

A Spider in Gotham

AN: The chapter numbers are a little wonky. I combined a couple of them when posting to QQ & HF.

1.

Peter watched the older alternate versions of himself. A golden glow surrounded them both. He raised his hand in a wave. The world around him shifted, changing from the foot of the statue of liberty to some sort of alley. It was warmer than it had been a few moments ago and the sun hadn't set yet.

His suit was gone. He was wearing a Mid-Town T-Shirt, a pair of jeans, and, luckily, a pair of thin converse knockoffs. The alley didn't have any answers. He hopped up to a fire escape before climbing up to the roof. Peter stood on the top of the building to get a good look out at the skyline. One thing was certain, they weren't in New York.

"I really hate magic." Peter grumbled.

A quick pocket tap-down to find his wallet and phone. Usually, his suit was paired with his devices. With it gone he had to do things the old-fashioned way. He pulled out his wallet and took a look inside.

"Seventeen dollars and... hey a stick of gum!" Peter said. He pulled the stick of foil only for it to squish under his touch. "Yuck."

Peter scanned the roof for somewhere to put it. He sighed and stuffed it into his pocket. With that done, he moved on to his cellphone.

No bars, GPS, or data connection. From the looks of it even the clock was wrong. Peter muttered to himself.

He needed to figure out where he was. A gas station, or convenience store would be a good place to start. They usually had maps. First, he needed to secure some food, shelter, and water. That was a lesson all of New York had learned after the Battle of New York. The Dark Elves, while not as big of a threat, helped solidify the mantra as well. Somewhere around that time the Hammer Bots turned the grounds around the Stark Expo into a warzone.

Shelter, water, and food became the new stop, drop, and roll. Homeless shelters were a good resource, as were public libraries. Churches weren't too bad of an option if they kept the preaching to a minimum.

Money would speed all of that along. Except he had no idea where he was. He had just graduated High School if that counted wherever here was. Not that it would have counted after the spell. His work experience with the Stark Internship was gone too. Honestly, that had mostly been a cover for his time as Spider-Man and working in the lab with Tony.

Peter hopped off the roof, deftly landing on the street below. There weren't too many people nearby. Those that were didn't pay him any attention.

He found a convenience store easily enough. The clerk looked up at him behind a sheet of security glass. A shotgun was clearly displayed on a hook within reach. The old man looked haggard, a scraggly beard that was broken by a strip of a scar along his jaw. Peter shot the clerk a quick look, but they didn't seem to mind.

Pete caught a view of himself on the security screen. His face was still cut, there was a yellow bruise along his cheek, and his nose was slightly off kilter. Peter shook his head. He made sure the clerk wasn't paying attention before putting his nose back in place. Peter grunted from the sharp pain.

There was a full medical section that wouldn't have looked out of place in a pharmacy. Peter grabbed a small first aid kit. There was a small clothing section as well. Peter came to a halt when he saw a small shelf of body armor. They weren't quite police grade, but it was still odd.

He snagged a travel map that was for the city and the country. Peter placed everything on the counter. The clerk scanned the purchases boredly.

"Paper or plastic?" The clerk asked.

"Plastic." Peter replied.

A stack of newspapers caught his eye. The headline read 'Joker Returned to Arkham'. Peter looked at the mug shot. A guy in full clown make-up, complete with green hair and smudged red lips smiled maniacally at the camera. The clown wore a full purple suit that had stains on it that looked like blood.

He added a newspaper to the pile.

"Ten dollars and fifty-three cents." The clerk rested a hand on the shotgun.

"What's with the body armor?" Peter asked.

"It's the cheap stuff." The clerk shrugged. "Shit against anything. Won't stop a knife. Guy hits you with a pipe and you're screwed."

"Yeah." Peter muttered. "Thanks."

"Not from around here?" The clerk asked.

"Is it that obvious?" Peter gave him a grin.

"The accent." The clerk shrugged. "What brings you to Gotham?"

Peter shrugged. "Just kind of wound up here."

"You strapped?" The clerk asked.

Peter shook his head.

"Get one." The clerk stared at him for a long moment. "Gasmask too. A good one."

"Why?" Peter asked slowly.

"Don't you know anything?" The clerk gawked at him.

"No." Peter said slowly.

"Good luck, kid." The clerk shook his head.

"Thanks." He took the plastic bag.

Peter stepped back out onto the street. There was a small tingle on the back of his head. Danger, but not imminent. He scanned the area with his eyes, not moving his head. Peter had to suppress a laugh when he noticed a group of clowns. Five of them. Sure, their make-up was messy, and their clothes were more out-of-work carnie than birthday party, but they were still clowns.

The tingle told him that they shouldn't be ignored. After his experience with Goblin, a guy named Doctor Octopus, and a dude made out of sand, he made sure to tamp down the incredulity of the situation. They fell in behind him as he walked down the street.

Peter sighed. He was not in the mood for this.

"What do you want?" Peter turned to face them.

"Your bag and your cash or your life." The largest of the group said.

The big one, Peter decided his name was Jumbo, stood in the center, flanked by two other clowns on either side. To the right was Bozo, a portly guy with a smear of dingy red smile, and Groucho, the only one of the clowns with a mustache, he was also the shortest of the bunch. On the left were two clowns that could have been twins. They were both around six feet tall, were in decent shape, if a little thin, and were wearing purple pants. Dee and Dum seemed fitting. All five of them wore clothes that looked like they had been swiped from an old circus. Except not one of them had a full clown outfit.

"You're really going to mug me for a first aid kit and five bucks?" Peter asked.

"Did I stutter?" Jumbo growled.

Logically, Peter knew he should just drop the bag and walk away. He didn't need the trouble. On the other hand, he still had some pent-up anger he needed to work out. Effectively, the serum had killed Green Goblin. Peter knew that Norman Osborn was a victim as much as any of them. That didn't mean Peter could just let it go. He had lost May, MJ, and Ned. Hell, it looked like he had lost his entire world. Now these clowns wanted to take even more from him.

Peter sprang forward, kicking Jumbo in the chest. The big clown flew a couple of feet before coming down hard on the sidewalk. He used the impact to flip backward, landing almost in the same spot he had just been. The four others didn't move. It took a couple of moments for them to realize that their leader wasn't there anymore.

"So." He looked at the clowns. "Seen any good movies lately?"

Bozo yelled something that almost sounded like English. The portly clown raised a thick fist, ready to throw a haymaker. Dee, Dum, and Groucho seemed to wake up at the yell. They rushed forward.

To him, they moved in slow motion. Peter ducked under the incoming haymaker, grabbing the extended arm, and tossing Bozo into a nearby wall. The clown didn't move to get up. Pete twisted out of the way of another haymaker. He finished the turn, replying with a punch to the ribs. Dee wheezed as the air was forced from his lungs.

Peter lifted the clown up by the belt. He tossed him into the same wall Bozo had gone.

"Not movie buffs?" Peter asked. "What about books? I need to catch up on some reading. Just don't have enough time for it these days."

Dum screamed, charging forward. The clown locked his hands together, bringing them up, ready to smash Peters skull.

He caught the clenched fists. Peter yanked the off-balance clown towards him. The wild kick that Groucho had lined up collided with Dums' lower back. Dum dropped to a knee.

"I'll read just about anything." Peter backhanded Dum, sending him twisting in the air. "Except for political thrillers."

Groucho looked at the four clowns spread out in the street. They groaned and fumbled to get to their feet, but it was slow going. The clown was alone for now.

"How many times can democracy fall to thunderous applause?" Peter shook his head. "It's like, do something original guys."

"You fucked up." Groucho chuckled, if it was meant to sound intimidating, then he failed. "Just wait 'til the boss finds out about this."

"That five of you couldn't take on a teenager?" Peter actually did chuckled. "I'd love to hear that conversation."

Peter checked his plastic bag. Still intact. He grinned as he started down the sidewalk, leaving the clowns where they were. Hopefully, the cops would be around to pick them up.

He cut across a couple of streets and doubled back just to make sure he wasn't being followed. Peter looked around, just to be safe once he found a decent building. He hopped from wall to wall, bouncing from one side to the next, until he was back on the roof.

Pete took out the first aid kit and started to clean the wounds on his face. They would heal up in a day, two at most, but he didn't like them untreated. Over the years he had become rather adept at patching himself up. There were too many times he didn't want May to see him all bruised.

He spread the map out along the top of an AC unit. Currently, it was flipped to show the United States rather than the city. The clerk had said he was in Gotham. The city was spread across a string of three islands. It was about eighty miles south of New York, which put him in Jersey. He may have taken a few shots to the head recently, but he knew they didn't exist in his world. The other big change was that instead of D.C. was a city called Metropolis.

"We're not in Kansas anymore." Peter sighed.

He flipped the map over to the side that focused on the city. Judging from the street signs he was in The Bowery. There was a place called Wayne Foundation Chapter a few streets over. It sounded like a homeless shelter, or at least an organization like FEAST that May had worked with.

He sat on the roof, his back against the AC unit he had been using as a table. It helped block out the ever-present breeze that all rooftops had. He pulled out the newspaper and began to read.

Joker, as the clown was aptly named, had been apprehended by a joint effort between Batman and the GCPD. The article went on to explain that while the criminal had been captured only a few days after his escape, there was still the chance that something had been put in motion. It went on to reference the

many times Joker had escaped before, how long it took to catch him, and a highlight of his more recent activities.

The guy was like Goblin in full evil mode. From this article alone he could tell that this was a common occurrence. There had been more than a dozen of the 'recent activities' listed in the article. Not only that, but he seemed to escape from this Arkham place like clockwork. The death toll attributed to him was in the triple-digits. Either there was more than one of him, or the guy was a modern-day mass murderer.

He needed to be put down, not locked up.

Peter paused. The thought had come so easily. Peter Two had stopped him from killing Osborn. He gritted his teeth. Figuratively killing Green Goblin and actually doing it were two separate things. They didn't have any room to talk. Practically every one of the guys that came over from the other universes had been killed. Otto had drowned, Osborn had been impaled, and Flint he wasn't sure about. Peter Two had no right to stop him. Peter Three was a bit of a goof, but he had still killed Max. He even admitted to not pulling his punches after. The one-time Peter had let himself go full was against Thanos. If the Spider-Men were all the same strength, then Peter Three would have turned a few people into gooey chunks.

Toomes hadn't been personally involved in killing anyone, but the guy was a weapons dealer. He put alien tech in the hands of criminals who had no qualms about stacking up bodies. The guy had also kept his identity a secret. Maybe he deserved a pass for that.

Thanos. How many millions, no billions of lives would have been saved if Peter had just snapped his neck? He was definitely fast enough to get in close. One moment of using his full strength to twist that purple bastards head around and things would have been over in time for lunch.

Mysterio deserved to be dead. Outing his identity was a dick move, but it was more than that. How many people had he killed, or hurt while putting on his act?

Peter focused back on the newspaper. The last page of the Local Announcements section of the newspaper was rather alarming.

Recommend travel with access to a Grade Three or higher filtration mask.

Citywide Updates are broadcast on all major news channels.

Law Enforcement requests citizens limit time spent outside at night during active crisis periods.

Tune in to the dedicated radio here. Siren patterns for Crisis Classification.

The section afterward caught his eye. It was called Bat-Watch. It was dedicated to keeping track of a group of vigilantes that protected the city. The section focused on the main duo of Batman and his partner Robin. There was also Batgirl and Black Bat, just to make it easy. Red Hood and Red Robin were featured as well as a guy called Nightwing, but he was only around sometimes.

Gotham seemed to like its themes.

Peter rubbed a hand over his face. He didn't have his suit, web-shooters, or web-fluid. Getting caught up in the various vigilante escapades wasn't an option for now. Judging by the attempted mugging earlier,

avoiding trouble was not going to be easy. It wouldn't be the first time he made his gear by digging through the trash. Until then he would have to adjust to being strong and sticky.

He packed everything back into the bag. He wrapped it tightly, so it fit in his pocket before he hopped off the side of the building.

"This place has seen better days." Peter whispered as he scanned the multiple empty storefronts as he walked.

He hadn't seen so much as a single patrol car. That, coupled with the clerk having a shotgun within reach, made him think this wasn't a place that was safe during the day, let alone after dark.

It was just now sunset, and the streets were already thinning out. A rougher looking crowd started to appear. Oddly enough, the factions were pretty easy to distinguish. Back in New York, the thugs were just thugs. They didn't have a theme. Sure, some of them dressed better or had better equipment, but they didn't dress up like clowns.

Each group had a theme to it, which became even more noticeable as the numbers grew. By the time he had made it to the Wayne Foundation, the streets were getting crowded. This area was much more active at night. The new faces weren't the friendly kind.

The Wayne Foundation Chapter was a nice-looking shelter. A lady stood behind a thick layer of protective glass off to the side of the entry. Opposite her booth was another, this one with a few intense looking security guards. The way deeper into the building was blocked off by a set of sturdy double doors.

"Name." The woman said.

"Peter Parker." He offered.

The woman didn't bother looking at him as she put in his name. A card popped up from a slit in the counter.

"Don't lose or trade this." The clerk explained. "The cards track and unlock services such as the showers, job search terminals, and personal storage lockers. Wayne Foundation Chapters are not responsible for lost or stolen items. You can stay for a total of forty-eight hours before you need to vacate this location for at least twelve hours. You can check in to another Wayne Foundation Chapter during that time. Weapons of any sort are not allowed on the grounds. No smoking outside of marked areas. Illegal substances are prohibited as is alcohol. If you are found in possession of weapons or drugs you forfeit your access to Wayne Foundation Chapters for no less than twelve hours, or until you have passed a drug screening. Addiction counseling is open as needed. A medical professional is on staff at all times."

"Thank you." Peter said as he picked up the card.

The woman buzzed them in. She shared a look at the security guards across the way. They shook their heads.

"Poor kid won't last a week." She muttered.

He was in luck. The last bit of dinner was being served. There were quite a few people still eating, but there were also a lot of empty spots. Peter took a seat at a table in the cafeteria. It looked like a school lunchroom.

Now that he had shelter, food, and water handled, he needed money. The shelter was a temporary solution, but they did have job search terminals. He finished eating quickly before seeking them out. They were easy to find. A row of computers bolted to the wall like old phone stalls.

None of the jobs listed required ID. Each one was day labor with the option of continued employment. Even though his lack of documentation wasn't an issue, his lack of experience was. Construction seemed like the best option. The instructions were simply to show up at the listed location. Pay would be in cash at the end of the day.

Peter knew that a shelter wasn't going to be decked out in top-of-the-line tech, but the computer was ancient. Oddly enough, it didn't look older than a couple of years. The monitors were the big, heavy ones rather than the LCD that even the school had. He took a quick look around the room. An elevated TV was bolted to the wall. It was one of the type that he had only seen in thrift shops.

Tech was constantly evolving back home. Sure, Stark Industries was at the forefront, but other companies could be dismissed. Mid-Town was a public school, and like pretty much every other school in the country, underfunded. Yet, students were supplied with individual laptops that made this computer look like a calculator with delusions of grandeur.

Thinking back, the cash register at the store hadn't been digital. The clerk had typed in the prices from the stickers on the stock. He wasn't certain, but it seemed like this place was at least ten years behind as far as technology was concerned. Of course, he was in a rundown neighborhood, so that needed to be factored in as well.

He printed off the address for the job before moving on to find somewhere to sleep.

Peter snagged an open top bunk. He quickly found out why it had been available. The lady on the bottom had a kid with her that liked to kick the underside of his mattress. He couldn't bring himself to get mad.

He settled down to rest. There wasn't going to be any sleep until the kid on the bunk below passed out. That gave him plenty of time to be alone with his thoughts.

Getting sent to a different dimension was unexpected. Peter wasn't sure if it was a bad thing yet. He had given up everything to save his world. Starting over in a new one, even accidentally, was a gift, kind of. Ned and MJ were better off without him in their lives. They were amazing, and they deserved to have a good life. Ned loved being 'the guy in the chair' but he was so much more than that. He was incredibly smart, sweet, and had a heart of gold. MJ was a freaking genius, she was artistic, and held to her morals.

He felt a lump forming in his throat.

Peter tried to disconnect from the emotional side of the equation. Messing with the spell had created the multiverse mess. If he stuck to the plan, trying to get MJ and Ned to remember him, there was a chance that would mess up the magic that had saved everything. Erasing Peter Parker had saved the world. Would bringing their memory back destroy it?

He really hated magic. Math and science had defined rules. Getting distracted during an equation didn't suddenly turn calculus into interpretive dance.

Peter wasn't sure if he would go back even if it was an option. Every little bit about him had been erased. Regardless of where he was, he would be starting over from zero. At least here there wasn't the possibility that he'd destroy the universe by having someone remember him. Or have to see that empty look in his friends' eyes when they look at him.

This was going to be a long night.

2.

Peter woke up with a jolt. The sound of a baby crying sent his instincts into overdrive. He sprang out of bed, slightly off kilter as the distance was more than he expected. His mind cleared as he swung on his feet. The baby crying was a few beds over. Angry grumbles and some cursing came from all around him.

A wave of memories hit. May, the other Peters, the Goblin, and the spell. His chest was tight. Deep, bone arching sorrow crushed him. He wanted to cry, to scream, anything. This wasn't the place. These people had their own problems.

He shuffled out of the sleeping area to the kitchen. It was closed, a bowl of fruit and some plastic wrapped muffins were out for people. He grabbed an orange before sitting down at a table. His hands worked on autopilot as he started to plan for the day.

It was 5:32 in the morning. The kitchen didn't open for another thirty minutes. He didn't think he could go back to sleep. His plastic bag was still in his bunk. Even if someone stole it, there wasn't much to worry about. A newspaper, a map, and a first aid kit.

He finished his orange, took care of the mess, and headed for the showers. A glance in the mirror let him know the bruises on his face had all but faded. Most of the cuts were now superficial, not much more than scratches. His clothes, luckily, were mostly clean. The blood and grime had been on his suit, wherever it was.

Still. He'd need a change of clothes soon. Otherwise, these ones would get worn out fast. He couldn't just keep staying here either. Clothes, food, and shelter all required money.

That thought brought him back to the present. He finished his shower and headed out to the row of computers. A quick couple of clicks brought up the job board. The construction job he had seen yesterday was still up. It started at 7 A.M.

The clock on the computer told him it was 5:55 A.M. The kitchen would be open in a few minutes. He wrote down the address then headed back to the cafeteria area. There were a few folks puttering around. The lady with the crying kid was one of them. They weren't the same pair that had the bunk under his.

For a moment he was back with May after The Battle of New York. They had spent almost a month in a shelter like this during the cleanup. Most of the damage had been contained by the Avengers, but not all of it. Queens, the Bronx, and some of Brooklyn got hit with a good amount of damage. Most of the houses on their street had been destroyed. They had spent most of the attack in the basement watching

the news on an old TV. The house above them had been demolished if it hadn't been for the stairs to the backyard they would have had to wait for the clean-up crews.

That had led to them moving into the apartment. The insurance from the house had paid for it.

Peter shook his head, the wetness around his eyes bringing him back to the world. He wiped away the gathering tears. There was a line forming already. He joined in, ending up behind the lady with the fussy baby. Peter smiled at her, which she returned with a suspicious glare. Instead, he turned his attention to the baby. He waved at them and made a couple of silly faces.

The lady hurried through the line, trying to get away from him. Peter shrugged. He thanked the kitchen workers for the bowl of oatmeal and grabbed an apple as he went by the bowl. Pete finished his food quickly, he cleaned his spot, and headed for the front door. There were two new security guards at the post. Another had joined the person at the desk, which was also someone new. He was an older guy with a clean haircut and a tidy beard.

"Excuse me." Peter said as he stepped up to the desk.

The guy looked at him but didn't speak.

"I need to get to this address." Peter put the handwritten note on the desk as he spoke.

The guy studied Peter. Slowly, he pulled the note closer. The guy flipped it over without looking away. Peter waited.

"The job starts at seven." Peter spoke up. "I need to leave to get there on time."

Finally, the guy looked at the note. He read it, looked at Peter, and then read it again.

"You sure about this?" The guy asked. His voice was higher than expected, not comically so, just slightly.

"It's work." Peter shrugged.

"Go to the intersection to the left once you're out of here. Then go down five blocks." The guy motioned with his hands as he spoke. "After that, take another left. Two blocks and you're there. You should be able to see it from the intersection."

"Thanks." Peter said.

He didn't see the looks that the security guards and the guy exchanged.

Peter followed the instructions. The streets were in a state of flux. Working people were appearing as the thugs faded away. It stoked a fire in his chest. Even with a team of vigilantes this place looked like it needed someone. He hadn't seen a patrol car since he got here. No wonder the streets practically emptied after the sun went down.

There were more people walking than there were cars on the road. The few vehicles he saw were desperately in need of maintenance. More than one burned-out husk took up parking spots along the street. From the looks of it, they had been there for a while too. He really hoped this was the bad part of the city.

The construction site was clearly marked with bright yellow striped tape. An entire block of half-ruined buildings had been fenced off. It was tall and topped with barbwire. There was a sign with a LexCorp logo. The tagline and whatever the project was had been covered by layers of graffiti.

Peter joined a line of workers at the gate. Two men dressed in tactical gear, complete with full-face gasmasks flanked it. There was a small trailer, also covered in graffiti. The few windows it had were covered with metal mesh. As he got closer, he realized that it may have started as a trailer but now it was a solid shack that had been cemented in place.

A guy in a reflective vest and a hardhat stepped out of the shack. He opened the gate and watched the line shuffle in. The hardhat guy purposely didn't look at the guards.

His spider-sense flared up as he walked through the gate. It was a dull pulse rather than anything major. He stole a quick look at the guards. Both of them had a patch with an umbrella on it rather than the same logo as the sign.

"How old are you kid?" The hardhat guy asked.

"Eighteen." Peter replied.

"Got any ID?" The guy asked.

Peter looked up at him. He shook his head. The hardhat guy shrugged.

"Listen up if it's your first day here." Hardhat guy yelled. "First shift is four hours on. There is a one-hour break before the second shift starts. If you are not here by the time the second shift starts, you do not work that shift. If there is not a helmet available for you on the second shift, you do not work that shift. You get paid at the end of the shift. Grab a helmet. You will not get paid if you do not return the helmet. If there isn't a helmet for you, then you aren't working today. Once you got your dome protected, line up. You will be given a toolbelt. Turn it in at lunch and at the end of the day. No pay if anything is missing."

There were still a few left over when Peter grabbed one. He plopped it on his head, then adjusted it, or rather tried. The inside of the helmet was stripped of any sort of straps and padding. He set it on his head, tilting it back, and concentrated for a moment. That was enough to stick the helmet to his head. He had learned the hard way early on that it wasn't just his feet and hands that could stick to things. His entire body could, except it took some focus rather than just happening naturally.

He joined the line once more and waited. Hardhat Guy separated them into groups. Once sorted he would give them some instructions. Peter found himself among a few other smaller guys. He was the shortest among them, but they were all slim side.

"You three." Hardhat Guy barked. "Grab a belt. You're working on the top floors. Follow the red line."

Peter followed the instructions, trying to figure out what that meant. He grabbed a toolbelt and put it on as he went. The red line led them farther down the block. It looked like each crew was working on tearing down a building. They started at the top floor then moved down to the foundation, which was broken by guys with sledgehammers.

He wasn't an expert at construction, but he was pretty sure it was usually done with machinery. His confusion was cleared up when he came to a gap in the buildings. The smashed remains of a bulldozer were wedged vertically in the ground. A couple of jackhammers were sticking out of the engine block.

Peter shook his head. For the next few hours, he focused on the job. The group had split up, working on their own section of the top floor. He was able to zone out, focusing on smashing things. At some point he was aware that Hardhat Guy came to check on the crew. He didn't talk to any of them, just kind of watched before leaving.

A loud siren signaled lunchtime. Peter made his way back to the shack and turned in his gear. Hardhat Guy gave him fifty dollars in tens. He held the money, not letting Peter go yet.

"You did good work, kid." Hardhat Guy spoke in a low tone, trying to keep it private. "Show up for the next week and you'll have a permanent spot."

Peter nodded. It wasn't the worst job. Smashing things seemed to take his mind off of things. His spider-sense flared up again as he walked through the gate, stronger this time. There were more guards at the gate now. They were watching the workers as they left. He didn't have to look back to know that at least one of them was following him.

"Hey, kid." One of the guards shouted at him.

He stopped.

Peter turned around, facing the guards. There were three of them in tactical gear. They hadn't been the ones from the gate. He noticed now that they were armed. Their guns were holstered at the moment, but he wasn't going to ignore that fact. The ones at the gate were watching intently now.

"You're a hard little worker, huh?" One of the guards said.

It was hard to tell which one with their masks. Peter rolled his eyes.

"Someone needs to be taught how things work around here." One of the guards growled as he snapped an extendable baton to length.

Smashing things seemed to take his mind off things.

The one with the baton rushed him. Stick was a good enough nickname as any. Pete shifted to the side, letting it slide through the air where his shoulder had just been. He took a step back as the guy adjusted.

"Come on." Peter scoffed. "My cousin can do better than that and he's in T-Ball."

Stick yelled, swinging out horizontally. Peter hopped back again.

"Last chance." Peter said. "I've had a really bad week and you're not going to like where this goes."

The other two tactical thugs laughed. Stick didn't like that. The thug swung like a mad man, going every which direction he could, just trying to land a hit now. Peter hardly moved as he dodged the crazy swings. A small turn of his shoulders, a step to one side or the other, and a slight duck avoided all of the attacks.

Peter sighed. He caught Stick's wrist on the next swing. The guy outweighed him by a good fifty pound and was much taller than him. Stick's mind didn't seem to understand why his hand wasn't moving. He swung at Peter with his free hand, balling it into a fist.

"This is pretty cool." Peter said turning the captured hand to the side to study the retractable baton. "I think I'm going to keep it."

Peter twisted the wrist he held, hearing it snap. He caught the baton as it fell and snapped it back into its compact side. Stick didn't give up. He grasped at the gun on his belt with his free hand.

"No." Peter said, smacking the hand away.

He unlatched the gun and drew it. The other tactical thugs tensed. Peter ejected the magazine, racked the slide to clear a chambered round, and tossed it over his shoulder. He hadn't had much time training with the team, but he had picked up a few tricks.

"Done yet?" Peter asked.

Stick drew a knife and lunged.

"You just don't learn." Peter groaned.

He slipped the lunge, grabbed the outstretched arm, and twisted. Stick was introduced to the asphalt in a snappy manner. Mostly his arm, and possibly some ribs, were doing the snapping. Peter kicked the discarded knife away. Stick didn't move to get up.

Peter turned to look at the other two tactical thugs. He crossed his arms.

"Well?" He asked, shifting his gaze from one to the other.

The two thugs looked at each other. They shrugged. One reached for his gun.

"None of that." Peter chided. "This is between us. We don't want anyone else to get hurt."

The thug laughed but didn't draw the gun. Chuckles, that would work. The other slapped him on the chest, joining in on the joke. Slappy, that helps. The two of them squared up. Slappy popped another baton while Chuckles took out a knife that was practically a small machete.

"Now that's a knife." Peter quipped.

"Just supposed to rough you up, kid." Chuckles said as he approached. "Can't let you walk after that."

"Oh, good, you speak English." Peter said. "These next two minutes are going to be very important for you. You have some really critical decisions to make."

Slappy and Chuckles stared at him.

"The first decision you should consider is to walk away. You see that." Peter motioned to the whimpering lump that was Stick. "That was me taking it easy. I've had a really bad week and I don't feel like holding back."

"Jobs a job, kid." Chuckles shrugged as he took another step forward.

"I'm really doing you a kindness here." Peter shook his head. "We keep this up and I can't guarantee you're walking away from this."

The two continued to approach.

"Here's the thing, kid." Slappy finally spoke. "This ain't our first go. You did okay with the new guy, but we get paid to do this. It's our job. And we are GOOD at it."

"Alright." Peter sighed. "What do you want them to tell your family?"

Slappy took another step forward. Peter sprang to action. The duo seemed to move in slow motion. A solid punch landed in the center of Slappy's chest. He felt the armor plate in the vest break, as well as the bone underneath it. The impact lifted Slappy off his feet and sent him tumbling back toward the gate.

He turned to look at Chuckles. The man had stopped mid-step. Chuckles stared at the spot where Slappy had been a moment ago, where Peter now stood.

"Jobs a job, eh?" Peter planted a kick in Chuckles' stomach.

The tactical thug rocketed through the air. He collided with the chain link fence, bowing it in, but not quite punching through. Chuckles stayed suspended in the fence, practically folded over, held in place by the strained links.

Peter looked at the two guards at the gate. They shook their heads. One motioned to the ground next to him.

"We're here to guard the gate." The guard said. "You ain't the gate."

He turned away and headed to look for some lunch. A couple of convenience store hotdogs slathered in ketchup and large soda worked well enough. It didn't taste good, but he needed the calories, and it was cheap. He still had over forty dollars left.

Peter returned to the construction area. Chuckles, Slappy, and Stick had been collected. The two gate guards watched him approach but didn't say anything. Their hands stayed well away from their weapons. His spider-sense didn't even tingle when he walked through the gate. He joined the line to pick up the gear.

Hardhat Guy waved him over. He stepped inside the shed. Peter followed. Inside the place looked like a survival bunker. There were monitors along one wall and a stack of crates with the LexCorp logo. What surprised him the most was the staircase. It led down to a rather nice office.

"Kid." Hardhat Guy said with a sigh. "After that fight I can't keep you on. I'd love to, you've done more work in one shift than the last week. We just can't afford the heat that Penguin would bring if you're still here."

Peter nodded.

Hardhat Guy gave him another fifty dollars. "You more than earned this. Sorry, kid."

Peter took the money without a word. He gave Hardhat Guy a wave before leaving.

"Hey, kid." One of the gate guards called to him.

Peter looked over but didn't say anything.

"You're a meta, right?" The guard asked.

Peter shrugged.

"You just dropped three of our guys." The guard didn't sound bothered. "The boss won't be happy. Got a way to fix that though."

As much as Peter would love to tell them to shove off, he was only one guy. He didn't have his suit and he didn't know how much worse things could get for him. Peter motioned for the guy to continue.

"The boss only cares about two things, money and respect." The guard said he pulled out a business card. "Go to this address, show them the card, and you'll earn more money than you could ever make here."

"I'm not a criminal." Peter said without taking the card.

"You're not going to be knocking over banks or working the docks." The guard scoffed. "You can fight. People like to watch fights. You get paid to do what you're good at. The boss brings you in, it looks good on him. Everybody gets paid, no one has to get shot, no homeless shelters get burned down. Win-Win."

Peter took the business card. It had an address on it. The other side had a logo that matched the ones on the guard's coat. Peter One had said something about fighting for money. Underground Wrestling, the kind that wasn't scripted and no one pulled their punches. There were worse things to do for money.

3.

Peter sat in a booth toward the back of a diner. He had found the place on his way back to the shelter. The convenience store hotdogs were not filling, nor tasty. He practically floated like a cartoon once he caught the scent of this place. The waitress hadn't been over to take his order yet. It looked like there was only one lady working. He wasn't going to complain. Plus, it gave him some time to think.

He set the card on the table. His map was back at the shelter which meant the address was useless. The name made him want to laugh.

The Iceberg Lounge is owned by a guy named the Penguin. This place was wild. He seriously doubted that Doctor Octopus had a hideout called The Aquarium. His own themed bad guy encounter, Vulture, was given the name after the fact. He didn't want to think about Mysterio, that guy was an asshole.

That guard had called him a meta, which Peter took to mean enhanced. Most likely, that meant that the fights were for people with powers. He didn't have any real training. Sure, he had been in plenty of fights against bad guys with powers and aliens, but it wasn't like he was a boxer on top of all that. He trusted the tingle and just went with it. Peter also relied on his webs in the thick of things.

Unless they fought in a dome he'd be stuck on the ground. He'd be out of his element with nothing to fall back on except for moves he'd either seen Cap and Black Widow do, or professional wrestling. Granted, the pro wrestling moves could do some real damage. It took a lot of work to do that stuff and

keep injuries to a minimum. They were like stunt actors that put on shows multiple times a week without wires, crash pads, or protective gear.

He would have loved to powerbomb Goblin through some a few floors.

"Hey sweetie." A flirty voice snapped him out of his brooding. "What can I get you?"

Peter looked up to see an older woman waiting at the edge of his table.

"A burger, fries, and a soda, please." Peter said.

"Metropolis?" She asked.

"Hm?" Peter cocked his head to the side.

"Your accent." She clarified. "You should head back there. This ain't no place for a kid."

"Thanks." Peter schooled his expression. "I'm legal."

"Mhm." The waitress didn't sound convinced. Her eyes drifted to the card on the table in front of him. The small bit of kindness in her expression dropped. "Where did you get that?"

"Thug in tactical gear gave it to me." Peter didn't see the point in lying.

"Stay away from there." The waitress said. "They don't let you go unless you're in a body bag." She shuddered. "Sometimes not then."

Peter nodded. "Thanks."

"No problem, sweetie." The waitress hurried back to the window to the kitchen.

The people in Gotham were a strange mix of equal parts compassionate and jaded. Peter didn't know if someone would try to mug him or give him directions to a soup kitchen. He scanned the other patrons in the diner. Most of them had the look of day laborers like he was. There were a few guys who looked like they had the remnants of clown make-up that had been hastily scrubbed off. One of them would keep a lookout while the others ate. He got the feeling that they wouldn't be in for a good time if they got caught in this neighborhood.

Peter needed to figure out what to do for money. Accepting the offer on the card was not a good idea judging by the reaction of the waitress. He couldn't keep thinking like he was home. What he needed was more information. He didn't think it was the kind that he could get from a trip to the library either. Then again, this was a place that suggested the type of gasmasks that people should buy to keep safe.

The waitress came back with his food.

"Excuse me." Peter said before she could leave.

She looked at him with a tired expression.

"Can you tell me how to get to the library?" He asked.

"Sure, sweetie." The woman smiled. "Head to the intersection to the right, four streets up, two over, and one more up. They give kids a free backpack with some supplies if you get there while it's open. Sometimes they look the other way if you need a warm place to sleep too."

Peter sighed. He was too hungry to argue. It wasn't like he had an ID that he could use to show his age. He really needed to get something in order. Which all came back to money. Unfortunately, it would probably mean he'd have to resort to dealing with some shady people too. An ID and maybe a High School Diploma if possible. He didn't think he'd be able to head to college, but he wanted to at least have something to show his minimum level of education.

The food was tasty, and he made sure to leave good tip when he left too. He organized his thoughts on his way to the library. News articles were a good place to start. He could use those to identify possible leads. If nothing else, it would give him an area of the city to start exploring.

It wasn't until he walked to the third pawn shop that another idea came to mind. Peter stopped in front of the latest one. All things considered; the place looked pretty nice for a pawn shop. It was well-lit, there were a couple of security cameras, and the door had magnetic locks.

Peter backtracked a couple of blocks to another shop that wasn't as inviting. This one wasn't nearly as well lit. Thick metal bars covered the windows that worked as a deterrent and to obscure any casual glances trying to see what was inside. Just looking at it made him want to take a shower.

He stepped inside to find two guys waiting behind the counter. One guy looked like the average shop owner, if a little more on the wary side, while the other was simply there to look imposing. The shotgun across his lap helped in that regard.

"What do you want kid?" The guy who wasn't visibly armed asked.

Peter strolled over to the counter without bothering to look at what the shop had on display.

"I need documents." He said simply.

"Go to the library." The guy gave a harsh laugh.

"You know what I mean." Peter didn't rise to the bait.

"No." The guy said firmly. "Tell me exactly what you need."

"I need a working ID and social security card." Peter clarified. "I'm not looking to pretend I'm twenty-one to get drunk. I just need to prove I exist on paper."

The guy studied him for a long moment. He looked to the armed man.

"You're not a cop." The armed man stated. "Papers that will hold up aren't cheap."

"How much?" Peter asked with a sigh.

"Five hundred for the ID." The armed man answered. "One grand for the social."

Peter blew out a long breath.

"What do you need an ID for anyway?" The first guy asked.

"A job." Peter answered. "A place to stay."

"This is Gotham, all you need is cash for that." The guy scoffed.

Peter waved a hand at himself. "Do I look like I have cash?"

The guy shrugged.

"You could work down at the docks." The armed man offered. "They don't ask questions. Just be sure you don't ask any."

That was the second time someone had mentioned the docks.

"Either way." The armed man continued. "Fifteen hundred for the documents. All in advance."

"Looks like I'm going to the docks." Peter said with a sigh.

He waved as he left the shop. The duo watched Peter go.

"I give him a week before he heads back to Metropolis." The armed man said once the door was closed.

"A week?" The other guy snorted. "Two days, tops. He'll be dead in a week."

The thug at the construction site had mentioned the docks and now the pawn shop guy had as well. Whatever was going on there didn't sound like it was of the legal variety. The first thing that came to mind was smuggling. Using a legitimate traffic to cover the shady import and export was pretty standard. Criminals could move stolen goods, weapons, drugs, and even people among the freight headed to supermarket shelves.

If his experience with Vulture was anything close to normal, that meant a lot of cash changing hands.

Peter meandered through the streets. Eventually he found himself at a thrift store. He grabbed a basket and began to idly browse the shelves. It wasn't until he found himself in the sporting goods section that he realized what he was doing. Peter stood in front of a display for biker masks. There were half-face styles as well as the classic balaclava.

There was a black half-face mask with a spider-web pattern. He had to get it. The shelf next to it had gloves. An off-brand set of black moto-cross gloves went in the basket as well. He didn't have enough money to get a new pair of shoes as well, but he would need a clothes. A pair of black compression leggings and red basketball shorts were next. He ended his shopping spree with a red hoody. It was close to his home-made suit that he had first used. The main difference being that the blue had been replaced with black and he didn't have any goggles.

Peter took a spot in line and waited. The lady at the register stopped once she rang up the mask.

"This rated as a filter." She said holding it up.

"It's to keep my face warm." Peter replied.

The lady shrugged. She finished ringing everything up and moved to the next customer. Peter wrapped the bag tightly into a ball, taking time to make sure all of the air was out, and tucked it against his side.

He didn't want a repeat of his first night again. There was one more stop before he was ready for tonight. A free backpack from the library wouldn't raise any eyebrows if he was carrying it.

Was it still stealing if he was taking money from criminals? Yes, it was. Peter was having a hard time caring. It had been a long week.

He wasn't going to be knocking over some mom-and-pop store. His plan was to steal money from criminals. It wasn't heroic. He didn't have an expansive plan to shake the underworld by the core. It was stealing, plain and simple. They stole it from someone, he was stealing it from them.

Peter spent the next couple of hours slowly making his way to the docks. Gotham, unlike New York City, was spread across a collection of eleven islands of varying size. The three largest of the group their own docks. He had to cross a river to get to Old Gotham. Luckily, the bridges seemed well maintained. Even the walkways looked like they were in good condition.

It was getting close to sunset by the time he arrived at the edge of the industrial area. He wasn't all the surprised when he found out the Iceberg Lounge was a few blocks away from the docks. Peter wasn't sure if it was just his imagination, or not, but the streetlights weren't as bright the closer they got. That worked in his favor tonight.

Peter scaled a building via a rusted fire escape before he changed to his improvised costume. It wouldn't be good if someone saw him climb the walls. He wanted to play it close to his chest for now. Keeping the connection between tonight and his eventual debut as Spider-Man hidden was for the best. He was already taking a risk with the costume.

No sticking to walls. Try not to jump around too much. Hit hard, move fast.

The rooftops were perfect for travel. He could easily jump from one to the next without relying on his powers. It was only when he moved from the rooftops to the stacks of shipping containers that he needed to push beyond what a normal person could do. Well, a normal person who was good at parkour.

As quietly as he could, he patrolled along the docks. There were a few boats actively unloading freight, but they looked legit. Not that he expected criminals to be obvious about it. Most of the areas that had workers were fenced off with visible security. They didn't give off the vibe as the thugs at the construction site. These ones had an office with monitors, radios, and uniforms that looked mass produced rather than tactical. There was also a certain '*I don't get paid enough for this*' walk that night security always had.

He kept moving along the docks until around midnight. That was when things started to get interesting. A couple of black SUVs with tinted windows so dark they were opaque pulled up to what looked like an empty shipping container. The logo on the side of it split open, allowing the vehicle to pass through. It sealed back closed after it was inside. Even knowing where the door was, it was hard to see.

The hidden door was located in a container on the bottom of a block. It was three high and three wide and ten long. The block of containers was set a distance away from the others making it one of the few that couldn't be easily reached. He had no idea what was inside. Unfortunately, it was also his best lead of the night.

Peter hopped over a few stacks to get a closer look. Forgotten transport cables hid security cameras. He pressed himself flat against the container and scurried over on the tips of his fingers and toes. The only way he was going to get inside was with his powers. It should be fine. As long as no one saw him. And if he wasn't caught on camera.

A quick circuit around the block of containers let him know that there were only cameras on the corners. That didn't make sense considering how long it was. He had to expect that there was some sort of security along the open stretches.

"My, my." A sultry voice spoke from nearby. "What have we here?"

Peter spun around to see a woman dressed in all black standing nearby. She had goggles with red lenses and a what looked like a whip rolled on her hip. The lack of cape and pointy ears told him she wasn't one of the many bats.

His spider-sense hadn't alert him to danger.

"Pizza delivery." Peter said without thinking. "Thirty minutes or it's free. Just can't find the doorbell."

The woman gave him a small smile. "Cute."

"Thanks." Peter replied. "Am I on your turf?"

"My turf?" The woman scoffed. "Do I look like one of those two-bit thugs?"

"No." He said quickly. "You're better dressed than they are."

"Aw." She smiled. "It warms a girls heart knowing someone notices."

He wasn't sure if she was flirting with him or threatening him. No. Flirting wasn't the right word. It was like when girls would try to use him to do their homework.

"I just found this place." Peter said motioning to the block. "If you already had plans..."

"I did." She purred. "But now I'm curious."

She sauntered over to the edge. Somehow, she made flopping down look elegant. She swung her feet over the side of the container. Her hand patted the spot beside her.

"You're new here." She said as he sat next to her, though not as close as she had directed. "I'm guessing you don't know who I am."

"Sorry, no." Peter shook his head.

"Catwoman." She said, waiting for a response.

"Nice to meet you." He replied. "I haven't come up with a name yet."

"You need to get your own before they give you one." Catwoman said seriously. "You do not want to get stuck with whatever some sleep deprived reporter decides to call you."

"I got this stuff from a thrift store." Peter motioned to his outfit. "Thrift Store Man doesn't sound intimidating."

"The web is a nice touch." She said thoughtfully. "You could run with that."

"It was this or bright pink camo." Peter tried to play it off.

"Tell me, kid, what do you see here?" Catwoman asked motioning to the container block.

"It's a hideout." Peter replied, shifting back to the task at hand. "I've seen one door, that one was well hidden, and there has to be more. Each corner has a cameras on it. Either they think that, and the hidden door is enough security, or I'm missing something. I haven't gotten close enough to take a look at the roof. Until I figure out how they're monitoring the sides, I'm not going to risk it."

"Good start." She patted him on the shoulder.

He noticed that her gloves had claws.

"There is an exit on the other side and two access points underground. One of which is an escape tunnel, the other shouldn't be mentioned in polite company." Catwoman continued. "They've got pressure sensors on the roof and the top row along the side are windows covered with a façade. Without any gear, you're stuck."

Peter sighed.

"What do you want in there anyway?" Catwoman asked.

"Money." Peter answered simply. He knew he probably shouldn't be talking so casually about breaking into a criminal hideout, but this was the most conversation he'd had in the last couple of days. Not only that, but she was also easy to talk to. "A place like this, there has to be some deals being made. That means lots of cash and these guys can't exactly call the cops."

"You don't know what crew that is?" Catwoman asked with a bit of humor in her voice.

"The Iceberg Lounge is a few blocks away." Peter replied. "Penguin probably. I don't seem someone that well known allowing anyone else to be so close."

"What was your plan then?" Catwoman asked. "After you got in, that is?"

"Scope out the place, find where the cash is, and take it." Peter answered.

"That simple?" Catwoman shook her head.

"I like to keep my options open." Peter shrugged. "What's your plan?"

"Who says I have a plan?" Catwoman asked with smirk.

"Did I interrupt your evening job?" Peter countered.

"Knock out the power, trip the alarm on the far side." Her voice was slightly less playful. "Temporarily disable the pressure plates, enter through the air vent, move through the support beams, located my prize, grab it, and leave the way I came in."

"What is your prize?" He asked.

"Never tell them what you're after." Catwoman waggled a finger at him. "Professional courtesy only goes so far."

"No honor among thieves?" Peter asked with a chuckle.

"There's plenty of honor, but not nearly enough loot." Catwoman said laughing with him. "Alright, kid, let's go."

Catwoman stood up.

"Go where?" Peter asked looking up at her.

"Home." She replied. "Stealing money from Penguin is a fast way to get a price on your head. If I go in there, I'm betting you're desperate enough to follow. The only thing to do is to come back later."

Peter watched her walk away. The sway of her hips was nice, but he was more confused than anything.

"Why are you taking me home?" Peter asked as he hopped to his feet and followed after her.

"I get a good sense about you." Catwoman didn't turn to face him. "A bit of guidance and you'd make a name for yourself in no time. Bast knows there are enough Batgirls in the city that could use a cutie like you to flirt with."

"I'm wearing a mask." Peter said pointing to his face. The fact that she wasn't looking at him didn't help his argument.

"We'll fix that." Catwoman said before jumping over to the next stack.

She didn't stop, continuing on from one to the next. Peter found himself following her. They came to a stop once they hit the rooftops. It was a different angle than his approach.

"First lesson." Catwoman said finally turning to face him. "Never travel in a direct route. You never know when you're being followed." She subtly inclined her head to the right.

Peter stole a quick look, covering it with a sneeze. He could see the outline of someone on the rooftops across the street and a little ahead of them. It was too far for the details, but he got the idea.

"Unfortunately." Catwoman sighed. "They know where I live, so it won't help."

"They know where you live?" Peter asked.

"It's complicated." Catwoman crossed her arms. "Give it a moment."

His spider-sense let him know someone was approaching from their left. This one wasn't the figure they had already spotted. He pretended he wasn't aware, not wanting to tip his hand yet. So far, most of what he had done tonight could be explained away as an athletic person rather than someone with powers.

"Selina." A deep rumble of a voice spoke from their left.

Peter was startled at the sound even knowing someone was there.

"Please, Bats." Catwoman groaned. "We wear masks for a reason."

They turned to face the imposing figure that could only be Batman. Even without the suit, the guy was probably on par with Captain America in build. Peter studied him for a moment. This was the first time he had seen someone with tech that didn't look out of date. Even then, it was more like tactical armor than Iron Man. The only thing that stood out as technology was the slight sheen to his eyes. They were still visible, but Peter got the impression that there was probably a barrier. Most likely, something for a Head Up Display similar to the first suit that Mr. Stark gave him.

"Who's this?" Batman asked, not even bothering to look at Peter.

"My kid." Catwoman replied offhandedly.

Batman tilted his head to the side.

"What?" Catwoman purred, strolling over to him. "Are you the only mask that can pick up strays?" She paused. "Stray, that's a good one. Keep it in mind."

Peter found himself nodding.

"This isn't a game, Selina." Batman didn't acknowledge how she was now practically hanging off of him.

"But it's so fun." Catwoman pouted. "Oh, ease up Bats. The kid has potential and with my help, he won't end up dead trying to steal from the wrong person."

Peter watched the scene unfold. It felt like she was trying to convince her husband they could adopt a puppy. She wasn't kidding when she said it was complicated.

"You weren't here for me, were you." She huffed dramatically. "It was just a happy accident. You're on your way to the docks to bust up that deal Penguin has going tonight."

"What do you know, Selina?" Batman said in the gravelly voice.

Peter wondered if he practiced that, or did he need tea with some honey at the end of each night.

"Stolen goods. Priceless jewels. Loads of cash." Catwoman sounded bored now. "Go on. Do your thing. You know where to find me." She started to jog toward the edge of the building. "Come on, kid. I've got a warm bowl of milk waiting."

Peter followed behind her. They made good time. Most of the jumps from one building to another were done quickly. There were a few times he purposely had to shorten a leap, aiming for a fire escape, window ledge, or pipe to make it look convincing. Each time he found Catwoman waiting on the roof playing with her whip. He had seen that it was more than what first appeared. It could stretch much farther than its length and easily held her weight.

"You're good." Catwoman said with an appreciative nod. "We'll go to one of my safe houses. Getting to my penthouse isn't possible without gear." She looked him over. "I should have some street clothes that will fit you."

"Why would we need street clothes?" Peter asked.

"It would be silly for Catwoman and Thrift Store Man to be seen driving around the city." Catwoman quipped.

4.

Her safehouse apartment building was small but felt like it had been well used. The style was a few years out of date, which made him think that this had been her actual place at one time. There wasn't a fire escape. Instead, it had to a greenhouse that stretched the width of the alley. The building opposite the apartment appeared to be some sort of office. A quick look told him it was a free clinic. The greenhouse was an open to the public as well.

"I've got people who check to make sure nothing unseemly gets planted inside." Catwoman said once she saw where he was looking. "They are dragging their feet legalizing a certain plant, so I can't have it around just yet."

"You'll break into a criminal hideout and plant a community garden." Peter asked. "Steal from the rich and give to the poor?"

"With a healthy cut for myself." Catwoman said with a laugh. "Nothing so selfless. Take care of the people and they will take care of you. They know how the city feels, so I know how the city feels."

"Got it." Peter nodded.

"Come on, kid." Catwoman bounced off the wall and up to the top of the greenhouse.

Peter followed suit with a bit of a run-up. He didn't want it to look too easy. Catwoman didn't wait for him. She scaled the side of the building; he guessed it had something to do with her gloves and possibly her boots. The closest window was three stories higher than the top of the greenhouse. He couldn't explain being able to follow her without showing his powers. She seemed nice, and apparently had decided to take him as a protégé, but he wasn't going to be so trusting anymore.

He took a closer look at the wall. There was a track of claw marks in the brick that showed she did this kind of entry a lot. Peter attempted to put his fingers in the divots, but there wasn't enough for a grip. There was too much distance between the other buildings to be able to logically bounce from one side to the other.

Peter looked up to see Catwoman sitting on the window watching him. She didn't move to help. It seemed this was a test. He widened his search and his gaze settled on the nearby streetlight. It faced the front of the building rather than the side, but it was better than nothing. He had seen enough parkour videos to get an idea.

He hopped back to the ground. Knowing that he was being watched, he took a running start. He made it up the streetlight three big steps before he latched on with his hands. Leaning back, keeping his feet on the pole, he pushed, keeping himself from slipping. Slowly, he climbed until he reached the bend in the light. A quick scramble swapped his grip from the vertical part to the horizontal bit. He pulled himself up, hooked his legs on the bar, and then sat there to take a breath.

Carefully, he got his feet on the bar, and crouched with his hands still holding it for balance. The front of the building had a window on the second and third floor. The fourth, where Catwoman waited, was blank. Still, it was a better option than suddenly climbing without any form of assistance.

Peter pushed off, leaping from the streetlight to the window on the third floor. His hands grabbed the ledge, holding on via his fingertips.

"American Ninja, eat your heart out." Peter grunted as he pulled himself up.

The ledge wasn't wide enough for him to stand straight on it. His feet could fit if he turned them to the side. He did so, as he stood, pressing himself against the window. There wasn't a path higher, which meant the only thing to do was to stop trying to go up. Now it was time to go forward.

Peter slid his fingers along the bottom edge of the window. It was locked. A small smile crossed his face as he looked at it. He knew this kind of window; it was the same kind that he had in his bedroom. They also opened at the top.

He found the ridge at the top of the window and shimmed it open. Gripping the side of the interior wall, he braced himself and climbed through. He found himself in a hallway rather than an apartment. Peter closed the window and quietly headed for the stairs.

There was only one apartment on the next floor. The door looked solid, as well as the frame, and it even had a video doorbell.

Peter knocked. Catwoman opened it a moment later. She had taken off her goggles.

"Nice job." She said stepping aside to let him in. "Where did you learn to climb like that."

"I've had to climb a telephone pole to get my shoes back a time or two." Peter answered.

It was only a half truth. He hadn't tried to climb it, but that was before he had powers. They couldn't afford a new pair in the aftermath of the invasion, so he had to wear May's old work shoes with torn cloth in the toes.

"Hm." Catwoman said. "I didn't think things like that happened in Metropolis."

"Every city has slums." Peter replied.

The interior of the apartment was much nicer than the building would have let on. It had an open floorplan with wood floors, leather furniture, and granite counters. There were only two doors, which he assumed were to the bathroom and the bedroom.

"Take off the mask, kid." She said strolling over to one of the doors. "I'll look for something for you to wear."

Peter felt silly now that she mentioned it. He wasn't going to be recognized. The only reason he had it on for tonight was so that his face wasn't captured on camera. There was a chance the thugs from the construction site would be there too, but they didn't even have his name.

He took off the mask and tucked it in the hoody pocket. After a moment he added the gloves as well. He didn't see a coat hanger, so he kept the sweater on.

Catwoman returned a couple of minutes later. She was dressed in a pair of black sweats that were just shy of being skintight. Her top was a shimmery purple that had one shoulder exposed.

"I knew you were a cutie." She smiled at him as she came to a stop. "Selina Kyle, and you are?"

"Peter Parker." He replied. "It's nice to meet you."

"Polite too." Selina chuckled. "These are the only clothes I had that were close to your size."

Peter took the folded stack of clothes. He looked around the apartment for somewhere to change. Turning back to Selina, he saw her smiling.

"The bathroom is over there." She pointed to the other door.

"Thanks." Peter hurried over and slipped inside.

He thought about locking the door, but that felt silly. This was her apartment. Not to mention she was a professional thief. A simple bathroom door wouldn't stop her if she wanted in. Considering how she was talking to Batman; it didn't seem like she would be interested anyway.

The bathroom was nearly as big as his bedroom back home. There was a tube that looked more like a jacuzzi and ceiling mounted shower head.

Peter winced as he undressed. His clothes smelled like sweat and grime. He had forgotten that part of using a homemade costume. They had to be washed constantly or he smelled like a locker room.

"Could I take a shower?" Peter asked, popping his head out.

"Sure, kid." Selina replied. "There should be towels."

"Thank you." Peter closed the door and stripped the rest of the costume off.

He didn't see anywhere to put it. Leaving the costume on the floor felt disrespectful. He folded it and put it on the edge of the sink as far away as he could from the clean stack. The shower was just as luxurious as it looked. As were the towels. Unfortunately, he wasn't so lucky with the clothes.

Peter stepped out of the bathroom dressed in a pair of sweats that were only different from the ones Selina wore in color, the shirt was a promotional one for a pizza place. There weren't any socks in the stack, but there were a nice pair of pink and green sneakers. He decided that putting the dirty clothing back on didn't make sense, putting the shoes on without them.

Selina laughed when she saw him.

"I'm sorry." She said, sounding anything but. "The only clothes I had for a guy were way too big for you."

"I've worn worse." He shrugged. "What do you want me to do with my costume?"

"Throw it away." Selina answered quickly. "You're not going to wear that ever again."

Peter let out a low sigh. It made sense, but he had bought them with the money he had earned.

"None of that." She said in a surprisingly sharp tone. "Do you realize what you did for me tonight?"

"Provided quality conversation?" Peter asked.

"Saved me ruining a perfectly good plan." Selina said as she crossed her arms. "If I would have used that approach on that hideout only for the Bats to show up, it would have been a bust. Maybe, maybe, they would have been too busy handling whatever deal Penguin had going on. Most likely, I would have ended up empty handed with my resources wasted." She relaxed. "Now, I've got my own kid to focus my attention on."

"Your own kid?" Peter asked slowly.

"Bats has like five of them." She waved off the question. "I swear he can't pass an orphanage without grabbing a new one."

"Seriously?" Peter scrunched his brow in thought.

"Not literally." Selina laughed. "There's Robin, Red Hood, Red Robin, Batgirl, the other Batgirl, the old Batgirl, and Nightwing. The last two aren't kids so much anymore. They started as kids though. The original sidekicks."

"Wow." Peter blinked.

"Come on." Selina waved to him to follow. "We've got a little drive ahead of us."

He followed her down to the bottom floor which turned out to be a garage rather than more apartments. She saw him looking around.

"I own the entire building." Selina explained. "This is the garage, the second floor is my planning room, and storage. Sometimes it takes a while to fence the goods. Or I want to keep them and they're too hot to take to my place."

Peter nodded. He didn't expect to become an apprentice thief, but here he was.

Her car, like everything else, was pure luxury. The doors opened with a beep-boop. Peter sank into the passenger seat, surprised to find it wasn't leather. The brick wall folded away as she started the car. They slid back in place once they cleared the line.

"Tell me, Peter." Selina said as she drove. "What were you going to do with the money?"

"I need papers." Peter replied with a shrug. "I can't get a real job, a place to live, or even go to school without them."

"You could have gotten enough money for that hitting an armored car." Selina said. "Less dangerous too."

"It wouldn't be for the guards." Peter shook his head. "I don't like hurting people. Stealing from criminals doesn't hurt anyone who didn't sign up for it."

Selina nodded. They settled in silence for a moment.

"One suitcase would be a minimum of four-hundred and fifty thousand." She said easily. "Those are some expensive papers. You're a fit kid, you could carry a couple. That's close to a cool million."

She let the words hang in the air. Peter sighed. What did he have to lose?

"I needed the money to make a suit." Peter leaned his head against the window. "Something better than thrift store athletic wear."

"And what would you be doing once you had this million-dollar suit?" Selina asked, there was a slight tease in her voice under the curiosity.

"Help people." Peter shrugged.

"Fight crime?" She asked. "Do I need to watch myself?"

"I'd help people." Peter rolled his eyes at her. "Muggings, assaults, robbery, emergencies, and that sort of thing. I would help where I could. You're not trying to blow up the neighborhood or knocking over mom-and-pop stores."

"I'm the good kind of bad guy?" Selina laughed.

"You're not a bad guy." Peter closed his eyes and enjoyed the cool glass against his forehead.

"We just met." She scoffed. "Who's to say I'm not planning on kidnapping you and turning you into some mindless drone? You could be one of the many that I've snatched off the street to build an army."

Peter gave her a flat stare without bothering to move his head from the glass.

"In Gotham, that's not unheard of." Selina teased.

"You're too smart for that." Peter replied.

"Oh?" Selina laughed. "I'm sure the guy turning people into a mindless army would beg to differ."

"And he would be wrong." Peter said. "There's no point. You are different. You've got a target, you do your research, and then execute. Genius in the simplicity. Tonight, you recognized the approach was wrong and were able to adjust. The guy making a brainwashed army is going to be too invested in their plan to even think something can go wrong."

"Not bad, kid." Selina said turning her attention back to the road. "Here's the deal. I know some people who can get you papers and a suit. You stick around with me for a while to pay back the favor. After a bit, we split on good terms. I don't like to hurt people. Getting in and out without anyone seeing me is a sign of a job well done."

"What do you get out of it?" Peter asked.

"Call it my good deed." Selina shrugged. "You want to help the little guy. I'm fine with that. The little guy has nothing to worry about from me. You clean up the streets and make the people feel safe between madmen planting bombs and setting things on fire."

"I'll get the papers and the suit after, I'm guessing." Peter said.

"You guess correctly." Selina replied. "We're almost there. We'll have some food, get some sleep, and then go shopping in the morning. You can't keep wearing my clothes even if those pants make your butt good enough to bite."

The safe house had been deceptively fancy. Her apartment, while not a penthouse, was even more luxurious. It didn't have that same lived-in feel to it though. Various paintings and sculptures, all depicting cats, decorated every room. They weren't any that he recognized, but they all appeared to be quite expensive. Peter wasn't much of an art connoisseur, so he wasn't sure if there were any pieces that he should have been able to identify.

Selina had shown him to a guestroom and left him to get settled in. Peter stripped out of the borrowed clothes before crawling into the bed. It was the softest mattress he had ever slept on. When he woke

up, there was a stack of freshly purchased clothes waiting for him. A pair of jeans, some sneakers, and a simple T-shirt that were close enough in size. Thankfully, the pants weren't skintight.

He got dressed. Peter followed the scent of toast to the kitchen. Selina was waiting for him. She leaned against the counter eating a slice of toast while watching an elaborate machine produce coffee.

"I hope you didn't expect breakfast. I don't cook." Selina motioned to the fridge. "Help yourself."

"I do." Peter said with a smile.

He opened the fridge to find it mostly empty aside from a carton of eggs, a couple gallons of various types of milk. He shrugged before whipping up some scrambled eggs for both of them. Luckily, she had a decent selection of spices.

"What do you usually eat for breakfast?" Peter asked as he watched the eggs.

"Coffee." Selina answered as she poured herself a fresh cup. "Do you want some?"

"Yes, please." Peter replied with a nod. "Thank you for the clothes."

"I couldn't be seen with you dressed the way you were." Selina huffed.

Peter hid a smile. He had a feeling Selina wasn't used to getting legitimate thanks from people.

"If you'd like." He said as he turned off the heat. "We could stop for some groceries so I can make breakfast."

Selina made a noncommittal sound. She motioned to where the plates were stored. Peter grabbed a couple and served up the eggs. He couldn't see a table, so he set them out on the kitchen island.

"It would be better with some cheese." Peter said, finding the silverware drawer. "Some bacon on the side, or crumbles mixed in. I've never been a fan of peppers in my eggs."

Selina took a bite. She nodded, then proceeded to scarf them down.

"I will order delivery." She said with a shrug.

They finished their meal in silence. Peter loaded them into a dishwasher that looked brand-new.

"Let's go." Selina motioned for him to follow to the elevator.

When Selina had mentioned shopping, he had thought she meant a department store, or the mall. Peter did not expect to be standing on a raised platform being measured for a tailored suit. There had been a bag of clothes waiting for him when he woke up,

"Why do I need a suit?" Peter asked looking over at her.

Selina was currently camped out on a nearby chair. Every now and then she would suggest a different color or add more to the order. So far, he had five two-piece suits, two three-piece suits, and an entirely new wardrobe of casual clothes that probably cost more than a reasonably priced car.

"You're going to look good if you're going to be my apprentice." She replied. "After this, we'll go see my guy who makes suits for more rugged activities."

"All done." The tailor announced. "Send it to the usual address?"

"Of course." Selina said with a wink. "The same account as well. Double the tip as my thanks for fitting us in on such short notice."

"You are too kind." The tailor inclined their head.

"Let's go." Selina stood, somehow making it look graceful.

Peter followed her out to the car. He scooted ahead of her to open her door. She shook her head before slipping into the driver's seat.

"What can you do?" Selina asked once he had joined her.

Peter looked at her.

"You're a Meta." Selina continued. "What can you do?"

"Why do you think I'm a Meta?" He asked.

"I was watching you on your way to the docks." She replied. "You jump to far without equipment."

There wasn't much point in lying if she had already seen him. Still, he wasn't going to tell her everything.

"I'm stronger than I look, and I heal fast. It takes time, but a broken bone only takes a couple of days." Peter sighed. "I was trying to keep it a secret."

"You were pretty convincing at the end of the night." Selina nodded. "We'll get you a grappling system to help hide it. Faster healing isn't too obvious. Bullets still hurt?"

"I'm not bulletproof." Peter scoffed. "Knives, guns, and all that are a problem."

The ride to the other suit maker was shorter than he expected. Peter thought the place would be tucked away in some industrial area. Instead, the building was upscale and unmarked. Only people who knew about it would know what it was.

Selina parked out front. She clicked the alarm without a look back as she stepped up to the door. It didn't have a handle and there wasn't a call box. Peter stood beside her; she didn't seem bothered. The door popped as the seal was broken signaling them to step back. It swung open, they stepped inside a little area with another door in front of them. The one behind closed. A metallic clunk sounded as the lock engaged just as the way before them swung open.

"Selina." A happy voice called.

She led him down a short hallway that opened to a warehouse sized room. An old man stood nearby waiting for them.

"You had me worried when I got your call." The man wagged a finger at her. "I had thought you had destroyed another one of my suits."

"Another?" Peter asked.

Selina ignored him. The old man seemed to see him for the first time. He hurried over to Peter, walking around him in a tight circle. The old man was muttering as he moved.

"Something in black?" The old man asked.

"Same as mine but fit for him." She replied.

"Mask and whip as well?" He asked with a smile.

"Mask yes, whip no." She chuckled. "Did you work out that wrist grapple you were tinkering on last time?"

"No." The old man grumbled. "The force needed to launch the hook to be effective is too much for the wrist to take. I went through four different volunteers before I figured that out. It did lead to a breakthrough in a compact launcher."

"One for me and the same for my protégé." Selina said. "How long?"

"I can get it to you tonight." The old man replied with a proud look. "Any special orders for the young man, or standard build?"

Selina studied Peter for a moment. "As cute as he'd look with a fur trim to his collar, I think the standard build will work for now."

Peter gave her a mock glare.

"No later than tonight." The old man said as he literally skipped away.

"That's it?" Peter asked, looking from the old man to Selina.

"He's got a gift." Selina replied with a shrug. "Let's go."

"Where to now?" Peter asked as he followed her back through the doors.

"Lunch. Then home to change." Selina replied, this time she opened the car door for him.

"Thank you." Peter said. "After that?"

"It's a surprise." Selina purred.

5.

Peter eyed Selina as they walked through the party. After a nice lunch at an open-air café, she directed him to dress in one of his new suits. The dapper kind, not the one for nighttime excursions. After that, they arrived at a large building that apparently was set aside solely for parties like this. Charity balls, holiday events, and all the usual rich people used to show off. Back home, he had only had to go to a couple as Tony's guest.

Was it home anymore? He didn't think he could ever go back. Not only did no one remember him, it was possible that his return could unravel the universe. Making Gotham his new home was the best option for the time being.

"You're brooding." Selina whispered.

"Am not." Peter grumped.

"I know brooding, you are brooding." Selina gave him a sly look.

"What are we doing here?" He asked.

He scanned the room. Aside from the numerous well-dressed rich people, there was an impressive number of security. They ranged from simple guys in suits to full on tactical gear.

"Why are there so many armed guards?" Peter asked quietly.

"We're in Gotham, kid." Selina chuckled. "Any gathering of more than two people is a potential bad guy target. Luckily, that psycho in clown makeup is locked away. Otherwise, they wouldn't dare hold this little get-together."

Peter arched an eyebrow as he motioned to the crowd around them. "This is little?"

"You're so cute." Selina wrinkled her nose at him. "This is for the Gotham Metropolitan Art Gallery. Most of the people here are B-List rich. Only a Wayne party would bring out the big spenders." Her expression turned a bit sour. "Luthor is trying to push in, but Gotham doesn't buy his act. We know slime when we see it."

"I'm lost." Peter muttered.

"I'll get you caught up on all the movers and shakers." Selina hooked his arm with her own. "This is more of a test run."

"A test for what?" Peter asked.

"An important skill." Selina leaned in close to share a big secret. "Information gathering."

Peter wasn't impressed. She rolled her eyes.

"Rich people, especially the B-Listers, love to brag." Selina continued. "They can't wait to tell everyone about their new house, piece of art, or jewelry that they picked up."

"And then you break into their place and steal it?" Peter asked flatly.

Selina held up a finger to her mouth giving the universal sign to be quiet. She fixed him with a teasing glare. At the same time, she plucked a flute of champagne from a passing waiter.

"No." She huffed. "That would be too easy. We take this information and read between the lines." She paused to take a sip. "A new house or apartment means that someone with cash in the bank is moving. Which leads to a possible shake-up in the hierarchy. It could also mean some shiny bits and baubles will be mobile. In our line of work, a moving target is easier to hit. No matter how 'secure' they try to make it, there are too many variables to consider."

Peter gave her an impressed look.

"Art usually means smugglers." She continued. "It's easy to hide high value goods among other high value goods."

"The same with jewelry?" Peter asked.

"You're paying attention." She smiled at him. "It can mean smuggling. There is also money laundering. Following that lead opens up an even larger range of potential. Every operation needs to launder their ill-gotten gains. Smugglers, arms dealers, drug runners, and traffickers. We stay away from arms dealers, that a fast track to getting shot. I do not recommend that. Drug runners can be dangerous too. Grabbing a payday from them makes things messy."

"Messy, how?" Peter asked, bracing for the answer.

"Lots of angry armed thugs looking for someone to blame." Selina shook her head sadly. "The cash from their deal is gone and that means some dangerous people aren't getting paid. That leads to innocent people getting caught in the crossfire."

"No drugs, got it." Peter nodded.

"I knew I picked a good one." Selina beamed. "Smugglers, are a mixed bag. Mostly they move stolen goods, artifacts, and sometimes tech. You have to be careful with them because you never know when something shiny might open a portal to some hell-world."

"Speaking from experience?" Peter asked with a chuckle.

Selina huffed.

"The last category." The humor in her voice disappeared. "Traffickers. They move people. Any chance they show up, we hit them hard."

Peter nodded. "That's something I completely agree with."

Her smile returned. "If the operation is too big, we pull back and call in the Bats."

"Anything else?" Peter led her over a secluded spot.

"We can't hit everything, kid." Selina shrugged. "You come across a working girl, keep an eye out for her. If it's a bad situation, tell me about it. I've got contacts."

Peter chewed on his lower lip as he mulled that information over.

"Working girls are great sources." Selina placed a hand on his arm. "As long as they are getting treated right, it's not our call. Gotham looks after its own out here. I guarantee you will find more solidarity on the streets at night than any of these parties."

He shrugged, she had been doing this longer than he had.

"Now come on, it's time to mingle." She seemed to flip a switch, her attitude down to her posture changed. "Follow me and take notes."

Selina led him back out to the crowd. The next hour was a masterclass in working a source. With a laugh and a casual question, the people were more than happy to tell her everything. Peter watched in awe as Selina effortlessly got a guy to provide his home address and alarm codes. She shot him a wink after that. The guy didn't even pause before continuing to go on about where he got his security, how he set them up, and how he constantly tripped his own alarm.

Around sunset the party dispersed. Even with the impressive security, no one wanted to be caught out after dark. They went out back rather than follow the rush of people to the valet.

"Slip the guys a twenty and they'll have your car ready to go." Selina said as they passed one of the servers. "Never, never underestimate how far some money and being polite will get you. The servers, valet, waitstaff, and cleaners get treated like they don't exist at best, or vermin at the worst. A few regular visits and you'll find yourself on some Christmas card lists."

Peter laughed at that.

"Thanks, Al." Selina said as she took the keys from one of the valet from when they arrived. "Did you settle on a major yet?"

"No." The guy, Al, sighed. "I just can't decide between robotics and culinary."

"You'll do great." Selina slipped him a couple of fifties.

"What about a robot that cooks?" Peter offered.

Al thought about it. "That... might work."

Peter settled in the passenger seat. They waved to Al as the car pulled away.

"Next time, you'll take the lead and I'll observe." Selina said as she navigated the gathering traffic. "It can be a pain in the ass, but it's part of the gig."

Peter sighed but still nodded.

"Now that we've got that part settled, let's discuss the after-dark crowd." Selina tapped a couple of buttons on the dash.

Peter raised an eyebrow in question.

"Surveillance jamming." Selina answered. "You can never be too careful."

He shrugged.

"There are three categories of masks in the city." Selina kept her eyes on the road. "The Bats, we'll talk about them at length later, the rogues, like you and me, and the psychos, I shouldn't have to explain that one."

"You're not selling me on sticking around." Peter cocked his head to look at her.

"Come on, kid." Selina shook her head. "I can tell you're like me. You'd go out of your mind in some mundane life. Excitement, adventure, and some romance, that's what you crave."

Peter sighed. Damn, she was right. After getting bitten by the spider he could have become a sports star. Instead, he decided to put on a mask and help people. He volunteered to fight Thanos. He went against Strange and helped the guys who were pulled to his world. Even in the worst time, he couldn't just let things happen.

"Please, continue." Peter said after a moment.

"That's the spirit." Selina smirked at him. "Starting with the rogues. There's Riddler. He's mostly just annoying. We usually leave each other alone. He likes to try to stump Batman with puzzles and Riddles. Rarely, he even commissions me to snag something. An ancient puzzle box, or something like that. He's tried to kill me a couple of times, but there's no hard feelings." She said that last bit like she was talking about the weather. "Croc, or Killer Croc, isn't as bad as people think. He sticks to the sewers and the wetlands most of the time. Stay out of his way and he'll stay out of yours. He's pretty fucking scary, so make sure you stay out of his way. Way back he was something of a crime boss. His mutation has advanced to the point where he's hardly human anymore."

"Damn." Peter whispered.

"If you ever seen a nine-foot-tall lizard man, that's him." Selina shook her head. "He's not on the sane side of things anymore. The only thing keeping him from being one of the psychos is that he keeps to himself. Another borderline individual is Poison Ivy. She started out as a scientist, then she became a bioterrorist, now she is a plant person. Literally. Stay out of her garden or you'll wind up as fertilizer. We used to hang out before she went full Mother Nature."

"Where exactly is her garden?" Peter asked.

"You can't miss it." Selina sighed. "It's the jungle in the middle of the city."

She motioned to the distance. He couldn't see anything through the buildings in the fading sunlight.

"Then there's Harley." Selina shook her head. " Doctor Harleen Quinzel, amazing gymnast, dangerous with a mallet, and likes big guns. She goes by Harley Quinn. Former henchwoman to Joker. Now freelance rogue, part time mercenary, and sometimes girlfriend to Ivy. She's the good kind of crazy. Mostly. Like me, she's not completely against working with the Bats, but it's something rare."

The conversation stopped for a couple of minutes as she parked the car. They made it up to her apartment before continuing. Selina giggled as she saw a package waiting on the kitchen table.

"Your suit." Selina grabbed the box and held it out to him. "Try it on."

Peter took the box into the room she had designated as his. He opened it to find a black suit almost identical to the one she wore. It even had the goggles. Granted, it was tailored for his measurements and the cut was masculine. The goggles were a tad different, closer to a domino mask than the large-lensed sunglasses look.

He found it a lot easier to put on than his old suit. Not counting the Iron Spider. You just couldn't beat nano-tech. He did have to strip completely nude to get it to fit though. That wasn't something he was too keen to learn. Luckily, the crotch portion, with snug, was reinforced and didn't show every detail of his manhood. That had been an issue in his old suits. He had a hard time, no pun intended, trying to talk to Tony about it as well. How did he mention that the suit did little to obscure his equipment?

Peter fastened the accompanying belt. It rested on his waist at an angle. The boots and gloves finished the outfit. There was an odd weight to both, which made him think there was more going on with the suit than met the eye. He looked at himself in the mirror. His face below his nose and his hair were exposed. The mask portion only covered the strip around his eyes, it did have a protective shield for them which was nice.

"Let's see it." Selina urged.

He stepped back out into the hall. She clapped.

"It's more comfortable than I expected." Peter nodded in approval.

"Spin for me." She instructed.

He did.

"The Batgirls won't know what hit them." Selina cackled. "Now, where were we?"

"Rogues." He prompted.

"Right, the rogues." She tapped her chin. "The last group of them are mercenaries and crime bosses. Penguin, he's got a criminal empire. There is Deadshot, he's an assassin with an ego. Deathstroke, he's also an assassin, but he's all business. You don't want to meet him. And..." She trailed off in thought.

"Mister Freeze is borderline psycho. He tends toward technology and diamonds. In the past, he would freeze chunks of the city and hold it hostage. He doesn't do that so much these days."

"We'll talk about the psychos later." She practically skipped over to him. "I'll walk you through the features and we can come up with your name. Take a look at your palms." Selina instructed. "And flex your fingers."

He did. A rough patch raised across the pad of his palm and claws popped out of the fingertips.

"Those pads help with climbing without sacrificing speed. Bounce your weight on the toes of your boots to activate a patch there as well." Selina explained. "They work best against stonework. The claws add to the maneuverability. They are not good in a fight. Using them might give you a bit of time, but they can't stand up to anything major."

She motioned to the belt.

"You've got a set of traditional lockpicks as well as one that targets electronics." Selina continued. "The buckle acts as a scrambler. Camera, heat sensors, and most laser tripwires will register you as a glitch. The more sophisticated the system, the less time you've got."

"I don't get a whip?" Peter asked with a wry smile.

"Do you know how to use one?" Selina countered.

She ran a finger along the stretch of fabric along his arm. It sent a shiver along his skin.

"The suit itself is flame resistant and insulated." She booped him on the nose. "Limited armor to maintain speed and agility. Common blades will skip right along, but anything custom is an issue. It will slow down small arms fire but that doesn't make it bulletproof. It won't stop a bullet if you get tagged. Don't trust it to do much against any of the masks. We shop at the same store."

"Don't get shot." Peter summarized. "Got it."

"Now." Selina motioned to his face. "Your mask can switch between wide-spectrum infrared, dark-vision, and investigation mode."

"Dark vision? I thought it was night vision." Peter asked.

"They're close, but not the same." Selina explained. "Tap the side of your mask twice."

Peter did. His vision shifted to flat grayscale. He couldn't see any shadows and it muted the lights. An odd sense of vertigo hit him briefly.

"It takes some time to adjust." Selina laughed. "Use it for sneaky times, not when you need to move fast."

Peter tapped his mask twice again, returning it to normal mode.

"And the other two?" He asked.

"Wide spectrum infrared picks up heat signatures, fresh and those that linger, and light beams invisible to the human eye." Selina mimed tapping the mask once.

Once he did that, he saw her as a humanoid shape of heat. He could also see their faded footprints on the floor as well as where her hands had touched the box.

"It works great for keeping track of everything around you. The lingering heat signatures can also clue you in on any security codes and secret passages." Selina giggled. "Last but not least, investigation mode."

Peter tapped his mask twice, skipping over the dark vision option. He looked around the room. His pulse and body temperature were listed in the top right of his vision. Focusing on the furniture, art, and other décor made information screens pop up. They looked like something out of a video game. It listed the estimated weight, value of each item, and status. Some had more information such as previous owners and if they item was on a 'wish list' for special clients.

"What is the status?" Peter asked.

"It marks something that's dangerous." Selina sighed. "Magical items, alien tech, or something power hungry idiots are looking for. Avoid anything marked as dangerous. Tag it if you're curious. I have contacts that can track down more information."

Peter tapped the mask to set it back to default.

"The lenses will also protect your eyes when you're moving at high speed. Dust and grit too." Selina added. "I learned that lesson fast. I think that's it." She circled around him before coming to a stop where she had been before. "Now, where were we on the people of interest?"

"The psychos." Peter answered.

"Oh, goody." Selina deadpanned. "Before I forget, the investigation mode also works on people. Just the highlights: arrest warrants, outstanding convictions, and affiliations."

Selina took a seat. She motioned for him to join her. Peter relaxed on the couch, finding it incredibly comfortable. The investigation tag let him know it cost over four thousand dollars.

"The psychos are not good for anyone." Selina lounged in her chair. "There is the Joker. He likes to kidnap, murder, and torture seemingly at random. Sometimes he has a plan or scheme that only makes

sense to him. He lives to piss off Batman. The clown make-up makes his minions easy to spot. Never, under any circumstances, work with him. Most likely, he'll try to kill you regardless of how the job goes."

Selina left for a few minutes before returning with a bottle of wine and a large glass. She drank an entire glass before she continued.

"Scarecrow." Selina rolled her eyes. "He dresses like a scarecrow. Once upon a time he was a chemist. Now he uses 'fear toxin' for some reason. Shits and giggles, I guess. He won't kill you, probably lock you in a room and test his latest batch on you. I don't understand him or his plans."

She poured herself a smaller helping of wine. This time, she drank it in sips.

"The Ventriloquist and Scarface are exactly like they sound." Selina continued. "If you see guys dressed like 1940s gangsters then they're working for them. They are on the lesser side of the psycho. Still better to avoid them."

"Mad Hatter." She shuddered. "Obsessed with Alice in Wonderland and has hats that can control minds. Also likes to kidnap blonde women to be his Alice. It doesn't end well for them. His goons will keep fighting until they drop dead. He's creepy and I don't like him."

"And I'm glad for that." Peter added.

"There's a psycho with tally marks on his body." She mimed the lines on her arm. "Serial killer. Avoid. Then there's Firefly. He likes to burn things, especially people and isn't picky about who they are. Bane, big muscular guy. Very big, very muscular, and a lot smarter than you'd expect. Years back, he had his own mercenary company. Now, it's just him. I've seen him pick up a truck and toss it at Batman. He doesn't like collateral damage, but it doesn't slow him down much."

She took another drink.

"Anyone else?" Peter asked after a moment.

"Those are the big ones." Selina said thoughtfully. "At least the ones I can remember."

Peter ran a hand through his hair. A small sting reminded him to retract the claws on his gloves.

"Now." Selina sat up, placing the wine glass on the table beside her. "Let's come up with a name."

"I was attached to Thrift Store Man." Peter smiled at her.

"Not in that suit." Selina shook her head. "What was it that I called you when we ran into Bats?"

"Awesome Cat Man?" Peter offered.

"No." Selina sighed. "Stray! That was it." She tapped her chin with a single finger. "No, that doesn't work with you looking so good."

"Thank you." Peter winked at her.

"Alley Cat." Selina shook her head. "I think there is already a Wildcat... and a Catman." She studied him for a long moment. "I'm overthinking this. Back Cat. It matches your suit."

"Black Cat." Peter repeated.

He wasn't sure why, but it sounded familiar.

"Black Cat." Peter said with a chuckle. "That puts the 'Parker Luck' in a new perspective."

"With that settled, let's move on to the final stretch of intel." Selina poured a little more wine. "The Bat Family. As it currently stands."

"What do you mean by that?" Peter asked arcing an eyebrow at her.

"It changes." She sighed but didn't say any more.

"That doesn't sound ominous at all." Peter muttered.

"There is Batman, the big guy." Selina waved a hand around. "Big, brooding, and has more gadgets than you'd ever think."

"And you are dating?" Peter asked.

"That's complicated." Selina rolled her eyes. "Nightwing, black suit, blue emblem that kind of looks like a bird. Fast, agile, and mouthy. Robin, red and green suit, carries a sword, and has a bad attitude. He has a temper and is fun to piss off. Red Robin was Robin before the current one. Red and black suit, sometimes with a domino mask, sometimes a full cowl. He's smart and fast, but he's easily flustered." She shot him a cat ate the canary grin. "For me at least."

Peter chuckled.

"Red Hood, most of the time he has a leather jacket. He swaps between a mask and a red helmet. A year ago, I would have counted him as one of us. He's the only one who uses guns." She made finger guns at him. "On to the ladies. Batgirl number one. Blonde, peppy. Grey and purple suit. Batgirl number two, black suit, yellow bat emblem, and the lower part of her cowl is blocked. I've only heard her say a few words the entire time she's been here. Finally, there is Oracle, she runs the information network and keeps everyone informed. All of them work together to keep the psychos and the rogues from ruining the city while we have fun on the rooftops."

Peter nodded slowly. "Why didn't I join up with them?"

"No brooding." Selina tossed a couch pillow at him. "You could if you want. I would be incredibly insulted, but you could." She took a sip of wine. "Breaking into a criminal hide-out to steal money would have put you on their radar. Not in a good way. Plus, you look like you could use less brooding in your life. Bats is surprisingly caring to his brood, but brooding is a daily chore he never forgets."

Peter stretched out on the couch and tucked the pillow under his head.

"No boots on the couch." Selina waved at his feet.

He laughed as he set them back on the floor.

"I'm too tipsy to go out tonight." Selina wiggled the wine glass at him. "Tomorrow, we'll get out there and work on the compact launcher."

"Where do I put the suit?" Peter asked.

"In your room, silly." Selina chuckled. "You live here now, remember?"

"Thanks." Peter spoke softly as he headed back to his room.

~ x ~ x ~

6.

The last week had been rather busy. Selina would take him around the city during the day to point out important places. At night, she would have him lead her back there via the rooftops. They also spent a lot of time meeting people. Selina introduced him to her network of street-level contacts. These were the people who worked at events as servers, cooks, and valets. There were also working girls, a few security guards, and a homeless shelter. Selina had spent a lot of time cultivating relationships with people and had even created something of a 'safe zone' for those who slipped by the system. It wasn't perfect, but the homeless shelters, soup kitchens, and clinics in the area were well-stocked.

"It's time for you to take a run on your own." Selina said from her spot at the kitchen table.

She had one ordered and delivered the day after he had arrived. They had breakfast and dinner each night. During the meals they would discuss the things they had learned the previous night. She would ask about the people they had met, security on important locations, points of entry, and possible complications.

Selina slid a manila folder across the table to him. He flipped it open to see a private collection of Norse artifacts. It tugged at his heart a little. He pushed the feeling down as he studied the items. The artifacts were focused on Freya. Two golden cat statues were circled.

"Myths say Freya had a carriage pulled by cats." Selina explained. "It would be an insult to her name if I didn't own them."

Peter smiled and shook his head. He flipped through the pictures. It was one of the buildings they had scoped out recently. While it was an office building, the top two floors were a mixture of a penthouse apartment and lounge. It was recently refurbished and only had ten levels. The area was in the process of being gentrified. In Gotham, he had learned that meant the criminals saw promise in the place. The other buildings around it ranged between ten to twelve levels with the highest being fifteen.

"Increased power draw means they at least have tripwires." Peter flipped through the documents.

"There's a roof garden, possible point of entry, but it's obvious. Who has a roof garden in Gotham? I'd wager motion sensors, cameras, and at least one guard on watch."

He flipped over one of the pages to see a floorplan of the top two levels. There was a guard station, as well as an armory, on each with three guards listed per. The display was set in the center of the ninth floor.

"No skylights." Peter commented. "At least they thought that far ahead."

The tenth floor ended in a balcony that looked out over the display.

"Pressure and heat sensors on the windows." He smiled as he looked up at Selina. "Almost missed that."

Selina gave him a small nod.

"Going in from the roof or the windows is out." Peter muttered. "He knows you're coming and has tried to prepare for you."

He flipped through the documents some more until he came to a floor-by-floor blueprint. The vents had been replaced to a size that no normal human could move through. There was a freight elevator that looked interesting.

"Here." Peter tapped the elevator.

"You missed the motion sensors." Selina clicked her tongue and shook her head.

"No." Peter smiled. "They only track movement outside of the elevator. I can just take a ride."

"Stroll through the front door and use the elevator?" Selina chuckled. "Bold. I like it."

"Not exactly." Peter gave her a sly smile. "Deliver the statues to the second floor of the safe house?"

"If you think you can." Selina gave a smile of her own. "If not, I can grab them tomorrow."

In a very mature fashion, Peter stuck his tongue out at her. He closed the folder and slid it back to her. After that, he took his dish over to the sink and washed it. There was a top-of-the-line dishwasher a couple of feet to his left, but he preferred to do them by hand. The task helped him think.

Working with Selina was a lot more enjoyable than he had expected. They had spent most of their time around the neighborhood. Their excursions into the bigger part of the city were for the random gala, of which the city had on a regular basis, or to case a possible target. From what he could see, every potential job hit the corrupt side of things. They made sure the workers and little people weren't hurt. In fact, she had shown him multiple times that it paid to cultivate a positive relationship with them.

A sly smile crossed his face as he put the dish in the drying rack. He turned back to face her. Selina smiled brightly at him.

"Don't wait up." Peter teased as he hurried to his room.

He quickly got on his suit; thankful it had been made with the ability to rapidly change in mind. Peter hooked his mask on his belt before he headed to the closet. A panel along the side slid back to reveal a row of uniforms from various companies. He covered his suit with a set of gray overalls. It was loose on him to hide the gear underneath and looked just worn enough to pass for someone who hadn't been on the job for long. He clipped a toolbelt on to finish the disguise. His mask was now carefully wrapped in a protective cover tucked among some random tools.

Peter snatched a set of keys as he headed out of the apartment.

"Make sure you fill it up." Selina called after him.

A couple of minutes later found him behind the wheel of an unmarked work truck. He stopped to get a cup of gas station coffee on the way. Peter braced himself and dripped some on his chest to complete the look. There was just something about gas station coffee that made it feel hotter than he ever expected.

The streets were almost empty after sundown. Rough neighborhoods became dangerous once it got dark and even the high-class parts of the city took on an imposing air. No one paid much attention to a beaten-up work truck that made its way toward one of the 'new old' sections of the city.

Peter pulled the truck into a spot in front of the building. He grabbed a ladder and a toolbox from the back before he made his way to the door. Three visibly armed security guards watched him approach. Anyone who lived in Gotham with a sliver of self-preservation would not step out of the building.

He made a show of shifting the ladder and the toolbox around as he pushed open the door. Two of the guards flanked him on either side while the other sat behind an imposing desk. Peter grunted as he moved deeper into the building.

"What are you doing here?" The guard at the desk asked.

"What do you mean, what am I doing here?" Peter scoffed. "The office up on the fourth floor has been bitching about a leak for the last three days. Do they send the guy who knows the building? Of course not, they sent me. Let the new guy do the night shift. That fancy Metropolis degree will keep him safe."

He paused to take a deep breath. The guard in front of him gave a single snort of laughter.

"Maintenance is supposed to check in around the back." The guard crossed his arms.

"The back of the building." Peter deadpanned. "In the alley, with the broken lights, and only one way out. I'm not going to do that when the sun is up, sure as hell not now."

The guard looked at the other two and had a silent conversation. Peter knew he was short, and looked like he was barely old enough to drive. That combined with the ill-fitting uniform did wonders to put them at ease. The trio of armed guards obviously thought they could take him if things went south.

"Put the toolbox down." The guard at the desk ordered. "Take off the belt and step away."

Peter grumbled as he followed the instructions. One guard stepped up to inspect the tools while the other two watched him intently. He put on an annoyed expression as they guy looked at each piece. All the real equipment was stored on his belt under the overalls. His mask was the only thing that could cause any sort of question.

"Looks clear." The guard stepped away. He didn't bother to put things back in order.

"Take the freight elevator." The one behind the desk ordered. "We'll be up to check on you."

Peter didn't say anything as he gathered up the tools. He lugged the ladder over his shoulder and made his way down the hall to the elevator. That was a subtle test as well to see if he knew where the freight elevator was.

One of the guards followed at a distance all the way to the elevator. Peter half expected the guy to get in with him. It would be inconvenient, but the plan had room for improvisation.

Peter dropped the ladder and toolbox once the doors closed. The motion sensors would turn off as the elevator began to move. Unlike the main ones, there wasn't a camera in the freight elevator. Peter popped his mask out from the case and slid it into place. He unzipped the overalls. They pooled on the

floor as he leapt onto the ceiling. The hatch was locked, but an application of spider-strength took care of that issue.

He was out and on top of the elevator as it started to move. There wasn't a moment to lose. He climbed quickly up the cables until he reached the tenth floor. Peter had the doors open before the elevator made it to the second level.

Peter stood at the back of a balcony that looked out onto the display. He tapped the side of his mask to shift through the modes. The color of the room faded as a network of lasers popped into view. They covered the entire display but were especially thick around the two feline statues.

He sighed. The statues were bigger than they looked in the picture. Each one stood at least two feet tall. There was no way they would fit in the bag he had brought. He should have expected something like this. Selina wasn't going to take it easy on him.

Peter studied the network of lasers as he worked out an idea on how to transport the statues. His train of thought was interrupted as a bright flash of light washed over the room. The windows shattered less than a second later. His spider-sense hadn't gone off, but he knew an explosion from experience. He rushed over to the window. A building a couple of blocks over had a chunk missing.

The explosion had knocked the power out. He could easily snatch the two statues and run. The sound of a pained scream stomped out that idea. Peter grabbed the grapple from his belt and jumped out the window.

He adjusted his aim as he came to the peak of the swing. The grapple wasn't the same as web-slinging. It had a shorter reach and he only had one. For the most part, it was supposed to be for quick movement across gaps in the buildings which Gotham had in abundance. The rooftop highway was rather intricate across the various islands that made up the city.

Peter landed on the street in front of the ruined building. His spider-sense told was a low hum, which he took to mean that there weren't any immediate explosions. A quick tap on the side of his mask shifted his vision to filter out a good portion of the smoke. The thermal readout had practically blinded him.

He bounded up from floor to floor, the exposed interior helped him move fast. The first person he found was a cleaning lady, she was unconscious, but breathing. He carefully lifted her up into a bridal carry and got her out of the building.

She roused as he set her on the sidewalk. Her eyes tried to focus on him, but she was still dazed.

"How many people are in there?" He made sure to keep his voice calm and even.

"Five." The cleaning lady replied. "My crew."

"Was it an attack?" He asked.

She shook her head. The motion made her eyes flutter. He settled her back onto the ground. A large shadow flashed by the edge of his vision. It didn't set off his spider-sense, so he focused on finding the people inside.

The EMTs had arrived and there were two more of the cleaners outside when he came back. One of the medics caught sight of him. They froze. Peter motioned to the two cleaners. He raised his hands to his head to mime bat-ears. The medic nodded.

"Three more cleaners." Peter called over to the EMTs.

"Any others?" One of them asked.

"I don't know." He shrugged. "Be right back."

He bounded back into the building. The dark shape flashed by as he went in. Peter found one of the cleaning crew stuck under a collapsed desk and the other trapped in a maintenance closet. Both were easily rescued with a small application of his enhanced strength.

Another ambulance and some police had arrived when he got back outside. The cops stared at him for a moment. His spider-sense flared as they raised their weapons. Peter hopped back into the smoke. It hid his movements well enough for him to get to the roof. Even after the explosion the building felt sound. There was more to this place than a simple office. He didn't have the time to take a look now.

He sprinted over the rooftops. Vigilantes were on rough terms with Gotham PD. Selina had told him that they weren't nearly as corrupt as they used to be, but they certainly were clean yet. Either they drew their weapons because he wasn't a bat, or they didn't like people in masks. That was an issue for another day.

Peter jolted to a stop as a dark figure dropped in front of him. He wasn't sure where they had come from, most of the buildings were the same height.

Before him stood a girl in a black bat-suit with a yellow emblem. The lower half of her mask was sewn shut. His spider-sense tingled when he looked at her. The message was clear, she was dangerous.

He didn't speak. Neither did she. Selina had mentioned there was more than one Batgirl. The only thing she had mentioned about this one was that she didn't talk much.

"Hi." He gave a small wave. "Thanks for the assist."

She nodded.

"Any idea what caused the explosion?" He asked.

Batgirl didn't answer. He got the feeling that she couldn't answer him rather than not choosing to.

<<Do you know ASL?>> Peter signed.

<<Yes.>> Batgirl replied. <<Who are you?>>

<<Black Cat.>> He replied. <<You are Batgirl, right?>>

<<Black Bat.>> She corrected him.

<<Black Bat and Black Cat.>> Peter chuckled. <<That sounds like a bad Doctor Suess book.>>

<<Who?>> Black Bat cocked her head to the side.

<<Nevermind.>> Peter sighed. Did this dimension not have Dr. Sues? <<Do we have to fight now?>>

Black Bat cocked her head to the other side.

<<Do you want to?>> Her posture told him she was amused.

<<No.>> Peter smiled at her. <<It was nice to meet you.>>

<<You as well.>> She signed. <<See you around?>>

<<I would like that.>> Peter inclined his head in a small bow.

He stepped turned back the way he came and hopped off the rooftop. The grapple snapped tight on the edge of the building across the street. He took a circular route back to the target. A couple of squads in unmarked tactical gear swarmed the building floor by floor. He wasn't going to get the statues tonight.

Peter slipped into the building and then to the freight elevator. He changed back into his disguise just in time for a squad to bust the door open. A cluster of impressive firepower were trained on him at once. He held up his hands to show they were empty.

The squad laughed at the scared kid in the elevator. They laughed as he struggled to get the ladder and his toolbox down the stairs. Even the guards at the front door laughed at him. None of them even thought to question how he had still been in the elevator when it was on the third floor on its return to the lobby rather than on the fourth floor where he was supposed to be.

Not even Gotham could see through the disguise of a pair of overalls and a ladder.

7.

Peter scrolled through the internet on his new laptop. It was a top-of-the-line model that Salina had got him for a job well done. He hadn't been able to get the statues, but he had saved lives. She would have done the same.

Still, the computer was a good five years or more behind what he had back in New York. He was pretty sure he could get one of similar specifications on clearance. It was an interesting difference. There were a couple of tech companies, Wayne Enterprises and Lex Corp were the biggest, but they didn't measure up to Stark Industries. The odd thing was that Lex Corp probably could put out some advanced tech, but they were focused on preparing for when Superman went rogue. Wayne Enterprises, on the other hand, paid more attention to infrastructure and making the technology open for everyone. The two giants of industry had little to no real interaction with each other.

His Iron Spider suit would have revolutionized the world.

"What are you scowling at, kitten?" Selina teased as she lazed on her expensive couch.

"I want to go to college." Peter replied without looking at her.

"Why?" She scoffed.

Peter opened his mouth to reply then snapped it shut. How was he going to explain this?

"Before I left home, my friends and I were getting ready to go to college." Peter said after a moment. "I don't know if they got in, but it just feels like I should try."

"And why can't you go back?" Selina asked, yet again.

"It's a long story." Peter sighed.

"If only we had an expanse of free time." Selina stretched out on the couch.

"What do you think?" Peter ignored her comment. "Gotham Tech or Gotham State University?"

"Neither have anything worth stealing." Selina rolled her eyes. "Both are funded by the Thomas Wayne fund. The art on display is fake and the notable inventions are nonfunctional models."

Peter looked over at her deadpan.

"Fine." Selina huffed. "Gotham Tech is a better fit for engineers, inventors, and technicians. Fixing, creating, and assembling all those machines that make the world go round. GSU has a broader field of study. They are the best Nursing Program in the state and the facilities are on-par with Metropolis University."

"Thank you." Peter said.

"Go take a tour if you're that interested." Selina waved a dismissive hand at him. "Let me know what you decide, we'll need more documents."

"I think I'll do that." Peter stood up. "Selina, really. Thank you."

"Steal something for me on the way back." Selina rolled her eyes.

He had just reached his room when the front door slammed open. His spider-sense kicked up a notch to alert him of general danger, but nothing immediate. The smell of animals and gunpowder came with the sound.

"Harley." Selina sounded annoyed rather than alarmed. "What are you doing here?"

The weird yip, bark, laugh of a couple of hyenas made him freeze in place. He had to be hearing things. His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of claws on tile and the solid impact of bodies. Selina let out a startled yell.

Peter rushed back to the living room to see two hyenas jumping on Selina. The scene froze for a moment. They were licking her face and wrestling each other to sit on her lap. Selina had a long-suffering smile on her face. She was in as much danger as a person with a big dog. The fact that hyenas were related more to felines rather than canines passed along the back of his mind.

He turned his attention to the other person that had entered the apartment. She was an attractive, athletic blonde. Her hair was up in pigtails. She wore a pair of cut-off jean shorts and a black tank top. The two thick suitcases at her side were another thing to note.

"Is this your new kitten?" Harley strutted over to him. She pinched his cheek. "He's a cutie."

"Peter, this is Harley. Harley, this is Peter." Selina managed to say between the yips and aggressive cuddles of the hyenas. "Yes, yes. Aunty Selina loves you too."

"Hi." Peter winced. Smooth Parker.

"I hope you like to snuggle." Harley turned away from him. "The girls do not like to sleep alone."

"Wouldn't they sleep with you?" Peter asked.

Suddenly, that was the most pressing issue.

"The bed is too small for me, Selina, and the girls." Harley giggled.

"You're sleeping on the couch." Selina glared at the woman.

"Selina." Harley pouted as she plopped down on the couch beside the woman pinned under the hyenas.

"You would put your good friend out on the couch?"

"Of course not." Selina quirked a smile at her. "Where is Ivy anyway?"

Harley's smile dropped.

"We had a fight." She grumbled.

"Harley." Selina sighed. "What did you do?"

"Why is it 'what did I do' and not 'what did she do', huh?" Harley yelled.

Selina arched an eyebrow at her.

"Fine." Harley grumbled. "I may have, accidentally, kind of spilled some homemade napalm on one of her flowerbeds."

Selina sighed.

"It's not my fault!" Harley yelled. "It crawled into the room! I had the door locked!"

"How long are you staying?" Selina asked.

Harley shrugged.

"You are not sleeping in my bed." Selina glared at her friend.

"I'm sleeping with the kitten?" Harley perked up.

"No." Selina would have face-palmed if she had a free arm. "Harley is going to clean out my office. I can have a new bed here by the end of the day."

"I can help." Peter offered.

"Awww." Harley said. "Ain't he the cutest."

"Peter." Selina fixed him with an impressive stare. "Harley will do it. You have plans."

Peter sighed, then nodded.

"Are you going to take a car?" Selina asked.

"I don't have a license." Peter shook his head.

"And that matters, why?" Selina chuckled.

"You're one of us now, kitten." Harley added happily.

"Fine." Peter groaned. "I don't know how to drive."

"You'll fit right in then." Selina groused.

"I don't want to hurt anyone." Peter crossed his arm. "I'll take the bus, or the train."

"Go with the train." Harley said quickly.

"That's too dangerous." Selina said at the same time. She glared at Harley. "I'll call you a private car."

"Thanks, but I need to stretch my legs." Peter gave her a gentle smile. "I can take care of myself."

"He is the cutest." Harley squeed.

"It was nice to meet you, Harley." Peter said. "I should be back to make dinner."

The hyenas had fallen asleep in a pile on Selina. Harley waved as he stepped out of the apartment. He wasn't lying, he did need to stretch his legs. Lately, he had spent his days in the apartment researching upcoming events or training in the Black Cat suit. It had a different weight to it and the grappler took some time to adjust to. At best, it was like web-swinging with one hand, only with shorter range and it had a kick with each launch. The nights were a mixture of rooftop tours of the city and dinner parties, auctions, and charity events. There was at least one party a week that Selina insisted on the both of them attend. He now knew quite a few staff members by name and most of the security teams by sight.

Peter was dressed in a casual outfit of jeans, sneakers, and a blue Superman shirt that Selina insisted on buying him. He didn't think he'd draw too much attention. Like all the clothes she had picked out, it was tighter than he usually wore. Back home he had to work to hide his physique. It felt a little weird not worry about it. The fact that he was shy played absolutely no part in it.

He got on the train without an issue. It had a good amount of graffiti on the walls, but they lived in one of the better areas of the city. The fact that it was mid-morning rather than the rush meant that there weren't many other passengers. Most of the people traveled in small groups even if they didn't appear to know each other. Safety in numbers. Peter took a seat near a group of older women. They looked like a knitting circle that had been transported to the train. He smiled at them. They returned his expression with an appraising stare.

Peter shook his head. He leaned against the seat and waited for his stop.

GSU was closer. He didn't plan on staying out after sunset. For one, he promised to make dinner, and he wasn't looking for a fight. The tension in the city was constant, but it wasn't as high as he Selina had told him about. There were certain big names that made everyone hunker down. Joker had been caught recently and hadn't broken out yet.

That annoyed him. Everyone talked about it like it was just a matter of time before the breakout happened. It didn't put Batman in a good light considering there was always a body count when the clown escaped. How many lives could be saved by putting Joker down for good?

It was Goblin all over again. If he had the chance, he would put Joker down.

Peter shook his head to clear his thoughts. He could see that Gotham was corrupt from through and through. The more time he spent with the rich folk of the city made that clear. It was the main reason he didn't feel bad about his less than legal outings. Technically, being Spider-Man was illegal. He would still help people when he could, and their targets were only people who deserved it.

He was pulled out of his thoughts when the train stopped near GSU. Peter smiled at the old ladies again before left. They watched him go but didn't otherwise react.

It was a short walk to the campus proper. He had to take a moment to adjust to the view. Either colleges all looked alike, or this place was almost an exact copy of NYU. The layout at least. He found an information kiosk easily enough and grabbed a map. It lacked a couple of the newer buildings, but it was the same. Even the buildings looked similar. His science class had gone on a tour in junior year to check out the labs. They also had a citywide expo there for all the schools.

Peter felt himself start to drift back to his memories. He cleared his throat to get his focus back on the matter at hand. The pamphlet said that the tours didn't start for another week. He sighed and tucked it in his pocket. It looked like this was a wasted trip.

He was about to turn around when he saw two girls nearby. One was blonde and the other appeared to be of Asian heritage. The blonde was talking animatedly and incredibly fast. She was the first person he had actually seen with a genuine smile.

"Excuse me." Peter said as he approached them.

He made sure to keep his hands at his side to show he wasn't holding anything. It was a posture he used to ease the tension when he encountered people in distress in his spider suit. At night his eyes were the first thing people usually noticed. The white lenses almost glowed when he got to street level. It could be disturbing depending on the circumstances.

Their postures were complete contrasts. The blonde didn't seem to have a care in the world while the other girl looked like a tightly wound spring.

"Yes?" The blonde shot him a bright smile.

"I was hoping to take a tour." Peter shrugged. "I got my dates mixed up. Do you two go here?"

The blonde looked at her friend, who gave a sharp nod.

"Yes." The blonde answered. "I'm Stephanie, this is Cassandra. She doesn't talk much."

The other girl, Cassandra, glared at her friend from the corner of her eyes. He was missing something. She seemed to pick up on his confusion.

<<I'm mute.>> She signed.

"Do you know sign language?" Stephanie asked.

Peter nodded.

"Perfect." She spun toward the campus. "On we go!"

Peter smiled. The spunky blonde began the tour with a bounce in her step. Cassandra had fallen back a little. She kept off to the side, angled toward him so he would have to turn to face her.

"What's your name?" Stephanie asked.

"Peter." He said. "Peter Parker. Nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you too." Stephanie laughed. "You're not from around here, are you?"

Peter shook his head.

"You?" He asked.

"Born and raised." She said proudly.

"You aren't like the other people I've met so far." Peter chuckled.

<<It's the coffee.>> Cassandra said.

<<I can relate.>> Peter smiled at her.

Her eyes narrowed for a moment but didn't say anything more.

"What are you planning on studying?" Stephanie asked. "That will help me focus the tour."

"I'm not sure yet." Peter shrugged. "I'm going to tour Gotham Tech tomorrow to see if it is more my speed. I like to make things."

"You're an inventor?" Stephanie spun to face him.

"I tinker." Peter replied.

"Peter the tinkerer." Stephanie said. "Sounds like something out of Doctor Sues."

Peter cocked his head to the side. That sent a shiver through his spider-sense. He tried to play it cool but took a closer look at the two girls. Stephanie wore a baggy GSU sweater and yoga pants. Her legs looked fit, but that didn't mean much. She wasn't the right height for the masked girl he had encountered.

Cassandra, on the other hand. He stole a quick look out of the corner of his eye. She wore a simple pair of black jeans and a long-sleeved black shirt. Her height was right, and her build matched. Her gaze was incredibly sharp. She caught him looking.

Batman knew who Selina was. He also knew that she had 'adopted' a young man. It made sense that his team would know as well. His encounter with Black Bat started to make more sense. She was probably tailing him when the explosion happened.

Was this all a setup?

Peter hadn't felt any warning until now. Even then, it was just a tickle and not a full-on danger. It would be pointless to pretend he didn't know if they already did. He didn't put on his mask to walk around the Avengers Tower the few times he had gone. They knew who he was, he knew who they were. A couple people only thought he was Starks Intern, but they weren't superheroes.

"Kind of like a cat and bat." Peter looked at Cassandra when he spoke.

She glared at him. Her entire body was ready for action.

"Exactly." Stephanie's happy voice cut through the tension. "Glad that's out of the way. It's annoying to pretend not to know what we both know you know we know."

Peter couldn't help himself. He laughed.

"Science." Stephanie turned a slow circle to scan the buildings. "This way."

<<Thanks for your help the other day.>> Peter signed.

Cassandra replied with a curt nod. <<Hurry, she's faster than you think.>>

8.

Stephanie led him through the Engineering Department. She came to a stop beside a set of doors that led to a workspace. There was a window to see in, but the door was currently locked, and the lights were off. Peter looked across numerous workstations that had scattered tools and what looked to be half-constructed prototypes.

"This is the engineering department." Stephanie said. "As you can see, this is where they use the thingamajigs to make whatchamacallits."

"I see you're up to date on all of the technical terminology." Peter smiled at her.

Stephanie shot him a smile. She shrugged.

"I may have not known this place existed until today." She admitted.

"Have you settled on a major?" Peter asked.

Stephanie shared a quick look with Cassandra who stood beside him at a slight angle. A thought struck him. Did they even attend classes here? It was possible they had been sent to keep track of him. They looked like a couple of college students, but that didn't mean much. He had no idea how people treated education here.

"History of Gotham." Stephanie answered after a moment. "You have no idea how many times some random fact in a history book has helped our night job."

"Really?" Peter asked.

"Forgotten subway lines, Old Gotham, and so, so much corruption." She sighed. "I swear, there are like two entire cities under this one."

"Under?" Peter scrunched his eyebrows.

"Yep." She nodded. "There was the first subway system for Old Gotham that disappeared when the water level rose. The earthquake a while ago split the city into three islands and they had a lot to rebuild. It was easier to just bulldoze the stuff still standing and build on top of it, but they didn't bother with the basements or stuff below street level."

"There was an earthquake that split the city into three islands?" Peter's voice raised as he spoke.

"I don't remember much." Stephanie shrugged. "I was like three when it happened, and my dad got us out before things got too bad. It's the reason why Gotham is an independent city-state."

Peter blinked a few times. "What?"

"Yeah." Stephanie didn't seem phased by the question. "Why do you think there are so many weird things here? We've got an entirely different set of laws from the continental US. When the earthquake hit, the city asked for aide and the US responded by declaring Gotham a No Mans Land, basically disowning it. Once the city was back on its feet, it officially split from the US. Corporations by the dozens flocked to Gotham to take advantage of the relaxed regulations on scientific and intellectual properties."

Cassandra flicked the shorter blonde on the nose. Stephanie flinched.

"Sorry." She rubbed her nose. "I get a little carried away."

<<She agreed to the reset option.>> Cassandra added quickly.

"Yeah." Stephanie giggled. "I'll just keep going if someone doesn't interrupt my lecture. Cass calls it a 'reset option'. She has one for all of us."

"All of you?" Peter asked.

"The family." Stephanie replied.

Cass flicked her on the nose again.

"Hey." Stephanie pouted. "I wasn't going to say any more."

Cass gave her a flat stare. The blonde crossed her arms and stared right back.

"What about you, Cassandra?" Peter asked.

<<I'm studying art.>> Cassandra replied without taking her eyes off of Stephanie. <<With a focus on sculpting.>>

"That's awesome." Peter smiled at her. "I draw, but it's mainly for technical designs. May said I should take classes."

A lump formed in his throat. He closed his eyes. That had snuck up on him. Peter found the two girls looking at him when he opened his eyes.

"Sorry." He gave them a weak smile.

"Do you need to talk about it?" Stephanie asked. Her voice was soft and full of real concern.

<<She is a goof, but a good listener.>> Cassandra added.

Peter laughed.

"Thanks for the offer." He shook his head. "It's not something I want to talk about. I just met you."

"Two meals." Stephanie stated with a firm nod.

"What?" Peter didn't understand the sudden shift in conversation.

"We'll have two meals together, then we can talk." Stephanie said. "Let's go get lunch."

Stephanie turned back the way they had come and started to walk with purpose.

<<Come on.>> Cassandra sighed. <<It's pointless to argue when she gets an idea in her head.>>

"I heard that!" Stephanie called over her shoulder.

"Huh?" Peter arched an eyebrow.

<<Now she's just being a brat.>> Cassandra rolled her eyes.

[- -]

"Big Belly Burger?" Peter asked as they stood before a fast-food place.

The building looked like a Burger King but had the colors of a Wendy's. Its sign was kind of like McDonalds, but with three B's instead of the Golden Arches.

"You've never had Big Belly Burger?" Stephanie gawked at him. "I thought they had them in Metropolis too. They're everywhere."

Peter shrugged.

"We could go to Taco Hut or Bell Pizza if you'd like." She offered.

"No. It's fine. Just didn't expect one to be so close to campus." Peter shook his head.

It was a weak lie. He knew that. They knew that. He knew that they knew. Especially with the look that the two girls shared.

"Ok." Stephanie broke the silence. "Let's get some food. Cass's treat."

The other girl glared but didn't argue. They ordered. Thankfully, the menu wasn't anything too strange. He got a burger, fries, and a drink. If he had been more active, he would have been able to each enough food for all three of them. Selina had him go back to research mode after the failed heist. He had burned his maintenance disguise and needed a new approach. So far, being a cat burglar wasn't nearly as energy intensive as fighting crime.

A cat burglar called Black Cat. Peter chuckled to himself. The name was a bit on the nose, but then he didn't have much room to talk. It wasn't like the Avengers had incredibly original names.

Another lump started to form in his throat. He tried to play it off like he had taken too big of a drink. They didn't buy it. He switched tactics and focused on eating.

"Ok, Pete." Stephanie said. "What's going on?"

"I'm fine, Ned." Peter replied on instinct.

He froze. Slowly, he looked up at the two girls at the table with him. They had spent maybe an hour together and it already felt familiar.

"Sorry." He whispered.

Peter focused on his food. He tried to avoid looking at them.

"Is it ok to call you Pete?" Stephanie asked softly. "You can call me Steph." She paused. "And Cass doesn't mind if you call her Cass. Just don't call her Cassie. We have a friend named Cassie and it gets confusing."

"It's fine." Peter shook his head.

"There's something going on deeper here." Steph said after a moment. "Listen, I know we just met, but people like us kind of bond fast. Shared stress with our night job. You just get a feeling about people. Like how you and Cass worked so well together."

Peter nodded. He could see the shadow of Cass's hands moving but didn't catch the details. Steph placed a gentle hand on his. Peter felt the familiar pattern of tough patches on her skin. It was something that developed in their lifestyle.

"Cass says she got a good feeling about you." Steph said. "What's going on?"

He hadn't told Selina about his real life yet. Honestly, he wasn't sure if he ever would. There wasn't much she could do to help. If he even wanted it. Strange sent him here for a reason. Peter was worried that going back to his home dimension might open the tears again. There was more to it than that. He didn't think he was strong enough to see Ned and MJ look at him like a stranger.

"Two meals." He offered her a weak smile.

Steph stared at him in shock. Cass let out a silent laugh. A scar across her throat was revealed as she leaned her head back. It was thin, surgical, not one that came from a fight. He looked away before she could catch him.

"Challenge accepted." Steph wiggled her eyebrows at him.

She started to eat with gusto. Cass looked at her friend and rolled her eyes.

<<We can trade stories about our scars.>> Cass said now that he wasn't turned away.

<<Sorry.>> Peter replied.

<<It's fine.>> Cass shrugged. <<You aren't the first.>>

Peter sighed.

<<Two meals.>> Cass said with a hint of a smile.

Peter nodded.

9.

Peter felt himself relaxing around Steph and Cass. He didn't plan on it, but it happened, nonetheless. Steph was a ball of hyper energy while Cass had a surprising sense of humor. People gave her a wide berth. If they knew ASL they would have seen how sarcastic she truly was. The two bounced off of each other in a natural flow.

He didn't miss the small touches between them either. It went beyond friendly. Steph gave Cass long hugs. When they came to a stop, she had her arm around her waist. At times her hands would cup the silent girls' ass for a quick grope. Cass would click her tongue at the blonde, or glare without any real fire behind it. Her rebukes never went beyond that. The blonde occasionally sent a playful look his way as well.

Peter was pretty sure the two were dating. He wasn't completely blind when it came to relationships. In other people at least. He wasn't exactly clueless when it came to his own love life. His track record just was not the best. Come to think of it, MJ was the only real girlfriend he had had. The relationship with Liz never got beyond a single date. She moved after her dad was arrested. They had lost touch after that. Her online presence slowed down dramatically. He had searched for information on people he knew once he came back from the snap. From what he could tell, she hadn't been dusted. Records from those five years were muddled at best.

"Come back to us, Pete." Stephanie bumped his shoulder with her own.

His spider-sense didn't flare up at all. He had relaxed around them even on a subconscious level.

"Sorry." Peter gave her a small smile. "Are you two a thing?"

"A thing?" Steph teased.

<<Yes.>> Cass replied quickly. <<She is my girlfriend.>>

"I thought so." Peter smiled. "You two are cute together."

"Aw, thank you." Steph kissed him on the cheek. "It's still kind of new. I didn't realize I liked girls too until, like, a month ago."

<<Three months. One week. Four days.>> Cass supplied.

Peter laughed.

"What about you, Peter?" Steph bumped into him again. "Any special ladies, or fellas?"

"No." Peter shook his head. He tried to keep a smile on his face.

"Two more meals." Steph said.

"Right." His smile shifted to something a bit truer.

"And look at that!" Steph spoke in a very fake surprise. "We just happen to be in the Student Union. This is the best place on Campus. Well, for food at least." The cheer in her voice dropped. She turned to address him seriously. "Don't eat anything that doesn't come from an established vendor. That goes for drinks, promotional items, and photographs as well. Those are the most common methods of delivery for contamination."

<<Do you have a gas mask?>> Cass asked.

"No." Peter shook his head.

"You need to get one fast." Steph sighed. "Wayne Enterprises has some high-quality ones that are cheap. It's best to go with a full-face version too. People forget to protect their eyes. Luthor Tech tried to push in the market with some rebreather masks that only covered the nose and mouth. It didn't work out well."

"Luthor Tech?" Peter furrowed his brow.

"They are another branch of LexCorp." Stephanie spoke slowly. "The company has been trying to expand into Gotham for a while."

"I've seen the signs around." Peter nodded. "They have some construction projects."

Cass rolled her eyes.

<<Luthor bribed a lot of people to get those contracts. Then he tried to strongarm the local mafia.>> She gave a single, silent laugh. <<He wasn't prepared.>>

"Is the mafia that big of a problem?" Pete asked.

"They never go away." Steph sighed. "A new organization pops up every time one of them gets too weak. It gets really bad when there's infighting. Then they split into factions and people can get hurt. They aren't like the costumed villains. No big plans, or clever traps. They work in bullets and explosives. Sometimes, they'll get desperate and reach out to one of the bigger names. Well, they used to. It only took a couple of times for them to realize the costumes only made it worse."

"What about the bats?" Pete dropped his voice low.

<<Like she said.>> Cass frowned. <<The other families smell blood and takeover. It's a constant cycle. The best the bat can do is keep the worst evils at bay. The mafia runs deep in Gotham.>>

"Power vacuum." Peter shook his head.

The two girls didn't look happy with the answer. He couldn't blame them.

"Enough of that." Steph swapped back to her cheery self. "The Sweet and Sour Pork is amazing."

"We just ate." Peter said with a laugh.

"Two meals." Steph called over her shoulder.

Peter didn't mind. His metabolism burned through calories like crazy. Usually, this meant he snacked throughout the day, but a couple of extra meals would work too. Steph bounded into the building. It was a bit on the later side of a normal lunch time so there was a decent number of people around.

He could see both girls scan the area for danger. It was subtle, but he knew the signs. The skill was one he was still developing. Usually his spider-sense let him know when danger was approaching. Selina had taught him how to scope the room for a different reason.

His quick look around the room confirmed her previous assessment. There was a distinct lack of items worth stealing. Any and all art was clearly forgery or recreated as wall murals. The few sculptures around the area were plaster copies. Whoever set this up knew what they were doing. It did make him wonder how many times it took for them to learn the lesson though.

Peter joined Cass and Steph in the line for food. The room was arranged as a row of different booths. Each served a different cuisine. There were a couple of common commercial options as well. He saw Big Belly Burger and Taco Hut. The lines for those were significantly shorter.

<<They don't accept meal plan cards.>> Cass answered before he could ask. <<No cash either. Just credit or debit.>>

"Yeah." Steph rolled her eyes. "They don't even have a full menu. It's better to go down a few blocks to one of the real places."

The blonde hopped a bit in place to see over the crowd.

"Aw, man." She pouted.

"What's up?" Peter asked.

"The Culinary Booth isn't open." Steph grumbled.

Peter arched an eyebrow at Cass.

<<Students in the Culinary Program have their own station.>> Cass explained. She huffed as she turned to Steph. <<They don't open until the last semester. You know that.>>

"They have special events." Steph muttered.

"Hey guys!" A beautiful redhead with thick-rimmed glasses called out to them.

"Babs!" Steph bounced and waved.

Cass gave a short wave. She signed something, but he couldn't get a good view of what she said. The new girl, Babs, nodded in understanding. To call her a girl wasn't right. She was a woman. He guessed she was at least twenty-five. She wore a tasteful black skirt and a grey blouse, but she moved with the grace of a dancer. Her outfit was styled to underplay her figure. It was something Peter knew about. He had to work to hide his body for the last two years of high school. Though, for a woman it might just be to avoid getting leered at.

"What are you doing here?" Steph pulled the woman into a hug.

"It's my first day as an Assistant Librarian." Babs smiled.

"I thought you loved the Gotham Library." Steph gasped.

"I did." Babs shrugged. "The offer was just too good to pass." She paused. "And it will finally get my dad to stop worrying so much. I swear, one hostage situation and suddenly my job isn't safe anymore."

Peter blanched at her words. Gotham was a strange place.

"Who's this?" Babs asked.

"Peter Parker." Steph stepped out of the way to provide introduction. "Meet Barbara Gordon. Barbara, this is Peter."

"Nice to meet you." The redhead flashed him a genuine smile. "Are you a student here?"

"They're giving me a tour." Peter replied.

"I'm sure they are." Barbara chuckled. "It was nice to meet you, Peter."

"It was nice to meet you too." Peter flashed her a polite smile.

"You aren't going to join us?" Steph cut in.

"My lunch is over." Barbara shook her head. "You know where to find me."

Cass signed something to the redhead. Barbara replied in sign. Peter subtly averted his gaze to respect their privacy.

"This is my treat." Steph said as the line moved forward. "My meal plan can cover it."

"Thanks." Peter flashed her a smile. "I'll pay for the next one."

"Now, come on." Steph grabbed him. Her hand slid easily into his. "You have to try the Sweet and Sour Pork. It is *soooo* good."

He looked down at their hands, then over at Cass. The silent girl didn't seem bothered.

[- -]

She was right. The Sweet and Sour Pork was really good. Peter wasn't sure how a school cafeteria could manage such quality. It was a major point in their favor to attend.

That was a lie.

He had already decided to go here. The short time with Steph and Cass had sealed the choice. He hadn't realized exactly how much he missed having friends. Selina was great, but she was more of a mentor than a friend. Not exactly on the same level as Tony. He was pretty sure the two would have gotten along though. She would have driven Pepper crazy and probably would have stolen quite a few things. Tony, of course, would take that as a challenge to come up with better security.

Peter smiled at the thought. He fought against the sorrow that tried to encroach.

Steph squeezed his hand. He smiled at her. The flush of warmth helped. She had taken his hand once they had finished the food. Cass was closer to him on his other side. She didn't touch him, but he could feel her warmth.

"How do you know Barbara?" Peter asked.

"She worked at the Gotham Public Library." Steph replied with an almost dreamy smile. "She's awesome."

<<She does a lot of work to help people.>> Cass added. Her hands moved much faster than usual. <<She was one of the first people I met when I first arrived in Gotham.>>

Peter smiled.

"Her dad is pretty cool too." Steph added. "He was the police commissioner for a long time. Retired last year. Wasn't it?"

Cass gave a firm nod.

"Yeah, last year." Steph repeated. "Guy was a legend. His mustache was too."

Cass rolled her eyes. Peter cocked an eyebrow at her.

"We're talking Magnum Jones level." Steph continued. "It's still impressive. Now that he's clean shaven it has lost a bit of impact. The stubble just made it."

Peter shared an amused look with Cass. The silent girl pressed the back of her hand against her forehead and fluttered her eyelashes.

"Stop it." Steph whined.

<<Your fan girl was showing.>> Cass sighed.

"Who is Magnum Jones?" Peter asked.

"Magnum Jones." Steph repeated. "It's an old show from the 80s. The guy was a private investigator and treasure hunter. He had an epic mustache and this cool fedora." She paused; her voice took a on a lower tone with a slight gravel to it. "Spiders, why does it have to be spiders."

Peter shrugged.

"Before your time." Steph waved it off.

"How old are you?" Peter countered.

"You're not supposed to ask a lady that." Steph squeezed his hand.

<<19.>> Cass added helpfully.

"Hey!" Steph groaned. "Not cool."

"I'm 18." Peter said. "How is it before my time, but not yours?"

"I used to watch the show with my dad." Steph replied. Her had lost its usual cheer. "He loved those old adventure shows. I can't tell you how many times I had him make these little traps through the apartment. I'd have to figure out how to disable pressure plates, made with real paper plates. My favorite was the pitfall. He used couch cushions and blankets. It was the most obvious, but I always made sure to trigger it."

She turned away to wipe the tears that had formed in her eyes. Peter carefully squeezed her hand in support. She leaned against him in thanks. At some point Cass had moved from beside him to be closer to Steph. They both held her hands now.

Peter wasn't sure what exactly was going on. It almost felt like a date now.

"Ok." Steph pushed the cheer back into her voice. "Now, the final stop in the tour."

Peter had let her lead him around. He didn't pay much attention to the city around them. His spider-sense would kick in if there was any danger. He looked at where they had stopped. Before them stood a convince store that didn't have gas pumps.

"Quick-E-Stop?" Peter furrowed his brow. "Why are we here?"

"The best burritos in the neighborhood." Steph proudly proclaimed. "And would you look at that, it is also the location of our third meal together. How fortuitous."

Peter laughed at her. She was good.

Chapter 15 - Chapter 10 on HF.

"Heart to heart conversations are best had with a hot meal." Steph smiled at him as they took a seat in a nearby booth.

The place was a shared space of a convenience store and a small restaurant. Everything they served was fried. They had quite an impressive menu for such a small place. Burritos, various types of chicken, cheesy fries, and mozzarella sticks.

"So." Steph opened a foil wrapped burrito. "Tell us about yourself, Pete."

"What do you want to know?" Pete asked with a sigh.

"Everything." Steph smiled brightly. "This is going to sound weird, but we've tried to find you. Not, like, now, but your past. We've found nothing. Not a sing paper trail, fingerprints, face scan, until you strolled out of an alley like a month ago. An alley that had been previously empty."

"Wow." Peter looked from Steph to Cass. "That doesn't sound creepy at all."

Cass nodded.

"Sorry." Steph blushed. "I like puzzles. You, my friend, are the Holy Grail of puzzles."

<<She bet you're an alien.>> Cass added.

"Rude." Steph gasped. "Yes. Tim and I made a bet, but he's just as curious as I am."

"You're not making me feel all that calm." Peter said. Oddly enough, his spider-sense hadn't kicked up.

<<That's fair.>> Cass nodded.

She sighed and bumped Steph with her shoulder. The two had a quick conversation in sign language out of his line of sight.

"You're right." Steph directed the statement to Cass. "You're right."

The duo turned back to face him.

"I'm sorry." Steph gave a weak smile. "I know I'm coming off as weird. I've been on desk duty for the last couple of months. Broke a bone, tore some muscle, and disconnected some tendons. Even with space healing, it took a while."

"Space healing?" Peter asked.

"Kryptonian Tech." Steph whispered and motioned to his shirt. "We can't make another one, but it can heal some amazing things. How else do you think we're able to keep going? I swear the Old Man stopped aging like twenty years ago."

Peter stole a quick glance at Cass.

"Voice... del... i... cate." Cass croaked.

"The more intricate body parts aren't easy to repair." Steph squeezed Cass' hand.

<<The healing is focused.>> Cass swapped back to sign. She shrugged. <<I would have to go in to target my voice. I've lived this long without it.>>

"I know it doesn't make up for me being rude, I'm just bored out of my mind." Steph groaned. "Would it help if we traded secrets?"

"We all know about our night jobs." Peter shrugged.

"Origin stories?" Steph wiggled her eyebrows.

"Here?" Peter motioned to the store around them.

"Good point." Steph tapped her chin with her finger in thought.

<<Apartment.>> Cass suggested.

"Are you sure?" She asked.

Cass nodded.

"Ok." Steph nodded. "Would you like to talk at our apartment? It's a short drive from here."

"I don't have a car." Peter replied.

<<I drive.>> Cass countered.

On one hand, he would be going to an unknown location and Selina didn't have a reason to suspect anything would be wrong. On the other, he was reasonably certain they didn't have any powers. He didn't want to sound overconfident, but he was pretty sure he could take them.

"Sure." Peter shrugged. "Lead the way."

"Yay!" Steph bounced to her feet.

She pulled Cass along. The silent girl gave her an all-suffering look, but there was a spark of joy in her eyes. He chuckled as he followed behind them. The walk to the car took longer than the tour around campus. Mainly because they had used the student parking structure that had five levels and the stairs were arranged in a weird order. Each side went up two floors, then you had to cross over to the next for the next, and roof access was a stairwell completely separate from the others.

"I know. I know." Steph said as they trudged up the last flight of stairs. "It looks weird, but it's for disaster preparedness. Each level can be sealed to prevent outside contamination, special vents can

blanket this place in foam if there's a fire, every angle is covered by cameras, and additional emergency exits open up if they need to."

"Wow." Peter blew out a breath. "This place is crazy."

"Gotham is a crazy place." Steph sighed.

A car on the far side of the fourth level chirped as they neared. Aside from the heavily tinted windows it looked could have been easy to overlook it. Even then, it wasn't the only one with darkened windows. It wasn't until they got in that Peter realized it had been urban camouflage. The interior looked like it belonged to one of the cars in Tony's garage. Minus the station for F.R.I.D.A.Y.

"Nice car." Peter commented.

"Bullet resistant windows up to small arms, tires can take a few seven-six-two, reinforced frame, multistage inertial cushioning, and a few other toys that I'm not supposed to talk about." Steph smiled at him. "We could punch through the wall and keep going once we hit the street. Four. Levels. Below." She dropped her voice deeper with each of her last words.

Peter chuckled.

She slid into the backseat and motioned for him to join her. Cass didn't seem bothered, so Peter joined her. The seats looked like leather but felt different. It took him a moment to realize they were made from the same material as his suit.

"Buckle up." Steph prompted.

Peter did and was instantly thankful for the prompt. Cass drove like a madwoman. She sped through the parking structure like it was a racing track. The car barely slowed when it took the turns, and they caught a bit of air as they made it to the street. His spider-sense was screaming at him.

"You were kidding about the punching through walls, right?" Peter shot a wide-eyed look at Steph.

"Yes." Steph sighed. "You do it one time and suddenly they won't let you drive!"

Peter caught the look Cass shot the blonde in the rearview mirror. He met her gaze and saw the mingled love and amusement they held.

"I'll start." Steph said. "Stephanie Brown, the origin story."

Peter chuckled.

"I told you about my dad a little." She continued. "He really liked puzzles. So much so he became a costumed villain that went by the name The Puzzler. Kind of like the Riddler, but not. I didn't like that he was hurting people, so I started giving the answers to the puzzles. I took the name Spoiler, you know, since I was spoiling his stuff. Bats put my dad away and offered me a job. I did a small stretch as Robin, but it ended badly. When I was finally back on my feet, I picked up cowl as Batgirl."

"Then you got hurt?" Peter asked.

"It happens in our line of work." Steph shrugged. "Physically, I'm healed. It takes some work to get my brain to accept it. That's a side-effect of the alien tech. Most humans have a hard time adjusting to their body healing so quickly. Your brain tells you, don't do that, it needs to heal, but your body is fine."

She sighed.

Peter let the thought settle in. He had some stutters when he first started too. Back then he was mostly focused on getting his strength and speed under control, but the healing had some issues too. Now it was second nature but had freaked out the first time a broken bone healed in less than a day. It was probably the reason it hurt so much when he got dusted. He didn't like to think about it. The experience wasn't something that just went away. His very being fought against it.

"Peter." Steph spoke softly and touched his hand.

Peter shook his head. He blinked. His eyes were wet for some reason. He wiped the unshed tears away.

"Bad memories." He gave her a weak smile. "I've got a lot of them."

Steph nodded. Movement upfront caught her attention.

"Are you sure?" Steph asked Cass.

The quiet girl nodded.

"Cass' origin story is kind of like mine." Steph continued. "Her father was a costumed villain too. Still is. Slade Wilson, he goes by the name Deathstroke in the mask. *The world's greatest assassin.*" She rolled her eyes at that last bit. "He trained Cass to be the perfect killer. That scar is where he sliced her vocal cords. Sick bastard. She came to Gotham, met Bats, and he showed her how to fight without going for the kill. She was Batgirl for a while before she became Black Bat."

Peter let the information sink in. Obviously, neither story was detailed, but he didn't really need to know all of it. That would come later as they got comfortable around each other.

"You'll have to get the others to tell you their stories." Steph said. "If you want to meet them. You probably will eventually. There aren't that many people on the rooftops as the papers say. The bad guys stay on the street, or underground for the most part."

The car pulled to a sharp stop. Peter looked out the window to see that they were in the parking lot of a ten-story apartment building. It was in weird neo-gothic style that the city loved. Now that he thought of it, classic glass and steel skyscrapers were rather rare in Gotham. There was a cluster of them in the business district. For the most part, the city was made of stone and glass. He had lost count of the gargoyles along the streets.

Cass and Steph led him into the building. A doorman waved as they entered. The lobby was sparse with only the desk and there were three unmarked elevators. Each required a keycard to activate. They scanned the card and stepped into the middle one. The apartment was rather well kept considering two college students slash vigilantes lived there.

Steph stopped by the door. She pressed the screw above the light-switch. The windows darkened and a gentle white noise filled the air.

"Privacy setting." Steph explained. "All of our places had surveillance in case of emergency. No one wants to hear *everything*. That way, this stays between us."

"Thanks." Peter gave her a soft smile.

"Now." She grabbed his hands and led him over to the couch. "Spill. I've got a bet to win."

Peter chuckled. Cass took a seat behind Steph. The blonde leaned back against her, and the quiet girl casually pulled her closer.

He took a deep breath. How much did he want to tell them? How much would they believe? Did Selina deserve to know first? She had taken him in, but they hadn't actually had many conversations. Their talks were about possible jobs, comparing observations of their patrols, and reviewing information they had gathered during various gatherings. He knew next to nothing about her, aside from the fact that she was a thief and had a complicated relationship with Batman.

"I got my powers when I was fourteen." Peter said. "I was on a field trip with my science club and was bitten by a genetically altered spider. It nearly killed me. I slept for like three days straight. When I woke up I was stronger, faster, and could stick to walls. We didn't have a lot of money, so I thought I could use my new abilities to get some cash. There was a talent show kind of thing. Like a circus blended with American Idol."

They shrugged at the reference.

"Not important." Peter waved it away. "Someone robbed the place. I didn't stop him. The guy stole a car and shot the driver. My Uncle Ben had just arrived to give me a ride home."

"Oh, no." Steph whispered.

Peter looked down at his hands. He didn't want to see them.

"I couldn't find the guy." Peter continued. "They found the car ditched by the river. He set it on fire before he left. We hadn't had it for long. Everyone was still recovering from the Chitauri Invasion. The Avengers tried to keep it contained, but Queens is just across the river from Manhattan. We were homeless for a while but were one of the lucky ones. The Stark Foundation covered the cost of getting an apartment before things got crazy."

He took a breath.

"After Ben died I realized that I was wasting my powers." Peter forced himself to continue. "I made a costume and started to help people." He chuckled. "Man, it was bad. I had a hoodie, a ski mask, and these swimming goggles. Mister Stark, Tony, he saw some videos of me saving people, and asked for my help. He gave me a new suit, much better, and that's when I really started doing the hero thing. I stopped mugging, car theft, that kind of thing, until this guy in a mechanical suit made from reverse-engineered Chitauri tech started getting out of hand. They called him The Vulture. It turned out he was my girlfriend's dad. She was kind of my girlfriend, we had one date that I had to leave in the middle of it to fight her dad." He scrunched his brow in thought for a moment. "I guess she was a girl I liked. She moved once her dad was arrested. After that, I went back to car thieves and muggings. At least until Thanos showed up. I hitched a ride into space with Tony. We, the Avengers, we fought Thanos and lost. He snapped and half of everything turned to dust. I turned to dust."

The breath he took now had a shiver in it.

"One moment Tony is holding me. The next, it's five years later. Tony died to save everyone." Peter swallowed. He tried to force the lump in his throat away. "We came back to Earth, and things were bad. Millions of people gone for five years and then suddenly came back. It was a mess. May, my aunt, was amazing. She set up a charity to help people. If you help someone, you help everyone. She liked to say that. Then Mysterio happened. He framed me for his murder and told the world who I was. Peter Parker was Spider-Man. That was my name."

He flashed them a sad smile.

"I even had web-shooters." Peter cleared his throat, that lump was stubborn. "It ruined my life. My friend's life. My aunt's life. I did the one thing I could think of. I asked Strange for help. He was going to erase the memory of my identity from everyone on the planet. I tried to get him to change it so May and my friends still knew." He sighed. "It caused some issues."

He gave a single, dry laugh.

"Issues." Peter closed his eyes. "It opened dimensional rifts. It let in people from other worlds who knew Peter Parker was Spider-Man. They couldn't be good guys, or like rich relatives. Supervillains, legit super-powered villains. There was a guy with these metal tentacle things, a guy who could control electricity, an eight-foot tall lizardman, a guy made out of sand, and Osborn."

He clenched his fist.

"It wasn't all bad." A shade of a smile fought the sorrow in his voice. "I met two other Spider-Men. They were awesome. The three of us tried to help them. Osborn killed May. I couldn't save her. I couldn't save her, I couldn't save Ben, I couldn't save Tony." His next words came out as a whisper. "Why did I save Osborn?"

"By then the walls between dimensions were about to break." Peter steadied his voice. "The only way to save the world was for them to forget me. Strange used his magic to erase Peter Parker. One moment I'm with my friends, the next I'm in an alley in Gotham."

Peter finally found enough strength to open his eyes. The two girls stared back at him with expressions so sorrowful it hurt him.

"Then I met Selina." He slumped back into the couch cushion. "Then I met Cass and now I'm here."

"Fuck." Cass croaked out.

Despite everything. Peter laughed.

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