! Oh, right. Yeah. Pizza sounds great! I’ll have—whatever’s fine, really. Any pizza is good pizza.” He grabs his backpack and shovels everything back inside before making his way to the elevator. The door opens when he reaches it.

“You got it. FRI, to the penthouse. And put an order in for two—three large pizzas from Ray’s. The usual.” Stark catches Peter’s perplexed gaze as FRIDAY confirms the order. “I watched you eat a thirty-two ounce steak and then some, with room to spare.”

Peter doesn’t have long to stare in embarrassment at himself in the reflective surface of the elevator before they’ve covered five floors and are on the move again.

Tony Stark’s penthouse (and Peter takes a second to let that sink in, since today has been absolutely crazy) differs vastly from the lobby of the Tower. Instead of the white marble and stainless steel that lent an air of enormity and elegance, there’s dark grey granite, brass, and brown leather. It’s classy, sophisticated, and makes the living area feel a little more cozy despite how undeniably huge it is. Peter feels like he’s walked into a spread from Home & Design. It’s immaculate, and he curiously looks around as he follows Stark toward the wall of floor-to-ceiling windows.

That is, until he spots the ceiling light.

It’s enough to stop him in his tracks. It’s — he’s not even sure how to describe it. It’s made up of an absurd amount of tube lights, scattered and fanned out in a circle from a simple black metal base. It resembles the bottom half of a cyborg-Christmas tree, jammed right there into the ceiling upside down. He silently prays that Stark had nothing to do with the design choice because it really is unforgivable.

When Peter finally manages to look away from the hideous light fixture, his eyes fall on the vista outside the window.
The lights of Manhattan are a sea of stars under an inky black sky, slashed through by the river before continuing on with Brooklyn and Queens. The Chrysler Building plays centerpiece to it all, piercing high and defiant above the swirling, sparkling streets, though not quite matching the height and grandeur of the Tower.

Peter’s seen the city from up high before, of course, when he’s swinging from apartment buildings and skyscrapers, and while that in itself is exhilarating and freeing, it’s nothing quite like this. There’s something else in being able to look down at it all from ninety-three floors up where it’s silent and still. From here, it’s hard to miss just how full and bursting the city is. It sparks something in him, something familiar and fond.

“Yeah. Wow.” Stark’s voice breaks Peter from his staring and he blinks a few times before tearing his gaze away. There’s a grin present on Stark’s face but it isn’t boastful or teasing as he watches Peter. The mirrored words may be simple, inadequately encompassing the feelings such a view elicits, but Peter can tell Stark knows exactly what he means with them.

“So. I think it’s my job, as the responsible adult in the room, to tell you to go wash your hands before dinner. But—” he turns fully and gives Peter a critical eye, “—I think you’ll need to, ah, wash your everything.”

Peter lets out an intelligent “Huh?” and looks down at himself. “Oh.”

His shirt looks like a middle school art project and he can only assume the mess spreads to the rest of him, too. Stark stifles a laugh when Peter reaches up to self consciously rub at his hair, a flurry of steel shavings fluttering to the floor.

“FRIDAY’ll show you to the guest room so you can clean up,” he says and gestures to the hallway Peter walked past when they first arrived. “Take your time, pizza’s gonna be a while.”

“Yeah, okay. Sorry for the mess, Mr. Stark.” The apology is waved off and he’s shooed away.

FRIDAY indicates the second door on Peter’s left when he reaches the hall. He leaves his bag and new web-shooters on the enormous bed and the UI directs him to the bathroom hidden past the dressing room (which is apparently different from a walk-in closet; he didn’t even know that was a thing). Inside is a jacuzzi bath big enough for him to swim in, along with a separate shower, and at this point Peter’s gotten better at reigning in his shock at how ridiculously oversized everything is here. He walks over to the long counter after sparing the two — two! — sinks a glance, and catches himself in the mirror that spans the length of the wall.

The reflection looking back is recognizable this time. Aside from a few grease marks smudged across his face, his skin is clean from grime. It’s a little darker than he remembers, tanned from wandering the streets now that he can’t hole up inside and play video games all day. His hair is still a horrible and hopeless mess, but the steel shavings are a nice touch. They flash and sparkle in his dark curls when he shakes his head and he grins.

It’s then Peter notices the real change: his grin is genuine, and the smile it morphs into from that realization comes easily. It isn’t forced or empty, a mask to disguise everything going on inside. It doesn’t need to because, for the first time in a long time, he’s happy. And how couldn’t he be after spending the majority of the day with Tony freakin’ Stark? It’s been unreal, like something out of a movie or comic, and he still can’t fully believe it.

He turns on the sink and splashes his face with cold water just to make sure he isn’t dreaming. When he looks up at his reflection again, everything’s still the same. He smiles again.
Peter strips on his way to the shower, leaving a trail of clothes. The interface below the rainmaker shower head is easy enough for him to figure out but the shower spouts in the wall are definitely a surprise. He’s silently thanking his sticky feet when he hurriedly spins on his heel after getting a jet of water right in the face, otherwise he’d most likely be nursing a busted tailbone.

After allowing himself ten minutes to stand under the Pulsing Massage Spray setting to appreciate the modern marvel that’s hot water, he flicks off the wall jets and rushes the rest of his shower.

There are clothes laid out on the bed when he steps back into the bedroom and he nearly drops the ridiculously fluffy towel clutched around his waist. It’s nothing fancy, just a pair of Stark emblazoned sweats and a tee, but Peter’s absolutely elated and dumps his old clothes to hold up the shirt. The dumb grin on his face doesn’t leave the entire time it takes him to change and he accessorizes the fresh duds with his new web-shooters. He doesn’t care how dorky it may be to wear them, they’re the coolest things he owns now and they’re going to be like lucky socks — he’s never taking them off his wrists after today.

Stark’s voice reaches Peter’s ears when he steps out into the hall. The smile on his face wavers and he stands there, listening. As he cautiously continues down the hall, Stark’s tone causes ice to lump in his gut — it’s hushed and urgent. At first he thinks to do the polite thing and head back to the room, to wait until the conversation’s finished so he doesn’t interrupt, but then he hears his name. Against his better judgement, he runs the rest of the way down the hall.

The glowing Manhattan skyline engulfs Stark where he’s standing and staring out the windows at the infinite black. His stance is rigid, mirroring his tone, but it stiffens further and then he turns when Peter comes to a stop in the middle of the room.

“Hey, kiddo!” He waves a hand by his ear. “Pizza got here just a minute ago. Still hot. So—”

“Who were you talking to?” Peter’s voice is steady, despite the fact it feels like the floor is collapsing out from under him.

“Just a friend. Nothing important, though. Hey, you wanna watch a movie while we—”

“I know you were talking about me. Super hearing, remember?” Realization dawns on Peter and he asks quietly, “You know, don’t you?” Then, louder, “You’ve known the entire time. About me. About May.”

It suddenly all makes sense in Peter’s head.

The confrontation, the food, the compliments, the workshop — it had all seemed too good to be true. Of course it was. Stark wouldn’t pick up a kid from the streets, enhanced or otherwise, and bring them to the Tower, to his workshop, without an ulterior motive. He’s just another adult trying to get Peter to do what he thinks is best for him. But unlike the others, who tried and failed or were too afraid to press, Stark succeeded. Peter let his idolization of a childhood hero blind him to something so obvious.

Shame and betrayal well up inside him. There’s anger, too, and it’s causing him to shake so much that he couldn’t stop even if he wanted to. When the storm of emotions settles enough for him to actually see Stark in front of him again, the look on his face is enough to tell Peter he’s right.

“I’m not going anywhere!” Peter snaps when he sees Stark open his mouth. He’s shouting at a grown up like some petulant teen who’s just been told they’re grounded for a week, but he doesn’t care. His yelling only makes Stark’s guilty look deepen and that makes Peter feel good. Justified.

And yet, under it all, he’s completely terrified.
“Peter,” and he suddenly wants to tell Stark not to use his name — it’s too personal, too familiar, “no one’s saying you’ve gotta go anywhere—”

“You were gonna send me away!” Peter accuses. “To—an orphanage or foster care or—” He sucks in a breath and nearly chokes on it when his chest seizes up. Stark takes a step, hand outstretched and eyes panicked, but freezes when Peter jerks away. “I don’t need you or some social worker to pretend like they care.” His voice breaks on the words.

Peter’s moving before his body can decide to break down with the rest of him. He sprints past Stark and avoids the hand that reaches out. The cool autumn air is chilling on his clammy skin and wet hair when he runs out onto the landing pad, but he ignores it and stumbles to the edge of the balcony.

The many lights of Manhattan no longer look like stars — they’re a blurred mess, like the edges of a galaxy being sucked into a black hole.

Peter doesn’t look back, and jumps.

There’s the blare of a ship’s horn and suddenly Peter’s falling. The underside of Queensboro Bridge rapidly shrinks from view and he brings up a hand to shoot a line of webbing at a support beam, grunting when his body jerks to a stop and his bare hands burn. He can’t remember how he ended up here, dangling nearly eighty feet above Roosevelt Island, but he’s lost all momentum by now and the only directions he can go is up or down.

He opts to go down.

When there’s only ten feet left between the roof of the building and Peter’s feet, he lets go of the web and free falls. The landing is a six at best but he’s really not concerned on impressing anybody right now. He gracelessly plops down to sit, legs splayed in a wide V and his hands palm-up on his thighs so the cool breeze from the river can relieve the rope burn. He can’t even begin to feel sorry about all the abuse his hands have faced lately as he’s too busy contemplating over how this situation feels so familiar.

Aside from the occasional honk and rush of tires against pavement far above, the steady crash of the river against the shore is calming. Peter wonders if his surroundings are the reason he isn’t panicking, like he’s pretty sure he should be doing right now.

Or maybe it’s because he’s so incredibly tired.

He can’t keep doing this, the running. He knows he can’t. It’s not getting him anywhere, and if he keeps going in circles then everything he’s avoiding will inevitably catch up. In all the running Peter’s done to try and save himself, he’s also running from his only friend — the only person who could help him.

“Peter, you’re not fine.”

Ned had seen something in him last night, when he had appeared at his house in the middle of the night stinking of smoke and fear. Three weeks is how long Ned had been left wondering what happened to Peter while hoping and waiting for him to come back. Three weeks is how long Ned had been left with the thought that, maybe, he never would.

Three weeks is how long ago Peter’s world had ended.

The lights of Queens greet Peter when his eyes finally refocus. He takes an unsteady breath, then releases it in an annoyed huff when the unmistakable sound of Iron Man’s flight repulsors reach
Before he can land on the roof, Peter pushes himself to his feet and walks to the edge. He doesn’t want to face Stark, knows that seeing him will only make him angry again, and so he resolutely stares down at the parking lot below. His attempt at appearing aloof is ruined when he has to grab onto an old antenna to steady himself. There’s the familiar sound of the armor folding and shifting and then it flies off again.

It’s like déjà vu.

Peter can feel Stark’s gaze boring into his back. He waits, and waits, and waits some more, but the lecture he’d been expecting never comes. The presence behind him becomes unbearable and he turns around. Stark looks impeccable — there isn’t a single wrinkle on his suit. But when Peter’s finally able to look up at his face, the expression he sees there belies the put-together appearance.

There’s a long, tense moment where they stare at each other, and then Stark speaks up.

“Kinda making me nervous where you’re standing. Gonna ask you to not pull a Luke Skywalker on me here.” The corner of his mouth quirks up into the slightest smile, but falls when Peter doesn’t react.

The tense silence resurfaces. Stark’s hands go to his pockets and he shifts his weight from foot to foot. Peter can tell he’s remorseful, probably panicked, and no doubt uncomfortable. He has the upper hand here and that sparks him into talking.

“Mr. Stark...I know it probably sounded like I was just being some stupid kid, yelling at you back there, but I’m serious. I’m not going anywhere. I — I can’t. I can’t do that. I can’t go and—”

“I’m sorry.”

Despite how surprised Peter is about the apology, he isn’t sure whether to believe him or not. Stark had already known so much about him before they ever met on that rooftop — how couldn’t he have known that, too? Why had he taken Peter in, then, except to get him alone and stranded so he couldn’t run away?

Stark sighs and runs a hand through his hair, looking away as if he’s fighting with a thought. What he says next causes Peter to stare.

“I shouldn’t have lied to you, Peter — distracted you. Probably went over the top with the whole workshop thing. I just—” Stark cuts himself off with an agitated sound. “I promise you, I didn’t know about your aunt. At least not when I first caught you on the roof. FRI,” and he motions to his ear, turning his head so Peter can spot the small earpiece there, “kindly filled me in after my big spiel about you blowing yourself up.”

Despite how surprised Peter is about the apology, he isn’t sure whether to believe him or not. Stark had already known so much about him before they ever met on that rooftop — how couldn’t he have known that, too? Why had he taken Peter in, then, except to get him alone and stranded so he couldn’t run away?

Stark sighs and runs a hand through his hair, looking away as if he’s fighting with a thought. What he says next causes Peter to stare.

“I didn’t handle my parents’ deaths too well. There were a lot of things I felt when I got the news, and that scared me. I didn’t want to deal with it so I distracted myself instead. Drinking, partying, working...I drowned myself in it, anything to avoid thinking about how they were suddenly just gone. How I’d been left behind.”

The antenna gives beneath Peter’s grip. He knows of the tragedy, of the car crash that had taken Mr. Stark’s parents from him. But despite that knowledge Peter can’t say he expected any of this from the superhero — of a shared pain from loss of family, the agony of suddenly finding yourself alone in the world. To him, Tony Stark is a wealthy, famous genius, the entire world within arm’s reach. He has everything.
And, really, Peter has nobody to blame for his ignorance except himself. Guilt fills his conscience.

“I thought I was alone, wallowing in my misery,” Stark continues, all of his fidgeting gone. “Took my hard-headed, stubborn best friend to knock some sense into me in the end, to make me realize it was my own fault for all the isolation and suffering. Can’t say it’s sunshine and rainbows now, but it’s definitely better.” Stark’s studying his shoes in a rare show of vulnerability, but with a small sniff he brings his head up and finally meets Peter’s eyes for the first time since he started talking. It’s like he’s waiting for something, for Peter to talk, so when he doesn’t he clears his throat.

“I won’t be calling in the authorities on this. Cross my heart, scout’s honor, all that. The person I was talking to back at the Tower? Said best friend. Needed some advice on how to handle this whole situation but I, as usual, made a mess of it before he could share his pearls of wisdom. Just...” He gestures behind himself with an arm, to the Tower that seems to always be visible, “I’ve got an entire floor of empty rooms and more money than I know what to do with. Letting you crash at my place really isn’t a problem. In fact, I thought you’d be ecstatic at the offer, what with how you were the whole car ride there. So this silence is killin’ me. Can’t you just—”

“Okay.”

The agreement startles Peter almost as much as Stark.

“Okay?”

“Yeah. Okay.” Peter releases the antenna and steps away from the edge of the roof. Inside he’s a complete mess, sorting through warring emotions and thoughts, but he manages to give Stark a piercing look. “Besides, I think it’s pretty clear you can’t keep me at the Tower if I don’t wanna be there.”

“Would it be presumptuous of me to ask you to never do that again? Seriously, I recently downgraded and don’t have the hardware anymore to handle another scare like that,” he says, patting his chest.

What just happened between them is a small step, Peter knows. But for him, personally, it’s a leap. He stares past Stark’s shoulder to the Tower, where it stands like a lighthouse on the shore of the sea. There’s hesitation creeping back in and Peter thinks Stark can sense it when he looks back at him. He taps a dial on his watch and soon Peter hears the approach of the armor again.

“So,” Stark drags out the word, “race you to the Tower? Or would you rather I carry you back? No one has to know but me.” The last half of his words come out in the tinny, filtered voice of the Iron Man armor as he steps back in.

Peter looks up at the bottom of the bridge, then back to Stark. “I know you’re just humoring me, Mr. Stark. But...give me a boost?”

“Sure thing, Spidey.”

Stark does humor him. He touches down just as Peter climbs over the edge of the landing pad. He’s still catching his breath as Stark struts down the walkway, the armor peeling away like a second skin before disappearing into the Tower.

Walking back into the penthouse is almost like walking through a gateway to another dimension. Peter feels uneasy in the foreign place, any of the optimism from before long gone, and he resists the urge to turn around and jump right back off the balcony again.
“I’m—thanks for ordering the pizzas, but I’m pretty tired,” Peter says quickly before Stark can say anything. He’s not sure why, but he feels embarrassed — he doesn’t want to be in his presence right now. “Where, um, where am I staying?”

“Oh, right. Here.” Stark turns to head toward the elevator and Peter quickly follows. They go down two floors, and when the doors open they’re stepping out into an even larger version of Stark’s living room.

“Got the whole floor to yourself,” Stark says, sweeping out an arm at the expanse of the huge common area. “Fully stocked kitchen, entertainment area, a bar — and I’m gonna trust you to not try any Risky Business the moment I leave you to it.” The joke falls flat and Stark clears his throat. “Balcony’s that way, perfect for admiring the view and not for nose-diving off of. Bedrooms are down the hall—”

Peter heads for them the moment they’re pointed out, Stark’s voice quickly falling silent. He’s still standing in the middle of the common area when Peter looks back. When he notices Peter’s gaze, he crosses his arms over his chest.

“Feel free to call dibs on any of them, we’re full of vacancies at the moment. If you’ve got any questions you can ask FRIDAY.”

“Thanks, Mr. Stark.” Peter quickly walks into the first room down the hall.

The lights automatically turn on and he stands just inside the threshold to allow himself a moment to take it in. The lights are too bright — they’re chasing away all the shadows and revealing just how massive and empty the bedroom is. Peter feels exposed in the huge expanse of space. As he dumps his bag and toes off his shoes next to the bed, he stares at the web-shooters on his wrists before clicking on the safety. The duvet is heavy and stifling but he pulls it up to his chin anyway and curls up on his side facing the door.

The oppressive silence fills the room to bursting. It grates like static in Peter’s ears. He stares blankly at the wall as the lights fade and watches for shapes in the dark.

Chapter End Notes

Alright so when I was looking up pics of Tony’s penthouse to get an idea of the layout, I came across the absolutely horrible light he’s got hanging in the place and it required a mention. I had to make Peter hate it just as much as I do.

Anyway, I promise things get better the next chapter. Tony’s not the best with kids and Peter’s got a lot of issues to deal with and while that won’t all be magically fixed in ch3, it’s full of fluff. Lots of bonding. 3’s actually the longest chapter so far out of everything I’ve written.

See you next week!
The grey-black darkness is smothering. Peter can’t move, can’t breathe, but there’s no feeling to the constraints, no physicality to it all. It’s more like the paralysis from intense fear keeping him still and silent.

And it’s fear that roars to the surface then, a prowling beast that pounces just before its prey can escape. It’s holding Peter down in mind and body and all he can do is stare, unseeing.

He knows what’s coming even before the shadows swirl and shift.

The voice is unmistakable as it cries to him, desperate and afraid. Then, there they are — the shape, the figure, the person — and Peter knows them. He needs to help them. He needs to help them before—

Another figure melts out from the shadows. They’re so close that Peter thinks he could touch them, if only he could move. There’s a familiarity to them, too, and he calls out, his silent voice burning in his throat as he tries to beg and beg and beg them to help. To do anything.

They don’t move.

He's still trying to scream as the bright purple light tears through it all.

Peter thrashes awake. Everything feels foreign, wrong, and the sunlight’s blinding when he opens his eyes. It’s too quiet, the ground’s too soft, and there’s something pressing down and strangling him. He throws it off in a panic and tries to stand but stumbles when the ground gives out under his feet.

There’s an intense wave of vertigo and he takes a step, then another to try and catch his balance, and it’s only his enhanced reflexes that prevent him from eating it when he tumbles to the ground. The light dims and his eyes finally adjust as he stares down at the carpet.

Carpet...?

Peter looks around and remembers he's in Avengers Tower. He’d spent the night here, stayed in one of the bedrooms. The rest of last night comes rushing back and it's nearly enough to knock him off balance again.

The memories and emotions that come with them are a lot to take in a second time — even worse now that he can reflect on it. He squeezes his eyes closed as if it’ll help shut it out, and when it doesn’t work he grinds the palms of his hands against the scrunched lids.

“Mr. Parker, are you alright?”

“Well, I—yes, FRIDAY. I’m—sorry, not used to the whole...ceiling-voice, thing.” He flexes his hand where it’s settled on his chest. His heart is racing again. “I’m fine. I’m fine, I just—”

“You had a nightmare,” the UI helpfully supplies.

“Yeah...a nightmare.”
“Do you need any assistance?” FRIDAY asks when Peter doesn’t move. “Would you like me to contact Mr. Stark—”

“No! No, no no.” Peter springs up to his feet. “It was just a nightmare. I’m not five. You don’t— Mr. Stark doesn’t need to know.” As if to prove his point, he busies himself with making the bed like a responsible teenager.

Which means it’s a frumpy mess when he’s done with it. FRIDAY doesn’t speak up again, though, and he takes it as a win.

Peter finds the bathroom easily this time. FRIDAY’s most likely everywhere and has access to everything, but he still locks the door behind him for the illusion of privacy. He washes his face, brushes his hair and teeth — things he could rarely do when he had nowhere to stay. It’s bizarre, how simple everyday habits seem so strange and luxurious to be able to do again. It should feel like a relief.

It doesn’t.

The bright white Stark Industries logo catches Peter’s eyes in the bathroom mirror while he dries his hands. Something twists in his stomach. He can’t stand to see the thing on his person right now and so he pulls the shirt off over his head and throws it to the floor.

When he finally decides to leave the room he’s back in his own clothes. They may not be brand new or in the best condition, but Peter feels better in them. They’re his, not somebody else’s given to him out of pity.

He’s idly wondering where there might be a washer and dryer in the place and is about to ask FRIDAY, when he steps into the common area and freezes.

The long kitchen island is buried under containers of food. There are stacks of waffles and pancakes, boats of bacon, sausage, and hashbrowns, French toast, four different kinds of bagels, a tower of cinnamon rolls, scrambled eggs, fried eggs, boiled eggs — and these are only the foods Peter recognizes. But it isn’t the breakfast buffet that’s causing him to stare, it’s what’s on the other side of it.

Leaning against the counter and sipping a mug of coffee is Stark. He’s dressed casually and scrolling through his phone as he stands in the communal floor’s kitchen like he doesn’t have his own just two floors up. Peter doesn’t bother breaking his gaze when Stark finally notices him and flashes a smile. It wavers just the slightest, and Peter knows he’s looking at his backpack. He shifts uncomfortably, hands going up to hang from the straps of it.

“Well good morning, sunshine,” Stark greets, smile back full force.

“Good morning, Mr. Stark?” It comes out as a question.

“Went ahead and ordered some breakfast,” he says when Peter makes no indication of moving. “Most important meal of the day and all that, so I got a little of everything. Pull up a seat, dig in.” When Stark motions at the only empty section of counter by a stool, it’s then he seems to realize there isn’t even a fork or plate out. He spins on his heel to rummage around in one of the cabinets.

“Several thoughts go through Peter’s head as he crosses the dark granite floor, most involving retreating to the bedroom or getting into the elevator and leaving altogether. It’s tempting. It’d be the easy way out.

But then he looks up as Stark leans over to set down utensils and a plate, his hands moving
through the air as he talks like he has to physically fight away any potential awkward silences. He’s putting in a lot of effort to try and make Peter feel comfortable around him, and Peter can’t really blame him, what with how he’d (over)reacted the night before.

So, he decides, he’ll try his best to do that, too.

“Are these Belgian waffles? Oh man, I love those.” Peter smiles when he sees the tension immediately leave Stark’s shoulders. “How many Uber Eats drivers were needed to bring all this stuff?” he asks, snatching up a container of fruit to dump on his plate-sized waffle.

“It looked like some cuisine convoy lined up outside the Tower,” Stark answers smoothly. “The freight elevator’s gonna smell absolutely delicious for a solid week.”

That’s all it takes for the morning to be off to a much better start.

Stark does most of the talking and Peter does most of the eating, and for a while it seems like Stark’s testing the waters with the topics he brings up. Eventually their conversation settles on the safe ground of shop talk and once it’s obvious things are civil between them, Stark asks what he thinks of the new web-shooters.

“They’re great, Mr. Stark,” Peter says, barely taking the time to swallow his mouthful of food before he gushes. “The band’s really comfortable. I always had to keep my old ones on top of my sleeves otherwise I’d chafe really bad,” and boy he hopes that’s not TMI, “and the spinneret launches the line even faster so my shots are more accurate. I love them.”

Stark hums, pleased. “Any suggestions on improvements? Upgrades? Feedback leads to progress, so lay it on me.”

“Oh, um,” he looks down at his wrist, where the black alloy of the band peeks out from beneath his sleeve, “I dunno. I can’t...I can’t think of anything. Right now, anyway. I gotta try ‘em out a little more.”

“Need more data, I got you. Alright, what about your webs? You said you wanted to make them naturally dissolve. What’s the hold up with that?”

Peter’s nose scrunches up at the question. The natural dissolution of his webs is something he’s been trying to tackle for a while now and getting on the topic brings back memories of all the hours he’s sunk into it with nothing to show. It’s like an annoying pebble in his shoe.

“All the viable solvents for nylon are too corrosive. I don’t really wanna cause damage at the contact points. Especially when, uh, webbing up people,” Peter explains. He takes out his aggravation on the subject by stabbing his fork into his innocent, half-eaten omelette.

“Sounds like you gotta work from the ground up again. Change the web mixture, change the solvent needed. If any. That little kit of yours? It’s impressive, what you managed to make with a small handful of chemicals swiped from your high school lab,” and there’s a knowing smirk on Stark’s face when Peter guiltily lowers his head, “but you’ve got a new supplier now. Sky’s the limit, kid. I know you’ll be able to come up with something even better this time.”

Peter’s glad he’s already looking away, because he can feel the flush spreading across his face. He looks up when Stark steps away from the counter.

“Y’know, when I first laid out everything, I had the ridiculous notion I may have gone a little overboard. Glad I was wrong about that.” There’s an impressed glance aimed at the tower of empty take-out boxes Peter’s been working on. “So, is that a young-male-teenager metabolism, or a suped-up-spider-bite one?”
“Ah...both?” Peter flashes a sheepish smile.

“Well, if your tank’s topped up, why don’t we head down to the workshop? Get started on cracking the conundrum of your durable-slash-dissoluble web.”

Stark empties the rest of the coffee pot into his mug and heads for the elevator while Peter watches him go. He looks down at his omelette, then to the rest of the leftover food.

“I’ll meet you down there,” Peter calls after him, then begins to close and stack the boxes.

“Are you…?” Stark watches for a moment, puzzled, before catching on. “Right. Leftovers.” He ducks around Peter to open the fridge before his leaning tower of food can spill all over the floor. “Usually, anything that’s left out would always disappear in due time. Not really used to leftovers, I guess. Slipped my mind.”

As Stark smoothly maneuvers around the kitchen, mug in one hand and boxes of food in the other, Peter swears he sees the same look from the restaurant the other day flash through Stark’s eyes. It’s there and gone in an instant, a smile on Stark’s face by the time they’re done putting everything away.

“We’ve only got the entire day for science,” Stark says as he leads the way to the elevator, “and by personal experience I can say that’s never enough. Vámonos.”

The ‘bots rush to greet Peter when they reach the workshop, causing Stark to dance out of the way or be run over. Their eagerness makes Peter smile despite the fact he’s now trapped in the elevator. Dum-E grinds in annoyance when the door gently nudges its base.

“Hey, good morning you guys,” Peter laughs, attempting to slide through the tangle of robotic limbs. U’s the only one to scoot out of the way and Peter gives it a thankful pat when he manages to break free.

“Stop encouraging them,” Stark exclaims when Peter gives Dum-E and Butterfingers quick pets as well. “They’re supposed to be assistants, not distractions. You give them positive reinforcement for bad behavior and they’ll never leave you alone.” He plops down on a stool and points an accusing finger in Peter’s direction. “You’re this close to being renamed Stickyfingers, mister!”

“Huh?” Peter cranes his head around and spots Dum-E attempting to pilfer his backpack again. “Hey!” It lets out a sad trill that only manages to make Peter feel slightly guilty when he hugs his bag to his chest.

“I warned you,” Stark chastises. He watches silently as the ‘bots continue their pester, finally stepping in when Peter’s forced to lean halfway over the workbench to keep his bag out of Dum-E’s reach. “Hey, Tweedledee and Tweedledum, why don’t you two go sort the yardsticks? Smallest to largest. U, record their progress.” At Peter’s questioning look he gives him a sly smile and says, “Trust me, it’ll keep them busy for most of the day.” He nods his head to where the ‘bots rolled off to.

In the corner of the shop stands an umbrella holder, a piece of posterboard zip-tied to the front with “toybox” written in sharpie. It’s full of old yardsticks, Dum-E and Butterfingers struggling to remove them with their tri-fingered claws. There’s already a pair laid out on the floor and Dum-E triumphantly sets down another between them.

Peter’s laughing when he looks back.
“It keeps them busy, I get my work done, everyone wins. Remind me to show you U’s footage of when I told them to play pick-up sticks. Anyway,” Stark spins in his seat, rapping his knuckles against the metal tabletop, “you said you’ve tried other mixtures. Got those formulas written down somewhere?”

“Yeah, but they don’t work, so—”

“Let me see ‘em. Just ‘cause they’re not viable doesn’t mean you weren’t close to something. You’re just showing me your notes, I swear it’s not sixty percent of your final grade.”

Reluctantly, Peter drags his laptop out onto the table, praying the battery’s still charged enough for it to turn on. When it boots up with its familiar clicking and whirring he lets out a relieved breath.

“What on Earth is that.”

At Stark’s horrified tone Peter glances around the workshop. He doesn’t spot anything strange, like an experiment gone awry or a mess the ‘bots may have caused, and he looks back to Stark.

Only to see him staring down at the computer.

“It’s...my laptop?”

“Is it trying to speak?”

“It’s the heads,” Peter says, quickly typing in his password once the cursor shows up. “Last time I checked, the platter was alright but, um, swinging and jumping from buildings isn’t an easy life for a hard drive.” He gives a half-hearted laugh, silently pleading it won’t take ten minutes for everything to load.

Stark nods, although his concerned gaze is focused on the desktop as the icons agonizingly pop into existence one by one. “Thing’s been through a lot. Is that duct tape?”

“I may have dropped it...a few times?” Peter rapidly taps at the touchpad as he navigates his way through his labyrinth of folders. “Anyway, here,” and he turns it so Stark has a clearer view of the screen, “they’re mostly nylon formulas but I did mess around with a couple kevlar ones. Never tried them out, but maybe they’re a better option?”

“Let’s see what you got,” Stark says. He slides the laptop closer and gives the document a browse.

An extremely tense minute passes while Peter watches Stark’s face go through a wide spectrum of emotions. The laptop continuously freezes as Stark attempts to scroll through the document, his tapping growing more aggressive against the arrow keys. There’s a loud buzz from the hard drive at the treatment.

“Wow, okay, I think it just insulted me,” Stark says with a huff, and Peter gives a betrayed look at his laptop.

There’s a moment as Stark seems to ponder something, then says, “Tell you what, I can have FRIDAY transfer everything from your hard drive to the server. I’ll give you your own folder, your own space, that way you don’t have to worry about losing everything when this thing inevitably goes kaput. And I won’t lose my mind trying to deal with...this.” The entire laptop is encompassed with the wave of his hand.

“Whoa, really?” Peter asks excitedly. He can’t help but think of the schematics they worked on last night, how they floated in the air as blue light that could be molded and changed at his fingertips. He wonders if it’ll be similar. “That’d be awesome! But um,” his grin falters,
“everything...?”

“Is there stuff on here you don’t want to save?” The bemused look on Stark’s face slowly fades as he looks at Peter. His hands immediately leave the keyboard to hover in the air like he’s just dropped a hot potato. “I just put my hands all over a fourteen-year-old’s computer.”

At first Peter’s confused, then realization dawns and his eyes grow huge.

“Oh my God,” his face feels like it’s on fire, “I swear, there isn’t any—I don’t have—there’s nothing like that on there. I—just—it’s a really old computer, and there’s a bunch of junk on it, and I—”

“Whoa, hey, it’s alright. I know for a fact I was up to worse shit at your age. I was in college. Trust me, there are stories from those years I never want to retell.” Stark scratches at his eyebrow with his thumb. “Look, you can let FRIDAY know exactly what you want moved, but anything you put in that folder is for your eyes only. I won’t go nosing around. You can even encrypt it if you want, whatever.”

Willing away the absolutely mortifying embarrassment, Peter shakes his head. “No. No, it’s okay. Um, you can go ahead and have FRIDAY move everything. There’s just a bunch of old schoolwork and dumb pictures and stuff on there, and I didn’t wanna waste space—”

“Seriously?” Stark cuts him off, incredulous. “There’s almost an entire floor in this building dedicated to my servers. What’s this thing have, 500 gigs? That’s nonexistent. Infinitesimal. Doesn’t matter how many selfies or Vines you got saved on this thing, it’ll be a blip.”

Peter can’t help but smile at the offer. “Okay—yeah. Thanks.”

A small round tab is stuck onto Peter’s computer. “FRI, beam it up,” Stark says, and the transfer is confirmed in under a minute. “Great. Bring the web-fluid doc onto the holo.” It pops up in blue above the workbench (exactly how Peter had hoped) and Stark slides a tablet onto the table. “Ready to get this party started?”

“Absolutely.” Peter takes the stylus when it’s offered and gives it a deft twirl between his pointer and middle fingers before saying, “I’m fifteen, by the way.” He grins when Stark rolls his eyes. They review the formulas and right off the bat Stark scraps Peter’s idea for kevlar-based webbing — it’s too complex and even more difficult to make naturally dissolving. Plus, he points out, Peter’s not trying to stop bullets with his webs (although that’d be sick and is definitely on Peter’s to-do list) and his nylon formulas are strong enough as-is, anyway. So they focus on those, and Peter can’t help but look up every time a note’s made on the tablet. Everything written down is immediately transferred to the holo and converted to legible text, and it’s fun to watch his chicken scratch morph into neat, orderly font right there in the air.

Despite Peter’s earlier concerns on using solvents to dissolve the web, Stark still wants to give it a go since they now have more materials to work with. They try a couple slow-release diluted solvents first.

“Oh my God. Ew. It smells like burnt rubber and old chili,” Peter coughs, eyes watering. He pulls the neck of his shirt over his mouth and nose like a mask.

Beside him, Stark is slightly more composed despite the assault on his sense of smell. “Alright. I think it’s safe to say we’ll never try that again, unless you wanna stink robbers into submission. Could be effective.”

On the workbench in a glass beaker, a large bubble surfaces on the yellow glob of melted web.
pops and Peter gags, hands flailing.

“Yep,” Stark flicks away the formula, “back to square one.”

Their next attempt is to simply weaken the web enough to break, rather than making it dissolve completely. It appears to be a success with no horrid stench or discoloration, but the effect takes a while to surface.

“Hey, I think it’s working!” Peter sits up excitedly — there’s a red mark on his cheek from where it’s been pillowed on his arms for the past forty-five minutes. A strand of the web breaks and falls to the bottom of the beaker and he turns to give Stark a triumphant grin.

“Nearly lasted an hour. Not bad.” Stark makes his way over from where he’s been lounging on the couch across the workshop. “That’s decent time, but I think we can extend it if we—”

“Uh, Mr. Stark?” Peter slides off his stool and takes a cautious step back from the workbench, “I don’t think it’s supposed to do that.” Another strand of the web breaks and joins the small pile at the bottom. It begins to pop and sizzle. “Um…”

“Please don’t tell me we made another stink bomb,” Stark sighs, looking down at the tablet. The sizzling becomes more rapid as the strands melt together and begin to smoke.

“It’s definitely not supposed to do that,” Peter says nervously. The rest of the web breaks and collapses then, the beaker rattling against the tabletop with the intensity of the reaction that’s started. “Should we...should we be worried?” He jumps when a hand reaches out and he’s pulled behind Stark.

“FRIDAY—”

“Emergency containment procedure activated.”

The sides of the metal tabletop fold down and inch-thick ballistic glass slides into place just seconds before the webbing explodes with a wet, hissing pop. All that’s left is a thin white film lining the glass case, shards of the beaker dangling from strings.

Stark’s eyes are just as wide as Peter’s when he looks over his shoulder. “I know they say ‘third time’s a charm’ but I think we’ll move on from the slow-release thing.”

All their notes for solvent-based dissolution are trashed after that. Stark makes a show of it, grabbing at the holo and crumpling the list in his hands like a sheet of paper before tossing it into a basket FRIDAY supplies. There’s an airhorn and everything. It’s probably the most extra thing Peter’s ever seen and he absolutely loves it.

Those two epic failures cause them to start from scratch again. By the end of it, Peter’s not sure how many mixtures they’ve tried, although judging by the scoreboard FRIDAY’s posted over the basket, they’ve got seventeen points between them. It’s discouraging, to say the least, and while Stark’s busy scrolling through Peter’s newest notes he decides to check what time it is.

It’s well past noon. Peter rubs his eyes just to be sure he’s reading the clock right. They’ve been down here for at least five hours. It definitely doesn’t feel like it’s been that long, but he remembers how quickly the night went by when they’d been designing and building his webshooters. Now aware of just how much time has passed, he nervously glances at Stark.

He’s still reading Peter’s notes. Despite his fears, Stark doesn’t look tired or annoyed that Peter just can’t seem to get things right. In fact, he looks interested. And...invested? It’s honestly surprising to Peter, the level of concentration and time Stark’s putting into helping him when he
could literally be doing anything else right now.

Guilt bubbles to the surface and Peter looks away again — but it isn’t guilt over taking up Mr. Stark’s time, it’s guilt for having ever doubted his motives.

Peter realizes Stark’s talking. The sudden shift he makes in his seat isn’t subtle at all.

“—start over with a nylon five-ten base. With some tweaking of that third formula you had, we might be able to make the peptide bonds weaken after a couple hours and what is so interesting over there? Are Dum-E and Butterfingers jousting again?” The stylus Stark’s holding falls to the tabletop with a clatter and he slaps a hand down to keep it from rolling to the floor. He turns his head to look for what Peter’s been staring at.

There’s a sigh as he folds his arms over his chest and gives Peter a disapproving look. “This is a group effort, Parker. I can’t be doing your science project for you, so I really need you to—”

“It’s currently half past two in the afternoon, Boss.” FRIDAY’s tone is pointed, prompting Stark to look at his watch.

“Oh,” he murmurs, his scolding look gone. He claps his hands, causing Peter to jump at the noise. “Break time! Being brilliant burns plenty of calories. What’re you in the mood for? Thai? Mediterranean? There’s this great Korean barbecue nearby that has amazing pork belly.”

Lunch hadn’t been on Peter’s mind, but he could definitely eat. “Uh, I’m not really sure. Maybe —”

“Why don’t we head to Queens? Show me one of your favorite joints. I’m always up for giving a new place a try.”

Peter covers up the way he staggers at the mention of Queens by turning away to set his goggles on the workbench. He knows Stark’s trying to be kind by offering to take him somewhere he knows and likes, but the thought of going to one of his usual spots — his and May’s spots — isn’t something he wants to share right now.

“Nah that’s alright, Mr. Stark. That’s an hour drive.” He has a convincing smile in place when he turns back around. “Korean barbecue sounds great, though.”

They don’t head to the brightly lit white and silver of the lobby, like Peter had been expecting. Instead, when the elevator door opens, there’s shiny epoxy flooring and dim lighting. Any questions at the tip of Peter’s tongue are lost when he spots a row of cars along the far wall.

A row of extremely flashy and expensive cars.

“Whoa.”

“Happy’s a little preoccupied today,” Stark says as he strides past Peter, “so I’ll be driving. Got a preference?”

Peter’s eyes never leave the line of vehicles as he makes his way to them. “What—these are—wow.” He stops in front of a bright orange sports car, his hand reaching out to touch the smooth downward curve of the hood. He stops short, suddenly afraid to leave a fingerprint on the impeccable paint job. “They’re all yours?”

“Yes.” Stark pops the ‘p.’ “Saleen S7. Good choice.” The door unlocks when he steps around to the driver’s side. When Peter doesn’t move from where he’s still standing in front of the bumper in a daze, Stark clears his throat.
“Right. Sorry.” Peter indulges, letting his fingertips drag lightly across the hood as he makes his way to the other side. He slides into the leather bucket seat with a huge grin. “This is so awesome.”

When he looks over at Stark, where he’s sitting in the driver’s seat of a supercar with his sunglasses on, he looks a hundred percent like the charismatic, influential, billionaire genius that’s starred on countless magazine covers. This moment ticks onto Peter’s quickly growing list of “Best Moments of My Life.”

“Safety first,” Stark says, completely oblivious to the fanboying happening in the passenger seat. “Buckle up and keep your hands and feet inside the vehicle at all times.” He waits until Peter’s seatbelt clicks home, then starts the car.

Peter’s too exhilarated to be embarrassed about the whoop he lets out when they peel out of the garage.

The Korean restaurant they pull up to is way more low-key than whatever steakhouse they’d gone to the day before. Peter doesn’t feel underdressed, for one, and the bright orange Saleen looks ostentatious parked outside.

“I know you did quite a number on breakfast this morning,” Stark says, sliding into a booth by the windows, “but even after witnessing the extent of your appetite I’m still in a state of disbelief. So I gotta ask: how hungry are you? On a scale of one to Jughead.” His curious brown eyes study Peter over the top of the clipboard he’s got in his hand.

“Ah...seven?”

An alarming amount of scribbling happens on the order form before Stark tears off the page when their waitress arrives. Peter only gets a glance as it’s handed over, but he sees over a third of the boxes checked off by the list of menu items.

Peter’s fingers twist into the cuffs of his sleeves while Stark digs through the small utensil drawer on the underside of the table.

“Hey, thank you,” Peter says suddenly.

“What?” Stark looks up, then curses as something clatters onto the floor. “You’re, uh, welcome? You don’t need to thank me for every meal, though,” he says distractedly. “You’re very polite, and I appreciate that, but if you say that everytime—”

Peter almost interrupts to clarify that he’s thanking Stark for what he’d told him under the bridge last night, as well as for giving him someplace safe to stay even after the entire…misunderstanding. It would be the right thing to do, he knows, but it’s certainly not a topic he really wants to get into right now. Or ever.

Mr. Stark may not be a Wesley, but he’s still an adult taking responsibility to help out some kid in a tight spot. He doesn’t want to hear about Peter’s problems, much less the sob story behind them.

“Right, sorry,” Peter says, not even sure if Stark’s finished talking.

He gives Peter a strange look but doesn’t mention anything further on the topic. Instead, as their table is slowly overtaken by seemingly endless side dishes, he says, “Just so we’re clear, you’re not under house arrest.”
Peter drops his slice of pickled radish. “Huh?”

“You’re not confined to the Tower, Peter,” Stark clarifies. “I know with...everything that happened last night,” and Peter freezes as the topic he’d just been wanting to avoid suddenly comes up, “and me, uh, being in your kitchen this morning, it may seem like I don’t trust you on your own. But that isn’t true. You can leave and go do whatever it is you hooligans do these days.”

“Oh, right,” Peter says, calming. “Thanks, Mr. Stark.”

He appreciates the thought but, after his initial apprehension, the entire morning had been amazing and he can’t really see himself leaving Stark’s workshop now that he has access to it. It’s a dream come true, and he’d be an idiot to squander it.

The first few servings of pork and beef arrive and the gentle sizzle of the tabletop grill fills the silence that’s fallen between them. For once it isn’t awkward and Peter busies himself with enjoying the food. He’s in the middle of shoving his third sesame leaf wrap in his mouth when Stark speaks up again.

“So, ah, hey,” he says, pausing when Peter stares at him with his cheeks puffed out like a chipmunk, “I know this is probably gonna sound extremely contradictory with what I just said, along with the fact we’ve been upgrading your arachnid-arsenal, but...I’ve been thinking. And I’ve got a favor to ask.”

Peter’s unsure whether to feel panicked or curious, so he settles on both. “A favor? Uh...sure. Okay. What’s up?”

“I need you to press pause on the whole Spider-Man thing—”

“What?!”

“Hey!” Stark’s hand comes up, the universal sign for ‘I know you’re freaking out but I need you to stop,’ “You didn’t let me finish. I knew this topic wasn’t gonna be a hit—”

“I appreciate everything you’ve done for me,” Peter interrupts (again), “I really do, but I’m not gonna stop going out as Spider-Man.”

“That’s not what I said—”

Peter narrows his eyes.

Okay, it was but—God, can we move this thing?” Stark pushes the exhaust hood hanging between them up and out of the way, giving them a clear view of each other. “What I meant by that is to just cool your jets with the late night crime fighting. Temporarily.”

And now the panic’s turned to confusion. Peter slumps back in his seat. “Why?”

“I know I can’t stop you from going out there and doing your thing — you made that abundantly clear last night. You’ve also got this stubbornly altruistic vibe that, frankly, is aggravatingly familiar—” Stark cuts himself off with a sigh. “I just...can you please refrain from punching armed robbers in the face until I make you something better than that ridiculous hoodie-and-mask combo you insist on wearing?”

The air feels electric as realization slowly dawns on Peter.

“You’re gonna make me a suit?” he breathes.
“If I can’t stop you from going out there I may as well help make you look good. And bulletproof.”

“I...I can’t—”

“Believe it? Neither can I.” Stark taps his chopsticks against the edge of his rice bowl in a nervous tic. “Some of those videos of you on the internet are pretty wild, kid. If making you a suit that helps keep you safe also keeps me from greying early, it’s a win-win.”

Peter’s ecstatic. “So have you—do you have any schematics for it already? Can I see them? I’ve got a few things — well, a lot, actually — that I can suggest. Like for the HUD I think it’d be cool if—”

“Whoa, slow your roll,” and now Stark’s grinning too, “Finish your food first, we can get into specs later.”

There’s a fraction of a second that Peter can’t help the frustrated, impatient noise he makes (which is not a whine). He quickly shovels rice in his mouth and hopes it’ll go unnoticed but, judging by the absolutely shit-eating grin on Stark’s face, it hadn’t. They return to their lunch, with Peter attempting to eat everything in front of him in record time.

Stark’s chopsticks parry Peter’s when he reaches for another slice of pork. “Pete, I gotta ask you to slow down — last thing we need is for Spider-Man to be taken out by a pig.”

With the knowledge of the suit as his motivation, Peter figures out and finalizes a new web mixture within hours after they get back to the workshop. It works like a dream, the tensile strength improved and the webbing weakening and breaking apart on its own after two hours.

The rest of the night is spent going through and granting Peter access to certain files on Stark’s servers. His own little slice of heaven is tethered to a joint folder, where their main projects and anything he wants Stark to look over can be stored.

As it turns out, Stark had started on the schematics just last night (and he feels both thrilled and embarrassed that Stark did it anyway after how rude he’d been). It’s bare bones, but there’s still so much information on it that Peter’s barely able to go over it all before he’s locked out and ushered upstairs for an extremely late dinner of cold pizza (“Any pizza is good pizza,” Stark quotes).

The next day is spent brainstorming ideas, and Peter has a lot of them. The workshop looks like some futuristic house of mirrors halfway through the morning with panel after panel of holo-screens drifting around. While he works, Peter also doodles some possible designs for the look of the suit. Stark happens to see them.

“What—are these legs?”

Peter swivels his stool around so fast he nearly unseats himself when his feet hit the floor to brake. One of the sketches is blown up to scale in the middle of the workshop.

“N—yes?” He grabs for the tablet when it begins to slide off his lap. “I mean, I'm Spider-Man, so I thought...they could be useful? Maybe make me climb faster, grab onto things. And they...they look cool.”

Stark continues to study the design. He isn’t laughing his ass off or tossing the file into the trash, much to Peter’s relief, but there’s an amused look on his face.
“You’ve never used a suit made by me before.”

“Can you...not make it with the legs?” Peter asks slowly.

“I’m gonna overlook that slight,” Stark says, offended. He gestures at the sketch, to the extra spidery limbs protruding from the back. “Baby steps, Parker, that’s all I’m saying. There’s gonna be a lotta tech crammed into this thing and you don’t need the added distraction of maneuvering four extra limbs.”

He decides to show Peter what he plans to make the suit out of, just so he has a better idea of what they’re working with. There’s another fanboy moment when Peter learns the material will be a blend between Captain America’s and Black Widow’s uniforms.

“You need the extra armor, seeing as you’re not quite up to snuff in hand-to-hand, but you’re also extremely...springy,” Stark explains.

The file name for the project is mysteriously changed to “underoos” after that.

Sometime later there’s a loud crash and the unmistakable sound of breaking glass. Stark crosses the workshop to shout at his ‘bots, leaving Peter where he’s perched gargoyle-style on a stool. A stylus is spinning between his fingers while he reads over some notes on the tablet and he’s so deeply engrossed he doesn’t hear when Stark returns.

“Here.”

It’s all the warning Peter gets before Stark slides something onto the table and purposely bumps his elbow with it. He stares at the sleek red laptop and the small black box next to it.

“What’s...what’s this?” he asks, suspicious.

“A laptop,” Stark says coolly. “Thought you could use a new one. Same with the phone.”

“You got me a phone?!” Peter snatches up the box. Inside is a brand new StarkPhone, a model he’s never seen before.

“It’s a prototype, not even on the market yet.”

Peter sets the box down on the table and stares at the shiny new tech sitting in front of him. The brief moment of excitement rapidly passes and guilt is quick to move in.

“Mr. Stark, I can’t accept—”

There’s a sigh. The look on Stark’s face is exasperated, like he’d been expecting this, but he quickly schools it into an expression of nonchalance.

“Yes, you can,” Stark replies. The slight furrow between his brows fades when he gets a good look at Peter. “Whatever guilt-tripping thing you’re doing to yourself right now, it needs to stop, alright? No feeling guilty about the billionaire giving you things. I know your laptop finally bit the dust — I heard its death cry from across the workshop today.”

There’s a slight uptick at the corner of Stark’s mouth when Peter winces at the memory. It’d been a surprisingly sad moment, seeing his trusty old laptop finally quit on him.

“I’m pretty sure that if it were here right now it’d tell you, with its final, dying clicks, that it was time for you to move on. And that?” He points to the phone. “You’d be doing me a favor using it. Consider yourself a beta tester.”
Tentatively, Peter reaches over and pulls the flashy phone from its padding. He can see the reflection of his face in its screen.

“Thank you,” Peter says quietly, a small smile on his face. “Again.”

There’s a soft intake of air, as if Stark’s about to say something, but it’s let out as a steady breath.

“You’re welcome, Peter.”

When they get back to the project, they begin to implement Peter’s notes into the schematic. Stark coaches and guides Peter toward answers of why or why not something will work, letting him figure out fixes without outright telling him what to do. It’s incredibly informative, and at times it’s overwhelming to the point where Peter feels completely out of his depth. But the excitement of working so closely with Stark, with wanting to impress him and not let him down, trumps any of the difficulties that may otherwise have made him want to quit if he were alone. Peter isn’t sure if he can really rank his experiences with Stark anymore, as every day that passes feels like the best day of his life.

And of course that’s why, the very next day, Peter nearly gives the man a heart attack.

“Where is it?”

“Second shelf, left side. I think.”

Peter looks up, the shelf in question a good ten feet off the floor.

This morning had Stark greeting Peter by sharing a eureka moment he’d apparently had in the middle of the night. He’d come up with a new design for Peter’s web-shooters, which mostly consisted of a facelift for the band and an updated layout for the spinneret. So, directly after breakfast, Stark had whisked them down to the workshop to begin work on it.

“You find it?” Stark asks, watching the 3D printer as it slowly builds the new telescoping band.

“Oh, yeah! Comin’ right up, Mr. Stark.”

Peter stares back up at the shelf where the mold for the spinneret casing supposedly is. With a single leap he’s up the wall, fingertips stuck to the surface as he peers onto the shelf. The mold’s mixed in with a few other abandoned pieces just out of arm’s reach.

It’s a little difficult to shuffle around the corners of the shelves; Peter has to bow his back and cling on with only a single fingertip in order to maneuver around them. He leans forward to grab it but it’s not enough. Before he can adjust his grip to try again, something jerks at his pants and he looks down.

Butterfingers lets out a distressed whirr, its claw clutching at his ankle.

“Quit it, Butters,” Peter hisses, swatting at the ‘bot. There’s another tug, more insistent, but Peter ignores it and returns his attention to the mold.

He tries to reach it again but he’s still not quite there, so with a huff he holds the corner of the shelf instead. He swings around and grabs the block of graphite. The shelf shifts and breaks free on his return swing.

There’s a single, heartstopping second when the shelf snaps that Peter’s brain goes through a hundred and one reasons why he’s an idiot. His yelp is drowned under the cacophony of metal
impacting the floor.

“Peter?!”

Stark’s across the workshop in a heartbeat. He tosses chunks of metal out of the way and grabs Peter’s shoulders to haul him upright.

“Oh, shit. Hey, look at me.” His hands are firm on Peter’s shoulders as he helps him keep his balance as the world spins.

“Ow.”

Peter feels a puff of air against his face when Stark lets out a breath. It takes some rapid blinking before his eyes finally focus, and all he sees is a dark mop of hair as Stark’s head hangs in relief.

“Christ, kid…”

“Sorry,” Peter says weakly, “that was pretty dumb. I’m okay though—”

“You’re fucking bleeding all over yourself,” Stark snaps, the faintest waver to his voice. His eyes flick up to Peter’s forehead where there’s an obvious gash judging by the pain he feels. “What the hell were you doing?!” And Peter knows he deserves it, but he really wishes Stark wouldn’t yell right now. “There’s a step ladder right over there. Do I need to Spider-proof this place? God, don’t talk, I don’t wanna hear it. And don’t move, either. There’s a first aid kit here somewhere. Hopefully you don’t need stitches—”

“I’ll be fine, Mr. Stark.” Peter jerks back at the withering glare that gets him, doing his best to cover up the wince when his brain pulses inside his skull at the movement. “Just give me ten minutes, I’ll be good as new.”

The hold on Peter’s shoulders loosens as Stark leans back, eyes narrowing warily. “Do you have a healing factor?”

Peter nods, and this time he can’t suppress his wince.

“Of course you do.”

He just catches the weary eye roll as Stark falls back to sit amongst the rubble of metal and splintered wood. There’s a long, slow exhalation before Stark looks up silently, rubbing a hand over his face and into his hair. His eyes flutter between the gash on Peter’s forehead and up to where the shelf once was.

In the quiet of the workshop Peter can hear Stark’s rapid heartbeat despite how still and collected he’s trying to be. The panic in his voice when he’d called Peter’s name was undeniable, the slight tremble to his free hand the only evidence it’s still pumping through his veins.

Now that the pain in Peter’s head has begun to fade, he feels absolutely humiliated. Not just because he broke the shelf and got blood all over the floor, but for doing something so completely stupid in the first place.

Peter swallows, then opens his mouth to apologize—

“No, stop. He’s a kid, not a car,” Tony says, scrambling to his feet and shoving Butterfingers away before it can press an oily rag to Peter’s head. “Shoo. Put that in the sink.” He sighs, then turns and holds out a hand. “Can you walk?”
“Oh. Yeah.” There’s a second of hesitation before Peter takes it. He doesn’t waver when he’s pulled to his feet and he can tell that puts Stark slightly at ease.

“Let’s head on up, you need a shower.”

In the elevator Peter gets to see what a mess he is. His hair’s matted with blood, nearly black with how much there is, and half his face is streaked with red. It’s slightly horrifying. If he were anybody else, he wouldn’t be standing and talking right now.

There’s a gentle grip on his elbow when they exit. Peter can’t meet Stark’s eyes when he turns around.

“Just a sec. It’s definitely a relief to know you can heal, but I’d still like to check.” Gentle hands brace against Peter’s forehead and temple and Stark’s fingers part his hair to get a good look at the wound. “Huh. Already closed,” and his voice is soft, not a trace of anger left. The hands drop and Peter vaguely sees Stark nod and motion to the hallway. “Go and shower. We’ll have lunch then head back to the workshop. Taking it easy for the rest of the day, though. We’ll just work on the schematics.”

“Yeah, okay.” Peter quickly escapes to his room.

And that’s what it is now, isn’t it? *His* room.

As he carefully peels off his bloody shirt and drops it on the floor of *his* bathroom, Peter wonders just when he started to refer to them this way.

It’s only been three days, but he’s gone from feeling like a stranger in a stranger’s home, to feeling comfortable in a familiar place. He hasn’t woken up thrashing in the sheets, wondering where he is, since that first morning. There’s no dawdling to leave his room or apprehension of seeing Stark in the kitchen with breakfast anymore, and at the end of the day Peter feels accomplished and happy instead of alone and anxious. And at the center of it all, of all these changes and emotions and comforts, is Mr. Stark.

Tony Stark. The wealthy, arrogant, narcissistic playboy — at least as the media loves to portray him.

But Peter knows better.

He remembers when he’d first seen Tony Stark. He was five years old, sitting on the living room floor as he built a replica of the Saturn V out of Legos. Uncle Ben had been watching the news when a segment on Stark came on, some report on a new benefit he was hosting that weekend. It’d been followed by a biography piece, highlighting his achievements and contributions relating to science and technology. When the first images of the interior of SI’s labs were shown, the rocket in Peter’s hands was immediately forgotten. He’d watched, enraptured, barely grasping onto and following what was being said, but loving it all just the same.

Peter had always enjoyed science and robotics, but after that single news report full of flashy clips and photos and vocabulary too complex for five-year-old Peter to understand, he knew he wanted that in his future.

Even with the goal of being a brilliant scientist or engineer, he never thought for a second, not in a million years, *that he’d ever get the chance to work side-by-side with the man himself.*

People can say what they want about Tony Stark but Peter knows better — always has, for the last ten years.
Once he’s finished with his shower he feels better inside and out; there’s no evidence of his cracked skull except for a rapidly fading bruise. The bloody shirt is tossed into the trash chute and Peter opens the only dresser drawer with anything in it. Inside is his last pair of ratty, torn jeans, and two equally ratty shirts. Next to them is the Stark Industries tee and sweats.

“Ah, there’s Humpty Dumpty. Food’s not here yet so we’ll need to…” Tony’s voice fades when Peter takes a seat next to him at the kitchen island. He leans back and gives Peter’s black ensemble his attention.

“Get you more clothes.”

“What?”

“Clothes. You need new ones. Especially now that you’ve bled all over, what, a third of what you have?”

Peter fidgets.

“Hey, what’d I say? No getting weird about it.” Tony turns back to his phone. “You can order what you want online, FRIDAY’ll handle the payments and shipping.” He pauses in his browsing and looks back at Peter — if he was wearing one of his many pairs of sunglasses, Peter’s sure he’d be peeking over the top of them with a reproachful leer. “FRI, make sure it’s all express.”

“You got it, Boss.”

Peter leans back against the counter and pulls at the hem of his SI shirt. “Are you sure? I mean, don’t you have more—”

“Yes, but do you really want to wear the same thing everyday? Everyone needs options. Besides, do you even have any pajamas? What’ve you been sleeping in? Actually y’know what, don’t answer that.”

“Ms. Vandermere from reception is heading up with the delivery.”

“Thanks, FRI. Alright, lunch then work. And your homework for tonight is to freshen up your wardrobe. Got it?”

“Yes, sir.” Peter grins at the glare that gets him.

Things go back to normal, for the most part.

It’s a little rocky at first. Peter swears Tony's gone into helicopter mode, constantly hovering by his side once they go back down to the workshop (which is conspicuous spotless, minus one shelf). The web-shooter Mark 3’s are put on hold, but despite the small tangle in their day they manage to knock out a good chunk of the schematics for Peter’s suit.

By the fourth day of their efforts, Tony's paired Peter up with FRIDAY. The UI runs him through possible scenarios he may face in order to see how he’ll utilize the current tech they’ve come up with, as well as seeing if there’s anything new he can think of that could be useful. It puts an interesting perspective on the whole project and the entire VR aspect of it is super sweet, but a part of Peter can’t help but think it may be a bit of busy work, too.

Tony’s spent most of the morning on the other side of the workshop at his desk, papers and folders littering every available surface around his computer. Peter tries not to linger on it too much; the guy’s got an entire company to deal with, after all.
“Hey, Pete.”

The current simulation FRIDAY’s generated involves a sinking ferry full of people. He’s already tried — and failed — twice to save everybody on board. So when it pauses at Tony’s call, Peter’s more than ready for a break.

“Yeah?” he asks, pulling the headset off. Dum-E grabs it from his hands with a happy titter.

“I, ah…” Tony’s distracted and doesn’t even bother to look up at Peter from his work. “There’s a thing I gotta go to. Tomorrow. Really important, apparently. Pepper just reminded me.”

There’s a pang in Peter’s chest but he ignores it. He nods, then remembers Tony won’t see it. “Okay. I know you’re busy. I’ll just work on the schematics tomorrow while you’re gone—”

“It’s in India.”

There’s the pang again, and Peter suddenly doesn’t know if Tony even heard him, his eyes still locked on to whatever’s so important on his desktop. A clear look of annoyance crosses Tony’s face. He finally tears his gaze away and meets Peter’s eyes across the room.

“Looks like it may be a week.”

The bottom drops out of Peter’s stomach, like the world’s come to a sudden, screeching halt.

Tony’s still looking at him and he wishes he had the headset to give his hands something to do. As if noticing his distress, Dum-E gently bumps Peter’s shoulder.

“Oh,” he says, spurred into replying, “okay.”

It doesn’t sound convincing at all to Peter, and it mustn’t to Tony either because he sets the papers down and gives Peter his full attention.

“Working on the schematics is a good idea, I can check on them while I’m over there. But don’t stay locked up in here for the next week, either.”

Tony stands then, his hand going to his back pocket as he makes his way over. From his wallet he pulls out a clear piece of plastic that’s edged with silver and streaked with blue, the SI logo in bold white across the middle.

“A keycard,” he explains when Peter simply stares at it. “Meant to give it to you a while ago, but kept forgetting since we’ve been so busy.” He finally takes it when Tony gives it a small shake. “FRIDAY pretty much runs the entire Tower and she’ll let you in to wherever you need to go, but this is just a precaution. Mostly for people who may want to see some ID.”

It’s smooth and feather-light in Peter’s hands. He runs his thumbs along the edges and flips it over. There’s a small gold chip embedded in the back.

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It’s smooth and feather-light in Peter’s hands. He runs his thumbs along the edges and flips it over. There’s a small gold chip embedded in the back.

“It’ll also give you access to my penthouse.” When Peter looks up, Tony’s eyes are intently studying a pen mark on his hand, his thumb rubbing at the blue ink. “Another failsafe. The landing deck’s up there, in case of a needed evacuation. Aliens came out of a wormhole and attacked New York five years ago so, y’know, I think it pays to be careful.”

Tony turns to head back but stops after two steps. He twists around to point a finger at Peter.

“And if an alien invasion or some other world-ending scenario happens while I’m gone, you get your ass out of here. Remember what we agreed on.” He gives a pointed jab in the air with his
“I thought you just said armed robbers.” Peter fights against a grin.

“Oh, you are a smart—consider this an addendum.”

“Okay, okay, Mr. Stark. No punching aliens in the face or getting involved in ultimate showdowns of ultimate destiny, I promise.”

Tony’s gone the next morning.

There’s no friendly teasing about Peter’s bedhead or new Avengers-themed pajamas when he walks out into the empty kitchen. There is breakfast, though, sitting on the island in a big white paper bag, and the sight only makes the hole that’s been sitting in his chest since yesterday worse. When he pulls out the containers of chocolate chip Belgian waffles, mixed fruit, and a bottle of maple syrup, he realizes what the dreadful feeling is.

He misses Tony.

He’d quickly become a constant in Peter’s life. The company and routine of everything the past few days was familiar and comforting, especially after a long month of being alone. The loneliness was something Peter thought he’d gotten used to, something he deserved.

Now he isn’t sure if he can go through it again for seven days.

The huge common area does nothing to help alleviate the grim situation. Peter dumps the fruit on his waffles, floods the bottom of the box with syrup, and carries his nutritionist’s nightmare of a breakfast to the elevator.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Parker. You’re barred from the workshop during Mr. Stark’s absence due to safety concerns.” FRIDAY’s tone is apologetic.

“Oh.”

Seven days without Tony, and Peter can’t even go to the one place that could help distract him from everything. He stands there in the middle of the entrance, unsure of what to do.

The fork in Peter’s mouth clicks painfully against his teeth when the TV flicks on, causing him to start. It’s still paused on the episode of Westworld he and Tony had been watching two nights ago, something Peter had suggested when nothing on TV caught their interest. At first Tony thought he’d meant the old movie from the ’70s — but when Peter explained there was a show, it was agreed they’d watch the original first.

It’d been...interesting. Peter’s seen plenty of old movies before, so the campy acting and bad effects were taken in stride, but the story didn’t even come close to the few episodes he’d seen of the show. So, when the screen blacked out on Peter Martin’s exhausted, vexed face, he’d been excited to see how Tony would react to the reboot.

They hadn’t even gotten twenty minutes into the first episode before his excitement had become exasperation.

Tony launches himself across the couch, his plate of ravioli left to balance precariously on the armrest, and presses a hand over Peter’s eyes.

“What the hell, kid? Nudity? Are you old enough to watch this?”
“Wh—are you serious right now?”

“I’m just worried about your virgin eyes. Maybe we should put on Minions,” and Tony begins to laugh, “I’m pretty sure it’s on Netflix.”

Peter slaps his hand away and musters up a glare. “I know for a fact we’d both suffer through that—hey!”

“Alright, fine,” Tony says around a mouthful of stolen bruschetta. He flops back onto his side of the couch and props his feet up on the coffee table. “But I’m drawing the line at hanky-panky. FRI?”

“The Parental Control protocol is in effect.”

“Really—”

“Nope! Nothin’ outta you. My foot—” Tony stomps a socked foot onto the rug, “—is down.”

“—mething else on? Mr. Parker?”

“What? Sorry.”

“Back to the Future is currently playing. Would you like to watch it while you eat breakfast?” FRIDAY asks, endlessly patient.

Peter looks down at his waffles, which have begun to edge into the ‘unforgivably soggy’ territory, and sighs.

“Yeah, that’d be great. Thanks.”

Marty still hasn’t met up with Doc at the mall before the waffles are inedible mush. He picks at some of the fruit but his appetite’s long gone.

It’s incredibly tempting to stay in pajamas all day, but Peter knows being lazy will lead to wallowing, and the rest of the day will become a depressing waste. So he goes back to his room and changes into one of his many pairs of new jeans (FRIDAY had upped the order to two pairs of everything Peter had chosen) and a “Ah: The Element of Surprise” tee before padding back out to the common room in his socks.

The movie’s still playing but he can’t be bothered to pay attention. He heads for the balcony, the bright sunlight more inviting than the huge, empty couch. The fresh air is surprisingly invigorating and the Manhattan traffic below is a gentle hum at the top of the world. At the change of surroundings, high up and free like Peter’s used to during his patrols, his mood lightens just the slightest. He latches onto the feeling.

“It’s just seven days,” he thinks, “I can use that time to work on the suit.”

Peter lays out on one of the deck chairs in the sun, phone in hand. It has full access to the server and his files and he plans to type up more notes and ideas before going back inside to do the more involved work. But the moment the screen unlocks he finds himself clicking on the icon for his contacts instead. He stares at the three names listed there.

The day he’d gotten it, Tony Stark and Happy Hogan were already in the phonebook. The knowledge that Peter had Tony’s personal number made him grin like an idiot, but it didn’t take long for his fingers to go on autopilot and he’d added another number to his phone.
Ned Leed’s name stares back at him, his thumb hovering over the little phone icon next to the number.

Peter should call. He really, really should call his best friend and let him know he’s alright. The last time they'd seen each other was when Peter had crawled through Ned’s bedroom window in the middle of the night, half out of his mind and covered in blood and dirt. Ned had only tried to help him, so relieved to know Peter was alive, and Peter had fought and yelled at him before disappearing for a second time.

It was an asshole move. It was unfair, and Ned didn't deserve it.

Peter locks his phone and drops it onto his lap.

The entire reason any of this happened — Peter’s life ending, Ned’s worry, Tony’s generosity — was because of...of...

I need to get those weapons off the streets, before somebody else gets hurt.

He’s off the chair and marching back inside with a renewed determination. Peter flits around his room, snatching up his laptop and a spare StarkPad, one of his shoes tumbling under the bed in his flurry of motion. When he finally sits down in the high backed rolling chair in his writing room, the desk looks like a command center straight out of a spy movie.

“Hey FRIDAY, can you scan the news stations for any reports related to alien weapons? Robberies, explosions, injuries — from the last five days.”

“Of course, Mr. Parker.”

“Thanks — Peter’s fine, by the way — and keep it muted unless something comes up, please.”

The TV clicks on and begins to flash between channels. Peter opens his laptop and gets to work.

He hunts and studies and searches straight until nightfall, stopping only at FRIDAY’s insistence to eat when lunch and dinner roll around. There’s almost the entirety of a gutted notebook strewn about his desk and on the nearby floor once it starts to get dark out, the pages covered in dates and names and scribbled maps. FRIDAY scans and compiles it all into a single project file to be saved in Peter’s private folder on the server.

The chicken he’s been picking at has long since gone cold when the laptop’s shut with a definitive snap. All that research resulted in pretty much nothing helpful, the only progress being the map he’d put together with FRIDAY’s help. It depicts every area an incident or sale has occurred in the past year that may be related to the alien weapons, with evidence suggesting it’s been happening for even longer. It seems to have become more prominent recently, especially in the last month and a half. Peter isn’t sure how it’s been going on so long without gaining more attention or becoming a major concern on anybody’s radar, but that thought, along with the dead end he’s found himself at, has only succeeded in making him angry.

He looks out the windows to the twinkling lights of Queens’ skyline, and pushes away from the desk.

“Peter, are you planning on going out tonight?” FRIDAY asks when he enters his changing room. “Should I contact Happy so he can drive you?”

For now Peter ignores her, opening drawers and closets until he finds where he’s stashed his old clothes. He changes into them and tears his spare shirt in half along the bottom.
“Peter?”

“No, it’s alright,” he finally answers, “I’m not gonna need a ride.”

It isn’t until Peter slides on his web-shooters, the pair he and Tony had made together, that he slows down long enough to really think about what he’s doing.

“I need you to press pause on the whole Spider-Man thing.”

Tony wasn’t banning Peter from going on patrols, wasn’t stopping him from being Spider-Man. He’d built Peter new gear, was currently building him a new suit, and has been training him to be a real superhero. He’s helping Peter become even better, and the only thing he asked for in return was for Peter to wait.

And Peter had promised him.

“I’m so sorry about what happened to May—”

He takes a shaky breath and closes his eyes tight.

I’m sorry, Tony.

When the doors to the balcony open at his push and a cool breeze brushes against his face, Peter stands in the threshold, surprised.

“You’re not gonna lock me in?”

“There aren’t any protocols in place to keep you confined to the Tower. Mr. Stark made it clear you’re not to be kept here against your will,” FRIDAY says, soft and resigned.

“And will you tell him? That I went out?”

“He’ll only learn about this if he specifically asks, otherwise it won’t be brought up. I’m no snitch.”

Peter looks out across the river, then ties the torn shirt over his nose and mouth. “I’ll be back in time for breakfast, FRI.”

When FRIDAY speaks next, her tone is cheeky.

“You’re a real chancer, Mr. Parker.”

Two hours into his patrol and he’s had about as much luck as at the Tower. Besides a few petty crimes that were quickly foiled, there hasn’t been much else.

Peter’s lack of success could be partially attributed to the fact that, instead of heading east toward Queens like he’d originally planned, he’d gone north. It hadn’t even occurred to him at the time, as if Queensboro Bridge was some sort of barrier that had subtly repelled him away when he neared. So it was around the time when the trees became more abundant and the apartment buildings turned into swanky two story homes with pools that he’d become aware he’d swung all the way to Riverdale.

“Well this was a waste of time.”

Peter splayed out on a rooftop, staring up at the night sky where the stars are actually visible for once. Based on the data from the map he and FRIDAY had made, this area had the lowest
concentration of alien weapon sales and related crimes. The likelihood of him running into anybody with a connection to the weapon’s ring was slim to none.

Just as he settles on the decision to head back, there’s a low rumble. The treetops shiver and shake.

“What the hell?” Peter flips up onto his feet and stares at the plume of smoke wisping away.

It only takes ten minutes for him to find the spot, a second explosion helping to pinpoint the location. Peter’s heart drums against his ribcage as he hangs upside down from an old derelict bridge, watching three men talk by the open back of a white van. The inside’s full of crazy weaponized tech and his blood runs cold at the sight.

“You decide what you want?” the off-brand Tom Hardy asks with a grin. He oozes pent-up energy and Peter immediately doesn’t like him.

The guy in the striped tee shuffles nervously. “Listen, I just need somethin’ to stick up somebody. I’m not tryin’ to shoot them back in time.”

“Alright, alright. Just a sec.” Tom digs around the piles of chrome and metal, muttering to himself while his partner saunters up to the buyer.

“Look,” he says, calm and collected, “times are changin’ and we’re the only ones sellin’ these high tech weapons—”

“Yeah, but, really? Black hole grenades? Railguns?” Stripes asks, cutting short what was probably supposed to be a convincing sales pitch. He shakes his head and rubs the back of his neck with a hand. “The hell kinda people are actually buyin’ this stuff?”

Peter’s relieved to hear that at least one person has some sense — but one out of three still isn’t favorable odds.

“Ha!” Tom crows and turns around with a massive robotic arm in his hands. It looks wicked, and in any other circumstance Peter would have thought it was awesome. “You’ll like this one — it’s a reclaimed Sub-Ultron arm.” Yeah, definitely not awesome. “Check it out.” He turns to the rusting skeleton of a broken down car, deaf to his partner’s protests when he fires the thing.

There’s an explosion of grey smoke and blue fire, lightning crackling up into the sky. Tom cackles like he’s just set off a firework instead of shooting a car out of existence.

Peter’s heart races and palms begin to sweat as he stares at the scorched patch of dirt.

“Fuck, man! What’d I say? This shit’s crazy, I’m outta here.” Stripes is obviously spooked as he backs away toward his car.

Tom’s mood visibly darkens. “Seriously? We came all the way out here for you,” he growls, taking a step forward. The gun in his hands is still hot, smoke snaking between chrome fingers like fangs.

“Chill out, Jackson. We’ll find someone else.”

“You really that much of a pussy?” Tom — Jackson says, still watching Stripes. His grip tightens on the gun.

Peter doesn’t hesitate, doesn’t want to trust the guy’s self control, and drops from his perch to land on the ground in a crouch.
“Hey, Jayne Cobb! There’s no need for name calling.”

“The hell?” Jackson spins, his weapon now aimed at Peter.

His partner pulls a (thankfully normal) handgun and (not so thankfully) points it at their ex-buyer. “You set us up?”

“Hey!” Peter stands, the motion drawing their attention. “Hey, c’mon! If you’re gonna shoot at somebody, shoot at me!”

The instant there’s movement he webs away the handgun and shoots a glob at Jackson’s face. Stripes makes a run for it but Peter webs his hand to the roof of his car.

“Sorry! You’re in trouble, too,” Peter says at the indignant look he gets. There’s a squeal of tires as the van speeds away. “Hold on, don’t go anywhere. I’ll be right back.” He webs onto the open doors of the fleeing van before it can disappear around the trees.

Jackson’s curled up in the back, hands grabbing at the webbing over his eyes. “The fuck is this shit?!?”

“You’ve really got a mouth on you, dude,” Peter says. He jerks away when a boot flies at his face. It misses and hits the door, causing it to swing back open with him still on it. “Hey!”

Jackson’s cursing up a storm. There’s another squeal of tires as the van makes a turn and Peter leans in with it, the door slamming shut with a bang. He peeks around the edge when the swearing stops and is greeted with the glowing purple barrel of a gun.

“Fuck you!” Jackson snarls.

The gun fires, going wide and blasting a hole right through the top hinge of the door. The heat from the shot is intense, Peter gasping and ducking as he feels it against his face even from a good foot away. With a groan the door peels back and he struggles to crawl onto the inside of it just as it bounces against the asphalt, sparks flying.

“Holy shit!” There’s a whine as the gun charges up again. “You’re gonna kill somebody! Cut it out!”

“You shouldn’t have stuck your nose in where it doesn’t belong, freak.”

There’s a familiar tingle at the back of Peter’s neck. He webs the gun and yanks it down and to the side right as it fires. It doesn’t hit him or any of the houses, but there’s a new pothole in the impeccably paved street.

The van swerves again and the last hinge holding the door to the melting frame pops free. The air’s knocked out of Peter’s lungs when it hits the road and his chin impacts hard against the corner, but he isn’t going to let them get away. He webs onto the bumper, yelping as he’s jerked forward behind the van. It’s swerving and speeding and making it impossible to get his bearings, but just as he’s about to fire a second web to try and steady himself, there’s a sudden painful burn on his thigh and he looks down.

The leg of his jeans is completely shredded, the skin bleeding and raw where it’s dragging along the asphalt. He bites into his lip and looks back to see Jackson still struggling with the webbing over his eyes. Ignoring the pain, Peter tries to pull himself forward but the van swings tight around a corner and sends him flying into a brick mailbox.

It feels like only a second’s passed when he manages to push himself upright, but he looks around
and the van’s long gone.

“Shit.”

Peter tries to stand and a sharp pain lances his side and his leg feels like it’s on fire.

“Shit.”

He collapses against the cool, damp grass with a pathetic whine.

When the pain dulls enough to where every movement isn’t excruciating, Peter struggles back onto his feet and slowly makes his way to the old bridge. It’s a long, limping walk, but when he emerges around the trees and wide eyes stare at him from over the top of a car, he’s able to put his full weight on his leg and take deeper breaths without wheezing.

Stripes stares at his mangled leg. “Yo.”

“Hey,” Peter’s voice is loud enough to get the guy to look at his face instead of the bloody mess that’s his lower half, “who were those guys?”

“I dunno.”

Peter glares. “You were gonna buy crazy weapons from them and you’re really gonna lie to my face?” he snaps. “You gotta know who they are, how to contact them. So spill.”

Stripes tugs at his trapped hand without looking away from Peter. “Okay, okay,” he says, holding up his free hand when he realizes he still can’t get away, “I don’t know names or nothin’, but I know they’re a crew. Organized.”

The guy’s nervousness freezes Peter in his tracks — he didn’t even know he’d been closing the distance. He takes a breath and wills himself to calm down.

“Anything else?”

“Not really,” he says, settling now that Peter’s no longer advancing. “But uh, I used to work with a dude who buys from them all the time — he set up this meet, not me — they do commission work for gangs and sell the extras to whoever’s willing to buy.”

“To criminals like you?” Peter can’t help but jab.

“Hey.” Stripes’ eyes narrow and shoulders tighten like he resents the statement, but then he sighs. “Look, after seein’ that shit in person tonight, I don’t want it on the streets. I got a nephew who live around here.” He looks over his shoulder to where the car used to be, then back to Peter. “That thing you said when you first showed up was pretty ballsy. I ‘ppreciate it.”

“You’re welcome.” Peter’s caught off guard by the show of gratitude. He clears his throat. “So, anything else you can tell me?”

Stripes shrugs. “Not really,” and he actually seems sorry about the fact. ”They’re pretty good at layin’ low. All’s I know is they got a boss who’s a complete psychopath and dresses like a demon. He’s even creepier and more dangerous than the rest of ‘em.”

Peter stills, watching him expectantly. “You know his name?”

“Everybody on the streets calls him the Vulture.”
I know in HC it says there's ten years after the Battle of New York, but that time skip makes no sense so I'm electing to ignore it. It's five years instead here, making Peter ten-years-old at the Battle and eight-years-old when Tony saves him at the Expo in IM2.

Next chapter is Peter all by his lonesome. What sorta trouble is he gonna get up to? Who knows! But I'll tell you, FRIDAY isn't happy that Peter broke his promise to Tony.

She's not happy at all.
The walk back to the Tower is daunting.

Peter limps through Riverdale while sticking to the shadows as best he can. It’s late, he’s tired, and making camp somewhere for the night is tempting. He’s slept in empty buildings or hidden in plain sight on the streets plenty of times, but when he remembers his warm, fluffy cloud of a bed waiting for him at the Tower, it’s enough to push him on.

It could perhaps, possibly, maybe also be guilt that’s driving him to get back as soon as possible.

Tony had asked something of him, a simple request to follow in wake of all his generosity, and he hadn’t listened.

The familiar feeling of regret rears its ugly head. But he’s suffering enough as is so, instead, Peter thinks about the progress he’s finally made in locating the maker of the weapons.

He may have lost the sellers, gotten horrifically maimed in the process, and now has to walk nearly twelve miles back to the Tower (possibly in the rain if the cloudy sky is any indication), but he’s got a name for the leader of the weapon’s ring — and an informant.

Aaron, Peter learned his name was, had been more than happy to give up everything he knew. Which, really, hadn’t been much besides the Vulture’s alias. It’d taken some prodding and guilt tripping (and the fact that Aaron was at his mercy for two hours) that had finally made the guy cave into helping him.

“No no no no, come fix this now.”

“No way. You deserve it — you’re a criminal.”

“Two hours?” Aaron says, any trace of his earlier unease gone. “C’mon, I ain’t waitin’ that long. Don’t you have a bedtime or somethin’?”

“What—”

“I know what a kid sound like.”

“I’m not a kid!” Peter exclaims, voice cracking.

Aaron stares at him. “I’m real uncomfortable with the idea of helping a fourteen-year-old hunt down a crime boss.”

“I’m fif—” Peter cuts himself off with an aggravated groan, rolling his head back on his shoulders.

Okay, he needs to approach this differently.

Even without a running start Peter easily leaps the eight feet that separate them. There’s even a flip in midair before he lands in a crouch on the roof of the car. It has the desired effect of making Aaron stare up at him in surprise — and maybe a little bit of awe, if Peter squints.
“Look. These guy’s’ve been running around the city selling these weapons for years. People have died...and nobody’s tried stopping them. Until me.” He leans back slightly when Aaron’s expression shifts just the slightest, and hopes he’s changing his mind. “I can handle myself, and I’m gonna keep hunting this Vulture guy even if you don’t decide to help me. But if you do, I can stop him before anybody else gets hurt.”

There’s a long-suffering sigh. “Alright. Fine.”

Peter hops from the roof of the car, masking the twinge of pain in his injured leg by bouncing on the balls of his feet when he lands. “Thanks, man.”

“Yeah, yeah.” He leans awkwardly against the car with his hand still stuck to the roof. “Jus’ don’t get yourself killed.”

Peter nods. “So uh...” He swings his arms at his sides. “Do you, um...can I have your phone number?”

There’s a quirked brow and the twitch of a smile, then Aaron says, “Yeah, sure. Where your phone at?”

“Uh—” He left it at the Tower but pats his pockets for show. “Don’t have it. You got a pen and paper?”

Aaron’s full on grinning now. “You even old enough to have a phone?” he asks, and laughs at Peter’s protests. “In the glovebox.”

“Thanks.” Peter crosses to the other side of the car and pulls on the handle. It doesn’t open. “Hey—”

“It gets stuck sometimes. You gotta pull hard—” Peter yanks but it still doesn’t budge, “—try pullin’ up a lil at the same time—no no, other way—”

Peter stares down at the crumpled piece of paper in his hand where Aaron’s number is scribbled. Even though he no longer tangles with his old crew, he still keeps in contact with the boss and said he’d update Peter if anything came up.

There’s the unmistakable hiss and groan of an old city bus. Peter pushes himself from the brick wall he’s been leaning against and limps to the curb. The glowing sign for the late night bus from Riverdale to Midtown is like a beacon and he wastes no time climbing up a nearby tree to wait for it to pass below. He has a great view of the cloudy night sky for the next hour.

Somewhere along the way Peter must have dozed off, because the Chrysler Building comes into view and he jumps up with a start. When he’s webbed himself into an alley near the ‘Tower, he can’t help but groan at the idea of climbing to the top. He’s nearly tempted to just walk in and take the elevator but there’s no way he can pass anybody in the lobby in his current state — Tony would definitely hear about it.

He starts climbing.

It’s agonizing and takes forever and Peter doesn’t understand how so many people can still be working at whatever absurd hour it currently is. He takes detours around lit windows, just in case anybody inside realizes the beaten and bloody figure crawling by is, in fact, a real person and not just a figment of their sleep deprived and caffeine-crazed mind.

The smooth, curving surface of the Tower means there aren’t any places for him to rest. His arms are shaking and his leg is throbbing and he’s both sweaty and hot but shivering and cold. All Peter
can do is cling on for dear life and pray he doesn’t blow away on a particularly strong breeze. Around the seventy-fifth floor he takes a breather with his forehead pressed against the glass.

“This sucks.”

By the time he finally makes it, his body is burning and aching and certain extremities are going numb. He can’t do much more except allow himself to melt over the railing onto the balcony like he’s boneless.

“Peter, welcome back,” FRIDAY’s disembodied voice greets.

He rolls on his side to face where he thinks her voice is coming from, then wonders if he can roll all the way inside to the couch.

“Told...told you I’d be back before breakfast,” he replies weakly.

“Yes.”

There’s a dragging silence. Peter imagines that, if the UI were able, she’d be giving him a displeased look.

“You’re hurt.”

“No!” He shoots up straight, wincing as both his back and stomach muscles burn at the sudden movement. Peter presses a hand against the glass divider of the balcony to help keep himself upright. “I mean, maybe, but it’s definitely better than it looks.”

There’s another pregnant pause.

“You have three cracked ribs.”

“And I’ll have no cracked ribs come sunrise.”

As if to prove he’s perfectly fine, he wraps his hands around the railing and hoists himself up. He nearly keels over the side of it.

There’s no reply, but the doors open automatically when Peter finally drags himself inside. The lights are dim, leading the way down the hall and to his room like a runway. The water’s already running when he reaches the bathroom and as he undresses on his way to the shower he avoids the mirror, not needing to confirm that he probably looks like roadkill.

The hot water is both amazing and slightly painful, making Peter’s body feel like jelly. He has to sit down on the bench in the shower to avoid oozing onto the floor where he’s sure he’d never be able to get up from again. It’s more of a rinse than anything, just long enough to scrub the blood off his leg and side, and he resolutely ignores the dark tint to the water as it spirals down the drain.

His clothes are trashed (with a brief second of panic where he’s hanging halfway down the chute for the folded piece of paper still in his pocket) and there’s only enough effort made to put on an oversized shirt and underwear as he shuffles to bed and throws himself on it. It’s just as fluffy and soft as he’d fantasized about the entire ride back. He moans as he slowly sinks into the mattress.

The last thing Peter does is roll himself into a burrito before passing out.

“It’s Friday, Friday, gotta get down on Friday—”
Peter tumbles from the bed with a cry. Thankfully the tangled duvet cushions the fall but it just as traitorously keeps all his limbs trapped.


“What the hell?” He’s halfway free from his mummification as he crawls along the carpet blindly. “FRIDAY?” he shouts.

“Oh, good morning Peter, you’re awake.” The music softens to a tolerable level when FRIDAY’s voice merrily greets him. “It’s a beautiful day outside. The current temperature is seventy-three degrees with no cloud cover.”

Peter’s propped up on his elbows, blinking at the bright blue sky outside. “What—”

“Would you like me to put in an order for an early lunch? You missed breakfast so you must be hungry, especially after your late night activities.”

At her tone, Peter stills.

FRIDAY’s holding a grudge against him...on behalf of Tony.

He isn’t sure whether to be amused or terrified at that.

The volume of the music slowly increases in the growing silence and Peter snaps up to sit. “No! Um, not—not yet,” he answers, wiggling the rest of the way free.

“It’s ten forty-eight this lovely Friday morning,” the UI states purposefully.

“I’ll eat, I just...” Peter tugs at the hem of his shirt self-consciously — he’d completely forgotten he hadn’t bothered putting on pants before going to bed. A moment’s spared to check his leg and he’s relieved to see there isn’t a trace of the road rash he’d suffered the night before. But he feels gross, his hair matted and a little smelly due to him falling asleep with it still wet. “I need to shower.”

FRIDAY doesn’t reply but the music finally and thankfully turns off.

Later, clean and fully dressed, FRIDAY asks again if he’d like to order anything to eat. He peers around at the big, empty common room, his eyes falling on the kitchen island where breakfast had been waiting yesterday morning.

“Nah,” he says, making his way toward the elevator, “I think I’m gonna walk and get something since it’s so nice out.” Peter slows at the judging silence that follows and sighs. “I promise I’m just going out to eat. No Spidey-business today, okay?”

“Your words only hold as much merit as your honesty, Peter.”

He gapes up at the ceiling.

“Please be safe.” The elevator door opens and stays that way until Peter finally steps inside.

Even though he’s completely alone, the entire ride down is tense. The situation only becomes more stressful once Peter begins to cross to the front doors, having to pass a security desk and reception on the way. There aren’t any comments or murmurs he can overhear but he knows there are countless eyes watching him as he exits an obviously private section of the lobby. In his pocket he grips the keycard, the edges digging into his hand.
The glass doors open with a hum and Peter’s world depressurizes. He instantly feels more at ease as he steps out onto the sidewalk, the crowd around him acting as a cover which he quickly welcomes.

For the past few days he’s been in his own little world — Tony made it easy to forget everything outside the Tower. Peter’s sure that, if Tony hadn’t left, he would’ve been more than happy to keep it that way. It was a distraction. Maybe a needed one, but finally being out in the real world again makes him think about the fact it’s something that won’t last forever, despite how much he wishes it would.

It also makes him realize that isolating himself really isn’t the best answer to anything.

Weekdays aren’t when Peter normally comes to this soup kitchen. It feels a little strange, walking into a place he knows without recognizing any of the people inside. The person at the door is new, he thinks, and he gives them a friendly wave and hello when he passes. He doesn’t know the people behind the foodline either, and so he heads to his usual table.

*Maybe her schedule’s changed,* Peter thinks as the minutes pass and he still hasn’t seen a familiar flash of auburn hair. *She’s started that new class, so she might not even be here.*

Just like when he’d been crossing the lobby in the Tower, he feels more out of place the longer he sits there.

He shouldn’t have come. He has a place to stay, work to keep him busy, and all the amenities anybody could ever want. He should be happy and content at the Tower, where all his whims can be fulfilled with a simple voice command.

Except that, even with all its marvels and technology and advancements, it’s nothing more than a looming skeleton made of metal and glass. It’s completely empty without Tony there.

Peter can deny it all he wants, but being alone is a feeling he can’t stand anymore.

The table begins to fill as he continues to wait. He fidgets, but just as he comes to the decision to leave there’s a familiar presence at his back.

“Nathan?”

Relief washes over him. He swings his legs over the bench and sees Marissa staring down at him, brows raised in curiosity and disbelief, almost like she doesn’t recognize him.

“Hi,” Peter greets, offering a tentative smile.

A huge grin crosses her face. “Wow, lookit you! You’re lookin’ real handsome, science guy.” Marissa gently tugs at the shoulder of his shirt, eying the science pun that decorates the front. She settles beside him on the bench and it’s obvious she’s brimming with questions with the way she’s looking at him.

Peter tenses, preparing himself for an onslaught, but instead she says, “It’s really good to see you.”

“That’s...not what he was expecting. His excuses and deflections die on his tongue.

“You, too. I’m glad you’re here today,” he says quietly, suddenly shy about the admission. “I was starting to think you had class or something.”

“Nah.” She waves a dismissive hand in the air. “I’m only busy Fridays if I’ve got lab, which is
every other week. So I’m all yours,” she says with a flutter of her eyelashes. He can’t help but laugh.

“How’s school going, anyway?” he asks in an attempt to latch onto the topic — for the time being he really doesn’t want to address the elephant in the room.

Marissa plays along. In a completely relatable and dramatic show, she settles her elbows on her knees and buries her face in her hands. A low, exaggerated groan escapes between her fingers.

Peter bites his lip as he grins. “New semester that bad?”

“Yes.” She rolls her head so she can see him, her cheek resting on an open palm. “I made the terrible, terrible mistake of getting all my core classes outta the way last year. Now I’m stuck with the specialty courses and they are kicking. My. Ass.” Despite her insistence that she’s miserable, there’s a tiny smile curling the corners of her lips.

“Well,” and he mirrors her pose, which earns him a snort, “you know I’m always willing to help out with your STEM classes.”

“You’re an angel,” she coos. “You saved me with my first chem exam. That study guide you made was amazing. So I just wanna say, on behalf of my sanity and GPA: thank you. Again.”

“It’s no problem,” Peter insists. And then, before he can think better of it, “I could give you my number.” His eyes grow wide, as if the offer hadn’t just come out of his own mouth. “I mean, u—um...so you can text me. When you’ve got questions—” and now she’s staring and he’s panicking, “—’cause, uh, I’m not sure I’ll be coming here anymore.”

Peter resists the urge to bolt.

“That would be awesome,” Marissa says, as if Peter showing up in brand new clothes and having a phone isn’t huge news. “But you know,” and she drags out the word playfully, “if you do that I’m also gonna send you dumb videos and memes I find. At all hours. It’s one of the conditions you agree to by giving me your number.”

He shares a grin with her, shifting around on the bench so his legs are crossed. “You say that like I’m not gonna do the exact same thing.”

“Then it’s a done deal, my good sir.” She holds out her phone then, and when Peter grabs it she gives it two shakes before letting go.

“You have no idea what you’re getting into,” he challenges, typing in his number.

When it comes time to put in a name, Peter hesitates.

‘Nathan’ was what had slipped out the first time somebody had asked for his name when he started living on the streets. It wasn’t premeditated, but ever since then it’s what Peter’s taken to introducing himself as to the people who aren’t afraid to talk to some grungy, homeless teenager. Just like how Spider-Man is a mask he wears when he patrols the streets at night, Nathan is a mask he wears for all the same reasons during the day — it’s a way for him to keep his life separate and safe from strangers.

It’s simple. It’s easy.

But Marissa isn’t a stranger.

When she approached him that first day he’d prepared himself for the usual: volunteers flocking to
him to poke and prod with questions, probably because he looked so young. But instead she’d introduced herself, explained a little about the soup kitchen and how it worked, and let him know he could talk to her if he had any questions. Before she left to go greet somebody else, she’d complimented Peter on his shirt (that day he’d been wearing his “Hippopotenuse” tee).

It’d been surprising. And pleasant. It’d been the first real, non-panic-inducing interaction he’d had with another person since he’d run away.

From there it was an easy friendship. She was funny and optimistic and could easily carry the conversation on his worse days where he didn’t want to talk but still wanted the company.

He knows all about Marissa — about her family (like her foster kids Robin and Ryan), her worries about wasting her wife’s GI Bill (Gabrielle had retired from the Army), her major (she wants to become a physical therapist), even what her favorite dessert is (matcha macarons).

She doesn’t even know his real name.

But Peter’s not ready to remove that mask. Not yet.

“Okay. Here.” He hands back her phone. “Just text or send a pic of whatever you’re working on, I promise I’m better than Google.”

“You’re a lifesaver, squirt,” she says with a grin. Then she looks away and scrolls through something on her phone, pointedly avoiding his eyes when she says, “Should we take a selfie? So I got something to remember you by.”

It’s a loaded question disguised as something small, just in case Peter wants to brush it off. But he doesn’t, not with her.

“I’m actually staying somewhere nearby,” he blurts.

She looks up then, phone forgotten by her side. The hopeful look in her eyes speak volumes and suddenly he can’t stop talking.

“A...friend is helping me out. I’ve got food, a bed, new clothes, all of it. That’s, um, why I won’t need to come here anymore. But I don’t...I don’t wanna stop talking to you.” He looks away and picks at the hem of his pants. “They’re helping me get back on my feet. I’m still, um, figuring things out, but I’m doing better. And I just wanna say thank you. For...y’know, everything.”

“You’re very welcome.” Her voice is soft and there’s a lilt to it that makes him look up. His breath catches in his throat when he sees the way her eyes are shining, a huge smile on her face. “Oh, Nathan. I’m so happy for you.”

She moves, her body tilting forward like she’s going to hug him, but then she seems to think better of it and stops. Peter can’t help but feel crushingly disappointed. She reaches out to place a hand on top of his instead. It’s familiar, comfortable, especially when her fingers squeeze his and he brushes his thumb over the back of her hand.

When the silence grows Marissa squeezes his hand again. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” And if his voice cracks she doesn’t comment.

But the words are true. He’s okay.

Peter pulls his hand away to rub at his face and clears his throat. “Um, I think I’m gonna head out. I still gotta eat lunch.”
“Yeah, of course. You sure you don’t want something here? It’s okay.”

“Nah. I’m really feeling a hotdog, I think,” he says with a laugh. It comes out clear and so he deems himself composed enough to walk back out through the crowd. “Don’t forget to text.”

“What do you think I’m doing?” Marissa brandishes her phone, a devilish grin on her face. “I’ll see you when I see you, Nate.”

“Later, Marissa.”

The second Peter steps out the doors, his phone blips.

???: Boo

Peter: New phone, who dis?

???: OMG! I can’t believe I judged that up. Guess it’s 1-0

Peter: You’re up against a champ, I’ll have you know

???: Prepare to be dethroned

With a grin and a few taps Peter’s got Marissa’s number saved in his phone, bringing his contacts to a staggering four names.

Four names, and only one of them he’s actually spoken to.

On a whim he selects Tony’s.

Everything in him says to call or text. He can put in some effort to keep in contact with Tony while he’s gone. It’d be polite. And deep down Peter really, really wants to talk to him.

But if he calls, what would he even say?

“Hi, Mr. Stark! I know it’s only been twenty-four hours, but I did exactly what you told me not to. I got shot at and dragged behind a van for half a mile before getting wasted by a mailbox. In the end I lost those guys but made friends with a criminal! I got his number and everything. He’s gonna keep me updated on this really dangerous dude who builds and sells alien weapons. Been real busy. Hope things’ve been going well on your trip!”

Peter rolls his eyes and flicks away the contact information. Yeah, talking to Tony is a no-go.

Yet the thought of going back to the Tower right now, to spend the rest of the day alone, spurs Peter into impulsively calling somebody else. He’s got his phone up to his ear before he can think better of it.

It rings. And rings again. Each time Peter hears the trill tone instead of Ned’s voice, his heart falls that much further. Any apprehension that he may have felt at the thought of talking to his friend is drowned out as his mind begins to run wild with the reasons he’s not answering.

Ned’s probably mad at him; he has every right to be. Peter’s dropped off the face of the Earth not once, but twice, leaving his friend to worry and wonder why. He has no obligation to be at Peter’s beck and call every time he decides to contact him.

Or maybe Ned doesn’t want to deal with him, after the last time. It’s completely understandable considering how Peter had absolutely freaked. He already had his chance to connect with Ned
again and he’d blown it.

Ned doesn’t want to talk to him and he has to accept that. But the least Peter can do is apologize. Maybe he should leave a message, like how the nice lady on the line is suggesting—

Wait.

Beep!

Shit. “H—hey Ned, it’s Peter,” he’s talking before his brain has a chance to filter anything coming out of his mouth, “um...I know you probably don’t wanna hear from me right now, and I don’t blame you. I just — I dunno. I’m okay—better! I’m better. Just, uh, thought I’d try calling but...yeah. Anyway...uh...I’ll just, um...sorry.”

He hangs up.

Any of Peter’s earlier good mood is gone. His mind is still going a million miles a second, thinking back over what he’s just done, and the crowded streets of Manhattan aren’t helping in the slightest. Taking a second to reorient himself, he heads back to the Tower — secluding himself in the Fortress of Solitude seems much more reasonable than whatever the hell he thought he’d achieve by calling Ned.

He’s just going to have to deal with it. He’s done it before, so it’s not a problem. There’s plenty of work to be done on his suit that’ll help keep him busy. And at least he’s got FRIDAY to talk to while Tony’s still gone—

His phone rings.

Peter literally jumps in surprise and the phone goes flying a good foot into the air. There’s a frantic grab for it, and when he’s got it safely back in his hands he notices it’s conspicuously silent—

Ned’s name is on the screen, seconds slowly ticking by below it. Peter thinks he may be in shock when he lifts the phone to his ear.

“—eally you?! Oh my God, Peter! Peter, dude, say something—”

“...Ned?” Peter breathes.

“Peter! Holy shit! Where are you? Are you okay? Where’re you calling from?”

At the sound of Ned’s voice, Peter’s eyes burn. He closes them tight and buries his face in his hand.

Don’t cry, he thinks, and forces himself to take a slow, steady breath through his suddenly choked throat.

Don’t cry, don’t cry, don’t cry.

Ned’s still firing off questions. “Are you using a pay phone? Are those even a thing anymore? Oh my God, don’t tell me you’re in jail. Are you in jail? I can get my parents to bail you out if—”

“No, Ned, I’m not in jail.” He laughs and it’s shaky, but it’s enough to clear his head and his throat.

It’s then that Peter realizes he’s standing in the middle of the sidewalk like an ass, so he quickly moves to a nearby bike rack and leans against it. Not having to stand gives him one less thing to
focus on. He closes his eyes and desperately attempts to keep his shit together.

“Are you okay?” The question comes after a long silence, soft and cautious.

Peter bites his tongue to prevent an automatic bullshit answer from spilling out. Another controlled breath in through his nose and out through his mouth, and he trusts himself enough to speak.

“I’m, uh…” He can’t answer that. “Can you...d’you think we could...”

Please don’t say no.

When Peter speaks next his voice is weak and his body is shaking and he can’t still it, no matter how hard he tries. “Could...could we meet up? I really, um...I—”

“I’ll come to you,” Ned says, voice steady and strong, “just tell me where.”

Peter doesn’t know how he makes it to Grand Central Station. He doesn’t remember the walk — it feels like he’s teleported here more than anything.

For a dreadful moment he isn’t sure if he’d told Ned where to go, or if Grand Central was even the place to meet. Was he supposed to wait upstairs? Or the food court? But then his phone chimes and he takes it out of his pocket so fast it probably would’ve gone sailing through the air if it weren’t for his Spider-grip.

Ned: be there in 10

Peter collapses onto a chair and stares at the text.

Ten minutes is too long.

There’s too much input with the noises, the smells, the way everything seems to blur together in front of his eyes. Peter can’t filter it, can’t focus. It's like he's flipping through channels and every single one is static.

There’s something thrumming right under his skin, itching to get out. Right now he can’t tell what it is — nerves? Fear? He has to move.

Peter’s back off the chair before a minute has even passed.

It’s Ned. So why does he feel like this?

He could have ignored Peter, but instead he called back. He could have yelled at him, but instead he’d talked. Of all the things he could have done, he’d agreed to meet up without a moment’s hesitation.

Peter should be happy — excited to see his best friend again. The one person who’s still here.

And, God, that’s it, isn’t it? Ned is all Peter’s got left from before.

He shouldn’t let this be happening.

If Peter drags Ned back into his life he’s only going to get hurt. That’s what happens every single time to the people Peter cares about.

They get hurt, or worse.
Seeing Ned again is incredibly selfish. He needs to leave. He needs to leave before he makes a horrible mistake—

“Peter!”

Everything snaps into focus. He turns and spots Ned sprinting down the stairs.

“Ned—”

All that comes out afterward is a *woosh* as Ned collides with him without slowing down. They’d probably both be flat on the ground if it weren’t for Peter’s strength.

Ned hugs him, and it’s like all his buzzing thoughts are squeezed right out his ears.

He sags in Ned’s arms. The hug tightens, tethering him there in that moment, and all he can do is hold on. All of the anxiety that’d been boiling over inside of him is gone and it’s quickly being replaced by something else. It’s causing Peter to shake, slowly filling him to the brim with it, and he takes an unsteady breath like it’s the first one in his life.

“I missed you.”

At those words, Peter can’t help but be selfish.

“I missed you, too,” he whispers.

Peter has no idea how long they stay like that but ten, twenty, thirty minutes would never be enough. And hugging, as great as it may be, isn’t the same as talking. He still has no idea what he wants to say, if he even wants to say anything at all, but he knows for a fact that standing in front of the Shake Shack won’t do anything to put him in a chatty mood.

“Do you, um, wanna go somewhere more quiet?” Peter asks, Ned’s hair tickling his nose.

When Ned finally steps back, Peter’s glad he asked sooner rather than later. Ned’s still holding onto him, peering up like he can’t believe he’s really here. He suddenly has trouble talking and it seems like Ned’s having a similar problem because all he does is nod.

During the entire walk to Bryant Park, Peter can barely keep his eyes ahead of him. He constantly finds himself checking to make sure Ned’s still there and isn’t just a shadow in the corner of his eye. Ned seems to have the same idea because every now and then Peter feels a grip on his elbow, a finger hooking into the hem of his shirt, a shoulder brushing against his own.

It’s fairly empty when they arrive. They keep to the walkway and even though there’s now plenty of room they stay attached at the hip. It’s quiet between them and Peter begins to worry why, but when he glances over again he realizes Ned’s waiting for him to talk first. He’s asked and asked and asked, and Peter’s done nothing but dance around every single question.

There’s nothing to be said, not unless Peter’s willing to talk.

“Hey, isn’t it Friday? Shouldn’t you be in class?” Peter asks. When his own words register with him he adds, “Are you skipping right now?”

Ned looks at him like he’s lost his mind. “Of course I am! Do you really think I care more about Spanish than you?”

Something pleasant flutters in Peter’s stomach. “How were you even able to check my message during school?”
“I’ve got B lunch. Michelle’s actually the one who helped me sneak out.”

“Seriously?” Peter’s surprised. “Does she still sit at the same table?”

“Yeah. She, um, actually sits with me now. Like, right next to me and not hovering creepily at the corner. She…” Ned’s voice trails off. He looks nervous, his hands coming up to clutch at the straps of his backpack. “She started doing that ever since...well...since you went missing.” The admission is so soft, like Ned feels guilty for even mentioning it. Peter’s stomach drops.

“Ned...I’m sor—”

“No, it’s okay,” he says quickly. “Really. I’m just glad you called. Like, you have no idea.”

*I’m pretty sure I do,* Peter thinks. He clears his throat.

“So does she, um, know it was me? That called?”

Ned’s lips twitch. “Well, I sorta had to tell her after she saved my life when I inhaled a chicken nugget.”

“And then?”

“I’m kidding! It was a tater tot,” he laughs when Peter glares at him, “and it wasn’t that bad. I did choke when I realized it was you, though, and she seemed more than eager to punch me in the back until I stopped coughing. Which reminds me—”

And Ned slugs him right in the shoulder. It’s surprisingly painful.

When Peter gives him a bewildered look he holds up his hands. “Sorry! That’s from Michelle. Just be glad I’m the messenger and it wasn’t straight from her.”

“Yeah, sure.” Peter rolls his eyes as he rubs the spot. For some reason the fact he knows that Michelle knows doesn’t make him panic. It just makes that fluttery feeling in his stomach grow.

It also makes Peter wonder what else has been going on.

“What do you—” Peter takes a breath, the entire atmosphere shifting with those two words. Ned’s watching him intently, he can feel it even as he stares down at the sidewalk. So he keeps on walking, afraid that if he stops moving he’ll stop everything else, too. “Do you know what’s happened to May’s—to the apartment?”

There’s a brief silence, as if Ned’s weighing the pros and cons of answering that question. He’s still watching Peter closely.

“Yeah. It was the first place I checked when...when I went looking for you. There were a bunch of people there. Cops, maybe, I don’t know.” Ned looks away then, peering to the side at nothing. “I went back a few days later and bumped into Tyler,” he continues, voice softer. “He said all your stuff’s been cleared out. Probably in storage or something.”

Peter nods like he’s just been told about the weather.

Everything’s gone. He doesn’t have any of their photo albums, their videos, their books. Not even one of the magnets May liked to collect or Peter’s favorite scarf that had been Uncle Ben’s. There’s nothing left.

He feels completely hollow inside.
It isn’t until Ned’s guiding him to the edge of the fountain that Peter realizes he’d stopped in his tracks in the middle of the terrace. Ned’s hand doesn’t leave his arm even after they sit and for that he’s thankful. It’s like an anchor, preventing him from drifting off into his own mind as he thinks about...everything.

Eventually, Ned’s voice breaks through the fog. “Where’ve you been staying?”

Peter doesn’t hesitate as he says, “Somewhere safe.”

It doesn’t feel like a lie or something he’s said just for the sake of answering. It’s the truth. He looks up then, over at his friend who’s watching him with concern in his eyes, and is reminded of the last time they’d seen each other in person.

When he takes hold of Ned’s hand on his arm, dark fingers tighten around his own. It’s like Ned’s afraid he’s going to disappear again. So he smiles and makes sure their pinkies are still touching when he lowers their hands to the cold stone of the fountain.

“I’ve actually been doing pretty good, if I do say so myself,” Peter teases. He lets out a laugh when Ned bumps their shoulders together.

“I didn’t wanna say anything, but don’t think I haven’t noticed your shirt,” Ned says, grinning. “In the five years I’ve known you and your love for stupid nerdy pun tees, I’ve never seen that one. Where’d you get it?”

Peter really can’t help it when the smile on his face grows wicked. “Tony Stark bought it for me.”

It’s like Ned’s lost all control over his face with the expression he makes.


“He’s also letting me crash at his place,” Peter adds flippantly.

And suddenly Ned’s standing, arms waving in the air like he’s trying to fly. There aren’t even any comprehensible sounds coming out of his mouth at this point. Peter does his best to keep from rolling onto the ground as he laughs at his friend’s antics, barely dodging a weak swipe made his way as Ned finally gets his limbs under control.

“There? You’ve been staying there?” One arm’s outstretched and pointing at where Avengers Tower peeks above the treeline. The second Peter nods, that hand’s suddenly a fist and punching him in the arm. Hard.

“Ow! What the hell—”

“That one’s from me,” Ned says with a glare.

“Why?!”

“Because you’re an asshole!”

Peter isn’t laughing anymore. He watches Ned, who’s still half turned away and not looking at him. His shoulders are tight, arms held at his sides with his hands in fists — but it’s his face that really gets Peter.

He looks like he’s about to cry.

“I thought you were dead.”
Peter stares. He has no idea what to say.

“It was the worst three weeks of my life,” Ned mutters. “When I found out about the accident on the news I tried to call you, to see if you wanted to be picked up so you wouldn’t have to be alone. But you didn’t answer. You didn’t answer then. Or the day after. Or the day after that,” and each sentence is punctuated with a jerk of his fist. “I kept calling and texting and waiting and I couldn’t help but think that maybe you were…” He takes a breath. “And then you come crawling through my window in the middle of the night, like some kind of ghost.”

Ned swipes his sleeve across his face. When it drops he pivots so he’s facing Peter, his eyes watery and red. Peter’s heart twists.

“I was so relieved to know I’d been wrong. And then—and then you just left!” He’s shouting again but at least he’s finally looking at Peter. “You just up and vanished for a second time and I thought that, maybe, that was it! You were bleeding and starving when I finally got to see you and suddenly all I could think about was if that’d be the last time, if you’d wind up dead in some alley, something minor enough where it wouldn’t even come up on the news and I would never know.”

Even with the bird call and the rustling of leaves and the bubbling of the fountain behind him, when Ned finally stops, the silence is chilling. Peter flinches when Ned thrusts out a hand again toward the Tower.

“But, guess what? While little ole’ me was imagining all the ways my best friend might be dead, it turns out you’ve been chilling at Avengers Tower with Tony Stark?!?”

Ned’s chest is heaving. He makes a noise in his throat like he’s fighting something back and Peter still has no idea what to do. Then whatever fire’s been burning in Ned fizzles out and he slumps where he stands, his voice so quiet the next time he speaks.

“I get it, Peter. Not completely, I know — I can only imagine what it’s been like for you. But you can’t...you can’t do that. You can’t just run away without saying anything and then pop up half dead at my house, only to do it all again. I can’t...I can’t take it. I couldn’t the first time, or the second time, and if you do it a third time...”

And it’s the look Ned gives him then, when he finally lifts his head from where he’s been staring at the ground like he’s dead on his feet, that gets Peter to move. He doesn’t care if he’ll be punched or shoved or yelled at again — he needs to do something, anything, to get that look off Ned’s face.

When there’s only a fraction of space between them Peter lifts his hands and settles them on Ned’s shoulders. Ned leans in at the touch and rests his forehead against Peter’s chest, right over his heart.

“I’m not,” and now it’s Peter’s voice that’s shaking, “I’m not going to, I promise. I’m not running away anymore.” He wraps his arms around Ned then and hopes that, if his words aren’t enough, then the touch will be. He needs Ned to know, to believe him, because it’s true.

He’s done running.

The silence stretches. The panic in Peter’s chest hasn’t faded. He takes in a breath, not even sure what he wants to say — maybe beg for forgiveness — when Ned’s hands come up to cling to the back of his shirt.

“You’re still my best friend but I’m pissed at you.”
Peter squeezes his eyes shut, his laugh coming out as a puff of air. “That’s fair.”

“And you totally owe me with, like, a private tour of the Tower.”

“Sure.”

“And a meet and greet with Tony Stark.”

“Um...I dunno if—”

Ned leans back with an angry pout.

“Yeah, okay.”

“’K. We’re cool.” But Ned keeps hugging him.

Peter can see movement in his periphery, of the few people who had paused at the sound of raised voices who’re now on their way again. He really couldn’t care less about any of the attention they’ve gotten — Ned’s forgiven him and that’s all that matters.

There’s a sniff, which causes Peter’s hold to tighten just the slightest, before Ned’s pulling back and wiping at his face again with a sleeve.

“Tony Stark,” he murmurs, and Peter’s afraid he’s going to go off again. But when Ned looks up, his eyes are wide and wonder-filled. “How’d he find you?”

Peter smiles. Leave it to Ned to bounce back from something like that.

They start walking again and Peter recounts his meeting with Tony (while leaving out the less savory parts). It probably takes Peter twice as long to talk about everything, the two of them feeding off of each other’s excitement because oh my God, it’s Anthony Edward Stark! Ned also doesn’t help in the least with all his comments and questions that get peppered in.

Peter gets all the way to the new web-shooters they’d made, diving into the specs and mechanics of it excitedly, when Ned slaps him lightly on the chest with the back of his hand.

“By the way, I still can’t believe you never told me about that,” Ned whines. “How long’ve you kept that a secret?” He makes a motion with his hand which Peter recognizes as a mimicry of his web-slinging. There’s even a little sound effect to accompany it which, honestly, is adorable.

“Um...eight months, maybe?” Peter says tentatively.

If Ned gets upset over the fact that Peter’s been hiding his powers for nearly a year, he doesn’t show it. There’s a thoughtful silence and then Ned’s got a sly grin. “So since you’re living in the Tower and getting sweet tech, does that mean you’re an Avenger?”

Peter can’t help but laugh. “Nooooo. No way. The entire reason Mr. Stark found me was to tell me to lay low. It’s just...he’s Tony Stark, y’know? He likes messing with that sorta stuff.”

“Yeah but, c’mon. You’ve got powers! Maybe when you turn eighteen he’ll ask? I mean, kinda makes sense he doesn’t want a high schooler to join a superhero team. Even if there isn’t much of one left.”

“Wait, what?”

Ned gives him a strange look. “What do you mean, ‘what?’” When Peter continues to stare at him in confusion, he gets a clue. He’s suddenly full of energy again, eyes wide and body taut like how
he gets when he’s trying to explain his latest Star Wars theory to Peter. “The Avengers split up. Captain America’s a fugitive, along with half the team. They all went into hiding — no one knows where they are.”

“A fugitive?” And now Peter’s stopped walking again, because...what?

“Yeah, dude! There was this huge throw down between Cap and Stark over the Accords and that Winter Soldier guy. They even kicked the shit out of each other over in Germany. He never mentioned anything about it?”

Peter shakes his head, unable to speak.

Now that Ned’s said something, Peter has noticed that the Tower’s been conspicuously empty. They are (were?) heroes, after all. Going on missions and travelling is (was) a part of their job description.

Before...everything, Peter was aware of the debate going on about the Sokovia Accords. It’d been a hot topic on the news, always coming up anytime the TV was turned on. He assumed it would all work out in the end, that it’d be another issue the Avengers would overcome as a team. So when he’d started being Spider-Man again and busied himself with tracking down criminals and following breadcrumbs, things like the Avengers or the Accords were the last things on his mind.


“Yeah…”

“Hey,” and Ned bumps their arms together, interrupting his thoughts, “you eat lunch yet? Kinda didn’t get far into mine what with nearly choking to death and making a great escape.”

“Nope,” Peter says, deciding to unpack the news about the Avengers later, “I’m starving. Hotdog?”

They don’t even need to say anything to agree on where to go. It’s a quick walk to their favorite hotdog stand, ordering two each with Peter paying. Tony had, of course, enabled his phone with a contactless card option. When he takes it out to swipe, his face is immediately accosted with Ned’s eager grabby-hands.

“Holy crap is that the newest StarkPhone? Those aren’t being released for, like, another seven months!”

Peter finds himself suddenly becoming the designated hotdog-holder when Ned trades his paper boat for the phone. He balances them both on one arm.

“Mr. Stark’s letting me beta test,” he explains.

Ned’s scrolling through the settings and specs of the phone, pulling up menus Peter hadn’t even known were accessible. “That’s nuts. And totally unfair. Hardware’s your specialty, not software.”

“That’s your area,” Peter says fondly.

“Darn right it is.” Ned pauses in his exploration. “You should totally let me see if I can jailbreak this thing,” he says, a devilish glint in his eyes.

“What—no!”
“Why not? You think he’d get mad?” Ned sighs. “Okay, fine. But I’d still love to get a good look at this and see if I can get a peek at the coding.”

Before Ned can get too carried away, Peter coaxes him to take one of his hotdogs. They eat and walk and Peter listens to his friend ‘ooh’ and ‘aah’ about the phone. But being the tech genius he is, it doesn’t take long for Ned to stumble across Peter’s files — and the schematics.

“No. Way.”

The holo-feature’s been activated, and so the schematic for Peter’s suit spins and shines in the air above the phone’s screen.

“Dude!” Their food nearly becomes a casualty on the street with the way Peter starts. He crams the rest of his hotdog in his mouth and smacks a hand down on the phone, closing the holo.

“What the hell.” Ned’s eyes sparkle, his mouth hanging open. “Was that,” and he leans in, “was that a suit?”

Peter quickly chews and swallows, his exasperation gone as he fights back a laugh. “I don’t know why you’re whispering when you just showed the whole street.”

“You’re getting a suit?” Ned asks again, louder. He’s practically vibrating with excitement. “That’s, like, an official uniform! You’re totally an Avenger.”

“No, I’m not,” Peter denies, the mention of the suit reminding him of his broken promise. “I’m just Spider-Man.”

Ned doesn’t notice the undercurrent of guilt in Peter’s words, too busy staring at the phone’s screen where the schematics have been reopened.


Peter can’t help but grin at that.

For the rest of the day Peter isn’t alone. His entire focus is on Ned — not the streets, or the strangers, or everything he’s got going on inside. For the first time in nearly a month he feels like himself again, wandering Midtown with his best friend as they goof off and eat way too much junk food. It’s like everything that’s happened is a far off nightmare and Peter is, for a little while, free from his troubles.

So when the sky darkens and the street lights come on, Peter doesn’t think anybody could blame him for wanting to draw it out just a little bit longer. He’s extremely tempted to let things keep going, for them to talk and talk and talk because it doesn’t seem like either of them is ever going to run out of things to say.

But tomorrow’s another day, and now Peter knows he can face it because he’s still got Ned.

“You should probably head home,” he says, checking the time on his phone. “It’ll almost be nine by the time you get back.”

“Crap. I think I just missed the next train.” Ned flicks away the subway app on his phone with a sigh.

“I can give you a ride.” At Ned’s surprised face he explains, “Mr. Stark’s got a driver. I can ask
him to pick us up.”

“That would be the coolest thing. Please do that,” Ned says, his wonderstruck gaze returning.

Any apprehension Peter feels at calling Happy (he still remembers the absolute loathing glance the driver had given him that first day) is drowned under Ned’s questions of what car they’ll be picked up in. His voice drifts in one ear while the phone rings in the other.

“On Tony Stark’s Wiki page it says he owns a Ford Roadster. You think he’d let us ride in it?” Ned asks distractedly, then thinks better of it. “Nah, no way he’d chance driving it around the city...that Audi R8 Spyder he’s got is badass. Except, wait, I think it only has two seats? Aw man —”

“Hey, kid, you alright?” Happy asks as soon as he answers.

“Oh, yeah I’m fine, Mr. Hogan.” Ned’s still listing off possible cars so he turns away to hear better. “I just, um, wanted to ask if you could pick me up? Me and my friend — he needs a ride back to Queens. I know it’s kinda late and if you’re busy or something that’s okay, we’ll wait for the next train—”

“Whoa, whoa, slow down. First off, Happy’s fine. None of that ‘Mr. Hogan’ stuff. Tony gets wind of you calling me that and I’ll never hear the end of it. Second, I’ll be right over to pick you up. Give me ten minutes.”

“Right! Sorry. Thanks, Happy. We’re over at—”

“Times Square, I know, FRIDAY pinged me your location.” And Peter has mixed feelings over the thought that he’s being tracked when Happy continues, “Just don’t go wandering off anywhere, alright? I don’t wanna have to chase you two around the city.” He doesn’t wait for an answer before hanging up.

“What about the Tesla? It’d be so sweet to ride over the bridge with the top down.”

“Pretty sure that’s a two seater,” Peter says, pocketing his phone. At Ned’s forlorn look he adds, “Sorry, buddy,” and lays a companionable hand on his shoulder.

True to his word, Happy pulls up to the corner of 7th and 46th in just under ten minutes.

“A Rolls Royce! Not an Audi, but I’ll take it,” Ned comments, giving the flashy car an appreciative nod.

He slides into the backseat after Peter. The interior’s given a cursory glance before he leans over with an excited ‘ooooh!’ When he sits back there’s a crystal tumbler in his hand.

“This is so cool. I feel fancy. Do I look fancy?” Ned melts back into a sprawl against the leather seats.

Peter can barely muffle his snort. “I’m getting a real Don Draper vibe.”

“Niiiiiiice.”

“Hey, if there’s any drinking going on back there it better only be the bottled water,” Happy warns, watching them in the reflection of the rearview mirror.

Ned jumps like he’s forgotten they weren’t the only ones in the car and Peter grabs the glass before it hits the floor. “Oh, yeah, of course! Sorry Mister...uh…”
“Happy,” Peter quickly supplies as he puts the tumbler back. He meets Happy’s gaze in the mirror. “This is Ned.”

If Happy’s about to say anything, he’s cut off by Ned.

“As Mr. Stark’s driver, do you get to drive his fancy sports cars?”

“Uh,” and the look on Happy’s face is affronted, “I’m head of security, kid. Tony just told me to drive Pete around when he asks.” But whether or not he’s offended, the furrow in his brow smooths and there’s the slightest curve of a smirk when he says, “But, yeah, I get to drive all his cars.”

“That’s awesome.”

The following forty minutes pass with endless conversation. Happy and Ned discuss Tony’s cars, Ned living vicariously through Happy’s stories and experiences of driving each one. They seem to bond over that subject, with Ned’s comments and praise paving the way. He inevitably gravitates back toward Peter, though, and Happy lets them talk after getting an address once they cross the river.

“You better not avoid me again,” Ned says suddenly. He’s looking right at Peter, unwavering and stubborn. “If you do I’m gonna — I’m gonna blow up your phone and then I’ll march right into Avengers Tower and make the biggest scene—”

“Ned,” and Peter laughs; not because he finds Ned’s threat funny, but because it’s the only thing that’ll keep him from being swallowed by guilt. “I won’t. I swear I won’t.”

Ned nods, but there’s hesitation in his eyes, wariness in the set of his mouth. He doesn’t fully trust Peter. It’s a completely warranted reaction and Peter knows he’s earned it, but it doesn’t make it hurt any less. They’ve already talked about it once, and will probably talk about it again. The only thing he can do at this point is to prove that he means it, however many times Ned needs him to.

And after today, he really doesn’t think he could ever leave his best friend behind again.

“Oh, you can stop right here, Happy,” Ned says, turning in his seat to look out the window. The car rolls to a stop at the curb six houses down from where he lives. “I’m already in trouble for skipping. Last thing I need is for my mom to see me getting out of a fancy car. Don’t think any story I spin could fly under her bullshit-radar.”

“Wait, you’re in trouble?” Peter asks, panicking. “What—do you want me to—”

“Hey, don’t worry about it,” and Ned waves away Peter’s concerns, “I’ll just say I skipped to go see a movie or something.”

“But—”

“Dude, seriously. It’s my first time playing hookie. She’ll just stick me with doing the dishes for the next month or something.” He shrugs. “Whatever it is, it was totally worth it.”

Peter falls silent.

“Anyway, I expect a call tomorrow,” Ned says, giving him a pointed look.

“Yeah, of course.”

The air goes quiet and still. It’s heavy, like there’s something still left unsaid hanging between
them. But Peter doesn’t know what it is so instead he moves, sliding across the seat to hug Ned. It’s not desperate and frantic like when they’d seen each other at the terminal, or hesitant and sad like at the park. It’s gentle and full and warm, a goodbye between two friends who know they’ll see each other again.

It’s Peter who pulls away this time.

Ned shoulders his backpack as he opens the door. “Thanks for the ride, Happy.”

“You’re welcome, kid. See ya around.”

Peter doesn’t say anything when Ned steps out onto the sidewalk, and Ned doesn’t say anything back when he shuts the door. Their eyes meet, and Ned waits at the corner as the car turns around and drives away. Peter turns in his seat to watch through the back window until Ned’s completely out of sight.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys! Sorry for the late update. I started a new job recently so from now on updates won’t be weekly. I work 6 days a week now and am exhausted most of the time. Augh.

Hopefully this isn't too boring of a chapter. Just needed Peter to take the second step in his healing -- since he's finally accepted help, he now needs to renew the relationships he's had in is life (while also making some new ones!). Tony makes his return next chapter though and brings big news with him. Also expect to see more Ned from now on (and a little more Aaron, Happy, and Marissa), since Peter's finally done with being an evasive dumb-dumb.

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