The Chances of Survival: 14 million and the time that never happened

by BearlyMadelt

Summary
Stephen had looked through all possible outcomes of the battle against Thanos. 14,000,605. With one chance to win.

There was, however, another chance to win he never saw. A chance so unlikely to happen, that it never occurred to him. It wasn't possible. It couldn't be possible. But it happened.

The glowing green gem turned time backward.

Who remembers it happened?
Don't… don't kill him. I'll give you the stone if you spare him."

Stephen had just snapped out of his unconsciousness. The world still blurry and painful. And all he could see was Thanos, the four Infinity Stones he owned glowing, ready to kill. He couldn't allow that. Tony... he had to live. Even though it meant his own death. The death of so so many more. He had vowed to protect the time stone with his own life. He would. Even though the way he did was a bit… weird. They had to lose to be able to win. He had looked through all the possible outcomes of this battle. If he could make sure that the remaining survivors could reach the one tiny chance to win through his own death… who was he to object?

He got up slowly, Thanos' eyes focused on him. He had stopped to approach the person who had to live. At least something.

"No tricks this time, sorcerer?" Thanos asked dangerously. If you trick me, I will kill you all. Wasn't he going to do just that anyway?

"No tricks. Just spare him."

Their enemy, the huge purple titan, turned, faced him and waited. Ready to obliterate him if need be.

But Stephen wouldn't give him a chance. Not this time. He raised his hand, letting the time stone appear from wherever he had hidden it. He could see Thanos taking a step towards him, the other four stones still glowing. The green stone was floating above his hand, spinning around itself lazily. That was how it all ended. That easy. Just by handing a small, spinning stone to their enemy. He changed the spell, which kept the stone floating above his hand. Made it move the stone towards Thanos. He had seen that moment over and over and over. It had always ended the same way.

The stone reached Thanos, he took it and inserted it into the glove. The sheer power of five stones united would flow through them, make them despair, knowing they would never be able to beat that madman. Thanos would keep his word, let them live. Disappear towards earth by using the space stone. And finally, obtain the last. The mind gem in visions head.

This time, however, the 14 millionth and whatever time, exactly that, what he knew would happen, didn't happen. The spell started to move the stone. The stone moved. The stone's spin, however, was different then it should have been. The stone turned slightly, moving around its own axis, and grazed his bare finger.

The last thing he saw before a blinding white light swallowed them all, was a glowing green stone, and his glowing green skin. He felt a huge bolt of energy rush through his very being. He should be dead. The stone should turn him into smoldering ash. But it didn't. And then there was light.

Through the light, he could hear Thanos screaming "Noooooo!".

The next thing he knew, was being, well, thrown was probably the right word, against hard ground. The sheer impact forced every bit of air out of his body, the pain he had felt before intensived for a mere second. Ten-thousand times and then…

… there was nothing. Silence. His own ragged breathing, his thrumming heart, his always hurting hands and nothing. He was laying there for a second, waiting to be killed. Dying some gruesome, terrible death, but nothing happened. There was only silence.
That wasn't right. He had always heard the odd wind on Titan. Felt the rough ground. The steps of Thanos. The…

Opening his eyes, he stared at dark… wooden... parquet?

Slowly, he sat up, looking around. Yes. The wooden floor. The… that was… Stephen Strange blinked confused while eyeing his surroundings. There he sat, on the ground in his own (old) apartment. Shivering, fearful, waiting to be killed, but nothing happened.

He slowly got up, nearly freaking out when he finally heard something. He spun around, seeing a green stone, spinning around itself on his floor. It still glowed. Bright and powerful. With every heartbeat, the glow faded, until it was gone. Just a green gem, laying there.

A moment later, his door opened. Turning around again, he saw Christine entering, casually holding a shopping bag. She looked at him out of sad, calm eyes.

"He won't do it?" she asked, a piece of true sadness in her voice and eyes.

He stared at her for a mere moment, taking a step towards her… mainly to be sure she couldn't see that suspicious green gem on his floor. He still wasn't sure it was even there. He wasn't sure he was even here. Maybe… Thanos… yes… he played around with reality again, didn't he? Because… he hadn't handed him the stone fast enough? That made sense.

"Stephen, you have to stop spending money on it. Especially money you don't have. Your hands can't get any better. You know that." She paused, waging her words carefully to not upset him.

"I know your work is a huge part of your life. But it's just that. A part of your life. There are other things that can give it meaning."

He continued to simply stare at her for a second. That… that was… he remembered that sentence. He had freaked out over it. Thrown words at her in his fit he couldn't easily take back. It had needed a while until they grew back together. That… that moment… this moment… it had happened more than two years ago.

Christine came a step closer, watching him carefully. She had expected him to freak out. He would have freaked out. If…

"Stephen… is everything okay?" she asked worried, not being used to him simply being silent.

Well. No. He had fought a huge purple titan who threatened to wipe out half the universe a mere minute ago. He was sure he was going to die a minute ago. He was sure she was going to die a minute ago. He had placed all his hopes on the tiny possibility of victory a minute ago. That was… it just… didn't make any sense. Him here didn't make any…

Slowly, so very slowly, realization trickled into his mind. The time stone. It had been glowing when it touched him. The other four had been glowing. The stones. They had been so very close to each other. Basically, in the same place at the same time.

"Stephen?" the even more worried voice of Christine cut through his thoughts, bringing him back to reality. She had come closer, looking at him with deep worry in her eyes. And he just stood there, unable to say a word. Unable… he closed the little space between them and hugged her. To feel her against him, her warm, breathing, living body… For a moment he closed his eyes, fully embracing the impossibility of holding her, here, in this long gone moment.

Breaking away he looked at her. If this was the past, which was now the present... for a moment he
wondered how blind he had been for his entire life. Christine was... but... he couldn't think about that right now. He turned around, his gaze grazing the green gem which still lay innocently on the ground. If the stone was here, the Eye of Agamotto had to be gone. That fact wouldn't go by unnoticed. The past, his... present... it had already changed, then. How far could one alter time to still achieve the same outcome? If he did something different, would he become the same person? Would he simply cease to exist? Would he not be able to help fight against Thanos because he had never been there? Would he...

He sighed softly, looking at his reflection in the window. So many questions. So many liabilities. Unkowns. What ifs.

"Maybe you are right. That there are other things which can give meaning to my life."

First, figuring out who remembered like he did would be a good start.

He turned around again, looking at her sadly. There were so many things he couldn't understand. The present, being one of them. She looked at him, surprised. For a moment, none of them said a word. Finally, Stephen sighed again.

"Could I... hug you again?" He wasn't sure if she would like it, after all, they weren't together in this current moment. Hence, better ask. She shook her head, but embraced him, pulling him close.

"You are a curious man."

Oh, she had no idea.

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Tony Stark gritted his teeth, trying to not groan in pain. Based on the fact, that he had just been stabbed with his own sword, it was quite a heroic task. Thanos ripped the broken sword out of his side, threw it carelessly behind him. He raised his gloved hand, closing his fingers to a fist. The stones, all the stones, started to glow. That was how he would die? On a strange planet, surrounded by (all except the boy) strange people, far away from his friends and loved ones? Killed by a weapon beyond imagination?

"Don't... don't kill him. I'll give you the stone if you spare him."

Strange's voice cut through the weird silence of the moment. Tony tried to turn his head, get a look at Strange. The sorcerer had been knocked out by Thanos. He, Tony, had tried everything to protect that idiot. Protect the stone. And now he offered it up? For what? And why? Strange had repeatedly said that he would always choose the stone over any of them. Protecting the stone was everything. And now... he just...

"No tricks this time, sorcerer?" Thanos asked back, obviously annoyed with them. To him, they had to be ants. Stopping him from reaching his goal easily.

"No tricks. Just spare him." was Strange's weak answer. His voice sounded broken. Hopeless. There was no hope left anyway.

In horror, he watched, how Strange did what he had said he would. He saw the small green gem appear from its hiding place. It spun around itself, floating over Strange's hand. That... he couldn't... he couldn't mean to hand the time stone to that monster. The only thing which stood between him and Vision. Him and earth. Him and death for half the universe. Pepper... he had wanted to...

Closing his eyes he waited for his life to flash by in front of his eyes, after all, he could mark this day as his own death, in a way. They had lost. Everything.
While Tony was annoyed by the fact that his life wouldn't flash by in front of his eyes, another thought entered his mind. What if he survived today. What if Pepper was one of those who disappeared if that monster used the stones? What if... a life without Pepper... he couldn't...

And then, even with his closed eyes, he saw a blinding light. That would be it, wouldn't it? Thanos was going to kill them all at the same time. Wipe the silly ants out. He heard a scream like from far away. Yep. That was it.

The pain he felt, being stabbed and beaten and... grew into madness for a second. Ten-thousand times worse. He felt how his body simply collapsed, hitting ground and...

...nothing. Nothing followed. Was he already dead? Was nothing heaven? Would he even get into heaven? After all, he had been a really annoying person for a time in his life, even he knew that. Hadn't he made up for that by being Iron Man? Saving all those people? Always trying his best? In the end, trying his best simply wasn't enough. He had failed everyone. Every living thing in the universe. Thanos had won.

"Tony?"

Oh, that was nice. His dead head imagined Pepper's voice.

"Tony? Is everything okay?"

Don't stop talking, imagination of Pepper's voice.

Now, he even heard her walking. The sound of her high-heels hitting his floor. She stopped. Oh, come on.

Being touched jolted him upright. He shouldn't be able to be touched. Or was that a thing if one was a ghost? Was she already dead?

No. She had to still be alive. Thanos had killed them only mere seconds ago. His still living friends would defiantly make a last stand to defend Vision. She couldn't... be... dead. Not Pepper. Not now. He stared at her worried and confused expression. She wore her business-dress. As if she just came from work. As if...

He backed away from her, crawling away backward until he hit a solid wall. Through blurry, crazed eyes, he took in his surroundings. Pepper. Pepper, Pepper, Pepper. Pepper in his little working place downstairs. Pepper coming from work. His fingers found his side, the side which just had been stabbed by his own sword. Pulling up his shirt he stared at it. There was nothing. No wound. He touched it. It had to be there! But his fingers only touched warm, unbroken skin. He stared at it in pure disbelief. That wasn't... that couldn't... the second thing his hazy mind registered was, that the container for nanoparticles was missing. There was nothing in his chest. Just... nothing... gone.

That light. Thanos had used that reality thing again, right? He made him imagine things! He got to his feet and grabbed the closest thing he could get his hands on, a coffee cup of his, and threw it against a wall with full force.

"Come on, coward!" He screamed at the top of his lungs "Come and finish it like a man! No need to hide! Just come here and kill me already!" He really didn't want to bleed to death. Ugly and long and painful.

"Where are you, he? Nothing to say anymore?" The next thing he got into his hands were pieces of his armor he had been working on years ago. He threw each piece after another, watching how they bounced off the cement. The coffee cup had at least shattered to a dozen tiny pieces, making noise.
Well... when he finally got his hands on a hand-piece of his armor, he equipped it without much thought and used the one-time blaster to create a new door in one of his walls.


Until the illusion fell.

He didn't want to die out of his mind. At least that grace should be left for him.
Peter had just secured the rest of their weird team from flying around the place after Thanos had thrown the moon on them. He was swinging back to Thanos now, to see if he could help. He had to help. Somehow. From afar, he could see Tony in a kneeling position, most of his armor gone, Thanos in front of him, gems glowing. The sorcerer was getting back on his feet.

He couldn't hear what they were talking about, but he could surely see the green gem appear from nowhere. The green gem they were fighting to protect. The... the doc couldn't mean to hand that little thing to Thanos! He would kill them all! Earlier or later at least. He would head back to earth, kill Vision, snap his fingers and poof. Half the universe dead.

He was contemplating screaming "No!" but if he couldn't hear them, they couldn't hear him. He abandoned that idea, trying to hurry, but he couldn't get there any faster.

In shock and disbelief and fear, he saw how the green gem started to move. The image before him seemed to etch itself into his brain. Thanos standing in front of the doc now, gauntlet raised, stones glowing. The little stone moved and all of a sudden started to glow.

The last thing Peter saw before a blinding white light swallowed him, was the green light of the gem. The glowing seemed to embrace the doc, expand onto him, be him. He looked like the green lantern. And then. Light. He felt how he fell, he had obviously missed the piece of debris he had wanted to attach his string to and hit the ground hard.

Peter hadn't felt all that bad during the fight. Of course, he had taken some heavy hits, would have some gruesome bruises, but most likely nothing in comparison to the others. The suit had caught most of the endeavor. What he felt now, though, was past any humanly imaginable thing. Such pain! He felt as if there was nothing else. Only pain. Just pain. Pain...

... and then nothing. He embraced the moment, jolted himself back onto his feet and collided with something, no, someone.

"Hey! Idiot!" he looked around, his stressed-out mind trying to grasp the situation... and failed in vain. He backed away, looking at the scene in front of his eyes. Co-students. Running. He was still in his fight-for-my-life-mode, hunched down, ready to... anything. His heart pounding, his head reeling. But the scene didn't change. He was in his sports class?

His teacher jogged towards him, screaming at him. He should continue running if he was okay.

No. He was not okay. He... was just...

Thanos...

The end of the universe...

Thanos... he... the gems... he bent reality again, right? He made him see those things. Would he simply collapse any moment now, while the mad titan killed him behind his back, so to speak?

He didn't want to die!
With that thought, prominent and foremost, his stressed-out mind simply collapsed. He fell down again, starting to sob hysterically. He didn't want to die!

He didn't want to die! Nononononono! His sobbing was joined by uncontrollable shivering. He just wanted to… he… it couldn't end like that. He…

His teacher had reached him by now, staring at the broken-down bundle at his feet.

"Leeds!"

Some moments later, Peter felt how he was hoisted upright. His teacher held him carefully, while Ned was trying to support him.

"Get him away. See the nurse. Maybe accompany him back home."

Peter stared at his teacher out of blank eyes. Home. Home wouldn't exist any second now. Ohmygod! Aunt May! The thought of her dying through finger-snapping increased his fit, hence Ned had to basically drag him out of the gym hall.

In a corridor, his best friend sat him down, leaning his shivering back against the wall.

"Pete? What?"

"I don't want to die, Ned!" he told the image of his friend in his head. He was still sobbing. Still shivering. Still waiting to be killed any second now. Couldn't take much longer.

He could see his friend frown. "You aren't going to die. It's just sport."

He… sport?

The thought was so irrational, that Peter stopped sobbing for a second.

"You think this is about sport?" he asked his 'friend'. Ned simply stared at him, completely confused.

A second later Peter was back on his feet. "This isn't about sport! Who cares about fucking school?!" he screamed, hysterical again. He really didn't want to die. He turned around, starting to punch the wall. He felt the pain in his hands, creating holes in the cement along the way. Ned tried to pull him away, but he fought against it. Feeling something in his last seconds was better than… He didn't want it to end. Not like that.

"Should've stayed on the –" and then he stopped. Ned, who had continued to try to pull him away, toppled over backward and they both fell to the ground.

Peter just lay there, not moving, not anything. Probably not even breathing. The image. The thing he last saw before the light swallowed him. Thanos and the doc. The doc had glowed green like the stupid green lantern. The doc. Thanos hadn't done anything.

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Vision groaned in pain when the Infinity Stone in his head did something. He went to his knees, grabbing his head in the futile attempt to ease the pain. It felt… it felt… he guessed dying felt like that. An immense bolt of pain running through his very being. Energy. It was energy. A kind of energy he couldn't handle. The stone occasionally, well, communicated with him in weird ways, but it had never done that.

As fast as it happened, it was gone. Nothing.
"What the…?" he asked hollowly.

Wanda was kneeling next to him, looking at him worriedly.

They had finally succeeded in meeting up after the fight at the airport. Talking. How they should go on from now on. After all, she and her 'Team-Cap' band were wanted criminals. Even though he fought alongside Tony, he didn't want his old friends to get into even more trouble.

"What happened?" Wanda's voice was low and gentle, trying to be soothing.

"I don't know… the stone…" it had done something, that was for sure. Was that a message? A warning?

They were silent for a long moment, not knowing what to say. While Vision went to pondering what that weird blast of energy could mean, he felt Wanda's eyes on him. She…

"Could you try to feel what's wrong with it?"

Wanda looked at him for a long moment, then sighed softly and did what he asked. She raised her hand and held it above the Infinity Stone. Touching that little gem was off limits, even though it gave him his life.

"Something is off." She stated after a few minutes. Well… he knew that already.

"Nothing else?" she shrugged, smiling sadly. Vision sighed. It had to mean something. For sure. He had to… well… his thought process was interrupted the moment he got a call. Great. Now. He thought about not answering it, but as far as he could tell it was Miss Potts calling. Ignoring the girlfriend of Tony would be very rude. She would have a reason to call. Finally picking up, he greeted her tiredly.

The ancient one was reading through some old scrolls when she felt it. A huge wave of energy echoing through the entire multiverse. Something had happened. But what? Dropping the scrolls, she got up, leaving her room. She looked around for anything, eyeing her fellow sorcerer, but obviously, no one but she had felt it. They were going through their motions. Training, exercising, reading. Drinking tea.

She came to a stop when a hysterical Wong came to a stop in front of her. He was gesturing around like a madman, not able to say a thing. Sometimes he really was too much of everything.

"What is it?" she asked gently, trying to calm him down with her voice.

"The eye…" he finally got out in a tiny voice. Karl Mordo, who witnessed the entire ordeal, heard what he said to her. She looked at him for a second, then the three of them were hurrying away to the safe-keep of the eye. Wong was right. It was gone. Simply gone. Had the huge wave of energy been that? Someone or something sneaking in right below her nose and stealing the Infinity Stone they had vowed to protect?

She frowned, confused. While Mordo took to yelling in anger, Wong being the silent guy he was, she closed her eyes, trying to concentrate. That wasn't right. She knew the future to some extent. The Eye of Agamotto simply vanishing. That wasn't supposed to happen.

"Calm down, Mordo." She finally said gently, ending his screaming.
"I'll set up a surveillance spell. If someone tinkers with time we'll know of it."

Pepper was cowering on the ground, not daring to move for a second. Her boyfriend had exceeded his current last fit by the thousands. He had used his blaster to shoot a hole into one of his walls, then he had jumped into the next complete suit he could get his hands on, not done anything for a second, and then used those red-beam-super-weapon things, decimating everything along the way. Pieces of the ceiling were starting to come down as the room she was currently in was losing its structure, hence the ability to support the upper floor. She crawled towards her handbag which she had dropped somewhere between her lover collapsing and starting to throw things around like a madman. She pulled her phone out and ran upstairs as if her life depended on it. Hearing a piece of ceiling come crashing down behind her, she knew it had been the right decision.

While she ran out of the house, she could hear Tony crashing through walls. Staring at her phone for a second, she didn't ask herself who she could call, the question was who was the closest who could help her. She literally didn't have any time. Tony could get the next devastating idea any second now. He had a shitload of weapons in his suits.

Vision. He had mentioned being in the city because of something. Dialing his number with shivering hands, she prayed to every god in existence that he would take the call.

"Hello?" Vision sounded a bit off, but she didn't have time to ask what happened.

"Tony! He is completely out of his mind! He –" a pause. "Oh my god!" she turned and made for running again when her boyfriend found his grenades.

Stephen let go of Christine, looking at her calmly. They were still holding each other in a loose embrace.

"Could you stay overnight?" he asked slowly, unsure how she would react. Being shy usually wasn't one of his character traits, but in the current moment, not knowing anything at all, it seemed to fit. Having her around would calm him down. Else he would most likely freak out worrying about her.

She looked at him for a long moment, finally tilting her head.

"Normally, I would assume you want into my pants when you ask that question. Right now, though…" she paused, looking at him intensely. "I'll make us something to eat. After that, we can talk."

Stephen simply nodded, watching how she went towards the kitchen. How often had he been cooking in there? He could defiantly count the times with one hand. The moment she left the room he turned around, looking at the small green stone on his floor. He would have to do something about it. For the moment though… with a flick of his hand, the stone vanished.

A moment later he entered his kitchen, watching Christine. She moved around with those precise, self-confident motions he loved so much. If he could, he would love to watch her. He knew he couldn't, though. First, he had more important topics to think about. He had to consider what he guessed as true. And second, they weren't together. He would creep her out if he watched her too intensely. Closing his eyes for a moment, he focussed his thoughts. What did he know?

The time stone had reverted time. That much was obvious. Thanos could not, by any means, know about his (possible) fight with Christine, which, currently, never happened, hence this couldn't be an
illusion. It was a… well… different timeline? Reality? Possibility? So many words for the same thing. The question was, how could the time stone do what he had done? He guessed due to the proximity to the other stones. Five Infinity Stones united would be able to do some impossible things, right?

While he went down his trail of thoughts, he suddenly stopped. He had asked that question casually a few minutes ago. Who remembered like him? In fact, it was possibly the most important question of all. If Thanos remembered… if he still had the stones, they, most precisely he, after all, he tricked him again, would be dead by now. Consequently, he didn't own the stones right now. A good thing, at least. If he remembered and didn't have the stones… would he go for collecting them again?

No. If he was a madman whose goal was just snatched from him by inches, he would go for revenge. Kill him. Make sure he could never interfere again. How long had they needed from Earth to Titan using that small spaceship? Thanos, if he used his own ship, would be faster, wouldn't he? He would estimate somewhen during the night as arrival time if he was hellbent on killing someone. And Thanos would be hellbent on killing him. A shiver ran down his spine. Maybe it hadn't been such a good idea to ask Christine to stay.

He closed his eyes for a second, trying to hide his shivering. He couldn't watch her die. Not again. As soon as they had talked… he would say he needed sleep. And use the time stone to check the timelines. He would see if Thanos came for him.

Chapter End Notes

My one note on the timeline: yeah, obviously 2016. I tried to figure out when exactly in relation to 'Civil War' 'Doctor Strange' is happening. I came down to the beginning of 2016 for his accident. Strange has to go through multiple surgeries and therapy before he even leaves for Kamar-Taj, hence all of this is playing after the airport battle. I hope I don't upset anyone ;)
Tony Stark was busy flying above his property and decimating his own house when he glimpsed movement in the corner of his eye. Turning his head… Pepper… running away… The image of his love fleeing from him actually reached his brain, made him stop. Not even in an illusion, he could hurt her. He was still confused and mad and… but… Pepper.

Those were his last moments, weren't they? He should… Slowly, he registered, that Friday was talking with him. How long was she doing that?

"Sir? Sir? I would politely request not to destroy everything."

Not to… who cared about that? But Pepper fleeing and Friday's voice interrupted his crazy thoughts. Still hovering over what was left of his house, he looked around. A normal day. Sun shining. Birds… an airplane overhead… wind… it felt so real…

"Friday? Is there a way to figure out if someone is inside my head?"

Stupid question, really. He was inside an illusion. Of course, she would tell him he was fine.

"You mean mind-control, sir? Like Hawkeye being controlled by Loki?"

Well, it was a start.

"Yeah, something like that."

"According to my readings, your brain is currently over-active, but otherwise completely normal, sir."

As expected, he was completely fine.

"Is there a way to break mind-control? Or an illusion?"

Friday was silent for a moment. He took his time to land, raising his hands and slowly walking towards Pepper, who cowered outside of his open gates.

"A high-pitched tone or a high enough current should disrupt any trail of thoughts, sir."

Interrupt the trail of thoughts… if he wasn't actively being anything, there was nothing to control, right? Pain could force you out of dreams. Soo…. theoretically… an illusion was nothing else than a very persistent dream, right? He finally reached Pepper, who slowly got up, watching him carefully.

"Okay, fry me, Friday."

"Sir? Are you sure?"
"Friday? Did he say to fry him?" Pepper was on her feet in the blink of an eye, obviously having heard his conversation with his AI.

"Yes."

"You don't –"

"Pepper, calm down, please. She won't kill me." Hopefully. If not… couldn't get any worse. "I have to be sure of something."

A moment later, Friday did what he had asked of her. She misdirected some of the current powering the suit and

Slowly, Tony came back to his senses. He was laying on the ground again. He felt like after a reaaaaallllyyyy bad hangover. Frying himself wasn't that great of an idea.

He expected to see Thanos. Or not Thanos because he was already off to earth, but at least that moron of a magician, Peter, one of the galaxy guys. Anyone he saw before the light.

But he didn't. There was only Pepper, hunched over his suit and arguing with Friday to open it.

The implications of still seeing Pepper… he closed his eyes, counting to ten and opened his suit. They looked at each other for a moment, Pepper's face filled with relief that he hadn't killed himself. He smiled tiredly, got out of his suit and pulled her with him to the ground. Hugging her desperately, he pressed her body against his. With each second his thoughts got clearer and his body started to tremble. He had nearly killed Pepper. He had nearly…

He felt how he was close to freaking out again – he had nearly killed Pepper! – and started to breathe slowly, trying to calm himself down.

"Everything okay?" Pepper asked carefully while hugging him back and snuggling into his arms, obviously happy that he wouldn't cause any further destruction. He sighed softly when he heard her timid voice.

"Yeah… No… it will be okay." He guessed that at least, after all, he was still alive and, well, here, which shouldn't be possible to begin with. He closed his eyes and started to stroke along her body absentmindedly. What had he missed between Strange summoning the stone and that light? It could only be seconds, even though it had felt like an eternity.

He heard someone landing beside them, not bothering to look who it was.

"Miss Potts? Is everything alright?" the smooth voice of Vision made him loose the embrace a bit, looking up at him.

Meanwhile, he could hear Pepper's voice: "Yeah, he calmed…

Staring up at Vision, he completely ignored the conversation going on around him. The Infinity Stone. It reminded him of Thanos, gauntlet raised, until Strange had stopped him. He was sure he would die there. Until Strange had offered the time stone, which only let him to being sure to die there, but in a different way. Vision's mind stone... It was one of the last things standing between Thanos and death for half the universe. Vision shouldn't be alone. Not. Ever. Banner would have called Steve and they would protect him. Yet here he was, all alone. It didn't make any sense. Not at all.

"Tony? Tony?" slowly, Pepper's voice drifted towards him and he snapped out of his thoughts,
looking at her questioning, realizing that she had gotten up. What had he missed?

"What happened?" asked Vision softly, looking at them.

He stared at him. What… happened…

"I called him before I got here. He was like always, I guess. Working on something. I walked down the stairs, planning on telling him once again that he shouldn't stay in there forever." Reported Pepper in a voice, which tried to be calm, but failed a little. It trembled ever so softly. Looking up at her, he tried to see into her eyes. He had scared the hell out of her, hadn't he? "And then he just collapsed. And after that…” she gestured to the ruin of his house, unable to put into words what she wanted to say.

He got up slowly, embracing her again. "I'm sorry." He stated gently. He only got a half-smile in return, but she hugged him back. Holding her close, he thought about her words. He had collapsed and then… he frowned. That part didn't make any sense. She had said that he had been here the entire day, which he had not. He would have thought that she remembered him being stuck in a spaceship. He had been on Titan, fighting a madman after all. Then that unbearable pain which made him collapse and then he was here. And due to the fact that here wasn't an illusion… how was that possible? Only the space stone could have brought him here, but Thanos would surely not be that gracious. Strange had been the last one standing. If he was alive…

"Friday? Give me everything about Stephen Strange."

His suit was a bit away, but Friday would surely hear him. Meanwhile, Pepper brought a bit of distance between them and looked at him confused. He could feel Visions gaze on him, too. He knew what they were thinking. Why the hell did he want to know everything about Strange now, when he didn't answer their question about what had happened in the first place. He guessed he didn't make any sense to them either. At least their confusion was mutual.

Friday was telling him everything there was to know about Strange a moment later, having adjusted the speakers in the suit for them to hear her.

Highschool, University, a brilliant student, blabla. He didn't even listen to most part of it until Friday caught him completely off guard.

"Repeat that again." He said.

"That he had a car accident this February?" his AI asked back, while Tony was close to… well…

This…

February…

This was impossible. He had seen Strange. It couldn't… Out of nowhere, like usual, his brain supplied him with a random piece of memory, he once read. Maybe glimpsed in a newspaper or something like that. Strange. That accident... It had happened two years ago!

While one part of his head screamed at him that this was impossible, that he was probably, in fact, dead and fighting the truth of that, the other part was busy clicking the impossible pieces together.

There had been seconds between Strange summoning the stone and that light. Then he was here. In fucking 2016. Strange had reverted time. How that was even possible on that scale with no –

For the second time this day, his thoughts came to a sudden stop. Who said, that no one
He remembered. All those who had been on Titan could possibly remember, just like him. Peter, Strange, the Guardian of the Galaxy guys… Thanos.

Just the thought of the purple titan popping out of the next portal… but no. He couldn't have the stones else he would already be here and all of them dead. If he didn't have the stones and remembered, hence knew that Strange tricked him… He would come for the sorcerer. And after he finished him off, he... he... as soon as he had the time stone he could use it to reverse the reversal of time, right?

Tony felt, how a throbbing headache started in the back of his head. Thinking about time reversals which could possibly be reversed was confusing. After Thanos reversed everything, he would kill Vision one-handedly, wouldn't he? Or... Tony's gaze went towards Vision, staring at him blankly.

No. He would kill Vision, acquire the missing stone and then reverse time while having the stone with him, leading to him having all the stones. Was that even possible? Tony frowned. Questioning the possibility of things while being two years in his own past seemed a bit pointless.

"Friday. Get me..." Tony thought for a second, which had been his best suit two years ago? "... out here," He had to go. Like, now. Thanos would definitely make it to Earth within the night if he remembered. Maybe Strange could see if he came for him, would save them some hassle.

Meanwhile, Pepper and Vision stared at him, completely confused.

"Tony, what...? What's going on?" Pepper asked him in a weak voice.

"Maybe I can help?" offered the android, which made Tony shiver. If, if Thanos came for Strange, Vision shouldn't be anywhere near that place. He looked at both of them for a second. Could he tell them? A part of him wanted nothing more than that, he hated having secrets from Pepper. Yet, he guessed that one of the rules in the time-travel-101 was 'Not tell anyone who doesn't remember about time travel' unless you wanted to end up in a mental asylum. Which he might still end up in for freaking out, decimating his house and now running off. He had to monitor Pepper's phone, just in case.

"I have to get to New York. Something might happen. If it does I want you as far away from that city as possible." He hesitated for a second. "I will call you as soon as I know more. If things go south... I don't know." Probably destroy the stone. Was that possible? Had he just suggested to kill Vision to keep the stone away from Thanos? Was that even doable if Thanos had the time stone? He could simply reverse the destruction of Vision. Oh god, that day. Full of impossible things and questionable morals.

In the meantime, his suit had arrived. He took his time kissing Pepper goodbye, after all, it could possibly be their last kiss if he died today, jumped into his suit and was off to New York City. As soon as he was up in the air, he got a call from Pepper. Of course, she would call him, demanding to know what was going on.

"Friday, mute the call and find me Strange's address."

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Being dragged along one of the school corridors by Ned, who wanted to get him to the nurse office to let him be checked up after his breakdown, Peter looked around blankly. He had realized that Thanos hadn't done anything… and that was it. His mind went in circles, asking itself again and
again, how he could have come from Titan to Earth into the middle of his gym class in the blink of a second. It simply wasn't possible.

After a little while, he had started actively walking beside Ned, he began to pay attention to his surroundings again… and frowned immediately. There were ads and posters for events from 2016 plastered across the walls. He couldn't remember that his school was that sloppy. Actually, he couldn't remember having seen those posters and ads when he was here before his field trip, like... yesterday? He wasn't sure. Space-travel had screwed with his inner clock.

While he wondered about the number of aged posters, the bell rang and ended the current class. Students leaving their classrooms surrounded them in an instant. He really didn't bother… until he heard a voice. A certain female voice. Liz' voice. His crush from two years ago, who had moved to a different state. His heart skipped a beat, while his brain tried to understand. Liz… could be here for a visit! Yes, that had to be… but then he glimpsed her, surrounded by her friends. She looked like back then. She looked like…

His head jerked around and he stared at Ned. He hadn't paid attention… his friend looked like back then, too. Back in 2016. Slowly raising his hands, he stared at them. Where they… smaller…?

A weird panic had grabbed his heart. What had happened with everyone? Was he caught in an illusion nonetheless? Swirling around, he ripped himself free from Ned and stormed into the next men's bathroom. He instantly stopped the moment he saw himself in the mirror. He had hoped, hoped against all odds, that a freaked out and confused 17-year old would stare back at him. But there was none. A freaked out and utterly confused 15-year old stared back at him. He had grown quite a bit during those last two years, he could tell the difference. That wasn't the face he had seen last time when he looked in a mirror. He sneaked towards the mirror, like being afraid of it, and carefully touched the glass. Perhaps something would happen… like the glass exploding like in a bad horror movie. Or Bloody Marry gripping and eating him alive. Nothing happened, when his fingers touched the cold glass. The mirror remained a mirror and his reflection remained 15-years old.

He felt the next wave of utter panic approaching. He literally felt it coming, freaking out, going insane. Seemed very plausible given the situation. He felt the trembling start. In a moment, he wouldn't… nothing of this… his thoughts started to fly all over the place, his concentration lost to the impossibility of it all.

With his last coherent thought, he opened the water tap and ducked his head under the water stream, grabbing the sink with both hands to steady himself. He could feel, how his panic subsided. His trembling exchanged by a shiver, which was to be expected after having ducked his head under ice-cold water.

"Pete?"

Standing up straight again, he looked at Ned. When had his friend entered the bathroom to check on him? He couldn't remember hearing him. His gaze went back to the mirror. His 15-year old and dripping self stared back at him.

That was impossible. Getting from Titan back to Earth in an instant. Him being 15-years old. Liz back again. The posters. All of it was just im… possible. It was… it was…

While he stared at himself, slowly and unwillingly, he realized that it all made sense. Him being back on earth. The posters. Ned. Liz. It all made sense by not making sense.

The doc had done something. That stone. It was the damn Time Stone. He had been glowing green like the freakin green lantern.
"He reversed time." He mumbled under his breath, feeling the urge to say it, even though as a whisper.

"What?" he flinched hearing Ned's voice. Right, his friend was with him.

"He -" he had wanted to repeat those three words but stopped himself. If he told Ned... First, he had a breakdown, then he claimed having traveled back in time. Yep. Time to see a doctor and get a nice cozy room. On top of that, his aunt would most likely lose Guardianship over him. Who was to blame when the little one got nuts? Yep, the adult in the house.

He blinked and closed his mouth for a moment. "I... just..." it was quite rare for him to be speechless, but right now no words wanted to come. His eyes were fixed on his appearance in the mirror to make sure he didn't turn into thin air or something.

After a few moments, he sighed softly and lowered his head. Who remembered like him? Possibly, all of them could, right? Mister Stark, the doc, the galaxy guys... Thanos.

If Thanos remembered and had the stones...

Pulling his phone from his bag he opened his favorite search engine and entered 'Alien attack on NYC'. The search only yielded results from the attack in 2012. Sighing in relief, he closed his eyes for a moment. Good. That meant Thanos didn't have the stones and wasn't on Earth. But...

Peter bit his bottom lip, staring blankly at the mirror, then he turned and looked at Ned. His friend was staring at him, completely confused by his behavior.

He wanted to ask him for his opinion desperately, but currently with the given circumstances... Peter sighed softly. The case was simple, really. If he was Thanos and remembered, he would want to kill that damn sorcerer.

----

That very same damn sorcerer snapped out of his thoughts when he felt Christine's hand on his cheek. Had he been that far away? Obviously. Realizing, how strong he trembled, he scolded himself. Hiding it had gone especially well, that well, that Christine had seen it.

"Hey... don't you want to lay down for a little? You look..."

Terrible. The word she looked for was terrible, but she didn't say it. It would have upset the old him. Well... pretty much everything would have upset the old him.

Christine smiled gently, acting as if there had never been a break and continued talking with her gentle and warm voice.

"I can manage the food alone. I'll get you when I'm done."

He looked at her for a moment. He really didn't deserve such a loving and caring woman.

"You sure? Maybe it tries to eat you."

Earning a snort from her, he smiled a tiny bit. Christine laughing was always good.

"Are you trying to make jokes, Doctor Strange?" She asked him with a mocking tone, which nearly made him laugh. He forced the urge to smile down and plastered a deadly-serious expression on his face.
"Me? Never!"

The love of his life bursting into laughter actually made him smile and, for a moment, shooed all his worries of murderous titans away. Christine was leaning against the wall beside him, her head was thrown back in laughter, her eyes closed. On its own, his left hand rose, its goal the woman in front of him. He wanted to cup her cheek or pull her in for a kiss or... realizing once again what he was doing, he forced his hand back to his side, his smile gone. He couldn't do that. He had to keep himself together, however tempting the situation, else he could creep her out and lose her for good. In the meantime, she had calmed down, completely oblivious to his momentary weakness.

"Well... I'll be in the bedroom. Scream if something bites you and I'll be right by your side."

Once again, she chuckled, which made him smile involuntarily. Dammit, a chuckle from that woman was all it needed for him to be in a better mood. Keeping himself together would be interesting. Finally turning around, he left her alone and went into his bedroom.

As soon as he was inside the room, he locked the door. While he did that, he felt a sharp pain jolt through his hand. Raising it, he looked at it sadly. He had forgotten how painful everything had been in the beginning. He knew it would get better over time and with practicing magic. Yet, it was a long way ahead of him.

Sitting down and resting his back against the door, he focused his thoughts and let the time stone reappear in front of his face. It floated before him, seemingly being a normal green gem. He stared at it, not daring to touch it, but without the Eye containing the stone's power, the only way to use it was touching it.

He closed his eyes for a moment once more, praying to every god he didn't believe in anymore (had he ever believed in any god?) that he wouldn't turn into a smoldering pile of ash now. That he hadn't overstretched his luck. Grabbing the stone with his right, he felt the immense bolt of energy rush into him. Once again, he watched confused, how the glow of the gem expanded onto him until he, too, was emitting a soft, green glow. Of all the impossible things which had happened today, him being able to touch the stone without instantly dying was possibly the most impossible thing.

A moment later the green runes of time-manipulation appeared around his wrist. Good. A moment later he forwarded the current moment, glimpsing into the future. Initially, he only wanted to look until the end of the night, but a few days more couldn't hurt. In this timeline, there was no suddenly appearing Thanos like the worst version of Jack-in-the-box. Afterward, he jumped to next timeline and the next timeline and the next...

After he had looked into quite a number of different versions of the next days, he was sure that Thanos wouldn't come for him. He wouldn't come for any of them. He felt, how a weight fell from him. Christine was safe at his place. He was safe...

He picked the next best timeline and watched it until... it had to be around a month from now. For him, two things happened at the same time. Christine, here and now and in this moment, knocked on the door. Her gentle voice floating through the wood: "Stephen?"

In the same moment, he was blinded by a bright white light in his vision, hearing Christine screaming his name in fear.
Slowly and carefully waving spells into each other, the ancient one wondered once again, how the Eye could simply disappear. She knew that wasn't supposed to happen, and yet here she was, without the one thing they all had sworn to protect. How could she not have realized, that someone who didn't belong here entered Kamar-Taj? How could she not realize that the Eye, the time stone within, was stolen? She had been too preoccupied with that weird blast of energy, which had echoed through all dimensions. If only she knew what it all meant.

For a second, she watched her hands, golden strings floating all around her. She would know if someone used time magic. Hopefully, it wouldn't destroy their reality. Tinkering with time, however good an intention, was dangerous. She was just going to add another layer to her spell, localization of the place where the Eye was used, but she didn't even get to start it. All of a sudden, the surveillance rune she had created started to glow, making her back away and stare at it in disbelief. Whoever had stolen the Eye used it already?

----

Christine was watching the kitchen knife move absentmindedly. She had to be careful. A tad less concentration and she would definitely hurt herself and she couldn't stand being mocked by Stephen. He would surely do that. He acted, well, in the safety of her head she could use the word, strange today, but mocking and looking down on others was second nature to him. Like breathing. She couldn't believe that it was only a few minutes ago, that she had entered his apartment and seen him. He looked… well… fearful, terrified, confused, hopeless, most of all. She hadn't ever seen him like that. And then his actions! She had expected him to completely freak out the second she suggested that there could be other things which could give meaning to his life, he had asked to hug her again! If she wouldn't know better, she would think he was completely out of his mind. The probability of being born with a second head was bigger than Stephen Strange going around and hugging people.

In his kitchen… she hadn't realized it immediately, but that poor guy had started to tremble. He looked terrified. As if he expected a serial killer to magically appear in his apartment and stab him to death. And after that… he had tried and succeeded in being funny. Truth be told, he made a lot of jokes during work and gosh, they were all terrible. People usually laughed to not offend him. No one wanted to offend the next medical super-star, after all, there would be a time when they needed him. How ironic from life, to take everything away from him. They had all left him, all but her.

Some days she had wondered why she put up with his fits. It would be so much easier to simply walk out of the door and leave him. It would be better for her, for sure. Less stressful. Less painful. Yet, she didn't do it. Never. Whatever he threw at her. Stephen was good in hurting people using words. One might even say, he was excellent in that area. He was smart enough to find the one thing that really mattered… and then use it as a weapon. And still, she was here after a stressful day at work, cooking a soup for him. She knew she still loved him. After everything he had put her trough. How could someone not love him? He was brilliant. He was inspiring. There had been those moments, back then when they were dating, when she thought she had glimpsed who he really was. A kind and loving man, caring for all. It had always only been moments, though. The arrogant, egocentric asshole was stronger in Stephen. She couldn't lead a relationship based on moments, but those moments made it that hard for her to leave him for good. And his strange behavior.
Some twenty minutes later the soup she had cooked was servable. She stood there, undeceive for a moment. Should she go and get him? A bit of relaxation was good for him, whatever it had been that freaked him out that badly. She was curious what it was, but she knew better than to ask. She feared, that if she pushed him just a little, he would snap and... well... be who she was used to seeing. She had to admit she kind of liked the timid, shy person he currently was. Him acting that strange was the reason she hadn't turned down his request for staying the night instantly.

After a few minutes, she went to his bedroom, knocking carefully. "Stephen?" she asked gently.

She waited a few moments like courtesy demanded. Then she said his name again, waiting a moment longer. Still no answer. Opening the door, she entered the dim room.

-----

Stephen flinched the moment he heard Christine say his name in two so very different pronounced versions. Her screaming that fearful ripped at his heart, made him shiver. He dropped the stone, hearing how it hit the wooden floor. Calming himself down had worked especially well. He was closer to freaking out than before. Getting up in an instant, he made sure to hit the stone with his foot, kicking it through the room and basically jumped into his bed. Laying there, he took the time to ripple the bedsheets and closed his eyes. Oh. Right. With a flick of his hand, he unlocked the door, trying to calm down his frayed nerves, his trembling body. He heard, how she entered the room. Where to had he kicked that damn stone? Not that she saw it and... don't even think about that, Stephen. He could hear how she came closer. Silently, he cast a calming spell on himself. The effect was immediate: His heart rate reduced, his trembling stopped. And he felt how his mind got foggy. He didn't like that part of the spell, always made him feel as if on drugs, but oh well... what should he say when Christine asked why he trembled like a leave? That he looked into the future and... well... what had he seen exactly? His mind couldn't answer the question anymore, sadly. That spell had worked too well.

He felt Christine touch his shoulder, shake him gently.

"Stephen?"

One part of him wanted to actually fall asleep. But... he couldn't... she had...

"Stephen? Wake up." There was a chuckle in her voice. He could hear it. Oh...

Turning around, he opened his eyes, looking at her out of sleepy eyes. Damn spell.

"I'm awake." He mumbled softly, earning an actual chuckle from her. What?

"What is it?" he asked slowly, seeing how she suppressed a laugh.

"Nothing. I'll go and set the table. Don't fall asleep again, okay?"

He watched how she left him alone in the room, his mind completely blank. What had he wanted to...? Oh yes.

Sitting up, he tried to concentrate, but whenever he had a...

Getting up, yes. He had to get up. Right? Or... was there... hadn't he forgotten something?

Finally getting to his feet he moved towards the open door. Or wanted to. Or planned to. His foot grazed the green stone, which lay close to his bed. In his current state, the pulse of energy felt like a lightning, blasting through him and ripping the clouds in his head away. He jumped to the side, his
mind sharp again. Christine had been that damn close to this… he closed his eyes for a moment, cursed himself and let the time stone disappear again. Below his bed was surely a good hiding spot, he thought sarcastically, but he had to make sure the stone lay beneath the bed next time, not next to it.

He stood aimlessly in his bedroom for a moment, thinking. He had to… oh yes.

Leaving his bedroom, he looked for Christine, who was busy setting the table.

"I'll be right there, just have to…" and left for his bathroom.

In there, he pulled his phone from his jeans-pocket and searched for a phone number using the internet. He hesitated for a moment, cast a spell to make the room soundproof and dialed.

----

Peter was busy pacing through the small school bathroom, trying to decide what he should do next. He could try to call Happy and get forwarded to Mister Stark, but his contact-man would surely ignore him. Try to find out where the doc lived, but he guessed sorcerer where hard to find by nature. He hadn't known anything about magic before today, after all. His best bet would most likely be to head to the Avengers Tower. He would be able to see any spaceship arriving from up there. And he could try to contact Mister Stark from there too, to check if he remembered.

He felt how Ned stared at him. He was obviously not used to him being that… silent and hyperactive at the same time. He swirled around, facing his friend.

"Okay, I have a -" but he could never finish his sentence. His buzzing phone interrupted him. He stared at the display for a long moment. Unknown mobile number. His aunt always told him to not answer unknown numbers. Could be a reseller or scam or something. Nonetheless, he took the call, remaining silent for a moment. He was curious who was phoning him during official school-hours.

"Hey, ah, Peter Parker?"

He knew that voice! Was that...?

"Doc?" He asked surprised, his astonishment showing on his face.

"Yeah, I'd rather go as Doctor Strange though." Silence for a moment. "Well... you remember, obviously." Silence again. "We are not going to die anytime soon."

Peter blinked. "How do you..." Okay. He had the time stone, hadn't he? He would know it for sure. He was just going to ask... but then his eyes flipped to Ned. He couldn't talk about what had happened on Titan in front of him.

"How did you get my phone number?" He asked instead, earning a chuckle from the doctor.

"I found your aunt's number online. Convinced her that you have Onychocryptosis and that I had to talk to you right now. I am your new doctor, your aunt insisted on it. Lovely woman by the way. I would advise you to never get ill, I'm not practicing anymore. Besides, I've never done that stuff."

Peter just stood there, mouth slightly open and... that guy...

"I have what?"

"Oh, it's not as bad as it sounds." The doc chuckled amused, not saying anything for a moment. He
heard a soft sigh.

"Can you contact Stark? Or do you know..." He didn't finish the sentence, but there was no need to do so. Peter knew what he wanted to ask. Did he know if Mister Stark remembered?

"No, I..." his gaze fell on Ned, who stared at him as if he was nuts. Well, maybe he was nuts. "...but I have an idea. Can we meet later or tomorrow?"

"Definitely. We have to talk." He sighed softly. "Tomorrow is better for me. Let's meet at the Starbucks closest to the Avenger's Tower."

Peter frowned a little. Which Starbucks was closest? Well, he would find an answer to that later.

"Okay. 4 pm? My school is over by then."

"Okay." And the call ended. Peter stared at the phone for a moment, then his gaze went back to Ned.

"Was my doctor. I have Onysomethingosis. Gonna meet him tomorrow."

His friend blinked. "Is it... contagious?"

Peter looked at him for a moment. "Don't think so." Meanwhile, a frown appeared on his face. "He said it's not as bad as it sounds."

Ned looked at him, obviously not buying his story entirely. "A doctor wouldn't call you unless it's deadly, would he?"

Peter only smiled a half-smile. "Guess I have a life-saver." That statement was ironically most true. Without the doc... well... he didn't know, but he guessed he would be dead. With a chance of 14 million to 1, it wasn't that hard to die. Was that the one chance the doc saw? Or was it a second chance that had been granted to them?

"I.. Eh.. Yeah..." He cleared his throat. He had to focus. Contact Mister Stark.

"Ned? Can you hack into this?" In one swift motion, he pulled his spider-man suit from his backpack. Ned should be able to do it, after all, he had done it already. Will have done it. Screw you, timelines.

Ned only stared at him. "You... you are spider-man?" He asked in a high-pitched voice.

Peter blinked confusedly. He didn't yet know...? Ehm... "Surpriiiiiise?"
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

As I juggle quite an amount of different characters, I decided to tell you who shows up beforehand. You should still read everything, there is always something important in there, haha.

Who makes an appearance: Tony / Peter / Stephen

They are finally going to meet, yay...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Peter paced through his room. Walking until he stood in front of the wall, turned around, the few steps until he stood in front of his window, gazed out onto the city to make sure there wasn't an alien spaceship, even though the doc had told him that they wouldn't die anytime soon, turned around again and repeated the entire process. He didn't stop until Ned groaned.

"Pete? I can't concentrate. Stop running around."

His friend sat on his bed, the suit connected to his laptop and stared at his screen, trying to hack through Stark's security. A part of Peter had always wondered, how anyone could hack into the suit. Then again, maybe Mister Stark knew of it and simply let it happen. Karen, the AI in his suit, was connected to stark servers after all. Mister Stark would know if his AI got activated.

"Okay." Peter said, stopping his movements right in front of his bed. He stood still for about five seconds, then he started to sway for- and backward.

"For God's sake, Peter!" Ned groaned, staring at his friend who had gracefully stopped his swaying.

"What's wrong?" he asked gentler, seeing Peter's distressed face.

"I…" Peter hesitated, turned around, groaned, turned around again and looked at him. "I don't think you could take it. Would think I'm crazy." He stated, oddly sad.

Ned frowned, pointing towards his suit. "You told me you are spider-man. I guess I can take everything else equally well."

Peter bit down on his bottom lip, staring at his friend, indecisive. Could he tell him? He would love to, really. He trusted Ned with his life like best friends should do. Yet… what had happened to or with him was borderline crazy. No other words described his current situation. Crazy. Utterly insane.

Yet again, Ned had taken him being Spider-man super well. On their way to his place, his friend had asked him a myriad of stupid spider-related questions.

Are you relay as strong as a spider? Yes.

Do you make your own webs? No, I have a… like, web-shooter.

Can you really crawl on walls? Yep.
Do you lay eggs? Wha? No!

Do you find flies delicious now? Have you ever seen me eat a fly?

Can you summon an army of spiders? No.

How far can you shoot your webs? No idea.

He stared at Ned for a long moment. His friend had put his best trust-me face on, looking at him, waiting calmly.

Peter took a deep breath and ruffled his hair.

"Okay…" he started to pace through his room again. "Where should I start?" he asked slowly, more talking to himself than to Ned, but of course his friend had heard him.

"Maybe at the beginning?"

Peter let a weak laughter escape his lips, evidence of his slight panic.

"Okay… first I think I have to tell you… there are six so-called Infinity Stones. Each of them controlling one aspect of reality." He hesitated for a moment, checking Ned's face. His friend only looked at him, waiting for him to go on.

"If you collect all the stones, you can do… like… everything. There is a madman, who wants to use them to wipe out half the universe."

"There were… no… are two on earth. One is the stone in Vision's, yeah that guy from the Avengers, head. The other is with a sorcerer."

"Sorcerer? Magic is a thing, too?"

"Yep, magic is a thing. He, that sorcerer, has the time stone. I… we… were on a field trip when a spaceship appeared over the city. I left immediately to see if I could help defend the city. Met Mister Stark—"

"Iron Man – Stark?"

"Yep, Iron Man, who fought with an alien. Tried to help, but then the sorcerer flew by—"

"He flew by? Like super-man?"

Peter snorted. His friend stared at him, but he didn't seem to think that he was mad, just asking questions to grasp the story.

"No, he was unconscious. He has a cape. That thing can fly. However, I followed him and the alien which followed him. Tried to save the doc."

"Wait. Doc?" Peter bit down on his lip. Had he really said doc?

"Yeah, he's a doctor. Could I continue?" he asked, not wanting to reveal the identity of the doc. Ned only stared at him for a few long moments, trying to… and then nodded.

"We, the doc and I, got caught in a beam laser. I clung to the spaceship when it was leaving earth's atmosphere. You see, Mister Stark wanted me to protect the sorcerer, so I did that. Mister Stark send a new suit for me when I nearly collapsed and…"
He went on, telling his friend of the battle against Ebony Maw, their landing on Titan. The galaxy guys. The doc finding out that they had only one chance to win. Their battle against Thanos. Told him that they were so close to having that damn gauntlet off… but then everything went south. Thanos had thrown the moon on them, afterward. He had tried to save everyone, who flew around. When he returned to the battle, he saw Stark kneeling on the ground, his armor gone. And the doc… he had summoned the time stone, was just going to give it to the mad titan. And then… he had started to glow green and then he was here, in his gym class, completely freaking out, because he expected to die any second.

"I was sure we were going to die, you see. Only one stone and then, snap, half the universe gone." Peter, who was sitting on his bed beside Ned by now, had started to tremble again.

"It never happened, though. The doc turned time backward for two years. Earlier, the guy who called me, he told me that we aren't going to die soon, meaning Thanos doesn't remember." He hiccupped, feeling the sheer madness of his own words.

"I think… we'll be able to prepare for the moment Thanos comes for us. Be able to beat him… and then again, the doc saw 14 million futures in which we fail. What if… what if we still can't beat him? What if we are simply meant to fail?"

Peter blinked, realizing just now that he had started to cry silently. Tears running along his cheeks. He groaned, wiping his tears away. Ned only stared at him for a long moment, then his friend hugged him. Peter frowned, wanting to back away… but then he realized how strong he trembled. He cried. He hiccupped. Maybe… he leaned his head against his friend's shoulder and let his panic pass by.

After a long while, he broke the hug, looking at Ned and then down at his hands. He felt empty, tiny and alone. He had gone through so many emotions during the last day. There were simply none left for him to feel. What if they still couldn't beat him? With two years of preparation… with…

"You'll beat him." Ned stated calmly, ripping him out of his thoughts.

Peter frowned, looking at him in surprise.

"How do you… why…?" he asked, not able to form a proper sentence.

"You have the Avengers. They are gonna unite for that enemy. You have a sorcerer. You. You'll find more allies. You have time to train, get better, stronger. He doesn't know any of this. You do. You have the upper hand this time."

Peter smiled vaguely. If only he could have his friend's optimism.

For a long moment silence held the room, then Ned cleared his throat.

"Now, excuse me. I have a suit to hack."

Tony had reached the Avenger's Tower, still slightly annoyed. Friday hadn't found Strange's address. He knew where Strange had lived two years from now, but if the accident happened just a little time ago, he suspected he wouldn't find him at the sanctum. That guy had been a real doctor, right? He could hack into the hospital servers and get access to his file. Entering his apartment, he still kept within the tower, he looked around. Everything was just how it was supposed to be. Normal. He had just seen the going to be end of the world and no one around him knew. It was nothing short but crazy.
He had tried to think during the flight here, but somehow… it hadn't worked out that well. With no one around to stop him from doing so, his head had started to go crazy again, replaying the fight against Thanos over and over again. Analyzing where they could have done better. And then, somewhen, his thoughts had turned to the boy. He hadn't seen him after Thanos had thrown the moon on them. He could be dead, back in the future. Killed by a madman and it would be his fault. Realizing, that he had started to tremble again, he went for his bar. A scotch would help calm his nerves. Hopefully. The suit… his suit had taken the blow well enough, hence Peter's suit should have done the same. And still… if he had died there… Would he remember his own death, if he remembered like him? Did it work like that?

Wiping his hand along his face, he sat down, sighing softly and sipping on his scotch. He couldn't carry the weight of having killed the boy. Somehow, he had become the father-figure for him, he knew that. Peter wanted to be like him… sadly, in a way. He really deserved better. He should have made sure, that Friday got him off of that spaceship, damnit. And then again… without him, they would surely not even have come close to beating Thanos. Peter had to be there, just like him. Maybe he, maybe all of them, were meant to die again, maybe they couldn't change a thing…

No. He couldn't think like that. Two years were given to them by some kind of miracle. They had to use them… he had to use them. He wouldn't let Pepper die. He wouldn't let Peter die. He wouldn't die himself. Borderline impossible most likely, but easy. He would make it happen, like everything else in his damn life. First, he would pay Strange back in kind. Giving up the stone… he could have killed them all instead. Same result.

He realized with a certain kind of amusement, how his panic and sadness turned into rage. Strange had possibly not planned any of this and yet he was the one to blame (or to thank). He was just going to get up and do something when Friday's voice filled the room.

"Sir? I have an incoming call from Karen."

Karen…? Wasn't that…?

"Patch her through."

"He can hear you." Karen's voice filled the room.

"He can?" Peter's voice. Shaky, but all in all okay.

"Ah, Mister Stark? Do you…?"

He interrupted Peter's question, already knowing what he was going to ask. "Remember having been on an alien planet and fighting a madman hellbent on destroying half the universe? Pretty much yes."

There was a moment of silence from the boy, then he apparently found the words to continue talking. "The doc called me. Said we wouldn't die anytime soon."

Tony frowned, why would Strange call the boy and not him? "Why did he call you?" he asked just that, a bit annoyed with the man.

"Oh, he said he found my aunt's number online. Yours probably secret."

Oh… well… that was true.

"Mister Stark?"

Tony blinked, realizing that he hadn't said anything in a while. "Yeah?"
"The doc asked for a meeting tomorrow. The Starbucks closest to the Avengers Tower. I told him 4 pm would be possible, the school's over by then." He added after a moment as if to explain he wasn't going to skip any courses for this.

Tony sighed soundlessly, yet he smiled. That Peter told him that… he really was a father figure for that poor guy, wasn't he? Why couldn't he have chosen someone else? Someone with morals? Steve Rogers for example. That guy had enough morals for all of them. Then again, he wouldn't have wanted Peter on cap's side. He would be a criminal after that. When had he started to care that much about the boy? Somewhen between now and the end of the world, he guessed.

"Okay, thanks, Peter. See you tomorrow."

Friday ended the call for him. After that silence filled the room. Peter was… well, okayish would be the best word, just like him. He hadn't sounded overly terrified, hence he would most likely not have died. He could have asked him, but… there was just so much going on in his head. He had to focus. He had to…

"Friday? Wake me up at 3:30 pm tomorrow, if I should fall asleep until then." He wasn't sure if he could sleep after everything that had happened. First, he had work to do. Finally getting up, he went straight to the elevator, taking it down to the lab he kept at this place. Strange had said that they weren't going to die anytime soon, but… and that but was all he needed. He wouldn't take chances. Never again. He knew that way of thinking was dangerous. It had let him to create Ultron. Yet, as long as he didn't create a new super-evil AI, he should be on the safe side, shouldn't he? Besides, he only wanted to monitor the city for alien signatures as a first step. Friday would be able to do that if he connected her with the cities surveillance system. He couldn't see a possibility of her running havoc with that.

Tony Stark sat at a table of his most visited Starbucks around 3:30 pm, watching people follow their lives. It was hilarious, really. None of them knowing how close they had been to dying. Everything else was more important. He sipped on his latte, closing his eyes for a moment. He wore sunglasses for two reasons… the first was to hide his eye bags. The second, because they were his link to Friday. He had updated her to trace any alien signature overnight.

He blinked, feeling how his thoughts slipped away. Maybe he should have slept a little. Not being able to concentrate wasn't that wise. Or… he needed more coffee. He looked at his cup. He hadn't even finished that one. Yet, he really needed another coffee after that.

Somewener during the night he had called Pepper, told her that everything would be fine. Oh, and that he had ordered contractors to build their house up again. It was odd, that he had a default company for that job by now. He had a pretty destructive lifestyle, hadn't he? He had asked Pepper to come to New York. He needed her by his side, now more than ever. She would come by somewener during the day and she would definitely ask him again what had been going on with him. He still didn't know if he wanted to tell her. It was just all that insane.

Some minutes before 4 a rather ragged guy took the seat beside him. Great. Another homeless going to beg. That happened more often than he liked to admit in this city. People knew who he was, after all. He was just going to tell that guy as nice as he had the nerve to, that he should get lost instantly when he looked at him. Was that Strange? His beard was longer, his hair a messy affair and he wore loose clothing's. The most obvious difference was his hands though. They didn't stop trembling. He saw, how Strange measured him calmly. His eyes and his face-features the only thing that resembled the man he had learned to dislike.
"Anything to say?" Strange asked in a soft voice, obviously already annoyed by him.

Tony looked at him for the longest part of a second. His watch. A jaeger lecoultre, wasn't it? One of the best brands out there. He had some too, as far as he remembered. "Nice watch." Was all he got together, trying to not offend the sorcerer. They wanted to talk like civilized people, after all. Right? They were the only who remembered. They had to work together, however strong the urge to not ever in any life do that.

"Thanks." Strange answered shortly, leaning back in the chair and watching their surroundings.

Ten minutes later, Peter dropped into the empty chair beside him. He looked alright. A bit stressed and a tiny bit confused. Like all of them, most likely. Tony felt the strong urge to actually hug him but fought it down. If he hugged random teenagers in public, things would get worse. He saw how Peter too looked at Strange for the longest part of a heartbeat but hid his thoughts about the sorcerer's current state better than he had.

"Hey guys, sorry for being late. That train, really." Peter laughed a little, trying to ease the atmosphere. Both, Tony and Strange looked at him. Tony cleared his throat, looking back at Strange.

"Okay, now that we're all together. What happened? If that was the one way to beat him, why didn't you revert time earlier?" he lowered his voice, not wanting other people to eavesdrop on them.

Strange sighed softly. "That wasn't what I saw. It shouldn't have happened, really. It shouldn't be possible to begin with. I didn't do anything, well, except for not dying while the stone touched me. It reverted time, not me."

Tony looked at him for a moment. Then… it was only luck that all of them were sound and safe?

"Why would you give him the stone, then?" he asked, trying to control his anger.

Strange only smiled sadly. "There was no other way."

There was no other way. He felt, how his anger flared up. Strange had been willing to kill half the universe for… He wanted to… breathe Tony. Calm down. Hitting a homeless guy in public wouldn't be good press either.

"Well, obviously there was another way, lucky us. How is the plan? Anything to know about time travels before we start preparing for him?"

Strange held his gaze with a weird ease. That guy never looked away, just remained calm, taking his anger like a man. Well, at least he had a spine.

"I'd like to wait for a month before we do anything at all."

Okay, that was too much for him to take. Tony jumped up, shouting.

"You want us to waste a month?!"

He could see Strange sigh, raising one of his trembling hands to wipe over his face. Those… trembling…

"What's wrong with your hands anyway?" Tony spat at him. That stupid trembling annoyed him. More than he liked to admit.

"What's wrong with my hands?" Strange had gotten up too, raised his voice in anger. His hands
were his sore point, obviously. "I'd say they are as fine as to be expected."

"You call that-"

"Guys?" Peter's voice cutting in between his ramblings made him stop, turn around and look at him. Peter was still in his chair, watching the two of them calmly. "Could you please calm down. Everyone is watching us."

Peter had watched the exchange between them with a growing feeling of distress. They were like two cats, fighting over a mouse. Or… like a married couple. Picking at each other's words and getting upset before asking for a reason.

Tony looked around. Peter was right. All the customers around them were watching them. Right. Tony Stark hitting a homeless guy. Don't do that.

"Fine." Tony grunted, straightening his stance. "Let's get into the Tower. There I can scream all I want."

Peter rolled his eyes but got up. He had watched the doc. When he had gotten up, he had avoided leaning onto his hands. He had only used his legs. While they followed Mister Stark, Peter walked closer to the doc. "Honestly though, what's wrong with your hands?" he asked lowly, but calm and worried.

The doc sighed softly. "I had an accident. They aren't getting better for a while."

Oh… "Does it hurt?" he asked, even though he knew the answer.

The doc smiled a half-smile at him. "More than you can imagine. Even the slightest pressure is… did you ever break a leg or something?"

"Yeah." When he was a little child. Fell from a tree and landed unlucky.

"When you break a leg, usually only one bone breaks. My hands got broken multiple times. Nerve damage. All that. Don't have a bone in there which is still intact." He stated calmly.

Peter made a grimace, understanding a piece of what the doc meant. His leg… whenever he had tried to walk on it, it had hurt like hell. And that was one broken bone. Multiple… he couldn't even imagine.

As soon as they were inside the elevator of the Tower, Peter cleared his throat, feeling the need to talk first, else the adults would bash their heads in again.

"So, ah, doc-" there was a tiny second of a pause, he saw how the doc looked at him. "tor Strange" that was a really bad catch on his side. "Why should we wait a month before we do anything?"

Tony turned his head, looking at Strange. Waiting for an explanation. And it should better be a good one. Strange smiled oddly, his eyes on Peter for a moment, then his gaze went to Stark.

"I don't know if the timeline we are in is stable. Could be it simply collapses and rearranges itself to fit into the natural order of things, meaning all of us would forget, together with everything we would have written down or said to others. It's like a reset. We could simply cease to exist, too, if we change too much. To be able to fight against Thanos and turn back time, we have to have done certain things. Were at the right place at the right time. If that doesn't happen…"

Tony stared at him for a long second. "You mean the grandpa-paradox? If I go back in time and stop
my grandfather meeting my grandmother I cannot go back in time, because I never existed?"

"Yeah. I would like to watch for a month, see if something changes by us being here, remembering. I
guess that, because of the stone, which is the pure essence of time, reverted time, we are safe on that
side. But…” he didn't bother finishing his sentence. The intention should be clear.

The three of them were silent for a long moment. The elevator had reached their level by now, but no
one got out. Just staring into nothingness in utter silence. Tony was the first one to catch himself from
it. He got out, mentioning for the others to follow.

"A drink, anyone?” he asked, remembering etiquette. Both his visitors shook their head a no. Okay,
then not. Sitting down on his couch, he motioned for his armchairs. Both sitting down, watching
him.

"Then, what should we do in the first month?” he asked.

Strange smiled thinly. "Lay low, best not change anything or only tiny things. After that, if we know
we aren't going to vanish into thin air… well, yeah. Stick close to what we would have done anyway
and prepare in any second that remains."

Tony nodded absentmindedly.

Peter, in the meantime, looked at the doc for a moment. Not change anything? He… ah… he had
told Ned earlier, that he was Spider-man. He even told him about Thanos! He… he kept his distress
under control, asking calmly: "What would happen if we change something?" trying to sound
curious.

The doc watched him calmly. Peter felt how he started to feel unwell. That gaze on him. Those eyes
fixed… the doc knew, he was sure of that!

"Do you know of the butterfly effect? One change causing havoc?"

Peter nodded, feeling how his throat clenched and his heart started to beat faster. "But, that is always
a danger, isn't it? We have to change enough to be able to beat Thanos and yet little enough to still
get the timeline we know of."

The doc nodded. "Exactly. That's why we stick to the timeline. We have to go through all things we
would have done anyway to ensure we can fight Thanos. One thing I would never change, for
example… We could, somehow, get the power stone from Xandar. Yet, it's the first stone Thanos
acquires. If that changes, we cannot predict where he is at what point in time."

They were all silent for a long while, pondering those words, following their own thoughts.

Tony was the first to raise a question. "Couldn't we change anything on earth and make sure to still
be at the right spot at the right time? As long as we don't move the Infinity Stones around we should
be safe, right?"

Strange smiled softly as if he had just been asked a really stupid question. God, that smile alone
drove Tony mad.

"Do you think it was a coincidence, that a magic-user was sent after me? I would have beaten the
hammer guy rather easily, but Ebony Maw? We saw how that went."

Tony frowned, his words rung true. "You imply… that Thanos knows things about us?” the moment
he spoke that sentence, he scolded himself stupid. Thanos had told him, that he wasn't the only one
cursed with knowledge. That he knew him. That he hoped, that after he had wiped out half of earth's population, the other half would remember him. A cold shiver ran through his body.

He looked at Strange, for the first time today seeing him as the man he was. A powerful sorcerer with far more experience than him regarding time travels. And apparently a good skill in connecting the dots. To send a magic-user after the sorcerer. Obvious choice… if Thanos knew, that the time stone was guarded by a sorcerer.

"Okay. Change little enough to not make it obvious that we prepare for him." He had to admit grudgingly, that Strange's plan wasn't all that stupid.

Tony sighed softly. "Can we tell anyone? I mean, what happened?"

Strange shrugged. "We have to, earlier or later."

Peter sighed softly. The two had somehow succeeded in not bashing their skulls in. And had worked something out. He was proud of his married couple. "Could we exchange phone numbers, please? To be able to call one another if something gets weird?"

The two adults in the room nodded. A moment later phones went round, each of them typing their respective numbers in.

"Well… meet in a month again?" Peter started but never got further. They hadn't paid attention to the elevator. It had gone down and now dinged on their level. The doors opening, Pepper Potts walked out, eyeing the collection of people in the room.

Tony got up, alongside the others, wanting to say something, but Strange cut in.

"Let's get going boy, I think we get kicked out."

"Don't call him boy, Strange." Tony said annoyed. Only he called him boy. Wait. Did he get upset because of…

"Fuck you, Stark."

"The same back to you, Strange."

Peter only rolled his eyes, greeted Miss Potts, just like the doc did, and entered the elevator. The married couple which got into meaningless fights was back again.

Chapter End Notes

I finally picked up the etiquette of answering to my comments. I did that for the last chapter and I'll do it for every chapter to follow. Thank you all for that great amount of feedback! If I am silly in the comments... that's just who I am :D
Chapter Notes

Like promised: an appearance will make: Tony / Pepper / Peter

Some things about Stephen are mentioned along the way.

I have decided to span the month until... well, you'll read it at the end. Peter and Strange will get their months-spanning chapters, too. At the end of the last of those chapters/at the beginning of the next chapter, I merge their stories back to one.

I figured, as I focus on so many characters, that all of them deserve to tell you, what happened in that month for them. And I can't just put everything in one chapter and jump between the scenes. Would get messy and unreadable.

I hope you enjoy it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tony looked at Pepper, who looked at the closing elevator doors, eyeing his leaving guests.

"Who...?" she started but didn't finish that sentence. She had heard one name. Strange. Was that the guy Tony had been looking for? She had... well... expected someone else, not a ragged, bearded man and a high-school student. Finally turning she looked at Tony. He looked tired and stressed out. She hadn't seen him like that in a long while. After New York, when he had PTSD, he had looked like that. To see him like that again...

"Tony? What's going on? Why are you meeting ragged ex-doctor's" yeah, she had looked him up. He didn't work anymore after his accident. "and teenagers?"

Tony looked at her for a long moment, then he turned and paced through the room again. Of course, she had to ask. Did he want to tell her? Could he tell her? Would she believe him? It was all so... insane. He abruptly stopped his pacing, when he felt her arms wrap around him from behind. He leaned into her for a moment. Pepper.

"Tony?" her voice was warm and gentle and worried. It broke something within him, he felt it. Something he had tried to forget. Swirling around, he embraced her, pulling her close and burying his head in the crook of her neck. Pepper. He felt, how his body started to tremble again. All that panic, all that stress, and this impossibility were finally...

His last thoughts were about her, back on Titan. Before that light. Before he thought he was dead. He had asked himself, what he should do if she disappeared as a causality of finger-snapping. A life without Pepper...

"I love you, Pep." He whispered against her skin, closing his eyes and inhaling her scent, willing his panic to pass. A few minutes later, he finally let go of her, smiling embarrassedly.

He saw, how she looked at him confusedly. He really had to make no sense at all to her. Sighing, he rubbed his face. He didn't want her to be that confused. He... he had to tell her, didn't he? For the
sake of his mind alone. If she believed him... maybe... maybe he wouldn't go insane after all.

"Sit down. I'll tell you. Doubt you will believe me, though."

"Why should I not believe you?" she asked in a hurt tone.

All he could do was laugh weakly. "Because it's hilariously insane."

"So... ahh..." he started his pacing again, walking by in front of his couch, feeling Pepper's eyes on him. How did anyone do this without being labeled as insane? Time travels? Come on.

"Maybe you tell me, why you freaked out yesterday?" Pepper offered in a gentle voice. Tony stopped his pacing and looked at her.

"No, wouldn't make any sense. It's... I was..." he sighed. "Okay..." looking at her, he smiled softly. Pepper staring at him, waiting and confused. She was a sight, even then. Sitting down beside her, he sighed softly.

"Okay. You know about the stone in Vision's head, right? An Infinity Stone?" he saw her nodding.

"There is someone out there, who will try to collect all of those stones to wipe out half the universe."

He was silent for a moment. She just looked at him. Yeah. So far so good. Until now it was just as plausible as everything else after New York.

"Strange has one of those stones, too. I tried to protect him, but... ah... had some alien problems along the way." He chuckled softly at his wording and then launched into the entire story. Being abroad that spaceship with Strange and the boy. Meeting the galaxy guys, learning of their very plausible death. Fighting Thanos. And, at the end of the day, losing against him.

"I was sure I was going to die. He had his gauntlet raised, taking a step closer. Those stones glowing. And then this incredible idiot got up, offering the stone in exchange for my life."

Tony shook his head. No life was worth an Infinity Stone. Not his, not anybody's. "And then I'm back in my workshop and ah... you know the story. I really thought I was dead. That he had snuffed us all out. And then you suddenly touch me. I mean, touching a ghost? Well, maybe ghosts can touch each other, but you shouldn't have been dead, not by then. The one thing I know is, that the rest of the team would have put up a fight for Vision. You couldn't be dead. And after that... yeah... thought he had caught me in an illusion. He turned rocks into fucking bats to chase after me, after all."

Shaking his head, he dared to look at Pepper. She had been silent for most of the time, only asking questions for clarification.

"Then I figured out I'm two years in my own past. Came here to be able to protect the Time Stone, if need be. Obviously, Thanos doesn't remember though. At least we think that. He didn't come for us, after all."

Pepper was silent for a long while, making Tony squirm. He hated her being silent with that tense atmosphere surrounding them. She was thinking he was insane, wasn't she? Planning on how to get him to the next best hospital, most likely.

"You are right. That's insane." She finally stated, earning a strangled laugh from him.

"But..." she started, cupping his face in the palm of her hand. "Sadly, it's a story which could happen to you."
Bursting into laughter, he shook his head. A story which could happen to him…

"My life is pretty screwed up then, isn't it?" he looked at her, both serious and smiling. She did believe him, didn't she?

She only rolled her eyes. "Oh, I'm used to it. My life would be boring if I didn't have to worry every free second, what madness happened to or because of you again."

Once again, he burst into laughter. "Hey, I only created an evil super-bot once!" Why did everyone always shun him because of Ultron? Everyone made mistakes.

"Isn't 'once' one time too many?" she teased him, smiling gently. Tony blinked, realizing what she had done. Get him on a different topic, away from his worries. He smiled softly.

"I'd argue no, everyone makes mistakes. Besides, without him, we wouldn't have Vision."

He could see her put on a thoughtful face. "Hmmm… okay, you may be forgiven. For Vision's sake alone, that is."

Shaking his head, he pulled her close to be able to kiss her. After he broke away, he stayed close to her lips. Whispering a "Thank you, Pep." Against them.

He saw, how her face changed to be smiling. All those muscles moving. She… pecking her lips again, he leaned back against his couch, closing his eyes.

"What are you going to do now? Knowing that… ehm… guy is coming for us?" Pepper's voice was calm and concerned. Opening his eyes again, he looked at her. Yeah. Back to the real problems.

"Nothing for starters. Strange wants us to lay low, not change much. He doesn't know if the timeline we are currently in is stable. According to him, turning back time can have some serious side-effects. If we change too much we could simply vanish." He shook his head, sighing gently. "I don't know. Probably invent some stuff like always. Just keep me busy." He stated slowly, looking at Pepper.

"First though..." with him having told her everything, with that crazy stress declining, he felt how his energy left and sleep caught up with him. "I'll go to bed, catch some sleep."

He could see her frown. "When did you last sleep?"

That question… was actually not that easy to answer. "Not since I have been on that spaceship. Two or three days, I guess." He really didn't know. How long had they been on that ship? Had it been a day? And yesterday until today…

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Jolting from his very realistic dream, he sat up, realizing at the far end of his consciousness, how he activated his Iron-Man-bracelet. The glove covered his hand in no time. The next thing he knew, was, sitting upright in his bed, his one-time blaster aimed at the open door. His heart pounding, his body trembling and him breathing heavily as if he had just run for his life. He stared at the door. The dark room. A dream. Closing his eyes, he still felt his body tremble. A dream. Just a fucking dream. Thanos wasn't coming for him. Thanos wasn't… No. That wasn't true. He was still coming for them. Always would. The Infinity Stones let him right back to earth.

"Tony?" he blinked, when Pepper's voice reached his foggy mind. Looking at her, he scolded himself. He had freaked her out. Even in the darkness, he could guess her worried face. It was evident in her voice.
"It's... it's okay. Just a dream." He said, trying to get control over his breathing. He didn't want to be... like back after New York. PTSD sucked. Disabling his glove, he watched how it retreated back into the bracelet on his wrist. Strange had told them to lay low for the next month. But he couldn't do it. He would, like he had told Pepper, invent some stuff. Getting out of bed, he stumbled and leaned against the wall in search of support. Just now, he realized how badly he trembled. Closing his eyes, he forced himself to breathe steadily until the worst of his tremors had passed. When he opened his eyes again, Pepper was standing beside him, her hand on his shoulder, looking concerned.

"Friday? Turn on the lights and order me the strongest sleeping pills you can find. Can't take dreaming anymore." He let go of the wall, finally standing on his own. He looked at his love for a long moment, pecking her nose.

"Sorry, I woke you." It had to be terrible for her. He acted like back then again. Turning and tossing and screaming in his sleep, waking up to find himself wearing his one-time blaster. What if he used it in his sleep? What if he hurt her? Maybe... maybe they should sleep apart. Just the thought hurt him though. To sleep without his Pepper when they were at the same place. No, he couldn't take that. He had ordered sleeping pills. They would help. And if not, he would sue the company.

"I'll get down to my lab. Can't go back to sleep."

He saw how Pepper watched him for a moment. "I'll join you." She said, turning to grab her tablet.

"You really don't need to. I'll pace around, think about what to create and talk with computer screens." He stated wryly, summing up his thinking process quite accurately. Pepper only shrugged and followed him.

Down in his lab, he actually did that. Pace around and talk with Friday. He had looked at her new alien-surveillance-system first, making sure that there were no bugs, faulty readings or the like. After that, he was back to pacing and thinking aloud, which actually didn't make any sense. Not his thinking, but his talking. He babbled part-sentences most of the time, stopping that way of thoughts the moment he realized that they didn't lead anywhere. More often than not, his gaze slipped to Pepper. She was sitting on a chair in a corner of his lab, her eyes switching between him and her tablet. Her lips silently mouthing the words she was reading. It was a business report from Stark Industries. She had said, that she wanted to check something. God, she looked so gorgeous. Sleep tussled hair, her nightgown hugging her body. Eyes sharp and awake.

Spinning around, he focused on thinking again. What could he... and then he stopped any movement mid-pace. It was that obvious. Why hadn't he thought about that earlier? Well, because it was that obvious. Improve his new suit. Well, first build it and then improve it.

"Friday? Order me..." and off he was in technical terms, sitting down in front of his screens, a pen in hand and scribbling notes onto the screens. He listed points he could or should change about his not yet created armor. It had made an awesome job during his fight against Thanos, yet again he had been stabbed by his own sword. The love of his life, he had eyed every few seconds earlier, momentarily forgotten. Everything was forgotten but the task at hand.

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Three weeks later, Tony paced around in his apartment within the tower. He watched his suit take form around him and retreat back into the container of nanoparticles, which he currently held in his hand. He wasn't yet sure what to do with the container. He wouldn't implement it into his chest until he had... will have had it implemented into his chest in his old timeline.
Watching his suit re-appear, he tilted his head. Okay, time for a few more tests. He let his glove form into a dagger-like shape and willed it to break off the suit. Grabbing the dagger with his other hand, he flipped it around for a moment and then rammed it into his suit. Well, or tried to. With a smirk on his lips, he watched the nanoparticles, which formed the dagger, slip from his hand and merge back into the suit on impact. He had needed quite a while to find the right formula for hit testing on collision. The particles, if they got parted from the container and hence the suit, decided within a nanosecond if they were not impacting with other same nanoparticles or not. The not had been important. He had tried to teach them to check if they were colliding with the suit first, destabilizing the weapon on impact, because they always assumed to be hitting the suit and wanted to merge back. Letting the particles first assume to not have collided with the suit kept them in shape. If they realized they had hit other particles, they would merge back with them afterward. That had been the easy part.

He had spent the last one and a half weeks on finding a way to make it impossible to hurt him as badly as Thanos had with a weapon he created. He had thought through a ton of weapons which could be used against him. After all, one could break off a gun he created, too. Shoot him with it. After a little, he had realized that that scenario was stupid, though. His guns were powered by the suit. If they got parted from the container, they simply wouldn't work. The only thing that could get dangerous were stabbing weapons of any kind.

Creating a dagger again, he placed it on his table, making his suit retreat back into the container, placing it beside the dagger. Okay… The main focus had been, how the particles should be able to decide if they were hitting him or not. He couldn't use his blood as a test, because it was quite easy to get bloody while fighting. To force the particles to analyze the chemicals in his blood to guess his emotions was too messy. Needed too much processing time and, to be honest, he was always on edge when fighting. To base it on his DNA… nuts. Again, too much processing time.

He had taken a different approach, instead. If the suit retreated the nanoparticles left a specific kind of energy signature behind on his skin, which dissipated after a few minutes. He had made enough tests and glimpsed through papers to make sure the energy frequency he used wouldn't harm him. Well… it wouldn't harm him worse than running around with a smartphone all day and wear an Iron Man suit. He had to be drenched in radiation. If the particles registered that kind of energy signature, they simply deactivated. That was his theory, at least. His eyes were fixed on the dagger. Of course, he had tested deactivating the particles if they hit the energy. But he hadn't tested it on himself. Well, he would never be sure if… grabbing the dagger, he felt how it fell to pieces below his grasp. He watched the nanoparticles, which closest resembled sand if not activated, run through his fingers and fall onto his table.

Sighing deeply, he closed his eyes. And started to smile a moment later. Things would work out differently now. Thanos would be surprised if he tried to stab him again with his own sword. Grabbing the container, he locked it away in his safe. He knew he wasn't allowed to use it outside this place. He shouldn't have it, after all. He would make sure that no one knew about it.

"Friday? Delete my notes, surveillance and all of the last three weeks."

"Are you sure, sir?"

"Yeah."

Getting himself a glass of brandy, he walked to his panorama windows, looking onto the city. It looked so peaceful, really. It still gave him chills, to see that no one knew. He had told Pepper, yes. She knew. But she couldn't understand. Only Peter and Strange understood what was coming for them. Thanos was… he was different than anything else they had fought. There was too much at
stake. During the last weeks, he had realized why Strange had wanted them to lay low. To wait and see if they would still exist after a little time. He, of course, had changed things. Had created his newest suit long before its time. Had thought about saving so many people. They had that possibility now, to stop events from happening long before they came to pass. And yet… messing with the timeline changed things. Saving one person who was meant to die could start a chain-reaction with no foreseeable end. The only advantage they currently had, was, that they knew exactly when Thanos would be where. They could not afford to lose that.

Taking a sip from his glass, he willed his thoughts to tackle the other obvious problem they had. Someone watched them. Thanos knew about them. If he knew about him, he would know about the other Avengers too. He would have sent someone, who was able to deal with Vision easily, just as he had sent Ebony Maw after Strange. If he knew who was watching them… his lips formed a thin line. Even if he knew, he wouldn't be able to do a thing. They couldn't kill that person else Thanos would know that something was odd. Wasted resource to think about that problem, really.

Hearing the ding of the elevator, he turned around, watching Pepper entering the apartment. She looked exhausted…

"How was your meeting?" he greeted, walking leisurely towards her.

"Oh, if I hear one more manager say…" Tony smiled gently while he listened to her ramblings, taking her blazer off of her in the meantime. She was currently working on a takeover, which obviously not all her managers wanted to see happen. They had had several meetings, both internal and with the company which was going to be bought by Stark Industries. The deal was basically sealed. Tony himself had looked at the company she wanted to acquire and told her she should do it. A rising tech company with some really interesting patents. Yet, she had to fight for acceptance amongst her own. He himself had figured, that it was indeed because of her being a woman. She was the CEO of his old company since a while and still some didn't believe in her abilities. Lazy old…

"Did… your 'thing' work?" she asked, looking at him timidly. He had told her to not talk about anything with others. That the risks were too high if anyone would know. Yet, of course, he told her. He couldn't only talk with Friday. Peter had school and a life. He would rather go insane than talk with Strange. Left only Pepper, who of course always wanted to know what happened in his life.

"Yeah. It worked." He said smiling. "Locked it away for now. Won't take it out until… well, whenever." He winked at her and stole himself a gentle kiss from her lips.

"You knowing more than I do is quite annoying." She stated after they broke apart. Tony only smiled softly.

"It's for the best, I guess. Wouldn't want you in any danger." That was true, at the end of the day. He would do everything to protect Pepper. If not telling her more than she already knew kept her safe, he would go with that.

Pepper was silent for a moment as if thinking about what to do. "Well… I'll take a bath. Like, a really long bath." All those managers arguing with her and one another. She guessed she had to fire some people, earlier or later. First, though, she wanted to relax a bit.

"Can you get us dinner in the meantime?" she asked, looking at her lover.

Tony raised an eyebrow. "Iron Man serving as a delivery boy again? It'll be a pleasure. Do I get tips?" he asked smiling. She only rolled her eyes. "We'll see about the tips. See you later?" kissing him goodbye, she left for the bath, finally allowing herself to relax.
Tony was doing better ever since he took the sleeping pills. They seemed to keep his dreams at bay and force a somewhat regular sleeping rhythm onto him. Not that he wouldn't stay awake until 3 am, but he would sleep straight until 11 am after taking a pill. Always eight hours of oblivion. She wasn't sure if not talking about his worries was indeed helpful, but she understood why he didn't want to do it.

Watching the 'bathtub', it was rather a whirlpool really, fill with water, she slowly undressed, her thoughts far away. Knowledge of the future. It had to be terrible to know what would happen but not be able to intervene because they had to carefully structure their plan on how to beat Thanos. It was all about him. Everything else was secondary.

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Tony was enjoying his evening flight over New York. He liked the city, even though it was part of his worst memories. Well, the city couldn't be blamed for alien invasions. Multiple alien invasions. What was wrong with this place? At the back of his head, he knew it of course. First, the Avengers had lured everything here. One of the reasons he moved the entire facility upstate. To a place where no one could be harmed. The other was, of course, the Infinity Stone. Strange being here would always lure evil things, wouldn't it? Yet, they couldn't change somethings. Concentrating on flying again, he watched the people below him. Whenever he was outside, Friday was looking for Strange. He just couldn't take it to not know where that ass lived. He had decided against hacking the hospital servers… Friday would surely find and then be able to track him one day. He just needed patience. Because he was that good in patience.

Passing one of the skyscrapers in the inner city, he stopped. Wasn't that Peter? Turning and getting lower, he smiled to himself. Yep. Peter. Landing beside him, he left his suit. Peter was wearing his suit, sitting at the edge of the building with his legs dangling down. His mask just moved up enough to be able to eat a sandwich.

"Hey, Mister Stark." He greeted him, smiling between gulping his bites down. "How is it going?" he asked, placing his sandwich beside him and pulling his mask off entirely.

"Good. Have to play delivery boy for my girlfriend again." That comment earned him a laugh and made him smile in return. He was still afraid, that the boy could die in front of his eyes. That he couldn't save him. That he wasn't meant to save him.

"I'll stick to my sandwich. Have to get home soon anyway." A pause, while Peter rolled his eyes. "Homework. Its kind of pointless when you already learned all that stuff. I mean, I forgot at least half of everything, but… it's still easy." He chuckled, going back to eating his sandwich.

Tony smiled half-heartedly. "How are you coping? With everything?" he asked slowly, eyeing Peter and waiting for his reaction.

A little while of silence went by, in which Peter continued to eat. Obviously delaying an answer.

"I don't know, really." He finally said slowly. "I mean, I have to go through all of this again, right? Liz. Her father. It's…" he was silent for a moment before he sighed. "Nearly sinking that ferry. Losing my suit to you. All of it has already happened and it has to happen again."

Tony had actually thought about letting him keep the suit, but the boy was right. The things that happened had to happen again. What if Peters personality changed if he didn't take his suit away? They couldn't know what long-term impacts living in one's own past had on them. Even though it was their present currently. Damn time travels.
"I… I'm afraid, honestly." Peter said slowly, finally looking up at him. "I know what's going to happen and I can't change anything and I… I…" his voice broke. Tony sighed softly, bridging the distance between them and finally allowing himself to hug Peter for a moment. Up here no one saw them.

"You already did it. You'll do it again." He stated confidently, even though he knew what Peter meant. He knew those worries far too well.

"What if I don't? What if I fail?" Peter asked back, looking desperate. "I hate it, really. You always say 'Oh, if only I could do that and that again.' That's terrible. You have to go through all of it again. That's... I don't know. Building insane pressure on me." He sighed voiceless, looking up at Tony. The older man only smiled sadly. That was their life now, wasn't it? Go through the motions and try to not screw anything up along the way.

"Okay. Peter." He sat down at the edge beside the boy, eyeing the distance to the ground carefully. That would be quite a fall.

"We survived Thanos, even though by luck. What can any of the other villains do in comparison to him?"

The question earned a wholehearted laugh from the teenager. Obviously, he had hit a nerve.

Peter finished his sandwich in silence. Tony remained for the time. It was relaxing to be around the boy. It was relaxing to be around someone who understood.

"I met the doc this week." Peter stated, his mood better than before. "I really didn't know he had so many problems in his life. Back when we met him... well, seemed to be pretty well grounded, except being a wizard and all. Currently, I think he is one step away from being homeless." He was silent for a moment but continued talking a few heartbeats later. Obviously, this was more of a monologue than an actual conversation.

"I can see the sanctum. He told me its hidden by illusion spells and that I shouldn't be able to see it. No one should, who wasn't invited, adept at magic or stumbled into it. Ned sees one of those small grocery stores in that place." He chuckled amusedly. "Did you know that the doc has a girlfriend?" he asked, finally looking at Tony and making a break for an answer.

Tony just blinked. He hadn't even thought that that guy had anyone besides co-wizards in his life. He had guessed that he was that annoying, that everyone in their right mind ran away from him. That egocentrically, murderous, stupid ass. He would never forgive him for offering up the stone. Even though it had given them an unexpected chance.

"No." he finally stated, after having gotten over the shock that that guy actually had a girl.

"Well, I think they have issues. The atmosphere was pretty tense." Peter stated casually. Tony blinked. Confirmed his thought of everyone running away from him. Forcing a grin down, he said: "Oh, that's sad."

Peter looked at him for a moment. "Yeah..." he said slowly. "Why do you not like him anyway?"

Tony blinked, staying silent for a moment. He just realized how Peter got into all his troubles. That damn curiosity.

"I... how to say that nicely? "He's pretty self-centered. Hasn't ever done something for the good of the world. He wanted to give Thanos the stone for... well, what exactly? He would have wiped out half the universe." He felt his old anger flare up in him. He wouldn't get over this in a long while.
Peter tilted his head while listening to him. There was something on his face, just for a moment. "You are still working together with him, right?" he asked slowly as if afraid Tony would refuse just that. He couldn't stop burst into laughter.

"Of course, I will. I don't have to like someone to be able to work with him. He is good in his sorcery stuff. Wouldn't want to be in this mess without him." Well, they wouldn't be in this mess without him, to begin with, but they wouldn't have this chance without him either. Well, he shouldn't cry over spilled milk. What happened, had happened. He would live with it. He would adjust. And simply try to spend as little time as possible with that arrogant asshole.

Peter watched him for a long moment, then nodded slowly. He just wanted to say something, but then thought better of it. "I guess I gotta go. Homework and all." He said instead. "Thank you for everything, really. See ya, Mister Stark!"

Putting his mask back on, Peter jumped off the edge. Tony watched how he created a string a few meters below, simply swinging himself into the direction he wanted to go. Somehow, it still surprised Tony, that the boy could simply withstand such an acceleration force. He did such things too, of course, but he had his suit. The boy had done those stunts before they had known each other.

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A week later once more, Tony's gaze was fixed on his TV. His head was resting in Pepper's lap, he felt how she slowly stroked through his hair. They had settled on date-night again else they would surely ruin their relationship again. He didn't want to even dare that. Hence, one evening and night a week, only for themselves. Phones turned off, calendar blocked. Even Friday had the order to be silent if she wasn't asked for anything or the world was going to end. Currently, they were watching a movie. Well. Pepper did. He just wanted to get through with the ordeal. Pepper had wanted to watch that thing since ages and of course they hadn't worked out a date for cinema. Even though he wasn't that sad about that fact. He really didn't want to watch Fifty Shades of Grey in a damn cinema. Would have boosted the movie's PR additionally.

"Can I choose the movie next week?" he asked lowly, earning a "Pssht!" from his girlfriend. Yeah. Great. He would definitely choose the movie. Something with blood and horror. Saw, maybe. Revenge, so to speak. Wasn't he a great boyfriend and so very grown up? Raising his arm, he peered at his watch. A little after 1 am. Only… thirty minutes to go? Something around that. He hadn't paid much attention, sadly. The second he had learned of the movie Pepper wanted to watch, he had asked Friday for the final scene. He would know when he had survived it.

Grabbing her free hand with one of his own, he entwined their fingers and started to draw tiny circles on her skin, closing his eyes in the process. Just a little longer, just a little longer, he sang in his head. He could get through this! Wasn't worse than... than... his mind didn't want to supply him with a suitable comparison, sadly.

He counted the minutes, checking his watch every now and then. At 1:25, he knew that because he had stared at his watch, thinking, begging, wishing that the movie should be over soon, a bright, white light swallowed his world. Sounds, smell, feeling were gone for a moment, simply overtaken by pure nothingness. For a second, he felt his old injuries. The bruises and the stab wound Thanos had given him. He flinched, groaned in pain, jolted himself up and activated his wristband. He felt his Iron Man glove wrap around his hand. At least that was working.

He just stood there for a second. Or two. Or eternity. He couldn't tell. There was just white and nothing else. Part of his brain expected to be back on Titan. To see Thanos, grinning amusedly at him.
"Tony...?" Very softly, the panicked voice of Pepper floated into his consciousness. Pepper? He couldn't be... slowly, he realized that the pain he had felt a second ago, was gone again. Yet, he didn't see anything. Blinking, he waited for the world to re-appear in front of his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

I guess I can update earliest next week, sadly. This chapter got too huge. And I have to write two more which at least deserve the same attention. It'll take some time, but oh, I'm working on it :)

Thank you for reading <3
Finally, I'm back again!

This chapter features: Peter / Ned / Aunt May / Strange / Christine / mentioned Tony

While writing, somehow things went out of control. I planned the chapter to be as long as the previous one, but somehow... there were so many things that wanted to get in here.

Have fun!

While they were riding the elevator down, Peter bit his bottom lip. He wanted to ask the doc so much, but he didn't seem to be in a mood to talk at all. As soon as they were out of the elevator and leaving the tower, the sorcerer said his goodbyes, aiming for his home obviously. Peter watched him for a moment, thinking about following him. For what, though?

Closing his eyes for a moment, he let a sigh escape from his lips. This was all so messed up. He being in his own past. He knowing about murderous titans and the end of the world. Well, according to the doc they could still just forget everything about it. If time reset. How did that work, anyway? Did time know what the original version was? Was time sentient? Frowning deeply, he aimed for a street close by. It ended in a back alley. He could change into his suit there and do some spidey 'work' before heading home. The doc had said, that he hadn't done anything. That the stone reverted time on them. If the stone actually chose to do that, it meant that it was at least a tiny bit self-aware.

Peter blinked, stopping in his tracks. If the time stone knew what was going on, the other stones would know that too, right? Did those things choose sides? Did they care about who they were used by? He pondered the thought for a second but cast it aside. Nah. That was all too crazy. Sentient almighty stones. It most likely had just been a coincidence and they had to use it. Make the best out of what they were given. And better not destroy everything along the way. The butterfly effect... if only they knew, what they could change without bringing havoc over all of them.

Three hours later, Peter entered his aunt's apartment.

"May! I'm home!" he said out loud, getting rid of his shoes along the way.

Entering the living room area / open kitchen, he found May on the couch, zapping through TV shows, apparently not finding anything worth viewing. She muted the TV and turned around when he entered, gifting him a warm smile.

"Hey. Lasagne is in the fridge if you like. How was your day?" she asked, watching him.

"Lasagne? Awesome." He aimed directly for the fridge, placing his going to be dinner in the microwave.

"And my day was awesome too, really." He flung himself beside her, looking at her all smiling.
"School was fun. The decathlon training was really good and Ned and I hung around until a little
ago.” He was reporting on his school events, when the microwave dinged, announcing his dinner to be eatable.

Getting up, he heard her raise a question.

“How was your doctor's appointment?”


“Oh, good really. The doc told me everything would be okay.” He had nearly forgotten about the doc's excuse to get his phone number. He had convinced his aunt that he had Onyotings and that he had to talk to him right now. "He was really nice. Took his time for me.” Which wasn't the usual way doctors handled patients. Usually, it was more of an in, oh you are ill, let's get you medications and out again. "He said, that I should be a bit more conscious about myself. Eat, enough sleep, all that. Can be caused by stress, obviously.” He still had no idea what the doc had claimed he had. Hadn't memorized the word and hence couldn't look it up. He was just inventing things as the words tumbled from his mouth.

May sighed softly. "I know that this Stark internship is a big deal for you, but… ever since you started it, you are always that stressed. Would you take it a bit slower? Maybe? Just for me? I don't want you to get away with something serious, after all.” Her voice was soft but concerned.

Peter looked at her for a long moment. He knew that nothing really interesting happened until… well, he had to check the date and sort his memories. "Okay.” He said gently, watching, how a smile appeared on her face.

Finally turning around, he got his lasagne from the microwave, sat down beside his aunt and started to shovel noodles-meat-cheese into his mouth. Meanwhile, they watched a re-run of The Big Bang Theory.

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Leaving school together with Ned, he was once again confronted with his friend's never-ending curiosity. This time, it was thankfully not about him directly, more about everything else. Did he know the Avengers? Yeah, some of them. Who? Well, he stole Cap's shield. It went on like that for a while, until Ned became serious.

“How was your… meeting?”

Peter looked at him, eating his ice cone. He had told his friend, that he would meet the other two who remembered.

"Embarrassing, kind of. I feel like the adult in the room, if those two are together. They started to pick on each other because of everything. Even screamed at one another. I don't quite believe that they worked something out.” He was silent for a moment, concentrating on his ice-cream. "I actually dubbed them my married couple. That's how I imagine one, after being together for years. Why didn't you put your clothes in the washer? You forget this every time! Wha, wha! Cry, cry, rant, rant."

Ned stared at him and burst into laughter. Peter couldn't stop himself from smiling. Yeah. Somehow…

"Tony Stark is picking on and fighting with another guy?” Ned somehow got together between his laughing fits. "I mean… for real…?”
Peter shrugged innocently and nodded. Oh yeah, for real. Ned was still busy calming down and shaking his head when Peter's mind went back to today's gym class. Flash had picked on him because of his break down last time. Asked him, if he would start to cry like a baby this time too. He would like to record it for the future. Peter had just tried to ignore him, really. And after that, they had been back to running. He had made his rounds, pretty much ignoring his surroundings, until Liz came into his view. Her hopping ponytail. Her movements. He had remembered how bad his crush on her had been. He had been so incredibly sad when she had to move away. Kind of, it was his fault at the end of the day.

Well, no. He knew it was her father's fault. He had to stop him. Yet, seeing her again… it made him wonder if he could stop her father from going all villain. What it would change in the aftermath. Obviously, Liz would stay here. Maybe, he could dance with her on homecoming. Maybe they would end up together this time. Maybe… at this moment, Michelle jogged into his field of view. MJ. Instantly, he felt guilty for even thinking about the possibility of being together with Liz. MJ had been his girl for a little while. Would be. Was going to be. Argh! She was, kind of, his first real girlfriend. She was accepting of Spider-Man, supported him if he got nuts and pulled him back when he got too nuts, just like Ned. Not being together with her…

"Peter?"

Ned's voice brought him back to reality. Blinking, he looked at his friend.

"Yeah?" he asked slowly.

"Where have you been?" Ned sounded badly worried. What kind of facial expression did he have?

"I.. eh… yeah." Peter stated, somehow getting words together. Thinking about his could-be relationships was kind of pointless. As of now, he didn't have any girl either way. And getting one girl meant changing his timeline…

"In the depth of my head?" he offered weakly.

His friend just rolled his eyes, shaking his head in the meantime.

"What are you going to do now? To defeat the-one-who-must-not-be-named."

Peter frowned slightly. Was his friend really quoting Harry Potter? Well… it kind of fit. They shouldn't run around and talk about Thanos in public.

"Nothing for starters." Peter stated, earning a confused look from Ned. "Don't look like that at me." He said laughing. "We have to see if something changes by us being here, you know? We have to make sure we know where he is when hence we have to be careful what to change to not change too much." He had started to frown while talking. Alone that sentence gave him headaches. Be careful what to change to not change too much. It was crazy to even have to think about that.

"Well, ah…" Peter had checked his watch. If he wanted to do some spidey 'work' he had to go else he wouldn't get anything done. After all, he had to be at home at an acceptable time. Getting up, he said goodbye to his friend.

"See you tomorrow, okay?"

And then off he was, into the next deserted back alley he could find. Checking his surroundings once more, he stripped down to his boxers and socks and put his suit on. As soon as it fit, he put his everyday clothes away and webbed his backpack against the wall. He had to remember to be back in two hours. If he lost a backpack again, which happened more often than he liked to admit, May
could get suspicious. She didn't know about him being Spider-Man and he liked it that way. His aunt finding out his secret…

"Hey, Peter."

His AI greeting him ripped his thoughts away from May getting to know his secrets.

"What can I do for you today?" she asked, polite as ever.

Peter stood there for a moment, before hopping onto the closest building and looking down on the city.

"Are there any irrelevant emergency calls nearby?"

Karen was silent for a moment, most likely working on his request.

"There seems to be a cat on a tree. Should I call the fire department and tell them that we handle this?"

Peter grinned for a moment. Yeah. Karen was awesome.

"Yep." He stated, waiting for her to calculate the best route to the cat problem and headed off.

After he got there, he blinked surprised. It was like the only tree a cat could climb on in the entire block.

"Hey, guys." He greeted the owner, a worried mother and her little girl, who had definitely not expected him to stop by.

"I saw that you need help and yeah." He smiled embarrassedly, even though he knew they couldn't see it.

The mother finally got out of her stupor, smiling. "She is up there for two days. I thought she would get down when she gets hungry, but no. I even tried to lure her down with food, but… yeah…"

Peter looked up at the cat. It was a scared, black thing with a small white splash above its nose. He crunched down, looking at the girl.

"Is it yours?"

The girl, obviously close to tears, nodded. "It's a she." She stated stubbornly. "And her name is Twinkels."

Twinkels, hu?

"Okay, then. I'm coming Twinkels!" he exclaimed, jumping up the tree and carefully approaching the cat, which sat on one of the higher branches. He was getting closer slowly. When he was just going to grab the cat, it started to claw at him, bit down on his finger and ditched away. Hissing dangerously, it hopped to a higher branch. Peter stared at it. Persistent cat.

The chase along the tree continued for a little while until Karen offered webbing the cat to keep it from moving. Peter, who was able to eye down to the worried owners, dismissed that idea. The little girl would most likely not ever forgive him if he webbed up her cat.

"Nah… Can you calculate her next escape route based on the last ones?" he asked instead. Karen was silent for a moment, before his display lit up, highlighting the most likely escape routes.
"Okay, kitty kitty. I'm coming!" Five seconds later, he was down the tree and held a hissing, clawing, biting bundle of fur in his hands. Handing Twinkels back to the mother, he was hugged by the girl.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you!" the little one squealed before eyeing her cat.

Peter smiled once more, waved goodbye and was off again, swinging away. He was soon on one of the buildings, making his way and looking for the next potential help-victim.

After a little, he found someone, who looked suspiciously like a lost tourist and jumped down to him. Landing beside him, the poor man flinched and nearly screamed. "Hey, sorry!" Peter hurried to say. "Can I help?"

The man stared at him for a few moments, before he raised his phone. "Can I take a photo?"

Well, he hadn't expected that, but "Yeah, sure."

A few minutes later, the guy had his wanted picture and finally asked him how to get to his hostel. Seemingly, he had turned wrong a few blocks ago and had gotten himself lost in Queens. "I have a bed in 'The Local NYC', but for grace…" he laughed embarrassed.

Peter had no idea where that was, but of course, Karen served the address up promptly, together with the best route. "Okay, you have to catch…"

After that, he slowly walked along the sidewalk, thinking about where to go next. Maybe a thief would bump into him or something.

"Hey! Spider-Man?"

He stopped and turned around, when a man in his twenties came to a stop behind him, obviously having run to catch him.

"Hey… ah…" he stopped talking for a moment to catch his breath. "Could you help us carrying some furniture down? I'm moving out and yeah."

Peter blinked. Moving out?

"Sure, if you can prove to me that it's your flat." He winked at the man. "Don't wanna help rob someone."

The man started to laugh. "That's no problem. I'm Nate, by the way. Let's go, my apartment is just around the block."

"How did you get the idea of me helping you moving out?" Peter asked curiously while walking beside the guy.

Nate shrugged. "Saw you walking by. I have some friends at my place who help me, but we realized we just can't move this wardrobe. It's one of those old things, completely made out of wood. Didn't have the heart to cut it to pieces."

Up in the flat of a guy he didn't know, Peter felt a bit weird. After Nate had proven to him that he actually lived in this place, he helped him and his friends. First, he carried the wardrobe down. Afterward, after all, he was already here, he brought a table and a couch down too. As a thank you, he got a handshake and a sandwich. Nate obviously had some food for his helpers on hand. Thanking him, Peter was off again.
Some thirty minutes later, Peter sat on a multi-story house and nibbled on his sandwich. He had been really hungry when he got it, but now, sitting on a house and watching the sun go down, he felt ill. The world seemed to be so normal. He hadn't realized it at first, but after he had helped that guy moving out… they were worried about getting from one flat into the next. Money, work, friends, sports. His tummy clenched suddenly, making Peter wince. All those things were so irrelevant. Half of them would be gone if Thanos snapped his fingers. Half of them, just gone. He felt how he started to cry silently again. Just the possibility of May dying. Or Ned. Or MJ. He couldn't handle any of them being gone. They had to stop the mad titan at any and all cost.

Peter stared into the sunset with wide eyes, a shiver running through him. The thought he had just thought… the implications of it… to be able to defeat Thanos, he had to make sure that the events played out exactly how they had already played out. Like the doc had said, stick to the timeline and prepare in every second that remained. He couldn't even dare to keep Liz around. He couldn't dare to stop her father from going all villain. He had to go through the motions, really. He felt, how he started to tremble again. He… he didn't want to nearly sink that ferry. He didn't want to disappoint Mister Stark. He didn't want to lose his suit. He didn't want to leave Liz on homecoming, get trapped below that building, fight Liz' dad on a fucking flying invisible plane. It was all just… too much…

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May Parker watched her nephew closely, whenever he thought she wouldn't watch him or pay attention. First, this doctor called and convinced her, that Peter had something really bad and that he had to talk with him immediately. After that, the school called telling her Pete had had a breakdown. That he had completely freaked out during gym class. And not told her about his breakdown. When she was back from work that day, he was joking and fooling around with Ned, seemingly everything was okay. She wasn't worried about Pete having a better mood, most likely his best friend had helped with that, but that he didn't tell her anything about the breakdown in the first place. And he hadn't told her anything about the scheduled doctor's appointment initially. Only on request. And then… he had looked at her as if he didn't know what she was talking about. A second later he had started to talk something to calm her down. Yet… she was kind of… suspicious. There was something nagging at the back of her head. Usually, when she had that feeling, she knew that something was off.

For around two weeks she watched Peter calmly. He acted as usual as if nothing had ever happened. Talked about school, his internship, Ned. Like always. Exactly that put her off.

Sitting down on a Saturday, Peter was away with Ned, she finally decided it was time. Booting her laptop, she opened FireFox, slowly typing in 'Onychocryptosis'. She had written the word down just in case they had to go and see a specialist and hit enter.

She blinked surprised and confused when she saw the search results. That… that wasn't what she had expected at all. The doctor had made it sound like the worst thing one could ever have. That he had to talk with Peter right now. Like, instantly. Or better, five minutes ago.

Onychocryptosis was an ingrown toenail.

Frowning deeply, she searched for this 'Doctor Strange', how he had introduced himself. That guy actually existed, but he wasn't a general practitioner or something like that. He was a damn neurosurgeon. And on top of that, he wasn't even practicing anymore. He had had an accident and apparently couldn't continue working. Why in god's name hadn't she checked him and that illness earlier? Well, she knew the answer. He had sounded so convincing, so sure of what he had been speaking, that it was important, that she hadn't even considered he might have lied at any point.

She tried to get to know where this guy lived to face him with what she had found out but couldn't
find an address. She tried calling him back, after all, she had his number, but he wouldn't answer.

"May! I'm back!" Peter's voice reached her ears, while he entered her apartment. She felt caught, guilty and angry at the same time. Why wouldn't Peter talk with her about any of this? She thought they had a good relationship!

"Is something wrong?" her nephew stood in the junction of corridor and living room and looked at her, a worried expression on his face.

She blinked, put a smile on her face and shook her head. "Nah. Just got myself lost on YouTube and watched this reeeaaaly weird clip." She laughed awkwardly, closing her laptop. She would try to get to know more about this 'doctor' before she talked with her nephew. Perhaps, he would talk with her in the meantime about all of this.

On Tuesday, her day off from work this week besides Sunday, she found herself in the lobby of Metro General hospital. She had dug through Strange's public life, realizing he had worked here. Maybe someone could help her, tell her where she could find him or something. Approaching the reception, she smiled carefully. The woman currently on shift looked at her.

"Hello? How may I help you?"

May was close to turning around and running away, she didn't want to think bad about her Peter, but something was going on! She had to make sure he hadn't gotten himself into something horrible.

"Do you know a Doctor Strange?" she asked carefully, not knowing if he stood in good terms with the personnel.

The woman looked at her for a moment, before she repeated his name. "Doctor Strange?" the way she pronounced his name made it obvious, that she didn't like him. "He doesn't work here anymore."

It sounded more like 'he doesn't work here anymore, thankfully.'

"Yeah, ah, I know this. I have some questions… Could I… does someone know where he lives or something?"

She felt a calm gaze on her. Obviously, the woman was thinking about… well… waging her curiosity with her own dislike of Strange…

"Doctor Palmer could, most likely. Wait a moment." She typed something into her computer. "She isn't in an operation currently. Please wait here, just sit down for a moment, I'll call her up." She smiled gently, obviously enjoying hacking on Strange. What did this guy do? And even more important, what had he to do with her Peter?

Some minutes later, a blond woman entered the lobby, approaching the reception before she aimed for her. May was sitting in one of the lobby's chairs, waiting her time. Watching how Doctor Palmer approached, she got up, gifting her a soft smile and offering her hand. Shaking hands, she introduced herself.

"Hello, I'm May Parker."

"Hey, Christine Palmer." Christine stated, looking at her with a curious gaze.

"I, ah… have some questions about Doctor Strange." She stated, hoping that the receptionist had already told her, but judging from the frown on Christine's face, she hadn't.

"He called me and convinced me, that he had to talk to my nephew, Peter. Convinced me that he had
But Doctor Palmer interrupted her. "Onychocryptosis? Stephen wouldn't even take that word into his mouth if he was paid to do so. He has some, ah, weird views on those basic things."

Stephen. She called him Stephen. May knew, that she had already lost her. Palmer wouldn't tell her anything about Strange.

"See" pulling her phone from her pocket, she pulled up the number of this guy, showing her phone to the doctor. She saw, how something flashed over Christine's face before she hid it well. "He called because of my boy, claiming some nonsense. It sounded like he was going to die. Of course, I gave him his number. I… I just don't know what to think of this. What to do with this." Too late, she realized, how her voice had dipped into the area of panic. She was close to either screaming or crying.

Christine Palmer looked at her for a long moment, then sighed softly. "Mrs. Parker, this isn't his number. Someone set you up."

Someone… someone had set her up...

May was pacing through her apartment, waiting for Peter to come back from his Stark internship. Doctor Palmer had told her, that she had been set up. That that wasn't Strange's number. She wasn't sure anymore. She had found some footage of him on a gala. She guessed he sounded like the guy who had called her, but she wasn't sure. She wouldn't bet her life on it. Hence, she would act as if she had never talked with Palmer. She would talk with Peter though. He had to answer for some things.

When Peter entered the apartment, he was quite elated. Today had been really awesome. Some celebrity had tweeted about him because he had saved him from a car accident. Now, #spiderman was trending. Entering the living room area, his good mood faded instantly. May was sitting on her interrogation chair, looking at him expectantly. What had he done? Had he missed an appointment? Missed a birthday? Missed calls? No. He had checked his phone some minutes ago. He hadn't missed any calls.

"Hi?" he asked slowly, letting his backpack drop to the ground.

His aunt took one of those heavy breaths, which heralded his doom. "The appointment with that doctor. You don't have to lie to me. You were never there." She stated softly, making him blink in surprise. He felt, how goosebumps ran along his skin. Something was very wrong.

"I… what is this about?" he asked instead of giving an answer. He needed to know what was going on before he would turn on the doc.

May smiled thinly. "Looked him up. He doesn't practice anymore. And obviously, your deadly illness is an ingrown toenail." She stated, her voice dripping with venom. How could she ever have trusted that guy?

Peter blinked. Oyanything was an ingrown toenail? Well, the doctor had been right. Sounded worse than it was.

"Why do you lie to me, Pete?" his aunt asked softly, in this tone she knew he couldn't handle. This...
was psychological warfare. "Why did you not tell me you had a breakdown in school? Your teacher called me, you know." She added slowly, looking at him.

Peter stared at her, seeing how his not very well thought through construct of lies dissipated. May was… okay… brain. Think! He couldn't tell her the time travel truth. She wouldn't be able to handle that. She had freaked out when she had learned of him being Spider-Man. Of course, she had taken it well after a little time, but… Him being traveled backward in time? Oh, Pete. That stress… you don't have to pretend anything…

"I…" he took a deep breath, faced her and got ready. It was time. "I didn't tell you about the breakdown, because I was really okay when I got here. Ned built me up, really. He's awesome. Didn't want to worry you for nothing." He smiled sadly.

He saw, how her furrowed brows relaxed a bit. "Oh, Pete!"

A moment later, he was hugged by his aunt. Taking her into his arms, he let her comfort him.

"You don't need to be all grown up. You could've just mentioned it." She smiled sadly, both upset and proud of him because of such a mature decision.

Letting go of him, her face darkened nonetheless. "What about this doctor, though?"

Yeah… that was the hard part. This doctor… Brain? Hello? Help!

Miraculously, his brain did help him. It served up an event at his school. Some of those wanting to get extra points for their college application had helped struggling people. The doc was a struggling person, right? Closing his eyes, he scolded himself and went forth with the biggest lie he could come up with.

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On Saturday, Peter and Ned walked aimlessly through the streets of Greenwich Village. They were looking for a restaurant but couldn't decide. They really couldn't decide. They had gone down 6th Ave, looking for something to eat. Realizing, that the restaurants were rather located in the streets going off 6th, they went right and… found a French something. While Peter tried to read through the menu, it was all in French, Ned made a face.

"I'm not gonna eat snails."

Peter frowned. "They don't serve snails. I guess." He stared at one of the words. "This could be frog legs though."

"I'm not gonna eat frog legs either." His friend stated, grabbing him by his arm and pulling him on.

They had ended in Greenwich Village because Peter simply didn't want to eat in his usual restaurant. New impressions, try another place and… well, honestly, he couldn't stand the waiter at his usual restaurant, after he had flirted with May. Ned had brought some other places up, but… well… nah. Jumping into line 7, they had gone till Bryant Park, considered simply dropping into the next McDonalds, but Peter had complained that he wanted to eat something real. They had discussed walking up to Times Square, but they surely couldn't afford anything up there. Accordingly, down 6th Ave.

A few restaurants later, which all hadn't passed their high standards of pay-food balance, they stood in front of Domino's.
Peter rolled his eyes. "Come on. We could've gone to McDonald's then." Earning a laugh as a response.

"Hey, I just want something to eat, you are the picky one."

Peter groaned. Yeah. He was the picky one. He normally didn't much care about what he ate, but somehow… "How about Korean?" he pointed towards the restaurant on the other side of the street, earning a frown from Ned. "Korean?"

Ruffling through his hair, he turned to Ned. "You aren't much better!" he claimed upset, turning and walking further down the street. He could hear Ned follow him soon after. Crossing Bleeker Street, he looked around. Burgers. Vietnam. Or… a bakery? Well, the bakery included 'Sweets' in the title, hence he aimed for that, dragging Ned along the way.

Some minutes later, he had a chicken salad and Ned had a bunch of sweets. He would really like to buy some of those muffins too, but… ah…

After they had finally eaten something, they went along the street, chatting about Ned's favorite topics: Spiders, Avengers and time travels.

Eyeing his surroundings, he saw a pretty ragged guy sitting at a table of the Spanish café across the street. Damn. Those homeless people were every… wait a second. Checking the street for cars, he went across, aiming for the ragged guy. Ned, who hadn't expected him to cross the street, yelled his name after him, catching the attention of the ragged guy, who watched them for a moment before his eyes went back to his… tablet?

Sitting down opposite of the man, Peter looked at him.

"What are you doing here?"

The doc raised his gaze, eyeing him. "Same back to you, Mister Parker."

"Really, call me Peter." He stated, looking up at Ned, who had joined them by now. His friend looked kind of aghast at the guy Peter had decided to sit with.

"Ahm… Ned, Doctor Strange, Doctor Strange, Ned." He introduced the two. Ned still stared at the 'doctor', really not wanting to sit at a table with that guy.

Peter was silent for a moment. "We searched for something to eat in the area, couldn't decide on anything. Ate at Chloes." He stated, waiting for the doc to answer, Ned was standing behind him by now, softly nudging his back and whispering: "Pete? What are we doing here?"

Peter looked at his friend, presenting a smile. "Conversation." No, really?

Meanwhile, the doc eyed him for a moment, before he chose to give the obvious answer. "Reading through news and watching."

Peter blinked. Watching? He turned in his seat, getting up to look around Ned and… the old building across the street?

"Over there? That old building?" he asked, motioning towards it before he looked back at the doc. He had watched him for a moment before he looked back at his tablet. "Yeah."

Ned had looked into the direction he had mentioned and frowned. "Pete? There are a grocery store and a tattoo shop. No old building anywhere." Was his friend insane?
The doc raised his eyes again, watching them. "Yep. Whatever makes you sleep at night." He stated towards Ned, before his gaze focussed on Peter.

"You can see it?" he asked, seemingly paying them some kind of attention for the first time today.

Peter threw a glance over his shoulder, partly seeing a very confused Ned, whose gaze switched between them and the old building. "Yeah?" he answered in a questioning tone. Was that bad?

"Hm." The doc emitted. "Usually, it should be hidden to everyone who wasn't invited, is strong enough to see through the spell or… Well, you've been drenched in magic. I guess the spell just fades out on you. I should fix that later." At the word 'magic' Ned's head snapped around, staring at the ragged guy open-mouthed.

"Ma... Ma... Magic?" his friend stammered together, earning a questioning gaze by both, Peter and the doc.

"Could he sit down? Him standing around is kind of annoying." The doc stated, looking at Ned.

Peter sighed, getting up, pressing Ned into the chair and sat down beside the doc.

"So…. That grocery store Ned sees. Could he buy real food in there?"

Strange, who had eyed them calmly, frowned deeply at that question. "Parker! You insult me. Of course, you can buy real food in there."

Leaning towards the doc he looked at him with big eyes. "How does it work?" He couldn't see any grocery store or tattoo shop… but… he was curious! Obviously, Strange knew about those things.

"The illusion spell hiding the sanctum. It shows people who can't see it those other two stores. They are two structures at the same place, just different dimensions."

Peter blinked. That was kind of crazy. Somebody just wanted to buy some apples and ended up in a different dimension. "Do you guys run those places?" he asked slowly, watching the calm face of the doctor.

"The grocery store. It's used as forever run exam for apprentices." What? Being an apprentice sucked even in the magical world? "If you screw up bad time you end up in there, too." The doc added casually, with a certain smirk on his lips. Being an apprentice sucked hard in the magical world. Thought one would make a difference and then ended as a worker in a grocery store. "The tattoo shop is owned by us and leased to the guy who works in there."

Peter frowned. Ned meanwhile said his first words towards the doc: "You lease a store, which is located in a different dimension?"

Strange started to grin, while Peter looked at his friend and then back to the doc. "Does the guy know about this?"

"Of course not." He stated in a mildly amused tone.

Shaking his head to focus, he looked at the doc. "Did anything change?" he asked, serious for once and looked at the tablet.

The doc was silent for a long moment. "Not as far as I know." He finally stated. "Just trying to find something that's too odd to have happened."
Peter was silent, watching Ned for a moment, who was still busy processing everything that had been said. Other dimensions. Sorcerers. Invisible buildings.

For a moment, Peter became calm and serious, looking at the doc. "I'm afraid of what is to come, honestly. What I have to go through again. All of this. What if I fail?" he asked lowly, watching the sorcerer.

For the first time, Peter thought he glimpsed something like true compassion in the doc's eyes. "I know what you mean. I'm not keen on fighting Dormammu either, but I have to. We all have to go through the loops. It will work out, somehow. We've done it already. We'll do it again."

Peter blinked. Dormammu? "Dormammu? Who's that?"

The doc only gave him a gentle smile. It was… odd. As if there was too much to say than words could convey in any language. He hadn't ever… well, no. That wasn't true. He had seen him like that one time. When he had glimpsed into the futures on Titan, he seemed to be shaken to the core. There had been something in his eyes back then, that fit this smile.

"You not knowing who he is, means I did my job right." The doc stated gently, smiling this weird smile.

Peter frowned. That meant… if you saved the world as a sorcerer, no one would ever know? That sucked big time.

After a few moments, he figured he had to lighten the mood, hence he asked what interested him most. "Do you guys take interns?" After all, they had apprentices!

The doc burst into laughter, shaking his head weakly.

While the doc was too distracted to pay attention, Ned leaned close to Peter. "Is that the guy Stark always fights with? That sorcerer guy? Really?"

Peter nodded, smiling softly. Ned stared at him with wide eyes, obviously still trying to fit everything into his head. Magic was a real thing!

Peter just wanted to ask the doc something more serious, granted he could get the attention of the still laughing sorcerer, when a woman stopped at their table, eyeing the collection of people with a frown.

"Peter Parker?" she asked gently, looking at him. Her voice made Strange snap out of his fit, looking at her calmly. The both of them exchanged a gaze, which made Peter wish to not be here. There was so much tension in it, so much…

"Yeah?" he asked slowly, not wanting to be dragged into… "Why did he have to call you?" she asked pointedly. He looked at her in a soft shock. Why the doc had called him…? His eyes switched to the sorcerer, who leaned his face against his trembling hands. He looked… sad? Devastated seemed to fit even better. The annoyed playfulness he had shown before was all but gone. Strange looked at him.

"Oh, go on. She knows." He stated curtly.

Peter's gaze went back to the woman. There was a calm scornfulness in her gaze. The way the doc had… she was his girlfriend…?

If he could, Peter would want to be anywhere in this world but here, being stared down by a woman
he didn't know. If only he could know what had happened between the two of them.

"I… okay. I'm not sure what he told you, but that man saved me from dying some gruesome death on an alien planet. He… somehow… reverted time and I was back here, in this year, in my gym class. I completely freaked out, Ned can testify for that, he was there." Ned blinked surprised, obviously not wanting to be dragged into any of this. "The doc called me to tell me that I wouldn't die that night. Or any night to come, not through that guy who has the biggest interest in killing us. You have no idea how much that calmed me down. I took it onto myself to contact Mister Stark, to check if he remembers too."

The woman looked at him, calm and thoughtful. "You back that crazy story about aliens and time travel?" she asked slowly, obviously trying to decide whether he was insane or not.

"Yes. Every second of every day. As I said, I owe him my life."

Her gaze went towards the doc, Peter feeling extremely relieved. "Ned?" he nudged his friend, basically jumping to his feet and dragging him away. While they were leaving, he threw a glance over his shoulder. He could swear he heard, how the doc said: "Christine, please. I can't." Then he got up and turned, going his ways. Leaving the woman alone.

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Staring at his homework, Peter thought about his meeting with Mister Stark. He had hugged him. He had actually hugged him for the first time, giving him support when he was close to a breakdown. It had surprised him more than anything else… and then he had enjoyed it. Having closed his eyes, guessing how it would feel to be comforted by a father. He knew Tony kind of took that place in his life. The older genius took care of him, watched over him, gave him his suit. He knew he was Spider-Man even without his suit, but… Stark had given him so much.

Peter sighed softly, putting his pen away. Tony was right. They had survived Thanos, what were the other villains he had to fight compared to the mad titan? Right, nothing. Just silly obstacles on a way to something bigger, something more insane. He would fight against all of the other guys standing in his way. And he would defeat all of them, simply, because he had no other choice. He had to defeat them. He had to help fight Thanos. For a moment, it felt like his entire life was leading to that titan. That everything was only, so he could help to stop him.

Picking up his pen again, he stared at his homework. Advanced algebra. Half of it was done, the rest… well… Tony's answer why he didn't like Strange. That he had never done anything for the good of the world. He remembered that name and how odd the doc had looked. Dormammu. He guessed, he had done something for the good of the world, it was just that none of them knew. Because, how had he said it? Because he had done his job right. They had to stand together, however big the dislike between the two. He had to have an eye on them. As he had said to Ned, be the adult in the room. Maybe he should send them to marriage counseling.

The thought alone made him burst into laughter, making May stick her head in.

"I thought you were doing homework? What's so funny?"

Peter looked at her, close to crying out of amusement. Mister Stark and the doc at a therapist, both claiming the other one was to blame. He could basically see it in front of his eyes.

"What? That guy gave up the time stone! He was daring to sacrifice all of us!" Tony would yell. In the meantime, the doc would get all brusquely. "I already told you, there was no other way!"
And the therapist would look from one to the other, asking herself if those two morons had a fulfilled sex-life.

Roundabout a month after he had first opened his eyes in this weird time, his own past, Peter and Ned were on their way back from a movie. They actually shouldn't have seen it. It was a late night movie, more or less really scary. Well, it hadn't scared him, but Ned was a bit edgy afterward. They had told their parents (in his case his aunt) that they were staying at the other one's place respectively, creating one of those silly, perfect alibis. If none of their guardians decided to call the other. Peter only hoped that that wouldn't be the case.

They were talking about the movie, Peter always having an eye on their surroundings. He was wearing his suit below his casual clothes, his web shooters equipped. Just in case something would happen to them. That poor thief would get the surprise of a lifetime when Peter defended them. He wasn't planning on using the suit, he was strong enough to defend them without it anyway. Thanks to spider-power. Oh, damn it, did he start to think like that? Ned was asking him too many questions...

Keeping to the sidewalk, his gaze went towards the other side of the street. A group of adults just split into two camps, two women starting to yell at each other, a third trying to interfere but was obviously completely ignored. The two guys standing at either side of the now formed two camps, one behind the woman who had started to yell, the other beside the woman who had tried to interfere.

The man behind the woman, who had started to yell, took a few steps back, obviously not wanting to get caught in that fight. Getting closer to a street lamp, Peter came to a sudden stop. That was the doc. Shaved and better clothes and all. He saw, how the doc looked around aimlessly and came to a stop too, just like he had.

The two of them looked at each other wordlessly. Ned had come to a stop, looking at Peter and the group of adults on the other side of the street.

"Is everything okay?" but Peter didn't hear that question. He only stared at the doc. And then… then… he turned his head, looking along the dark street, speckled with light spots at every lamp. There was… it felt like… and suddenly, there was that light again. This time, just like last time, it swallowed his world. Sound, feeling, vision. All gone in an instant. For a moment, he felt his old bruises. Where Thanos had hit him badly. Would he be back there? Had Thanos yet found a way to revert what the time stone had done?

But no, he could still feel the cold night air, the strong gravity below him. All his senses returned but vision. And in the darkness of his momentarily world, he heard a woman scream. A scream, which ripped at his heart, the voice filled with so much fear.

"Stephen!"

Chapter End Notes

Like always, thank you all for reading, thank you even more for commenting and leaving kudos.
Strange's chapter will be up sooner or later, I'm not sure how long his month is turning out to be.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Aaand... finally, the last one of my one-month chapters.

It got (quite) too long, but I guess I knew that the moment I finished Peter's chapter. I get more used to the characters the longer I write them and they always want me to write more :). I already deleted some passages of my original draft to reduce the length. If you are interested, I can post the entire thing (with everything that's still safely stored in my head) as a different story. Just let me know.

This chapter is basically Stephen/Christine, (or Stephen's try to keep them together, why is actually hinted at in the chapter) with a few mentions of others along the way.

Like always, have fun reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Stephen said his goodbyes to the boy while they were leaving the tower, once again conscious of being watched by the security personnel in place. They had eyed him, when he had come in after Stark, too. He knew how he looked, at the end of the day.

Walking aimlessly through the streets, his head tackled the one topic he hadn't brought up. There was the possibility of a reset. They could simply cease to exist. Or... and that possibility scared him even more, they could be caught in a time loop. That, whatever they did would lead up to him giving the stone to Thanos and the stone reverted time on them, forcing them to relive those two years forever. He guessed the stone would have the power to create a loop that long. It turned back time for the entire universe, what would stop it from doing that again?

He came back from his thoughts when he realized he had stopped moving. Eyeing his surroundings, he smiled sadly. His body had brought him back home. To the sanctum. Looking up at the old building, he... he knew what he should do. Walk in and demand to speak with the Ancient One.

And then again... he had asked the others to follow their old timelines. If he would do that, he would have to hunt after Pangborn and a possibility to heal his hands. Go off to Nepal in search for Kamar-Taj. The way Peter had looked at him, he was sure he had already changed something. He himself had already changed something by not screaming at Christine. They all had by meeting one another. He didn't know if it was obvious to the others, but they had already created a divergence from what had been. The question once again arose in his head: How much could they change?

Sighing softly, he lowered his head and walked on. He had a long way home, after all, he had gone into the exact wrong direction. He didn't have money on him to buy a bus ticket. Did he have money at all? He would have to check his bank account later.

Entering his apartment block, he picked up his mail with trembling hands and went for the elevators. He ended up with a busy businessman, phoning during the ride and eyeing him suspiciously. God. Walking around unshaven and in loose clothes was worse than running around in weird clothes and a cloak. In the latter case, people most likely thought him eccentric. Or crazy. But a ragged guy who could easily be homeless in an upper-class apartment block? Wrong.
With an amused smile, he nodded towards his neighbor, who eyed him aghast, and left on his level. Digging in his pockets for his key, he found it… and let it drop to the ground. Stupid hands.

"Screw it." He muttered under his breath, unlocked the door with magic and let his keys float into his flat after him. As soon as he was inside, he closed the door and let his keys place themselves on a low board.

A moment later, he changed his clothes for sweatpants and a loose, blue shirt, wondering for a second, that he owned exactly two sweatpants. He had been quite… well… best not finish that thought. Re-entering his living room, he dropped himself onto his couch, opening his mail.

Reading through the few letters he had received, he sighed and closed his eyes. His rent was due, which he was quite sure he couldn't pay. He had forgotten about those normal things. Paying rent. Water. Electricity.

Sighing, he got up and grabbed his tablet, falling back onto his couch. Each touch on the cool surface was painful. Yet, after a few minutes, he stared at his account balance. Yeah. He hadn't had any money back then currently. It was enough to buy him the flight-ticket to Kathmandu. Even if he didn't do that, because he could simply walk into the New York sanctum and ask if he could use the portal, he couldn't pay the rent for his flat. How much money had he thrown out of the window?

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Christine had entered the apartment block only a little time after Stephen. She caught an elevator up and watched him drop his keys. She just wanted to walk up to him and help him, even though that gesture of kindness would surely upset him when he simply… did his keys float after him? She blinked confused, ducking behind a corner and waited until the door to his flat was closed again. She stood there for some minutes, thinking about simply leaving again. Maybe that would be better. She had just imagined that his keys were floating into his place after him. She pinched the bridge of her nose, frowning. No, she didn't want to leave. Her day had simply been too long. She needed sleep and imagined things. Besides, she had been looking forward to meeting this strange Stephen all day. He had been so very different yesterday… like the man, she had fallen in love with a lifetime ago. At least it felt like a lifetime. He had been a drag on her nerves for quite a while.

Finally, walking up to his door, she prayed that he wouldn't be his old self again. She guessed that would break her even worse. Entering his apartment, she looked around. No floating keys anywhere to be seen. Good. Getting rid of her coat, she entered the living room, seeing Stephen sitting on his couch. He stared at his tablet's screen with a frown, mail laying around on the low couch table in front of him.

"What's wrong?"

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He heard when Christine entered his flat. He didn't get up, simply continued staring at his tablet.

He raised his head and looked at her when he heard Christine's voice. For a second, he held her gaze, then looked back at his tablet.

"Can't pay the rent for the next month." He stated calmly. He had pre-paid his rent for quite a while, obviously. At the end of the month, that duration was over. Yet again, he wouldn't be here by the end of the month in his original timeline. He would be off to Nepal, on his own insane quest to find a cure for his hands.
He felt how Christine sat down beside him, not reacting though.

"What are you going to do?" she asked calmly. For one last second, he stared at his tablet screen. Locking it, he sighed and got up, striding through the room and staring out onto the city for a moment, before he turned and looked at her.

"Don't know. Probably sleep on a park bench." He snorted at his own words. He had done that for quite a time. Would give Stark a real reason to stare at him when they met next time. "Only thing I can afford, honestly."

"You could sell things off." Christine suggested.

Again, he snorted. "For what? For a month's rent?" he asked back in a harsh tone. Having to pay rent. From his perspective, it was just so ridiculous! All those silly worries he hadn't thought about in years. He knew it was actually important for a lot of people. Yet, knowing what he knew, that a murderous titan would come for them… it was all so meaningless.

Christine stared at Stephen for a moment, reminding herself to stay calm. "You don't have to lash at me. I just want to help." She stated in an even tone, keeping an eye on him. He was upset about something, wasn't he? And she, being here, got her part of it. As if he would have…

Stephen sighed, annoyed at himself. "Okay…" he said brusquely before he approached her slowly.

"How was your day?" he asked her, trying to use a calm voice.

Christine, in the meantime, raised an eyebrow at that question. "As if you would want to know." She stated in a cold voice which made him stop moving. He looked at her for a long moment, before he sat down beside her.

"No, not necessarily." He stated, seeing how she wanted to say something. "But." He intervened, stopping her from talking. "I lashed at you. Take it as my… mm.." he thought for a moment, searching for the right word. He had to ease this atmosphere… "search for redemption."

She blinked at his words and burst into laughter. Redemption. Was he serious? She didn't even know that he knew that word. After she had calmed down, she eyed him. He just sat there, having endured her laughter, and waited.

"You sure?"

Stephen tilted his head at her question. "No. But go on, before I change my mind."

She giggled at his words and did, what he had asked of her. Tell him how her day had been.

There had been a bus accident in the city, they had been the closest hospital and had to take care of the injured. All day, she had been busy running from one to the next while checking on her regular patients in the meantime. All but one, the driver, were stable and out of danger. At least something.

Stephen listened calmly, asked the right questions and urged her on to tell him more.

After a while, she checked her watch. It had gotten late. Yawning, she got to her feet.

"I think I should leave." She stated.

He frowned. "Nah." He said, earning a raised eyebrow from her. What please?

"You look as if you fall asleep any second now. If you go home by train, you'll sleep within the first
five minutes, ending god knows where." He stated it this mildly annoyed tone, he always used to point out something really obvious.

"Stay. You can have my bed. I'll sleep on the couch again." He claimed, keeping an eye on her.

Christine looked at him, indecisive. She still wasn't sure what to do with that Stephen. What to think of him. She…

"Come on. Letting you go in this state is irresponsible." He paused for a second before he chuckled. "I could sleep on the ground. Have to get used to hard surfaces after all. Training for the park bench."

Him talking about park benches again made her smile a bit. The only other option was calling a taxi, but she really didn't want to go through half the city at this hour. Maybe he was right…

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During the same night, Stephen was sitting in front of his windows, the Time Stone motionlessly floating on eye level. He had originally wanted to use it again, to check more timelines for a longer period of time, but he had decided against it. The Ancient One would surely have set up a spell to find time magic being used. He didn't want to pull a bunch of sorcerers onto his trail. Letting the stone disappear again, he lowered his back until it hit the parquet. Staring at his ceiling, he considered his options.

He could go for Kamar-Taj and act his way as a struggling student. Stick precisely to his timeline. Yet, he guessed that that wasn't in his best interest. He needed to talk to someone who understood the concept of what had happened. Only the current Sorcerer Supreme could really help him with that. His best bet would most likely be, to go for the sanctum and demand to talk with her. Avoided him being seen as an unknowing student. Of course, it was a divergence, but as long as he went for Kamar-Taj, in one way or another, things shouldn't change, right?

Moving his head, he looked towards his bedroom. Christine was in there, hopefully sleeping. She had looked that tired. She being here was… well, wrong. He knew that. He should have driven her away the moment he knew, he had gone back in time. But he couldn't do it. He couldn't make himself hurt her. He felt, how a sad smile played around his lips. He was still an arrogant, egocentric asshole, wasn't he? Betting the fate of the world on the hope that keeping her close wouldn't change anything. He told the others to not change anything and did just that himself. Yet again, he was a realist. None of the others would stick to his words. Why should he do it, then? He just couldn't hurt her. He didn't want to live without her, not for the tiniest second. He had watched her turn into ashes 14 million times. He couldn't take losing her. Not ever again.

He remained motionless until he had calmed down, willing his thoughts to travel around. He wasn't really paying attention to anything until his mind brought forth one name. Dormammu. He felt, how a cold shiver ran through his body. He knew he would win against him. He always would. Time defeated the inter-dimensional being. Yet, he wasn't keen on dying that often again. He remembered all his deaths. He had stopped counting after the 10.000th one. All he knew, was, that he had been in the loop for quite a while. Closing his eyes, he sighed softly. So many things he had to face again. So many things he had to do again.

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One week later, on a Saturday, Christine woke up in Stephen's bed. Like always, lately.

They had started a rhythm of her coming to his place after work, talking about her day with him
glued to her lips. He seemed to take a genuine interested in what happened in her days. Well, maybe the only way to still kind of participate in his old life. After all, he would never be able to work again.

After one week, she still wasn't sure what to make of him. What had happened in his life to force such a change in character? She hadn't dared asking, not knowing if she would like the answer. There was the possibility of him tricking her. That he simply wanted something from her and played along, acting all sweet and nice. He was losing his flat soon, after all. Maybe he wanted to get her to ask him, if he could stay at her place. He wouldn't have asked and of course would accept her offer, keeping his questionable ego intact. If he tricked her… she sighed softly. She didn't know what she should do, then. Most likely walk away from him for good. Maybe… just maybe she wouldn't have to, though. Maybe he had really changed. She liked who he was now. This calmer, gentler man. He reminded her of the person she had always glimpsed when he had one of his moments. The person she had always hoped he had it in himself to be. Seeing him like that now… it stirred old feelings she had thought were long gone, together with new fears. If he played all of this, she would have to accept that he was a psychopath.

Rolling around in his bed, she got up slowly, slipping back into her old clothes. She really should bring a change along next time.

Entering his living room, she watched him going through his Tai Chi moves. He had started with that somewhen during the week. As well as meditating. She still wasn't sure what she should make of that. It was all so damn odd.

Wishing him a "Good morning" she left for his kitchen immediately. First, she needed coffee. Without coffee, she wasn't able to function. She guessed she had a caffeine addiction, but how else should one survive 36-hour shifts in the hospital?

Re-entering his living room, she leaned herself against a wall, sipping on her drink every now and then and watched him. She had done that during the last week when she came from work, too. Watch him do his moves. He did that every morning and evening, as far as she could tell. One time, when she had been really tired, she had imagined seeing a golden sparkle appear close to his hand. After she had blinked, there had of course been nothing there. Just his body going through the motions.

"Enjoying the view?" Stephen's cheeky comment pulled her out of her realm of thoughts and made her blush a bit. She had stared at him for the entire time, hadn't she?

"I… eh..." she got moving again, placing her cup on his couch table and came to a stop in front of him, feeling his watchful eyes on her.

"Show me how to do that." She stated. A pause. "Please."

"I thought you said it's silly." He said back in a mocking tone.

Christine felt, how she blushed again. Damn Stephen Strange. She had said that the first evening she had gotten into his apartment and seen him do those moves. She had said more things too.

"Maybe. You seem to be pretty relaxed though. As I am notoriously stressed… why not try it? Can't hurt." She stopped herself from talking more. She just wanted to distract him from the fact, that she had indeed stared at him. How could she not stare at him? He was only wearing sweatpants, damn it!

She saw, how Stephen raised an eyebrow, but thankfully didn't say anything to her words.
"Okay." He said after a few moments of silence. "Get your feet a bit further apart. You need a solid stance."

Following, he slowly guided her through some basic motions, keeping an eye on her movements. "You have to keep your arms up." he stated, ripping her out of her state of not-thinking. It was indeed relaxing, she had to admit that. His comment made her blink, her gaze switching to her arms and then to his. His were in one line with his shoulders, her own arms were lower. She frowned. She hadn't even realized, that her arms weren't in line with…

Repeating the move under his watchful gaze multiple times, she held the stance one time… of six or seven tries. Groaning lowly, she let her arms drop to her side. That stupid Tai Chi was too hard for her. "Stupid…" she mumbled some curses below her breath, catching a glimpse of Stephen's face. He seemed to frown and be amused at the same time.

"Calm down." He said softly, moving behind her and told her to repeat the move. She tried again, and again her arms were lower than they should have been. On a second try, she felt, how he carefully touched her elbows, pressing them upward for those few inches she always failed to hold. She felt his scars, the tremble of his hands. To keep her arms up had to be painful for him.

"Repeat." He said lowly, continuing to keep her elbows in place. She could feel his breath stroking her skin. They were that close…

"How do you do that? It looks so easy for you." She stated after a few more repetitions.

"Photographic memory, remember?"

Hearing that answer made her burst into laughter and lean away from him. Yeah, of course, his memory helped him do Tai Chi moves well. Not. He was good in it, because he paid close attention to the tiniest detail, her little control freak.

Straitening her stance again, she turned her head, looking at him. She had wanted to repeat the move again, but… the way he watched her. He wore a small smile on his lips, a soft glimmer in his eyes. She couldn't remember… before she was quite aware of what she was doing, she had turned around and pressed her lips against his.

She felt, how Stephen tensed below her kiss. Damn. That had been stupid! He would surely push her away now. Out of his life. After all, she had just overstepped a border by miles. She had been too intrigued by this calmer and gentler Stephen. Thought that he, too, would still like her. With that stupid impulsive kiss…

Her thoughts came to a sudden stop when she felt Stephen kissing back.

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Slowly waking up, he blinked a little before his gaze focussed on Christine. She was sleeping next to him, sprawled out on the bed and claiming at least two third of it. She had come in at 3 after her shift and dropped into his bed, waking him in the process. He wasn't even fully awake when she already slept beside him. They were something since a week by now. They hadn't talked about it, apparently both not wanting to define their current relationship with words, and simply went along with it. Most of the time, she would come to his place after work. Honestly, she was barely at her place at all. She went there to get new clothes, get her mail or water her plants.

He ghosted a kiss on her cheek, not wanting to wake her up, and left the bed carefully. Grabbing his sweatpants along the way, he left towards his living room. As soon as he was outside his bedroom,
he closed the door carefully, placing a surveillance spell on the door, to warn him if she woke up. He really didn't want her to walk in on him using magic.

In a way, he still found it hilarious that she thought he did Tai Chi. When she had walked in on him going through the basic motions, he had nearly told her, that that was definitely not Tai Chi, but stopped himself from doing so. Telling her about magic and the entire madness of his life seemed a bit unwise in the current situation. One step at a time.

Finally, standing in his living room, he started with the basic motions once again and watched golden lines flow from his fingers. He had started to use magic in hopes to accelerate the healing of his hands. He had the impression that they had gotten a tiny bit better, but he guessed he only imagined that. The accident wasn't that long ago. All he needed, was time. He could use his defensive spells well enough. Shields and barriers were easy to create and maintain. He struggled with weapons, though. Ropes, swords, anything he had to grab and take a hold of. They tended to dissolve as soon as the pain in his hands got too strong, breaking his concentration. And the pain in his fingers was constantly close to being unbearable. There was a reason why he didn't shave, after all. He simply couldn't hold the razor. Or if he could, he guessed he would rather cut himself to pieces due to trembling. No thanks, he would stick with the beard and keep his head.

Some hours later, he was sitting on his couch, reading through news articles on his tablet, searching for anything which couldn't have happened now. Yet, he had to admit that his search was quite pointless. He could barely remember anything at all from the current time. He had other worries back then. His stupid hands were everything. What did he care about the world? Hearing, how Christine left his bedroom, he had dissolved the surveillance spell when he was done using magic, he raised his gaze, looking at her. He felt, how his heart skipped a beat at her appearance. Partly, because he was happy to see her, partly, because she wore nothing more than her underwear.

"Shouldn't you put on some more clothes?" he asked her cheekily, unable to take his eyes off her while she walked towards him. She only smiled cocky, straddling him and caught his lips in a long good-morning-kiss.

"Same back to you, mister 'I don't wear shirts'." He laughed softly, while his eyes went along her body. He felt, how his blood rushed somewhere else, making it hard to keep his thoughts together.

"Any plans with this attire?" he asked lowly, placing his hands on her hips and caressing her gently. While he spoke, he actually managed to look at her face.

She chuckled softly at his current state. "I hoped you weren't done with your Tai Chi. Wanted to join in, this way you are too distracted to realize how bad I am."

He laughed softly, knowing that they both in her current state of undress doing 'Tai Chi' was probably a bad idea. He had to focus to suppress his usage of magic. It was hard enough with her around wearing clothes.

"You aren't that bad." He stated instead, earning a snort from her.

"You know, that I am worse. You are just too polite to admit it." She pointed out, pecking the tip of his nose and moved away, sitting down beside him. Her gaze fell on his tablet, which was laying on the table, all but forgotten.

"Anything new in the world?" she asked, being used to him reading through every online newspaper he could find. She did wonder, what he was looking for. Was this another version of his maniac hunt for a cure for his hands? Him looking for a story of someone badly hurt and healed afterward?
He only shrugged, his eyes not yet focussed on her face. When he started to speak, he looked at her, surprisingly. "Usual state of chaos." He offered, making her smile. Usual state of chaos. What kind of answer was that?

He cleared his throat, succeeding in ripping his eyes from her.

"I'll take a shower." He stated, getting up.

She watched him leave, leaning against the back of the couch.

"Should I get some breakfast ready?" she offered, waiting for his answer.

"It's more like midday." He stated.

Oh. Was it really that late already? "Then hurry up, I have to shower too. My shift starts at 2."

His only answer was a groan.

----

A few days later, Stephen re-entered his apartment. He had been strolling through the city, trying to sort his memories. Meanwhile, trying to decide what could be changed and what not. They had to get in contact with the other Avengers, after all. Then again, there were things which simply shouldn't be changed. For one thing, he was sure that they couldn't tell Thor any of this. He had thought about sending him off to Nidavellir when he came to earth in search of his father. Yet again, he wouldn't be able to wield his new weapon then. He had to go through the realization, that he was in control of his powers, that the hammer was only a means to focus his strength, to be able to use that axe-thing. On top of that, Thor had to get Banner off Sakaar.

He only knew pieces of the whole story, but he had seen enough in his try to find a reality where they defeated Thanos, to piece some parts together. He wasn't sure, though. He wasn't sure when or if they could jump the titan and catch him off guard. He knew that Thanos got the first stone from Xandar. The second right after the fall of Asgard. If they had a spaceship, they could try to defeat him before he acquired the space stone. Or even before he got the power stone. Then again, where was he between Xandar and Asgard? What was he doing before that? Making himself a tea, he continued thinking about all the things he didn't know. All those terrible liabilities, which, if handled wrongly, could easily break their advantage of knowing where Thanos would be when.

Sitting down on his couch, he watched his tea cool, caught in thoughts about things which were still far away. Even though two years weren't all that long. He was just sipping on his tea when Christine burst into his place. To say she was angry seemed to be an understatement. Furious fit better, he guessed.

"Why the hell would you 'need' to speak with Peter Parker?"

Stephen blinked surprised. Being ripped out of his thoughts, he needed a moment to process her words…

Oh.

"What 'Oh'?" She spat at him.

Had he said that aloud? He... ehm...

Putting his cup down, he cleared his throat, which seemed to annoy her even more.
"I guessed you had something to hide after this weird turnaround of your personality, but you having something with teenagers?"

Stephen looked at her, startled by her words. That sounded just plain out wrong.

"Why would you call Mrs. Parker, tell her some stupid lies, convince her, her nephew was dying just to get his phone number?" She asked again, this time not only angry but impatient. His silence seemed to make everything even worse.

"I... had to talk with him?" He offered weakly, seeing how she was close to losing it.

"Okay, ehm." He said slowly, trying to calm her down. "Could I try to explain myself?"

She kept silent, looking at him. He took it as a sign to go on. Or try. Or whatever. For a moment he closed his eyes. He hadn't planned on telling her anything so soon. Yet, he hadn't much of a choice in the given situation, right?

He was silent after that, thinking about how to start, feeling her angry gaze on him all the while.

"Are you gonna say something or just sit this out?" She asked, her tone that cold it actually hurt.

"No, I... don't know where I should start." He said lowly, looking at her. He could see, how her nose wings trembled. Oh god. He was going to die.

"Maybe you should just start." She said, pronouncing every single word to make sure he finally got the message.

Taking one deep breath, he closed his eyes for a moment. Okay... This would make no sense at all...

"Stark, Parker and I were on an alien planet trying to fight a murderous titan. He wants to wipe out half the universe, hence we had to at least try to stop him."

"Stark?" she asked back coldly.

"Yeah. Tony Stark."

A frown appeared on her face, her voice sounding even more pissed than before "Why would you of all people try to help Iron-Man fight an alien?"

Wow. That part of his sentence was considered the most unlikely one?

"I can do magic." He stated. He could see a frown appear on her face and hurried to keep talking. Better keep her listening and not allow her much time to think about what he was actually saying.

"It went well for a while. Not that I already knew we were going to fail, but... Well... The short story is, we lost against him. He was just going to kill Stark when I went in to save him." He had decided to not tell her about Infinity Stones. One madness at a time. "Reversing time accidentally. That's when you walked in on me close to three weeks ago. I was two years in my own past, waiting to get murdered." He took a second to take a breath.

"I used some magic to see into the future if that titan remembered and would come for us. He doesn't. I had to tell the others, though. As I can't contact Stark I went for Parker, telling his aunt whatever came to my mind to get his number."

He looked at her hoping for... for... a miracle, most likely. She only stared at him, her anger gone. Exchanged by an expression he couldn't read.
"You're insane."

It was barely more than a whisper leaving her lips and yet he heard it as if she had screamed at him. He knew what was going to happen. He really didn't need to see the future to know that. He jumped to his feet, calling her name, but she was already in his corridor, running away from him. Taking after her, he saw her vanish through the door leading to the stairs. He stood there, thinking about following her... and then turned and walked back into his flat. Catching her wouldn't help right now. Pacing through his living room, he felt how he trembled. Being angry at himself. He had changed something to be able to contact Peter. Of course, his aunt would look into him earlier or later. And she looking into him had driven Christine away from him, because... well... his story was nuts. He didn't think that she would return. Not how she had looked at him.

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Stephen sat in his apartment, staring at what remained of his life. Again. This time, however, it didn't bother him nearly as much as two years ago. What bothered him, was the obvious. Thanos. Peter had said he was grateful for being saved by him. He wasn't that sure of that. He hadn't saved them. He hadn't saved any of them. He had wanted to give the stone to their enemy, fully aware, that Peter would die. Christine would die. He would. Half the fucking universe turning to ashes. For the one tiny chance, so unlikely... and then something even more unlikely happened. Something impossible. The time stone saving their sorry asses. He still wasn't sure how it happened. He guessed by proximity to the other stones. But based on that, he would guess that they keeping their memories was based on the proximity to the time stone. And then it made no sense at all that Thanos didn't remember. He had been closer than Stark. If he would remember, just like them, he would already be on their doorstep, knocking down the frame and take, what was his. Kill them all along the way. He wasn't sure if they could ever beat him. If they were meant to at all. 14 million universes in which they failed. Peter had the right to be afraid.

Forcing his thoughts away, he focussed on the task at hand. He had sorted his life into boxes and what he really needed into his backpack. He would store the boxes away in a long-time storage. He had to get his other key from Christine. Drop the keys. And then... he wasn't sure. His consciousness told him he should go off for Kamar-Taj. But... he didn't want to, really. What he wanted was...

He was ripped out of his thoughts when he heard his apartment door open and close again. Turning around, he saw Christine standing in his corridor, looking at him timidly. Seeing her, here, was more than he could take. He felt how it ripped him apart. He knew he had meant it, when he thought, that he could never lose her again. He had spent the entire day trying to not think about her, knowing full well, where those thoughts would get him. Into a bottomless hole of self-pity. Seeing her earlier had been rough. Seeing her again just...

Christine watched Stephen carefully, not coming closer. He looked terrible. Her fingers started to play with his key. Having seen him with that teenager earlier had been so odd... Peter telling her the same insane story was even odder... she wasn't sure what to think. Why she was here. To drop the key, grab her clothes and disappear or... or... he looked that bad. Sad and afraid and...

"Magic, yes?"

She saw, how a weak smile formed on his lips. "Yeah." Was all he said.

Stopping to play with his key, she watched him.

"Show me." It wasn't a question. Not even a request. It was an order. If his stupid story was true, he had to show her. Else she would simply turn around and be gone. This time for good. She was done
with his shit.

Feeling his gaze on her, she waited impatiently. For a moment, she thought he wouldn't do it, because he couldn't do it. That he had lied to her all along, that he was just searching for another excuse, but then he raised his hands and…

She couldn't believe what she was seeing. Golden lines remained in the air, where his fingertips had been, forming something like a sigil. Or a rune. Or whatever. Staring at it in pure disbelief, she watched how it dissolved, small golden sparks tumbling towards the ground before they too vanished. Her gaze went back to him. He just stood there, waiting for her reaction.

"Can you do something more permanent?" she asked, not moving an inch.

He shrugged, raised his hand again. This time, she watched, how some kind of energy shield appeared in front of his closed fist. A myriad of runes interwoven, glowing softly, moving within the circle, which was formed by the shield.

Again, she stared at it in disbelief. Slowly approaching him, she let her fingertips hit the shield. It was solid. It was actually solid. She could see the runes pulse with light below her fingers, them moving on, not bothered by her touch.

"What would it need to break it?" she asked in a disbelieving voice.

"A strong enough force or me dissolving it." He stated calmly, watching her carefully. Just then, she realized how close they were. Only a weird energy shield and an arm's length away.

"Can you pull rabbits out of a hat?" she asked, trying to lift the weird mood that was surrounding them.

Dissolving the shield, he groaned.

"I don't do tricks." He stated, stepping away from here. That reaction wasn't lost on her. He was… upset?

"But you could?" she insisted. She wanted to know if he could.

Stephen was silent for a moment. For a very long moment. Before he grudgingly admitted a "Yes."

Which made her giggle in return. He was a wizard. A freaking real-life wizard. This was crazy. Insane. But it was real.

Raising her gaze to watch his face, she asked: "Where did you learn that?" she guessed that magic wasn't taught around the next corner.

"I went to a monastery in Nepal. Or… will go there. It's a bit complicated. I changed how I look at life there. Realized there was more in this world."

She nodded absentmindedly. "You mean you joined a cult?"

Her honest question made him burst into laughter, which made her blink confusedly. What had she said that was that funny? It was a legitimate concern in her eyes! Him joining a cult… she didn't want that. Cults were dangerous!

"Yeah, of course, it's a cult." He mumbled to himself before he raised his voice. "No, it's no cult, Christine. Just an… hmm… group of people with a familiar set of skills. Like the Avengers, only
more awesome."
She couldn't stop but giggle at his words. Like the Avengers, only more awesome. "Still a cult."
"I'd argue the Avengers are an official organization." He pointed out gently, making her laugh out loud.
"Are you defending them or your cult?"
He only rolled his eyes, remaining silent this time. Seemingly, he was done with cult comments about whatever he was doing.
"How did you reverse time?" she asked, tackling the next weirdest point of his story.
For a moment, he seemed embarrassed. Like caught. He hadn't…?
"I didn't, actually. I have a something with me, which did it."
A something? Raising her eyebrows in a questioning manner, she looked at him. Waiting.
He got more uneasy by the minute until he sighed softly and conjured a green gem, which floated above his hand. She stared at it. That tiny, beautiful thing should be able to turn back time? Raising her hand, she wanted to touch it, but he backed away and out of her reach.
"Don't touch it. It would kill you." He stated gently, letting the stone vanish again.
She just blinked, looking at him. That tiny thing could kill her? Yet, he seemed to be genuinely concerned, hence she wouldn't argue.
For a while, they just stood there, not saying a thing.
This time, it was him who broke the silence. "What made you come back?"
Raising her gaze back to his face, she thought for a moment. "Well, Peter telling me the same story as you did was a point." She started, watching his face. It was calm but expressionless. "And… well… your hands." She took the initiative and reached for them, holding his hands in her own. She could feel every scar on his skin, feel his gentle trembling. "They were always the most important thing for you. After your accident, there was nothing else. And then they weren't. From one day to the other. I watched you for a while." She explained, gently stroking his broken fingers.
She saw, how a weight fell from him. His expression got softer. A moment later, she found herself in his embrace. For a moment she was surprised. Catching herself, she hugged him back, snuggling into him.
"Don't ever hide something from me again." She said in a low voice, muffled by his shoulder.
"Even if it is as crazy as magic?" he asked back. A smile in his voice.
"Especially, if it is as crazy as magic."

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Stephen Strange endured the gazes of the three people at his table calmly. He had to be nice. Christine had asked him to be nice to her friends. At his table sat, minus Christine who was getting something to drink for herself and him, two females and a man, boyfriend to Claire as far as he remembered. The two women, Claire and Hellen, looked at him as if they wanted to skin him alive.
What bothered him most, was, that they had the knowledge to do just that. The man, John or something, only looked grumpy. Most likely told what he had to do, just like him.

Up until now, the woman had talked all the while, mostly just ignoring him. The moment Christine was gone, he was granted a rare piece of attention and accordingly killed with stares. He wouldn't bother really. Not normally. Under the current circumstances though...clearing his throat, he looked at John, the only person at this table who didn't obviously want to murder him and tried a bit of polite conversation.

"And... what do you do for a living?"

He didn't have to ask the women. He had worked with them, after all. John looked at him, seemingly trying to decide whether he should be nice and answer, after all, they were the only men at this table, or continue to be grumpy and ignore him.

A moment later, Christine joined them again. He forced himself to hide his relief. Only for a moment though, until he realized, what kind of drink his 'girlfriend' had gotten him. A neon pink thing with an umbrella, weird exotic fruit and drinking straw. Was she kidding him? For a moment, he felt how anger rushed through him. He was fine putting up with her friends, but with her too? He was just going to say something when Christine looked at him. Her gaze and her smile... it calmed him down. He couldn't freak out in front of her friends. She was testing him, just as they did. Why else be here? In a stupid bar, with stupid live music floating in the background. Sighing, he accepted his fate, pulling his drink towards him. Getting rid of the umbrella, he eyed the fruit. Was that thing decoration or actually edible?

"What did I miss?" Christine's question pulled his attention back from the fruit and towards her.

"I just asked John what he does for a living." He informed her, looking at him. With her here, he would surely answer. When she was here, the three of them only stared at him with loathing. Better then before.

John blinked, put on a smile, and started to talk.

"I'm a lawyer. Work downtown for a big company. I'm currently working on a defense case. Should be rather simple, really. The evidence the attorney has is wonky at best. I'm still wondering who allowed that case to go to court. It's obvious that they will fail."

A long moment of silence followed. Stephen saw, how John fought with himself, but finally got out what he had surely been told to ask if he was asked.

"And you?"

Stephen could hear a snicker from Hellen. Christine had told him about the gossip at the hospital. One of the nurses had seen him in his ragged attire. For this current occasion, Christine had insisted on getting his beard and hair in shape. On top of that, she had gotten him into new jeans and a dress shirt. This afternoon, he had rather felt like a ragdoll than anything else.

"Nothing, momentarily. I read much and..."

Christine joined in, he wasn't sure though if she would help him.

"Oh, he has started to do Tai Chi. He's so good in that. I join him at times, but, honestly, I'm terrible. Never get the moves right." She started to giggle, which the other girls joined without question. The two men only looked at each other, for a silent moment sharing compassion at the other one's situation.
"You do Tai Chi?" Claire joined in, as soon as she was done giggling. "John does that too. Maybe you could meet? Tai Chi buddies or something."

He could see, how John looked at her for a moment before his gaze went back to him. "Yeah, sure. I'm free on Friday afternoon if you like." Great. He would have to look into actual Ta Chi. Christine would be the end of him. "Yeah, sure." he answered, making a mental note, that he had to ask for specifics.

Following, the women started to gossip again, which he only listened to with half an ear. Something about a new nurse, who obviously wasn't liked by anyone. His concentration went back to his horrible drink. Sipping on it by using the straw, he fought with himself to keep an expressionless face. That stuff was incredibly sweet. Most likely only sugar and alcohol. Great. Should he be able to walk home after this occasion?

While he stared his drink to death and contemplated not drinking it, the women had changed to a work-related topic. A patient who... 

"That actually sounds more like NMO than MS." He joined in, being instantly stared to death by Christine's female friends. He frowned at their open aggression. "Just saying." He added brusquely. "The outbursts are sudden, yes? Together with the loss of vision in both eyes, combined with lesions in the spinal cord, it points to NMO." He was silent for a moment. "You could do a blood test." He added, before leaning back and closing his eyes for a moment. He listened, how Christine and her 'friends' ruled NMO out. Where they idiots? Or just not going to admit in front of him, that he was right? While he concentrated on his anger management, he felt how Christine grabbed his hand below the table, squeezing it gently. Looking at her, he frowned. Would she look into it or not?

Somewhen later, he had stopped paying attention for a while, he heard how the background music picked up. Oblivious to him, a stage had been cleared for dancing. Together with the others, he watched how a bunch of people actually started dancing. Cheering and laughing soon filled the bar. Feeling, how Christine tugged on his hand, he frowned. He really didn't want to dance. Her staring at him with pleading eyes didn't help him either. After a long moment, he sighed, rolling his eyes in the process and let her drag him onto the stage. If all this torture didn't lead somewhere, he would actually have to consider... and then his brain was busy concentrating on dancing while trying to not make an utter idiot out of himself.

When they had gotten close enough to each other to actually be able to talk, he raised his voice. "What is this all about?"

She would know what he meant. This stupid drink. Questioning of his medical knowledge. And now dancing of all things.

Christine looked innocently at him, taking her time before she got close enough for an answer. "We have a bet, actually." She stated, taking her time to continue talking. "They don't believe, you wouldn't snap at me if I push you far enough. They want to prove that way, that you aren't actually interested in me. Just playing a game."

Stephen made a face hearing that. Were they really that shallow? "They really don't trust me, do they?" he asked, s soon as she was close enough to hear it.

"Nope. You have a reputation, after all." Oh yeah. Arrogant womanizer, as far as he remembered. Sighing softly, he closed his eyes for a moment. He hadn't been that person for so long, that he barely remembered. Being judged on that basis now... Opening his eyes again, he looked at her. There was an amused sparkle in her eyes. She was enjoying this, wasn't she? See how far she could
go, until he utterly freaked out. He knew she had her worries. Even after knowing about magic and the time travel insanity. She had to be sure...

Pulling her close, he pressed his lips against hers. Feeling how she stiffened in his arms, he broke away, looking at her confusedly. He just wanted to ask, what was wrong, when she pressed her lips against his, pulling him into a long and sensual kiss.

After they broke apart, he looked at her in a questioning manner. She smiled weakly. "I'm not used to you kissing me in public." She explained shyly.

He frowned for a moment. He... he had actually never kissed her anywhere they could be seen, while they were dating. Everyone knew they had something back then, but actually showing it to the world... he had only committed to her behind locked doors, where anyone could say anything.

Pulling her close again, he stole a kiss from her lips, before he nibbled along her jawline and finally sucked on her earlobe. "I don't care. Let them see." He proclaimed softly, making sure she could hear him. He had worried about actually committing to her when he had become Sorcerer Supreme. Being together would make her a target, if only for his sake. Yet... Stark managed too, somehow. Hawkeye did. They all had someone important, despite everything else. He wouldn't stop doing it now when he was just some lousy guy.

He could feel how she looked at him for a long moment. A very long moment. The music around them, other people passing by, but he had only eyes for her. He knew that expression on her face. He had seen it often enough, a long time ago when they were dating, in a future time that was not yet to be. That soft glimmer in her eyes. That tiny smile playing around her lips. She loved him.

Embracing her again, he pulled her close, enjoying the moment. Those tiny few seconds until he would have to go back, sit down at that table, face her awesome friends and herself too. Smile through whatever was said at or about him. Try not to freak out along the way. How much he enjoyed that night.

"Can you get me something without an umbrella next time?" he asked while they were leaving the stage. She threw a glance at him.

"Oh, I was under the impression you liked the umbrella." She stated mockingly, forcing him to take a deep breath. He loved that woman. He had to remember that.

Sitting back at their table, he felt how Christine wouldn't let go of his hand. She had entwined their fingers below the table, gently stroking his roughed skin with her thumb.

Closing his eyes, he sighed voicelessly and listened to the women starting to talk about an HBO series. It sounded vaguely familiar. Like something, he could have sat through during a calm weekend at the sanctum. Squeezing Christine's hand, he leaned back, trying to relax. Meanwhile, he wondered where all those monsters, inter-dimensional beings or aliens were, which usually wanted to kill him. Now, when he could use them as an excuse, they were nowhere to be found. Stupid monsters. He guessed, he would kick the next one into another dimension, just because.

While the night went on, Christine took the initiate to serve him some really weird drinks. The next one was neon green (gracefully no umbrella) but decorated with a bunch of kiwis which actually made him want the umbrella back. After that he got something which mostly consisted of pineapple juice, thus the decoration of pineapple pieces strung along the glass, and vodka. Tasting the last, he frowned involuntarily. Vodka. That wasn't good.

The next thing he knew, was talking with John about actually meeting for a Tai Chi session next
Friday. They exchanged phone numbers and talked on about…

Talking with Claire about blood poisoning, he got the weird feeling that he had already talked to her about that topic. Yet, she had asked again, hence he answered again.

Getting up in search of a toilet, he realized just how wasted he was. That vodka… wrong decision. Walking through the bar, he realized he couldn't assess the distance between him and anything for that matter. For a moment, when he had found the men's room, he even leaned against the wall, simply making sure that there was something he could hold onto. After he was done with his business, he cleaned his hands and took his time to splash cold water on his face. Looking at himself in the mirror, he frowned. Hopefully…

The next thing, which came to his attention, was walking beside Christine. She was holding his hand gently, their fingers entangled and talked with Claire about he-really-didn't-know. They were outside. When had they left the bar? And why for all hell couldn't he remember? He felt, how the cold night air helped a bit with his clouded mind. In the next minutes, he didn't register a memory loss or a sudden change in place. After some ten minutes, the group had gotten silent. Christine was back to gently stroking his hand with her thumb. He could get used to that. Checking his watch for the time, 1:07, he felt how something pulled on him. Not on his physical being, but on his mind. He stopped, looking around. The world was a bit blurry and his thoughts scattered. Yet, even in this state, he realized that something was wrong. He felt Christine tug on his hand, looking at him. He hesitated for a moment before he walked on.

Checking his watch increasingly during the next minutes, Christine finally stopped and faced him.

"What's wrong?" she asked gently, a certain slur to her words which made him realize she was drunk too. The uneasiness, which had taken a hold of him, seemed to be obvious, even now.

"I… Nothing. I don't know." He stated slowly. He felt as if he missed something. Something truly obvious. Something really important, right in front of his eyes, but he just couldn't... that feeling of something pulling on him had gotten stronger. It was a constant reminder of something now. If only he could…

Snapping out of his thoughts, he looked at Christine, frowning. She was shivering softly.

"Are you cold?" he asked slowly, watching her face.

He saw how she wanted to say no but already pulled his jacket off, placing it on hers. Pecking her nose, he tried it with a confident smile and continued walking. They had to catch up with the others, after all. Claire and John were walking ahead, behind them Hellen.

Having caught up with the group, he felt how Christine squeezed his hand again. Whenever she did that, it was a weird combination of happiness, she was squeezing his hand after all, and pain, she was squeezing his hand after all. Pulling her towards him for a moment, he pecked her lips. Earning a giggle from her, she deepened the kiss, making him close his eyes. For a moment all he knew, was holding Christine, who had thankfully stopped shivering, her warm body pressed against his, their tongues dancing with one another.

An annoyed groan got him out of his happy place and back into reality. Hellen stared at them with a dissatisfied glare.

This time her friend disapproving of him, made Christine bristle. He felt how she tensed in his arms before letting go of him.
"What is your problem?" she spat at Hellen, suddenly furious.

"What my problem is?" Hellen yelled back. "He's using you, don't you see that? He most likely just wants to get into your pants!"

Christine scoffed at that accusation. "You know nothing about him. He's changed." She told her friend in an angry voice.

"He's changed? He's changed?!" Hellen spat back, her voice cracking dangerously. "A few months ago you hated his guts! I know you have a complex with helping people, but that doesn't mean I have to watch you waste your life!"

At this point, Christine snapped, taking a step towards Hellen.

"I waste my life?! Hellen, maybe you missed out on that, but he nearly died in that car crash!"

Meanwhile, Claire and John had gotten back to them. Claire wanted to intervene but was completely ignored by her furious friends. John threw a concerned gaze at him. All Stephen could do was shrug.

While he listened to his girlfriend for once defending him, he felt how that something pulled on him again. It was stronger this time. As if not only two women screamed at another, but something screaming at him to finally open his eyes. Turning away, he took a few steps, meanwhile glancing at his watch. 1:24. Aiming towards a street lamp, he looked at his surroundings for the first time. He glanced onto the other side of the street and came to a sudden stop. Were that Peter and that weird friend of his? He looked at Peter for a long moment, before he felt that pull again. This time, it felt as if something was close to ripping pieces off of him. Turning his head, he glanced along the street. There… there was something. He knew he should know... But… It was… and while his hazy mind tried to fit the pieces together, a blinding white light swallowed his world. All his senses were gone in an instant, taken away by pure nothingness. A second later, his dizzy head through alcohol was joined by the brutal pondering of just having woken up from unconsciousness. He felt his throat hurt, having been grabbed by Thanos. His body hurt from all those other bruises, having fallen and thrown around and… in the heat of the battle, he hadn't felt it that much. This time though, he groaned and sank to his knees, trying to get some air into his lungs. He felt his roughed up throat protest at the outlook of air rushing through it.

And then it was gone. The pain was gone. And the nothingness of the light was gone. Slowly, so very slowly, he felt how his senses returned. As if within a dream, he heard Christine call his name. Her voice was filled with so much fear, so much dread, that it ripped at his heart. He had heard that scream before. A month ago. When he had checked the timelines for Thanos.

Chapter End Notes

I actively decided against telling you, what is attacking Strange. You have to wait for the next chapter to finally get to know that. I think it’ll be a surprise.

Thank you all for reading!
Stephen, still on his knees, tried to re-orient himself. For a few long moments, his mind was focussed on Christine. Her voice. That dreaded, fearful tone. Something… something had happened to her, right behind his back, while he had... while he… He couldn't… while he wanted to lash out in anger, pity himself and simply disappear all at the same time, his slow, alcohol-controlled mind finally succeeded in flipping the picture around. Christine hadn't screamed because something was happening to her. Christine had screamed because something was going to happen to him.

While the realization dawned on him, that he was in imminent danger, his hazy mind registered the sound of heavy footsteps approaching. They were fast. Running, weren't they? While he could taste fear at the back of his throat and tried to focus his thoughts enough to create a barrier, he heard how something lighter landed right in front of him. Light steps, nearly impossible to hear. A whooshing sound when something heavy moved through the air and then a grunt. A grunt in an effort to something.

"Hey, doc." Peter. Peter was right in front of him, then? His voice sounded strained. Then something growled at them. The sound alone made his heart stop for a second. A growl. That… He heard how, whatever Peter had caught, got moved forcefully, air whooshing as the object moved again. This time, he got his thoughts together and created a shield right in front of where he guessed the boy.

Peter felt how whatever he had caught was ripped from his fingers. Bracing himself to be hit by it with full force, he felt his thrumming heart. His muscles tensed, trying to ease the force of the hit he was going to take. But the impact never came. He heard the weapon their enemy was carrying crash against something, only inches away from his face.

"There is a golden shield right in front of you." His AI informed him.

A glowing… the doc.

"Can you expand the shield?" he asked worried, guessing that their enemy would simply take a step back, walk around the shield and corner them. Without sight, they were in a peculiar situation. At least, he guessed that the doc couldn't see, just like him. He heard how the doc moved, together with those heavy footsteps moving away from them. Frowning, he realized that the sorcerer had been on
the ground. Or kneeling or something. Focussing again on the sound of whatever was attacking
them, he waited, still tense. Ready for anything.

"The shield expanded." Karen told him, not even a second later he heard how that weapon crashed
into the shield again. And again and again and again. He heard the steady breath of the man, who
stood beside him by now.

The sole center of Stephen's existence was the shield, he tried to maintain. Huge barriers were flimsy
at best, needing so much willpower to be kept stable over a long period, but he understood the need
to keep their enemy in front of them. He couldn't see. Peter couldn't most likely either. If whatever it
was, that was hammering away at his shield, got behind them while their vision was still gone, they
were as good as dead. Something screamed at them in anger, the hits, which rained down on his
magical shield, never stopped for a second. Narrowing his eyes, he tried to reinforce the spot, which
was hit repeatedly. His hazy mind didn't realize, how the edges of the barrier flickered and turned to
golden dust, raining down to the ground before disappearing.

A few moments went by when the hits suddenly stopped. They heard heavy footsteps walking to the
right. Then to the left. To the right again. All the while, something scraped at the shield.

Suddenly, the scraping stopped, was exchanged by one massive hit, which broke straight through the
golden runes of light. Stephen heard, how his shield broke, was splintered with force. While he heard
the swoosh of the weapon moving again, he recreated the broken part of the barrier, this time
catching the hit again. He felt, how he started to tremble, how…

While Peter heard, how their enemy started to move along the shield, his vision returned slowly. First
it was only contrast. Light and dark and shadows in between. The scraping on the shield nearly
drove him mad. Their enemy was teasing them. Mocking them. I'll get through, don't you worry.
Blinking, he thought about asking Karen to call Mister Stark, but he guessed disrupting the
concentration of a blind wizard, who was currently maintaining a barrier with effort, wasn't that wise.
The moment, he heard the weapon being moved, the contrast blurred with color. An eternal second
later, he felt how his heart skipped multiple beats, his mouth opened slightly, his breath halted. He
felt, how goosebumps ran along his skin, an unspeakable fear… That wasn't possible. It just wasn't
possible. His terrified mind repeated the thought for a few times, trying to make him believe in it.

Meanwhile, a sweet voice in the back of his head asked, how impossible exactly it was. Just as
impossible as he being in his own past? Impossible like that? Because based on that, it was very,
very plausible.

While his head fought a battle of possible impossibilities, Peter Parker watched in horror, how Cull
Obsidian smashed his way through the golden barrier. A child of Thanos. The hammer guy. Slowly,
in pure horror, he turned his head. Looking around if he could see the other guy. Ebony Maw. Who
had disposed of the doc that easily. All he could see where two of the former group of adults. The
blond-haired woman he had seen around a week ago. The girlfriend of the doc, wasn't she? Another
woman beside her. Ned on the other side of the street, where he had left him.

"Go!" He yelled at all of them in an annoyed tone. What did they think? Oh, cool, an alien. Let's
watch?

"Doc?" looking back at an alien, which shouldn't be here, he continued to talk "It's… It's the guy
with the hammer."

The guy with the hammer? The… Stephen frowned while trying to not lose his concentration. Yet,
of course, his hazy mind jumped at the topic like a starving man would jump at food. How could the…
And with his thoughts slipping away, the barrier did so too. The entire thing turned to golden dust in an instant.

Staring at the dissolving shield in horror, Peter took a step forward, placing himself in front of the doc. He could survive a hit with that hammer. He wasn't that sure if the sorcerer would be able to do that too. He watched tense, how the hammer guy launched himself forward, ready to attack.

Succeeding in getting his scattered thoughts together once more, he created a shield right in front of them, feeling how the alien impacted with it within seconds. How could…

"Peter? Can you give me, like, 20 seconds?" he couldn't fight like this. Not with the very certain possibility of his thoughts slipping away at any second. To be able to fight he had to concentrate.

Peter watched baffled, how Cull Obsidian wanted to jump at them and crashed into golden runes midway. The alien growled at them in what had to be an annoyed tone and took a few steps back. The doc's voice ripped him out of his astonishment. Twenty seconds? For what?

Tony Stark blinked annoyed. Why was his vision not returning? He felt Pepper's hand cupping his face. As far as he could tell, she stood in front of him, the movie still playing in the background. He let his Iron-Man glove retreat into the wristband and placed his hand on Pepper's.

"What was that light?" he asked aloud, even though he knew somehow, that she hadn't seen it. He had felt his old, not yet happened, injuries. It had to be the same light, which had brought all of them here. Then again, nothing had happened, nothing had changed, hence…

"Sir?" Friday interrupted his train of thoughts. "I know you didn't want to be interrupted, but I have located an alien."

That much to nothing had happened. He felt how Pepper tensed. Pulling her closer, he placed his hands on either side of her head (to be able to know where exactly her head was) and pressed his lips against hers in a gentle kiss.

"Don't worry." He whispered against her lips. Don't worry. Who was he kidding? There was a fucking alien which shouldn't be here!

"Friday? Get my suit up and ready." He ordered his AI, letting his hands slip from Pepper's face and walked past her. Not like he usually walked. Slower and more careful. He was blind, after all.

Watching how Tony moved, Pepper frowned. He walked that caref… "Tony? Are you blind?" the way he had kissed her too…

"Temporary, I guess." He stated, trying to get onto the terrace of the tower, where his suit would be waiting for him.

Pepper stared at him for a long second. Partly, she knew it was just who he was. Whatever had happened, it had shaken him. Now that alien… He just wanted to help. He…

"You will not leave this place without eyesight." She stated firmly, hurrying past him and blocking his way. She would not allow him to go. Fighting without vision was as good as suicide. She couldn't take it to be responsible for his death.

"Pepper, I…" he hesitated, stopping when he realized she was blocking his way. "I guess it's only for a short time. Don't worry, I will soon be able to see again. I have to -"
"Wait until then." She cut into his words, only realizing now that her voice was on the verge of panic. She couldn't let him walk out of this building without sight. She couldn't allow him to fight without sight. She couldn't…

Tony had wanted to scold her for interrupting him if she didn't know what was at stake after all a fucking alien which shouldn't be here was here, but the tone of her voice… she was close to freaking out, wasn't she? He… Raising his hand, he moved it slowly, until he felt his fingertips hit her skin.

"Okay." He stated slowly. He couldn't leave her here, completely freaking out. Feeling, how she pulled him into an embrace, he sighed softly, hugging her back. For a moment, he tried to relax, placing his lips on her throat. Getting aware of her accelerated pulse, of her thrumming heart. She… she really was afraid because of him. And in an instant, he felt guilty. He had only thought of him and what he had to do, not considering how she felt.

"Can we at least go outside, for me to be able to jump into the suit as soon as I can see again?"

He felt, how she nodded, and carefully guided him towards the door to the terrace. He had to admit, that getting out was easier that way.

"Sir? I have Karen calling."

Tony, having reached the door, stopped instantly. Karen. Peter.

"Put her through."

"Mister Stark?" Peter's voice filled the room. He sounded a bit… stressed. That was it.

"We have a – fuck!" he grunted the last word. Was he fighting? "I'm trying to make a call here, man." Peter stated, in the way he always babbled about everything.

"Karen. Taser net." For one second there was silence. Then grunts and heavy breathing followed. He was definitely…

"That ain't working." Karen commented.

"No, really? I see tha-" the rest of the sentence was swallowed by what sounded like a surprised scream.

Returning to his senses, Stephen Strange blinked. He had used a spell to clear his mind, collapsing in the process, like he had expected. The first image, that he saw (while meanwhile registering, that he could see again), was Christine's face taking up a huge part of his vision. She looked terrified. In the same moment, he heard a surprised scream, Peter flying past them overhead. And additionally, he heard heavy footsteps approaching rapidly. Flicking his wrist, he created a piece of barrier somewhere close to where Peter had to fly past any second now, grabbed Christine by her shoulders, spun them around in a way that she was lying beneath him, he wouldn't ever be able to take it watching her getting hurt, and raised his hand, creating a barrier in the last possible second to catch the impact of the hammer before it crushed them.

Christine, having run to Stephen, when he fainted a few seconds ago, watched in horror, how that hammer thing was stopped inches away from Stephen's raised hand. Only that thin, golden shield between him and death. It had smashed its way through his barrier before… she… she couldn't watch him die right in front of her eyes! A strangled sob escaped her lips, making him, who had stared at the hammer for a few moments, turn his head. "Hey…" he started softly.
While Peter was flying away, he had caught a hard punch, he saw how something golden materialized itself above him. While he was losing altitude, he raised one arm, focusing enough to… hitting the shield-thing with one of his webs, he used the energy of the punch to swing back, hitting the alien, who was busy trying to get through the doc's shield, which in turn was the only thing between the hammer and imminent death, in the chest, throwing it off balance. Watching, how the alien was flinging away, he landed in front of the doc, scowling at their enemy.

"Hands off of my wizard, man!" he yelled at it.

"Be right back." He heard the doc's voice and heard something like a rustle. Seeing, how the alien had gripped the asphalt of the street to stop its recoil, he dared to throw a look over his shoulder. The doc wasn't right behind him anymore but instead stood close to the other woman, seemingly talking with his girl. Turning his head again, he raised his arms and aimed at the alien's face. Peter allowed himself a smile when he heard their enemy scream annoyed. He had hit its eyes, taking its vision for a time. Instantly, he took the initiative and webbed its hands to the concrete, buying them a few moments.

Christine blinked disoriented when the place and her orientation within it changed in a heartbeat. She had been sitting before, now she was standing. She had been on the street before, now she was on the sidewalk a few meters away.

"I appreciate you being worried about me, but right now keeping your distance is best." Stephen told her in a low and gentle voice. She realized a bit amazed, that the slur of his words was gone. Looking at him dumbfounded, she realized that the clouded expression in his eyes was gone, too. He wasn't drunk anymore. Her mind was too slow to process anything but the soft kiss, he pressed against her lips. "Get Claire and Peter's friend a bit away." He told her, before taking a step away and disappearing.

While the alien had succeeded in getting its webbed hands free, Stephen appeared on the other side of it, their enemy between him and Peter now.

"Come on, moron. You want me, don't you?" Stephen taunted the thing, waiting for it to rip the web from its eyes, turn its head and scream at him.

Peter watched, how Cull Obsidian took after the doc, who was teleporting a short distance away again. What was he… luring him away. They were standing in a street, after all. Houses towering on either side. But there was nothing close with fewer people. Only more crowded streets.

Watching, how the alien ran at him again, he took the hit of its hammer with his shield, suddenly very aware of how much he missed his sling ring. Dropping it in Antarctica would be so sweet. Dissolving the shield, he dodged the attack by side stepping, struggling to dodge the second swing, he lost balance and fell. Ripping his hands up, he caught the hammer with his shield again. Well. He missed his cloak even more. It would have pulled him out of reach of the hammer easily. Closing his eyes for a second, he concentrated, teleporting away again. He hated using that spell in battle. It was that hard to only move himself.

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Finally arriving at the place, where Friday had located Peter's suit, Tony stopped in mid-air, staring at the battle scene below him. That was… that… the hammer guy… but… that shouldn't be… That light, a voice whispered in the back of his head. That light had to have something to… He watched, how the alien ensnared Peter with the head of his weird alien-tech hammer and tossed him away. There wasn't any other way to say it. Peter was simply tossed away as if he was nothing, still ensnared in the head of the hammer. The alien turned around, screaming at Strange, who seemingly
tried to do something. Thin golden runes wrapped themselves around the alien, which only grunted, tensed his body and broke the runes after a few moments.

Watching, how Cull Obsidian launched himself at him yet again, Stephen conjured his shield, waiting for… at the last second, right before he would have hit the shield, the alien changed the grip of his hammer into a sword, simply crashing his weapon through his barrier. If it wasn't for his magic, which had moved him by some inches in the last second, Stephen knew he would be dead. He felt his trembling body, his thumping heart. He stared at the blade in fear, only inches away from his face. That… that had… he saw, how the alien growled. Backing away, he dodged the moving sword, which ripped through his barrier as if it was nothing. Why hadn't he used the sword from… a cold knowledge caught him off guard. The alien had waited for them to be exhausted, knowing it would kill them anyway. Watching horrified, how the alien pressed itself against the shield, enlarging the broken edges where his sword had smashed through, he… he… Suddenly, it screamed in pain, swirling around while ripping through his barrier yet again.

Watching, how the alien swirled around, Tony braced himself. Getting its attention with a laser blast to its back had definitely worked. He was standing in the middle of the street, close to Peter. The alien grunted something and started to run towards him, sword raised. If that thing had smashed through Strange's barrier that easily, it would probably do the same with his suit. Not letting it get close seemed to be the best choice he had. Upping the energy level of the repulsors in his hands, he fired a massive energy blast at the approaching alien, sending it flying back along the street.

Tony swirled around, kneeling beside Peter and tried to get the snare off him. With a bit of effort, the snare moved enough for Peter to slip free. In the same second, Strange was standing beside them.

"How did you get rid of it in the first place?" the sorcerer asked.

"Wong sent it to the Arctic or something." Tony stated, frowning when he heard the sorcerer groan.

"He can't do portals." Peter explained the moment Tony wanted to ask what was wrong, standing between the adults by then.

Tony turned his head, lowering his mask. "What do you mean by he can't do portals?"

"Well, that…" Peter tried to start, but Strange snapped at him faster.

"What does the sentence 'I can't do portals' mean in your head?"

Meanwhile, they had to scatter, when the head of the hammer flew past them, back to its owner. The weapon setting itself back together. The alien, getting back on its feet, growled at them annoyed.

Tony scoffed at the growl, raising his hands again and firing a constant laser beam at the alien. It growled in pain, turning its hammer into a shield to reflect the beam. It hit a startled Peter, who yelped in surprise while flying backward. Tacking the moment of surprise as its advantage, Cull Obsidian ran towards them, swinging the hammer at Strange, who was forced to dodge away. With faster movements, than should be possible for its body size, it threw the hammer at Peter, ensnaring him again and ripping the weapon, including Peter in it, back towards it. In one swift motion, it threw the snare at Stark, formed the handle of the hammer back into a sword and stepped on Peter's chest.

Peter snapped for air when the alien stepped on his chest. He felt its weight bearing down on him. He couldn't breathe. Frantically, trying to get a grip on its foot, he tried to push it away, but it wouldn't move.

Stephen had gotten a bit of distance between himself and the alien, staring at the scene in front of his
eyes. It would kill Peter. Simply smash his rip cage. Or stab him to death. He… he… he took a deep
breath, closing his eyes for a moment. Focus. How did the rest of the Avengers kill it? He knew he
had seen the other children of Thanos die during the battle of Wakanda in various visions. That…
that… Succeeding in calming down, he was instantly ripped out of his thoughts.

"Give me the stone, human." The alien growled at him, increasing the weight which pressed on Peter
by changing its stance. Something, like a terrified groan, escaped Peter's lips, making him press his
lips together.

Feeling, how the pressure on his chest increased every second now, Peter tried once again to
frantically push the alien off of him. He tried to kick at its other leg, web it and… but to no avail. It
simply wouldn't move. He… He…

Still ensnared by the head of the hammer, Tony stared at the scene in front of him in sheer panic.
Peter. He… he couldn't watch him die. Not right in front of him. He… he had to… Meanwhile,
Friday was sweet as ever, calculating how much weight was left until the Spider-Man suit would
simply give in. Watching how that number decreased every second, he…

Strange stared at Cull Obsidian calmly. Come on, head. How had it been killed? His eyes flickered
to Peter, who was frantically trying to move the alien on his chest. And then stopped just that.
Couldn't be much… The energy shield. Banner had fired him into Wakanda's energy shield. But
they didn't have a strong enough energy sou…

In utter panic, Tony had somehow gotten one of his hands free, aimed and shot a blast of energy at
the alien's chest. When Peter had stopped moving, something within him snapped. He wouldn't have
Peter die on his watch. He simply…

The alien, surprised by the attack, lost its balance and took its weight off Peter. It threw a short
glance at the little spider and jolted itself forward, ramming its sword into the Iron-Man suit.

As soon as the alien was running towards him, Tony opened the back of the suit, ducked below the
snare and let himself drop onto the street below. Rolling onto his side, he watched the sword crash
through his armor and burry itself in the concrete. That thing was a hand away if at all.

"Hey, moron!" Strange's voice cut in. The alien stopped its movements, ripped the sword out of the
street and took a solid stance, staring at the sorcerer. Crawling away from his suit, Tony got back to
his feet, wanting to… but his thoughts scattered, when he saw Strange yet again offering the
levitating green gem to one of their enemies. That insane idiot couldn't be serious.

The alien eyed the sorcerer suspiciously, but walked toward the stone, grabbing it.

At the moment the alien grabbed the stone, Stephen summoned his energy rope, letting it coil around
Cull Obsidian's fist and keeping it closed. A second later, the alien started to scream in agony.

"Get away!" he yelled at Stark, who still stared at him perplexed. What did he think? Had he
forgotten how to move? Being screamed at, got him out of his stupor and he swirled around, running
towards Peter.

Keeping the rope stable despite the ever-growing pain in his hand, Stephen watched both, calmly
and in sheer horror, how the alien started to glow green from within. A darker green rippled along its
skin like tendrils. Dissolving the rope, he punched the air in front of him, watching reality splinter
away. Moving the opening into the mirror dimension by will, he caught the alien within, watching
how the darker green tendrils gave way to searing bright green light, which ripped him open from the
inside. A heartbeat later, the alien disintegrated in a flash of green, only a few flakes of dust
remaining. Watching, how the opening to the mirror dimension closed itself, the green gem starting to fall down, Stephen closed his eyes and sighed. Exactly that was what he expected to happen when he touched the stone. Get killed by it.

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Slowly walking towards the others, Stephen realized how badly his hand hurt. It had gone from a pain at the back of his head, thanks to his adrenaline levels, to a throbbing, painful thought consuming monster. There wasn't much space left in his head except for pain.

"Are you okay?" Tony asked slowly, watching relieved how Peter opened his eyes and looked around bewildered. Peter's gaze focused on him for a moment, then he nodded slowly. "Will work out." He stated before trying to get up. Tony grabbed his arm and pulled him to his feet, supporting him for a few moments until he seemed to be able to stand alone.

Meanwhile, Stephen had reached the two, watching Peter with a calm gaze. He had to have fainted due to a lack of oxygen. Beside that… he was probably trying to act as if it hadn't been that bad.

"What's wrong with you? Can you stop handing Infinity Stones to our enemies?" Tony snapped at him instantly, watching him with a cold gaze. Stephen only sighed. "I will not discuss this on a street." Turning around, he looked at the houses. Some windows were illuminated, people staring down at them.

"I will turn time back for them. We can't have anyone know of this. Else it could reach the ears of the wrong person." Whoever was watching them for Thanos would surely recognize a child of Thanos in a Twitter message. And then… well… he didn't know what then. He was afraid of what then. "Get away, together with the others. I'll join you soon. Can't be seen using the Time Stone." He stated, turning around and eying the windows. Stark seemed to want to say something for a moment before he nodded.

Tony looked at Peter for a moment, before he let go of him, walking towards his suit and eyeing the damage. That damn alien had rammed its sword right through the arc reactor, rendering it useless. Awesome. Pinching the bridge of his nose, he activated his ear-piece, connecting with Friday again.

"Friday? Get my suit away asap. And send me a new one later." He wasn't sure how Strange wanted to reverse time, but it had sounded as if he would only target the people in the houses, however that worked. His suit laying around would be considered odd, then.

Turning around, he joined the others, the two women he didn't know, and Ned, who supported Peter. Strange had kept his distance, obviously not wanting to join the others yet. "Let's go. He'll find us." He wasn't sure about that. He would, in fact, be happy, if he didn't find them. That maniac had just offered up the stone. Again.

Christine nodded, throwing a gaze at Stephen. Originally, she had wanted to run to him the moment he had talked with Stark and Spider-Man. She had been terrified of losing him. Watching him fight and dodge that alien… its sword crashing through his barrier... She… she had to… But he had turned away after he had talked with the others, kept his distance. Obviously, he didn't want to join them just then.

Claire had stayed silent for the entire… well… whatever. When the alien first appeared, Hellen had freaked out completely and ran away. She, being the always responsible one, had sent John after her to make sure she was okay. She had wanted to drag Christine and Stephen away and join the others as soon as possible, but… well… she had watched astonished, how Spider-Man swung right in front of that monster and had blocked its attack. That little spider was a real lifesaver. And from there,
things had just gotten odder and odder. She had wondered, who had created that glowing shield until she had realized that it had to be Stephen. How… When… How… the rest of the fight was even odder if that was possible at all. She had watched Stephen teleport, for god's sake. And then Iron-Man. And then an exploding alien. Yet, there had not been a piece of evidence that it had exploded. No wave of energy pushing them away, no destruction of the street or houses nearby. It had been as if nothing had happened! Following Tony Stark, she finally raised her voice to a whisper, looking at her friend. 

"Have you forgotten to tell me something, Christine?"

She seemed to be beside her and terrified for her boyfriend. But she had the feeling, that it didn't surprise her as much as it had surprised herself, that her lover threw glowing shields around as if it was nothing.

Christine needed a moment before she said anything. "It's ah… complicated?" she offered weakly. Complicated? She didn't say! Claire frowned hearing that word, but couldn't finish her thought, when she heard a rustling sound. Christine nearly jumped at it. A moment later, Claire realized, that Stephen was with them now. How the hell?!

"Did it work?" Tony said lowly to Stephen, who was walking beside him suddenly.

"Yeah." The sorcerer stated softly, throwing a gaze over his shoulder. Christine and Claire, Ned and Peter, who was walking beside his friend, still wearing his mask.

The moment, Peter saw the sorcerer suddenly being in front of them, he hurried up and joined the two men. "What happened?" he asked, not specifying anything because he guessed the two would know what he meant. That light. A child of Thanos. How was any of that possible?

"I don't know." The doc answered softly, making Mister Stark snap at him instantly.

"What do you mean, you don't know?" Tony asked him coldly. What was a future-seeing wizard worth, if he didn't know what was happening?

"Why didn't you warn us, that that would happen anyway?" he added immediately.

"I didn't know… well, I knew about the light, but not about the alien." Tony frowned. He didn't know and then again did know? That was a bullshit excuse.

"Why didn't you tell us?" snapping at him again, he slowed his walking, focussing more on watching Strange.

"I didn't think it was important." Strange pointed out in an annoyed tone, once again sounding as if he was talking with a dumb child. God, that tone. He wanted to hit that guy. Badly.

"Then, check the future if there are more flashes of light with the possibility to kill us all." He pressed through gritted teeth, trying to control his anger.

"I won't use the stone at any of our places." Strange answered coldly, eyeing him. They had come to a stop by then, only staring at each other darkly.

"Where then?" Tony asked, trying… trying so desperately to not scream at that guy.

He watched, how Strange shrugged, raised his left hand, and pointed towards a bar which was still illuminated. "How about in there?" Two sets of heads moved, eyeing the place across the street.
Allen Pangborn was busy watching his last customer. He had wanted to throw him out five minutes ago, but he seemed to be done with his beer any minute, so why not wait and have a happier customer, who would return. Hopefully. Hearing, how the door opened, he turned his head, already wanting to start his usual words at this time of the day.

Sorry, we are closing. I have to ask you to leave.

Yet, the words never came out. They stuck in his throat when he saw who had entered. Iron-Man himself, Tony Stark by name, Spider-Man, a man he didn't know, two women and a teenager. What the fucking hell? Stark approached his counter, leaning against the wood leisurely.

"How much money do you make a week?" the billionaire asked in a casual tone.

Allen blinked. 2000, if he was lucky. Currently, more like 1000. He could barely pay for anything. He had already thought about moving out of his flat and sleeping in the storeroom to save money. Desperate times… his friends all told him, to finally let his stupid idea with the bar be over and done. Find a good job. Where he earned some money. Yet, he really loved what he did…

"3000." he answered without hesitation, watching his greatest hero up close. He saw how Stark frowned but didn't say a word for a moment. Then his gaze went to the last customer in the room.
"Throw him out, lock down the place, leave the keys for me, forget that you've seen us and I'll give you 30 for the night."

Allen tried to look casual, but he guessed he failed miserably. 30 000? For him keeping silent? His eyes switched to the other people of this weird group. What was going on? Eyeing the other man, he thought he looked close to fainting on closer inspection. Had something happened? But no, he would know if something had happened. One of his friends was working for CNN and always pushed the latest news to him if it was close by. A sign of gratitude, after saving his wife during that fateful day in 2012. One of the reasons, why he couldn't take a cooperate job anymore. He nearly died working that day.

"Could you come back another day and I can take a selfie with you?" he asked, fearing he overstretched his chance. Stark would surely walk out and find himself another place. He felt how the billionaire scanned his face for a very long moment.

"Sure." He stated. "Friday? You heard me?" Stark added, seemingly talking with his ear-piece.

Allen went to work within the same second, asking his last customer if he wanted to leave. He even helped the drunkard out the door, locking it afterward. Hurrying through his little bar, he finished everything that needed to be done, finally standing before Stark and handing him the keys.

"You can leave through the back door, just, lock it, please. I have some spare keys. Just hand the others back to me when you come by during the next days, okay?"

He just wanted to leave, when the poor guy who looked close to fainting, asked if he could get some ice. Eyeing the man, he nodded, disappearing behind the counter for a moment and produced a bucket of ice cubes after some rummaging. The guy looked as if he could need them. Placing the bucket on the counter, he left, having just experienced the weirdest day of his life. Well. Except for maybe that day in 2012. But that had just been horrifying. Tonight had been weird.

Sitting down at one of the chairs at the counter, Stephen buried his right hand in the ice-filled bucket.
A moan escaped from his lips, his eyes fluttering shut. He whispered something like "Ohmygodyes." while his head zoned out. Leaving only his throbbing hand and the soothing coldness. The pain went down from Insanity to… to… who was he kidding, it was still unbearable. Feeling how Christine cupped his face pulled him back from nowhere to reality. Seeing her, after having opened his eyes again, made him smile involuntarily.

"How are you?" she asked in a gentle voice, looking at him concerned.

Stephen looked at her for a long moment, not sure how to describe his current state. Besides the hand, everything was okay. Better than some other days. Smirking, he answered "Alive."

He saw how she rolled her eyes but started to smile. God. Her smile. It was enough… wait, was he on drugs? His head felt like that. Probably only his body trying to dim the pain. He could see, how Christine's eyes went towards his hand. Knowing, what she would want to ask, he stated: "Eleven."

The frown on her face was obvious. He knew she knew, that 11 as an answer to 'how bad is the pain on a scale from 1 to 10' was absolutely awesome.

Christine watched Stephen for a long moment. He had tried to be funny, even though he looked close to fainting. He hadn't looked that bad after the fight. Most likely adrenaline levels falling and the body getting aware of the pain. Seemingly, only his hand was his problem, though. His hand. His carefully reconstructed hand. She went closer, only planning on pecking his lips, after all she was aware of the others in the small bar. When her lips met his though, she felt all those emotions rush through her. The utter fear of losing him. That alien… it could have killed him so many times. It could have killed all of them so many times. The… the day… all she wanted… deepening the kiss, she lost herself in it, ignoring her crazy worries for a moment.

Tony paced through the room as soon as the owner left. Had he literally just paid 30k for… for what exactly? Well, it wasn't as if he did not tend to throw money out of the window, but… watching, how the blonde-haired woman approached Strange, who had buried his hand in the ice-bucket, he watched startled, how those two seemed to enter a private conversation. However private could be in front of them. Even more startled, he watched, how Strange's expression softened while he talked with her. As if he was a completely different man. Not that shitty ass he had to fight with. Finally, being grossed out, when those two started to kiss sloppily, with what seemed to be incredible much tongue, he raised his voice.

"Get a room, you two."

He watched with a piece of glee, how the woman broke away instantly, blushing softly. Strange seemed to need a bit longer to return to the land of the wake. When his eyes finally focussed on him, Tony stared at him calmly.

"Why do you throw Infinity Stones at our enemies?" he forced himself to use a calm voice, picking up the dropped topic again. It made him that angry! This stupid insolent maniac handing away one of the only things standing between life and death. Twice.

He could see Strange sigh. "There was no other way." He stated.

There was no other way. There was no…

Hearing that sentence again, yes, again, in connection with that stupid green stone, made him flip.

"There was no other way?! That seems to be the only answer you are capable of!" he yelled at him, angrier than ever.
"Not telling us about that light... the alien could have killed all of us, you know that, don't you?"

Christine had gracefully disappeared from Stephen's side. She couldn't handle being screamed at right now. Besides, she felt as if she didn't know a lot. Ending beside Spider-Man, she watched how her boyfriend and Tony Stark seemed to enter a yelling contest.

Spider-Man just groaned, lowering his head along the way. The two men had started to yell something about Wakanda in the meantime.

"You are right." Stated the only teenager in the group, making Christine look at him slowly. She hadn't heard him talk before. "They really act like a married couple." Spider-Man barked into laughter at his words.

"Yes, damn it, aren't they?" pulling his mask from his face, Christine had to blink a few times. Peter Parker? That made two teenagers. "They start screaming about everything, not willing to even listen to one another."

Christine blinked. Married couple? "Are they always like that?" she asked Peter, who turned his head, looking at her. "Yeah." He stated as an answer. "Whenever they are not fighting together, they hack at each other." He added slowly, letting his head drop for a moment. He should really send them to counseling.

Christine stared at the two for a very long moment. Those two screaming at another irritated her. It just felt… There was something… them acting like a married couple, how Peter had stated… blinking, she slipped out of her lovely-dovey phase for a moment and saw them for who they were. Two grown-up men, close to one another in height, appearance and obviously ego too, screaming at each other. Like a married couple… the line ghosted through her head like a broken record. If only one of them was narcissistic, she could imagine them making out instead of screaming. Her alcohol-induced brain jumped at the thought and served an image of her boyfriend and Tony Stark. Pressed against a wall. Kissing heavily. And… other things… she blinked the thought away, realizing how she got jealous. Like, really jealous. Stephen was her's. Stupid alcohol. Stupid imagination.

"Guys!" Peter barked in, making both of them stop, turn their head and ask "What?!" at the same time.

Christine blinked. What the hell had that been?

Even Peter seemed a bit startled but caught himself after a moment. "Could we just do, what we came in here for? Check the timelines?" he suggested gently, hoping that they wouldn't start to scream at one another again. He knew that they could work together. If they wanted to.

The doc sighed softly. "I'll need a bit of preparation." He stated.

Mister Stark shrugged. "Go on. Take your time." His voice was still tense. Ready to freak out at any second. Having a watchful eye on them, Peter approached, staying close. Mister Stark was back to pacing through the room, while the doc had closed his eyes, whispering words in a language he didn't understand. After they kept silent for a few more minutes, he finally turned around, starting to pick ice cubes from the bucket, making sure he didn't touch the doc's hand in the process. He had heard the conversation between him and his girl, after all. After he had a bunch together, he sat down, gently tapping on the spider on his chest. His suit loosened itself instantly, slipping down to his waist. Revealing a gruesome, black-purple bruise, which covered his entire chest. The area where the alien had stepped on him. He knew how close he had been to dying. Only a few seconds more, and his rib cage would have given in. Awkwardly pressing the cubes against his chest, he webbed them in place. Sighing in relief after he had cool ice pressing against his skin, he leaned his head
against the wood of the counter. That was better.

Tony, having seen Peter's chest, stopped with his pacing and stared at the boy. That... that bruise... joining him, he sat beside him casually, trying to hide his worry.

"Why didn't you say something earlier?" he asked gently. That bruise had to be terribly painful. He saw how a weak smile flashed over the boy's face.

"There were more important things." He stated softly, barely audible.

Tony felt, how he got angry again. There was barely anything more important than Peter's life. Pepper's for sure, but she hadn't been here. And he wouldn't ever allow her to clash with an alien. Not even while wearing one of his suits. He guessed he would die a worrisome death otherwise.

"You heal faster, don't you?" he asked, trying to ease his worries. Peter was in this mess because of him. Because he hadn't gotten him off that stupid spaceship.

"Yeah." Peter ghosted. He was slipping away gradually, just as Strange had. For the tiniest of a second, he felt guilty for how he had acted towards Strange. That guy had probably grilled his hand by using that rope and he snapped at him. A second later his guilt dissolved, when he remembered how he had reacted. There was no other way. As if. He frowned softly, trying to remember anything from their screaming contest besides being angry. Strange had said something about Wakanda and Banner, but what...? Trying to remember, he got the feeling that the sorcerer knew a lot more, then he had told them. They would have to sort that out. Right after checking the timelines.

"Okay." Strange's voice got him out of his thoughts, looking at the man. He saw, how the sorcerer let the green gem appear in front of him again. Floating motionless like always. As if it was just a simple, green stone. Yet, the reaction of one of the women wasn't lost on him. The blonde one hurried to them, trying to grab Strange. He got up, catching her gently before she could reach the damn wizard.

"Calm down." He said softly.

The woman looked at him venomously. "He said that thing... that's how you made that alien explode, didn't you?" Tony hadn't been sure if any of their viewers had seen what exactly had killed the alien, but obviously, at least she was able to piece the story together.

"Calm down." He repeated again. "He knows what he is doing." he thought that at least.

Stephen's eyes flickered to Christine when he made the stone appear. Of course, she would be worried. He had told her, that that thing would kill her, after all. Letting his gaze slip back to the room, he watched the spells he had placed on it. He hoped, that they would delay the localization of time magic for long enough, to keep the other sorcerers off his trail. He really didn't want a bunch of them bursting in and attacking them. Wouldn't be... closing his eyes again, he gripped the Time Stone, feeling how its vast energy rushed into him. Feeling, how it allowed him to control time. This was one Sorcerer Supreme against the other, wasn't it? Seeing, whose spells failed first. His would, he guessed. He couldn't hide time magic, after all. He could only delay it being found.

A moment later, he forwarded time, glimpsing into the future.

Christine watched in horror, how the love of her life started to glow green, just like that alien had. He would be turned to nothing right in front of her eyes, wouldn't he?! Why... why...?! Closing her eyes, she waited for the inevitable, feeling how tears started to run down her face. She... losing him that fast again. It just... she blinked when Stark finally let go of her. Opening her eyes again, she
looked at Stephen. All he did was glow green. Around the wrist, which held the bright, glowing gem, was a band of runes. Moving on themselves slowly. He… wouldn't explode? She felt how relief flooded her being. Together with a myriad of questions. This man had a lot of explaining to do. Her eyes flickered to his hand, still in the ice-bucket. Not today though, she guessed. Today… whenever they were at home, she wanted to hold him close, be certain he was really still alive.

Slowly walking towards Claire, she joined her best friend, whose eyes were transfixed on her boyfriend. Leaning against the wall beside her, she looked at the room. Peter leaning against the counter, most likely sleeping. His friend sitting beside him by now. Stark standing around, not sure what he could do. Just then, she really realized how close they had slipped away from death. All of them.

Finally facing Claire, she raised her voice. "Could you not tell anyone anything about this?" her voice was soft but weak.

Claire laughed softly in response. "Who would believe me? That's insane." She stated, bursting into laughter a moment later again. Christine joined in. Yeah. Laughing at this insanity was the only thing anyone could do.

Some fifteen minutes later, Stephen opened his eyes again, refocussing his gaze on this current time. Letting the stone disappear again, he flicked his wrist, dissolving his spells.

"3 to 26 flashes of light, depending on the timeline." He finally stated, making Stark turn around and stare at him.

"Did you… see anything about what comes after that light?" Stark asked slowly, for a change of tone completely calm.

Stephen only shook his head. No. The stone had only shown him that it would happen not what would come afterward.

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Mordo stopped by the Ancient One's room, originally wanting to talk with her. Knocking at the door towards her chamber, he entered. Realizing too late, that she wasn't here. She was watching over their apprentices again, wasn't she? Shaking his head, he wanted to close the door again, when his gaze… The surveillance rune was glowing again. He knew, that she had checked it only a little time ago, finding nothing but traces of magic at the place the rune had found. Whoever had used the Eye was already gone. Seeing the rune glow again...

Sighing in the safety of his head, Mordo entered the room, touching the rune. Its magic jumped onto him instantly. With a softly glowing hand, he picked up his sling ring, opening a portal to wherever the rune wanted him to go and jumped right through. He was standing outside of a closed bar, the cold night surrounding him. Where the hell was he?

Entering the mirror dimension to be invisible to others, he looked around for a bit. After a little, he entered the closed bar, finding an odd collection of people inside. The only one he knew was Iron-Man. Watching the group, he realized, that they were leaving. His eyes flickered from one pair of people to the next. Two teenagers. A couple. Iron-Man and a lone woman. Who could have… praying to all gods that he was right, he chose the couple, following them without being seen.

Chapter End Notes
... right until the end. You know what's coming.

And yes, I know that Ned hasn't done much this chapter. He'll be all talkative in the next one. This incident was just too much for the poor guy.

Like always, thank you for reading!
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

And back again.

This chapter features Peter & Ned / Tony & Pepper / Stephen & Christine and lastly Tony & Stephen

Before I let you read, I wanted to thank you all for the huge amount of feedback.
I'm happy whenever I see a new comment, kudo or bookmark. Never thought my story would get that much attention, honestly.
Like always, have fun!

After the group had disbanded, all going their separate ways, Peter walked silently beside his friend. Ned had barely talked since the alien had turned up. He had commented on Mister Stark and the doc, had asked how he was, but besides…

"How are you?" he asked, breaking the silence between them.

Ned was silent for a little while longer until he…

"That alien. You knew it, right? From before. Or later. From the future for sure. It… it could've killed you! And… all the others. Are your foes all that bad in the future? I mean, I could never even imagine how this you-know-who would be, but if this… is this one of his guys?"

Just started to talk. The words bubbling from his mouth. All the stuff he had to have thought about since the alien popped out of nowhere.

"Yeah. They call themselves children of Thanos. I've met two."

Ned was silent for a moment. Then the rush of words returned. "Those are his 'children', yeah? You three could barely kill that guy. How will you defeat the big one, then?"

Peter was shocked into silence for a moment. Had his friend lost his crazy optimism over one alien?

For a moment he was silent, pondering his words. Then, slowly, he started to talk.

"None of us were in their best shape, Ned. Mister Stark will have a better suit by then, the doc will actually be able to fight, I'll be stronger and have a better suit. We'll have more allies. There are still two years between now and then."

Ned frowned. Peter could see it while they were passing a street lamp. "The doc couldn't fight?" To him, all those glowing shields looked pretty good. Just kind of useless, if the alien could simply break through it.

Peter chuckling made Ned blink and look at him.

"Nah. The doc couldn't fight. Didn't you see that? He only defended himself. He can do all sorts of crazy stuff if he is well. Portals and swords and ropes and… damn, I miss his portals." Those portals.
They were the best. Magic with a kick. Peter snickered at the thought.

"That alien… it nearly killed you." Ned stated lowly, completely ignoring his earlier words. "A little bit more and you would be dead. Doesn't it scare you?" he asked in a trembling voice.

Peter stopped and looked at his friend. "Of course, it does." He stated, calm and serious. He felt the throbbing pain in his chest, reminding him of how close he had slipped away from death.

"But I am not alone in any of this, Ned. I have people who have my back. I didn't die, did I?"

Ned opened his mouth, wanting to say something, and then closed it again. One long moment passed by until his friend decided to talk.

"Yeah, you didn't die. You trust them that much?" he asked timidly.

Peter only smiled. "I fought with them at the end of the world, Ned. Of course, I trust them."

He heard his friend 'hmm' for a moment. "No offense, Pete. I'll just be your guy with the laptop. Open field is too much action for me."

Hearing those words, Peter burst into laughter. He wouldn't even want his friend anywhere near the action. He was best behind a computer screen. Or a laptop screen for that matter. He didn't want his friend to get hurt. He could take the hits. Ned couldn't.

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The moment Tony was out of the suit Friday had gotten to the bar on his request, Pepper was throwing herself at him. He stumbled a little, catching her nonetheless. For a moment he just held her, before he slipped his arms around her and pulled her close, burying his face against her neck.

Inhaling her scent, he tried to calm down. His emotions were simply a mess. He was so angry because of Strange and the alien and the stone and… and afraid because of the alien and those lights which would come again and… Realizing, that Pepper trembled in his arms and was clinging to his shirt, made him bring a bit of distance between them. He had done it again, right? Make her crazy with worry.

"What's wrong?" he asked softly, looking at her face for the first time. Were that… had she been crying? He saw how her bottom lip quivered. In an instant, all his anger and worry and fear went out the window. Replaced by deep sadness. He raised his thumb, gently stroking along her face.

"Hey." His voice had gotten gentler. That tone only Pepper knew. "I'm here. I'm alive."

Pepper sobbed and smiled at the same time, a second later her lips were crushed against his, the embrace which held him tightened. He felt something wet on his cheeks. Breaking away, he saw that she was crying again.

A moment later, they were inside the tower, Tony sitting on his couch, watching a sad-mad-angry Pepper pace around in front of him.

"When Friday brought your suit in. I… I… I nearly… the breastplate was crushed for goddamnssake. Just crushed. I thought you were dead!" her voice pitched dangerously high with the last word. "Friday told me soon that you were okay but… and then you don't answer your phone!" this time her voice trembled with pure anger. He had…? "I mean, obviously. You left it here, but how dare you leaving your phone here?" she snapped at him. "I asked Friday to patch me through, you are never leaving this house without an earpiece after all, but she told me you were busy." She spat the last word at him, staring at him with fire in her eyes. God. How much he loved her when she
was angry. And how much he was afraid of her when she was angry. Her words made him blink though.

"Friday? You never told me that Pepper wanted to talk to me." He said accusingly towards his AI. Of course, he would have talked with Pepper if she called him. Why hadn't Friday said something?

"You were busy screaming at the sorcerer, boss. Didn't think you would hear me." his AI retorted.

He blinked. And felt how his face got hot. That was… "Tony?" …probably true. He had been that far away… he had been that angry… he… He blinked again, focussing his gaze on Pepper. He had felt his surroundings slip away while his head wanted to dive back into hatred.

"He… he gave the stone away again." He got through gritted teeth. Yeah, he was angry. Again.

"What?!" this time Pepper's voice cracked. She knew what that meant. And within one second, all the anger she had thrown at him was redirected at the wizard. "Why would this king of morons give the stone away again? Is he insane?" she went on a rampage of curses which made even Tony blink. Where had his girlfriend picked up some of those words? After she was done screaming and cursing, she sat at the other end of the couch, looking at him out of worried eyes.

"What happened?"

Tony sighed, closing his eyes for a moment. "An alien happened. I know it. Knew it. One of those guys coming for Strange. Thankfully not the magic-man. It was… I don't know. Probably close to the Hulk in strength." He should have used the hulkbuster armor, damn it. Why hadn't he thought about that? "It had Peter ensnared and was attacking Strange when I got there." Well, obviously he didn't think about it, because of time. He hadn't had any choice. No chance to wait. He had to fight right there and then. "I distracted it. Realized that we couldn't get rid of it because that moron couldn't do portals. Then it ensnared me, snatched Peter, and stepped on his chest. It was so close to killing him." His voice had gotten silent at the end. Peter. He had seen the number right in front of his eyes. Just a few hundred kilos worth of pressure left. That had been nothing, considering how much that damn alien had to weigh. He told her the rest. Strange offering up that green stone. The alien disintegrating in a flash of light. They ending in a bar, originally planning to talk but went for screaming at another instead.

"I can't remember any of his answers, really. Just wanted to… I don't know. Punch this arrogant smile from his face. Smash him through a wall. Something like that." He stated, his voice was exhausted by then. "After we were done screaming, he finally looked into the future to search for more light flashes." He was silent for a long moment, looking at Pepper in the meantime. His eyes were filled with fear.

"There'll be more. 3 to 20-something." He stated with a softly trembling voice. A moment later Pepper was close, kissing him gently and hugging him against her body. Closing his eyes, he finally allowed himself to relax. That was…

"I think, that something from our future will come through those light flashes. Most likely always trying to kill us." He chuckled humourlessly. "I think… I don't know… our old timeline is falling into this new one?" Yet, there had to be more of those incidents, then, right? All around the world, not only close to them. He would look into that later. Maybe… Just maybe it was connected to the Time Stone. That whatever stumbled into this timeline was pulled towards Strange. Well. Would make defending him easier for sure. He was silent for a while, enjoying her warmth and her scent. His arms wrapped around her. Her soft body…

In the security of her embrace, he allowed himself to think the one thought, he had pushed to the
back of his head ever since Strange had said, that he had simply thought the flash of light wasn't important. The real reason he had freaked out that badly.

"What if Thanos comes through the next flash of light?" his voice was toneless. His body softly trembling. They wouldn't be able to defeat the mad titan if they had to face him that soon. He had thought they would have two years. Now it was a life from light to light, always afraid of what would come through next. He felt, how Pepper's embrace tightened. How she pressed her lips into his hair.

Slowly, slowly, slowly, Tony was pulled towards consciousness. Waking up earlier than eight hours after taking a sleeping pill felt like wading through water. Being pulled down again and again while slowly and brutally being pulled up. Up into the light of being awake. Up into the world of worries and thoughts and fears. He felt how Pepper wanted to move beside him. He wouldn't let that happen. His arms slipped around her, pulling her back against his body. Her alarm-clock. That had gotten him awake.

"You no leave." He somehow slung together, his brain still far from awake, fighting with the remnants of the sleeping pill. He could feel how she laughed. Her body rippled that delicately against his.

"I have to get up, Tony. I have work to do." The far far away voice of Pepper told him. She sounded amused. Being amused was good.

"Call in sick." He suggested slurry, barely able to pronounce the words.

"Pff... I'm the CEO. I can't call in sick." She stated, turning around and kissing him. The moment he relaxed into the kiss, he felt how she wanted to slip out of his embrace. Tricky beast she was. He snapped her back against his body, blinking a few times and tried to focus his gaze onto her face.

"Nope, you stay here." He stated, pecking her nose. A moment went by, he completely forgetting what he had wanted to say. Then he remembered.

"I'm the owner. I'll let it slip."

This time she burst into laughter, snuggling against him for a long moment. Pressing her lips against the scar where his arc-reactor had been, she sighed against his skin.

"Let me get up for a shower, Tony."

"You'll come back after?"

"Of course."

Silly liar. Yet, he let her go. She had to go to work, after all. Feeling how she slipped from his arms, he felt all alone and... rolling onto his back, he stared at the ceiling. His sleepy brain reminded him of something suddenly. Strange had said something about Wakanda earlier during their screaming contest. What was up with Wakanda? He could only guess that that damn wizard had known something. That he had figured out how to kill that alien. That giving it the stone had actually been the only way. Yet... he wanted to... Hearing, how the shower turned on, he got up, joining the bathroom to spill some cold water on his face. Raising to a straight stance, he looked at himself in the mirror, for the first time taking some time to really look at him. He was younger than he was used to. His eyes. They were older. They didn't fit his age. Hearing Pepper move below the shower beside him, his head turned. Looking at the steamy glass, which hid her body. Maybe... he was so obsessed with his thoughts, so obsessed with his fears... maybe he should act
like two years younger. A little bit more carefree. He wasn't ever. Not really. Not after New York and Sokovia and… but… together with her, he could forget for a little. Letting his boxers drop to the ground, he slipped into the shower.

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Watching, how Christine bandaged two ice packs around his hand, Stephen sighed.

"What is it?" Christine looked at him for a second, before focussing her attention on the ice packs again, carefully wrapping a thin towel around his hand and a piece of bandage around that to keep everything in place.

"Even drunk your hands are calmer than mine when I'm sober."

He earned a giggle for his comment. Christine and her giggling while she was drunk.

"How did you do that anyway? Did you use a spell to get sober? Could you use it on me too?" she winked at him, carefully stroking along his right arm as the hand was off limits for touching.

"I would rather not. It's not as if the spell makes you sober all of a sudden. It forces you through all stages of your hangover until you actually are sober within one second. The reason why I fainted, the pain is quite excruciating."

Christine made a face, moved and pecked his forehead.

"Idiot." She stated before getting up.

He remained sitting at her table, watched how she moved through her flat and stopped at her bedroom door. "You coming or what?" she asked, throwing a sleepy gaze over her shoulder.

"If you help me out of those jeans." He stated, getting up and joined her in the bedroom. Sitting down on the edge of the bed, he watched her getting rid of her clothes, slipping into a loose sleeping shirt afterward.

"You could get rid of them using magic, couldn't you?" she asked while turning around to face him.

"Mm…" Stephen emitted "But it wouldn't be as much fun." He stated naughty.

Christine raised an eyebrow at him. "This is about fun to you?" Damn. How much he loved her for going along with his stupid words. She slowly closed in on him, letting her fingertips run along his chest, his shirt between them. Tipping him over and onto his back, she slipped her warm fingers below the hem of his shirt, caressing his abs for a moment. She was leaning onto him and between his slightly parted legs. God. If his hand wouldn't throb like hell… "Enough fun?" she asked playfully, before opening his fly and pulling his jeans down swiftly. Getting back into a standing position, she folded his jeans neatly and placed them on a chair close by.

"I won't help you out of your shirt. Should've done that before bandaging your hand." She stated matter-of-factly while slipping into bed. He chuckled softly, moving around until he had reached the pillows, coming face to face with her again. Pecking her lips, he earned a smile from her. A moment later she was snuggled against his chest, one arm lazily wrapped around him. Carefully moving his right arm, he held her for a while. Normally, cuddling with her calmed him down, but… he felt his thumping heart, his throbbing hand. Somehow…

"Could you… hold me? If only for a little?"
Christine raised her head, looking at him out of cloudy eyes. "Sure."

A moment later, they had flipped positions, his back against her chest, her arm wrapped around him. Closing his eyes, he felt her warmth envelop him. Her hand started to gently stroke along his shirt, coming to a stop on his still thrumming heart.

"I was that afraid." She stated after a while. "You… that alien and you. And then you touching this stone. Thought you would die." During the last words her voice broke, the utter fear evident in her voice. Stephen turned around, looking at her. She was just laying there, her sleepy gaze filled with fear. Watching him fight had to have been rough on her.

"You won't get rid of me that fast." He stated softly, trying to smile while saying those words. She only frowned in response.

"It could've killed you. It crashed right through your shield." She stated firmly, worried, her words still slurry from the alcohol.

Looking at her for some long moments, he sighed softly. "It didn't. I had backup, remember?" She only snorted at that statement, even when drunk she realized that he wanted to distract her.

"Peter and you…" she didn't finish that sentence. He knew, what she implied. You two alone wouldn't have made it.

"Stark joined in. I knew he would." He stated calmly. Seeing, how she watched him for some long moments.

"I don't like him, no, but I trusted in his interest to keep us alive." He stated before she could ask anything. "He likes Peter quite a bit." He had seen that. The poor man was nearly broken after he lost him on Titan. "He would have come to protect him for sure." he added in a silent voice. Stark would always try to protect Peter. He didn't know what exactly was going on between them, but if it saved his life he wouldn't bother.

Christine was silent for a while, her eyes slipping closed more often than not. "Why don't you want to talk about that alien? Weren't you afraid?" she asked softly, her eyes on him.

Stephen looked at her for some long moments before he sighed. "I was. I am. I don't know what's going on. Yet, I don't want to talk about it right now." He couldn't, really. If he allowed himself to think about it, he would surely freak out. And he didn't want to freak out. All he wanted, was to snuggle up to her and sleep. Try to forget his worries and alien related fears for a little while. Forget his throbbing hand. All of it. She was silent for a little while, once again only looking at him. "Turn around, idiot." She stated, making him blink. After a moment, they slipped into their earlier position, her body against his back, her hand placed on his heart, drawing tiny circles onto the fabric of his shirt.

"You know how Stark and you appear to others?" she asked, her voice casual. Was she trying to change the subject?

"No?" he asked, unsure where she wanted to go with this.

"You act like an unhappy couple. All screaming and bristling around each other."

Stephen frowned. He and Stark? A couple?

"At some point I imagined you two making out. Would be easy, if you stopped screaming."
This time, a deep frown appeared on his face. Stark and him doing what, please? He turned his head, looking at her. There was amusement in her eyes. Together with something else. Was… was she jealous? The thought sent a chill along his spine. She jealous of Stark. The thought alone was insane. He turned around enough to be able to peck her lips. "Don't need him, I have you." He stated, joining her playful… well, what exactly were they doing right now? It wasn't banter for sure. The topic seemed to be too serious to her. Yet again, she wanted to not show that it bothered her at all. She just wasn't good at hiding things when she was drunk. His words made her smile though. Seeing just that, he pecked her lips again and turned around, snuggling into her embrace. Being held felt that good. He felt secure with her arm around him and her body against his. As if no alien would try to kill him tonight. Slowly, with his body finally relaxing, he drifted closer to sleep. Just a little more. The warmth her body radiated… her hand on his chest…

Some three hours later, his throbbing hand pulled Stephen back to consciousness. He didn't remember falling asleep. Christine was still holding him, her face pressed against his neck. Every breath she took tickled on his skin. After a few minutes, in which he enjoyed their current position, he rolled onto his back. He carefully unwrapped his hand from the towel and the now non-cold ice packs. He stared at his trembling right hand, carefully trying to move his fingers. The pain, which jolted into him, made him groan lowly. Should he continue to cool it? Or was warmth better? The cold numbed his hand and eased the pain, but… moving his fingers again, he gritted his teeth. His muscles were tense and sore. Most likely, warmth was a good idea.

Watching Christine sleep and the light of dawn creep into the room, he thought about what exactly had happened yesterday… this morning. The hammer guy. Suddenly standing right in front of them. What bothered him most, was, that he seemed to know them. He was instantly attacking him, not Peter because he knew he had the stone. He had followed him when he lured him away. He had even talked English, though heavy to understand. Give me the stone, human. All that meant, that the alien… well, what? That it had come from their future? Being pulled into this new timeline? Did that mean, that the timelines were finally collapsing?

Christine groaning while waking up snapped his attention to her. He watched how she rolled onto her side, burying her head in the pillow, one hand pressing against her temple.

"That bad?" he asked softly. She hadn't seemed that drunk, yet every person handled alcohol differently. Back when he was younger, he could get utterly wasted and be fine the morning after. Nowadays… well, nowadays didn't count with his cleansing magic.

His girl rolled around, looking at him out of small eyes. "Terrible." was her raspy answer.

He couldn't stop himself from chuckling, before he patted his chest with his left hand, his right calmly resting on the bed beside him. She eyed him suspiciously for a few moments, before she moved, placing her head on his shirt. A moment later, he slipped his fingers into her hair, gently massaging her temple and head. A soft pain pulsed through his hand, but nothing he wouldn't take any time, alone to hear her breathy sighs and tiny moans.

"Really, Christine, that doesn't sound like getting a massage." He pointed out after a while, earning a soft chuckle from her.

"You and your dirty thoughts." The last word of that sentence was nearly lost in a low moan when he caressed a particularly hurtful spot. "Yeah, right there."

"Not making it any better." He retorted, this time earning a low laugh.

"What should I say? Ooooh yes, that's sooo good? Give it to me?"
He snorted at her words in amusement. Her good mood was contagious. For a second, at least. Then he remembered, how she had looked at him. That piece of jealousy because of Stark. That she felt like that, if only a little, was stupid.

"What's wrong?" she asked, looking at him when his hand had stopped caressing her.

He was silent for a long moment, not knowing if he really wanted to bother her with it.

"Come on, tell me." Her soft voice stated. Her tone was that intriguing… before he knew better, it had already slipped from his lips. "That couple thing…" instantly, he scolded himself.

She looked at him for some long, thoughtful moments, seemingly thinking how she should react to that. "Actually, you're a married couple, as far as I remember." She stated after a few moments, making him blink.

"Married?"

She chuckled. Hearing that sound made smile again. "Yeah. Peter called you like that when you wouldn't stop fighting. You know those terrible embarrassing people fighting all the time during a subway ride? Just like that." She snickered at her own words, looking up at him. A few silent seconds passed between them.

"You… aren't mad at me because of that, are you?" he could see, how her smile was exchanged by a serious expression.

"You telling me, that I am obviously married to Stark? Grateful fits better." He huffed playfully, pulling her up for a soft kiss. God, she really had to brush her teeth. He too, he guessed.

"Now that I know, I can issue a divorce." He deadpanned, making her laugh softly.

For a while, he continued to caress her painful head, his thoughts slipping away. Thinking about aliens, mad titans and… he had to…

"You really imagined Stark and me making out?"

Her answer to this question was embarrassed silence for a while. Somewhen, he really didn't expect an answer anymore, she started to speak.

"Actually, yeah. You two… I don't know… fit…" there was a long pause. She didn't want to say something and he didn't want to push on her. "You see… you're both narcissistic, egocentric madmen. I think you are more alike than you want to acknowledge. If you get past this passive-aggressive hatred, you could actually get along quite well. And then…” she never finished her sentence. He saw where it would lead.

One part of his brain commented on how easily she could analyze him, the other just wanted to cuddle her to make up for his stupid question. Yet, he never got there, when a beeping sound caught his attention. Christine blinked for a moment, then she rolled away from him, grabbing her pager which rested on the bedside table. She stared at it for a long moment.

"I'm called in." she stated with a worried frown. She looked at him for a moment. They both knew what that meant. Some kind of emergency.

"Can you… undo my hangover?" she looked at him timidly. Obviously, not entirely sure if she really wanted that. Magic to get rid of her hangover.
"You sure?" he asked softly, watching her face carefully.

She seemed to ponder his question for a moment, her fingers playing with the pager. "Yeah." She said slowly "I need a clear head." While she said the last part, a serious expression appeared on her face.

He nodded slowly, moving beside her. "That'll hurt a bit, okay?"

She rolled her eyes at his words. "You know, I do remember the conversation we had about that spell."

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After Christine had left towards work, Stephen had meditated to clear his head. Even then, he didn't come up with a reasonable explanation to what exactly had happened early this morning. How could the alien be here? And how could it remember them? The timelines couldn't be collapsing, they were still here, after all. It could be… his buzzing phone ripped him out of his thoughts. Out of reflex, he wanted to reach for it with his right but made himself stop right before touching the phone. As soon as he actually moved his fingers, he would regret it. The throbbing in his hand had died down to a slow, pulsing pain. He wouldn't want to wake the sleeping monster. He liked to be able to think about something other than how badly his hand hurt. Taking the phone with his left instead, he looked at the screen. A message. From Stark. Asking if they could talk. He hesitated for a long moment, before texting back.

About one hour later, he entered the Avengers Tower, feeling how the security guards eyed him calmly. He wanted to, something, most likely talk with the girl at the reception, tell her that he was here to meet Stark when he heard a female voice from overhead.

"Hello, Mister Strange." Was that Stark's ambiguous AI called Friday?

"It's Doctor, actually." He told the ceiling.

"I'll note that. You can take the elevator up."

Said and done. Inside the elevator, he eyed the many different levels, trying to remember to which one Stark had taken them a month ago. The penthouse, wasn't it? He hadn't yet pressed any button when the elevator started to move upwards. Oh. Okay.

Reaching the highest floor in little time, Stephen left the elevator, looking around. The place seemed to be a bit more, well, lived in than last time. Did that mean Stark wanted to stay here? He should better stay at his own home, not live in the tower.

Stark was sitting on his couch, not bothering to get up. He only raised his hand as a greeting, watching how he sat down in an armchair facing him.

A few moments of uncomfortable silence passed between them until Stark raised his voice. "Want something? A drink? An ice-bucket?"

The last thing made Stephen snort. "Thanks, but no. I'm past ice-buckets."

After that, they slipped back into being silent and staring at each other. Stark hadn't told him what exactly he wanted to talk about. And obviously, he…

"Why should I come?" Stephen asked, trying to not sound annoyed. He didn't want to get into another fighting contest with Stark. Truth be told, he guessed he wouldn't be able to get there
anyway. Having been told that they acted like a couple and Christine telling him, that she… she…

"Yesterday." Stark paused a moment, frowning. "This morning. In the bar. You said something about Wakanda. Can't remember much of it, but…"

But he wanted to know. Stephen banned all emotions from his face before he sighed softly. "Banner killed the hammer guy there. Made him stuck in a piece of your armor and sent him right into the energy shield. I assumed that we would need something similar to be able to get rid of him. Hence, I gave him the stone. It's the only energy source we had strong enough to kill him." And, well, it had worked, hadn't it?

He could see a frown on Stark's face. He obviously wasn't happy. "How could you know, that he wouldn't simply take the stone and leave?"

This time, he couldn't stop himself from smiling smugly. The smile just appeared on his lips. It seemed to always pop up when he was asked a really stupid question. He kept silent for a moment though, until he had relaxed his face muscles, trying to keep his neutral tone.

"The hammer guy is like us. Quite massive, I give you that, but just a mortal alien from somewhere across the galaxy. Only celestials or the likes of Thor can have a chance of touching an Infinity Stone and live happily ever after to tell of it. We… we just get overwhelmed by its power."

Stark was silent for a long moment. "What made you so sure?" he asked slowly.

Stephen shrugged. "Ebony Maw was with him originally. He would simply levitate the stone around."

He saw, how Stark opened his mouth to say something but closed it again. There was silence between them for a while.

"What happened in Wakanda? Or… will have happened. Do you remember every possibility you looked at on Titan?"

Stephen was silent for a moment. He wasn't sure if he really wanted to answer… but then, why not. "Thanos kills Vision, snaps his fingers and that's it. Half the universe turns to dust. And… well… I remember most of it. The things that seemed important."

He could see Stark frown once again.

"How do you do that?"

"Photographic memory."

Tony Stark frowned when he heard, that Strange had a photographic memory. That meant, then he remembered most of everything that had ever happened to him. Everything he had seen on Titan. Not actively, but… it was there… Most possibly going to hunt him at night. For a second, he remembered how it was. Waking up out of terrible nightmares which felt too real to be a dream. He was done with the nightmares currently, thanks to sleeping pills, but… it was always there, somewhere at the edge of his consciousness. Ready to jump him if the possibility should arise. That Strange knew that feeling too… that he…

"How do you live with it?" he asked, not specifying the question. The sorcerer would understand and answer or… well… he hadn't yet decided if he should like him any better. He was still an arrogant, selfish madman. No one he would want to call a friend. Just. Maybe. They could get along. They had to, after all. And if they really shared at least one thing, maybe they could go from there.
Even though having panic attacks didn't seem a desirable thing to have in common with someone else.

Strange was silent for a while, not saying a thing. Then he lowered his gaze, stared at his trembling hands. "I just do. Some days are better, some are worse. They will pass, earlier or later." Something like a sigh escaped his lips. "I'd go insane if I thought about what can kill me every day. Being Sorcerer Supreme is just… a long list of atrocities and all of them either want to kill me or shatter this reality." He shrugged. "I go with whatever wants to kill me this time and adjust. Just like you do. Don't wanna know how many people wanted to kill you already. In the end… I guess it's easier if you have someone who's worth fighting for."

Tony watched Strange while he spoke. Those words felt more familiar than he liked. Living with the knowledge of imminent death was so utterly normal… it was his every day. The reason why he would implement the container for nano-particles into his chest. Just in case. If there was a monster in the closet. Because he knew there was always a monster in there. And having someone… he would do everything for Pepper. She was… Oooh.

Tony blinked, while his brain finally clicked the pieces together.

"You didn't warn us about the light, because you were too busy getting into the pants of that blonde woman."

He saw, how something like anger flashed along Strange's face. His hands and the blonde woman could get him angry. Good to know.

"Her name's Christine," Strange paused. Stark just wanted to jump at the topic and annoy him some more, when he continued talking. "We will have been together for about a year when Thanos comes for us. She dies in almost every version. In some possibilities, we make it back to earth before he gets all Infinity Stones. I… I went looking for her then. She turned to ashes in my arms." His voice broke during the last part. His eyes still fixed on his hands.

Tony simply stared at him. If Pepper died in his arms… he… he wouldn't be able to take it. He would… simply… "How do you cope with it?" he asked lowly. For the first time feeling something like sympathy for the man. Strange raised his head. There was something for a second. Apart from the unhappy smile, which was more like a twitching grimace. Strange's eyes. They were sad. And they seemed older than they should be. Centuries old, in fact. As if he saw more than he could put into words. It was gone a heartbeat later. Exchanged by the guy, he showed to the world.

"I try to spend every minute I have with her."

Tony was silent for a while after that. He understood him. Completely. Fighting to protect the one person who really mattered. He frowned a bit when he realized, that he… he felt respect for the wizard. Actual respect. He hadn't done that in a long while. He had respected him back on Titan, for his knowledge and his fighting skills, but after that… no, not really. He couldn't get past him giving the stone to Thanos. And him giving the stone to that alien this morning. It simply made him snap.

"Does it work?" he asked softly, not wanting to ruin the weird, nearly friend-like moment between them.

Strange shrugged. "More or less. When I told her, I can do magic she freaked out and left. Didn't believe she would turn up again."

"But she did." Tony concluded. After all, he had seen them together only hours ago.
"Yeah, she did." There was a softness in Strange's voice he had never heard before. It made him feel uncomfortable somehow. He had talked about relationships with quite a many people. And he knew this gentle side when they were talking about the person they loved, but somehow it grossed him out when Strange did it. It was... just...

"So, back to the pants thing."

Finally, Strange snapped at him. "I'm not gonna discuss my sex life with you, Stark."

Tony burst into laughter, earning a worried frown from Strange. "Sorry. Just... asked me when you would snap at me. I'm really sorry. That was... misplaced." He somehow got together while laughing. He really had wondered, when Strange would lash out on him. Usually, that man snapped at him a lot faster. Today he had been all self-controlled and forcefully-calm. For a moment, he wondered what had happened in the few hours they hadn't seen each other. Last time, they had completely lost it. He had tried to be super-calm because of that too. He couldn't scream at the guy if he wanted to have answers.

"Soo..." he took a deep breath after he had calmed down from laughing. "...back to the topic. How do we defeat Thanos? What's the one possibility where we win?"

Strange looked at him with a weird expression. One he couldn't read. "I won't tell you." The sorcerer stated after a moment. "If you knew you would try to work towards it, making it impossible to achieve in the process. Just go on doing what you did two years ago."

Tony frowned. "If I went on doing what I did we would lose again." He stated, feeling how his old anger resurfaced.

Strange chuckled softly. He... that idiot chuckled... "We won't do what we did, obviously. We'll get the other half of the Avengers back on board. Find more allies."

Strange and he were silent for a while after that. Seemingly, both following their own thoughts. Until Tony blinked.

"Do you think we have a chance?" he asked gently, watching the sorcerer's face for any hints. But there weren't any. He completely hid his emotions below a blank mask.

"We had one. We got this one. Makes two. We should use it." Strange answered, without saying anything at all. He hadn't answered the question. Just dodged it well. Tony could guess the answer, accordingly. It would be a Perhaps to No. Somewhere along that line.

"Well, then we'll use that new one wisely." He stated, not saying anything at all too. They had to use it. He wouldn't want to hold Pepper in his arms while she turned to ashes. Looking at Strange for a second, he wondered, how that man could still be sane. Having to watch Pepper die 14 million fucking times. Somewhere in between, he would have gone nuts. Then again, Strange didn't believe they could win. Maybe he was insane. Just not in the literal meaning of the word.

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Back in a subway line, he had actually paid for, Stephen sighed softly. The wagon was crowded with people. He had been lucky enough to get a seat, he wouldn't have been able to hold onto something with his hands. Damn it, how much he missed portals. Closing his eyes for a moment, he thought about the conversation with Stark. That had... worked weirdly well. He had still felt the need to snap at him at any second, but... maybe, he could get away from the angry married couple thing. While he had talked with Stark, it had ghosted through his head, whenever he was close to
lashing out at him. That he had talked with him about Christine… it felt good. Better than he would ever admit. Someone knew besides him now. He had spent a few thousand possibilities to see if he could save her. Somehow. Somewhen. She survived a few times, countable at one hand, but always at a terrible price. Even though it broke his heart back then, he knew that she wasn't worth more than the universe. He had to let her go. That was, what was expected from him as a damn Sorcerer Supreme, right? How much he had hated himself for that. And then… getting her back…

His buzzing phone once again ripped him out of his thoughts. Damn thing. Even though currently, with the direction his thoughts were heading, a good thing. When he saw Christine's name on the screen, the corner of his lips moved upward into a small smile.

"Just got home. Where are you?"

Stupidly stroking the screen of the smartphone, his smile broadened. She was home. Maybe he could massage her some more after her sudden work day. He really liked the sounds she made.

Reaching her apartment block, he felt giddy like a teenager. Being in love was awesome, except when it sucked. But currently, it was plain out awesome. Got him away from his thoughts about mad titans or randomly appearing aliens. Even though he had to deal with married couples. Entering the house by actually using the key, a rather awkward situation with a trembling left hand, he caught the elevator up. A few moments later, he stood in front of her door. Looking around to make sure he was alone, he unlocked the door using magic. He wouldn't stand there for what had felt like five minutes and try to get the damn key into the lock. The second, he entered her place, his good mood vanished. It was too silent. If Christine was here it wouldn't be silent.

"Christine?" he asked into the apartment, with nothing but silence as a response. Slowly, he walked through her corridor, leading up into the living room. No one there. Maybe… maybe she was… in the bath? His scared mind suggested. Like a drowning man, he followed the suggestion. No. The bathroom was empty. Standing there, tense, with a thrumming heart, he looked around. Entering her bedroom, he found the jacket she had worn when she left this morning. She had to be here. She had to… feeling, how magic was used in the room in his back, he swirled around. There was no one. Just an empty… walking back into the living room, he found a simple note. Handwritten. Recognizing the handwriting, his heart clenched. Mordo. He was…

*You have something I want.*

*I have something you want.*
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Tada :D
I give to you... (finally) The Cloak of Levitation!

Who cares for the rest?
(Okay, okay...)

An appearance will make (except the obvious cloak): Stephen, Tony, Peter, Mordo, briefly the Ancient One and Christine.

Have fun!

Stephen stared at the piece of paper in his trembling hand. Normally, he was always aware of his useless trembling, currently, though, he didn't even register it. There were only those two lines. Two sentences, trying to break his mental stability into pieces. After a few seconds, he closed his eyes, trying to breathe. Mordo had her. Mordo had Christine. Christine of all people. The only one who really didn't have anything to do with this entire mess. If she got hurt... if she... Christine... he wouldn't be able...

With effort, he forced his thoughts away. He had to stay calm, even though he wanted nothing more than to freak out. He had to focus. He had to... he had... He had always assumed that the Ancient One would come for him. Truth be told, he had expected that. He would have been able to reason with her. Convince her by showing, that he could touch the stone, which still shouldn't be possible in the first place. Mordo though...

Mordo was...

He should still be stable, after all, he hadn't yet lost his trust in the Ancient One. Yet... he tended to be a bit radical, to say the least. Kidnapping Christine to force him to trade the Eye in for her was enough evidence for that. The only question, that really mattered to his brain, was: would he hurt her? Currently, he guessed no. Yet, he knew what he had done after he had lost trust. He knew what he was capable of. He knew what he could do. That knowledge alone was enough to frighten him. To break his confidence. Turn the answer to the question would he hurt her to a: If he was lucky enough. If he hurt Christine...

Letting the piece of paper fall to the ground, he conjured a map of the city into his hands. Placing it on Christine's couch table, he told himself he would see and try if a localization spell worked with a Smartphone, too. He had always wanted to try that. And had always been too busy to try. Next time, he had always said. Next time for sure. In the end, he didn't want to run around and hunt people down with a plain old paper map in hand. Yet, he once again had no other choice but to.

Concentrating, he closed his eyes. Imagining Christine. In the beginning, it had struck him how close to one another portal and localization spells were. The first needed a place, the second a specific image of a person or thing one wanted to find. For both, the base premise was the same. Know
exactly, what you wanted to have. When he was certain, that the image of her in his mind was precise enough, he let his magic flow into the map.

Opening his eyes, he saw a glowing, golden point at the edge of the map. Another reason to see if the spell worked with Google Maps. He wasn't forced to conjure new maps if the spell didn't find its target in the current one. He knew of a spell, which created the map and localized the person in the same step. He had just been too lazy to learn it. He used surveillance spells to tell him if certain beings entered this dimension in favor of simple localization.

Staring at the golden point, he considered his options. Part of him wanted to charge in there and strike Mordo down. Wanted revenge on the other man for kidnapping his love. Yet, the little piece of his mind, which was still reasonable, told him that Mordo wouldn't be alone. If he would be going after the guy who most likely stole the Eye, he wouldn't go alone either. He would bring help along. And he couldn't fight Mordo and help with his useless trembling hands. Honestly, he could barely use the right one. The left only marginally better. He wouldn't risk Christine over his recklessness.

What choices did he have left? He could go and contact the Ancient One, but he didn't think he would have enough patience for talking with her, while his love was held captive by a potentially murderous sorcerer. He could create and send a doppelganger of himself but that one would dissolve as soon as he lost concentration to keep the spell up. If he fought more than one, he was bound to lose his concentration for that spell rather earlier than later. Especially, if Christine did get hurt right in front of his eyes. His mind would snap onto that, letting the spell drop and gone would be his second self.

Which only left... God... grudgingly, he swallowed his pride and ego. This was for Christine. Pulling his phone from his pocket, he selected the contact. This was about his love. Only about her. He didn't matter. He didn't... pressing the calling button, he raised his phone to his ear. God. How much he despised himself.

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The cloak of levitation joylessly floated behind the silly apprentice, who had to watch over it this time. It had immediately known when time had been reverted over a month ago. Feeling the flow of time was kind of second nature to it. It being aware of such concepts as time and space and dimensions was a necessity. Else it could forget who its master was, but it wouldn't ever. Not after a million resets it would ever forget. A master was chosen for as long as he was worthy (and alive), not for as long as the current blip in time endured. Being back in a showcase in the Sanctum Sanctorum made it rather obvious where it was. Having fought the mad purple titan a second ago and then being back in a damn showcase!

Yet, it being a self-aware object in a room filled with self-aware objects... it knew which objects would help it escape. It frantically gestured around until it had caught the attention of the staff beside it. It took a little until the cloak had convinced the staff. Then, the staff tipped to the left, falling to the ground, smashing its own and the cloak's showcase in the process. It had tried to escape the Sanctum instantly, planning to search for its master as was expected of it, but the sorcerers within the sanctum caught it, locked it up in the showcase again. After its second escape, the staff beside it was moved away. After the third the indestructible, ancient vase. After the fourth, the necklace which could jump through dimensions was reallocated.

This early morning, the cloak pulled its biggest stunt. After all, it had to escape! It had felt the same energy resurface, which had brought it here. Weaker by a thousand margins, but it was the same. Time flexing around the burst of energy, pulling something along that shouldn't be. It had felt the disturbance. It had been weak by all means, but the cloak had waited for something like that.
Reverting time for two years had to disrupt the normal flow. Hence it had waited. Endured. And the moment came as it had expected.

At 1:25 this morning, the cloak had convinced the axe at the other end of the room to fall down, hit lose she shield it was connected to, which took care of hitting the ground in just the right angle to roll against the new podium of the ancient, indestructible vase, which gratefully dropped to the ground, crashed against the showcase of the nunchucks of Myanmar, which got pushed out of their holding spell, somehow managed to fly into the showcase of the Sword of Dawn which in turn crashed into the cloak's showcase. It had laid waste to half of the upper room in the quest to escape, waking the Master of the Sanctum (wrong master by any extent) in the process. The wrong master had tried to ensnare the cloak immediately. Yet, the cloak had fought as if its life (it's masters life for sure) depended on it. It had been so so so close to escaping... but the wrong master had stopped it from leaving once again. It was a bad cloak by all means.

Yet, it wouldn't give up. After its last stunt, it was dragged around by silly, stupid apprentices who had to look after it. Of course, it wouldn't follow them. The cloak had too much pride for that. Hence, it was dragged around on a silly golden leash. A fucking leash. The first apprentice had spent three hours trying to get some ground below his feet. The second had stopped trying to pull the cloak around after what seemed ten minutes. Just sat beside it without a word. The third one was allowed to drag the cloak around. Mostly, for surveillance purposes. After all, it was free of its showcase now. There was a whole new possibility of escape. It knew, that it could break the silly energy leashes of the silly students rather easily. Maybe, hopefully soon, it would be a good cloak and help its true master again. The next time, the door of the sanctum was open for long enough, it would jump, well fly, at the possibility. It would leave the sanctum. And find its master.

----

Tony Stark eyed the tattoo shop and the grocery store unhappily. He knew the sanctum was here. He had seen it. He had been inside of it, damn it. But it simply wasn't here. He had been taken aback when he saw Strange call him so little time after they had met. What could that guy possibly want from him? He was grateful, that he had answered the call, the second he heard Strange's voice, though. He had heard the strain in his voice. The self-hate that he had actually called him. The soft trembling. The anger. God, the anger. And above all else, utter fear. Christine's life was possibly at stake. Kidnapped by a possibly dangerous man. Could be that he was stable and sane and wouldn't hurt her. Could be that he lost it and... Strange hadn't even dared to finish that version. That version was no acceptable possibility in this reality. It had to be stopped from coming true at all cost.

Exchanging the time stone for her was no possibility either. They couldn't give the Infinity Stone away to people who didn't know what was coming for them. It was the safest right where it was, despite Strange's annoying habit to throw the thing at their enemies.

Accordingly, he stood in front of the place where he knew the sanctum to be. He had asked Strange if he should join him where he had located Christine, but Strange had only scoffed at him. He claimed, that he knew at least one of the guys, who had Christine. He could work with that, for a little while a least. Tony needed to do something else. His job was to make the current Sorcerer Supreme aware of the mess. Strange was sure she would stop the entire ordeal and demand answers – from all of them. Answers he would be able to give. Based on the presumption, that Christine wasn't killed right in front of his eyes. Then, the poor fellow would likely lose it and... well... what could a really powerful wizard with an unbelievably powerful energy source and the capacity to destroy time cause for problems? None, right?

Tony sighed softly, letting Friday call Strange and walked off to a café nearby.
"The sanctum isn't there." He told the sorcerer as soon as he had picked up.

"That doesn't make any sense. Peter can see it. You should be... well, you didn't jump through all those portals. Might be..." Strange was silent for a moment. "... our best option is calling Peter I guess."

Tony was silent for a moment. He didn't want to call Peter, not after seeing his black-purple chest. The poor boy deserved all the rest he could possibly get. Yet, he couldn't force Strange to come to him. The place where Christine was kept was at least two hours away without portals or Iron-Man suits. That was the reason they had split up, after all. There was not enough time.

"I'll call him and let you know as soon as I'm inside."

----

Peter sighed lowly when Ned placed a new bunch of ice-cubes on his chest. They had gone from ice-cubes to ice packs and back to the last ice-cubes, they could find. Lucky them, Ned's parents were away for the weekend. Else, they would have to explain what they wanted with all that ice, after all, it wasn't that super warm outside. Ned had already started to freeze water into new ice cubes. With a bit of luck, it would work to hide their current excessive ice-usage. Save them from inventing a cover-up story.

After waking up this morning, Peter had eyed his chest in the mirror. It had gone from gruesome black-purple to only purple. It still hurt like hell to breathe. Every expanding of his rib-cage felt like...

"You ok?" Ned asked for the hundredth time today, earning a weak laugh from Peter.

"Yeah, sure. You don't have to ask that every five minutes."

They had started to watch a Netflix series, but Peter had a strong suspicion that Ned didn't pay attention. He always threw worrisome gazes towards him.

"Gym class will suck on Monday, but everything else is just fine." Peter stated, moving slightly to be able to look at the TV comfortably without making the ice cubes slide from his chest. With his stupid comment, he at least earned a chuckle from Ned. For a while, they actually watched Netflix, commenting about what was going on. Act as if nothing had happened this morning.

His ringing phone caught his attention. It lay a few feet away on Ned's desk. Before he could move, his friend took that task onto himself, getting onto his feet to get his phone. While his friend moved, Peter prayed that it was just aunt May who wanted to check in on him. Please, just be May. He didn't know if he... he wanted some peace after that alien had stepped on him.

"It's Stark."

Damn it. Yet, he had registered the tone his friend had used. He wasn't happy that the man called him, that much was obvious.

Peter watched, how Ned stared at his smartphone for some long seconds. Obviously thinking about not handing him the phone. Let the call go to voicemail. Be done.

"Ned? Give me the phone."

His voice was calm but certain. Mister Stark would have his reasons to call him. If it wasn't important, he could still simply tell him, that he wouldn't come.
"But..." Ned stated, hesitating.

"Please." It would be important, it had to be.

After Ned handed him his phone, he finally answered the call. If it hadn't been important, the call would have ended ages ago but Mister Stark had just waited for him to pick up... he...

"Hello?" Peter asked timidly. He didn't want to fight against another murderous alien.

"Peter? Thank god." Mister Stark was silent for a moment. "You have to help me to get into the sanctum. I can't see it for whatever reason."

Peter blinked. Why would he want to get into the sanctum? Asking just that, he waited for an explanation. Didn't sound it all that important until now.

After a few moments of silence, Mister Stark started to finally talk. He seemed reluctant to pull him into whatever had happened.

"Strange's girlfriend was kidnapped by most likely a bunch of sorcerers."

Peter sat up instantly, asking "What?!" in a rushed voice, groaning in pain afterward. His chest hadn't liked the sudden movement. But the blonde woman had been kidnapped?! She...

"Everything okay?" Mister Stark asked.

"Yeah, just moved too fast. What's going on?"

For a few more moments, Mister Stark was silent. Obviously... but then he continued to talk.

"They located him. Most likely because he looked into the future earlier. They want the stone in exchange for his girl, obviously. One of them has the potential to be really dangerous, might even kill her. He's going after them, I should go for the sanctum and talk with the Sorcerer Supreme. Strange claimed she would end this mess."

Peter was silent for a very long moment. The girlfriend of the doc, the blonde woman, kidnapped by a bunch of sorcerers. That was... his eyes went to Ned. Just as if someone kidnapped Aunt May or his best friend over some Spider-Man stuff. One of the reasons why he kept who he was in his off-time a secret. He couldn't live with having dragged them into danger.

"On my way."

----

Some ten minutes later, Tony had ordered, drank and paid a coffee by then, Peter landed silently beside him. The boy was wearing his Spider-Man suit, looking around unsure.

"What should we do?" he asked, while Tony got up from his seat. The coffee had tasted better than he had expected. The moment he realized he couldn't see the sanctum, he had felt the need to act inconspicuous, walking to the nearest place to order coffee. He didn't want a bunch of sorcerers being aware of him. That window of surprise should be reserved for him when he barked into the sanctum.

"You get me into the sanctum. I'll call Strange and tell him we made it. He is close to her. Don't think he can manage to wait much longer." He stated, once again looking at the tattoo shop and the grocery store. Could he just go in there and buy something? Weird world.
"Where is he?" Peter asked while crossing the street, Tony following suit. How did that work, now? Did Peter simply have to get him there? Was it that easy to pull someone through a hiding spell? Telling the boy the address absentmindedly, he stopped in front of the tattoo shop, seemingly interested in wanting to get one. He had had one as a teenager. God, how his father had screamed at him.

"And now?" Peter asked, looking at the sanctum out of the corner of his eyes. For a brief second, he wondered what the poor tattooist thought about Spider-Man and Tony Stark staring into his shop. They had to stand in front of his window, right?

"I don't know. Strange didn't say anything really. He just said that you would be our best option to get me in there."

Peter hmm’d lowly when hearing that answer. So… simply… drag him in there? How did it work? When did the other dimension, which hosted the store and the shop, snap around Mister Stark? Would he just…

"Okay." He stated, grabbing the wrist of the grown man and simply dragged him onto the threshold of the sanctum. He stared at the door for some long moments. And now? Just go in there?

Tony stared at the solid wall only inches away from his face. Under which circumstances had that been the best idea in his head? The wall would surely simply remain solid for him. Peter disappearing into a different dimension and he would hit the concrete. Like, hard.

Pushing open the door, he took a step, pulling Mister Stark along with him. He could hear something like a yelp, which died suddenly. He threw a glance over his shoulder, seeing him entering the sanctum, looking around disoriented.

When Peter had pulled on his wrist, he had seen the concrete creep closer. For one long antagonizing second, he had felt how his cheek – he had turned his face to rescue his nose – pressed against the hard, cold concrete. This was a bad idea. A really bad one. Peter couldn't pull him into the sanctum. He did need Strange to get –

And then the concrete tipped away. It felt as if the whole wall simply tilted, folded away and then he stood with one foot in the sanctum. In there, he looked around like a madman. What the holy fuck had just happened?

Peter looked straight ahead, while Mister Stark was still re-orienting himself. What he saw was probably one of the oddest sights, he had ever seen. The poor apprentice most likely thought the same about them. What the fuck where Spider-Man and Iron-Man doing in here? The young guy, maybe fifteen at best, was holding onto what seemed to be a magical, golden leash, connected to the collar of the cloak of levitation, which (who?) floated beside him.

Both teenagers, one of them unbeknownst to the other, stared at each other for a long second, with Mister Stark not yet saying anything.

"Ehm…” the guy managed to say. "This branch of the national museum is closed due to renovation. I would ask you to leave. There's nothing here."

Peter blinked, the eyes of his suit twitching. This was their cover-up story? Well… his gaze wandered along the insides of the sanctum. It looked old. You could probably sell most items in here as ancient findings from somewhere. Just the floating coat and the golden leash ruined the story.

"I know where he is." He told the unlikely pair in front of him. The poor guy only blinked, looking
at him confused. He didn't understand. How could he? Yet, the cloak got the message. It jolted forward, ripping the leash which was meant to hold it, wrapped itself around him and pulled/shoved/pressed him out of the open sanctum door.

The sound of the door falling shut made Tony blink, finally ripping him out of his astonishment. He had heard the boy's words. He had seen the cloak flinging itself at Peter and disappear through the door with him. He… taking a sidestep, he placed himself in front of the now closed door. The cloak flinging itself at Peter meant that it had to remember them. A remembering cloak was their ally. It would surely want to get back to Strange. And with Peter entangled in the (cloak?) mess, he would surely not allow, that they were followed and caught.

The young man, who had to be an apprentice or something, stared at him open-mouthed. He apparently couldn't fully register what had just happened. Then he turned his head.

"Master?" he yelled into the sanctum, another (female) teenager appearing at the top of the stairs moments later to check on her co-student. She too only stared at Tony Stark.

"It's the cloak again!" he added after a few moments.

Again? Tony frowned. The cloak trying to escape or escaping had happened before? It surely remembered, then. That made three and a cloak? Weird collection of allies.

Some moments later, the master of the sanctum, a black man wearing weird tunics, appeared at the top of the stairs which led into the inner sanctum. He seemed to have wanted to scream something at the young guy but stopped when he saw Tony.

"Hey, ehm…" he stared at the sorcerers or going-to-be sorcerers in front of him for a moment. "Friday? Tell him I made it."

The master, not bothered by him talking with his AI, took the flight of stairs in no time, standing right in front of him. Angry demeanor and all.

"Did you just let a semi-sentient cloak loose on the streets of this city?"

It actually was sentient?

"I guess I did. Even though it didn't drag me out of this very interesting… what did you say? 'Museum'?" he looked at the young guy, staying firmly in front of the door. He wouldn't allow the cloak to be caught.

He blinked when his place of location changed. He was standing beside the stairs now. Had that been a teleportation spell? Pretty rude.

"Excuse me, could you please not magic me around?" he said, striding back towards his place in front of the door, interrupting the master yelling at his students to catch the cloak again. The girl was halfway down the stairs, the boy who had to keep watch over the cloak still dumbfounded by it escaping remained still when he stopped all three of them in their tracks by simply talking.

Taking a deep breath, he looked at the master, who eyed him suspiciously.

"I have to talk with the Sorcerer Supreme." Tony stated firmly.

He could see a frown appear on the other man's face.

"What do you know of magic, Stark?" he asked, his voice careful now.
"Next to nothing, I admit to that. I still have to talk with the Sorcerer Supreme."

He could see eyes narrowing. A hand moving back. He would conjure an energy whip and strike at him, if his answer wasn't enough, right? He wasn't expected to know of magic. He shouldn't be here. And yet, he was.

"About what?" the master voiced the question he knew he would have to answer. It was a rather simple one, really.

"I know who stole the time stone."

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The guy who currently owned the time stone was leaning against a house wall only a street away from where he actually wanted to go. He had to wait for Stark calling him. They had agreed on that. Getting here, he had considered just sitting the mess out. Wait for the Ancient One to step in. Yet, leaning against a wall, he felt his trembling increase once more. He couldn't wait that long. Christine was kidnapped because of him. He couldn't sit idly by and wait for others to sort out what he had caused. Christine… God. If she was hurt. If she died.

Fighting his anxiety down, he tried to concentrate. He had thought about using a spell to eavesdrop on the sorcerers close by. He knew where they were, after all. Yet, he couldn't risk giving his position away. Mordo would feel magic being used. Stephen needed the element of surprise in his current state. Hopefully, he would use it wisely. If she died. His plan was, if he had any at all, to try to reach her and teleport them away. He knew he couldn't get far with those short distance spells but… he wanted her away. He wanted her safe. He wanted… If she…

His buzzing phone caught him off guard. It ripped him out of his admittedly dark thoughts and brought him back into here and now. Pulling his phone from his pocket he frowned. What kind of number was that? Answering the call, Friday's voice filled his ears.

"Mister Strange? He's in."

And the call ended. Yet, it was all he needed. He didn't even realize, that she still called him 'Mister'. His thoughts were too far away to even bother for such things. Christine.

Pushing himself off the wall, he took a deep breath. It was time.

Reaching his destination, he saw it was just an alley between two houses, leading into a dead end. He didn't even have time to ponder that realization, though. All there was, was Christine. She… He had been right. Mordo hadn't come alone. The love of his life was on her knees, bound and held down by softly glowing, golden ropes, which were held by two sorcerers. His gaze was fixed on her face. She looked scared. And oddly a tad angry. Her gaze though… when she saw him it was so full of fear. Hope. And love. He wanted nothing more than to get to her and get them away. Get her somewhere safe. Hug her and never let go. Taking a step forward -

"Well, well. The thief has a heart." Mordo's cold voice ripped his eyes away from Christine. He had been leaning against the wall, watching him calmly. That much for his element of surprise. Mordo had played him brilliantly, guessing he would be too preoccupied with Christine if he saw her like that. Guessed well, indeed.

Mordo kept an eye on him while walking calmly into the middle of the alley. Placing himself in front of Christine.

"Give me the eye and you can have her back. Unharmed, if I may add."
"He doesn't have a stupid eye for god's sake!" Christine yelled at Mordo's back. Ah. That explained the anger.

Mordo chuckled, smiling for a second. "You found yourself quite a woman, I hope you know that. Loyal till death."

Stephen's eyes narrowed. The threat was obvious. Loyal till death. Yet, Mordo hadn't hurt her until now. He guessed that he didn't intend to do that at all. His goal seemed to be to force him to exchange the eye, not hurt her. Yet...

"What? Lost your ability to speak?" Mordo asked, mocking him. "Ignore the woman. Just give me the eye and let us walk our separate ways."

If only it was that easy.

"I don't have any eyes, except those in my head." Stephen retorted, bracing himself.

Mordo chuckled softly. "Of course, you don't."

Dodging Mordo's energy whip by sidestepping, Stephen watched for a moment, how it hit the concrete, tiny sparks swirling into the air. Mordo used a whip, not the staff he was carrying on his back, which was a good sign, he guessed. The other sorcerer obviously hadn't come here intending to kill. He had to use that to his advantage, as long as he could.

Catching Mordo's next swipe of the whip with a quickly conjured shield, he allowed himself the moment to throw a quick glance at Mordo's... what? Henchmen? Helpers? Friends? He didn't have to knock them out to get Christine free. Just cut the ropes.

He stepped back a little after every lash of the whip, luring Mordo away step by step. After a few tries to break his shield, Mordo jolted himself into the air, his magical boots allowing him to step on nothing as if it was solid. His goal Stephen's back to get past the shield, obviously. Darn relics. Yet, he had expected it. Teleporting himself forward, back into the alley, he turned. With a quick circle of his hand, he conjured a shock wave, hitting Mordo mid-air and blasting him away. He didn't even bother looking if his spell hit, though. As soon as he had the shock wave conjured, he swirled around in one swift motion, teleporting beside Christine. Creating a glowing sword in his right hand, even though his hand begged him to not-ever-grab-anything-again and punished him with a jolt of pain, he cut one of the ropes which held his love. Turning, he aimed for the second rope. His sword got surrounded by an energy leash mid-movement, though. The guy in his back seemed to be fast. Great. Without wasting a second, he let his sword dissolve, surrounded his hands with a soft, golden glimmer and simply grabbed the rope in front of him, ripping it apart while letting himself drop to his knees, right behind Christine. With a final quick motion, he surrounded them with a shield, hearing whips hit his golden runes only moments later.

Only now, kneeling kinda safe behind his love, he got aware of his panting, his pounding heart. He dared to look at Christine. She turned her head, to be able to look at him. Still looking rather terrified, she gifted him a tiny smile. Only the edges of her mouth moving upward. Breathing out, he allowed himself to smile back at her. For a moment he closed his eyes, pressing his face against the side of her neck. Inhaling her scent, he felt her soft skin, her thrumming pulse.

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Peter watched in something like mild horror, how the city passed below him. He was used to heights. He swung around with his webs like a maniac, after all, but they were his webs. He trusted them. He knew how much weight and acceleration they could withstand. Being, well, flown around, by a
fucking magic cape, which could change its direction at any second or let him drop to his own death was something completely different. During the first seconds with the cloak still on his face, he had been terrified, when he realized he lost the ground below his feet. A little time later, the cloak had sat him down on a skyscraper, floating in front of him expectantly. Peter had needed a few seconds to realize, what the magical garment wanted. The address, of course. Where the doc was.

After telling it the address, he hurried to ask: "Do you… do you really remember?"

The cloak had rolled its collar around as if rolling non-existent eyes. Obviously, it thought that question was stupid. Peter was still adjusting to the reality of clothes having memories when he felt the cloak settle on his shoulders. A second later he lost the ground below his feet once more, the cloak obviously planning to take him along to where the doc was. He wouldn't object, even though he was scared to die through hitting a street from an average height of 200 meters.

----

Tony looked around the library of Kamar-Taj. The master had stared at him for some long seconds before he grunted something and let him off to some door-portal-thing. He stepped through it and, magic, was in a different place. Time-zone. Continent. The master had vanished to find the Sorcerer Supreme, or so Tony hoped, telling Wong, who seemingly was the librarian in this place, to watch over their 'guest'. Wong had taken to the task by heart, staring him to death without ever blinking. Tony didn't really bother about being stared at, after all, he was kind of a celebrity, used the chance and looked around. He had come through one of three doors, all directly leading towards some kind of altar. By its form, he guessed that the eye of something, the container for the time stone, was usually placed on it. Raising his gaze from the altar, he looked at the other doors. He came in through one of them. The others would lead to the other sanctums, he guessed.

Turning around, he let his gaze wander through the library. Closest to him was a collection of books, chained to what seemed to be movable shelves. They had to be special. The walls were covered with wall-high bookshelves, hosting other, seemingly more normal books. Even though the question forced itself into his mind, what normal meant in a world like this.

Looking directly at Wong, he decided to formally introduce himself.

"Tony Stark, by the way."

"Wong."

Wow, really no other word? No try at conversation at all?

"May I take a look around?" he asked, curious what he would find in 'normal' books in a magical library. Wong didn't even show a different expression on his face. Shrugging, Tony turned on his heels, aiming for a random bookshelf and pulled a book out of it.

Staring at pages he couldn't read, he blinked. Was that Sanskrit? Well, he was in Nepal… but… were there any pictures in that book he could at least look at? Flipping through the pages, he found a depiction of some rune. Raising his gaze, all he saw was a grumpy Wong. How long could it take to get the boss-sorcerer, if their most important artifact was concerned? Letting his gaze fall back onto the drawing of the rune, he hoped that Strange was doing okay. He really didn't want to lose the damn sorcerer.

----

Chris Chambers, one of Mordo's friends, stared at the, well, he guessed couple below the energy
shield. He had tried to stop the unknown sorcerer from cutting the second rope, but he had simply dissolved his sword and taken a different approach. And now, sitting beneath what seemed to be a solid energy shield… he had started to hit it with his energy whip instantly, but it didn't even seem to care.

Letting his whip dissolve, he watched the two. He had his face pressed against her neck, eyes closed. His hands stretched out before him to keep the shield active. Chris watched, how the woman raised her hand, burying her fingers in his hair in an effort to press him closer against her. Those two… she didn't have anything to do with the eye of agamotto disappearing. That much was obvious from the start. She couldn't do magic. She was drenched in traces of it, yes, but that was most likely only due to him being that close to her. He on the other hand… Mordo had been that convincing, that he had stolen the eye. That he had seen him at the place the spell of the Ancient One had guided him to. That he would be drenched in time magic. Yet, all Chris saw, was a poor, terrified guy who wanted to save his kidnapped love.

----

Christine allowed herself to relax for only a moment. Feeling Stephen beside her calmed her down, even though he was trembling like hell. He was here. He had come to save her. Of course, she had hoped that he would, then again, she had hoped that he wouldn't. She had counted one and one together, after all. They wanted the eye thingy. They wanted the time stone. She had had the feeling that they used her as bait to get to him, nothing more. And of all things, she didn't want him getting hurt. Closing her eyes, feeling his hair below her fingers, she allowed herself one calm moment.

"Stephen…" she breathed his name. Enjoying him being that close. Just for one more second. Please.

"I'll…" she felt how he raised his head. He never finished that sentence. Instead, she felt how he got up. Opening her eyes, she looked through his barrier. She could see the leader of the group, who had kidnapped her. Mordo, he was called. The area right in front of him looked like a broken mirror. Shards dancing with another, reflecting their surroundings multiple times. That was the same thing Stephen had used to whatever the alien, right? She saw in horror, how the weird area moved towards them. It would swallow them, right?

She could see, how Stephen moved his hands, forming another sigil right in front of them, catching the sparkling mirror-shard-thing directly in front of them. The rest of the shard-thing moved past them but let them be. They didn't get swallowed. Yet... Stephen's barrier... looking around with a thrumming heart, she could see it dissolve, the golden lines which had protected them dissolving into thin air. He had ceased his concentration on that spell to be able to stop that shard-thing, right? Within a heartbeat, she could see how something golden coiled itself around Stephen and ripped him away from her.

"Stephen!"

----

Hearing how Christine screamed his name in fear a second time within 24 hours, he scolded himself. He didn't have much time to dwell on it, though. All his thoughts left him for a second when he was thrown against a wall by the rope, which had grabbed him. He felt his back screaming in pain, but he didn't think that anything was broken. Yet. God, how much he missed his cloak. It would have softened the blow. Sinking down onto the ground, he watched how Mordo came closer. The other sorcerer was wielding his staff by now. Great. He against a relic. He had pissed him off by blasting him away, hadn't he?

Stephen watched out of worried eyes, how the staff of the living tribunal uncoiled itself when Mordo
swung it. Golden sparks flew up from the concrete. The staff being called a staff had always seemed misleading to Stephen. It was far more like an energy whip. A really powerful one, on top of that. Moving himself away with magic, he realized dryly, that he stood in the same spot from where he had started to fight a few minutes ago. This time, he didn't dare to look at Christine, though. He knew she would be ensnared again. He had to focus on the staff, try to avoid being hit or ensnared and thrown around by it. He wasn't sure how many collisions with walls his body would be able to take.

---

Tony Stark raised his gaze from another drawing of a rune when he heard soft steps approaching. A bald woman in white robes walked up to him, taking a look at the book he was currently holding.

"I think a book about the evolution of defensive spells would bore you quite a bit, Mister Stark, even though I doubt you would be able to cast even one of them."

Tony chuckled softly, closing the book and placing it back on its shelf.

"How come you know of magic?" asked the woman, her voice all soft. He understood why Strange had said she would help them. Instead of asking for the reason of him being here, ask about the time stone, she wanted to get to know the whole story. How it was even possible for him to know about magic.

"I, ah, have come across a sorcerer, who showed me some magic." He stated calmly, watching her. Saw, how a frown appeared on her face.

"How did that meeting come to be?" she asked, still gentle, her voice filled with curiosity.

Well… what should he tell her, really? Should he tell her, how he had met Strange? What had happened afterward? He had hoped Strange would answer those questions. He was the guy with knowledge about how-to-not-break-time. If he told her the wrong… yet again, Strange had said she would have questions. She could only have questions if…

"He found me, really. Stepped out of a glowing portal and saved me from jogging. We were attacked by aliens soon after."

Was that enough? He barely told her anything.

She tilted her head a little, watching him with eyes, which were too old for her body. Eyes which had seen worlds and lives and universes come and go. Collapse and rebuild. Just like Strange's.

"You know the future, don't you? To some extent, at least. You know I shouldn't be here."

He watched her unreadable expression, hoping for a hint but none ever came. She simply watched him for a few long moments, before she started to speak.

"You have seen the future too, don't you?" she asked back, looking into his eyes. For a moment, Tony felt as if she could look into him. Read within him like in an open book. Averting his gaze, he remained silent for a long moment.

"I've seen what comes for us."

"Then, you do have the time stone." She said, her voice still gentle but it had become a tad cooler. Swinging of into dangerous fields. "Or your sorcerer friend, for that matter."
"We will not give it away." He stated calmly, facing her gaze.

"You may have no other choice." Her voice was like silk. Hiding her true intentions.

"Then we'll die fighting."

Both of them stared at each other for a long moment. This seemed far more like a battle of wills than an actual conversation.

"Good."

----

The cloak floated above the alley, where it had found its true master. The spider-boy was hanging at the wall close to it, looking down at the scene below them. The cloak wanted nothing more than to sweep in and help, but... it watched helpless, how its master defended himself for a little, then he was caught by the staff, not one of the nicer staffs by the way, and thrown against a wall. It could basically hear his painful grunt. Yet, the cloak remained, levitating above their heads, trying not to pull any attention towards it.

Its master got beaten up, yes, but the woman he loved was trapped in golden ropes, a sorcerer behind her. The cloak knew, that its master would place her life over his own. Accordingly, it waited. Watched, how its master slid down the wall. Mordo was walking towards him calmly, apparently not fearing that he would escape this time. Oh, how much the cloak wanted to... watching, how its master was grabbed by the throat and pressed back against the wall, it knew its time had come.

----

Stephen tasted blood in his mouth, feeling how Mordo grabbed his throat. Had he blacked out for a second? A moment later, the other sorcerer pressed him against the wall. Instinctively, his useless hands moved up, trying to get a hold on Mordo's hand, stop him from strangling him.

"You could stop this. Just give us the eye."

The voice from one of Mordo's helpers filled his ears. The other one, the one who had caught his sword earlier, had kept out of the fight, surprisingly. Feeling, how the pressure on his throat got weaker, Stephen focused his gaze. What he saw made his heart skip a few beats. Christine, all ensnared by the golden rope of one sorcerer, like he knew it would be. Yet, that didn't bother him at all. His eyes were glued to the thin, glowing dagger, which was close to Christine's throat. A tiny, tiny part of his brain, which was still busy analyzing his surroundings, realized, that Mordo, looking at what was going on, frowned. He didn't approve of what his helper was doing but he wouldn't argue with him in the middle of a fight either. Much, much later Stephen would realize, that he could have teleported away right now. That Mordo hadn't paid any attention to him. That he could have...

Yet, could have never happened. Instead, Stephen saw, how a swirl of red slung itself around the sorcerer's head, who held Christine. Was that his cloak? That was definitely his cloak. And banged his head against the wall behind him, obviously either trying to break his spells or kill him, whatever happened first. In the same moment, or maybe a moment earlier or later, Stephen couldn't tell, Peter was in the middle of the chaos, his hand raised as if he wanted to shoot a web at the sorcerer, maybe hit the dagger and pull it away.

None of either happened, though. The dagger, still existing, moved towards Christine's throat and grazed it. While Stephen's world came to a halt, his heart stopping in the same second, together with all, he had ever been, he watched in horror, how a spray of red escaped from Christine's sliced throat.
Her eyes were ripped open in surprise. Her mouth slightly open. *There was so much blood.*
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Same people as last time.

Let's save Christine.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Watching, how Christine tumbled, something snapped in Stephen. For a mere moment, he couldn't move. Couldn't breathe. Couldn't think. All he could do was stare at his love. All that blood. For god's sake all

Then his doctor-side kicked in and took control. He couldn't succumb to panic. Panicking wouldn't save her. If he remained rooted to the spot, she would die. Right in front of his eyes. And he wouldn't let that happen. He couldn't. He...

Teleporting himself beside her once again, he made her float, inches before she hit the concrete. He couldn't let her impact with the ground. Might open the wound further, take any chance he had at saving her. Placing her on the ground carefully, he looked at her. First, his hand found it's way to her nose. Could she breathe? Please, please, please, be able to breathe. If her windpipe was cut, she would drown in her own blood. He felt her warm breath hit his trembling fingers, felt how relief flooded him. She could breathe. God, she could breathe.

His eyes moved to her throat, saw, that her fingers had found their way there, frantically pressing onto the wound. Blood ran through her fingers, painting her throat and the concrete below red. It had been a spray of blood. Blood spraying from her cut was good. The only thing he could have hoped for. A spray of blood meant they had more time. Her artery had only been nicked. A surge of blood, no spray, would have meant the artery was cut, leading to immense blood loss within seconds. Upping the possibility of her windpipe being cut. Placing her survival-chances somewhere close to…

"I'll move your fingers away, okay? I have a spell, which places more pressure on the wound than you can with your hand."

Making his right hand glow, he carefully pulled her hand away with his left. Blood spraying from the cut instantly, hitting his face and clothes. He didn't even realize that. His right placed itself on the cut, pressing against it. The amount of blood escaping from the wound reduced. Yet, he could see a fresh amount with every beat of her heart. Her life running through his fingers, quite literally.

Finally, allowing himself to look into her eyes, his heart nearly broke again. There was so much panic in her gaze, so much… God, how much it had to hurt. How much… closing his eyes for a second, he realized, that he was crying. When had that happened? Catching himself, he hunched down, his free hand finding its way into her hair, his lips pressing against her forehead in an attempt to sooth her panic.

"I'm here. I have you. Don't worry." He was nearly tempted to believe himself. Sitting up again, he locked his eyes with hers, feeling her blood run through his fingers. Feeling her fleeing pulse. A fresh surge of warmth with every beat, despite his spell. It was far less than it would be under different circumstances, he knew that but… 40 percent. The human body could function until a
blood loss of 40 percent. Roundabout. A little less for women. That was the breaking point. Below, she could survive. Above, she was as good as dead. How much blood had she lost already? Once again, he felt his doctor-side kick in, pushing the scared boyfriend away. Her pulse was fleeing. Her face pale. He guessed if he would touch her hand, it would feel cooler than normal. Placing her anywhere between 15 and 30 percent.

----

Peter watched the scene in front of his eyes in horror. The knife moving along her throat, blood spraying from the wound. If only he had dropped himself a bit closer to him. He could have been able to grab the hand of this maniac. Or try to grab the knife and pull it away. Or anything for that matter. Like this, though, he watched how the cloak finally ripped him away from her, flinging him to the side. Peter was on him seconds later, webbing his hands and feet to the ground. That guy wouldn't make them any troubles.

He turned his head, staring at the sorcerer, who had been standing by the side, watching the whole ordeal. He had taken a step in their general direction, Peter raising his hands, not knowing if he wanted to help his friend or... but the man raised his hands over his head, surrendering. Peter stared at him for a long second, then turned again, trusting him for the moment that he wouldn't interfere.

Stephen was kneeling beside Christine by now, his glowing hand on her throat. It was obvious that only she existed in his world right now. There was nothing more important than her.

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The second, the cloak realized that blood was spraying from Christine's throat, it went into shock. For like a second. It had failed its master yet again. It was a really bad cloak. Not being able to protect his girl. And then there was nothing more than anger. Finally succeeding in ripping the sorcerer away from her, the cloak threw him to the side, not bothering if he broke some bones when he impacted with the ground. Would only seem fair. The cloak saw, how its master teleported himself beside her, catching her. It was obvious that he didn't care for any of them. Still floating beside its master and Christine, the cloak saw how Mordo took a step towards them...

Hell no. That wouldn't happen. Mordo wouldn't interfere. Not if it had any say in that matter and it had. Swooshing past its master, the cloak coiled itself around Mordo's body, making sure he couldn't use his hands to cast magic, pulling him back until he hit the wall. The cloak kept tight, stopping any of his movements. If he had failed in protecting Christine from the get-go, it would damn certainly make sure that no one would interfere. For a second, there was the tempting thought of killing Mordo. Right here and now. The cloak remembered what terrible things this man had done. Yet, that choice wasn't its to make. Accordingly, it just remained coiled around him. Maybe pulling tight a bit more than necessary, exerting more pressure than needed, making it a bit hard to breathe.

----

Peter stared at the cloak, which had coiled itself around the boss-sorcerer of this group. The guy, who had beat up the doc that badly. Walking towards him, he raised his hands.

"Cloak? You can let go. I'll handle this." He stated, hoping that the sorcerer wouldn't fight back or try to escape within the second. The cloak seemed reluctant, not wanting to let go. This guy seemed to be its to keep down but then it did let go, hurrying to the side instantly for Peter to be able to web the man against the wall. He stared at him for some long seconds. Could that guy teleport around like the doc too? Would he simply escape?

"The… his sling ring!" the voice from behind his back startled him. Turning around, he saw the
The man was kneeling beside his webbed partner. For a moment Peter thought he wanted to help him escape, but he only pulled something from his hand, got up and stared at the mess they had created. His eyes wide with horror. The... sling ring? Turning his head back to the boss-guy, he looked at his hands. There it was, a small two-finger ring. Pulling it from his hand, he turned around. The cloak floated beside him, not daring to move too close to the doc. With his adrenaline fading, Peter felt the throbbing pain in his chest again. His body would punish him later for moving that much. Yet, it didn't really matter. Not matter at all. What should they do now? Call the ambulance?

Christine was looking at Stephen. There was only his face. She only concentrated on his face. She had to hold onto something to not go mad. She could still feel his hand on her throat, pressing down, but... there wasn't much left besides. There had been an unbelievable pain the second that man had cut her throat. It was still there, she knew that. Pulsing in the back of her mind, ready to swallow her if she allowed that to happen. She felt how close to dying she was. She knew the stages of hypovolemic shock, after all. Her body had grown cold, her heart thrumming like crazy, she felt uneasy and restless. Stage 2 of 4, if she remembered right.

"Kiss me." She whispered. She had to feel his lips again. She still had time, after all. She wanted to remember...

He looked at her for some moments, before he complied. Bending down, she felt his lips on hers. A slow, gentle, careful kiss. He was scared to move her by accident, wasn't he? After he broke away, she tasted blood in her mouth and on her lips. That one wasn't hers for sure.

"You bleed." She stated dryly, feeling the need to annoy him. Maybe she would see him smile one last time. That would be great. Just one last, true smile. His face was ruled by fear and worry currently.

He frowned when he heard her words. Raising his left arm, that one whose fingers had been buried in her hair, he licked along his shirt, leaving a trail of blood behind. She could see how he frowned, spat out. That was damn sure blood in his mouth.

"Not that bad." He stated. She couldn't stop herself from chuckling, even though a fresh bolt of pain rushed through her very being, undoing the world around her for a second. Not that bad.

"You look like shit." She retorted. Mordo had beat him up quite badly. If he hadn't fought against that damn alien earlier this morning, Stephen would surely have kicked that guys ass.

He managed a weak smile. Oh god, even a weak smile of his was better than his expression before that.

"I love you." She whispered. It escaped her lips before she could manage to stop herself. Even knew that she wanted to say that. It had just been there. He was here, trying to stop her from dying, even though he looked like somewhere close to fainting too. She guessed he wasn't aware of that. In his world, there was only her. And for that...

His timid smile was exchanged by pure horror instantly. "Don't say that." He stated firmly, obviously fearing she only said it because she was close to dying. Like, the list of words she would regret never having said.

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While Peter stared helplessly at the scene in front of his eyes, feeling sick and terrified when Christine told Stephen she loved him, Karen patched a live stream to Friday.

Friday analyzed the data she had received and in turn, informed her boss.

Tony Stark was looking at the Sorcerer Supreme for a few long seconds. Good, that they would fight to their deaths to protect the stone? Was that a threat? He didn't know how much he could do against her without his suit, but he surely would try if need be.

Friday's voice suddenly filling his ear made him flinch. He had completely forgotten his earpiece. Meanwhile, the bald woman in her white robes eyed him curiously.

"Boss? Christine Palmer is dying."

Five words. Just five simple fucking words, which made him...

"What?!" his voice was unusually high, worried.

They couldn't lose Christine. He knew what she meant to Strange. If he watched her die he would defiantly snap. He needed that man sane, however much he disliked admitting it.

"Apparently, someone sliced her throat." Friday's voice informed him.

Someone… someone sliced her... the chance of surviving something like that was largely based on how deep the cut was. If the artery had been cut...

"You know any good healing spells by chance?" he heard himself ask, the woman frowning at him.

"Why?" she asked, her eyes watchful.

"Someone who can't die is currently dying." He stated dryly. "You can make portals, right? We need to go to…" telling her the location, he waited, preparing mentally for, well, anything.

She looked at him for some long moments, waging his words. Then she sighed softly, raised her hand and drew a circle into the air, a golden glowing circle appearing as her hand moved.

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Stepping through her portal, the ancient one frowned at the scene in front of her eyes. Mordo webbed against a wall, Spider-Man and the cloak of levitation ready to attack anyone who got through the portal. And… Stephen Strange. Stephen Strange of all people. He was kneeling beside a woman, who was obviously badly hurt. She was the person who shouldn't die? Stark getting through the portal after her, made Spider-Man relax. The cloak hadn't bothered to attack her the moment it saw her. She heard Stark talk, but she didn't bother listening. Walking up to Strange, she touched his shoulder. If he was this sorcerer friend of Stark… if he came back from the future if he remembered... She felt how he flinched, raised his gaze. It was there. All her questions answered with one short gaze alone. He had been with her when she died. Seeing him use magic meant that he wouldn't heal his hands. That he embraced the way of a sorcerer. That he would help protect this world. She had always been curious who he would become. She had seen so much potential in him, but never more. The future with him in it hidden through her own death.

If the woman who was dying meant something to him, which she guessed based on his terrified expression… Stark was right. She couldn't die. A human mind could only take a certain number of losses before breaking.
She stepped away for a moment, drawing a complex rune with both her hands. The rune remained in the air for a moment, glowing golden like all spells. Touching it with her right, the light jumped onto her hand, the golden lines dissolving into dust. She knelt down beside Strange and that woman she didn't know, carefully nudging his hand. He moved one finger after a moment, blood spraying at them instantly. Placing her fingertips on the unprotected part of the wound, she felt her magic run into it.

First and foremost, she forced the energy into her body, searching for the damaged artery. That was the really important part. Then, she watched the edges of the wound move, closing itself. Slowly and methodically, she worked her way along the throat of that unknown woman, her fingers moving in sync with Strange's. He always raising a finger, making space for her to imbue the next part of damaged tissue with energy.

The second the cut was closed, the fingers of the woman were there, touching her throat, not yet believing that it was gone. She lay there for some long seconds, panic and disbelief in her eyes. Her gaze rested on her for a mere moment, before she moved. She sat up and buried her face against Strange's neck, he closing her into a strong embrace instantly. Watching, how he closed his eyes, how a weight greater than the world slipped from him, a feeling of dread filled her heart. If she had died… she didn't need to see the future, to guess that he wouldn't have made it. Not as the person he was meant to be. Probably freaked out completely, killing everyone close to him. She had seen that. Strong, emotional-unstable sorcerers. They could wreak so much havoc on their surroundings.

The moment Christine was securely wrapped in his arms, the world around him faded away once more. There was only her. Her face pressed against his neck. Her trembling body. Her fleeing pulse. Her cold hands clinging to his shirt. She wasn't bleeding to death anymore, but she wasn't anywhere near safe either. She needed a transfusion. She had lost too much blood to go without. Pulling her away carefully, he wanted to…

But his thoughts came to a stop when he saw her gaze. It was still terrified, yes, but timid hope filled her eyes. He hadn't seen something more beautiful in a long while. Maybe in his entire lifetime. Gifting her something like a mad smile, he pressed his lips against hers. It wasn't how they usually kissed. It wasn't like the careful kiss earlier either. It was a mad dance of tongues and lips, sloppy and aggressive and loving at the same time. A reaffirmation, that they hadn't lost each other. That she was alive, that she would be okay.

Breaking away, he gently stroked along her cold cheek. Her lips were blue, with a hint of red. The remnants of their earlier kiss, his blood on her. After a few last long moments of looking at each other, he pecked her nose and carefully got up, pulling her along. Finally turning, he saw, that only cloak was left. The others had apparently disappeared through the still open, golden portal. Cloak gestured towards the portal before floating through it. Stephen blinked. The cloak really remembered? Who would have guessed it had memories in the traditional way. Slinging an arm around Christine's waist, he pulled her towards the portal. Nearly instantly, she tensed against him, not willing to move. He stopped, looking from her terrified face to the portal and back again.

"He kidnapped you through one of those?" he asked gently, putting the pieces together. All she did was nod, stare at the glowing ring in utter fear.

"How do you know where it leads? That we aren't going to be attacked again?" she asked, her voice trembling with uncertainty.

Looking at her for a long moment, he turned, embracing her again. For a few moments, he only held her, made sure that he felt how she relaxed against him. As soon as she did that, he brought a bit of
"The woman who saved you came through this one, I'd guess. The others most likely disappeared through it. I think we have to explain ourselves to her."

Seeing, how she frowned, he smiled timidly. He could guess her question before she asked. Why?

"She is, like, the boss-sorcerer. The stone I have should belong to her." He hesitated for a moment, then added "I actually have questions, which I hope she can answer." with a quiet voice.

Christine looked at him, obviously not convinced to walk through that portal.

"The cloak would never tell me to walk through it if it wasn't safe." He finally stated, knowing that that was true for sure.

"It floated." Was Christine's first reaction to the cloak. Then a frown appeared on her face. "What makes you so sure it wouldn't trick you? You know it?"

"Yeah, it floats. And yeah, I know it. It's kind of..." how should he phrase that? "...my magical companion in the future. It seems to remember what happened too, which makes it probably the cloth most interested in my survival." He added dryly for good measure, seeing her frown. Yet, there was an amused glimmer in her eyes. Mission lifting Christine's mood in progress.

"You trust the cloak?" she asked slowly, watching his face.

"Always." He answered without hesitation.

For a long moment, he watched her face. She seemed more relaxed, but yet not willing to step through the portal. How should he...

"Okay. How about this? I hug you, you close your eyes and I slowly walk us through the portal. When you open your eyes again, everything is still okay, okay?"

For a long moment, she didn't answer, still indecisive if she wanted to go through this sparkling golden ring into an unknown place. Where they may or may not get attacked again. Closing her eyes, she leaned against him, nodding against his chest without a word. Hugging her, he did as he had said. He slowly stepped back towards the portal, making sure to keep Christine close to his chest.

As soon as he was through the portal, he felt the shift in atmosphere. The sudden change between standing on a street and in the library of Kamar-Taj. It felt strangely familiar. For a brief second, he wondered how entering the sanctum would feel. If it would feel like coming home. Then he pulled Christine through, intensifying his embrace when he felt how she flinched.

"I'm still here. Don't worry." He whispered into her ear, feeling how she relaxed slowly. "You can open your eyes, by the way." He added after a moment, trying to let his voice sound light, but failed miserably. She did what he had said, looking around. First fearful, then disbelieving. He only smiled weakly, loosening his embrace to be able to look around himself. The library looked like he remembered it to be. He could even see Wong in the distance, sitting at his reception and throwing curious gazes into their direction while trying to seem disinterested. Kamar-Taj attracted a weird assembly of guests, after all. Always had. Spider-Man and Iron-Man in here wouldn't seem all that odd by comparison.

Finally facing the others, his eyes passed over all of them. Cloak, Peter, Stark. The Ancient One. The sorcerer, who had stopped attacking them. Mordo and the guy who had sliced Christine's throat were
nowhere to be seen. Which was probably for the best. He wasn't sure if he could keep himself from trying to kill harm them in a sudden rush of hate.

The soft voice of the Ancient One pulled him out of revenge related anger management issues.

"Chambers? Can you get them to the infirmary? I think she'll need a transfusion."

The sorcerer, who hadn't attacked them, nodded and was going to turn when the Ancient One stopped him mid-movement by touching his shoulder.

Then her gaze went to Christine. "Can you go through another portal?" her voice was soft and gentle. She hadn't missed, that Christine had been terrified by her portal to Kamar-Taj.

"Please, no more portals." The fear in her voice made Stephen embrace his love stronger again, holding her close for a moment.

"Then, let's go." He said softly, looking at the guy who was obviously called Chambers. Stephen looked at Christine for a moment before he let go of her, his arm securely wrapped around her waist to stabilize her a little.

While they left the library, he felt Wong's gaze on him. Following their guide, he felt more eyes on him. It didn't bother him very much initially until he realized that basically everyone who they passed raised their head and shot them a gaze. When he had come here as a student, he had been largely ignored by everyone. Yet, he hadn't come here as a student. For them, he was an unknown sorcerer. An outsider. Most sorcerers had either been trained in Kamar-Taj or at one of the sanctums, raising the question where he had learned magic. Only left outcasts as a teacher, right? Maybe even Kaecilius. The thought alone made him shiver. Good, that he wasn't that keen on human interaction anyway.

"What's wrong?" he heard Christine's calm voice. She had to have felt his shivering.

"Nothing." He only answered and tried it with a small smile. Meanwhile, he realized that him being seen as an outsider was the reason the Ancient One wanted them to use a portal initially. She knew what her fellow sorcerer would think when seeing him. If they had used a portal… Christine only frowned in response but didn't say anything to that. Instead, her gaze went behind him.

"Is it normal, that we are followed by a cloak?"

Stopping, he turned around. Cloak was there, in a respectable distance but it was there. Would explain those gazes. And make the rumors about him even worse. An outsider with a relic. How had he gotten that one? Had he broken into the Sanctum Sanctorum?

"Oh, come." He said in the general direction of the cloak, which seemed to bounce up and down in joy. A moment later, its clasps rested securely on his shoulders. He felt, how the cloak nestled against him. Even that seemed to be normal. He couldn't even begin to explain how much the feeling of cloak resting on his shoulders calmed him down.

"Ehm, is that normal?" Christine's voice ripped him out of his thoughts. Turning his head towards her, he chuckled. Cloak had coiled one side of it around her waist in an effort to stabilize her further.

"I would guess." He answered dryly. The cloak remembered. While his head wanted to tackle the important questions of the possible implications of cloak remembering, a very different thought pushed itself into the forefront of his mind. That piece of cloth had actual memories. God. He should be grateful that Christine had always insisted on cloak leaving the room when they had sex. Thinking about it, cloak had always seemed sad to be sent away. Was he hanging around with a perverted
Finally entering the infirmary, Stephen even felt the eyes of the nurse on him, eyeing him suspiciously. Then her gaze found Christine. It was nearly funny, to watch her jump into action, switch between bored woman to actual medical staff. Instantly, she was beside Christine, helping her to one of three beds in the room.

"What happened?"


The nurse looked at him for a long moment, before her eyes went back to Christine, focusing on her throat.

"Where's the wound?"

"No wound there anymore." Chambers stated, sounding both exhausted and tired.

Stephen saw how the nurse hesitated, staring at the sorcerer. No wound there anymore. She knew, just like them, that healing wounds shouldn't be possible.

Catching herself, she helped Christine to the bed, asking for her blood type and disappeared to get some blood preserves. Meanwhile, Stephen dragged a chair to Christine's bedside, entwining their fingers as soon as he sat. For a moment he only looked at Christine. She looked terribly pale. Then his attention went to Chambers, who still stood in the room.

"Thank you for bringing us here." He stated softly, looking at the young sorcerer. He couldn't remember having seen him in Kamar-Taj, yet alone having interacted with him later on. Which implied he would have been at one of the sanctums when he got here in his original timeline. And he would die trying to defend it from Kaecilius, after all, he hadn't seen him after the battle of Hong Kong. For a moment he felt irritated and something like sad. That guy seemed to have morals, he surely didn't deserve to die. Yet, no one ever deserved to die.

Chambers, unbeknownst to his thoughts, nodded and smiled timidly.

"I... I'm sorry for everything. I really am."

Stephen could only smile sadly and acknowledge his words with a nod. Chambers seemed to get that he didn't want to talk about any of it right now.

"I'll... ah... get to go. See ya, I guess. Good luck, Miss Palmer." And gone he was before any of them could say a word.

Stephen blinked when he realized that that fellow had even remembered her name. Looking at Christine, he smiled timid, raising their entwined hands to his lips and kissing hers softly.

"Respectively, he doesn't seem all that bad." Christine commented thoughtfully before turning her head to look at him. He only hummed a response, gently caressing her cold hand with his thumb, and closed his eyes for a moment.

The moment was longer than he indented it to be. When he opened his eyes, the nurse was returning with several blood preserves in hand. He hoped they were blood products. Giving her whole blood would be stupid.

"What do you want to give her?" he asked softly, watching the woman with hawk eyes. She looked
at him irritated, obviously not used to being asked questions.

"Resuscitation fluids, red blood cells and fresh frozen plasma."

"Is the blood type compatible?" he asked suspiciously.

He could see how she narrowed her eyes. "I grabbed zero negative, that stuff is compatible with everything. That way I don't have to care for her blood type. I'll check that the preserves are correctly labeled. Anything to add?" she asked pointedly, obviously annoyed by him.

"Nope." He stated calmly.

"That moron was a doctor, wasn't he?" she asked Christine in a low voice, while she dripped a bit of the preserves blood on test sheets to confirm the blood type. It was indeed zero negative as expected. Christine only giggled in response, leading to him huffing annoyed.

"She's a doctor too." He pointed out annoyed, earning gazes from both women.

"Yeah, but she ain't question my medical knowledge, mister." The nurse stated annoyed.

Stephen narrowed his eyes at the open insult but kept silent this time.

"Obviously, I did grab something compatible. We'll start with the fluids." The nurse told Christine, obviously ignoring him.

Stephen knew, that cross-matching would be necessary normally. Mix some of Christine's blood with the blood in the preserves. Make sure it didn't clump. Make sure they were compatible. Yet, that test needed ages, more or less. If the preserve was zero negative...

Once again, Stephen watched with hawk eyes, how the nurse asked Christine to pump her hand a few times, disinfected her skin where she wanted to insert the needle and did just that on her first try. Soon after, the bag with fluids was connected to Christine's bloodstream.

Stephen watched with a silent sigh of relief, how the fluid entered Christine's arm and disappeared into her system. Closing his eyes, he pressed a kiss against the hand he was still holding. That damn nurse had broken quite a bunch of hospital rules, yet... if the blood type was zero negative... his thoughts started to scatter after a moment, instead, he focused on the hope that Christine would be okay. The huge feeling of relief. She would be fine in due time.

"Ellen? Can you give us a moment?" the gentle voice of the Ancient One ripped him out of his empty state of mind. Opening his eyes, he looked around. The nurse stood by Christine's bed, watching her. Searching for any symptoms that her body might not accept the transfusion. The Ancient One stood by the open door, her eyes on them. The nurse, (Ellen?), turned her head, wanting to say something.

"Don't worry. I guess Doctor Strange will notify you if she shows any symptoms."

The woman was silent for a few moments before she huffed and left the room, closing the door while doing so.

Slowly, the Ancient One walked towards them, stopping by Christine's side, opposite Stephen and looked at her.

"How are you coping?" she asked softly.
Something like a smile passed over Christine's face. "Not dying anymore?"

While Stephen smiled a tiny bit, the Ancient One remained calm, like always.

"Thanks for healing me." Christine stated after a few moments, looking at the bald woman in her white robes.

"Oh…" she grabbed a chair, sitting down beside her. "I didn't heal you. I gave your cells enough energy to heal themselves. The spell I used merely inspired them to jump into action."

"Meaning you could have healed my hands?" Stephen's voice sounded exhausted, yet curious. Christine moved her head to look at him. She could have healed his hands?

"I could've. Yet, you have to admit it would have been counterintuitive. You wouldn't have become a sorcerer if I healed your hands. Besides, it would have raised questions. Normally, no sorcerer should have enough power to be able to do such a thing."

"You used his energy to heal her? Traded in some of your lifetime for her?" this time, Stephen's voice was curious and something like…

The bald woman only tilted her head in what seemed to be a yes.

… worried?

"What will you do about the others? They will know that whatever you did shouldn't be possible."

"I think I'll alter their memories. Whatever happened shouldn't have happened anyway. I'll make them believe I jumped in before she was hurt. Makes enough sense and doesn't raise questions."

Christine watched confused, how the two talked with one another as if they knew each other. Yet, that shouldn't be possible. Even if Stephen knew her…

"How do you know each other?" she asked, obviously confused.

"I know her through my past, she knows me through her future." Stephen stated, gently stroking her hand.

She… what?

"You know the future too?" she asked, feeling how her head started to pound. Why did everyone know the future?

The bald woman simply nodded.

That meant… that they somehow met in the middle? Stephen coming from a future which never happened and she knowing of a future, which didn't exist anymore? Was that in any way even possible? Well, she saw both of them right in front of her eyes, implying an impossible yes.

"You have the time stone?" the woman asked softly, looking at Stephen, who only nodded.

"I have to talk with you." She stated while getting up, leaving the room to give them a little privacy.

Christine watched how the woman left them, then turned her head and looked at Stephen. She didn't want him to leave. Not anytime soon. Not ever. From one moment to the other, being faced by Stephen not being here and her being alone in an infirmary in a fucking magical someplace, she was terrified to death. She… she couldn't… being here alone… what if… Her heart rate still increased,
increased even more. The dizziness she had become used to was getting even worse.

"I…" she tried to start, not knowing what exactly she wanted to ask of him. Please, stay here, for sure.

"I have to." He looked as heartbroken as she felt terrified.

"I'll be right back, okay?" he stated softly, pressing his lips against her hand once again and claimed her lips shortly afterward. That short kiss really didn't calm her down. He shouldn't leave! He… In horror, she watched how he got up, walked a few steps and then stopped, looking at her.

He didn't want to leave her either. Why did he do it then?

"Stay with her." he stated. A moment later his cloak left his shoulders and floated beside her. How should that damn cloak calm her down? She had seen how it had jumped the guy behind her, the guy who had sliced her throat. It hadn't saved her back then and it would most likely not now either. She didn't know why Stephen trusted that thing, but she would surely not do that!

Watching the cloak, her eyes flipped back to him. She felt, how she danced around the edge of freaking out completely. He couldn't… he… "Please," Her voice broke in the middle of the word, making him stop and look at her. Sighing softly, he raised his fingers. Astonished, she watched him move his arms, creating a copy of himself, which stood beside him. The second Stephen looked at her, tilting his head softly, while the first one left the room.

Chapter End Notes

I've researched more about blood loss, medical terms and blood transfusions in the last days than I ever wanted to know. Yet, I thought that Christine and Stephen being doctors, they had to know all that stuff. The right terms. The state of her body. Everything.
I wanted to thank you for the amount of feedback I got for the last chapter, it means a lot to me. I'll try to write fewer cliffhangers... for a few chapters.
I'd be happy to get some comments for this chapter too, haha. I'm always happy to hear from you.

Lastly, more of a note: I'll be learning for an exam for the next two weeks. I'll update afterward, I promise!

Hugs and see ya!
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Finally, I am back. Exam written (and passed, haha). Thanks again to those who wished me luck!

You'll meet Stephen, the Ancient One, Christine, Peter and Tony.

Have fun reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

As soon as Stephen was out the door, he felt the gaze of the Ancient One on him. Ellen rushed past them, eyeing him suspiciously once again and closed the door after a moment. Before he could even say a word, she spoke.

"Will you try to save me?"

Her voice was like silk, not showing any emotion. He knew, that it was normal for her. Showing emotions wasn't anything she did.

"No." he stated gently, watching her. For a single, tiny second, he could see relief. He guessed, she had hoped that he wouldn't mess with the natural flow of time.

"What happened to lead to this moment?" she asked immediately, letting the prior topic drop as if it had been casual. Like talking about the weather instead of her own death.

"Two years from now, more or less, there'll be a mad titan seeking to collect the Infinity Stones. He'll succeed. At least, that's what he should. He'll snap his fingers and wipe out half the universe." He paused for a moment, holding her gaze. It was intense. She was searching in his eyes for anything that wouldn't match the story. "I wanted to hand him the time stone. In every possibility I saw, he would have gotten it earlier or later. Somehow, someway." he broke their eye contact, looking away. He could see how she tilted her head, sensing he reached a point he didn't want to talk about.

"How many possibilities did you see?" she asked softly, waiting for him to be willing to continue talking.

"Over 14 million." He stated in a soft voice, earning the first real reaction he had ever seen from her. She grimaced.

"In how many did you die?"

"Quite a few."

She looked at him for a long moment, before raising her hand. A second later they were in the mirror dimension, with no one around to hear them. None had been close before, but… just to make sure, he guessed.

"This time, when you wanted to hand him the stone, would you have been able to defeat him afterward?"
Stephen was silent for a moment. Would they?

"There was a chance. Some things had to align quite impossibly, but it would have worked out. I glimpsed far enough into that timeline to know it would work out."

"Were you essential for defeating him?"

He barked into laughter. Feeling, how insanity dripped back into his being. After he had seen the future on Titan after he had found the one where they could win… for one second, while he came back from a million different versions of himself, he knew he had been mad. His feeble mind wasn't meant to grasp the impossibility of it all. He had been quite successful in hiding what he knew. In forgetting about it. Pushing it away into the darkest corner of his mind. Talking about it now…

"All I did was make sure, he would snap his fingers in the exact right moment. I die as collateral."

A frown appeared on her usually expressionless face. He knew what she thought about. A sorcerer could never see past his own death. At that point, all futures one could ever have ended and merged into the darkness beyond. How could he possibly know, that the remaining survivors would defeat their enemy?

Instead of enquiring, she changed the topic back to their original topic. "How come you are here? Like in this moment here. With all your memories intact? Multiple people. The Eye can't do such a thing."

His lips twitched into a smile. "The Eye didn't do it. I didn't do it. I don't know how it happened. It shouldn't have, I know that. I… I think the time stone brought us back. Reversed time on its own."

He was silent for a moment. A long moment, in which he felt her gaze on him.

"I think, it was five stones together reversing time. The four he had glowed while I wanted to hand him the stone."

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Five stones together. The Ancient One eyed him for a very long moment, being silent. Five stones. It would explain the huge wave of energy she had felt nearly a month ago. The Infinity Stones banding together to achieve something impossible. Reordering time, reality and space, forcing a new timeline out of the old one, while keeping their mind and soul intact. Thinking about it, it sounded like all six had done it. Five being together, the sixth joining the moment it knew what was going on.

Time was the obvious one. It reverted time. Mind kept their minds and memories stable. Place reallocated them to the place where they had been in in their past, current timeline. Reality kept the strings together, making sure they ended in their reality, not in a different one. And power lent its siblings the energy to even do it. And soul… well… Being touched by infinity energy should not only break their mind but their very being, shouldn't it? Maybe soul had saved their souls, quite literally. Together, the stones ripped a new, an impossible timeline out of the current flow of time. Gifting those people, who remembered, an unbelievable advantage. They knew what would come for them.

She hadn't heard of something like this ever happening. In any reality in any universe in any timeline. It shouldn't be. And yet here he was, obviously remembering a future that wasn't yet to be. Having been with her when she died. Knowing things only he could know by living through them. She had seen it in his eyes. She had seen the scars in his soul. The madness of having lived through 14 million possibilities. While her mind wanted to dwell on the impossibility of it all, another thought came to be. More important than any else.
"Do you see how you guys fight against the titan in two years?" She could see the worry on his face before he could even say a word. There was…

"I..." But he never finished the sentence. Instead, she watched, how he simply collapsed.

----

Opening his eyes, Stephen found himself on the ground. He blinked a few times, trying to clear his clouded vision. Sitting up slowly, he groaned in pain, his entire back throbbing with every tiny movement he made. How could he not have realized… well, he knew why. Christine was more important than his current condition. What did he care about himself when her life was at stake? She had said he looked like shit, hadn't she? Finally focussing his gaze again, he saw the Ancient One looking at him worriedly.

"You should get some rest before we continue to talk." She stated softly while watching how he tried to get back onto his feet.

After he had succeeded in just that, he leaned against the wall in his back, realizing how his vision flickered again. His back was cursing him right now. How could he dare to lean against something?

"Do you…" he took a slow breath, finally getting fully aware of what was hurting in his body. His back, his shoulders, his waist, where the staff had grabbed him, …

"Yes, I have more questions, but I doubt you could answer them." She stated, looking at him for a long moment. "You are looking as if you could faint again any second." She added, raising her fingers and created a portal. Shoving him through, he found himself back in the little infirmary.

----

Christine nearly freaked out when the second Stephen vanished into thin air. She could guess what that meant. Her Stephen, the real one, couldn't maintain the spell, which meant he had to… The cloak placed itself on her like a blanket, seemingly trying to calm her down. That stupid cape thing. It should let her be, leave her alone for good! It couldn't… It didn't… While Christine felt, how she jumped off the edge of sanity and panic poured into the empty space, a thought rushed through her mind. Cold and calculating. The cloak. It had attacked the sorcerer behind her. It had moved him around that much, that he had sliced her throat. All of that was its fault. Within the second, she tried to get the cloak off of her. She didn't want to be touched by it. She kicked at it, raising the arm, which wasn't connected to the bag of fluids, she grabbed the cloak to rip that stupid garment away from her

And then the collar of the cloak brushed her face. Inhaling its scent, she stilled in surprise. She didn't know what she had expected, but not that for sure. It smelled like Stephen. While she calmed down a bit, she realized her crazed heartbeat. Ellen was beside her, looking worried. She shouldn't freak out while having too little blood in her system.

Then, to her horror, she heard that hissing sound. That sound which would hunt her until the end of her life. She had just come home, texting Stephen to ask where he was. Entering her bedroom, she pulled off her jacket, letting it drop onto the bed. A shower. She needed a shower. The day had been crazy. A bus had crashed into a car, several cars behind the bus were too close to stop and… well…

Ten people were gone from this world. Ten people with hopes and dreams and plans. She knew she shouldn't let it that close to her. If she allowed herself to dwell on how many she had lost, it would destroy her. And yet… she had watched a six-year-old girl die on the table. She had… She really needed a hot shower. And more distraction. She would wait for Stephen to be home, yes. Netflix
would do in the time until then. She would ask her boyfriend if he wanted to join her for that shower. And then… there had been this hissing sound, interrupting her train of thoughts. Slowly turning around, she recognized the golden sparkles of magic. Whatever had appeared in her bedroom looked very much like a portal. Could… could Stephen do portals?

Instead of Stephen, a different man stepped through. He looked at her, all serious.

"Your boyfriend has something I want."

She knew she had backed away, her calves hitting her bed, her heart thrumming in fear.

"Oh, don't worry. I hope he'll just trade it in." the unknown sorcerer told her softly when he saw her terrified expression. A second later another hissing sound. Another portal. And another sorcerer, who grabbed her and dragged her through the first portal, while she thrashed around like crazy, fighting for her life.

Hearing that hissing sound again… seeing a portal open again… there was nothing else but fear. If the cloak hadn't draped itself on her, she would have tried to jump to her feet and bolt away. Run for her life. This way, however, with the unmoving garment on her body and Stephen's scent surrounding her, she watched horrified, how the portal formed. This time, Stephen stumbled through. Seeing him, her panic for her life seamlessly turned into panic for him. He looked worse than before, however that was possible.

For a long moment, she felt his gaze on her. He looked torn between rushing to her and… and…

"Don't even think about it." The voice of the woman, who had saved her life, stated firmly. Where had she… through the portal, right? Christine watched, how Stephen went to the bed beside her, sitting down. She could hear people talking, but she didn't listen anymore. Her mind was fixed on the painful expression on Stephen's face. He had to have fainted. That broke the spell and his copy dissolved.

A moment later, Ellen was by his side, asking the usual questions. What had happened, what did hurt. Christine couldn't see much of Stephen or Ellen. The nurse had her back to her, examining him. For a little while, Christine zoned out. She knew what Stephen could have. Strained muscles, broken ribs, concussion or maybe… even… no. She wouldn't allow herself to think about even worse. Instead, she snuggled into the damn cloak and breathed in Stephen's scent. He would be okay. He had to be. If he

Her thoughts came to a stop, when she saw, how Ellen pulled his shirt off. Unveiling his back, her gaze fixed on the countless, gruesome bruises. Stephen's back was rather one big bruise, really. A moment later Ellen's body was between them again, her hands on him, most likely running along the strained muscles to make sure they were strained, not ripped, and his rips. If a rip was broken or…

"Hey…" the voice of the bald woman caught her attention. Slowly and unwillingly, she ripped her eyes away from a Stephen she couldn't even see towards those calm eyes.

"Tell me how he moved earlier."

Christine blinked for a moment. How he had moved. Her eyes flipped back to Stephen or rather to Ellen's back in front of Stephen. On their way here, he hadn't limped or leaned onto one side more than necessary. He hadn't flinched when he had hugged her more than one time. Yet, he had had blood in his mouth. Then again, that hadn't been much. Could be because of damaged gums. If his lung had been pierced she would know that. He would have flinched when hugging her. He would have difficulty breathing. His skin would be blueish by now because of the lack of oxygen. Closing
her eyes, Christine took a deep breath. Yes. Stephen would be alright.

Turning her head back to the sorceress, she smiled timidly. "He moved normally." She hesitated for a moment before she added: "Thank you."

"Not for that. What could he have at worst?" she asked. Christine knew what she was doing. Keep her head busy with rational thoughts to keep her from going crazy.

"A broken rib. People tend to not feel that if the lungs haven't been damaged. Concussion." Her gaze went back to Stephen (Ellen). His back… "Strained back. Guess he won't be able to move for a little."

"Would you recognize a concussion?" the woman asked, while Christine's gaze was still on Ellen. The question made her snort. If she could recognize a concussion? What kind of question was that? Turning her head back again, she looked at the woman.

"Of course. The symptoms are headaches, dizziness, confusion and so on."

She stopped after she had listed the symptoms. The problems with concussions could be, that they didn't show immediately. They could surface months later. Yet, she would recognize the symptoms. She would know if Stephen had one.

Christine was silent for a moment. Meanwhile, Ellen walked past them, most likely to get some medicine.

Turning her head again, she felt as if watching a tennis game. Always turn her head from one side to the other. Her gaze found Stephen, sitting on the edge of the bed. His gaze was sleepy, but he locked eyes with her instantly.

"How do you feel?" he asked, his voice soft and filled with worry.

"Hmm… In progress." Christine retorted. There was not much to say, really. She was still getting fluids. After the red blood cells, things would really get better. Stephen knew that.

"You still look like shit." She threw back, earning a small smile from him.

"Oh, I listened to your explanations. Can't be that bad."

Christine snorted and shook her head. That man. A moment of silence slipped between them, they just looking at one another. Their beds were too far away for Christine's liking.

"Was I exchanged by a cloak already?" Stephen asked after a moment, his voice trying to sound light.

Christine rolled her eyes in response. "No, it threw itself at me. Don't know what to think about that." Stephen didn't have to know that she very nearly freaked out. "It smells like you. That's the only good thing."

Stephen frowned. "It does?" he asked in surprise, not saying anything more to that. He seemingly didn't know anything about cloaks which smelled like him. Turning her head back to the woman, Christine raised a question.

"Can we… ehm… move the beds together later?" after all, they had to stay here for a little. Stephen needed sleep and she had to wait for her transfusion to be finished. Truth be told, she didn't think she would have a single calm second if Stephen slept further away than an arm's length. This place… it
still freaked her out. Murderous sorcerers and fucking flying cloaks, which still entrapped her. She wanted it to be gone, even though it smelled like Stephen. The sorceress only nodded as a response, not saying a word.

Some minutes later Ellen returned with an ointment, which she generously spread on Stephen's back. He got a white shirt and their beds were indeed moved together. Would be pretty pointless if *that* was the impossible thing in a magical infirmary. As soon as Stephen was in the bed beside hers again, the cloak flipped away from her.

The moment that damnable garment was away from her, relief flooded her being. Filled with something like dread, she watched how it hovered above her for a second. Please, please, please, go away. If that thing threw itself at her again she would completely lose it... Stephen snuggling close ripped her out of cloak related fears. Turning her head towards him, she watched, how he placed his face close to hers, one arm finding its way around her waist, pulling her close carefully.

"It wouldn't ever harm you." He said in a soft voice. He had obviously seen how she had looked at the cloak. Christine couldn't do anything else but smile. It wouldn't ever harm her. It had already done that, but she wouldn't point that out.

"Good night." She whispered instead, wrapping her free arm around him. His lips twitched into a small smile before he pressed his lips against hers in a soft kiss. A moment later his head was back on his pillow and his eyes closed.

"I'll leave you for now." The voice of the boss-sorcerer caught Christine's attention once again. Her head flipping towards her. "Ellen? Can you tell me if something goes wrong?" Christine could see how Ellen nodded, then the woman was gone. Ellen looked at them for a long moment, before sitting down again. Her eyes altering between them and the magazine in her hand.

Slowly, very, very slowly, Christine allowed herself to relax. Her gaze still darted through the room, wanting to see where that damn cloak had gone. It floated in a corner. For a mere second, Christine stared at it. She couldn't shake the feeling off, that it watched them. Ripping her eyes away from it, she looked at Stephen, trying to soothe the unwell feeling the cloak left in her tummy by watching him. He was definitely sleeping. His breath came in slow, rhythmical puffs. His eyes moved involuntarily. His arm on her waist was relaxed. She wanted nothing more than to raise her hand and cup his face. Pull him close to be able to kiss him. Drown herself in him until all her thoughts were gone. Yet, she didn't want to wake him up and she didn't want to move the arm which was connected to the bag of fluids. More than necessary at least. Instead, she moved the arm which held him and dug her fingers into his hair.

Looking at him, she debated with herself, whether she could close her eyes or not. She was afraid of the darkness behind her eyelids. She was afraid of sleep. She was terrified of dreams. She would hear that hissing noise again. She would be kidnapped again. She would be on that street, dying again. She would see Stephens fearsome expression while he tried everything to save her. And maybe, this time, he couldn't.

She didn't close her eyes. No. She turned a bit, her fingers still playing with Stephen's hair. It kind of calmed her down. Her gaze found the bag of fluids, which slowly dripped into her system. It was half empty.

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After the doc and Christine left, being followed by the cloak, Peter watched, how the bald woman in her white robes left too. Leaving Mister Stark and him alone with the grumpy looking guy at the reception.
"And now?" he asked, turning to look at Mister Stark, who just sighed softly.

"Guess we have to wait until someone gets back. Christine has to get first aid first." He stated, strolling away from him. Peter watched, how he pulled a random book from a shelf and started to flick through the pages. They were… allowed to read?

Looking around in the library, he put one and one together. The grumpy guy had to be the librarian. And… turning, he walked up to the reception, watching the man watching him.

"Which book would you give to an idiot who never practiced magic?"

The guy's face remained completely calm. Yet, he got up and let him through the library. Some moments later, he had an old book in hand. It seemed well read, its cover looking old and battered from time and many hands touching it.

"If you damage the book I swear you'll find yourself faster in another dimension that you can search for an excuse why it happened." The man stated while handing him the book, returning to his reception. Peter only blinked. Had that been a threat? Would the doc come and pick him up if he was kicked into another dimension? For a moment he thought he would, but the doc couldn't do any portals currently. He simply couldn't pick him up. Gulping, he opened the book carefully.

And blinked.

What language was that?

"That's Sanskrit." Karen informed him. "Should I translate it?" she added instantly. Peter blinked once again. She could… of course, she could. She was a Stark AI. "Yes please." He said, watching how his display lit up and Latin letters overlaid the original text. Perfect English sentences. Moving the book around, he watched how the letters on his display adjusted, moving along.

"Damn, that's super awesome Mister Stark!" he stated in excitement. He could hear a chuckle. Mister Stark could obviously guess which functionality he had found. Instant translation. How cool was that?

"You can call me Tony."

Peter's head snapped up at that statement, the book in his hand momentarily forgotten. He could… call him Tony. That was… that was…

"I…" he stuttered, not knowing what to say. To be allowed to call him Tony. That was… were they… he knew, that Mister… Tony had somehow become his father figure. And he guessed Tony knew that very well. He wasn't an idiot after all. To be allowed to call him Tony…

He could see a soft smile on his face. The adult held his gaze for a moment before he started to speak.

"We traveled back in time, fought an alien which shouldn't be and you dragged me into a building I never saw. I guess we can drop the formalities," he stated matter-of-factly, his eyes back on the book he was flipping through.

For a long moment, Peter felt all giddy. Excited like a little child on Christmas. Only one night to go until Santa left some presents. He… he had a second family, hadn't he? Tony and the doc and a cloak. They had fought Thanos together. They had traveled back in time together. They had danced with an alien and saved Christine. Even though he had to admit, that he had barely done anything. Yet, without his help, Mister Tony wouldn't have gotten into the sanctum. The woman wouldn't
have healed Christine. He didn't want to think about that. About what if the blond woman had died. Instead, another thought slipped into his mind. This new family consisted of two adults, who could easily be married, a cloak and him. A ragtag team trying to save the universe. They needed a name. They really needed a name.

His gaze went back to the book he was holding, reading through the first page. Or trying to. His head was busy throwing stupid names at him. The reversers. Going to be titan-killers. The unforgettables. Chuckling softly, he forced himself to concentrate on the book. He really wanted to read that. Get some understanding about magic. The first few pages were introductory stuff. Sorcerers seemed to draw on dimensional energy. And with that energy they could cast spells. Create shields, summon weapons.

Flipping through the pages, he found some basic moves. Carefully placing the old book on a shelf in front of him, he tried to go through the motions, Karen even helping him by showing which movement had to be done when. Unsurprisingly, nothing happened. While doing the motions again, he heard a snort from behind. Turning around, he saw Tony watching him.

"You want to learn magic?" he asked, his voice carefully calm. Peter guessed, that if they weren't in a magical library, his tone would have been different. The teenager simply shrugged.

"Can't hurt. I really wanna do portals." Portals were awesome. If he could do them… but he had to get there first. Portals were much harder than some stupid basic movements.

After some more tries, he sighed softly. Maybe he should continue to read the chapters before those motions.

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While Peter tried to grasp the very basics of magic, Tony got restless. Too much time had passed for them to still be alone in a library. The Sorcerer Supreme should check back on them, shouldn't she? Or anyone for that matter. Yet, only Wong stared at them grumpily. What if there had been complications during Christine's blood transfusion? What if Strange had finally passed out and hurt something vital in his body the process? He had looked pretty damn screwed up when Tony saw him kneeling on that street. Honestly, Tony had wondered how that man was still conscious and on top of that saving his girlfriend from dying. Then again, it was Christine. If it had been Pepper in her stead, he knew he would go to some impossible lengths to save her. The same was true for Strange.

Sighing softly, his gaze focused on the pages of the book he was holding. Kind of, he was envying Peter. Without Friday, he couldn't read Sanskrit, which left him to search for drawings he could look at. After turning the page, he stared at even more Sanskrit. Wonderful. Instantly, his mind drifted off again. For a moment he allowed his head to play through all gruesome possibilities which could go wrong right now. Maybe Christine had gotten the wrong blood type and was dying. The thought made him shiver and then again, he knew that wouldn't happen. Strange would simply not allow something like that to happen. He seemed like a control freak to Tony. He would pretty damn make sure, that his girl didn't get the wrong blood.

After three more books, he was flipping through one which depicted the various kinds of weapons one could summon. Apparently, if it came to weapons, the only limit was the imagination of the sorcerer. For a long moment, he stared at a drawing of something that had to be related to a rapier. Covered with barbs. Which seemed to be able to move, if he interpreted the small drawings below the main image correctly. Was that a rapier chainsaw? While turning the page, he heard those soft footsteps again. Raising his gaze, he (finally) saw the bald woman walk towards him. For a moment, her gaze flipped to Peter, who went through basic magic motions again. Like before, nothing happened.
"How are they?" Tony asked before she could even come to a stop. Originally, he had wanted to ask how Christine was, but Strange not joining them meant that he...

"They are fine, I guess. In due time at least. Christine isn't freaking out anymore. Strange is sleeping. He collapsed as soon as Christine was safe."

Tony nodded absentmindedly while placing the book back into the shelf. That sounded about right. "Can we see them?" he asked after a moment. He had to be sure that they were okay.

"Sure." She stated, waiting until Peter had joined them. Without the book, Tony noted. A moment later, a portal opened. Stepping through, Tony realized surprised, that they weren't inside the infirmary. Peter looked around as surprised as he was.

"What..." he started, but then he saw the woman raise a hand and something around them shifted. Tony couldn't put it into words, but... somehow... Astonished, he watched, how the Ancient One literally walked through the wall, which parted in front of her. The bricks moving to the side and out of her way, creating a hole. A second door. Following her, he looked into the room behind. The infirmary. Christine's gaze roamed restlessly through the room, a woman with a magazine in hand sat on a chair, watching her and Strange every now and then. Strange soundly sleeping. The cloak floated in a corner of the room.

"They don't see us?" he asked softly, staring at Christine. He heard, how the Sorcerer Supreme launched into an explanation. Something about mirrors. Yet, he didn't listen anymore. All he could do was stare at Christine. Her gaze. He knew that gaze. He knew that expression. He knew it from seeing it in the mirror for a very long while. She would try everything to not remember what had happened to her. She would try everything not to sleep. And if she slept, terrible nightmares hunted her.

Averting his gaze, he looked at the Ancient One for a long moment, then his gaze went towards Peter, who was watching Strange and Christine. His own gaze went towards the cloak for a moment. With it around, he knew they were safe or at least close to. If someone would try to hurt them, it would do everything in its powers to protect them.

"Can you make us some portals home?" he asked, his eyes still fixed on the red piece of garment. He heard, how Peter stated an address he didn't know. He hoped it was Ned's place. He had to check that later. Just to make sure. After a hissing sound and a goodbye from the boy, he was alone with the woman.

"It will pass, you know that." She stated softly. Her words made him finally turn his head. How could she know that he had had PTSD? Then again, she seemed to know a lot. "Yeah, but..." What did he want to say? That it could take months, years? "Can you open a portal to the Avengers Tower? Highest floor, please."

As soon as he was home and the portal behind him closed, he closed his eyes, a sigh escaping from his lips.

"Friday? How is Pepper's schedule for today?"

He couldn't fully believe that all of this had only been one day. The alien. Christine being kidnapped, laying bleeding on that street. Nearly dying. The moment he had seen her, he had thought that that was it. That they couldn't save her anymore.

"She is currently in a meeting, boss." Friday's voice told him.
"How important is it?" he asked. He was prone to burst into meetings. Pepper always scolded him for it, but he simply couldn't help.

"It's about the takeover." Oh damn, he couldn't burst into that one.

For a long moment, Tony just stood there. Indecisive what he should do next. Part of him wanted to walk into his company and wait for Pepper to be done with her stupid meeting, which could potentially go on for hours. He had to see her. He had to hold her and kiss her. Make sure she was fine. Christine nearly dying had taken a bigger toll on him than he would ever admit. Seeing her haunted gaze. Then again, if he went there now, he would surely burst into the meeting, making things worse for Pepper. He knew she had troubles being accepted as the CEO of his company. All because she was a woman. Him showing up today…

Sighing softly, he did ask Friday about the address Peter had told the sorceress. The apartment turned out to be rented by the Leeds family, which seemed fitting. Peter would be at his friend's place.

While he walked through the room, his goal the elevator and his workshop downstairs, he stopped in his tracks. His eyes came to a rest on that bar key he still had. It was resting on a sideboard, where he had placed it this morning after he had told Pepper what had happened. Not even a day ago. He had paid 30 000 to that guy to be quiet. Good, that he really didn't bother about money. And the guy kind of looked like he needed it. He knew he had lied when he had told him, he made 3k a week. Sighing deeply, he grabbed the key, asking Friday to get him a suit up. He would fulfill the rest of his stupid promise.

Chapter End Notes

And, like always, thank you very much for reading! I hope you enjoyed it! Thank you for all those comments I got for the last chapter. And all those kudos. I feel flattered, haha.

I plan for more Peter in the next chapter.
And the Ancient One.

I have to admit, I really missed writing during those last weeks. I think I'll start with the next chapter over the weekend.
Finally, I made it!

First and foremost: Thank you all!

I nearly freaked out when I saw that my 'little' story got 10k hits and over 500 kudos. Thank you so very much for all your support.

I am really sorry this chapter took that long. It's unbelievably annoying to myself, honestly. Apparently, my creativity dies at temperatures above 33 °C / 90 °F.

However, you'll meet: The Ancient One, Peter, Ned, Tony, Stephen, Christine and shortly May.

Have fun!

After she had sent her 'guests' home, the eyes of the Ancient One remained on Stephen Strange and his girlfriend. What he had told her. What she had seen in his eyes. A mad titan coming for the stones. It seemed plausible, that something would come for them. It was the reason, why the time stone was guarded by them ever since Agamotto. The reality and space stone had been hidden by Asgard for all those years. It should have worried her, when the stones, one after another, started to resurface. It never meant anything good. As if the stones themselves wanted to warn them about the coming storm. And yet, she had ignored that sign, being distracted by her own worries. She had been busy searching for a new sorcerer, who was capable to take her place after her death. She had had high hopes in Kaecilius, despite better knowledge. She had not wanted to believe that he would turn on her.

After all, there had been a few possibilities where he didn't. He had seemed like a safer bet than Strange with his massive ego. Strange with all his arrogance and fears. Strange, who could have healed his hands at any point and turned away from sorcery. Who should protect the time stone after she was gone? There had to be a new Sorcerer Supreme after her. There always would be, of course, but it was the way to select the person with the greatest promise. The person who had it in himself to follow in her footsteps... the person with the greatest possibilities. Seeing now, that Strange hadn't healed his hands made her seem like a fool. She should have passed on Kaecilius in favor of him. Then again, maybe Strange only became who he was because he fought Kaecilius. Because he faced Dormammu.

Shaking her head about impossibilities she couldn't know about, she wanted to turn away. Seeing the cloak made her stop in her movement. It smelled like Strange. Christine had said it smelled like Strange. There were some pieces in his story which didn't make sense. Like him knowing about things after his own death. He couldn't. A death was a death. His timeline ended and he couldn't look past that. Yet, the cloak smelling like him… whatever didn't fit didn't matter. The cloak itself was evidence that what he said was true. It smelling like him… they had to have shared some time together, even though that time didn't exist anymore. For the cloak it did, though. It was a relic. And like most relics, it was without time. Even though that created some other problems. Some worse
problems. Problems she had to think about before talking with Strange again. An odd smile appeared on her lips. The first one in ages. To be able to talk with the next Sorcerer Supreme without treating him like a child. The thought alone was refreshing.

Ned's face was priceless when a portal popped up in his room and Peter stepped through.

"Was… was… is..." his friend stammered together, staring at him or rather the portal behind him with wide eyes. Peter blinked, pulling his mask from his face while the portal closed behind him. "Yeah. Portals. The only best things really." Ned got to his feet, walking around him, seemingly looking for the golden, sparkly portal. Peter could only chuckle. "It's gone, Ned."

Ned turned slowly, staring at him. "That was… is… magic? Portal-thing? Where were you? Who opened it? How did it go? Is the woman safe? How are the" once again, questions were just bubbling from Ned's lips in a seemingly endless stream.

"Calm down, calm down." Peter said laughing, raising his hands. "One thing at a time, okay?" he asked while walking through the small room and letting himself fall onto Ned's bed. Not move for the rest of the day sounded like the best idea he had ever had.

Ned saw his relief and frowned deeply. "How are you?" his friend asked while sitting down beside him, watching him with hawk eyes again. Peter could only chuckle. "Ned. I'm not made of glass."

He could only hear something like a grunt as an answer. After that his friend staid quiet for a little while. Peter took the chance to close his eyes, only for a moment. Taking a deep breath, he looked at Ned again and showed him a confident grin. His friend didn't need to know how very close everything had been. Again. What was wrong with this day?

"Okay, first things first. She's okay. She got hurt, but the doc, I told you he's a real doctor, right? He saved her. She'll be fine. All good." Peter took a deep breath, trying to decide which question to answer next. Maybe just tick them off one after another. "Yes, that was magic." Starting with the most obvious one and then work his way along the list sounded good. "And yes, that was a portal. The boss-sorcerer created it for us. Tony and me, I mean. I was in… Nepal? Yes, I think it was Nepal. And then I'm back here. With one step! Isn't that crazy?!" His voice was filled with excitement while he spoke about the portals. Leading to a tiny smile on Ned's face. Obviously, his good mood was contagious.

"I..." he let his voice drop to a conspiratorially whisper. "I asked the librarian there, in Nepal I mean, we were in a magical library while waiting for the boss-sorcerer." Peter took a deep breath, trying to sort out his sentences. "I asked him for a beginner's book about magic. He gave one to me. Couldn't read it, some old language and stuff, but Karen could translate it. Before I had to place the book back, I flipped through all the pages. Karen recorded everything. I mean, I tried some of the basic moves and literally nothing happened, but I'm definitely gonna try. Imagine me being able to do portals!" While the excitement in his voice rose, he had started to talk faster and faster, until his voice broke at the last part. He laid on Ned's bed, basically grinning at his best friend. As if the world was fine and no alien had tried to step on him and no crazy sorcerer had sliced Christine's throat. He was gonna try to learn magic. How awesome was that, please?

Ned only chuckled at his enthusiasm. "Well..." he looked at him, deadly serious all of a sudden. "You know. I get you, magic is cool. You have to learn it now else I'll be mad at you. You can't hype me like that and then some. I'm planning on using you to reduce my travel-time."

Peter couldn't do anything else but burst into laughter. There he was, his friend. He had been gone
worrying for the entire start of the day. Seeing him make jokes again...

After some more quipping about magic, Peter told him what had happened, deliberately forgetting to mention some things. For example, how close Christine had been to dying. Or how odd it had been to be left in that library, waiting to get to know anything. All he told him, was that it had worked out, repeating again that Christine would be fine. Tony had somehow managed to convince the boss-sorcerer to help them, he had helped the doc after reaching his location. They had been in Nepal. Nothing more had happened. Really.

Well, that wasn't true. "The doc, he had a freakish living flying cloak with him back in the future. Some magical relic or something." That sentence was quite odd if you thought about it. "That thing remembers too." Peter could see Ned stare at him, mouth slightly open.

"You have a remembering magical cloak? What the hell?!!"

He only chuckled. "I know! I can't quite get used to the fact that it has memories. I mean, personality, okaaay, it's magical and all, might be, but actual real memories?"

He shook his head, then he got serious. "I wonder… if the cloak remembers… who else?"

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Nicolle Brewster stared at the perfectly clean surface of the table in front of her. How the hell had she ended here? At the reception of Stark Industries? She knew she had filed an application for their intern program. As a stupid joke, because none of her friends believed that she could get in. She hadn't believed it herself. And now here she sat, smiling and greeting and helping everyone who walked into the building. Slowly, her fingers started to drum on the pristine white surface of the counter. Oh god, she was that nervous. During the first two weeks, her kinda supervisor had been with her. Guiding her through the process of checking if people actually had an appointment, issuing ID's, notifying the security personnel without being obvious and all that other stuff. Like getting birthday cards ready for the other employees. The most important thing above all others was being freakishly polite. She couldn't remember when she had smiled that often that long at a time in her life. Probably never.

Her eyes darted to her watch. She wasn't allowed to use her Smartphone here. She felt as if she was missing out on so much stuff with her friends, but… she was here. In Stark Industries, manning the reception. Only half an hour left, then she could go. Home sweet home. The day hadn't been interesting really. She had greeted a bunch of really important managers today, all smiley and happy and that was it. She knew, that it was about the takeover. Stark Industries wanted to buy some really tiny company. Well, everyone knew that. It had been the gossip in the corridors for the last two weeks. Obviously, some high managers didn't want that Miss Potts bought the other company for the sum she was offering. And then, somehow, two camps had grown among the employees. Those on Pepper's side and those, who weren't. As far as she knew, even bets were running if the takeover would take place or not.

Letting her fingers drum on the clean surface of the table again, she sighed softly. Maybe she could use the PC beside her to go check Twitter or something. Yet, she was sure that Friday would know of it, report it and then, damn, she was in troubles. She guessed that Friday would be more chill with the actual employees, but she was just a stupid intern. She was here for another four weeks and wasn't paid to check Twitter on the PC. Besides, how would that look if someone did walk in? She all lost in the PC. She couldn't be freakishly polite then. And being freakishly polite was her main job.

The ding of the opening doors made her snap to attention, her usual "Wel"come to Stark Industries
died on her lips. Tony Stark was walking into the building. Tony Stark of all people! Tony…
granted, it was his building, but... but... breathe Nicolle, oh god, breathe. She hadn't ever expected
to see him. Sure, he was owning the place, but he was always busy with Avengers and other super-
hero stuff, right? How high was the percentage of him entering the building during her six weeks of
internship? Somewhere close to zero. She had calculated it.

"Hey. Where is Lindsey?" he asked, looking at her.

And all she could do was stare back. She wanted to open her mouth and talk, but... she had
forgotten how her face muscles were working. All she could do was stare at him. She, she really
wanted to, but... She saw how he raised an eyebrow, looking at her. Oh god, he had to think she
was some stupid little girl, didn't he?

"On holidays. Hi, sir. I mean, Lindsey is on holidays." Yeah, that far that good. Damn it. She
couldn't speak right anymore. "How can I help you?" she finally asked, just as if it was the first time
she said that line. Well. It was the first time she was saying it to Tony Stark!

"A visitor's ID, please. Don't wanna upset Happy again." He chuckled softly at his words.

For a long moment, she stared at him. Yeah. Happy. Happy Hogan. He was that somehow nice but
more annoying security guy. Who always wanted everyone to wear security IDs.

"Okay. Sure. I'll issue you one, sir." She turned to her PC, got the mask for visitor IDs open and
started to enter his information. Name, age, reason... "May I ask why you are here, sir?" she asked,
staring at the blinking cursor in that input field.

"I want to see Pepper. After her meeting is done, of course."

The name of Miss Potts let her look up from the PC. "They are in there since morning, sir. I arranged
for them to get lunch, but I don't think they made an actual break."

After her words, she could feel how Mister Stark looked at her. Really looked at her. "Do you know
how it is going?" he asked, all curious. "No, sir. Sadly not." She stated carefully, entering 'Visiting
Miss Potts' into the field and saved the data. A moment later she grabbed an ID, activated it and
handed it to him. She hesitated for a moment. She wanted to... something. "You don't need that ID
for opening the doors, do you, sir?" her intern ID only gave her quite limited access to the building.
A visitor's ID was basically useless. It was for sitting in the lobby and not get kicked out by the
security team. It didn't open any doors or the like. Tony Stark smirked at her, an amused glimmer in
his eyes. "God, no. Friday will open the doors for me."

At those words, Nicolle chuckled. "Yeah. The benefits of being the creator of the AI." Friday was
implemented into nearly everything from Stark after all. She surely controlled the building. "May I
ask how you did it? Advance from a simple neuronal network to something like her?" Mister Stark
looked at her for a long moment, smiling. Then he turned away and said his goodbyes. A moment
later, he was inside the building, and she sat there, feeling dumb. As if Tony Stark would talk with
her about his inventions. A second later she realized that she had forgotten the 'sir'. Oh my god. That
would surely end in her report!

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Some minutes later, Tony looked around in Pepper's office. As sleek as ever. Some nothing-saying
pictures on the wall. A cactus as a flower. Her desk all neat. There was a frame, though... Taking
the picture, he looked at himself. God. That was... from this timeline a year ago, he guessed. Pepper
had taken him on a vacation for some relaxation. Guessed it had worked. Maybe they should do that
again, after her takeover madness and his usual crazy state of mind. Shaking his head weakly, he
placed it back on her desk and sat down in the chair for visitors.

For approximately two minutes. That chair was uncomfortable, damn it! And doing nothing was
nothing he could do for long. He should be proud of himself that he had managed two minutes.
Getting up, he paced through the office. No. He couldn't burst into her meeting. He surely couldn't.
"Friday? Don't tell me where Pepper is right now. And hide the information in the database if I
should try to hack myself in. Or… can you just lock me up in the room? Would work, I guess."

"Sure thing, boss." Friday responded dryly. A moment later, Tony saw how the electronic lock on
the door switched from unlocked to locked. Good thing. He would need a little if he wanted to hack
himself out of the room. Especially, if Friday was working against him. Even though that was a
challenge worth taking. He blinked when he realized, where his thoughts were heading. He needed
to do something. Just keep himself busy and time would fly by in no time.

Okay, who was he kidding? He continued his pacing for a while, jumping at every thought he could
find. And discarded it moments later. He had been very close to looking into another holiday with
Pepper, but he guessed she would like to have a say in that. Especially, if he didn't yet know if the
takeover was successful. How could anyone discuss that much about buying a stupid company?
Back then, when he was CEO, he just, well, bought it. But then again, who would dare to object? It
was infuriating, that Pepper had that many problems with a stupid takeover. Because of her own
people.

Realizing, he got mad again, he took a deep breath. Do. Something. Useful. Within seconds, his
thoughts were, where he didn't want them to be. Christine. Christine laying on that stupid street and
bleeding to death. Christine looking around in that room, obviously not going to sleep a second in the
near future if she could help it. Chris…

He stopped his pacing how he usually did when he finally got an idea. Christine being attacked and
nearly dying. That had surely not happened in the original timeline. Strange had said, that the
sorcerers wanted the time stone back. That sounded legit. Strange himself had said, that it was their
duty to protect the stone. That he would not hesitate to let any of them die if he had to choose
between them and the stone. As soon as the sorcerers realized, that the stone was missing because it
was with Strange after it had reverted time… were there such things as tracking spells? Could they
localize time magic being used?

Definitely. Or at least, he would expect it. Strange had looked into the future in that stupid bar to
check for more lights. Not one day later, Christine was kidnapped. Easy to see the connections.

Suddenly, Tony realized he was trembling. She… she had been hurt. By a chain of events, they had
started. They had reverted time, the stone went with Strange for whatever reason, the sorcerers
monitored time magic, found them and took the person who would most likely force him to
exchange the stone.

God. They… they had… taking a deep breath, Tony tried to fight his rising panic down. He couldn't
have a breakthrough in Pepper's office. What if she walked in with some managers after the meeting
was finally done? He couldn't embarrass her. No one knew about his condition, after all.

With effort, he pushed the realization away, that Christine nearly dying was caused by them. Like a
mad dog, his brain snapped onto the next greatest worrisome problem in his mind. That stupid alien,
that shouldn't be. That stupid light, which would occur more than once in their future. That stupid…

And then his mind went blank. The time. Damn it, the time! Why hadn't he realized that earlier? The
white light had occurred at 1:25. He knew it because he had stared at his watch like a maniac,
praying for this shitty movie to end.

1:25 AM.

In their original timeline, the aliens had come for Strange around that time, just twelve hours later. Or earlier, didn't matter. He had wanted to call Steve after learning about Thanos. After Bruce convinced him. Pulled that stone-age phone from his pocket. It had been 1:23, then. And moments later, all hell broke loose. It could possibly be, that it had been 1:25 by the time, they confronted the aliens on that street. No. It wasn't possible.

It was plausible. And it was surely no coincidence. An alien from the future would not just randomly appear at the same time it appeared in the first place, just with a time difference of twelve hours.

"Tony?" Pepper's voice ripped him out of his thoughts. He turned, looking at her. There had to be something on his face. She went straight through the room, hugging him.

"What happened?" she asked while stroking his back soothingly.

"We nearly killed Strange's girlfriend. And I think time wants to murder us."

This time, that damnable golden knife cut deeper. This time, it wasn't a spray of blood. It was a surge. Seemingly slow, but oh so fast. When Stephen caught her, he heard her ragged breathing. He knew, her windpipe had been cut. There wasn't anything he could do but embrace her. Hug her trembling body against his, making sure that her head leaned against his shoulder, allowing the blood to run out of the wound. He wouldn't let her drown. It was the only thing he could do. Besides holding her. He felt, how she embraced him, pressing herself against him, fingers digging into his clothes. It took forever. Her trembling body, her scent, that terrible ragged breathing. The gentle warmth that dripped onto him. Her life draining from her body. They were the longest two minutes of his life. He felt the moment, she was gone. Her embrace tightened one last time, then her body went limp. Her breathing stopped. Her body was still warm. It still smelled like her. Would for a while. Yet, she wasn't anymore. Christine Palmer was gone.

It was worse. Worse than watching her turn to ashes by Thanos' snap. Worse than dying a myriad times through Dormammu. Worse than anything. Stephen felt how his heart broke, probably his soul along with it. And for a long moment, there was only darkness.

She was dead. She was dead, she was dead, shewasdead. The thought repeated itself over and over, darker thoughts dripping into his being. Maybe he was never meant to save her. He knew the price, which had to be paid to save her in their original timeline. Maybe she always had to

He could bring her back.


Placing the shell of who had once been Christine Palmer carefully on the ground, he conjured the time stone. It floated in front of him, like always. Grabbing the small, green gem, he wanted to...

But this time, its energy was different.

This time, the pain was there. Everlasting and unspeakable. Stephen could feel, how the energy of the stone rushed into him, ripping him

Opening his eyes, he took a deep breath. The air was cold and warm at the same time. He lay on
soft, green grass, staring up into a strange, orange sky. Turning his head, he saw Christine. She was
looking down at him. Tilting her head. And was gone.

Finally getting to his feet, he looked around. Endless planes, stretching until the horizon. He knew he
knew that place.

He knew...

And then his dream, however short it had been, crumbled. The pictures fading, being replaced by
others. This dream was different. It felt sharper and clearer and more...

"You dream odd things." The soft voice of the Ancient One filled his ears. A moment later, he could
see her. They were in the training grounds of Kamar-Taj, sitting beside each other.

... under control. A shared dream.

"Might be. What do you want in my dreams?"

"Well, I thought I'd talk with you without ripping you away from your girlfriend."

Stephen smiled weakly. "Very considerate."

After that, silence embraced them. He waited for her to speak and she...

"The cloak. It remembering is a problem."

Stephen turned his head and looked at her, frowning. "Why should it?"

He could see her sigh softly. "I've lived through a thousand and more timelines. Yet, all of them were
variants of this. Of the future that was given to me. My relics always knew me, whatever I changed,
because I always remained in my time, the end always remaining the same."

She paused for a moment, giving him the chance to speak. "You mean... that we are still in the same
timeline? Just in its past? How..." But then again, they were talking about infinity stones. They
should be able to do the impossible, right?

"Did time reset? Turn back for two years?" he asked, looking at her.

She remained silent for a long while, staring into nothingness. Then a sigh escaped her lips. "Did
your death change? In this timeline?"

"I..." but she cut him off. "Don't tell me. I already know too much. If your death changed, this isn't a
reset or reversed time. None of them can alter the true outcome of how things were meant to be.
Whatever I did, I could never change my time of death, because this is how my timeline should end.
I cannot change its outcome as long as the surrounding, controlling structure of time doesn't change."
She paused for a moment. Talking about her own death as if it was a necessity... "That the cloak
remembers and you all are here..." she paused again. "I think... I fear... this whatever you are in, is a
new timeline, branching off from your original. You already changed things and are still here, after
all. If you had tried to alter the past of your original timeline, it would have already collapsed on you.
Yet, if this was a fully self-contained, a completely new timeline in which you can change things, the
cloak couldn't remember, because its memory is bound to the original timeline." She paused, taking a
breath. "Accordingly, earlier or later, this new present will merge back with from where you came."

They both were silent for a moment, Stephen trying to think about the implications of it all...
But, maybe thankfully, for now, she stopped him from doing so. "I decided to train you myself."

That statement made him snap out of his timeline related thoughts. "But..." She chuckled. She actually chuckled. Who was that woman? "You have two years. I will not watch you train with masters who can't teach you anything. Our time together is limited enough. We will make the best of it."

"What would you want to teach me?" he asked, all curious. She had lived through so many lives, fought so many battles and still had remained compassionate. She would definitely be able to teach him something. Even if it was only how to keep his sanity over time. He could use every single bit of help for fighting Thanos. And to learn from her...

She only smiled softly at his question. Like watching an over-excited child. Well, he guessed he was just that to her. "First, I have to assess your powers. After that, we'll discuss what will help you best."

And simply like that, the dream faded away. Kamar-Taj blurring out and turning to light and shadow, intermixing with another until gone it was. Stephen knew he was dreaming for a second longer. He knew that...

And then, maybe even while he was thinking about being in a dream, he opened his eyes. Christine's face lay on her pillow beside his own, only inches away. His first waking thought was about her. She was alive. She was fine. Would be in due time. She was alive. Closing his eyes for a moment, he remembered the alternative. She dying in his arms. It had felt real. More real than any of his dreams. That terrible ragged breathing. Her warm blood dripping onto him. How she had turned limp in his arms. How she had...

Opening his eyes again, he fixed his attention on her beautiful living face. That soft skin, which looked healthier than the last time he had seen her and would surely feel warm to the touch.

The moment he moved his hand, a dark rough pain jolted through his body. It started in his back, made its way into his shoulder and off into the arm, dimming out the world for a mere second. How could he have moved with something like that before? Was he sure that nothing was broken?

His fingertips reaching her cheek made the pain irrelevant. Her skin was warm. It was actually warm. For a second he considered crying out of joy. There was no possible word to describe his feelings. All would simply pale in comparison. And then Christine opened her eyes. Only now, he realized that she looked tired. Unbelievable tired. And fearful. The latter disappeared from her gaze when she saw him being awake. Not even a second later her lips were on his, her fingers in his hair. Only after she broke away, he recognized the kiss as what it was. Desperate.

"Morning." He whispered hoarsely. She chuckled at him. Not morning? "How late is it?" he asked in his sad imitation of a voice. "Somewhen after midday, my sleeping beauty." Even in that state, he grimaced at the word. Making grimaces was probably the only thing he could do without pain anyway.

"The... eh... how did you call her? Boss-sorcerer was here." Christine turned away for a moment, then she faced him again, holding a sling ring between her fingers. A sling ring. Portals. Even though his love was afraid of them. "And I got the ointment that was put on you yesterday."

Stephen looked at her. She had gotten the ointment. Only then, he realized, that she was done with her transfusion, that however the nurse was called wasn't here right now. He had been allowed to sleep in peace with Christine watching over him.

"Do we want to go home?" he asked gently, keeping an eye on her. He could see the joy connected
to the word 'home' mixing with the fear of what it implied. Home from here meant portals. He knew she knew. Little time later, she had helped him stand. It was agony, really. Nothing less. He wanted to get back into bed. Just lay there and never move again. He would do that soon enough.

"You'll create a portal, right?" Christine asked, eyeing the cloak which had joined her in helping keep Stephen upright. He looked like fainting any second again. When they were home, she would put that ointment on his back and watch him sleep.

"Yeah." His voice was that weak. She would have to give him some water. Or maybe make him tea.

"It's your portal, right? It will always go where you want it to go?" she asked, looking at him while watching the cloak from the corner of her eyes. She didn't want that thing in her flat, but she guessed she had no choice but to. Stephen trusted that terrible living garment for whatever reason.

"Yeah. Only where I want it to lead." Stephen said. In something like wonder, Christine watched how he raised his arms despite the pain and drew a circle into the air. The hissing noise made her flinch and then it was there, the golden ring of doom. She stared at it for some long seconds. She could see her bedroom through it. Yet, she simply couldn't get herself to move. Just the thought of walking through those golden sparkles filled her with dread. Last time, when they had gotten here, she had only managed because Stephen had held her. He couldn't now. He…

Taking a deep breath, she got herself together. She had to be strong for Stephen. She couldn't allow herself anything else. She had to be better than that stupid bit of cloth. It would surely help her love. For a moment she felt a weird mixture of jealousy and pure hatred for that thing. Then her crazy emotions calmed down, her usual distrust and the new jealousy remaining. Stephen trusted that thing. He would surely not part from it even if she asked him to. Taking one step after another, all the while supporting Stephen, she walked through the portal.

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On Monday, after school was done, Peter went straight home. Usually, he would spend the afternoon as Spider-Man, but his chest told him that that was a no go. His gym class had been bad enough. He had winced once or twice, leading to overly worried looks from Ned. He loved his friend, but this new super-worrying side was a bit annoying. Yet, he guessed his friend had the right. He had watched him nearly getting killed by an alien, after all. He had promised him to chill today and he would stick to it. He had to finish healing first. Then he could return to jumping from buildings.

Entering his aunt's flat, he realized he hadn't been home that early in ages. He usually did his 'Stark Internship' now, after all. Walking into their living room, he greeted a surprised looking May. She had obviously not expected him to be home that early.

"Pete? Is everything okay?" she asked instantly. She had more likely expected him around 8, hadn't she?

"Yeah, don't worry. I called in with my supervisor" as if Happy would ever answer his calls "told him I don't feel well today," He saw how she was all but ready to jump into Oh My God my little boy isn't feeling well! crazy aunt mode despite he had stated that he was well and hurried to add: "I just didn't sleep much at Ned's." he took a deep breath, seeing how she eyed him skeptically. Seemingly trying to decide whether he was fine or not. "We chilled and watched Netflix and went to a movie and all that. And yes, we weren't late at school today, even though we didn't sleep that much." He reported, finally watching her calm down. She seemed to have decided that he was indeed okay. Friend-sleepovers just were what they were. Long days, short nights.
"I just didn't feel like going to work for Stark's today. I'll do my homework, eat dinner and be in bed early." He stated, watching her face soften.

"Okay. Then you go and do your homework and I'll get an early dinner ready soon. You really look as if you could need some sleep."

He was as good as in his room when May started to speak again. "Pete? Good to see you paying more attention to yourself again."

He turned around, looking at her. She really looked happy. He only managed a soft smile. She had been hugely worried that he overworked himself with school and the internship. That he was here now… it proved that he had meant what he had said, right? That he would take it a bit slower for the time.

"Sure." He only stated, finally entering his room. In there, he hid his suit away, as usual, placing the mask on his pillow though. He would need Karen later.

Rushing through his homework, he had several book passages to read, which he wouldn't read because he remembered most of them, more easy math and an essay in biology. Honestly, he felt like a genius lately, knowing most of the things he had to learn already.

After he was done with half of the essay, he leaned back. He could finish that tomorrow. Really. Chewing on his bottom lip, he turned around, his eyes darting between his door and his mask. May had said she would make dinner soon. Soon would be by now, for sure. Carefully, he opened the door, sticking his head out.

"May? When is dinner ready?" he yelled in the general direction of their open kitchen.

"About twenty minutes." May yelled back.

Twenty minutes. Closing his door again, he basically jumped through the room, wincing shortly at his stupidity. He shouldn't move that fast. Yet, he had gotten used to moving like that if no one watched.

A moment later, he had his mask on, Karen greeting him as usual.

He lowered his voice, wanting to make sure that May didn't hear him talking, thinking he talked with himself. Or even worse, she decided to walk in on him to see what was going on. While he was wearing his mask.

"Hey, Karen. Can you pull up the book?"

She did immediately. Laying down on his bed, he started to read some more pages. He really wanted to get to know, how he could learn to draw on dimensional energy. That seemed to be the first and most important step before he could learn some actual magic. He even asked Karen to do a search for him, highlighting everything that could match. One passage, somewhere in the middle of the book, seemed promising. Meditation and focus. That far that obvious. The next few pages got that damn odd, that he had to read them several times. And he still couldn't believe what he was reading. Something about focusing on the un-focusable. Feeling what wasn't there. See what lay beyond. Did the book suddenly turn into a new age recruiting ad? He had thought up until now, that it was good for getting the basics. Rooted in science in an unbelievable weird way. And then, suddenly, it turned into blah blah about getting to know his inner self. Or his outa self, depending on the viewpoint.

While reading, he had completely forgotten the time. And he hadn't told Karen that he had only 'about' twenty minutes else she surely would have notified him that he got closer to the about time.
That way, though, it was only to his super-human senses, that he realized that his door handle was moved down. He ripped his mask from his face in one swift motion, letting it drop behind the bed. When May entered his room, he sat on his bed, trying to look casual.

"Dinner is ready." She chirped.

"Be right there." He stated, trying to sound cheery while his heart was thrumming like crazy. She had been that close to walking in on him. That close. If he had been a little slower… if he wouldn't have realized that she was entering his room… picking his mask up again after silently moving his bed, he hid it below his pillow. He had to be more careful. He knew he had to tell her, at least the Spider-Man story. He had decided to stick to his old timeline. After homecoming. He didn't want to mess things up, after all, he couldn't know about possible consequences if he told her earlier.

Joining his aunt in the living room moments later, he gifted her a confident smile. "Got done with my homework." All except that essay, but he could really finish that tomorrow.

"Good." She smiled back at him. "Then you can vanish into bed as soon as you are done eating." He nodded at that, picked up his fork and started to eat the pasta May had thrown together for them. Pappardelle with a meat sauce.

While he was eating, his thoughts drifted off to the doc. Originally, because he was planning on asking him why those new age concepts were part of that book. He really hadn't expected to read that. And then, he wondered how the doc was coping. Sure, in his case it had been an alien which stepped on his chest but being thrown against a wall multiple times without any protection had to be rough. The doc was no super-human like he was. He would need a while to heal from that. And then his mind jumped to Christine. He had seen her gaze in the infirmary. She had looked terrified.

"Pete?" May's voice ripped him out of his thoughts. He blinked and looked at her, only now realizing that he had stopped eating. He was toying with a noodle using his fork. "Is everything alright?"

Yes. No. He had watched someone nearly bleed to death on the weekend. That spray of blood hitting him. And he hadn't talked with a living human being about it. He couldn't tell Ned. Not currently. He didn't want to bother Tony. The doc surely had his own panic attacks.

"Yeah." He stated, trying it with a weak smile. He saw that May wasn't buying it. "Just…" Okay. What should usually be on the mind of a teenager? Why did he even have to think about this?! Maybe… "…you know, homecoming is soon. I still have no date and going without a date is super embarrassing and I kinda would like to go and I don't know I thought about asking Liz out but come on as if she wouldn't have a date by now!" he managed to say, saying everything that should have maybe at a time really bothered him in one messy, fast sentence. Which reminded him of the fact that he had to nearly sink that stupid ferry soon. And then the airplane debacle was just a blink away. He didn't want to fight Liz's dad. Maybe…

But May's soft laughter stopped him from going down that path. "Sure. Homecoming. Just ask her Pete, you can never know." She winked at him in what was surely meant as an encouraging gesture. He nearly felt his smile slip. "That's true." How could he lie to her like that?

He had nearly finished his pasta when May raised her voice once again. She sounded unsure, which usually wasn't a trait of her.

"You know…" he looked at her, wondering what she was going to say. "That school project of yours." He had to force himself from blinking. Or letting his worry show on his face. Which school project of his? Yet, he knew where this was going. "I would really love to meet him in person. Talk
to him. Maybe we could invite him for dinner?"

Peter did his best to keep his face calm. He couldn't show any of his thoughts. She couldn't know that he lied to her. On that scale. She would surely completely freak out if she found out about it. "Sure thing, I'll ask him."

Chapter End Notes

I hope the current iteration of the conversation between the Ancient One and Stephen is understandable. I got quite very worried while writing it. And re-wrote it more often than I like to admit, haha.

On the dream thing... Even though I just wrote one, I'll use them rarely. This time was... partly because Stephen and the Ancient One talking to another like that made sense. The rest will be revealed somewhen in the future.

I hope you enjoyed the chapter, despite the long wait. Like always, thank you for any and all feedback, I love to read from you!
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

This time you'll meet: Christine / Stephen / Tony / Pepper / Peter

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

„Are you sure you have to go?” Christine asked while walking back into the bedroom, watching Stephen slip into his shirt.

"For the thirty-seventh time: Yes." Stephen responded as soon as his head wasn't covered by a piece of textile anymore.

Christine made a face, feeling guilty. "You counted, didn't you?" she asked, knowing the answer already. Stephen was the guy to count the number of times she had asked him if he really had to go. Still, she didn't want him to. Whenever he thought she wouldn't look, the pain was evident on his face. Small winces and whimpers. He shouldn't go. Really shouldn't. He should stay in bed and go back to not moving. Or maybe better, go back to bed and cuddle the little they could. Lifted the spirits, after all. All better than leaving the flat to go to some stupid meeting Stark wanted to have. They apparently 'needed to talk' about something. And that couldn't wait until Stephen was fully healed?!

"Yes, I counted." Stephen stated partly amused, partly annoyed, pulling her in for a gentle kiss and ripping her out of her thoughts for the time being. She missed their more passionate kisses, but right now more passionate kisses would definitely lead to accidental making out and they couldn't afford that. It would hurt Stephen. Accordingly, cuddle a bit and gentle kisses.

"I don't like it. You leaving. You moving around." Christine stated sighing, making her point for the she-hadn't-counted-how-often time. "You should stay in bed and heal, for god's sake. Nothing is more important than your well-being. You need to be able to fight to save the world, right?"

She could see how Stephen looked at her with that soft, yet annoyed gaze. They had talked about that topic several times. He had told her time and again, that he had to go. Stark knew how he was. He wouldn't ask him to get to the Avengers Tower if it wasn't important.

"Yes, I know. You have to go. Bromance shit or I don't know what." Christine stated annoyed. She was annoyed at Stark. She was annoyed at Stephen for being loyal to him, even though he obviously didn't like him.

She heard Stephen sigh softly. A moment later his arms were around her and she was pulled against him and into a gentle hug. "We don't have a bromance, we aren't married and I'm definitely not gonna make out with him."

She knew that. Yet, somehow… she sighed. She should try to raise the mood again after ruining it in the first place.

"Oww, thanks for that image." Christine joked, her voice light.
"You are welcome." Stephen simply replied, letting go of her. "I'll warn you beforehand when I get back here?" he asked, or not asked but stated with a question mark.

"Yes, that'd be good." She responded. Else she might try to kill him if a portal just randomly popped up in her flat. She knew Stephen would use those to get around. Made everything way easier. Helped him to not move that much. Helped him to not strain his fucked-up muscles. And yet… the thought of a portal popping up right in front of her. She all alone. The real possibility of not Stephen getting through. It made her panic.

Seeing, how Stephen got ready, picking up his portal ring and all, she braced herself for the –

That stupid cloak floated to him? Wait. Why did it float to him?

"You take the cape along?" she asked, confused. She had realized the cloak got upset if called cape, hence she went with it. She felt like a stupid teenager. Yet, she hated that thing. Accordingly, she could act like a stupid teenager once every while. Or all the time, if that red cloth was concerned.

"It's a cloak." Stephen corrected her like always. Mostly just out of habit or something. "And of course, I'll take it with me. I guessed you'd freak out otherwise. Besides, it remembers, it could help with whatever Stark needs to talk about."

It remembers.

Christine still wasn't sure what to make of that. What did that mean? That the cloak knew who she was, knew how important she was to Stephen, and tried to kill her anyway? Maybe it was jealous of her in the future, knowing that Stephen loved her more than it. Staring at the red piece of cloth, which settled on Stephen's shoulders, she felt that odd pang of jealousy. She always felt it, whenever she saw them close. She didn't want that. She saw the odd connection they shared. And it worried her.

"I'll accompany you." She burst out spontaneously, not managing to stop herself until the sentence was said and done.

Stephen turned, looking at her surprised. "I…" he wanted to start something, but she cut him off. She had gotten her into that, now she had to see it through till the end.

"Yeah, yeah. I know, boring stuff and all. Mostly future talk and time travel shenanigans, but I'll accompany you anyway. Maybe you need backup. Or help through the portal. Or anything. I feel better if I'm close by, like, location-based close and not you give me a heart attack portal based close."

Stephen looked at her for a long moment, then simply shrugged. "Maybe you can look around the tower or something." He suggested while raising his hands. He hesitated for a moment, looking at her. "Portal incoming." His voice was soft and gentle. He didn't want to put her through it, but it was the only way of travel which made sense right now.

Christine nodded and closed her eyes, knowing very well what would come. She felt how her body flinched when she heard the hissing sound. Fear jolting through her like electricity. It did follow her into her dreams. That hissing sound. That portal opening. Just like dying. Just like Stephen's terrified face. She didn't sleep as much as she told him. She couldn't handle sleep. Sleep was gruesome and terrible and she didn't want it. And yet, she didn't want to worry him. And jumped to lies in her desperate need. She knew it was stupid. But. She had to do something.

Feeling, how Stephen hugged her again, she slowly opened her eyes and looked at the golden
sparkly portal. Oh god, how she hated portals. "You really want to come along?" Stephen asked, no hint of accusation in his voice, only worry. She could back out of her rushed comment. He gave her the choice to do that. Back away from the portal. Succumb to her fear. Oh, how much she would like to do that. How much she loved him for thinking about her first. She hadn't told him ever since. That she loved him. Not since dying on that street. It felt... "Pff, sure I will." She stated, raising her head while grabbing his hand. Throwing a gaze towards the stupid cape. Still on Stephen's shoulders. It should disappear. Only her hands should rest on Stephen's shoulders. While stroking, massaging, making out with him. Grabbing hold of his shirt, digging her nails into his skin. Thousand variations of his shoulders without a stupid cape.

Some moments later, despite her nearly insane fear, they had managed it through the portal. She was clinging to Stephen's arm, breathing heavily. She could feel how he turned below her grip. No. No. He couldn't leave her – but then she felt how he pulled her into an embrace, letting her head rest on his shoulder and held her. Held her until her panic passed away. Finally raising her head, she looked at him. She wanted to kiss him, really wanted to, but backed away, feeling the gaze of Stark on her. She could see the gaze Stark threw at Stephen. Why is she here? Asked without a word, only a gaze. Maybe they were really married and Stephen was cheating with her on him. No. That was stupid.

Stephen cleared his throat. "She wanted to come along. Hope that's no problem?" he asked, not really allowing anything other than a yes as a response. Then he let go of her, the cloak flipping from his shoulders, and settled in an armchair, sighing softly at not having to stand anymore. The cloak rested in the air for a moment, right beside Christine, then it moved around, looking at the room.

"No, surely not." Stark stated, still a bit surprised. His gaze rested on her for a long moment, before he turned to Stephen. "Peter should be here soon. Then we can start. Won't explain things twice." Stephen only nodded.

Suddenly, from one moment to the other, Christine really felt like intruding. Those two, well, three (four?) shared a different bond than she ever could. They had quite literally traveled through time. They had seen the possible end of the world. She shouldn't be here. She should just...

"Do you want something to drink?" the question directed at her ripped her out of her thoughts. She could see how both men, Stark and Stephen, looked at her. She was still standing in the same spot where they had arrived. She really had to seem quite lost to them.

"Yes, thank you." She stated, hurrying to finally move and placed herself beside Stephen's armchair. She wanted to be close to him.

"You can have the couch, you know?" Stark pointed out dryly while handing her a water.

"Oh no, it's..." she started but never got to finish her lame excuse, when someone entered the living room of whatever kind of apartment they were in and immediately started to speak. "Oh, you didn't tell me we have visitors beside the obvious." Pepper Potts stated softly, looking at Christine.

"I didn't know she would come along." Stark pointed out, sitting down on the couch he had offered to them.

Pepper looked at her for some long moments, then Christine saw how her gaze switched to the floating cloak. A frown forming on her face, but she didn't say anything about it. "Well..." she walked to them, offering her hand to Christine and introducing herself as Pepper. "How about we girls leave the boys alone to play their time travel war council games. I'll lead you a bit around and stuff... Friday will surely tell us when they are done talking, right?"
"Sure thing." A voice came from the ceiling, making Christine look up. Pepper chuckled. "Friday, say hello."

"Hello, Doctor Palmer, I'm F.R.I.D.A.Y., Tony Stark's natural-language user interface. I basically control everything he owns." She could hear Stark snort and Stephen complain.

"Why is she calling her by her title?"

"Because I'm polite, Mister Strange." The ceiling responded, obviously mocking her lover.

"Yeah, whatever." Pepper stated, looking at Christine and gesturing her to follow her.

Some moments later, still holding on to her glass of water, she was in the elevator together with Pepper. The other woman looked at her for some moments, not even managing to say a word before the elevator dinged and told them they had reached the level they wanted to go.

Pepper left, Christine following her. She entered something that could be called a common room. A large couch, TV, eating table. It was differently furnished than the more obvious living room upstairs. How many levels did this tower have? How many living rooms fit in here?

Sitting down beside Pepper on the couch, she looked around, unsure what to do or say or even think.

Then Pepper turned, looking at her with a little smile. "I'm sorry. You looked so lost and I know how Tony can get when he get's into talking and I guess Strange isn't that much different, knowing they love to start fighting." She chuckled. "Just couldn't leave you alone with those morons. I originally wanted to go running." Which explained her casual look. "But seeing you, I just had to rescue you away." Again, she smiled. "Just one question. Was that a floating cloak? Did I see that right?"

Christine tensed at the question. The cloak. That stupid, stupid cloak. Yet, it made sense that Pepper asked. That thing came with them.

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Watching her guest tense, Pepper worried if she had asked the wrong question. Was the cloak a no go? She had thought it to be an easy conversation starter. She had never seen a magical, floating cloak. It was crazy enough to think about that. Magic. That it was real. Yet, it seemed the least to worry or think about, with time travel and Infinity Stones looming overhead.

"Did I do something wrong?" she asked carefully, her voice timid. Christine. Christine Palmer. The girlfriend of Strange, if she had counted one and one together. The woman, Tony was so worried about. When she saw her, standing all lost beside that armchair, she knew she had to get her away. Make her think about something, anything else. Yet, asking about the stupid cloak had obviously been the wrong decision.

"No." Christine hurried to say. The way she said it. She seemed to realize, that she didn't believe her. "Well, you not anyway." Christine continued to explain. "It's the cloak." A pause. An awkward pause. She seemed to be… "I hate it."

Pepper blinked. Wasn't the cloak a companion of her boyfriend or something?

"Does he know? Strange, ehm, Stephen?"

Christine looked at her out of blank eyes for a long moment, then she lowered her gaze.

"No. He knows I don't like it and don't approve of it hanging around in the same room as we do. He
always sends it away when we go to bed. He is kind of considerate, you know? Or at least tries to be." Christine started to fidget with her hands, obviously feeling unwell. And Pepper could do nothing else than watch. Hugging her kind of felt intrusive. Maybe she would do that later anyway if Christine got even more nervous.

"The cloak doesn't always do what he tells it to do." Christine continued in a tiny voice, obviously not able to stop now that she could talk with someone about the entire ordeal. "I woke up one night. It floated above me, only inches." Pepper heard how her voice started to tremble, how it broke. Giving way to fear. True, utter fear. How could Strange not know about this? "I... I thought it wanted to kill me. Why else float that close to me?" Christine looked up again. Fear in her eyes. Fear and worry and... the poor woman was scared to death.

"Did it try that already? I mean, kill you?" Pepper felt obliged to ask. Now that this conversation was happening.

Her gaze flipped away at the question. "Kinda." She stated, her voice weak. "You... you know... I was kidnapped by some sorcerers. They didn't do anything to me other than scare me to death and bind me. Besides that they were... I mean I'm fucking scared of portals" Portals? "but it's okay. Kinda." Christine took a deep breath. No. It was not okay based on her body language. "One of them caught me when Stephen tried to free me. Held a knife to my throat. But he didn't press it against my skin. I think he just wanted to force Stephen to stop. Never intended to kill me. He..." and then, there were tears running along her cheeks. "My throat was sliced when that crazy cloak wrapped around the man behind me and tried to pull him away."

Pepper simply stared at the crying, scared wreck in front of her. Then she moved and pulled the woman into a hug. A strong and soothing hug. Meant to calm her down. She had seen, that she had PTSD. Just like she saw it in Tony. But this... being literally faced with the thing that she believed had tried to kill her, every day again and again.

After she had calmed down, Pepper let go of her. "Does he know about all of this? It entering your room even though it was told to stay away? It floating above you while you sleep?"

Those things were enough to freak her out, without believing that that thing had sliced her throat. And she had thought floating, magical clothes were cool. Obviously, they were rather the opposite. Terrifying to no end.

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Christine lowered her gaze at the question, subconsciously starting to chew on her bottom lip. "No. Like I said, he knows that I don't like it, but... I..." she stopped talking. "He doesn't know about it coming into the bedroom at night. He doesn't know about it floating that close to me. I never brought me to wake him up. He needs sleep, you know? He has to get better. I... I don't sleep that much anyway. Allows me to keep an eye on it." Her voice had turned scornful at the last part. That stupid magical cloak.

"When I woke up and it was only inches away from my face. I thought my heart would stop." She felt how she started to cry again. All of that was kind of embarrassing. Really embarrassing. To cry in front of a stranger, because nothing else Pepper Potts was to her. Yet, she at least knew about the time travel craziness. She knew about magic. She knew more than everyone else in existence. "I thought about screaming my lungs out, but I could hear Stephen snore beside me. He only does that when he is really relaxed, you know? I just couldn't wake him up. I... I..." Christine took a deep breath. "I really carefully moved away from below it. It seemed to instantly realize, that I was awake and flipped away and out of the room. I think it was afraid of Stephen's wrath if I woke him up."
She felt goosebumps covering her entire body just at the memory of it. The fear rising again. That piece of cloth floating above her. Inches away. Maybe, if she would have woken up later… The thing might have been on her face, trying to suffocate her. Kill her in her own bed. Right beside her love. No. She didn't feel secure and safe at home. It was only bearable when she slept in Stephen's arms. She knew that the cloak would do nothing if Stephen held her. It didn't dare to. Yet, Stephen holding her while sleeping was rare currently. It wasn't that he hadn't asked, because he had. She just… she didn't want to put extra weight on him. His back was worse enough without her sleeping on his chest.

A soft sigh pulled her away from her thoughts. She looked at Pepper again. She seemed sad and upset at the same time. "Think a bit more about yourself." She stated.

Christine wanted to open her mouth and say something when Pepper continued talking. "That cloak literally freaks you out. You have to tell him that it enters your bedroom at night. That's a no go. You having nearly died is bad enough, you shouldn't have to live in fear of a piece of cloth."

Christine only stared at her for a long moment. "He trusts it." She stated weakly, making Pepper simply snort. "I guess, your well-being is more important to him than this cloak."

A thin smile appeared on her lips. Was that the truth? Christine wasn't all that sure. After all, cloak and Stephen had gone through the end of the world together. Who was she to object?

"How are you doing?" Tony asked as soon as the girls were away. Strange only looked at him for a long moment, before he shrugged.

"Okay, I guess. It's getting better. I can kinda move after two weeks. That's more than I could have hoped for. I think the magical ointment Christine got has something to do with it."

There was only silence between them. A very long silence, while the cloak moved back and forth, obviously looking at stuff. "How is she doing?" Tony asked again, his voice lowered by a tad. Strange would realize that. That he was honestly worried about his girlfriend. And maybe wonder why.

The first answer he got was a heavy sigh. "Not good, I think. She lies about the amount of sleep she gets. I sometimes catch her watching the cloak as if it wants to murder her." Strange was silent for a moment again. "She doesn't tell me anything about it. I want to ask, but…” he shrugged, ending the conversation. Obviously, he wasn't that interested in talking about his problems with him. Really understandable, if one considered their history. And yet, Christine was the only thing that really... kind of connected them. Which seemed odd at a first thought.

They spent the following ten minutes in silence, until Peter got in, wearing his backpack and looking all exhausted.

"I hate it. I'm supposedly a super-hero and miss the subway every time. Ran the last part of the way here." He laughed embarrassed and dropped the backpack. "Did I miss something?" He looked at them and then at Tony for a long moment, as if to make sure that him getting in too late was really okay.

"Nah." Tony got up. "Didn't start without you. Don't want to explain stuff twice." He started to pace through the living room again. How should he start? He knew what he wanted to say, what he had to say, but…
Meanwhile, he felt Peter's and Strange's gaze on him. Both following his pacing with their eyes. When he stopped and turned to look at them, Peter was still standing, Strange looked at him with a raised eyebrow and the cloak was busy looking through his alcohol cabinet, not showing the slightest interested in what was going on.

"Okay." Tony sighed. He should have done that two weeks ago after talking with Pep. Yet, his girlfriend had insisted on him giving Strange and his girl some time to rest. Which he had done. Two. Weeks. That was forever!

"You see, I realized something about the attack. By the hammer guy. Back in our own timeline, we got attacked around 1:25 pm. Right after I wanted to call Steve. This time, we were attacked at 1:25 am. I... I don't think this is a coincidence. The attack happening with a twelve-hour difference but at the same time, so to speak. Something... I don't know. Something is playing us?"

He looked at Strange for support or something like that. He was the guy with time travel - mess up knowledge. Yet, this damn sorcerer, like always, gave no hint of his emotions. There was just nothing on his face. How could he always manage that?

"It could fit. With what the Ancient One told me." He stated slowly. Tony, just hearing that short sentence, felt his anger flare up again. This stupid ass had talked with the current Sorcerer Supreme and hadn't talked with them about anything? Why was he always so secretive and picky about information sharing? Did he need to hammer it into his head?

"Ehm... What did she tell you? Why should it fit?" Peter jumped in, pulling his attention away from Strange momentarily. The boy always seemed to know when he was close to throwing Strange out a window.

Strange sighed softly, moving in his armchair and wincing while doing so. Right. He hadn't told them because he was literally fucked up. He showed enough respect for their cause by simply being here.

"She told me, that this isn't a new timeline. But it can't be the old timeline either. Most likely, it's a branch. We are still connected to the original, yet independent from it at the same time."

There was a long pause, in which he simply stared at Strange. What, please? They were... they were in a branch. What...?

"First of, we can change things. We couldn't if we were in our past. But, and there is the problem, we are still part of our old timeline. At some point, this current present will merge back with from where we came. Kill the branch, swallow it. Whatever we change here will change things in the old timeline, when we merge back together. Or at least I hope that. Wouldn't make much sense otherwise."

Tony simply stared at him. They would... they would merge back together. Might be that all their time preparing was simply wasted? Everything resetting to the moment... No. Strange had said he hoped that the things they changed impacted how the things developed after the timeline merge stuff. He hoped. They couldn't work with hope. Hope was worth shit.

"The time stuff would fit in there." He finally continued, making Tony blink. What? How? Wait, what?

"We are still connected to our old time, you see? But we aren't in our old time. The timing thing plays into that. 1:25. It's like someone waving a sign at us." He was silent, seemingly back to thinking. A frown on his face.
Tony joined in. "Do you think, that those light flashes... it's always something from our future, or... well, from our old timeline getting through to us? That those things will always try to murder us?" He had thought about that possibility for a while. Honestly, it had haunted him. What if Thanos came through next time?

Strange remained silent, staring at his trembling hands before he sighed. "I'd guess that. It makes sense. The timing thing. It's as if..." and then he stopped talking, looking as if he just had a revelation.

"In our old timeline, where they popped up at 1:25. Those light flashes, I think they might try to push stuff from over there into here. Or maybe the old timeline simply falls into this one and no one is actively trying to kill us. Yet... why should an alien pop up right in front of us if no one tries to kill us? And the time difference... Just as if... Maybe both aliens were meant to pop up, but that wasn't, like, finished. Whatever tries to kill us didn't manage all the way. Just something around. That's how we got one alien with a twelve-hour difference."

Tony stared at him. Was he serious? Did that mean he hadn't been all wrong? That time indeed wanted to murder them?

"But why?" he simply asked. He was curious how outrages that explanation would be.

Stephen simply shrugged. Did that mean, he didn't know? Or that he...

"To create a paradox. If one of us dies, we can't reach the point in time where we went back in time. The branch would get unstable and that's it."

"Yes. I mean no. Why would time try to kill us?" Tony repeated. The paradox was obvious. But why? Where was the catch?


"I guess to preserve balance to itself, after all, we could actually change things. I'm not sure though."

They all were silent for some long minutes. No one saying a word. Just pondering what had been said. Those light flashes...

"When would this timeline merge back with the original?" He asked, not expecting a real answer. Yet, he got one. But not from Strange. Peter raised his voice.

"Like in Harry Potter. The moment right after time got turned back. That way we can slip back in, act as if it was never any different and no one can prove the alternative because the original timeline doesn't exist anymore."

Tony simply stared at Peter. Had he just explained time travel craziness with a movie reference? With Harry Potter?! That boy... Groaning, he finally let himself drop on the couch again, not moving for a while. Why was he trapped in his own past with a movie referencing teenager (who he kind of adopted along the way) and a stupid, egocentric wizard?

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For a long while, they once again said no single word. Peter stared at his hands, at the ceiling, at the cloak floating around and staring out the window from time to time. Tilting its collar once in a while, as if it was seeing something interesting. It still didn't seem to bother for any of them.

"Okay." Peter finally raised his voice, while still staring at his hands. "Can we, like, change stuff
then? Much stuff? Or do we still have to lay low and consider each and every step because we could possibly fuck things up and lose our advantage?"

Both supposedly genius adults were silent. None of them knowing for sure and consequently not daring to answer. Peter looked at them for a long moment, then he sighed.

"Okay. The question the other way around. What needs to happen from our past to give us a chance at winning?"

This time, the doc started to speak. Slow and unwillingly. "We need Thor's axe thing." Peter frowned. Which axe thing? Probably something he saw in the one future where they had a chance at winning. "Thor can't wield that thing until after Ragnarok. Which means we have to give Thanos the Power Stone at least, the Space Stone most likely too."

Peter closed his eyes. He knew what would happen.

"You want to give him two Infinity Stones? Are you mad?" Tony snapped at the doc, who looked at him annoyed.

"Why can't we use Thor's hammer?" Peter stepped in, hoping he would stop any more snapping.

"The hammer is too weak. We have no weapon which has even the slightest chance at killing Thanos. Only the axe can do it."

Peter blinked at those words. "Why are you sure that he can't wield it before this… eh… Ragnarok?"

The doc sighed. "He is too weak before that event. He would die trying to hold it."

Well. That was a word.

"We need to let that thing happen then? We need to give him the Power and Space Stone? All the others are only a portal far away after that."

Again, there was only silence after that. They weren't really into talking much today.

Slowly, very slowly, Tony joined the conversation. "All we have to do is get the Reality Stone and make sure he doesn't get his hands on this Gamora. He killed her for the Soul Stone, after all." Tony paused. "That way we would have three stones while he has two. Do we have a chance at standing against him?" he asked, his gaze turning to the doc.

Peter frowned while watching them. Tony's gaze was cold, looking at the doc calculating. As if waiting for an answer he knew he would never get.

And the doc only sighed. As if they… did they have this conversation already? Did he miss out on something?

"We have a chance." was all the doc said. A chance. A chance was the same they had before, but Tony only groaned, falling back against the couch and remaining sitting there, slouched.

"We can't win this war with chances."

He saw, how the two of them were very, very close to screaming at another. Again. "Well, we would only need to keep Thanos busy until Thor pops up with his axe, right?" He had to get it after Thanos collecting two stones and Thanos collecting all the stones if he counted one and one together correctly.
"Theoretically, yes." The doc finally stated. Theoretically yes.

Peter was up on his feet within seconds, feeling the need to inspire those two idiots. "Okay. Good. We have a moment that can't change. This ragna thing. We can work from there, right? What is needed for it to happen?"

The doc blinked. "Odin has to die, Hela comes free, Thor ends on Sakaar, finds Banner there. They get back to Asgard, fight, the planet gets destroyed."

"Good. Sweet. Or not. Friday. A holographic chart or whatever. With a timeline please, all up until April 2018, please."

Moments later, a holographic chart appeared in the middle of the room. God, he loved AI's. "Okay..." Peter said, his words trailing off while he touched the current date. "When is this ragna thing happening? Right before Thanos honors us with his appearance, right?" he asked, trying to joke.

He could see the doc frown and think. "Yes, a week before. Roundabout."

"Sweet." He said once again, marking the end of March 2018. "We can't change that. What else? What else is too important to get changed?" he asked, looking at the two adults, who finally got to their feet. Good grace, he had managed to inspire them.

The doc touched the end of the year, creating a glowing point at November 2016. "I fight Dormammu here." He stated, taking a step back and looking at the dates.

"Who or what is Dormammu?" Tony asked, staring at the timeline with its two marks.

"An inter-dimensional being or something, which we'll never know about because he did his job right." Peter stated, remembering their conversation about that name.

"Anything else which has to happen?" he asked, looking at one specific date. Homecoming. Meanwhile, he waited for a response.

"Well, around mid-2017 I become Sorcerer Supreme in our old timeline, but I don't think that's essential with me having the Time Stone anyway." The doc stated, staring at the time frame given to them. "Then again, we shouldn't diverge too far, shouldn't we?"

"Well, if we can change things, everything on Earth should be pretty self-contained as long as we don't screw up heroically, right?" Tony threw in while circling the hologram.

The doc didn't answer.

"Well, if we can change things, I don't need to have to get into that airplane debacle, right?" Peter asked, very well aware that there was way too much hope in his voice. "We could recruit Liz' dad to our side. We could recruit every villain to our side." After all, their villains were capable of fighting.

He saw, how Tony and the doc exchanged a gaze. Okay. That was odd.

"I don't think we should let our foes in on our secrets." Tony stated, staring at the timeline. For a long moment, he stared at the glowing mark at November 2016. "Okay. How about this?" he continued, not really waiting for their responses. "We change nothing until this November thing. After, we go and recruit for our cause? That gives us nearly half a year to prepare in private and about a year and a half to actually recruit and prepare everyone else."
Peter was silent. Sure. He had to go through the airplane debacle. After, they could start to change stuff. Blinking at his sudden rage, he got himself together. That wasn't true, after all. The doc had to go through Dormammu, whatever exactly that meant. It would surely be worse than a stupid airplane thing. And Tony was right. They shouldn't trust their foes. They stood on opposite sides for a reason. Sure, Thanos was a whole other opposite side, but he couldn't be sure that the people who wanted to see them dead would believe them. To believe that they would believe them was foolish. And above all else, they couldn't risk being foolish. They couldn't risk getting killed. If they got killed, the timeline collapsed and their chance at defeating the mad titan evaporated.

"Okay..." He marked his homecoming event. And. "Here. Exams. I really want to have a future if we survive, okay? I really wanna go to college. Or university, whatever comes up. I need good grades for that."

He saw, how Tony smiled at him. For a moment, he felt that accepting his fate was the right decision. It would all work out. It had to. There was no other way.

After some ten minutes, a bunch of marks were on their private timeline. Suspiciously, most before the November 2016 thing. That was their point then. Well, their point was more like the end of the year. The doc insisted that he needed a month to recover from his fight. And well, it was Christmas basically, why argue. They could at least pretend one last time that everything was okay.

To pretend one last time that everything was okay.

His gaze came to a rest on the doc.

The dinner thing May had asked about. He had promised her to ask and he couldn't let her down. He didn't want to lie over having asked him. At some point, he feared that this entire construct would collapse right on top of him if he kept lying. To not tell her about Spider-Man was worse enough.

"Ehm… doc? Could I ask you something? Like, in private?"

He could see how the doc narrowed his eyes at the nickname but nodded. A moment later they stood a bit away. Peter feeling unwell. He could basically feel Tony's gaze on him, burning questions into his back. Why would he want to talk with Strange alone?

"I may have lied to my aunt and told her something…" he started, getting more nervous by the syllable.

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Tony tried to look at the timeline they had created together. All those dots that they had to take care of happening in the exact right way. But, hell, who was he kidding? His attention was glued to Peter and Strange. They stood at a respectable distance, talking in hushed voices. Quiet enough for him to not be able to hear a single word. It was infuriating.

Why would Peter have to talk with Strange?

Why did Peter know about this Dormammu thing? Had they already talked in private without him?

Why wouldn't his boy come to ask him first about basically everything? This… this…

He could ask Friday to tell them what they were talking about. Easy thing for her to read lips. Just one command away. He could even ask her later. The whole place was under surveillance. Just revert the correct camera and there he went.
The cloak floated past. What was that thing doing here anyway? Besides staring at everything? It didn't particularly want to participate. It had stared at the marks at the timeline but hadn't added any. Which was probably good, if he thought about it. A moment later, Strange gestured for the cloak and it floated towards him. Towards him and Peter. What was going on?

A moment later, he watched how Strange punched Peter in the chest. His body going limp, the cloak catching him.

Tony felt his eye twitch. That was enough.

Within a second, he was beside the two. "What the fuck is going on?" he managed through gritted teeth. He had the strong urge to take his chances and actually kill Strange. Maybe throw him out of the window for good, see if his stupid cloak could catch him. Or if he could create a portal in time. He had to remember to take his portal ring from him before throwing him out a window. Yes. Would reduce his chances.

Then Peter snapped for air and looked around with big eyes. Seeing him look around made a stone fall from Tony's heart. Seeing him collapse, just like that… he couldn't take losing him. Not Peter. Not the son he never had.

"Oh my fucking god!" Peter exclaimed, getting back on his feet properly. "That… that… I was… where was I?" he asked, his voice bordering to hysterical fascination. Tony could only blink confusedly. What the…? What had he missed?

"Astral plane." Strange responded dryly.

Astral…? "This is about magic, right?" he asked, eyeing the wizard.

And the wizard simply shrugged. "He asked me why this new age stuff is in his beginner's book. I told him he had to look around."

"There is a whole dimension around our dimension! Or within it! That's just insane!" Peter took a moment to take a deep breath. "How do I learn to do magic? Like for real? How do I do the sparkly stuff?" Peter looked like he was going to start bouncing on the spot. That full of energy. God. Teenagers.

"Chill." Strange stated. Well, for starters Tony would agree with him. Chill. "Meditate, relax, try to feel the surrounding realities. All that stuff."

Peter tilted his head. Most likely, he was irritated by the 'feel the surrounding realities' line. Tony would be if he was interested in learning magic. Lucky him, he wasn't. Strolling away from the two idiots, he told Friday to store the hologram away. They were done for the day. After all, Peter had started bombarding Strange with questions about magic.

Magic.

How ridiculous.

For the following about five minutes, he simply zoned out, ignoring Peter and Strange. Then Pepper and Christine returned to his joy. Ending any discussion the two had because Strange was busy hugging his girlfriend. Tony watched with glee, how Peter stepped away to let them have some privacy. Yeah. No more discussions.
Breaking away from their hug, Stephen looked at Christine. She looked worse than before. Had she cried? Sure, she had tried to hide it, but…

"How are you?" the gentle voice of her ripped him away from his thoughts. Opening his mouth, he wanted to say something, but she cut in. "Yeah, yeah, I know. You are fine." Christine stated while rolling her eyes.

"I wanted to say ready to snuggle into bed and not move, but I can go with fine too."

She chuckled. That was good, her chuckling. It was close to laughing, which would have been better. Yet, he had to take what he could get.

"Ready to go home?" he asked, looking at her. Instantly, he saw how fear filled her. Those stupid portals…

"Are you done with everything?" she asked, dodging an actual answer.

Like a good boyfriend, he took the bait and looked at Stark, who was busy with not watching them. "Hey, Stark. Are we done?" he asked, his voice raised. Stark's head turned into their direction, looking at him for a moment. In this short second, Stephen realized that there was something else he had wanted to talk about.

"Sure. You go home. If something comes up, I'll text or call you."

But seeing them both, he had decided to let it slip. He guessed he had to be grateful for that.

Stephen held his gaze for a moment as if to check that everything was indeed okay. When no more words came, he simply nodded. After he had said his goodbyes to his little group, his attention went back to Christine. He was still holding her close.

Letting go of her, he raised his arms and created a portal. Even though not holding her, he felt how she tensed against him. Because of those stupid golden sparkles. She was terrified of those things, wasn't she? And yet, she literally went through them because of him. Placing his arm around her again, he pulled her against him lightly and started to walk them through. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw how the cloak approached. On the other side of the portal, he saw how it moved past them, using the brief moment, in which Christine leaned against him and didn't look at anything. What was it between her and it?

Watching how the portal closed, he hugged her against him. "We are home." He whispered. Slowly, he felt how she relaxed against him. Looked at him with a tiny smile, fear starting to disappear from her gaze.

A second later, she jumped into full doctor mode. "You get rid of your clothes and snuggle into bed. I'll get the ointment." She stated, letting go of him as if everything was okay. Most likely, as soon as she was Doctor Palmer, everything was okay.

"Yes, doctor." He responded, earning a chuckle from her yet again.

"You couldn't resist, could you?" Christine replied before she went to get the ointment.

Some moments later, she was back and sat on the bed, watching him get rid of his clothes. Arguably slow, with his trembling hands. Sure, he could use magic to get rid of them, but…

"You are even slower than normal, are you?" Christine asked when he had finally gotten rid of his shirt, standing in the room wearing jeans. Well…
"You could help me if it annoys you." He teased. He hadn't really expected her to get up, yet she did. He had thought she would throw a snarky comment at him, that he should use the magic he loved to use. For a long moment, he felt her gaze on his chest, before her eyes found his. He could see how she smirked while stopping right in front of him. Her hands rested on his waist for a second, before they slipped to the front, unbuttoning and unzipping his jeans. Then she pushed the textile down and stepped away. He restrained from frowning. First, she teased, then she backed away instantly. Was she mad at him?

"Guess you can finish the rest without taking ages." And there was the snarky comment. Women just didn't make any sense at times.

Stepping out of his jeans, he followed her to the bed, laying down on his stomach as usual.

Moments later, her soft hands were on his back, gently massaging the ointment into his skin and loosening tensed up muscles along the way. He winced at times when her fingers found a still strained muscle. She had to know them by heart by now, always checking if they still hurt. If they still hurt, her touch got light, only applying the ointment.

By the time she was done, he was very close to sleep. All relaxed and warm and…

"Turn on your back, sleepyhead. You won't sleep on your stomach." Yeah. Sure. Bad for his back. Rolling around onto his back, he opened his eyes to look at her. She sat beside him, leaning away to place the container of the ointment on her nightstand. Then her attention was back on him, smiling gently.

"Come." He stated, opening his arms while doing so. He wanted to cuddle up with her, but the expression on her face told him, that she didn't like that idea very much. Put extra weight on him.

"Come on, I can handle it. I just want to hold you for a while." She sighed but complied. With her head finally resting on his chest, he sighed content, wrapping his arms around her body. Making sure to keep her close while he was still awake. He didn't want to wake up without her, but he sure knew he would. When he opened his eyes again, she would lay beside him. Reading a book or something.

"How was your date with Pepper?" he asked jokingly, earning a soft laugh.

"Fabulous. We talked about girls' stuff, she showed me around the tower. Stark has a ton of Iron-Man suits, you knew that? Pepper said those were only a small part, but… crazy. And then we did some romantic gazing at the city."

He hummed softly. "Sound's good. Do I have to worry now, especially after the romantic gazing at the city part?"

She burst into laughter. For the first time in weeks and he felt proud because of it. He hadn't thought that his comment had been particularly funny, but he would go with it.

A few minutes passed by until she calmed down again. All the while he held her softly trembling body, laughter shaking her. After she calmed down, she broke away from him and claimed his lips. The following kiss wasn't gentle like all those others he had gotten ever since. God, he loved it. Their lips smashed against another, her tongue gliding against his. He moaned softly into the kiss, which seemed to make her snap out of the moment and instantly break away.

"I'm sorry." She stated, sitting upright beside him.

He tried it with a soft smile. "Don't be." But he already knew it was a lost cause. They wouldn't go back to kissing like that. She obviously lived in the fear, that them kissing like that would lead to
heavy making out which would hurt him somewhere along the way. He would take some stupid pain for her straddling him and kissing him like that, but obviously, she wouldn't have it.

She at least snuggled back against his chest, which he had to take as a semi-victory. He instantly wrapped his arms around her and pulled her closer. If he couldn't have any good kissing, he wouldn't let her go for starters.

He closed his eyes and nearly drifted off to sleep after a little. Her warm body on his. The sound of her breath. The way she moved lightly against him every now and then.

Maybe a minute later and he wouldn't have felt it. Like that, he felt her body tense. Opening one eye, he looked at her and followed her gaze. She stared at the door. Cloak floated there, looking at them, obviously not sure… and then it floated away again, exiled to the living room. For a moment he felt bad for the cloak. He was used to it being in the same room, except when Christine and he had sex.

"What is it about the cloak?" he asked slurry, feeling how her body slowly relaxed again with the cloak out of sight.

"Nothing." The word came immediate. Instantly. Too fast. "I told you, I just don't like that stupid cape."

Even in his sleepy state, he heard the lie.

Chapter End Notes

As always, thanks for reading and perhaps leaving a comment.
The next chapter will finally reveal the lie Peter told May.
Taking a deep breath, Stephen decided against sleep. He wanted this out of the world right now, right here. Even if it meant leaving this cozy, relaxed state with her resting on his chest. Slowly sitting up and moving away from her, he looked at her.

"What is it between the cloak and you?" he repeated his question, this time firmer.

He could see something move on her face. Annoyance at best. "Nothing." Something dark at worse. She responded again, this time cooler.

He wanted to say 'Yeah, sure. You stare at it like that because it's nothing.' but decided to frown instead, cupping her face gently and stroke her cheek with his thumb. "What is it?" he asked for a third time, this time sad and gentle. "You know you can tell me everything, right?"

That annoyance disappeared from her face gradually until there was only sadness left. Insecurity. And fear. He just sat there beside her, stroking her face and kept his mouth shut. He couldn't ask again. The best he could do was wait if she would start to speak. If he pushed her he would get no answer at all.

"I…" she started to speak but didn't get past the I. She just sat there, looking at him with those sad, fearful eyes and didn't get a word further. Again, he only smiled reassuringly and continued to gently stroke her face.

"Would you choose the cloak over me?" she finally asked, her voice weak and afraid.

He wasn't sure what he had expected, but not that for sure. Did she really believe he would abandon her for the cloak? How did she get that idea? He had to keep from snorting as it would surely not help their starting conversation.

"I would never choose the cloak over you." He stated gently, seeing something shift in her gaze. There were annoyance, fear and something different. Something like sullen coldness. She didn't believe him, did she? What had he missed during those last two weeks? They had been together for most of it, after all. How could he miss stuff?

"You say that. If I asked you to send it away, right here, right now, would you do it?"

He opened his mouth to object or ask why or anything but stopped himself. Asking questions back would only prove her point or infuriate her or hurt her. He wanted none of that.
"Yeah." Christine snapped at him, tears in her eyes. "You have to think about it."

Stephen stared at her, startled. "There is nothing to think about. I'm just confused."

"Why would you be confused?" Christine snapped again, hurt filling her words. "That thing tried to kill me!" her voice broke while she was yelling at him, true fear shining in her eyes. And probably disbelieve that he didn't see the obvious.

He once again wanted to open his mouth to object, defend his poor cloak, but he stopped himself. There was true fear in her eyes. She was terrified. She… she believed that the cloak had wanted to murder her. It was her truth. He couldn't simply dismiss that. Dismissing it would make her believe that he didn't care for her. Didn't take her seriously. Didn't take them seriously. She went to great lengths to ensure his back healed as fast as possible and he laughed into her face when she told him her greatest fear. Good move. Nice boyfriend. Probably not for much longer.

"I will never let it harm you." He said softly.

His answer was a mixture of a strangled sob and a hysterical laugh. "It already did that!" she yelled hysterical, gesturing towards her throat. He could see the weak golden glimmer of magic on her skin. Still, after all those days. A part of him believed he would see it forever. A constant reminder, that she could have died on that street, right in front of his eyes. He only stared at her, unable to say a thing. He couldn't -

"It tried it again. It sneaked into the bedroom and floated above me. Only inches!" she spat at him, obviously angry that he hadn't said anything. "Stephen, it wanted to suffocate me! If I wouldn't have woken up when I did, I would probably be dead!" While she screamed at him, tears were running down her face, fear shining in her eyes.

Seeing her like that, all that fear and hurt and panic... He couldn't tell her, that the cloak didn't want to murder her. She wouldn't believe that. Not right now. Maybe never. He sighed softly and got up, aiming for the door.

"You are walking out on me?" she asked, disbelieve and hurt filling her voice.

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She watched Stephen's facial expression. He didn't seem happy with her telling him the truth. That his stupid precious piece of cloth had tried to kill her. Was still trying to kill her. She saw it in his face. He didn't believe her. He thought very differently about all of it. He loved his cloak. When he got up, she watched in disbelieve, how he took a few steps.

"You are walking out on me?" Christine asked, her voice hurt and hollow. She couldn't believe it. He was picking this shitty cloak over her. She should have kept her mouth. Stick to "Nothing" as an answer as it seemed to be the only one he accepted.

She closed her eyes, feeling new, hot tears on her cheeks. She would have to get up and storm out of her own flat, which didn't feel right to begin with, but could she throw him out? Could she do that? No, she couldn't. She… she had lost him. To a stupid rag of red fabric. She… and while she felt her heart clench and her world fall to pieces, she felt his warm, trembling hand cup her cheek again. Such a sweet gesture, which said nothing at all. I'm sorry, Christine. You are just not worth it. You have no idea what will come for us. I need that cloak.

"I'll send it away." This voice she loved that much told her. At first, his words didn't register with her. She heard them, but she didn't hear them. They were just meaningless characters slung into
words building a sentence. They were just that. Nothing. Just like her. Nothing. He left her. For a cloak. The soft pressure of his lips against hers made her snap out of her catatonic state. She looked at him, her world blurry. Stephen. He had always been the love of her life. Losing him now to a fuck-

I'll send it away. Slowly, as if within a dream, she blinked. Had she imagined those words? That he would send it away? He couldn't mean that he wanted to… but looking up at him, there was only calm determination in his eyes.

"You… you..." she stammered, not getting a word out of her mouth.

"I'll go into your living room, create a portal, be away for a few minutes and be right back again. And the cloak won't be with me."

She stared at him, her mouth slightly open. She hadn't expected that. She really hadn't expected that. Sure, she had hoped it would happen, that he would choose her but…

Watching how he smiled weakly at her and turned and left the room, she still couldn't believe it. Hearing that hissing sound, she winced. And then there was silence.

****

Cloak had wanted to look for its master, floating in the open bedroom door, making sure to not enter the room. Nearly instantly, it felt Christine's gaze on it. Afraid and angry and hateful. Moments later, its master had seen it and had asked Christine what was wrong. Cloak had floated away at that, knowing it was wise to give them some privacy. Christine was upset because of something it had done and it simply couldn't figure out what. Sure, it hadn't succeeded in protecting her, had to watch her nearly die on that street. It did indeed deserve eternal shame for that, but all that hate? It had done nothing wrong. Not after not being able to save her. It had tried to be the best cloak in the world. In the uni-multi-verse even. It had remained in the living room without comment when Christine asked for it. It tried to help her in every possible way. Water her plants, sort her books alphabetically, carry groceries for her to the kitchen when she came in. Never a thank you. Never even a word. Only that look. Fear- and hateful at the same time.

One night when it had heard Christine wince and whimper, it had decided to float and check on her. Make sure everything was fine. Floating above her, it checked her body. Everything seemed fine. Just a bad dream. This one seemed worse, though. Cloak had half a mind to wake its master, make this peaceful sleeping moron aware of her distress when she woke up and stared at it. The sheer panic in her gaze had made it flip away and leave the room. Christine didn't want it to enter the bedroom. It should have stayed away for good.

Hearing them argue now, because of it, cloak let its collar drop. If Stephen would choose it over her? The question was ridiculous! Its master didn't need to choose between them. The dynamic was a purely different one. Christine was Christine. The love of its master's life. It was his cloak. There was nothing more to say. Back, in their original timeline, Christine and it had been great friends. It missed that Christine. The happy, cheerful, laughing woman, it had accepted that easily. It had been easy to see why Stephen fell for her in the first place.

"That thing tried to kill me!" Christine's snapping voice made cloak snap out of its thoughts. Did she mean that? Seriously? It would never do such a thing! It would never harm its master's… it wanted to float into the room, all angry and upset when the following words made it stop. Her tone. Her shaking voice. She was obviously crying. She believed those words. Cloak was frozen in mid-air for some moments, shocked into not moving. She believed it had wanted to kill her. Back on that fateful, dreadful street. Its collar dropped even lower, cloak dropping until it touched the ground. Christine
thought that it had wanted to kill her. That it still wanted to kill her. Sure, she hated it for that.

When Stephen left the bedroom, it snapped up, floating to him and gesturing around like a maniac. Like the mad, desperate cloak it was. It didn't mean her any harm! Its master had to know that! He couldn't send it away! It was nothing without him! Stephen simply stared at it, creating a portal. The cloak stared at it for some long seconds. It could refuse to leave. It could run away. Yet, for what cost? If it wanted to help its master right now, it had to leave. His girl thought it wanted to murder her in her sleep, after all. Once again, it let the collar drop and floated through the portal, hearing how Stephen followed it.

"I don't think you want to kill her." The words of its master were instantaneous. Cloak had to let them sink in before it swirled around and wrapped itself around Stephen, softly rippling against his skin. Its master didn't believe it had wanted to harm her. Of course, he didn't believe that. He knew it, after all. They trusted each other. They were master and cloak. Simple as that.

"I'll get you back as soon as I can." Its master stated, meanwhile managing to free himself of its embrace. He patted cloak for a moment, created a portal and was gone. All cloak could do was float and feel lonely. It should be at its master's side. The next random alien would surely pop up any second now, with it being alone in some stupid room in Kamar-Taj.

Snapping out of her nightmare, Christine ripped her eyes open, staring into the darkness of the night. For a few long seconds, she was still laying on that street, blood flowing from her wound. Stephen above her, looking terrified. He knew he couldn't save her. And he knew she knew it. He had never been good at hiding anything from her. She knew he was dying. Blinking, she reoriented herself. She didn't lay on cold concrete. She didn't feel blood run from her cut throat. She… she was laying on Stephen's chest, comfortably wrapped in his arms. At least, she hadn't trashed around like a maniac and had woken him in the process. No, her hurt angel slept peacefully, holding her close. For some long moments, she allowed herself to enjoy their position. The warmth of his skin, the sound of his heartbeat, the security of his embrace. Then she sighed and slipped away carefully.

Sleeping on his chest hadn't been the plan. The plan was to wait until he was in dreamland and then slip away. Don't strain his back even more. Her poor love. She knew he tried to hide it and be all tough man, but every time she massaged the ointment into his skin, she felt him flinch below her touch and heard him whimper. He was far from good. And sleeping on him didn't further the cause.

She watched him for some long moments. Her peacefully sleeping idiot. With a sigh on her lips, she bent down to peck his lips and carefully slipped out of bed. Leaving the room altogether.

She slipped into her bathrobe and settled on her couch. Catching herself, how she looked around, she shook her head. She had looked for the cloak, expecting it to lurk in some corner and jump at her while she was distracted. Stephen had brought it away, though. He had chosen her over that stupid rag. And yet… it didn't feel like a victory. She knew how much the stupid cloak meant to Stephen. They had seen the end of the world together, after all. They had survived, although through sheer luck. Who was she to complain? She had her Stephen. And the cloak… for a moment, she felt something like sympathy for the stupid rag. All alone, wherever Stephen had brought it. Then she remembered that that stupid rag had tried to kill her repeatedly, and all her empathy turned into the cold hatred she was used to. As if she was going to miss that stupid thing.

Finally checking the time, she sighed again. 2 am. Falling asleep with him furthered the complete screw up of her sleeping times. Not that she had been any good in it before, with working at the hospital, but she could at least pretend! Now, she often fell asleep with him and woke up whenever her body saw fit. And he, he just slept for hours without end. She knew he needed it, of course. And
yet…

Getting up again, she picked up her laptop and snuggled into her couch. She had wanted to do something. Something productive. Yet, she ended reading through questionable news articles online, went lost on YouTube and just watched through whatever came up on autoplay next.

Stephen's sleepy "Morning." startled her. With her head snapping up from a movie review she didn't even know the movie for, she looked at him. Soft light played on his face. Sure. Light. Morning. She had definitely realized that it had gotten brighter, but she had completely ignored the time.

"Morning." She finally greeted back. "How was your sleep?"

He smirked softly. "Lonelier than I hoped it would be." He stated, sitting down beside her and stealing a soft morning kiss from her lips.

She rolled her eyes, making sure to glimpse at the time on her laptop. Fuck. "Well, not all of us can sleep soundly until 10." She stated, got up and stretched herself. She could see a sad glimmer in his eyes. He had surely expected her to sit there for a little, maybe cuddle a bit. Yet, it was 10. They needed something for breakfast. Or freakin early lunch.

Entering the kitchen, she heard him follow her. When she looked up, he leaned against the door frame, watching her calmly.

"The usual?" she asked, already grabbing for his porridge.

"Yep." He stated, watching her every move. She simply smiled, got some milk from the fridge and started to heat it. Porridge always tasted better with milk. At least, if someone would ask her. Meanwhile, she started to cut some fruits. Stephen had insisted, that he would eat it without fruits, but… no. She wouldn't watch her boyfriend eat only porridge for breakfast. When she was done cutting peaches and strawberries into small bits, she put the knife aside, looking at him. "Why couldn't I know this you earlier? All humble." She asked jokingly.

He cocked his head, a small grin on his face. Oh… she knew that expression. He was going to make a really bad…

"Why? Because you wanted to save thousands of dollars wooing me?"

She looked at him for a moment… then she burst into laughter. That was true. She could have saved the money she had spent on the watch. She had 'only' gotten it because she knew he loved expensive stuff. And of course, she wanted that he could show her present off. See, what my girl gifted me! Yet, she knew she would have gotten it for him anyway. She earned enough to afford to buy it.

The milk daring to burn made her snap out of her laughing fit, moving to save what could be saved. Afterward, she stared at the boiling milk and started to giggle. She had nearly burned milk because of laughing. Catching herself, while still giggling, she grabbed a bowl, added his porridge and milk and threw the fruit slices in. After everything was mixed, she took a deep breath and looked at him.

He still stood there, leaning against the door frame, watching her with a smile. It was an honest, loving smile, which reached his eyes. Seeing it, she realized how long she hadn't seen one. Not ever since (that street). No, not ever since. She had always been a bit absent and he seemed to have picked her behavior up, even though unknowingly. And then, she realized what had changed. The cloak was gone. She felt more free and happier without it constantly floating around. Could she… tell him that? She didn't want to talk about the stupid rag right now. Feeling, how her good mood faded, she took the initiative, walked to him and caught his lips in a passionate kiss. One of those
kisses, they hadn't shared for two long weeks. (Except for yesterday, but yesterday had been odd.) Breaking away, she looked into his eyes. Those warm, loving eyes.

"I love you." It left her lips, once again without her knowing that she wanted to say it. Thank you for saving me. Thank you for caring about me. Thank you for listening to me. Thank you for sending the cloak away.

He looked at her for a long moment, obviously baffled. Then he pulled her close and kissed her. Long and passionately.

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Stephen stared at her for a long moment after she said those magical three words. With all his discipline, he kept his emotions from his face. She couldn't see them. All she should see was being surprised. He knew he should be happy. He knew he had waited for ages to hear those words in his original timeline. He had been all giddy back then when she finally said them. Hugged her and kissed her and them finally ending in his bed, making love. It hadn't been sex that time. It had been making love. Slow and teasingly and torturous and perfect.

This time, however, he could count one and one together. She hadn't said it after that day. That day she nearly died. And now, today, she said it again, right after he had sent the cloak away. He had immediately realized this morning that she was more carefree than ever in those last two weeks. And then she was telling him she loved him…

She had to have been terrified of his poor cloak. How the hell was he going to fix that?

For starters, though, he smashed his lips against hers, pulling her close. Forcing his worried thoughts away, he concentrated on the feeling of their lips moving as one. She had said she loved him. And then, suddenly, without him having expected it at all, there was that giddy feeling. His entire existence narrowing down to her. Her warm body in his arms, her lips against his, her fingers tangled in his hair. There was only Christine. She loved him.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Finally, coming to an end. (With the Christine / Cloak situation.)

This chapter will have: Stephen / Christine / Cloak / Peter for some reason (he just popped up!)

I'm sorry this chapter took that long. Like you can guess, life happened. Had to sort stuff out. I hope, I can start with the next chapter soon.

Enjoy reading :)

Stephen wasn't sure how it had happened. Or when. Or if he could have prevented it if he had really wanted to. Which he didn't. He was in trouble now. In really bad trouble. His increasing worries stood in stark contrast to how he had felt an hour ago. With Christine moving teasingly slow on top of him. He knew he had wondered, for how long Christine didn't have sex. Then she had snapped her hips and the thought was gone.

Why the hell had he had sex with her?! He had not brought cloak up for the entire day, wanting to give her some time to really calm down. At least, that was what he told himself. He knew very well, that he hadn't wanted to ruin her good mood. That he wanted to see her smile. Still see her smile out of the corner of his eyes, when she thought he didn't look. She all cheery and flirty for the first time in weeks. Ever since she nearly died. More like the woman he always knew. Of course, he knew that she needed time to heal from everything that had happened. PTSD needed time, most of all. Yet, the selfish him he was had fully enjoyed every second of her good mood. While knowing, that it only stemmed from cloak being sent away. As soon as that change turned normal, she would be worse again.

He gulped and sighed. Moving a little, he felt her warm (naked) body press against his. How would he ever bring cloak up again? It would look like he hadn't said anything about it for getting sex with her. And after he had had sex with her, he jumped right at the important topic. Cloak, who was just everything to him. Exactly like that, it would look to Christine. And that would surely ruin his relationship. He couldn't lose her. Not again. Not after... If he would bring up cloak tomorrow, she would freak out, wouldn't she? Fall to pieces right in front of him. He couldn't do that to her.

For a mere second, he felt the temptation to conjure up the Time Stone. Use it to gaze into the future. Flip through timelines until he found one with the result he wanted to have. Keeping both: Her and cloak. Yet, what kind of boyfriend would he be, if he couldn't handle relationship crises without magic? Or outright cheating like using the time stone felt like. He had to talk himself out of that. Or better, convince Christine that cloak didn't want to murder her in her sleep. Even though that seemed impossible.

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Warm lips pressing against his made Stephen slowly return to consciousness. Opening his eyes, he met the gentle gaze of his girlfriend.
"Morning handsome." Christine whispered, pecking his lips again and got up. He couldn't stop himself from admiring her naked body. The way she moved. Her firm...

"How are you?" Reluctantly, Stephen moved his eyes away from her breasts and to her eyes. She smirked at him before pulling his shirt over her head, hiding her beautiful body from his eyes.

The question was simple yet dangerous. He hadn't slept much tonight. He had brooded over his problem. How to console Christine with the cloak. He would talk with her today about it. He had to. The longer he pushed it away, the worse it would get. Postponing that problem would only lead to more pain. And he had to bear in mind that he was terrible in hiding things from her. She would know if he was brooding about something. And she wouldn't rest until she knew. If he could control the circumstances, maybe he could achieve the outcome he wanted.

"Perfect." He finally answered her question. It was true, in a way. She was happy. They had had sex. How could he not be happy? "Even though I dislike you obstructing the good view."

Christine snorted at his remark. "Because we wouldn't get anything done if I didn't." She stated matter of factly. "Coffee? And your damn porridge? And how is your back?" Christine went on with her questions while moving through the room. She bent down while picking up some panties from her drawer. Stephen's heart skipped a beat at the sight he was allowed to see. God damn that woman!

"You did that on purpose, didn't you?" he asked, watching how she pulled her underwear on.

"Might be." She said innocently. Damn. How could that woman manage innocence after he saw her… "Coffee? Porridge? Back?" she repeated her questions from earlier.

Stephen simply chuckled. "Coffee and porridge are a yes, my back is… not much worse."

He winced slightly while he finally got up to pull on some clothes himself. She had reminded him of the fact, that sex would worsen the state of his back. While undressing him, her lips busy with caressing his neck. Yeah. He knew that. And he hadn't cared.

Entering the kitchen a few minutes later, he took her in. Swirling through the room, making coffee and getting his porridge ready. Still only wearing his white, loose shirt and her panties.

And while looking at her, he realized that this could be the last time he saw her like that. If he messed up, that was. The last time he would see that happy smile. That concentrated gaze while handling the knife. The precise and calm movements, he had watched her do in the ER a thousand times. The last time he would hear her voice. He couldn't screw this up. He simply couldn't.

"Hey." Christine cupping his cheek made him blink. He had zoned out on her again, hadn't he? Damn it, he had to get his thoughts under control.

"Are you thinking about murderous titans again?" she asked softly, watching him. Stephen could just stare at her. And then he blinked. Yes. The last time he had zoned out on her like that had been when he was worried about Thanos. Whether he remembered like him. If he was coming for him

"No." That was true. "Just watching you." He stated softly, fetching his coffee cup and sitting down at the kitchen table. Watching how she placed his bowl of porridge in front of him and sat down herself. She started with her own breakfast. A bun. With Nutella. Tons of Nutella.

"How did you sleep? I didn't feel you trash." She had done that sometimes when the nightmares had been really bad "Or wince or anything." He asked casually, changing the topic away from titans along the way.
"I actually didn't dream at all, which I consider a good thing." Christine stated smiling and returned to eating immediately. He simply smiled as a response. She hadn't dreamt at all. This was good. This meant she was getting better. Hopefully, it would stay like that.

While Christine stuffed herself with Nutella buns, Stephen toyed with his porridge. Moving his spoon around without much appetite. Watching the substance move along lazily. He didn't feel like eating. Not if he could possibly ruin his relationship in a few hours. He didn't want her to get worse again. Have nightmares again. Most likely about the cloak trying to murder her. He couldn't…

No. He had to do this. No chickening out.

"Can I talk with you about something after breakfast?" The sooner, the better. He had to get this done. Else he would probably freak out completely. He needed certainty. Whether they were still together come midday or not.

"About what?" she asked, ripping a piece off of her Nutella bun and continuing to chew on her food. Oh god, did she always eat like that? Or was it foreshadowing of him being ripped apart?

Okay.

That was ridiculous, even he knew that. He took a deep breath, calming his thoughts. He wouldn't lose her. He would sort this out like a grown-up, not at all crazy man.

He placed his spoon on the table, looking at her calmly. Watched how she frowned and placed her nearly completely eaten bun on her plate.

"Is something wrong?" Christine asked, looking serious and worried.

Stephen took a deep breath. For one last time, he looked at her. How she sat there. In nothing else than his shirt and some panties and looked at him. A frown on her beautiful face.

"I have to talk with you about the cloak." He said with a calmness he hadn't expected to have. Not with how nuts he had been during the night, but right now was no time for going nuts. He needed his wits together. He needed to convince her.

He saw how her face fell, anger in her eyes, hurt. He could basically see what was going on in her head. How dare he? Was he kidding her?! They had just talked about the cloak. And they… they had had… He knew how she thought about the cloak. He knew she thought it wanted to murder her. How dare he bring that ragged red thing up again?!

"Christine." He said firmly. "Give me five minutes. To tell you how I see things. After that, you can scream all you want, throw me out of the flat, whatever comes to mind."

Tense silence filled the little room. Nothing of the earlier easy atmosphere was left. He felt her death glare on him and held it. Endured it. One second seemed to drag on into eternity with only silence and her dark, dangerous glare. And more silence. Until she nodded.

"Okay. Five minutes." She stated coldly, her eyes already judging him.

Five minutes.

Five minutes to convince her that cloak didn't want to murder her. Five minutes to save their relationship.

Time's ticking, enough thinking.
Stephen took a deep breath, exhaled and started to speak.

"We got attacked by that alien on the street. Afterward, we went into the bar to talk, well, scream at each other. I used the Time Stone there to look into the future. Some sorcerer must have found me there, using it. Or maybe he found traces of it and followed us. I don't know. It happened. I'm sure of that. The next day you get kidnapped to force me to trade the stone against you. They had to know I had it. And I can't do that. I can't give it away to people who don't know what will come at us. Got Peter and Stark to help me, found you, tried to save you."

He took a deep breath. That far, that obvious.

"I basically had you free already. And then..." he grimaced at the memory. Him getting caught with a whip while he blocked the mirror dimension, Christine being ensnared again. Him looking up and seeing that golden knife close to her throat.

"Everything went south. The cloak tried to rip the sorcerer behind you away but didn't manage in time. That guy sliced your throat. And then... all that blood."

He fell silent, looking at her face. He felt his time ticking away. The five minutes came and went. Christine only stared at him without saying a word. Was this good? Was this bad? He tried to read her face but didn't manage. There was only his racing heart. Panic being pumped through his veins.

"The cloak moved him around and made him slice my throat." Christine stated, her voice cold and firm. Stephen's heart sank. Her tone. He was losing her. She had her believe and he... well, he had his.

"No. I saw him. He moved the knife. Cloak didn't have anything to do with that."

Christine jumped up at that, her face contoured in anger while tears welled up in her eyes.

"Sure you say that. You really love that useless thing if you defend it that madly!" She spat at him, anger and hurt competing in her eyes. Tears running down her cheeks.

Seeing her cry nearly broke him. Nearly. Only the fact that he had to do this right kept him together. He needed both. Christine and cloak. He had to be careful now. Really, really careful. One misplaced word and that would be it.

"I don't defend it. I just want to say it doesn't want to murder you. Not today, not then."

She laughed, cold and despiteful. "Sure. What makes you think that?"

There it was. The one opening he would ever get.

"It doesn't have a reason to murder you."

He felt her gaze, saw how her face froze. Wrong. He had to hurry now. He knew what she was going to say if she got to speak. 'Get out of my flat, Stephen. I never want to see you again.' He couldn't allow that.

With a racing heart, he hurried to add: "It wouldn't dare to. It knows I would turn it to rags if it ever hurt you."

Christine snorted, gesturing to her throat. "It already did that, Stephen, and you didn't do shit. It doesn't care for what you would maybe do as you never punished it in the first place. It came into my bedroom even though you said it shouldn't! It acts all sweet and nice if you are here. And even..."
sweeter if you are away. And then I find it rearranged the kitchen. Including the knives. One is missing! What do you think it wants to do with the knife?!! she asked, her voice turning shrill.

This time, Stephen jumped up, raising his voice involuntarily. "No. It wouldn't ever hurt you! It knows that I value your life more than mine. That's why it went for you."

The love of his life just stared at him. Disbelieve shining in her eyes. She shook her head and turned around, taking a step to walk away. With his heart racing in fear, he moved. He couldn't allow her to leave the kitchen. He grabbed her wrist, holding her back. Christine turned, staring at him with teary eyes. "Let me go!" She yelled with a broken, angry voice, trying to rip free of his grip.

"No. If you want to blame anyone, take me."

Once again, Christine snorted. Her voice was weak now. Tears running freely. "Yeah. Because you love that fucking cloak that much. More than me. Defend it to the bitter end no matter the price."

Because he loved that… No matter the price... That was how she saw him. "No. Because I didn't get you out there in the first place. I should have let them catch us in the mirror dimension. I would have been able to fight them there. And someone would have gotten us out after a while. Because I didn't get you away in this one moment when Mordo stared at you two. Because I couldn't save you." He suddenly felt how tears ran along his face.

"You got hurt because of me. You nearly died because of me. I see this moment every night in my dreams, again and again. I see how that guy moves the knife while cloak keeps calm for a moment. I see all that blood. I see how you fall." His voice broke. He vaguely realized he hadn't been that emotional in a long while. Maybe never since they knew each other. "In my dreams, you always die, no matter what. Bleed to death in seconds or drown in your blood, or..." he shook his head. "I always try to turn back time by using the stone. To save you. And it always swallows me, overpowers me and kills me. I never get you out there alive." He let his hand drop, just looking at her. He felt her stare. He saw tears on her face. This was it then. This was it.

But she never turned and left. She never moved an inch. She just stood there and stared at him, her tears drying.

"The cloak didn't move when that man sliced my throat?" she asked disbelieving but unmoving. Staring at his face, gauging his every reaction.

"No. It didn't."

Silence again. It dragged on and on and on. Her gaze and silence and silence and her gaze.

Suddenly, she moved. Raising her hand and cupping his cheek, wiping his tears away with her thumb.

"It didn't?" she asked again.

"It didn't." He answered again, leaning into her touch.

"Prove it."

Stephen opened his mouth to tell her he couldn't. That that was impossible. That he surely could look at future events and at past events, but he couldn't share that with her. That he was terrified that the stone would rip her apart. That

Peter had been there. His suit surely had recorded everything. And it surely stored everything on
Stark's servers.

"I'll make a call."

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To say he felt uncomfortable felt like the understatement of the year. Yet, he was here. Sitting in a flat he didn't know, staring at two adults who had obviously fought and or cried, with an atmosphere that tense he could barely breathe.

"For what exactly do you need the mask again?" Peter asked fishing said item out of his backpack, eyeing them.

"She wants to see the moment her throat was sliced." The doc told him again. Most likely for the fifth time by now. He still couldn't believe that Christine really wanted to see that. Was it some crude version of visual therapy? Why would she want to see that moment?

"Okay…" Peter said, looking at Christine. "Really?" he asked again. She met his gaze and nodded. An odd determination in her eyes. She had to see it. For whatever reason. He shouldn't ask why Peter decided. Something was going on between them. He shouldn't get involved in that. More than he already was. On his way home, he would call Tony and tell him about this. They seemed that close to breaking up. He didn't want to know what a heartbroken doc could do. Maybe he would try to turn back time and screw them all in the process.

"Okay." Peter repeated, this time firmer. If she wanted this, he would help.

Putting his mask on, Karen greeted him, like always.

"How can I help?" his AI asked dutifully. "Did you learn for your Spanish test already? It's in two weeks." God, he knew that! He had to nearly sink that stupid ferry on the day of the test because they had decided to stick to how things went down until Christmas. Stupid future he didn't like.

"Sure I did." Good that he wasn't wearing the full suit. Karen would have registered an increase in his heart rate while he thought about the ferry. And exactly as she was, she would have asked about it. He didn't want to talk about it. Not at all. Knowing it was coming was worse enough. "Karen, I need you to get a video for me. I'll give the mask to that woman in front of me. Christine. You probably know her. You have to show the video to her."

"Of course I know Doctor Palmer. Which day do you want?"

"Ehm..." he told her the date. "That fight in that alley. Start at the beginning."

A moment later, the alley appeared in front of his eyes as an unmoving image. The first frame of the movie. The doc being beaten up and Christine ensnared in golden ropes. He could see a piece of red at the corner of his vision. The cloak had been beside him, waiting patiently for an opening to help try save Christine.

Pulling his mask off, he handed it to her. "Just tell her to start the video."

Said and done. He watched silently, how Christine watched the video. Or parts of it. And then asked if she could see it again. And again.

After a full 20 minutes, in which he just sat there and felt uncomfortable, he got his mask back. Christine's gaze was blank for a moment. Staring into nothingness. Then she caught herself and something that might have been a smile under different circumstances appeared on her face. "Thank
you." This way though, it was just a grim moving of muscles.

Peter looked at her, unsure what to say, but... the atmosphere had changed again. She had looked at the doc for a mere moment. He got the hint. He should leave. Whatever Christine had needed to see, she had seen it. And based on that they would go on fighting. Or crying. Or whatever. Oh god, please, let whatever not be a breakup! He didn't want to be responsible for that. Stuffing his mask back into his backpack, he looked at the doc. "Saturday remains the same?" He wanted that it remained the same. And at the same time, he didn't. Sure, he had promised it to May, but a heartbroken doc was the least he wanted to see. "Sure. I'll stick to it." was the answer he got.

He would stick to it. Good, he guessed. If they stayed together it would be good. Getting to his feet, he wanted to get going. The sooner he was out of this flat the better. They could go on fighting without him. Which was probably bad, but he couldn't just stay around. It was awkward enough as it was.

"Thanks for your help." The doc said softly, stopping him before he could leave.

All Peter could do, was manage a smile. "You are welcome. See you on Saturday."

Stopping at a street corner a block away from Christine's place, he pulled his phone from his pockets. Dialed. Listened to the calling sound. If he didn't answer... but then the call was picked up. He didn't even wait until he heard Tony greet him. "The doc and Christine may break up!" he blurted out.

A few moments went by in utter silence. "What? Why... how do you know?" "The doc called me, asked me if I had a video of the day Christine was, well, you know. I have or Karen has. Christine wanted to see it. Was there, did that. They obviously argued before I was there. And I think they are arguing right now, too. Looked like that to me. They could basically not wait to get me out of the flat to be able to go on fighting."

He was silent for a moment. "I don't want to be the reason they break up." He said lowly. His response was a sigh. "Whatever your head tells you, you are not the reason they break up. If they do at all. They were fighting before you got there."

"Yeah, but-"

"No but. You only showed her something she needed to see. Probably you are the reason for them not breaking up." Tony paused for a moment. "But we do need precautions in case they do."

Peter couldn't help but laugh. "Yeah. I thought the same."

----

Christine was silent after Peter left. Just sat on the couch and brooded over what she had seen. Multiple times. The wait, the silence made Stephen anxious. What if he had been wrong? What if the cloak had moved while Christine's throat was sliced? What if he only thought that to be true because he had seen it in his dreams on a nightly basis? What if he had made everything worse by showing her the video? She would surely have nightmares again. Only because (he wanted to defend his cloak). If the cloak had moved, then... Oh God, what had he done? Why hadn't he just kept his mouth shut?

"You were right."

Christine's unexpected words caught him off guard and made him blink. He was right?

"It didn't move." Christine said in an empty voice. All her emotions seemed to have fled her.
"It did move like a maniac before that. Banging his head against the wall behind him and trying to rip him away, but in that second it didn't move. And not in the immediate second after. It seemed..." and then her voice broke. Suddenly, there were emotions again. Christine started to cry. "It seemed shocked by what happened to me. It flung the guy away, you caught me and then it did everything to keep... Mordo was the name, right? Keep him away from us."

By the second she started to sob, Stephen had wrapped his arms around her, pulling her tightly against him.

They stayed like that for a while. Wrapped in each other's arms, staying close. Christine crying. He soothing her by stroking her back. And then, somewhen, she started to hiccup. She broke away from him, looking at him with red, swollen, teary eyes.

"I need to apologize!" she blurted out. "Oh my god, I need to apologize! It didn't want to murder me. Even though I wonder where that knife is, but it didn't want to murder me!"

He just wanted to tell her to calm down, when she jumped to her feet. "Get it back. From wherever you stuffed it. Oh my God, don't tell me it was beneath the bed."

Stephen snorted, not exactly sure if she was trying to make terrible jokes or not. "It wasn't. I don't fancy it around while we have sex." Not after knowing that thing had actual memories. "It's in... Nepal. I asked the Ancient One if it could stay there."

For a moment, he could see something like relief on her face. The timidest smile he had ever seen. And then she took a deep breath. "Okay. I go wash my face. Not that it would actually help, but it gives me the illusion. I'll turn on the radio too. That way I can tune out that terrible portal sound. Yes. That sounds good. You get it back in the meantime." With that, she left towards the bathroom.

Stephen waited until he heard water running and the muffled sounds of music. Getting to his feet, he got his sling ring from the bedroom and created a portal.

The moment he was only halfway through, a red thing was wrapped around his face and upper chest, softly rippling against him. Snapping for air he couldn't get because his cloak was suffocating him, his hands shot up, trying to pull it down. "We talked about this!" Probably a thousand times. Cloak had the decency to move off his face. Only to wrap around tightly, not letting go.

By the time Christine came back, he had managed to close the portal, with cloak having wrapped around him instantly again. He felt as if wearing a straitjacket. Unable to move his arms. The second Christine entered the room, cloak flung away and brought a bit of distance between her and it. Stephen looked from Christine to the cloak, who was obviously unsure about how to react, and back to Christine. She simply stood there for a long moment. Staring at the cloak.

Slowly, Christine managed a timid smile. It didn't yet reach her eyes, but it was there.

"I wanted to... I mean... you didn't..." Stephen could see how she started to tremble. Yet, he knew she wanted to do this alone. That much was obvious. He shouldn't interfere. Just wait and watch. Christine closed her eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath. Exhaling slowly, she opened her eyes again, looking at cloak. There was this calm determination in her eyes. Her stubbornness. Seeing it, Stephen knew she would be alright. Not today, not next week, not next month. Maybe not next year. But she would. One day she would. Sorting things out with cloak was the start of that. Of really getting better.

"I'm sorry. For what I said. That I made Stephen send you away. For kinda hating you. You didn't try to murder me."
Cloak floated on the spot, not moving. Neither to her nor away. Was it too surprised to do anything? Seeing the two most important beings in his life stunned into silence, Stephen started to move.

"Cloak? Christine said a knife disappeared from the kitchen." It seemed to have bothered her. Best get that out of the way.

This time, cloak reacted. It tilted its collar and hurried into the kitchen, gesturing to the knives at the magnetic board. Christine joined them a moment later, seeing what cloak did.

"Yeah. One is missing." She said softly. Cloak hesitated, looking at her. Back at the knives. Then it started to open drawers, looking around in a frenzy. Around a minute later, it pulled a knife out of one of the drawers and raised it. If Stephen hadn't known what cloak was going for, he wouldn't be too sure that it didn't want to murder one of them. It would look like that, wouldn't it? Cloak floating in a shadowy corner, suddenly raising a knife to stab one of them.

"Is that knife missing?" He asked dryly, keeping a close eye on Christine. Would she freak out? She just stood there and... blushed. And took the knife from cloak. As if it would be normal to take knives off floating cloaks. As if she did that every day. She cleared her throat and thanked it, obviously embarrassed by what had happened.

Christine and cloak just stood there for a moment. Then she moved, letting the knife snap onto the magnetic board, adding it to the others again. She turned, facing the relic. "Let's start again, okay?" Raising her hand, she tried a smile. "Christine Palmer, nice to meet you. Cloak, I guess?" she asked, trying to get her voice light and friendly, but didn't manage completely. Stephen could hear the strain in her voice. The worry in her gaze. It would need time until she trusted it. But time they had, now that they had it. Hearing her greeting, cloak rippled softly and reached for her hand.

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The moment the cloak touched her, Christine felt light. Not free of worries light. She felt actual light. Weightless. Looking at the ground, she realized she was floating. A few inches above the tiles of her kitchen. Looking at the cloak, she wanted to say something but didn't. It was the cloak of levitation for god's sake. Of course, it could make her float. "Can you move me around? Higher, lower, faster?" The cloak seemed to huff, riffle annoyed and pulled her, yes, pulled her back into the living room. She floated in after it, feeling like an astronaut in space. _She was floating!_ Carefully and gently, Christine noted, cloak wrapped around her. It felt as if she was wrapped in a warm, comfortable blanket, which smelled like Stephen. The smell alone helped her crazed nerves to calm down. She remained like that for a moment. Just floating in the cloaks… embrace? Did it expect her to say what she wanted it to do?

"Up?"

She said uncertainly, and the cloak did as she had asked. It floated her upwards until she was only inches below the ceiling. God. From that position, she could see how untidy the room was. No more hiding from the truth.

"Okay… ehm… down fast?"

Screaming at the top of her lungs, she stared at her carpet. A fucking inch away from her face. She had just dropped from the comfortable position at the ceiling straight to the ground. Basically. She had just never hit it. And then she burst into laughter. A bit crazy sounding laughter.

"Did you ever consider renting it as bungy cloak?"
Chapter 18

I'm back! And hit the 100.000 words mark, wuhu!

In this chapter, a lot is going on. A lot of things I never planned, actually.

You'll meet: basically everyone. (Tony / Pepper / Peter / May / Stephen / the Ancient One)

Have fun reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony sat on the couch and watched his scotch swirl in its glass. Raising it, he took a sip and leaned back again. Sighing heavily. How the hell could he best check on Strange without him knowing he was checked on?

The first idea which had come to mind was simply sending an unmanned suit. He could let it fly past Christine's flat and use the video stream to check on them. He would be able to see if they were still fighting. Yet, he couldn't surely see if they were miserable if he couldn't get inside the flat. Or maybe they had the curtains closed. What if they had broken up and Strange did something stupid? Like turning time back to before they had broken up. Maybe he could undo their cozy branch in time by accident. Besides, he really didn't want to explain to Strange, why his suit was flying past Christine's flat. Maybe repeatedly. Perhaps the sorcerer could sense such things. A magical sixth sense or something like that.

Tony moved, trying to find a more comfortable position. Maybe he could send one of his nano-bots. That thing could maybe get inside the flat if a window was opened. He could check on them better, that way. Yet, the chance of being discovered was relatively high, if Strange indeed had a magical sixth sense.

Maybe hack Christine's laptop and turn on the camera and microphone? Definitely doable, if it was online.

Change Friday's voiceover and let her call? Analyze the tone of the answers to get their emotional state? Reasonable.

Pay a pizza for them, send a delivery boy by and interrogate him later? Nothing easier than that.

He was as good as on his feet to change Friday's voiceover and probably order a pizza for Strange on top of that when the ding of the elevator caught him off guard. Turning his head towards the sound, he looked at Pepper. Beautiful, tired, annoyed Pepper, who came from work. He just loved her in her work attire. Blouse, blazer and skirt. For a moment, while his head was bothering with Pepper's blouse, he felt underdressed. Maybe he could get her out of that blouse by offering her a massage. Sounded... Pepper... reasonable. The click in his head was nearly audible.

Pepper had to have seen something on his face. "What are you thinking about?" was her timid question. She knew that sudden ideas of him were either brilliant or insane. Most times a bit of both.
"Peppeeer?" He chirped, getting onto his feet and kissing her lovingly, helping her out of her blazer afterward.

"What?" she asked rather briskly, obviously planning on some relaxation and not on getting pulled into whatever he wanted from her. "If you go invent something today and want me to watch, I swear I'll kick your ass myself. I just want to relax." She stated roughly, already mad at him without even knowing what he was up to. Granted, usually, he was up to something (brilliant) if he used her name like that. Yet, she didn't seem in the mood for it. He had to ask her what was going on later. Right after he had asked his question.

"We'll get you relaxed, don't worry. A warm bath and a massage?" He offered, letting his main topic slide for the sake of peace before smiling conspiratorially, jumping right back at his main topic before she could respond. "I need your help."

"You need my help?" Pepper asked surprised, stopping with getting out of her blouse. Maybe he should have waited a moment longer with this statement.

"Yeah, I need your help." He repeated, pausing for a moment. How to best approach... Well. Upfront.

"You know... you really seemed to click with Christine. I thought it wouldn't raise questions if you call her and ask how she is and how everything is going and stuff." He saw Pepper's surprised face. Why call her, please? He took a deep breath and told her what Peter had told him. That the two were on the verge of breaking up and the boy and him wanted to make sure that they didn't. Or at least that Strange didn't undo time in the process. Maybe intervene with some Pepper brilliance and stop Christine from breaking up. Something, really. Anything. He wasn't picky at that point. All he wanted was them staying together.

Pepper looked at him for a long moment. "You really do care for him, don't you?" she asked softly. He opened his mouth, wanting to object, wanting to tell her that he was only interested in keeping them safe and Strange stable, that he needed to ensure the survival of their tiny group, when she placed her index finger on his lips, hushing him in the process. She knew. He knew she knew. She maybe didn't understand everything that was going on in his head, but she knew how he felt. And he loved her for it. She pulled her index finger away and replaced it with her lips. Her warm and soft lips on his. After she broke away, she smiled.

"Friday? Get me a bath ready. Tony? You give me a massage in the meantime. If you are doing a good job, I might consider helping you out."

Tony laughed softly. The way she said it made it obvious that she would help him out anyway. She liked Christine. And seeing him kind of care for Strange made the decision easy.

"Aye, aye, Miss Potts." he stated, waiting until she made herself comfortable on the couch. He slipped behind her, starting to loosen her neck and shoulders and back.

"What happened at work? You are tense again." And she looked tired. Tired enough for falling asleep bathing. He had to tell Friday to have an eye on her. He wouldn't let his love drown in his tub. He felt her muscles move below his hands when she shrugged. "Usual stuff." She stated tired, leaning back against him. He slipped his arms around her waist and pulled her against his chest. Looking down at her, he smiled.

"I wonder if you being Mrs. Stark would change how they treat you." He stated lowly.
Pepper only chuckled. "No, you know that. For us, it wouldn't change a thing. There are apparently just some folks in the company who won't accept a woman as CEO of the biggest tech company in the world." She was silent for a moment. Then she giggled. "Maybe things change if I fly there every morning in an Iron Man suit. I could just blast whoever pisses me off to pieces."

They looked at each other for a moment until she burst into laughter, him joining in moments later. She blasting people to pieces. Alone the thought was hilarious.

"Just fire those who won't accept you. Or pay them out to keep everyone happy."

Pepper just sighed softly. They had had that conversation too often lately. "I need their expertise."

"Bulls. There are people out there just as good as or even better. We can buy them off. I'll set Friday to the task of finding replacements. You can fire them as soon as we have new people if that puts your mind at ease. Or maybe I'll help you out. Have some time, after all." He paused for a moment. "And I'll show you how to fly a suit. I want to see their faces when they expect me and you get out of it."

Pepper grinned at him, turned around in his arms and started to kiss him. "I'd... very much... like that." She managed between kisses.

"Miss Potts? Your bath is ready."

Within the second, maybe even before Friday was done telling them the bath was ready, Pepper was on her feet, leaving a startled Tony behind. He had been completely invested in kissing her. Now he had to watch how she got her phone and disappeared towards the bathroom. She stopped at the door, however, turned and looked at him.

"I'll work my magic. While I do that you get that suit upstairs. I'll take you up on those teaching lessons."

The following thirty-four minutes, twenty-two seconds and thirty-seven milliseconds were some of the longest of his life. He did get a suit up. Tried to do some planning for after Christmas, how to convince Cap and the others of them having traveled through time but failed in vain. His thoughts always returned to whether or not Strange was going to tear the fabric of reality apart. Could he do such things? He was determined to never get to know. Otherwise, he might have no single calm second for the rest of his life.

Taking a deep breath, he tried to force his thoughts away. Enough of Strange and glowing green gems.

Yet, his mind always jumped back to the topic. Always wondering about the same silly question. What could Strange do if he used the stone?

Could he undo their momentarily current moment? If he did, they had to fight Thanos, most likely ending up on Titan at the moment they had disappeared.

Could Strange fight Thanos with the help of the stone?

Could he defeat him with the help of the stone?

If he could, why was he always that hesitant about their future? Or their past, depending on the perspective. What would have happened after him handing Thanos the stone? The titan would have gone to earth, got Vision's stone and…
That was it. All of them dead. Or fifty percent of them.

They had right now, of course. A second try. A try at defeating Thanos before he could snap beings out of existence.

And yet, Strange didn't want to talk about it.

There had to be a something. A problem. A liability.

Getting to his feet, he ordered Friday to show him the timeline they had created together, taking a closer look at the dates Strange had marked. Nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing that screamed we are all going to die. Just dates in the future. Just points on a hologram.

Feeling Pepper's hand slip onto his shoulder, he turned around to look at her. There she stood, his sweet not-yet-fiancée, looking at him.

"What are you looking for?" she asked, eyeing the hologram herself.

"I don't know." Tony admitted. "Just a feeling."

With that he turned back towards the hologram, sighing softly and dismissing it.

"I got a suit up for you. An old test thing without weapons." Beside the repulsor blast. "Don't want you to turn the tower into ruins." He joked lightly, officially changing the subject away from his worries. He could see, that she had wanted to say something, but she didn't. She just went along. And then she started to grin like a little girl on Christmas Eve.

Being inside the unarmed Iron Man suit, Pepper looked around, watching the interface supply her with information about the suit, their current position, Tony in front of her, the height of the skyscrapers she could see.

"How can you concentrate on anything in here? This overlay drives me insane." she stated, watching how Tony got a suit for himself and got in.

"There is information about everything you need to know."

"Surely." Pepper stated sarcastically. Yet, she knew he was right. He invented that stupid overlay for a good reason. All the stuff he needed to know in battle. For her, it was just a bit too much. "Can I deactivate it for starters?" she asked, trying to get rid of the overflow of information.

"Wouldn't. You better get used to it right from the beginning." Tony commented. "Okay." He stated, getting in position in front of her. "The suit you have is controlled through motion, eye-movement and voice commands. When you press your toes down, very carefully by the way, the suit will get you up in the air." He started to hover a second later. "You should activate the hand-pieces to stabilize yourself. Hands tilted downwards. Lightly."

His hand-pieces turned to life. "With the hand-pieces, you have to be careful. Wrong angle and you'll actually blast someone to pieces." He made a pause to let the information sink in. "And then you can just lean towards the direction you want the suit to move." He moved around her in a circle before hovering in the air in front of her again. "Or tell Friday to lock onto a position and she'll get you there."

Pepper nodded. And froze. "Can I blow anything up by nodding?"
To her dismay, her lover started to laugh. "No. It's just a nod. Moving the head does nothing. You have to be able to look around, after all."

"Okay, smartass." She stated, pressing her toes down and yelped surprised when the suit shot up into the air. She screamed when she just went on flying higher, not at all stabilized. Tony was by her side instantly. "Stop pressing your toes down!" he screamed at her. Done as screamed at her, she stopped her crazy ascent.

"How do I get down?" she yelled at her smartass lover, who had forgotten to tell her she had to actively stop ascending.

"What do you think?" he asked back, not giving an answer.

What did she think?

Even more carefully, she pulled her toes upwards, watching how she descended slowly, wavering like crazy. Yes. The hand-pieces for stabilization. Hands angled downward and... her flight got calmer when the hand-pieces activated without blowing anyone to pieces. Or leaving a hole in their roof for that matter. When she was only a meter above their roof, she took a deep breath. And leaned towards the left, feeling how the suit reacted instantly and moved to the left.

"Wow."

She spent the next three hours levitating above their roof, getting better at flying. She was still leagues away from Tony, sure, but from nothing to okayish in a few hours... Well. Okay. The suit simply reacted nicely. Her every move got registered and translated into movement. She wouldn't have expected anything else. Tony always did awesome work concerning his suits.

Pepper was aware, that she was flying an older model. For a split second, she wondered how flying his newer, more sophisticated suits would be. They would surely react even nicer. Or maybe they were thought controlled. Oh, that would be sweet. Just thinking about getting up into the air and the suit did it. After a little, Pepper realized that her gaze was wandering to some of the information on the overlay. Her always updating position, the energy level of the suit. She tried to ignore the rest. Still too much for her.

"Can I tell Friday to disable all weapons? I get flying, but I fear I could literally kill someone by accident if I make a gesture. Like..." she landed and gestured around with her hands. "Have to at least decimated a skyscraper and killed around a thousand people."

Landing beside her, Tony laughed once again. "Sure, just tell Friday to disarm them."

Pepper chuckled, getting out of the suit into the night air, watching Tony do the same. Turning her gaze away, she looked at the lights of the surrounding city. "Can we do this more often? Fly together?" she asked softly, feeling how his arms wrapped around her from behind, pulling her against his chest.

"Of course. If you want to, I could design a suit especially for you. How about... Iron Woman? Iron Pepper?"

Pepper couldn't help but chuckle. "Thanks, but no. I want to surprise people when they think it's you and then it's me."

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After having set the table, Peter settled down on their couch, joining his aunt.
"Is the table set correctly?" May teased him, not moving her eyes from the TV. Peter snorted. "Sure. Is the lasagne doing well?" he threw back, very well knowing that it was in the oven and would stay in there for a while.

"Sure, it is. Otherwise, you would smell burnt food."

Once again, Peter chuckled but didn't say anything. For a while, they just sat in relaxed silence and watched one of May's terrible lovey-dovey romantic movies. He just had to comment on some scenes. The man hiding a terrible secret and her finding out was that predictable. She stormed out of his flat and didn't give him a chance to explain anything. A few days later they met again and he told her, Peter didn't actually listen, but it was definitely some romance blah blah, and they kissed each other after that again. Everything is forgiven, oh yeah.

"As you are making such annoyed sounds, how is you asking Liz to homecoming going?"

Peter felt guilty instantly. He hadn't even asked her yet. Honestly, he hadn't even thought about it. He knew he had to do it. At some point, to preserve this timeline or something, but... he knew the point when he would ask her. And she would say yes. Why hurry? Maybe, because this timeline was already changing in details. The doc visiting them had never happened. How many other details were changing every day without them noticing?

"Still in progress." He told his aunt.

She chuckled. "If you want to go out with her, get going. You'll be sorry if she already has someone." May stated softly, ripping her eyes away from the love-spectacle on the TV screen and looked at him.

Peter felt uncomfortable when she watched him. That warm, soft gaze that could see through his lies that easily.

"Yeeah… I know. I'll do. Like… next week?" he offered, looking at her. Trying to look determined. She just smiled at him. Soft and encouraging.

"Okay. Dare you, you don't report the progress on this thing. I want to know if my little boy finally grew up and goes out with a girl." She chirped, obviously mocking him. Peter rolled his eyes.

"Yeah. Sure." He said dryly, watching how she checked her watch.

"Well, I have to leave you alone with this formidable movie. Gotta change into something else. You... just don't touch anything."

"Can I touch the TV remote?" he asked amusedly, earning a chuckle from her.

"No, of course not. You have to finish the movie for me and tell me how it ends."

Peter burst into laughter. "I can tell you right now. There will definitely be some more drama, they will forgive each other again and live happily ever after. The end."

He could hear May's laughter as she went towards her room. "Well, true enough, but what specific drama? The details, Pete!" she scolded him, which lost a lot of its power because she was still chuckling.

Shaking his head, he watched her closed door. Suddenly, his good mood was exchanged with a calm determination. He would save her. Whatever the cost. Thanos wouldn't snap his fingers this time. Not if he could help to stop him. He would ask Liz on Monday. Just to make sure.
Entering his room himself, he exchanged his sweatpants for some trousers and looked around his room. He should clean up, right? Not that he would care. Or the doc for that matter. But May definitely would. They were going to have a visitor, after all. Accordingly, his room had to be presentable. He sighed lowly and went to work.

His used clothes ended up in the basket they should originally always end up in, his desk got magically more tidy, with everything which could fit into his drawers getting stuffed into those and finally, his washed clothes and some other books got stuffed into his closet. Alongside with his school bag and his Spider Man costume. Eyeing his room, he hummed content. Yep. Looked presentable.

Getting back into the living room, he saw May on the couch again, the lovely-dovel couple on-screen kissing. Probably again. "Is this terrible piece over?" he asked, leaning against the couch and looked at the TV. "Yep. What drama happened?" she asked instantly, making Peter snort.

"No idea, I tidied my room."

She turned, looking at him with a raised eyebrow. "You tidied your room? Without me telling you to?"

He grinned. "Yep. Be proud of me."

This time, his aunt frowned, trying to look all skeptical. "After you passed the inspection!" She announced and jumped to her feet, striding into his room. In there, she looked around, still wearing that faked frown on her face. "Seems okay. Your bed isn't made, though. And I bet you just stuffed everything into your closet." She stated, moving her hand towards the handle to open his closet. His heart nearly stopped, his eyes glued to her hand. His costume was in there. Why the hell had he stuffed his costume in there?!

Her hand reached the handle, grabbed it and

The doorbell rang.

"Well, benefit of the doubt, then." His aunt stated, turning around and smiled at him. "Great job cleaning up." And left towards the door. "Finish making the bed!" she told him while leaving. Peter just stood there for a long moment, staring at the handle of his closet, his heart still racing. One door opening away and he would have a lot of explaining to do. Taking a deep breath, he hid his costume in his school bag, made his bed and entered the living room again.

Seeing the doc getting hugged by his aunt felt surreal. Like two people who shouldn't meet, yet here they were. Just another detail of them changing a set timeline.

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May watched Stephen skeptically. He sat on the couch beside her, looking uncomfortable. He seemed handsome. Maybe even nice. Yet, she wasn't sure what to think of him. She really wasn't. That man had told her petty lies to get the phone number of her Peter. And Peter had covered for him. Why for God's sake had he covered for him? What was going on between them? To think that question was terrible enough. She hoped it was just what it was. A stupid school project.

"Well... how did you two get in touch?" she asked lightly, trying to sound curious.

There was a gaze. Peter throwing a fast glance at the adult man. A pause. And her nephew took the word.
"Well... after what I read about him, lost his career and all, I researched him some more. Found a few medical papers with several different email addresses of him. Tried each until I got a response." Peter told her casually. That tone. That tone Peter only used, if he tried to hide something from her. What would he want to hide from her?

Turning towards Stephen, she tried it with a smile. "Seriously, why on earth would you volunteer for a crappy school project of a random teenager you don't know?" she looked at Peter for a brief second. "No offense." And back at Stephen, continuing: "I mean, he should cheer you up, write stuff about you. That's all pretty... invasive?" she suggested, trying to wrap her worries in perfectly reasonable curiosity. Why would a doctor volunteer for a school project? Why would a doctor need to get Peter's phone number?

He looked at her for a long moment before he cleared his throat. "He was persistent. I like that. You have to know, that all of those email addresses are still active. He didn't stop after one try. After the seventh or so I had pity on him and wrote back. First writing back and forth to grasp his character. We met at his school, supervised if I may add. Really felt odd about it, but I wanted to get to know him first." He winked at her. Was that meant to calm her down? "Talked about the conditions I had to meet to be eligible. Had to pass a psychological test, had to sign a ton of papers. All that. Now he can happily write assignments about me."

May was silent for a long moment. That actually sounded reasonable. Kind of. Yet... "Why did you call me to get his number?" she asked briskly, scolding herself. She should have kept that for later, but she couldn't. She simply couldn't. That one topic still nagged at the back of her mind. Taunting her in sleepless nights. Why had he called in the first place?

Stephen was silent. A tiny bit surprised maybe, but he hid it well.

"He -" Peter started but May cut him off. "I want to hear it from him." She told her nephew and he fell silent. Her eyes returned to the doctor. Stephen Strange.

"I forgot my phone and needed to talk to him. We had an appointment and I forgot where. Well, I wasn't sure if he would read his emails in time. Teenagers and emails. Those things are old-fashioned to them. Would probably be safer if I twittered him. Anyway, didn't want him waiting for me, accordingly, I did what I could. Checked, if I could find your number and you know the rest."

May tilted her head. His explanation sounded reasonable again. Except for... "Why did you lie to me to get his number? Could have told me, that it was because of a school project." ...the details.

This time, the doctor didn't hesitate. His answer came immediately. "Well, he wanted to surprise you that he did extra work to get a bonus on his college applications. Wasn't sure if he had already told you and didn't want to spoil the surprise." His gaze went towards Peter. "Guess you forgot to tell her?"

Peter scratched the back of his head, looking embarrassed. "Yeeaaahhh... I had that much stuff in my head back then..." he went on mumbling apologies but May just looked at him, smiling. That sounded like her Pete. All busy with his Stark internship and school and doing volunteer work as part of that stupid project. It all sounded reasonable.

"Well, excuse me, I'll check on the lasagne." She stated and got to her feet. She felt comfortable enough to leave them alone. At least as long as they remained in earshot.

In their open kitchen, she listened carefully, trying to catch their every word. They talked about his school. Assignments he had to do, his upcoming Spanish exam, homecoming.
Homecoming. He wanted to ask Liz out. Liz, who he had a crush on for forever. Beautiful, perfect, brilliant Liz. At least according to Peter's opinion. May turned and looked at the two men on her couch. They sat closer, yet at a reasonable distance. Everything about them seemed just reasonable enough to her. Peter talked in a steady voice, Stephen listening and commenting as needed. As seemed appropriate. And yet… how they sat there, talking about irrelevant, relevant topics. This man she knew that little about, he was important to her nephew. She could see that much. She could see a bond between them she simply couldn't grasp. Couldn't understand where it had come from or when. And yet, it seemed reasonable once again. Peter hid things from her, she knew that. That odd bond being one of those things.

She knew that he sneaked into the flat late at night at times, hoping she wouldn't notice.

She knew he was ditching school sometimes.

She knew he met Stark regularly, even kept in contact. Only a few days ago, she had overheard a phone call while getting into the flat. He had been in his room, talking with 'Tony' about something being okay. That he didn't need to worry. Whatever that meant.

Seeing that bond now, that she had known nothing about, worried her. What else did she miss about his life?

Shaking her head, she turned away again, focusing on the lasagne in the hope to get rid of her odd feelings.

"May? Can I show him my room?" Peter's voice asked and she smiled. He asked first. That was good. He wanted to check if she was okay with it.

"After dinner." She responded, getting their food out of the oven.

Instantly, her little flat was filled with the aroma of melted cheese and meat and… Oh, she was a brilliant cook. Smirking happily at herself, she got their food onto the table and watched Peter and Stephen sit down. She served their guest first, then Peter, then herself.

Only then, when the doctor took hand to a spoon, she realized how bad his hand shook.

Only then, she realized he would never work again.

Instantly, she felt guilty for him. She had questioned his motivations to help Peter on his school assignment. Probably, he had just said the truth. He had liked Peter's determination and had replied. Why? Because there was nothing left in his life. Nothing he could do but drown in self-pity.

He would never work again.

Having a teenager hang around his place and annoy him with stupid questions was probably the thing he needed. A way to get away from the miserable reality that was his current life. Maybe all of this, helping a teenager out and visiting for dinner, was his way of starting a new chapter. At the very least it was a distraction. And yet, even though a part of her wanted to believe his words, something bothered her. Something she couldn't put into words. A nagging feeling at the back of her mind. She just knew that something was off.

Averting her gaze, she focused on eating. God, how long had she stared at his hands? He most likely hated that. She would hate it if she was in his stead. Yet, he didn't say a thing and she stopped to worry. He had been too distracted by her awesome lasagne to realize he was stared at. Yeah. That sounded reasonable. She frowned a little when she thought that word again. Reasonable.
Silent, comfortable minutes filled with the sounds of eating followed. During that time, she tried to get rid of her worried thoughts. Everything was okay. Stephen was a nice guy with no future. Exactly was Peter's school project demanded. The goal was to grow social skills or something like that.

"That's delicious, thank you." Stephen complimented her, making her smile and look at him. His gaze was calm and honest. If he hadn't lied to her to get Peter's phone number, she realized, that she would have liked him. Up front and polite. "Thank you." At least Peter didn't spill that she had experimented on him for years to get it just right. She was good in every other pasta dish imaginable, but lasagne had been a living nightmare. She either let it too long in the oven or too short or used too much sauce or messed everything up altogether.

"What are you up to these days?" she asked and looked at Stephen, trying her luck with platonic conversation. Maybe she could find something, which would make it easier to like him. He looked up from his plate with a hum, obviously having been lost in thoughts. He swallowed and smiled. "Not much really. I'm helping my girlfriend, read, annoy Peter. All that."

"You have a girlfriend?" May asked curiously. She wouldn't have guessed he had one, really. She couldn't even explain why. Just intuition, she guessed. He didn't seem like someone to settle.

"Oh yeah..." and then Stephen went on telling her about Christine. How they had met at work, how they had been friends for years and come together after his accident.

"I've been terrible back then. Nasty at everyone and everything. I guess I could have gotten the of course not existing worst patient of the year award." He smirked, making her realize that such a thing did exist. "Losing my work was..." he shook his head, smiling evasive. "...let's say rough. She was at my side through all of it. I still have no idea how she could put up with my tantrums. Love, I guess, even back then. We are officially together since close to two months."

"Oh my, congratulations!

During the following ten minutes, which felt like forever, Peter witnessed how May and Stephen actually got along because of casual relationship talk. Before that, he hadn't believed she even liked him. He had wondered why she had insisted on inviting him in the first place. Seemingly, to question him and be suspicious. He had felt, how she had watched them for a little, back then when she had claimed to check on the lasagne. They weren't food, his head had commented dryly.

But now, they chatted away. He nearly sighed with relief, when they were done with eating, hoping this not-at-all-interesting talk would finally end. And lucky him, it did. May got up and collected their plates. She looked at him, smiling a tiny smile. "Go ahead, show him around. I'll do the dishes."

Peter nodded, thanked her and gestured for the doc to follow him.

Once they were inside his room, the door closed, he sighed, leaning against the wall. "I'm so, so, so very sorry. Didn't know that she was still..." he started, but the doc made a dismissive gesture.

"Don't worry, I can take it. She's actually pretty nice."

Smiling, he... he just didn't know what they could talk about. He watched the doc look around in his little room and settle on his bed. Tony had sat there too, back then, when he had recruited him to fight against Captain America and the others. That moment wasn't even that long ago from their point in time. Seeing another grown-up man in his room... he turned around, opened his door an
inch and checked on May. She was doing the dishes, humming lowly.

Closing the door again, he sighed and settled on the bed beside Stephen.

"Christine and you are okay again? Considering…” he didn't finish his sentence. The doc would know.

He nodded as a response. "Yeah, we are okay again. She's slowly getting better I think. Thanks again for your help. Don't know what I would have done otherwise."

They were awkwardly silent after that. Yeah. He had saved a relationship, hadn't he? He should be proud, shouldn't he?

"You're welcome." He managed. He wanted to ask, how Christine and the cloak were getting along, but somehow felt like he shouldn't. They had been close to breaking up, after all. Asking questions about the current status of everyone felt like prying into private concerns.

"I have a question about you know what." He stated, changing the topic. Getting to his feet, he went through the basic magic motions. "I should be able to do those golden lines, right?” he asked, looking at the older man.

The doc hummed. "Yeah. Don't think about it."

"What do you mean? Don't think about it?” he asked back. Should he just… do it? He repeated the motions and, like always, nothing happened.

The doc chuckled softly, getting up. "I had to meditate for months to be able to… Well, casting magic is drawing on dimensional energy. I think you don't manage that yet, but we can start with…" he held his hands out. Peter looked at them for a moment, before he understood what he wanted. To hold his hands. Taking his hands into his, he… "And now?” he asked, unsure. He felt how Stephen's hands trembled in his own. It had to be rough, really. It had to be…

"Close your eyes again, stop thinking and imagine you would draw energy out of me."

Peter frowned deeply but did as told. He closed his eyes and set out to not think. But not thinking was insanely hard. The doc's trembling hands were too distracting, how could that man do anything? The possibility of May bursting in and seeing them holding hands. His future. Liz. The airplane. Thanos. Just everything. How should he ever not think about those things? Yet, somehow, somewhen, his thoughts faded away. His head turned silent. In that blankness, he imagined to draw energy from the doc.

For a long while, like always again, nothing happened. Nothing and nothing and…

His fingertips tingled. Very, very lightly. With that, he stepped away, broke hand-contact and went through the motions.

Opening his eyes, he could see golden sparkles raining down.

He stared at them, watching how they vanished.

Had he done that?! Had he really… did the doc not trick him into… he looked at him. No. The doc hadn't tricked him into anything. He just watched him with something like a proud smile.

Oh my god!
He
Had
Done
Magic!

Sure, only vanishing sparkles and only with help but he had done magic!

He had done - Oh my god - magic!

He started to bounce, grinning like an idiot.

He had to tell Ned! Oh, he had to! How excited his best friend would be when he heard that he had managed to do it! He was basically halfway through the room, grabbing for his phone when he froze. His excitement vanished from one second to the other, his grin fading. He had only managed to do magic through help. Not alone. He couldn't do it alone.

The doc seemed to know what he was thinking. Honestly, it had to be obvious. "Hey." Stephen said softly. "Don't think. Just try again. Imagine the drawing on energy thing if it helps."

Peter sighed. As if it would work if he did it alone. It had never worked when he had done it alone.

Yet, he once again did as he was told.

Closed his eyes. Waited until his thoughts had shut up. Imagined to draw on energy. And waited. Just went on imagining things. And waited. And imagined things and waited some more. Nothing. Just like always.

After some more tries, he stopped, sighing weakly. The doc just smiled softly. "Just continue trying. You did it once, you'll do it again."

Peter nodded but didn't feel as confident. Yet, he had done it. Once. That was proof that he could do it again. Maybe. If he was lucky. While he was brooding about the possibility of maybe being able to do magic one day, he remembered, that he had wanted to ask something. Something about Liz. Would it change anything if he asked her earlier then he was meant to? Yet, would it change something, if he didn't go onto the homecoming ball with her? Definitely. Yet again, he already knew who the Vulture was. It wouldn't change anything for him. Not really. Not completely.

Yet, he never got to ask a question. May's voice floated through the door, asking them if they wanted dessert.

His face lit up instantly. "She made panna cotta!" He announced, swirled around and ripped open the door.

----

On Monday morning, after Christine had gone to work, Stephen opened a portal to Kamar-Taj. Stepping through, he felt cloak float past him, saw it looking around on the other side. Once again, he wondered which place cloak would call home. The sanctum sanctorum? Kamar-Taj? Wherever he was? He didn't know. And he couldn't just go and ask. Cloak couldn't answer. Maybe it could write a reply. Stephen frowned at the thought. That would actually be worth a try. Give cloak pen and paper and see what happened.
Walking through the oh that familiar place, he once again felt eyes on him. Masters and apprentices stared at him. Like he had guessed when he came here first: For them, he was an outsider. With a relic. From one of the sanctums. He had to have stolen the cloak, right? Which of course didn't work. A relic chose its master. Stealing one would literally only end with pain.

Settling down on the stairs of the main training area he waited calmly. He saw several people pass him, eye him skeptically. Suspiciously. No one said a word. Only gazes. Calm and cold and calculating.

Some minutes later, the Ancient One stopped in front of him, tilting her head in greeting.

"How is Christine doing?" she inquired gently, her eyes seemingly watching more than only his reaction. He smiled softly. "Better. I mean, not good, but better than in a while." He stated truthfully, feeling her gaze on him. Then she nodded. "Good." A pause. "And how are you doing?" she asked, maybe even gentler than before. This time, he hesitated. How was he doing? He was… it was getting better, he guessed. "Okay." He decided. "The last week was a bit much." He added truthfully. After all, he had nearly lost the love of his life.

She nodded once again, staying silent for a moment. "Do you feel up to it?" she asked, continuing to watch him with this odd, all-seeing gaze. He just smiled in return. "Sure."

Turning around, the Ancient One raised her hand and within the moment, they were inside the mirror dimension. Stephen could feel the ground below him moving, getting them apart while the Ancient One turned around, holding her energy fans in each hand. This was it.

He got to his feet, conjured a sword into his hand and felt, how cloak settled on his shoulders. He didn't do anything then. Just waited for her attack. Just as she did.

"You know, I can wait forever." She mocked him. Stephen simply scoffed as a reply. Yeah. She wanted to test his abilities. He should go first. Moving towards her in an instant, he swung his sword, feeling how the ground below his feet started to move him away. Not with him. He took a step and moved the ground back towards her, finally swinging his sword, which just hit her energy shield.

Yet, he didn't pay attention for the tiniest of seconds, which she used to tilt the ground he stood on, letting him fall until cloak let him levitate. A second later, the ground rose around him, living brick walls ready to swallow him. Seeing the bricks move above his head, ready to trap him, he exhaled and wrestled for control with her, moving the creepy brick wall down into the ground again. Seeing something like surprise on her face, he used the moment and launched forward, hitting the shield she conjured at the last second repeatedly, pressing her back.

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She moved the ground below his feet again, which he simply moved back instantly. While his sword clashed against her shield, he felt how she wrestled with him over control of the piece of ground he stood on. Instead of one of them winning, the ground below them ripped open, letting them fall. While cloak caught him before he could hit the ground below, she created energy shields to step on, landing on the ground as if nothing had ever happened. Then they were back to weapons clashing and tearing at the fabric of matter while fighting for control.

At some point, they had dissolved each other's weapons and went for hand to hand combat. Yet,
cloak pulled him away nearly instantly. Seemingly, it knew which battles he could pick. Fighting her hand on hand seemed impossible, at least for him.

While cloak pulled him away, he turned reality upside down, seeing her surprised expression, when she fell again. For a moment, he remained where he was until cloak decided to follow her. When he was floating above Kamar-Taj, the world snapped around again. She fell onto him, ripping him along to the ground. Both got to their feet only moments later, returning to fighting with glowing weapons.

A long time later, they stood at a respectable distance from another, he was panting, she simply smiling. They were on par, with none able to overpower the other for long enough. Oddly, he was better at controlling the mirror dimension, while she was better at controlling magic. Stephen had expected her to be better in both, after all, she had had centuries to perfect her abilities.

Disbelieving, he saw how a smile appeared on her lips. An amused, genuine smile.

"Use the stone." She commanded. He frowned deeply. "What please?"

"Oh, you heard me. Conjure the stone, use its energy to fuel your spells. Magic is only that, controlled energy. If you have one of the six most powerful energy sources in the universe at hand, not using it is a waste of potential. Screwing with time could get you into trouble, but simply holding it and casting spells shouldn't."

Hesitating for a moment, he felt her gaze on him. Mocking him. Until he finally conjured the green gem into his hand, touching it. In his nightmares, he had always died to the energy of the stone. Simply disintegrated, turned to ashes. Not in reality, though. He just felt the burst of energy rush through his body, his skin starting to glow green. Closing his eyes for a moment, he focused on the stone in his hand. How little and cool it felt. Yet, the energy of that tiny thing coursed through his body like a heartbeat of its own. Could he really use it? Just like that?

He looked at the Ancient One, who smiled at him. Was she… curious? "Go on, use your strongest spell. I want to see what happens." Yeah. She was definitely curious.

His strongest spell…

Stephen raised his hand, which held the stone, circled above it with his other hand and sent a shockwave towards the building in front of him.

In a combination of horror and awe, he watched how his shockwave decimated the building, just leveled it into the ground. This… this was magic combined with the power of an Infinity Stone? Good, that they were in the mirror dimension. Outside…

The bright white light, which ripped his senses away, took him by surprise. He groaned when he felt his body ache. Thanos had just thrown him away. He had just woken up from unconsciousness again. He had just… Sinking to his knees, he dropped the stone. Stephen knew he was still here, kneeling in the mirror dimension. Yet, at the same time, he heard the odd wind, which had always blown on Titan. Felt the strange gravity of the planet.

Chapter End Notes

Yep. Cliffhangers are back.
I'll be busy with university stuff for a while, but I'll try to update every now and then. Maybe I'll (try to) write shorter chapters. Wish me luck with that, haha.

Thank you for reading! And for every kudo and comment! I'll try to reply faster to comments, bad me.
Nicolle was busy placing new flowers in the vase atop her pristine white counter, arranging them according to the 'stunning flower presentation protocol'. She still couldn't believe that such a thing existed. A PDF had popped up on her screen one day, detailing where to buy new flowers and which colors were favorable and how to arrange them. She could only guess, that Friday had monitored the flowers and had opened the correct file when it was time for a change. Creepy, if you thought about it. Having an AI watch your every step. And the state of flowers on the reception desk. Yet, it came with the job. Friday was part of Stark Industries. Everyone knew that. And even AIs were governed by privacy laws. Hopefully. Moving the purple flower to the front, Nicolle sighed content. That was it. Looked good. According to protocol, which demanded one 'eye catcher' as part of the flower arrangement.

The sound of the doors sliding open behind her back made her heart nearly stop. Those doors normally unlocked at 9, which was in about 15 minutes. By then she had planned to sit behind her table and smile her freakishly polite smile. Welcome to Stark Industries on her lips every time they opened. Yet, she didn't sit behind her table. She had her back to the door, unable to greet anyone. Unable to even look at anyone. She hadn't seen their guests coming. And if Friday unlocked the doors early, the guests had to be important.

The click of high heels on the floor made her head catch up with the situation. She had to do the best with what she had. She couldn't simply stand here and pray that whoever had entered just walked past her as if she was invisible because quite frankly, she wasn't. If only there was a hole beneath her feet. Or she was able to turn into thin air. Yet, she couldn't. Nicolle gathered all the courage she had left, swirled around and wanted to present her best: *I'm super happy to see you and feel welcomed even though you are early you damn bastard smile.* Yet, her heart skipped a beat once again the moment she laid eyes on their 'guests'. She never managed to get a word out.

Pepper Potts and Tony Stark were walking into the company. Of course, Friday had unlocked the doors for them. Were those Iron Man suits in front of the door?

"Morning Nicolle." Tony Stark greeted her. Him greeting her by name made her eyes move away from the two suits outside and focus on him. For a long moment, Nicolle stared at her boss. Or well, the owner of the company as her boss stood right beside him. She knew for sure that she hadn't told him her name. She had scolded herself for of that. After all, she had decided to make an impact on as many people as she could and not at least trying and telling her name to Tony fucking Stark, who
would surely forget it, but still, was idiotic. To know her name now, he… he must have checked her files. Why on earth should Mister Stark check her files? Because… because… her poor head frantically searched for a reason why he should check on her and came up with the most plausible answer: She had asked him such stupid questions last time. She had forgotten to address him with sir. No-goes as a damn receptionist-intern. She was the face of the company. The first person people saw when walking in. She had to behave. Not ask stupid questions. Oh god, this couldn't be good.

"Can you get me a visitor ID again?" Mister Stark asked her, smiling softly. A… visitor ID again? Just that? She wasn't fired for… what did she know? Not being polite enough? Not smiling enough?

"Oh, take your time, Nicolle, keep him busy. I want some free time." Miss Potts stated while walking off towards the doors leading into the company. Reaching them, she stopped for only a moment. "Actually, you can do me a favor and take ages."

"Oh, come on, you would only miss me!" said Mister Stark, but the doors already slid shut, hiding Miss Potts from view and sound.

A sigh made her head move back from the shut doors to Mister Stark. "Isn't she lovely?" he asked in a soft voice.

Nicolle really didn't know what to say to that. In her still panicked state of mind, she decided to buy some time. "Ehm…" yeah, brilliant. He would think she had lost the ability to speak again. Just like last time.

He only chuckled. "Friday? What are her options?"

"Her best reply would either be to have no opinion on your relationship whatsoever or be very happy for Miss Potts but refrain from judging whether she is lovely or not."

Mister Stark pointed towards the ceiling, a smirk on his lips. "Never get yourself into a position where your words can be used against you. So, visitor ID?"

Nicolle blinked, nodded and moved behind her desk, sitting down. Opening the mask for visitor IDs, her fingers hovered above the keyboard, but never moved further. Miss Potts had said she should take her time. That she should take ages. Had that been a direct order from her? Should she take ages and keep him busy? If she disobeyed a direct order from Miss Potts and just handed him the ID to send him through she would definitely blame her.

"Relax."

Relax. She blinked. Yeah, she should relax. No one would rip her head off for anything. Taking a deep breath, she tried as told. After a few long moments, hear heartbeat calmed and her head cleared.

She started to smile weakly and looked at Mister Stark, who had started to mess up her carefully arranged flowers. Moving the purple one to the back and hiding it behind the others. Should she… no. She couldn't tell him of all people to keep his hands off the flowers.

Instead, she focused on entering all the standard information again. Name, age, "What is your reason to be here, sir?" she asked, watching how he leaned against the table, an amused smile on his lips.

"Spending time with her. Pepper, I mean. She would say I'm annoying her." He chuckled at that. Nicolle nodded absentmindedly and entered 'Annoy Miss Potts.' into the reason field. Grabbing an ID card, she activated it but didn't hand it over. Of course, she knew that it was simply pro forma for him, that he didn't need it at all. Yet, her fingers played with the card, letting it flip from finger to finger, just as if she had something he needed.
"Well, sir, I was asked to take ages, so I'll at least give it a try. You never answered my question from last time. How you advanced Friday from a normal neuronal network to what she is now."

Tony Stark smirked at her. As if he liked her daring challenge. "You sure?" he asked back. And she only smiled. "Try me. I love numbers and IT and all that stuff. Trying to get a place at MIT and" she stopped mid-sentence. As if Tony Stark wanted to hear her plans.

"Well, Friday never really started from scratch. My last neuronal network… that's ages ago. Long before Jarvis. The tricky part wasn't the language interface, the research functionality or the initial limitations on resources. A 512 MB RAM can only do what it can do. I plugged a ton of PCs together to get reasonable computing power. The hard part was the personality of the program…” he went off talking about specifics, throwing technical terms around. And Nicolle couldn't help but listen with bright eyes. Oh, that man was brilliant. Just. Brilliant. She didn't understand quite a lot. Yet, Google would surely help. Or she could simply ask Friday later. If she could use her at work, why not make the best of it?

After they were done talking about technical stuff, Mister Stark looked at her, still leaning against the table. Something like curiosity was shining in his eyes.

"Well, after I answered your question, how about you answer one of mine." Her heart skipped a beat again. What could Tony Stark possibly want to ask her? "You worked here for a month. Where here during this entire messy takeover. Do you know…” he lowered his voice to a conspiratorially whisper "…which managers make Pepper's life worse? She doesn't want to tell me their names."

Nicolle stared at him. She knew some names. Everyone knew some names. It was obvious if one worked here. If Miss Potts didn't want to call names…”I don't know, sir. I'm sorry." She stated firmly, holding his gaze. She wouldn't spill. Her loyalties lay with Miss Potts on this one. He just kept smiling, his gaze remaining curious. It didn't seem to bother him that she hadn't answered his question. And if it did, he hid it extremely well.

While she was wondering whether he was unhappy with her or not, he leaned over the table and snapped the ID card from her. She blinked at that. How dare he… Nicolle opened her mouth to say something, maybe even have the nerve to scold Tony fucking Stark, but he was faster once again.

"Always pay attention to your surroundings, Miss Brewster. Comes right after never saying anything that can be used against you." He stated smirking and walked off to enter the company. Right in front of the automated doors, he stopped. "Oh. I think the flowers have to be arranged differently. Something about an eye catcher. I would fix that. Or better, tell me not to mess it up in the first place."

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Pepper was busy reading through reports when her door opened. And closed again. She raised her gaze, watching Tony watch her.

"Done with annoying poor employees?" she joked while turning the page, scanning the lines. She hated signing reports, but it had to be done. Tony hat suggested using Friday to check them and just sign them at the end, but she liked to know what was going on in her company. Which project was done, which wanted to get started, which…

"Oh, I haven't even started." Tony answered, sitting down in her visitor chair and made a face. Yeah. She knew she had to get a new one. She just always forgot about it.

"You mean you can waste even more of your money because you keep your employees from
"Working?" this time, she mocked him, curious how he would react. Most likely something along the lines that it was his to decide what to waste his money on.

"Oh, come on. It's small talk. Lifts the spirits. I think happy employees who know their owner still cares for them are more productive." He teased back. "Only did two selfies with fans of mine on my way to your office, by the way. Should I walk into the engineering department up in Vancouver? I swear, I won't get out of it for days."

Pepper chuckled softly, grabbed her pen and signed off one report, placing it on her fairly low 'signed reports' stack and grabbed a fresh one from her pretty high 'reports to sign' stack. "Yeah, but you wouldn't come out for days because you end up inventing stuff with your employees. That's..." she stopped, looked up at him. "Can I advertise you working with them over a weekend as a special event? Surely doable. Friday, create a reminder for me. You would do it, if I asked you nicely, right?" she checked his face, seeing a small smile on his lips, which usually meant yes.

"As long it's before Christmas I'll nearly do anything for you." He teased, leading to her chuckling.

"Yeah, I know. Christmas. The terrible deadline. We celebrate together with your crazy friends, right? Even though I wonder what to get a living cloak."

"Well..." he started, making her look at him. He didn't look as if he wanted to celebrate with them. He looked as if he wanted to celebrate with her. "Oh, you. We can be alone on New Year's. I think you should bond with the people you have to save the world with. Even though I think you are quite close to adopting Peter."

She saw how he wanted to object again and just snorted. "Don't even try to talk me out of this one. Friday? Create me a set of Christmas invitations to choose from." And her gaze went back to the reports, but she didn't get past the first line.

"Friday? Cancel the Christmas invitations. I would like to talk with you about this."

Pepper sighed annoyed. Looked at him. "What is there to talk about? Christmas is for family and friends. Shouldn't you at least celebrate that you made it to the end of the year alive seeing that god-knows-what wants to kill you? Besides, fireworks are more romantic. We could go on holidays. Rent someplace off the grid and pay someone to do the fireworks for us. Oh, and Friday, cancel the cancellation of the Christmas invitations."

She saw that he intended to turn this into a full-fledged fight over their Christmas plans when he grimaced and groaned. Slumped into the chair, his hand moving to grab his side, his face contoured in pain.

Pepper jumped to her feet, Christmas and reports and New Year's Eve forgotten, her heart beating in fear. She had seen that already. That expression on his face. Him slumping and grabbing his side in agony. Before... before that alien popped up in the city. For a mere second, she looked around. Would an alien pop up right here and try to kill him? Were her employees in danger? Was she in danger? She thought about calling the Iron Man suits in, just in case, but nothing happened. She could see people pass by her office calmly. No sudden screams. No people running for their lives. No Friday alerting them of alien activities. But something was happening. She saw that. She knew that. Her lover's expression gave it away. She took a step to get to Tony's side. To hold him or whatever, when he suddenly talked.

"Why would you do that?"

"Do what?" she asked confused. "Invite them for Christmas?" she asked, starting to round her table
to get to him.

She stopped when she saw his eyes tough. They were completely empty, staring right through her into nothingness. He hadn't talked to her.

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Peter's eyes moved to check the time. Twenty minutes left. And down onto the stupid surprise math test. Their teacher had started the lesson by collecting their homework, followed by a lecture on how important homework was and pulled a surprise test out of his bag afterward. All students had groaned in unison. Not a surprise test! True, they could have guessed because their teacher loved surprise tests, true, he could have remembered that the test was coming, but he had been too busy with telling Ned about his crazy weekend. After all, the doc had come visit. And he had done sparkles! Actual, golden sparkles, all by himself! With a bit of help. But sparkles! Ned had freaked out hearing it, just as Peter had expected. And then his friend had turned deadly serious.

"Portals by next week, Peter." and both had started to laugh. Yeah, portals by next week. That wasn't possible. Maybe in another world, where he went to Hogwarts, but as is he had to content himself with sparkles. If he managed to create them again.

He had wanted to go on reporting about his weekend, but then he had seen Liz' back and excused himself, hurrying after her. He really wanted to ask her out to homecoming. Get things done and safe. By the time he had reached up to her, she was surrounded by her friends and Peter just casually walked by. He didn't dare to ask her out in front of the others. He could only guess how some of her friends thought about him. Ew, stupid nerd. Look at that, Peter Parker asking out Liz Taylor! No. He would better ask her when they were alone, just like last time.

And now he had to answer stupid questions of a stupid surprise test. He vaguely remembered that he had screwed that one up pretty bad back then because he simply hadn't cared. Now… he stared at the next question. Moving his pen, writing an answer. Everything seemed fairly easy, compared to back then. Reasonable, after all, he was two years ahead of his co-students.

Tackling the next question, his world drowned in a flash of white. Just like last time, it took away his senses. Sound, vision, even the feeling of him holding the pen. Instead, his body groaned, feeling his old bruises again. Those bruises he would most likely never forget again. Not after feeling them over and over. This time, his vision returned astonishingly fast. He saw his hand holding the pen. He saw the test. He saw the question he wanted to answer. He saw the desk. The student sitting next to him. But at the same time, he was on Titan, swinging towards Tony, who sat on the ground with a pained expression.

Landing beside him, he extended his hand to help him back onto his feet. As soon as Tony stood, Peter raised his gaze, looking at the others. Starlord and Mantis, the latter helping the former walk, Drax, Nebula. They were all walking, well, limping, towards them, forming a loose circle. The doc was a bit away, grimacing while sitting up. Thunder rumbling caught his attention. Something was odd about it. And then something changed. He couldn't explain it using words. And yet, it seemed fundamental. Altogether. Everything. As if the very core of existence shuddered and changed and…

"Something's happening." Mantis said fearfully while looking around. Peter saw, how Tony took a few steps towards her, trying to…

But there was nothing to try, when she turned to ashes in front of their eyes, being blown away by the wind. Peter's heart skipped a beat, maybe even more and then returned to its task frantically. She had just turned to ashes. She was dead. Just like that. All Peter could hear was the odd wind, their combined panting, them looking around, not quite believing.
"Quill?" he heard Drax surprised voice and turned his head, just in time to watch him turn to ashes and float away.

"Steady, Quill." Tony's voice tried to remain calm. But what did it matter?

Peter looked at the other Peter, Starlord, and watched him turn to ashes too. Carried away by the wind like his other friends.

They were all dying. They were all dying. They were all dying.

At this point, Peter let the pen drop and jumped to his feet, rushing to leave the classroom. Somewhere at the back of his mind, he heard his teacher yell after him. "Parker! You sit back down or…" but he never heard the rest of that sentence.

"Tony?" the doc said, Tony turned to look at him. Peter rushed out of the classroom, seeing the empty corridor of the school in New York, on Earth, while he too saw Tony on Titan. He looked at the doc.

"There was no other way." And to his horror, the doc too turned to ashes. Just pieces blown away. Dead. Just like that.

And then he felt it. A tingle somewhere deep within him. It started in his chest. From there, it crept its way into all directions.

"Mister Stark? I don't feel so good." He heard himself say, feel how he moved, trying to get to Tony. "I… I don't know..." He stumbled forward, his legs trembling. Tony caught him. Holding him. Peter held onto him frantically, but it had no use. He felt, how his arm tingled. He saw how it started to turn to ashes. Little flakes of him flying away. "I don't want to go, I don't want to go, please." He heard himself say in a weak, terrified voice, close to tears. He didn't want to die. Not here, on this strange planet, while he too leaned against a wall in his school corridor. He didn't want to die. He didn't want to...

But he seemed to have no say in it as his legs started to tingle and fail. He felt, how Tony tried to hold him but didn't manage and they dropped to the ground. He saw his body. Flakes of ashes flying up and moving away. Tony looking at him with a terrified gaze. And then it was everywhere. The tingling. And as it turned stronger, he saw more ash flying up, carried away by the wind.

"I… I'm..." he tried to say but never made it. His face tingled too now. All of his body. The last thing, he ever saw, was ash floating up in a sudden gush of wind.

There wasn't anything after. Only darkness. Only cold.

And then reality snapped shut around him again. It felt like being ripped back into his body, everything too bright to see, everything still tingling. He was dead. He was dead. Slowly, very slowly, he recognized the corridor of his school. They were all dead. Tears were running down his face, his entire body trembling. He had turned to ashes. He still felt it. The tingling in his body and on his skin. And then… the wind gust. He had seen how he was blown away. Seen how he disappeared. How he died. He felt a hand on his shoulder, despite the tingling. Someone shaking him. They were all dead. The doc, the poor cloak, the other Peter, Mantis, Drax. All. Dead. Turned to ashes and carried away by the wind.

"Peter!" a voice. A voice at the far end of his consciousness. He blinked. There was a face in front of him. A face. Ned's face. Ned's afraid face. Slowly, very slowly, his head pieced together reality for him. He got aware of his own body again when the tingling subsided. He shivered like a leaf. He
was frantically crying. And Ned was shaking him like a madman. He was alive. Oh dear god, he was alive.

"What…?" he asked, blinking, hearing himself sniffle.

"Peter?" Ned asked, surprised, relieved, worried, confused.

"Yes?" Peter asked slowly, realizing how week his voice was. How broken he sounded. He had just died.

"Are you okay? You stormed out of the class and…" Ned turned silent for a moment. "Talked with someone. It sounded as if…"

He never got to hear the end of that sentence as bright, white light tuned out the world he had just returned to. This time, the bruises he knew Thanos had given him, hurt worse. They hurt like hell. Ten thousand times worse and. As if he had gotten stabbed instead of hit. He groaned in pain, whimpered even. Hugged himself in agony.

Slowly, very, very slowly this time, his senses returned. His face was pressed against a cold ground. Low humming surrounded him. Those weren't the tiles of his school corridor. And that weren't the sounds of a... That was…

"Peter?" Ned's voice reached his ears. It was more a panicked whimper than anything else. Slowly, he pushed himself off the ground, groaning in pain while doing so. Never in his life had his body hurt that badly.

While he got up, he finally saw his surroundings. And his surroundings sent his heart into a beating frenzy again. A cold shiver ran down his spine. Ned looked around, terrified, moving closer to him. As close as possible without being awkward.

He knew that corridor.

He knew that humming sound.

They were in that stupid flying donut – alien spaceship, which had kidnapped the doc. At least he hoped it was the stupid flying donut which had kidnapped the doc.

Chapter End Notes

I really hope you enjoyed this chapter! Basically put my heart into the ashes scene. Poor Peter, to watch himself dying.
Chapter 20

After trying for one month to write a version of the events out of Tony's perspective, I realized I couldn't write it. It was never good enough. Never how I wanted it to be. Accordingly, I deleted everything and started all over.

One day of writing as Peter and here I am again.

Enjoy!

"No, no, no, no." Peter repeated frantically. How had they ended up here? In a stupid alien spaceship. In space. In his future. They had just been in school together!

He had just… Suddenly, it was there. Just popped up in his head. The only question that ever mattered. Was he alive? Was this real? Or just some crude version of the afterlife? Did anything matter at all?

"Peter?" Ned's fearful and timid voice again, which ripped him out of his worries.

"Yes?" he asked weakly. If he was indeed dead…

"Where are we?" Ned asked, afraid.

He wanted to reply 'I don't know!' just to make him shut up but he didn't feel like lying to his friend. He very well knew where they were.

Taking a deep breath, he tried to sort his thoughts but failed. There was… he didn't know…

"In the classroom earlier. In the corridor. What happened?" Had he been at school all the time?

Ned stared at him as if he was nuts. Was he seriously asking those questions right now? There were obviously more important things to tackle. Like where they were or how they got here.

And still, he had to know. It was the one most important question. He had to know what had happened, according to his friend.

"Ned?" He asked again, apparently getting his friend out of his confused stupor.

"You stormed out of the class. I was sent to check on you. You sat in the corridor and talked to yourself. Sounded as if..." he hesitated, seemingly realizing why he had asked. "You were terrified, trembled like a leave, cried. Never saw you like that." His voice had turned lower with every word.

"But that was it? I was there all the time?" he asked, fearful.

Ned frowned at that, looking at him worriedly. "Yes, of course. I would guess you had a mental breakdown or something like that."

A mental breakdown. Peter laughed weakly hearing that. If only it had been a mental breakdown. Or
maybe it had been just that? "Yeah. No. Something like that." He repeated. "I'm alive, yes? We are okay? Besides being here, but..." he trailed off, turning silent. After some long moments, he looked at Ned again. "There was a light flash during the exam. Different from last time. I was on that alien planet on which we fought Thanos and I died. They all died." He whispered, feeling chills run along his spine at the memory. The tingling. Ash floating up. And then darkness. Only cold. Did death feel like that? Was there nothing afterward?

"You died?" Ned repeated, disbelief dripping from his voice. Peter really couldn't scold him for that. If it was the other way around, he would most likely react the same way.

"Yes. I... I turned to ashes. There was this wind gust and then..."

From one moment to the other, Peter turned silent. They were on the alien spaceship which had kidnapped the doc, right?

"This, here, right now, is real?" he asked, looking at Ned again, his voice laced with worry and urgency.

"Yes." Ned said dryly. "One moment I try to calm you down and then we are here."

And then they were here. The second light. It had gotten them here?

Taking one last deep breath, Peter closed his eyes for a few moments.

Two options.

The first one, he was dead and had ended up in his own action heaven, imaging Ned as his companion by his side.

The second one, the one he wanted to be true, was that he was still alive. That he wasn't currently ash floating below an alien sky. No. He was alive. There had been one light flash which brought him onto Titan. He had died and returned to his body on Earth. A second light flash which had gotten them here. If this was how things had happened, the doc was imminent danger. They all were. If one died, they would end up right in front of Thanos, ready to die for real.

The thought, as simple as it was, made his thoughts come to a stop. They would be in front of Thanos. They weren't in front of Thanos. Accordingly, he had to be alive. This was real.

The doc might get killed.

Opening his eyes again, he looked at Ned. Calm and determined. They couldn't waste time. They had to hurry.

"Okay." For one last second, he was silent, wondering about what to say. Well, simply the truth. Ned knew all of it anyway. "Let's go. I'll explain things along the way. For starters, the only important thing is, that we have to hurry."

Seeing that Ned wanted to object, Peter turned away and hurried along the corridor which would lead to the doc. A moment later, he heard how Ned followed him.

"Where are we?" his friend asked again, but Peter didn't answer. Not yet. Instead, he pulled the sleeves of his hoodie up, checking on his web shooters. They were still there, securely wrapped around his wrists.

"You have your web shooters with you?" Ned asked surprised, stopping for a moment to look at
him.

"Sure. With a light flash possible at every moment, I felt safer having them on me. I don't want to get killed by the next random alien which pops up in front of me. Seems to have paid off." He stated dryly, testing his shooters. Worked as usual.

"Do you have your suit on underneath?" his friend asked, oddly hopeful.

This time, Peter stopped, making a grimace. "No. We have sports later on and I can't change in front of everyone and"

Ned interrupted him. "Change in the bathroom prior to the start of the class." He pointed out dryly.

"Oh." For a moment, Peter felt dumbfounded. That obvious. Why hadn't he thought of that? Shaking his head, he moved on. No time to brood about his own stupidity.

"So, where are we?" Ned asked probably for the fifth time, moving along beside him.

"Well…" he paused, wondering how to phrase his words. Yet, he wasn't that big with speeches all along. "Actually, we are in the future. On an alien spaceship. Oh, don't look like that. There is only one alien here and I know where it is. The doc is captured by it. It's going to torture and kill the poor guy. Obviously, we can't let that happen. Cloak and Mister Stark" Ned seemed to dislike him calling him Tony "should be here too. We'll work something out. Worked last time too."

Yet, they couldn't blast a hole into the spaceship like last time. None of them had suits. Or at least he guessed that Tony didn't have a suit with him.

Chapter End Notes

At the end of the last chapters, I always promised to write chapters faster again. Seeing how it turned out, I simply say I'll try to update along the month. Hopefully, that should work out.

(Stupid university, needing that much time.) By March, I should be done with everything university-related. And then I have the time to write as much as I want again. Actually, I miss writing. I love the story and want to keep it going. For now, I'll stick to shorter chapters.

Thank you all for your comments and kudos! I appreciate all of them, even though I lack the time to reply properly.

Hugs and hopefully see you within the month!
Finally, I have time to write again! Handed every university stuff in. Now I just have to wait if I pass every course. And write in the meantime ;)

You'll meet: Peter, Tony, Ned, Cloak, Ebony Maw, (Stephen)

Have fun!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Peter stared down at the scene he had expected to see. He had known he would crawl along the walls, try to be as silent as possible, and finally enter the main hall of the ship. There, he would see the floating doc, suspended in mid-air. Unconscious. Unmoving. The poor man being surrounded by huge floating, needle-like things. The alien, Maw something, was busy watching the sorcerer. He would use the needles to kill him. Or maybe do worse in his efforts to get the Time Stone. On a small platform above the sorcerer and the alien, Tony and cloak were hiding, watching the unfolding situation. Peter had known he would see what he currently saw. Yet, actually seeing it bordered to insanity. He had been here before. They had been here before. They killed the alien before. Everything had already been. Yet, all he could think about was what if.

What if they couldn’t save the doc?

What if they couldn’t kill the alien?

What if they got stuck in this ship in their future without suits?

Would the timeline simply reset if one of them died here?

Would they end up in front of a massively pissed Thanos, because they obviously did something? Or maybe the titan would be oblivious to the fact that they had turned back time and just let them be. Let them live with the knowledge that they had had a chance and failed.

Peter shivered at the thought. Every new possibility was worse than the other. He wouldn’t let any of those happen. Not if he had a say in it. The goal was rather simple. Save the doc. Kill the alien. Or whatever of those two happened first. And then somehow get back into their own current past. Before he could start to brood over what exactly he had been thinking, he carefully dropped down from his hiding spot on the wall and joined Tony and cloak, who barely glanced at him. This was unlike the first time. The first time, Tony had been surprised seeing him. This time, it seemed to be expected relief. He was here. Finally.

“Ned is here.” He whispered, immediately getting a response from both. Cloak swirled around and stared at him, Tony frowned and did the same.

“What?!” He asked lowly, sounding something between worried and surprised.

“Yeah. He touched me during the light flash and…” he shouldn’t explain things. They didn’t have time for explanations. “Whatever. We can’t blast a hole into the ship like last time. I mean, we can’t anyway because we don’t have suits, but we can’t for sure because we might suck Ned out too.” He
fell silent. “What do we have? I have my web shooters with me.”

He saw, how Tony moved his hand, an Iron Man glove appeared, covering his hand. “One shot.” The man said grimly. Cloak gestured towards itself.

Even though Peter had expected it, he felt his heart beat faster. None of them had suits. They would have to fight an alien with nothing but web and intellect. Three idiots against an alien which could move things by sheer force of will. Nothing easier than that.

“Where is Ned?” Tony asked lowly, turning his gaze back to the still unconscious Stephen and the alien.

“Got him up on one of the higher platforms and told him to hide.” If Ned got hurt in the process… No. He couldn’t think about another what if. It would only drive him insane.

“Do you have a plan?” Peter asked instead, joining the two at staring down at their peculiar problem.

“You still have strength and speed, right?” Tony asked grimly, sounding as if he didn’t want to ask what he was asking.

“Yes.”

“You heal faster, right?”

While Peter answered “Yes” again, he realized what he would have to do, because currently only he could do it. Fight the alien. Or distract it for starters. Tony without his suit was surely awesome, but a bit restricted if it came to hand on hand combat against aliens.

“You go down and distract him. I will try to get Strange out of those needles. Hopefully, I can touch them with the glove. If not, cloak helps me first and then you. If I can touch the needles, I’ll see if I can use them as some sort of weapon. They seem painful enough after all.” Tony was silent for a moment. “Aim for his head. I guess that he lets stuff float through willpower. If he is unconscious, he can’t bother us.” Peter nodded. Sounded reasonable.

They kept calm until the doc seemed to return to consciousness, drawing the attention of the alien onto himself. Maw started to talk about his loyalty to Thanos and that he couldn’t fail him and…

Peter used the moment to jump down, making sure to pull the attention of the alien away from the doc. And away from the small platform where Tony and cloak were still hiding.

“You have a sorcerer who belongs to us. Give him back.” Peter said on a whim, feeling the urge to talk again. They had a plan. As stupid and crazy and suicidal it may be, they had a plan. He could work with that. And maybe distract his enemy through non-stop chattering.

“You want him back?” Maw asked, something between bored and amused. “You can’t fight me, human. Your powers are inconsequential to mine.” With a flick of his hands, metal scraps, sharp looking metal scraps, started to float, hovering on either side of him.

“Are you really living in a mess, only to have stuff close by to throw at enemies?” Peter asked. “By the way, try to get bitten by a radioactive spider first. Then we two can sit down and have a chat about inconsequential powers.”

With that, he ran towards the alien, deciding to mix a scream in for good measure to hide any sounds Tony could make while being floated down by cloak, only to stop when the metal scrap things
started to move towards him. He dodged one, webbed the other and let them crash into another.

“That’s all you can do? Throw metal at me?” he taunted his enemy, stepping away. He wanted to lure him away. If only a little. Even though he guessed that increasing the distance between Maw and Tony and the doc didn’t really matter. What was distance to a guy fighting with thoughts? Well, the metal scraps needed a few seconds longer to hit the target.

“Your words mean nothing.” Maw informed him oddly bored. A moment later, the ground below his feet started to move, metal bending, turning and twisting, trying to ensnare him.

“F…” acting fast, he jumped away, trying to hit Maw’s face with webbing, which he blocked easily by letting a piece of metal float in front of his face. For a long second, Peter stared at him. Obviously, he could block his range attacks easily. If he wanted a chance at webbing this guy, he would have to take the fight up close.

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Staring down at the huge, obviously magical, glowing needles floating around Strange, Tony moved his glove covered hand reluctantly, touching one of the things. He had expected to feel pain rush through his body. He had expected to be in agony. Yet, nothing happened. No pain at all. The touched needle simply glowed a bit brighter. Sighing relieved, he allowed himself a tiny smile. He could touch those things. Signalong to cloak to go and help Peter, he took to the task of pushing floating needles aside. “I’ll get you out.” He whispered lowly, not even sure if Strange could hear him, but he guessed the man could see Peter and count one and one together.

----

Peter, trying to get closer to the alien, was suddenly flung to the side and flew through the room. Crashing against the closest wall, he groaned lowly. “Not fair, man!” he yelled at the alien while trying to move. He couldn’t though. A mere second later, he heard metal screeching and breaking again. Watching, how the wall moved to literally swallow him, he felt panic rush through his being. Maw would bury him inside the wall. Cut off his access to air and just suffocate him. Let him die slowly. He. Would. Not. Die. Not like that. Not like… groaning and cursing, he tried to move again. Get away from that damn wall.

Suddenly, he could move. Wasting no second, he pushed himself off, crashing onto the luckily not-alive ground. Getting back onto his feet in an instant, he realized he didn’t have anything to do with being able to move. It wasn’t due to his will to live or something like that. Cloak had wrapped around Maw’s head and was busy dragging him along. Watching how cloak got flung to the side, Peter started to sprint towards Maw. He wanted to reach the guy and knock him over. Web him for good measure. Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw how cloak tumbled. Something trying to push it down. Yet, cloak prevailed shakily, just trying again to attack Maw. A few steps away, Maw turned his head and looked at him. Flicked his hand.

Once again, the ground beneath Peter’s feet turned alive. This time, he wasn’t fast enough. He felt cold metal wrap around his feet, ensnare him, make him fall. Hitting the ground, he saw the remaining walkway jump to life. Heard metal move and bend. Yet, it didn’t bother him as much as it should. All he did was stare at Maw. He had flicked his hands. He couldn’t control things by sheer force of will. Not alone at least. He needed gestures to make the crazy parts of it work.

Ripping his arms free from metal, which had already started to wrap around them, he aimed and webbed the one hand of Maw he could see. A surprised yelp was his response. Instead of being entombed in the ground, he felt his body being ripped upwards, fly through the entire room and hit the ceiling hard. Groaning, he felt his body fall down again. He was getting ready to hit the ground
when cloak dashed to the side and caught him. Suddenly floating, relief rushed through his body. He hadn’t hit the ground. Maw couldn't use the walkway to bury him. He wouldn't die beneath metal. Looking at the alien, Peter dared to smirk.

“All you can do? Throw me around? Doesn’t work that well, obviously.”

He just had to web Maw’s remaining hand. Stop him from doing the crazy stuff. This would work out.

----

The screeching of metal bending, louder than ever, distracted Tony from his task. Looking up, he stopped pulling on Strange’s leg for a moment. All he could do was stare at metal bending and twisting and turning. The ground, the closest wall and one of the upper platforms had turned to life. All of it forming one big metal structure, closing in on Peter and cloak, who just floated there. Couldn’t they move? Why didn’t they move?! He had to… finish what he was doing. Giving Strange’s leg a final pull, the sorcerer floated away from the vicinity of the needles. Yet, he just kept on floating. Unable to move. Staring at Strange for a second, he looked back at Peter and cloak. They too just floated there. Unable to move. All three of them were just suspended mid-air. Watching metal twist and move, the structure started to close around the two. Just a few seconds more and they would be trapped. Probably get crushed by metal or suffocate or…

Aim for the head. His earlier words rushed through his head. Raising his gloved hand, he aimed and shot. The one shot he had.

It hit its goal. The back of Maw’s head. Yet, the alien only tumbled a few steps forward, groaning. The screeching of metal stopped. Grabbing one of the needles, Tony didn’t waste any more time and started to run towards the alien. He had to reach it before it regained itself. He had to reach it before…

Maw swirled around. And then Tony’s body was flung to the side, moved upwards and simply stopped. Just. Stopped. Floating mid-air, he was unable to move. Tony tried to trash around, to move, to something, anything, but nothing happened. The alien stared at him. Strange had to feel like that. Peter and cloak had to feel like that. Suspended in mid-air, unable to do a damn thing. Just floating. Witnessing what was going on. Watching how Maw stepped closer, Tony felt oddly numb. This was it, wasn’t it? They had tried to save Strange and he got killed in the process.

A piece of metal clattered to the ground beside him. Another one hit Maw’s shoulder.

“Leave my friends alone!” another piece of metal hitting the ground.

He knew that voice. Ned. Peter’s friend.

Tony watched, how Maw looked up. How he raised a hand, gestured towards himself. A moment later, surprised screams followed. Ned floated into his field of vision, stopping right in front of Maw.

“Who do you think are you?” Maw asked softly. Somehow, it sounded more dangerous than all his other words or actions. Once again, a gesture. The needle Tony had brought along floated out of his hand and towards Maw. Another flick of his wrist and the needle moved towards Ned. With sheer horror, Tony listened to Ned’s accelerating breath. Watched the needle getting closer. Inch by inch. Maw seemed to relish in dragging out the inevitable.

“Such a noble action. Trying to save your friends.”

Suddenly, there was Peter with cloak on his shoulders. Half floating, half running, looking as if he
fought against a power holding him back and slammed into the alien. Tackling it to the ground.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! Hope you enjoyed it.

And thank you for all the kudos! You guys keep me motivated :)

I'll try to be back with the next chapter in the coming days.
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Hey there :)
Like promised, back with a new chapter.
Somehow, Peter hijacked this one - everything happens out of his point of view.
Have fun reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Crashing into Maw was oddly satisfying. Going down together even more. Wrapping his arms tight around the alien while they fell, Peter tried everything in his power to stay close to his enemy. He couldn't afford to roll off of him or something like that. Every tiny second he needed to move was dangerous. Maw could fling him away again in the meantime. Kill one of his friends. Anything.

Like that, as soon as they hit the ground, Peter was partly upright, webbing Maw's free hand to the ground. He was too late though. Fingers moved in an upwards motion right before his web pinned them to the ground. The screeching of metal filled his ears again, the ground around them starting to rise. Within seconds, Peter felt metal scratch along his arms. If he let go...

No. No more what ifs. No more distraction. He had to

"Peter!" Ned's frantic voice made his head snap around, stare at his friend. The tip of the needle had started to glow while touching Ned's forehead. The face of his friend was contoured in both, pain and panic.

Metal was scratching along his shoulders. Cursing below his breath, Peter jumped to his feet. Stop the needle from killing Ned, use it against Maw. Hopefully, that would work out. Before he turned his attention fully to his friend, he took the time to web Maw thoroughly to the ground. He wouldn't have this guy escape him. Unless Maw ripped the whole ground he was webbed against upwards and floated away, he shouldn't be able to get away. Yet, Peter had seen him do just that to Stephen. Knock him out and carry the ground he was laying on around. Praying to all Gods, which wanted to listen, Peter hoped that Maw needed gestures for that crazy stuff. Turning towards Ned, he grabbed the needle

And jumped back with a scream of agony. Touching the needle had felt like grabbing a knife by the blade. It had cut right into his skin, hurting worse than he could imagine. Yet, staring at his hands there was no blood. Nothing. The pain had to be inside his head. As long as he merely touched the thing, at least. He didn't even want to know, what his friend felt. What Stephen had felt.

Taking a deep breath, he braced himself and grabbed the needle again with both hands. The pain nearly made him let go, but he didn't. Instead, he screamed like a maniac and tried to pull the damn thing away from his friend. To his horror, the needle didn't move an inch. It just stayed where it was, floating in the air and slowly moving towards Ned.

"Not with me!" Peter grunted, feeling tears well up in his eyes. His whole body wanted him to let go of the needle. He couldn't move it anyway. Yet, if he did, he would have to watch his friend get
tortured and possibly killed without having done a damn thing to prevent it. He couldn't live with that. It would be worse than anything the needle could ever do to him. Pressing his feet into the ground, he tried to lean back. Pull on the thing with all his strength.

At first, it didn't help. Nothing changed. The needle simply continued to move towards a worse screaming Ned. His hands throbbed. His vision was oddly blurry. Was he crying or going to pass out? Cloak flipped from his shoulders, swished around and pressed against his chest. Still nothing. Still only...

All of a sudden, the needle gave way and he tumbled to the ground. Without wasting a second, he jumped up again. Ignoring his throbbing body, he climbed over the still moving metal and rammed the needle into Maw's shoulder. The alien grimaced. Letting go of the needle, Peter looked around frantically, his vision getting fuzzier. They were still floating. They were all still floating. What else could he do? What else... more needles. Stephen had been surrounded by a bunch of needles.

Looking up towards their sorcerer, he could barely see a thing. Forms and colors blurring into each other. Raising his arm, he shot a web blindly, hoping he hit something useful. He pulled on the string he was still holding, getting whatever he had hit into his reach. A needle. Actually, several needles. Grabbing one of them, he didn't even flinch and rammed it into Maw's body. This time, the alien screamed. He heard his friends fall to the ground, low groans and

Blinking, Peter saw worried faces float above him.

"What happened?" he asked, trying to focus his gaze.

"You collapsed." Tony replied, knelt down and picked him up without much of a word. Feeling his head lean against Tony's shoulder, Peter felt oddly secure. He got him away from the alien and the screwed up metal. Got him to safety. Once again, he thought of Tony as a father. Maybe he was in a way. His superhero-relative, who watched over him and tried to keep him from getting killed. A Dad did such things, didn't he?

Sitting on the ground and leaning against metal, he felt Tony's worried gaze on himself.

"How are you?"

Peter took a deep breath. How was he? "Okay, I think. My hands don't hurt anymore, but my head throbs like hell." He paused, focusing on Tony's face. "How could you touch the needles?" He would have gone insane trying to save the doc.

"My glove, I guess. I didn't touch them directly."

Ah. That made sense.

"I'll go talk with Strange. We have to get rid of it."

Rid of it? What? Oh, right, the alien. He blinked again. He didn't want Tony to leave. He didn't want to be alone right now. Allowed him to focus too much on his throbbing head. The memory of grabbing the needle. The endless pain. The fear of Ned dying.

"Okay." What else should he say? Besides, he could see his friend walking towards them. He wouldn't be alone for much longer. Ned looked good. Better than he felt for sure.

"Are you okay?" He asked the second, Ned sat down beside him.
His friend nodded. "More or less. Sure, it did hurt, but..." he paused. Peter could tell that his friend didn't tell him everything. "Thanks for saving me. I... I thought I would die."

Peter managed a soft smile. "Not on my watch." Never on his watch.

Focussing on the two adults a bit away, he frowned. Normally, he should be able to hear them if they were close by. Yet, he didn't. Maybe due to his headaches. His head felt oddly slow. Raising his hand to wipe over his face, he stopped mid-motion. There were scratches all over his arm, his clothes ripped. Had the metal scratched him there? Had to be that way. His gaze trailed along his other arm. His legs. What the heck had happened to his legs? They were covered in scratches, his jeans were spotted with red. He had been bleeding? Was he still bleeding? When had that happened?

"How do you feel?" Ned's worried voice caught his attention. Staring at his legs, he realized he couldn't say 'Fine'. He really didn't look fine. Still, he didn't feel as bad as he looked.

"I'm okay." Peter was silent for a long moment. "I'll be okay. I have been through worse."

Ned was silent for a long moment before he finally replied. "Okay." He was silent for a long moment. "No, not okay. You look like shit." Another pause. "I'm just worried. I'm sorry."

Peter smiled in response. "Don't worry." He frowned at that. "No, I want to say, it's okay if you worry. Was a bit insane what I did." A bit insane. Very much insane fit better, but he had to save Ned. And the others too, of course. Closing his eyes, he smiled softly. They had beaten the alien. No. He had beaten the alien. With a little help from cloak. "Can you watch the 'adults' for me? I think taking a nap is a good idea. Actually, sleeping for days seemed like a good idea. "If they start fighting again wake me, please. Have to keep our married couple happy." Right before he slipped into a dreamless sleep, Peter heard Ned chuckle. Their married couple.

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Slipping in and out of sleep, Peter lost his feeling for time. One moment he opened his eyes and stared at a golden rune. Why was Stephen creating runes? To protect them from something? Watching the rune dissolve into golden sparkles, he drifted away again, all questions he had had already forgotten.

The next time he woke up, Tony and Stephen sat beside them, talking about something with timelines. He knew he should pay attention to that, pull himself out of his sleep. This was important. Yet again, they would surely repeat it for him once he had slept enough. Once his head stopped throbbing. Right before he slipped away, he felt something warm wrap around him. Something red appeared in his vision. Cloak?

The third time Peter woke up, he saw nothing but white. A light flash. Oh God, he couldn't handle another alien. The others would have to protect Ned and him. With Stephen awake, that should work out. Hopefully. The doc defending them and Tony making up some plans. Sounded reasonable...

For a long moment, Peter didn't know when he was. Or where. Or if at all. Then sound returned. The soft humming of the spaceship had stopped. Instead, he heard soft breathing.

"Where are we?" he tried, hoping that the others had their senses together. Only Ned replied. He was as blind as he was. If they were attacked right now, everything would be over. Partly, he expected just that. That something screamed at them, jumped at them and killed them. Would be really easy while they didn't know anything about their surroundings.

Nothing happened though. Just silence. Tony and Stephen didn't reply. Were they okay? Then touch
returned. Instantly, Peter realized that he wasn't leaning against the metal of the spaceship anymore. Instead, he felt a solid wall pressing against his back. Tiles beneath his fingers. Cloak's warm embrace was gone.

"We are back at our school, aren't we?" he asked softly, counting one and one together. Tony, Stephen and cloak were gone. The humming of the spaceship was gone. They had to be back home. In their time.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed the chapter!

Thank you for every kudo and/or comment you may leave.

I'm currently working at getting back into writing longer chapters. It will happen earlier or later ;)

See you next week either way.
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

I know, I know... Over a week late. To make up for it, I'll try to publish several chapters this week! Hope everything works out :)
You'll meet: Tony & Pepper, Stephen & The Ancient One and Peter & Ned & May
Happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

One moment, Tony watched Peter and Ned worriedly. Peter didn't look good, not at all. He shouldn't be that weak after fighting Maw. The alien had mostly flung him around. Nothing to worry about. And still, Peter was doing nothing else than sleep. He had wanted to turn to Strange, ask him if he knew what was going on with him. After all, Strange had been very persistent about cleaning his wounds using his sparkly magic. Yet, he never got to see Strange's face. he never got to ask his question. Once again, his world disappeared in pure, white light, swallowing everything around him and leaving only pain.

Groaning, he cursed lowly. No more aliens, please. No more swords stabbing through his side. No more. He didn't know if he could fight another one just yet. He would have to, no questions asked, as he would defend Peter. And Ned, of course. And maybe even Strange. With his senses still gone, he waited for the inevitable. An alien screaming at them. Something or someone stabbing him, ripping him apart or beating him to death.

"re you?"

His heart nearly stopped. Had that been Pepper? Pepper's beautiful, surprised, slightly panicking voice?

"Pepper?" Was he back? Was he actually safe? Were they safe?

"Yes. Of course, it's me." Pepper's voice told him. She sounded closer now. As if she sat beside him.

"There aren't any aliens nearby?" he asked, sounding worried. Maybe they had turned up together with them. Just postponing his death by a few seconds. Attacking everyone close by. Was Pepper safe?

"No, there aren't any aliens nearby." Friday informed him.

Tony let out a sigh of relief. He wanted to start laughing. Or crying. Or both at the same time. No aliens. Did that qualify for a mental breakdown?

"You can't see again, can you?" Pepper asked lowly.

"I…" he just wanted to tell her that he couldn't feel anything either when said sense returned. Her warm fingers were running through his hair, stroking him gently. Was he laying on the ground?

"Yes, but just for a little." With his sense of touch back, sight couldn't be far behind. Sitting up slowly, he extended his hands in search of his girlfriend. He wanted to hold her. Feel her. Be sure
she was okay. There was no reason, she shouldn't be, but still. He needed to know. He had to be sure. Pepper caught his hands in her own. For a moment, they were simply holding hands. Until she let go and snuggled into his arms, hugging him tightly.

"I'm okay." He whispered softly, earning a half-hearted chuckle.

"What happened?" Pepper asked after she had her voice back under control. Tony had known the question would come. It was inevitable. Sighing softly, he only hesitated for a few seconds. And then, he told her. About whatever it had been he had witnessed first, all of the others turning to ashes. About the spaceship. About the alien torturing Strange. About Ned being there. About Peter distracting it. And them all nearly dying.

Pepper was silent for a very long while after he was finished with his story. Looking down at her, he saw she was brooding over what he had said. She was probably thinking about what to say first. About what to worry most.

"If we cuddle up for the night and there is one of those light flashes, I can end up in the future with you?"

He felt something cold grabbing his heart. A shiver running along his spine. He didn't want Pepper anywhere near aliens. He wanted her safe. At home. However safe his home was, but with Friday running the place and a ton of Iron-Man suits in the basement, her chances looked pretty good.

"I would think so." He said lowly. Things like that were the reason, he had built his nanotech suit in the first place. To always be able to protect her. Just in case there was a monster in the closet, which seemed more possible than ever before. Maybe… maybe he should build her one too. Teach her how to use it. Just to be sure, she could protect herself, if things went south.

"What happened here?" He asked, trying to distract himself. Pepper only needed a moment until she answered. Her voice calm and business-like.

"At first, you groaned and slumped, much like the first time. As Friday didn't give me any alien warnings, I figured you had to have something else time-travely. After all, you don't typically collapse." She paused for a mere second. "As long as you don't have panic attacks." She added dryly.

Tony smiled weakly. Good catch. She had been through too much with him, hadn't she?

"You eventually slid off the chair, despite my efforts to keep you in place. Before I could try to get you upright again…" Pepper stopped at this point, looking distant. Worry mixed with fear. Tony hadn't seen that expression in a while. Cupping her cheek, he kissed her softly.

"What happened?"

Holding his gaze, Pepper took a deep breath. "You vanished. Gone. Just like that."

Tony could only stare at her. He had been gone? Physically been in his future? How was that even possible? And what if he had died there? Would his corpse turn up again? Or would he simply stay lost, gone forever?

No. No, Strange had said, that their current timeline would collapse if one of them died. That they would end up back in front of Thanos. For a second, Tony was willing to believe that. Until his head reminded him, that he had just physically been in his future. Maybe Strange was wrong. Maybe they wouldn't turn up again and this timeline would simply continue. Without them.
Stephen stared at the blue-grayish sky above him for a very long time. He knew the Ancient One was sitting beside him, but he wasn't saying a single word and she wasn't pressing him for what had happened. She seemed to know he would speak eventually.

The pain of Maw's needle touching his face was still there. He couldn't even imagine how Peter felt, who had touched those things with his bare hands. Yet again, maybe he wouldn't be aware of it. He had seemed pretty terrible after the fight. Hopefully…

The feeling of turning to ashes returned. Of dying, fully aware of his surroundings. Of what was going on. And afterward…

Afterward…

Stephen shivered and forced his thoughts away. He had thought that had been it, right there and then. That they had never truly escaped Thanos. That all this had just been a farce. Them being trapped by the Reality Stone, while Thanos went to retrieve the Time Stone and the Mind Stone. Maybe, the snap was inevitable. It had to happen. Always. And they could never stop it from happening, just influence the circumstances under which they died. After all, he had been gambling. He knew that much. It would explain all those oddities if they never actually left Titan. Why he could touch the Time Stone, for example. He shouldn't be able to, after all. It should turn him to dust. Kill him within an instant. Yet, it didn't. He always only felt its vast energies and could use it, as if touching Infinity Stones was normal.

And then… all of a sudden he had been with Maw again. It didn't make any sense. None at all. He should be dead. He had already been…

Only, when Peter turned up in front of him to taunt the alien away, did he realize he wasn't in fact dead. He was still alive. And the others were doing their everything to save him. To save themselves. He guessed, he had convinced Tony that the first thing had been a vision. A possible outcome of the fight against Thanos. After all, it was true in a way. It had been one of his many visions. Of course, he hadn't told him, that it was the only way out. He had laughed at that question and shook his head. No. Of course, Peter wouldn't die. He wouldn't die. Tony could never know before it happened, else he would do everything in his power to save the boy. Yet, he couldn't. He could never. And he wasn't supposed to in the first place.

"You should tell someone."

Stephen flinched at her words and looked at her. She still just sat there, watching him with her ever emotionless face. Yet, there was a soft glimmer in her eyes.

"That obvious?" he asked lowly.

"To someone, who is hiding everything all her life, yes. If you don't tell it to at least someone it might eventually destroy you. Whatever it is you try to hide that badly."

Stephen looked away. "I could tell a psychiatrist. Tell him I have the strangest of all dreams. Wonder what he would make of it."

"Whatever works best for you."

His gaze moved back to her. Just looking at her. That glimmer in her eyes. It was still there.
Finally, Peter's sight returned. First blurry outlines, then colors, then a messy mix of everything and suddenly, there was his school corridor. He had expected to be here. To be home. Yet, actually seeing it calmed him down beyond words. He didn't have to somehow defend Ned. He would have, after all. Even now. His friend had been dragged into this mess because of him. He wouldn't let him get harmed. Any more than he had been already. Looking at Ned beside him, he smiled weakly. His friend looked shaken, but okay. He would be okay. He had to be. He wouldn't forgive himself if he wasn't.


"I was in the future, saved your sorry asses, nearly got killed by an alien and made it back home in one piece. Of course, I am okay." His friend said in an odd, hyper-happy voice. Peter blinked slowly. Ned was hiding something from him. He would tackle that problem. Later.

For now, he looked down at his clothes. All ripped and holes and… He sighed lowly. He couldn't be seen like that. Would only raise questions he didn't want to answer. Getting up slowly, Peter felt his world slip to the side. Leaning against the wall in an effort to not collapse and fall down again, he groaned. What the hell? What was that? Why was he feeling so miserable? Just a few scratches. Tiny wounds. Nothing to brag about. Should be healed in no time at all.

"Ned?" he asked, concentrating on a point on the ground. Finally, his surroundings stopped moving around him, stopped slipping and falling to either side. He felt as if he could work without instantly falling to one side. "Can you help me to my locker? I want to change into my gym clothes." Better than running around in those rags anytime. Hopefully, he could dodge any questions of why he was wearing gym clothes already.

A visit to the bathroom later, he was clad in non-ripped clothes. For a very long moment, he had stared at himself in the mirror. The boy who was staring back at him looked as if he would faint any second. Why was he feeling so ill? He hadn't been that bad ever since being bitten by the spider. It reminded him of having the flu. All dizzy and slow minded and a tiny bit confused, he guessed. Trying to concentrate, he wondered what had happened. He had only been scratched by metal. Nothing to… he had been scratched by some unknown, alien metal… worry about.

Alien metal. Ripping his skin. Maybe his body couldn't handle the strange element. Maybe… maybe his tiny, tiny wounds had gotten infected. Bacteria entering his bloodstream through the wound. Did he… did he have blood poisoning? Did the symptoms match? Was it deadly? Sadly, he had no idea. Besides blood poisoning surely being deadly. Couldn't be healthy having bacteria in his bloodstream.

"I think…" should he go to a hospital? He would have to explain to May what the hell had happened and he really wasn't keen on that one. After all, she didn't even know he was Spider-Man. How to explain everything else? Time travel and mad titans and Infinity Stones. It bordered to insanity. What if they locked him up in a mental asylum?

Turning his thoughts away from telling the truth, he wondered if he could sit this one out. See if his healing powers could handle blood poisoning. Maybe he could crash at Ned's place and wait until he was fine again. Honestly, that sounded like a pretty neat plan. Just wait until everything was okay again. Not tell his aunt about the crazy reality of things.

"What?" Ned asked, looking at him.

For a moment, Peter was silent. Just looked at his friend. Was it okay to keep silent? Just act as if he was exhausted? Just…
"I think I should go to the hospital." He finally managed to say. It was the right choice. The responsible choice. The insane choice. The choice which would lead to awkward explanations in his very near future. He didn't want to face the consequences. He didn't want to need to worry, whether or not his aunt would still have custody over him if he had obviously gone mental. In which hospital did Christine work again? Maybe he could dodge some questions…

Ned nodded without objecting. That simple gesture made Peter feel even worse. His belly clenched. He had to look like shit if his friend didn't object. Oh God, hopefully, he was okay. He didn't want to die to some lousy scratches. How to explain that to the others once they were back on Titan? Yeah… I survived Maw, but you know, those scratches just did me.

With the help of Ned, he made it to the nurse office. Right before going in, he stopped. "Can you get my bag later on? It's still in the class." He had completely forgotten about actually having school. About the class. About the test. About his stuff. Ned nodded, let go of supporting him and opened the door. Taking a deep breath, Peter made his way in.

The school nurse eyed him skeptically at first. Obviously, she was used to students looking like shit but not being ill at all. He guessed, the percentage of teenagers wanting to ditch a test, the last hours or the entire day was quite high. After he had told her about his symptoms and mentioned scratches, he showed her his arm, which didn't look all too bad in comparison to his legs, she looked worried. While he watched the wall flip to the side again, she was taking his temperature. Turned out he had a fever. Well, that would at least explain his dizziness. He guessed, he took a nap while she was making calls and dismissed Ned. The next thing he knew was a paramedic waking him up, his friend being nowhere to be seen. He was escorted off the school grounds under the curious gazes of his co-students, got into an ambulance and had to tell his whole story once again. This time, he invented some thorn bushes he had been crawling through during his break. He added having changed his clothes to hide having scratches on top of it and not feeling well afterward. Sounded reasonable. Just an unlucky idiot getting blood poisoning from scratches. All the way to the hospital, he didn't sleep once. He was too worried to even think about that. Listening to the paramedics didn't help much either. A possible side-effect of blood poisoning could be organ failure.

To his horror, Peter was admitted to the intensive care unit. Only the worst got here. The following was an odd combination of questions, tests, his scratches being treated in a hurry and long wait times. Once again, he didn't sleep once. He couldn't until he knew what the hell was going on. Sometime later, after he had watched a stupid romance movie from his hospital bed, a doctor turned up again, telling him what he had been worried about. Yes, he had blood poisoning. He would get antibiotics and an IV soon. He would stay on the station for monitoring purposes to be able to act fast, just in case his organs failed him. He didn't need to worry, by the way. He was in good care. They would watch over him.

Yet, Peter didn't quite share the enthusiasm of the man. If he died… no. He couldn't. Not to stupid scratches! He couldn't fail the others that badly. He couldn't suddenly be back on Titan, with Stephen handing the Time Stone to Thanos. He couldn't watch half of the universe die. He couldn't watch May, Ned, Tony, Stephen and cloak die. Just. Because. Of. Him. Bursting into tears made a nurse try to comfort him before they had to pin him down to be able to give him said antibiotics and place the IV treatment. And probably gave him something to calm him down as slowly blinking, he realized it was dark outside. Light flooded down on him from above. He heard someone breathe slowly beside him. Turning his head, he saw May. May, who looked as if she had aged at least a year from one day to the next. She looked grim, sad, afraid, worried and exhausted. She had been called, hadn't she? By the nurse or by the hospital. Your nephew, Peter Parker, he's in the ICU. With blood poisoning. We don't know yet if he is stable. Could you come as soon as possible?
He felt ill just thinking about it. How much she had to worry because of him. How afraid she had been. How…

She moved her head. Looking up from staring at his hand and saw him. Saw him being awake. A thousand emotions rushed over her face. Worries making place to happiness and relief. And then she jumped up from her chair, halfway laying on his bed and hugged him tightly, sobbing into his shoulder.

"I'm okay." He tried weakly, earning an even worse sob from her, while he hugged her back. They stayed like that for a long while. Eventually, she let go of him and dried her tears. Seeing that, Peter felt worse than ever. He had made her cry.

"You're in a hospital with blood poisoning. Don't give me the you're okay treatment." She scolded him softly, sitting down again. She still looked worried but relieved too. He was awake.

"What happened? And don't you dare tell me the same bullshit you told the doctor."

Chapter End Notes

I think in my fourth pass the chapter is actually readable. I would be happy to hear from you if you liked it. Had some bad troubles with it - I started the story arc ages ago and can't remember what I had planned to write.

The next chapter will be easier on me. Actually, it is partly done already.

Thank you all and see you soon!
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

You'll meet: May, Peter, Christine, Stephen, Tony

Have fun reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

May watched her nephew calmly. He was silent, obviously brooding about what to tell her.

"No more lies, Peter." She said softly when he did open his mouth. And shut it again. Did that mean he had wanted to lie to her?

Or had she startled him?

Or did he simply not know where to start? Had he continued lying to her? Was he worried that everything would come crashing down on him? That she would hate him? She could never hate him. She could be terribly mad, yes, and maybe ignore him for a while, but nothing more. Still, she wondered what she had missed. What had her little boy gotten himself into behind her back? She had thought, they had sorted everything out!

For some reason, she was suddenly thinking about drug dealing, bribery, hanging out with the wrong kind of people, stealing cars, credit card fraud, internet scams, illegal video downloads, making drugs for drug dealing, oh god, maybe he was addicted to the drugs he made -

"I..." Peter started without ever going further. He looked around, checking the door. What was he going to tell her, that needed privacy? Was it drug dealing to earn some money on the side? Some sort of addiction? Oh God, she...

Should stop freaking out and wait what he told her. He wasn't drug addicted or messed up in criminal activity. She prided herself on thinking she would know. She just had to stop freaking out. Like that, she went on looking at him. Concentrating on her calm breathing. Eventually, he returned her gaze. Just to break it a few moments later, looking down at his hands.

"Okay, this will sound a bit odd, so..." he trailed off and fell silent again.

Dragging on the minutes of not answering. Yet, she kept quiet and waited. He seemed to want to tell her. He was simply thinking about how to start.

What had he done? What worried him that badly?

After what seemed like ages, he finally said: "Okay. First things first. I'm Spider-Man."

May blinked. Once, twice. "Oh." She was silent for a moment. "Okay. I mean, I knew you were sneaking in and out late at night. Thought you had a secret girlfriend or something like that." She was silent for a long moment. "When... how..." she thought back. There was nothing particular that sprung to mind, beside him losing his backpack far too often. And sometimes coming home with a ton of bruises.
Peter shrugged. "Since…" and stopped in the middle of his sentence. "Ten months? Got bitten by a spider at Oscorp's at a field trip." She wasn't sure what he saw on her face, but it made him add: "Don't worry, the spider is dead."

May opened her mouth and closed it again, not sure what to say. Her nephew was a superhero. A web-slinging, jumping around superhero.

He was Spider-Man.

"Okay…" while trying to take it all in, she thought about the few video clips she had seen of her nephew wearing his suit. Spider-Man helping people get around, Spider-Man stopping a car crash, Spider-Man catching a thief. Didn't seem all too dangerous. Actually, kind of sweet. He was helping people. While she wanted to make her peace with Peter helping random strangers day in, day out, another memory sprung to mind. The Avengers fighting amongst themselves in Germany. Spider-Man had been there. She had been worried about the new superhero. They seemed to pop up like rabbits.

"You fought Captain America in Germany?" she asked, trying to sound calm. After all, she knew the answer. She had seen the news back then.

"No?" Peter answered instantly, looking caught.

May sighed lowly and shook her head. "You fought Captain America…"

For a moment, she felt the urge to scold him. To shout at him. Maybe even freak out a little about him being a superhero, but he was okay, obviously. He had survived the Avengers battling each other. He was helping people. He was fine. Besides having blood poisoning.

"What has you being Spider-Man to do with you having blood poisoning, she wanted to ask, but she stopped mid-sentence.

"How did you get the suit?"

"Tony..." he cleared his throat. "Mister Stark gave it to me."

Tony? He called him by his first name?

"In what kind of – Does he expect anything from you for that suit?" she asked suspiciously. She didn't like the thought of her little boy hanging around with an old, probably partially crazy billionaire.

Peter blinked. "No!" he said instantly once again, for some reason looking upset at the mere thought of her question. "Just a working relationship. Superhero to superhero." He fell silent. "Well, no, that's not true anymore."

She opened her mouth to ask even more questions, questions she never wanted to hear an answer to, when Pete went on talking.

"I'll explain everything, don't worry. First… well… Do you have any more questions to me being Spider-Man? I want to tell you the rest."

The rest. What else could there be beside him being Spider-Man and probably being in some very odd work relationship with Stark?

"A ton, but they can wait. What else do you want to tell me?" She asked, trying to sound calm.
"Can you not ask questions this time? Only when I'm done."

"Okay." She said softly, watching him brood over what to say next. What could possibly be that hard to tell her?

"I traveled through time."

Instantly, she opened her mouth. He had what? He couldn't mean what he had said. That wasn't possible. But Peter had turned and looked at her. "Please, let me explain."

May closed her mouth again. Yes. She had agreed to not interrupt him. Maybe he would explain, that he didn't mean what he had just said. Traveled through time.

"There are six stones which can literally do anything if combined. In two years from now, an alien will collect them to wipe out half of everything. We fought him already. We... we were losing." He swallowed, just as if the memory troubled him. "One of us was going to hand him the stone which controls time. But the stone never made it to him. Everything I remember is a light flash and then I am back here, two years in my own past. Do you remember that day when I freaked out at school? Was when I came back here. I expected to die any second. Thought I was caught in some kind of illusion or an alternate reality. Thought it was going to kill me. But... but it never did. I was just here. In my own past." He was silent for a moment, while May simply stared at him. Did he... did he actually believe that?

"There are others who remember. Tony is one of them. We met. We talked. We know what will happen and are trying to stop it. We made plans. Well, they include not yet doing anything, but I guess we'll tell the other Avengers eventually and..." He trailed off and shook his head. "Whatever. What I wanted to say is, there are others who remember the same thing. We are making plans." Once again, he fell silent. While Peter was back to staring at his hands, May opened her mouth. Was he done? Could she ask questions?

"Apparently, something tries to kill us." No, he wasn't done. And his story just went on getting crazier. "There was another light flash, about a month after I got back here. An alien appeared right in front of me. One of those who fights for the big bad one. Tried to kill me. Tony and the other one who remembers helped and we managed to kill it. Today in school, there was another light flash. I ended back in the future and apparently dragged Ned along by accident. We fought another alien, I got some scratches while doing so, we got back here and that's it."

Again, May opened her mouth, which led to him speaking again. "Right, the blood poisoning." As if that was the most worrisome part of his story! "Those scratches I have probably got infected. That's all."

"You..." May started but realized she didn't know what she wanted to say. Why would Peter invent such a crazy story? Time travel and aliens and going back and forth between now and a future.

"...believe all that?" she asked, staring at her nephew. All Peter did was nod. He believed all that. Why on earth would he believe all that? She had always thought Peter was a normal, down to earth teenager. Now he told her, he was a superhero, had fought Captain America, worked for or with Tony Stark, which she did not like at all, had traveled through time and was trying to stop some big bad alien while fighting other aliens.

She just continued to stare at him, momentarily speechless. What could she say? What should she say? How could she help him? Him being Spider-Man was one thing, believable even though unexpected and worrisome within itself, but time travel?
A knock on the door ripped her out of her thoughts. May looked up, wanting to yell to please not enter, but the door already opened. In walked, May found herself gawking at her quite impolitely out of sheer surprise, Doctor Palmer. Wearing hospital scrubs and a bun and a serious expression on her face. Of all people in the world who could possibly walk into the room, it had to be Christine Palmer. She remembered her from back then when she had asked questions about Stephen Strange. How she had blocked her off. Had she lied back then? Or had she not known that Peter and Stephen were in some odd school-based work-relationship?

"Hey. How are you? What happened?" she asked, looking at her Peter worriedly.

"I'm fine. Don't worry."

"You two know each other?" May asked, suspicious again. The moment she asked the question, she wanted to scold herself for doing so. Of course, Peter knew Christine. She was Stephen's girlfriend, after all. Peter would have met her at Stephen's place earlier or later, while they did things for his school project.

"Yeah. We do." Peter looked from May to Christine and back again. "Met once or twice."

Did she ever tell him? That she had questioned her about Stephen Strange? Only after having talked with Christine, May had called Peter out on his lies. Did he know that she had played detective? Why did she feel so guilty about it? She had to make sure her little boy was okay! Yet again, her little boy was nearly grown up. No need to snoop through his affairs.

"You know each other?" Peter asked, obviously having picked up that she knew her too.

May wasn't sure what to say. She just looked at Peter, her thoughts all but gone. What should she say? Come up with some cover story? Or tell the embarrassing truth? The latter would be the right thing to do after she had scolded him for lying.

"Yeah, we know each other." Christine answered casually. Luckily, she didn't go into details before she repeated her question: "What happened?"

Again, Peter looked from her to Christine and back again. He sighed. Silence. She would get to know what had really happened, wouldn't she? Peter wouldn't tell Christine the same, insane story he had just told her, right? He couldn't make a doctor even entertain the idea that he had gone mental. To her sheer horror, Peter launched into the same story he had just told her. Light flashes and being in the future and fighting aliens. For some odd reason, he added Stephen into the story this time around. Reported that the ex-doctor had been tortured and would surely have been killed if they hadn't saved him. May was too baffled to stop him. Why would Peter tell someone he barely knew such an insane story? Now, that he had done it, she wasn't sure what to do first. Probably jump up and tell Christine that Peter was quite literally out of his mind. The poor boy was delirious from the meds - yes, that had to be it! He simply didn't know what he was talking about. She shouldn't take this story too seriously. He had surely added Stephen to make it more engaging for Christine. Worry her or something like that.

May's worries came to an abrupt stop when Christine asked: "Is Stephen okay?" her voice was low and worried. As if…

"I think so. He was okay the first time around, after all. Well, at least he seemed to be okay. Might be he hid it well." Peter shrugged as if to say he really didn't know.

The look on Christine's face. It had turned from slightly worried to find Peter here to sad and even more worried and maybe a tiny bit afraid.
... she believed him.

For a moment or two, Christine just stood there. Her face going through all sorts of emotions. From worried to afraid to terrified and back to afraid simply being worried.

"You are still here." Christine said lowly, looking calmer and less worried with every word "Means he is alive, at least. We wouldn't even have this conversation otherwise." She added with a small smile.

Finally, May caught herself from her stupor. "You believe him? Time travel and aliens and being in the future and…"

Christine looked up at her, a surprised expression on her face. "You..." but she would never know what she had wanted to say as her gaze switched back to Peter. "You didn't tell her?"

Peter looked terribly uncomfortable. Nearly ashamed.

"I told her like just right now?"

Christine opened her mouth and closed it again. Then she looked up at her, something like sympathy in her gaze, which May couldn't place at all. Why would Christine feel sympathy towards her?

"Okay..." Christine hesitated "I understand where you are right now. Not wanting to believe what he said, because, quite frankly, it is insane. If I wouldn't know better, I'd say he has lost his mind and would make a happy patient in a lunatic asylum. Most likely a mental breakdown of some sort. Too much stress with school and work, perhaps." Christine took a deep breath. "I was there. Literally, just there. In the exact same situation. I didn't believe Stephen when he told me. Thought he is insane. Invented crazy cover-up stories for why he contacted Peter. I even left him, but…" she smiled a timid, somehow sad smile. "It's true. All of it."

They were both insane.

Peter was pranking her, in the most terrible way ever.

She had stumbled into a comedy show and any second someone would jump into the room and yell 'SURPRISE!'

Or, the most unlikely of all possibilities, they were telling the truth.

The fact that Christine backed his story... that she had instantly been worried about Stephen's wellbeing...

"Why do you believe that story?" she asked the other woman.

"Well..." Christine fell silent for a moment, most likely thinking about what to tell her. "Why do I believe him? Stephen told me a really insane story. Then I met Peter by accident. He told me the same insane story. One person with a story is just crazy. Two people with the same story might be worth considering. On top of that, Stephen was always... let's say egocentric. He still is, don't get me wrong, but his priorities in life shifted from one day to the other. His attitude. Before his hands were the single most important thing in his world. Then he acted all odd one evening and suddenly, he doesn't even bother about them. Sure, they annoy him sometimes, but that's the extent of his worries. He's more occupied with getting stronger to be able to better fight off Thanos."

She sounded so convinced. That doctor in her scrubs telling her stories about time travel being real. About light flashes and aliens "Why? No, how? How could an ex-doctor be helpful with fighting
aliens?” she didn't know why, but she got hung up on that part. She had seen Stephen's hands. He could barely do anything with them. How could he be a help in any of this?

Once again, she had to watch how Pete and Christine exchanged gazes. Peter cleared his throat. "He can do magic."

Magic?

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Stepping through his portal from Kamar-Taj into Christine's flat, he felt cloak flip from his shoulders. Looking after it, he saw how it floated off into a corner, seemingly staring out of the window and into the night. His magical friend had been oddly quiet ever since they had come back from their time travels. Of course, cloak couldn't be quiet as in not speaking, but usually, it was more active. Kind of happier. Since a few hours, it seemed gloomy. As if it was brooding over something.

Sighing lowly, Stephen turned the light on in the living room, hoping that none of Christine's neighbors would take notice of the odd, flying cloak behind the window and went for the bathroom. He wanted to take a shower and change into something more comfortable. Think about everything that had happened today. What should he tell Christine? He didn't feel like telling her the turning to dust thing, but maybe it was time. He didn't want to hide too much from her. She deserved better than that.

His thoughts ended abruptly when he passed the dark kitchen. He had seen a movement out of the corner of his eyes. Someone was sitting on the floor, trying to hide below the counter. Stephen sighed inside his head. He didn't want to fight a burglar today of all days, but he seemingly had no choice but to. Hopefully, the day didn't manage to get even worse. Even though he didn't know how that should be possible. Maybe by another light flash and Thanos popping out of nowhere. Don't. Think. About. It. Flipping on the light switch he saw Christine, sitting on the floor, trying to hide while holding a butchers knife in her strongly shaking hand

"Wha-" He didn't finish the question. He knew what. He could hear her sob, saw her terrified face, the knife clattering to the ground. Instantly, he was by her side, sitting down to pull her onto his lap.

"It's just me, don't worry. I didn't think you were home already." He said while wrapping his arms around the trembling woman. "Only me. Don't worry." He repeated, starting to stroke her back. "Everything is okay." He said again, continuing stroking her until she seemed to calm down. He wanted to punch himself. She had heard the portal open in her living room, hadn't she? In her panic, she had turned off the lights in the kitchen to pretend to not be home, grabbed the next best weapon she could find and had ducked to hide beneath the counter.

"I'm sorry." He said once again, this time earning a low, disapproving sound from her.

"Don't be." She whispered quietly. "You couldn't know."

"Should have called you and checked." He objected, leaning away to look at her. Her panic seemed to subside slowly. She only looked mildly freaked out. Again, he wanted to scold himself. He knew she freaked out when hearing a portal open. Nothing had changed about that.

"I'll call you before I get home, okay? We'll make a routine out of that." He promised, still stroking her. Christine rolled her eyes and nodded at the same time.

"Okay."
After she had calmed down, she snuggled into him. This time, she was relaxed though. This time, she didn't tremble like a leaf.

"Can we get up?" Stephen asked "Nothing against your kitchen tiles, but…"

She chuckled. He breathed out at the sound, smiling a little smile. She was okay again. For now. Until the next stupid portal carelessly opened by him.

He waited until she had moved off his lap. He had wanted to get up and pull her along, but she was already on her feet and offered him a hand, which he grabbed. Only to pull her against him once he stood, finally giving her a tiny kiss.

"A counter in your back isn't all that more comfortable than the ground." She said mockingly.

Grumbling lowly, he let go of her and went into the living room, checking on cloak who still floated by the window. Maybe they could say it was a curtain. An oddly shaped, moving curtain.

"How was your day?" his girlfriend asked while she settled on the couch, looking at him. Stephen hesitated. He didn't want to tell her. Freaking her out once a night was enough. She didn't need additional worries. Like an alien planning on torturing him to death with magical needles for the second time.

"I know there was a light flash."

Had his face given him away that easily? "How do you know?" Maybe he should train his poker-face some more.

"Peter told me. He ended up in the ICU with blood poisoning."

"Fuck." Stephen cursed "I had really hoped my runes cleaned his wounds fast enough." He said lowly, looking upset. He had feared him getting just that. His symptoms had only allowed one conclusion, after all. Alien metal and human bodies didn't seem to go well together. "How is he?"

Christine hesitated. Why did she hesitate? How bad was the poor guy? Was he on the brink of death? Were they going to end up back in front of Thanos any second now? "He is okay, I guess." Ohgod, he is okay. Why did she… "Has gotten antibiotics and an IV. He will be fine in time. Back to the bouncy teenager you know. Luckily, he came in so fast." Again, Stephen exhaled in relief. He had gotten antibiotics. The chance of Peter developing sepsis and dying as a result should be tiny now. Hopefully.

"Why did you hesitate? You scared me to death." He said lowly, watching her.

She laughed embarrassed. "Well… His aunt was there. He told her the truth. All the bloody truth in one terrible go. I still think she thinks we are both insane."

Stephen chuckled. "You backed Peter's story?"

She huffed. "Sure, I did! I know how important that was to me. Someone else then you telling me that crazy story. Wanted to help. I hope she comes around."

"She will eventually. We'll just get Stark to tell her the same story. Three maniacs are unlikely." He joked.

"Ooorr… you all joined a cult. The 'some mad alien gathers tiny stones and wipes out the universe' cult. We are living in New York, after all. After 2012 it's as plausible as anything else."
Stephen grinned, chuckling lowly. "As plausible as anything else."

He leaned back against the couch, still chuckling. "How was your day? Besides Peter and his slightly freaking out aunt." He tried to keep her talking. Maybe she forgot about asking what had happened after the light flashes. He really didn't want to tell her. Not today. Not right now.

"A bit stressful, but okay." And then she went on telling him her day, in all the wonderous, perfect, time-consuming details. She had treated the bullet wound in someone's foot. "What a moron. One should think people are more careful while holding weapons."

Had tried to calm down a hysterical mother, whose child had swallowed a small magnet. "As long as he doesn't swallow another one everything is fine."

Had chatted with Peter in her break after hearing his name from a colleague.

Had checked on patients, had accidentally napped for five minutes while listening to an elderly woman.


"Really sounds okay." He said softly, stroking along her back. This felt oddly good, even though he still hadn't taken a shower. She hummed and snuggled against him, her head resting on his chest. Her finger drawing tiny circles onto his shirt. This was good.

"Don't you want to tell me what happened?" she asked softly, trying to sound casual.

No. Nonono! Why couldn't she let it slide? Why couldn't she…

"You don't have to, of course." She conceded. This time, it had to have been on his face. He was an open book to her, wasn't he?

He was silent for a while. She just continued drawing circles and – was that a heart? – onto his shirt. He should tell her. The Ancient One had been right on that one, after all. He couldn't hide everything without getting into troubles earlier or later. Maybe a mental breakdown from all the stress. He had wanted to tell her earlier. Before finding her on the kitchen floor. He had wanted to. At least some things.

"There were… well… three light flashes today. One far into the future. We saw one of my visions." He desperately wanted to believe it had been a vision because the alternatives were too bad to even be considered. If it hadn't been a vision of his, it had been the future. Still happening after they had left. That of all things really didn't make any sense. He had never given the Time Stone to Thanos. Thanos could not snap them out of existence. It wasn't possible. He. Had. The. Time. Stone.

"After we were back on an alien spaceship. One moment died and then back to not dead. It was insane. I just came to terms with being dead and then I open my eyes and this damn alien smiles at me. He tried to make me break the protection spell on the time stone. I never paid attention to whether it was actually with me or not. Should have, I guess, but now it's too late." He sighed.

Christine looked at him calmly, watching him with a calm, warm gaze. Just letting him talk.

"I thought I would die." It was out before he could stop himself. And then the rest followed suit. His panic to see Maw again, his worries about the vision, the fear of dying on that spaceship. What would happen if one of them died there? The pain of those needles, relentlessly moving forward through his skull. And then getting nearly sucked out into space – no, that had happened the first time around, but while he was on it…
After he was done talking, he snuggled into Christine's arms, closing his eyes. Finally, he had told her. Most of it. The first battle with Maw, Thanos, Maw again now. He told her of his many visions, dying over and over. In the end, he dozed off in her arms, only to snap up awake, looking around bewildered. Had he fallen asleep?

"I should call Stark." He heard himself say. He wanted to distract himself. Just a little bit. Even call Tony Stark. "I guess, he doesn't know about Peter. He will want to know. Better me than someone else."

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Peter: If I watch one more minute of this stupid love movie I'll jump out the window

Ned: Why don't you switch channels?

Peter: Might have lost the remote

Ned: Hahahaha

Ned: Enjoy your cheesy love story. Don't dare to jump out the window! I didn't take all your homework along for nothing

Peter: Don't remind me…

Dropping his phone on the blanket, Peter continued watching the 'movie'. For two whole minutes until he couldn't take any more sappy, lovely-dovey stupid love confessions. The remote had to be somewhere! Getting out of bed, he looked beneath it once again. Beneath the little drawer. Beneath the closet, which he lifted a tiny bit to peer below. Still nothing. His stupid room wasn't all that big. The remote had to be here.

He heard his phone vibrating silently. Just a moment. He had more important things to tackle than answering the phone. After some five minutes, he climbed back into bed, looking defeated. Still no remote. He would stick to the love movie. Afterward a true crime show started which he wanted to see. He had switched to the channel long before the love movie had started to check if he could see it after all hospital TVs weren't known to have a wide range of channels. He could, obviously. And somewhere along the line, he had lost the remote. Probably karma striking him, because May didn't want him to see those true crime shows. Yet, May wasn't here.

Finally checking his phone, he grimaced. Ned had sent him a new picture of his ever-growing mountain of homework and May had called for her usual good night call.

Calling her back, she answered the phone within a second.

"Hey May."

"Hey, Spider-Boy."

Peter rolled his eyes. She was going through every possible combination of Spider- and anything else really.

"How are you? No aliens or light flashes or other shenanigans?"

"Nope. Just me boring myself to death. The doctor said I might get out tomorrow or the day after. More likely the day after, in his words, not mine. Apparently, my blood values look really good." He was silent for a moment. "I hope that they can't see anything not-normal in them. I have no idea how
the you-know-what changed me."

Maybe they had called the FBI or any other agency with three letters on him.

"But I guess if there was anything to see, we would know by now, right? Maybe I can ask Christine to check my record." To give him peace of mind, most of all.

"I hope so. And yes, maybe you should ask her." May said softly.

"Are you gonna be here to pick me up in two days?"

"Of course, I will, Pete. I'll just take another day off. Don't worry."

But somehow, he couldn't stop worrying. He had no problem with getting home alone, nothing easier than that, but…

"Can we pay my hospital stay?" He asked softly, finally putting his worries into words. He knew he wasn't on her insurance. He knew this could get insanely expensive.

This time, he heard her sigh before she turned to words. "Of course. Don't worry about that." But she sounded a bit too happy in his opinion. A bit fake.

"If I can help in any way -"

"You focus on your education. And the whole saving the world stuff. That's not an excuse for not doing homework, by the way."

Peter couldn't help but chuckle, despite feeling miserable. She had said that back then too. Him being Spider-Man wasn't an excuse for missing school or not doing homework. She would lock his suit up if she found out he skipped school or his grades dropped.

"Aye aye, my lady!" he said, trying to sound cheerful.

Obviously, May was too worried about her own worries to realize that he was worried. Probably a good thing.

"Good spiderling. I'll see you in two days. If anything changes you call right away, okay?"

"Sure!"

Afterward, he played with his phone, not really paying attention to the kitschy love yadda yadda. His stomach was rumbling lowly, his thoughts scattered. She couldn't pay his hospital bills. She couldn't. She would probably work herself to death or take another lease or… He had to help. Somehow.

His vibrating phone ripped him out if his ever-circling thoughts for a moment. Another text from Ned, mocking him? But no. There were three words and one question mark.

Tony: **Are you alone?**

Tony texted? Peter blinked. Couldn't… Maybe… Would he dare to ask him, if he could pay his hospital bills? Shouldn't be much money for him. Yet, he felt even worse just thinking about it. He didn't want to ask him for money. It felt like him using Tony for the cool stuff. Suits and money to pay bills and…

Pulling himself together, he replied.
He hadn't even lowered his phone, when a golden circle appeared in front of his bed, Tony and Stephen stepping through.

Tony wore an amused grin. "Surprise!" he said cheery, keeping his voice low, probably to not pull attention to their sudden appearance, while the portal closed behind them.

"I really couldn't stop him. Yes, I opened the portal and am here willingly, but I really couldn't stop him." Stephen said dryly, making Peter smile. They had worked together because of him?

"Hey, guys." Peter said happily. He pushed his worries aside for a moment. They shouldn't know. Somehow, it felt wrong to burden them with it.

"Wait a…" he managed a frown. "How do you know in which room I am?" he asked suspiciously. Had Christine told Stephen? Or had they just freaked out a whole lot of other patients by portalling into the wrong room repeatedly?

Tony smiled a mischievous smile.

"Who do you think got you in a single room in the first place?"

Peter stared at him, blinking multiple times. Had he just heard what he thought he had heard? He had wondered about exactly that ever since he left the ICU. How the fuck had he gotten a room for himself?

He opened his mouth to say anything, but nothing would come out.

"See what you did? You made him speechless." Stephen remarked, grabbing a chair and pulled it to the side of his bed.

Peter could only stare at Tony, who had made himself comfortable opposite from Stephen. "Thought that would never happen, honestly."

"But… how?" he finally managed to ask, trying to ignore their bickering. What the hell had he missed? Since when were they on not-yelling terms?

Again, there was this smile on Tony's face. "I might have told Friday to change your future room number."

Peter stared dumbfounded. "Friday is installed in the hospital?"

"Only for data-analyzing. Might have ordered her to keep tabs on you." Wasn't that illegal, if all she should do was data-analyzing?

"Why… how…" what exactly did he want to ask? "Since when is Friday in hospitals?"

Tony managed to sound very clueless. "Friday is in hospitals? What are you talking about?"

Stephen snickered and leaned close. "Think he broke a ton of NDA's by telling us."

Tony cleared his throat. "Can we change the subject, please?"

"Sure. Since when do you two talk?" Peter asked, sounding even more baffled. "Did couple therapy finally work?"
Both men stared at him. Peter could guess what they were thinking. Excuse me, please. What did you just say? Couple therapy?!

"Well, yeah. Whenever you are in school we go see a therapist. Think it's the non-existent sex-life." Stephen said as seriously as he could manage, making Tony snort and then burst into laughter.

"See? He's even laughing about it! This isn't funny, darling! We need to talk about our problems!"

While Tony seemed close to dying through laughter, Stephen went to playing this to the hilt. "We haven't even kissed in ages. Can you believe it? And he always yells at me because of everything. On top of that, he's seeing his ex-secretary, this Pepper girl, suspiciously often." Stephen lowered his voice to a very well audible whisper: "I think he's cheating on me."

Tony made a very odd choking noise and slid off his chair. "Is he okay?" Stephen asked concerned. Peter sat up and peered over the edge of his bed. "Yeah. Just laughing silently."

The doc hummed in acknowledgment and shrugged. "Can't hurt. Let him laugh. I think the Pepper girl did him."

Peter grinned. "Definitely. What did I miss? Since when are you guys on speaking and obviously making fun terms?"

"I called him after Christine told me you are here. We met. Decided it's time to put aside our differences. We have fought mad aliens too often to still be arguing. We can use that time more productively. Hence, here we are, testing the new not yelling at another policy."

Peter smiled weakly. "Lucky me I ended up with blood poisoning?"

"If you put it like that… still yes." Stephen acknowledged with a wry smirk.

The weak smile was still on his lips. At least something good had come out of this hospital visit. Them working together. He had no idea how his aunt should pay for the bills, but at least Tony and Stephen tried to get along.

"Do you… do you know what the first thing was? Before the spaceship?" he asked softly. He had to focus on anything other than May working herself to death to pay the bills. Asking about them turning to dust seemed a good choice for that.

For some reason, Stephen looked really uncomfortable for a moment. Then he hid his emotions and started to talk. "It was one of the 14million possibilities in which Thanos wins. I already saw them before we ended up back here. I think, that whatever those light flashes are, they can make us see or be anywhere up until time was turned back."

Peter blinked. They would literally turn to dust when Thanos snapped with his fingers? "Wait… I mean, we already did it, but we can end up in the future again?"

What if they stood in front of Thanos next time? He would kill them single-handedly while their senses were gone.

"It's the same process." Tony said lowly, crawling up from the ground and resting on his bed. "Throw aliens from a future into our timeline or throw us back into the future. I can only guess that the big one would have disappeared after a while when we wouldn't have killed him. Just like us getting back here after a while."

Sounded reasonable. Peter just wanted to push his worries aside, they would be able to fight aliens –
except Thanos – no matter being in the future or in the present – when it hit him. "Can we change things?" he asked terrified. "Does it have an impact on us?"

He looked from one adult to the other and settled on Stephen. He would be the one to know such things, right?

"You want to tell me you didn't check the future?" Tony asked lowly, something between worried and defeated.

"I have." Stephen replied lowly after a little. "Some futures changed. They end after a light flash, indicating that I die."

Peter stared at Stephen. Had he just said he might die?

"But there are visions which end up with us winning against Thanos, right?" he asked, trying to cling to the hope of other possibilities. Of a future of them not dying. If the first thing they had seen was a reality in which Thanos had acquired all six stones and used them, Peter didn't want to see it happen. Well, maybe he would die and wouldn't have to see it anyway.

"Yes."

Such a simple word. Yes. And still, it freaked Peter out. Yes. Them fighting Maw in the future had changed some of their possibilities. What if, after the next light flash, even more, things changed? He didn't want to have one in 14 million chances again.

"You can't see what happens right after the flashes, right?" Tony asked lowly, even though he knew the answer. Stephen shook his head as an answer.

They just sat there in silence. The cheery atmosphere all but gone. All just busy brooding over the what-ifs. They might die. Very soon, maybe. Back to Thanos then. Was trying to fight him here, in this timeline, even a valid choice?

"Well." Tony interrupted their brooding. "We will focus on staying alive. We will stick together. Just in case another alien pops up and catches us unaware. One of us is easier to kill than all three. Can you write down date and time for all possible light flashes? We'll just sit them out."

Stephen exhaled. "Sure."

They stayed, trying to chat and make jokes and be happy, but it all felt fake right now. Peter was, just like the others, brooding over possibly dying with the next light flash. Or the doc dying. The possibility had always been there, but knowing that their chances had changed with them fighting Maw in that stupid spaceship… it changed perspective.

Eventually, Stephen fished his vibrating phone out of his pocket. He stared at the display for some moments, before he looked up. "I have to go."

Tony nodded. "Can you give me a moment?"

"Sure." Stephen got up and opened a portal, hopping through. Peter could see him walk into Tony's apartment in the Tower, obviously picking something up. In the meantime, Tony got up himself, looking at him very seriously.

"I know you don't have insurance."

Peter's heart dropped. He knew?
"I'll pay your bills."

Of all the baffling things which had happened today, this one was the most astonishing for Peter. He wanted to open his mouth to talk, but found it was already open.

"I… no. You can't… I mean… You don't need to. Really not. How do you know?" he stammered together, too surprised for coherent sentences.

"Like I never told you, Friday keeps an eye on you. You not having insurance is saved in their system. And I will. Good night, Peter."

With that, he hopped through the portal, which closed as soon as he was on the other side, effectively ending all possible discussions.

He would pay his bills.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed this chapter! The next one will be a bit different, if everything goes how I want it to.

By the way: My word document reached 200 pages - Partey! Thank you all for reading up until now - what a crazy journey. Thank you for every comment and kudo!

I'll try to update regularly again. The last weeks were a bit crazy, sadly. But looking forward, the craziest thing happening should be me going on vacation ;)

(To grandma, rest in peace)
Staring down at the little blue planet, he sighed. He didn't want to go down there. He had never wanted to come back. Never. And yet here he was, staring down at it. White clouds swirling over blue oceans and green and yellow continents.

"Are you sure?" Gamora asked softly, obviously knowing what went on in his head.

"Yes." Peter replied darkly. He knew what he had seen.

Ripping his eyes away from the little, blue planet, Peter returned to his seat.

"Okay." With a tap on his monitors, a map of the planet appeared. "We need to go down there." He tapped on a place in the US. Hopefully, Missouri was there. He couldn't remember that well after all those years. "Gamora and I get off, you get off the planet and stay somewhat close. In, out. I don't want to pull any attention towards us. When we want to be picked up again, we'll contact you. We'll have a transmitter with us, that way you can locate us if need be."

"You really want to go down there?" Rocket asked, looking at him.

Peter managed a hopefully convincing smile. "Yeah. I want to visit mum's grave at least once."

"Terranean and their odd customs." the raccoon said, shaking his head.

"I am Groot!"

"Oh, come on, Groot. I think it's cute." Gamora replied, an amused smirk on her face while she sat down.

"I'm not cute." Peter grumbled.

"No. Cute wouldn't be the word I use for you. Rather weedy or thin." Drax stated seriously, making Mantis laugh out loud. Was Gamora chuckling?

"Perfect." Peter mumbled, took control of his ship and steered into Earth's atmosphere.

No ten minutes later, Gamora and he stood in a forest, watching the spaceship disappear again.

"I hope no one saw us." He said thoughtful, watching his ship get smaller and smaller.

"I guess we'll know in time." Gamora said softly, shouldered her bag and started to walk off through the woods.
Taking one last look at the by now clear sky, Peter followed her.

Hours later, they found a tiny collection of houses. In front of one of the buildings, which turned out to be a church, Peter managed to chat up an elderly lady, who couldn't stop staring at Gamora every other second. He learned, that there was no bus, no accommodation and no shop they could buy something in. For shopping, they had to go to the next city. For accommodation, they had to get all the way to Mount Ida or Glenwood.

"We need a map." He said below his breath, once he had thanked the lady and they were on their way.

"You have no idea where we are?" Gamora asked softly.

"None at all." Peter confessed. They could fly. A quick hop above the trees and search for the next biggest city. But flying would draw attention to them. Something he wanted to avoid at all cost. No one should know they were here. Gamora was most likely right, at the end of the day. They shouldn't change things more than they had already done.

Hitchhiking turned out rather troublesome. Firstly, barely a car passed by. Secondly, if a car passed by, it never slowed. After wasted 30 minutes, they decided to travel on, along the bigger street. Maybe, someone would pick them up. It never happened, though. They reached a place called Norman before anyone did bother to stop for them. This time around, the place seemed big enough for a shop. It had to be the 'next city' the old lady had been talking about. To Peter, it wasn't a city. Just a tad bigger than the first tiny place. The 'shop' didn't turn out to be much bigger than the 'city', in comparison. Literally, a small one-story house. One could order pizza and breakfast. Two tiny rows of groceries. A table with people eating and chatting. Awesome.

"Hey, ah, do you know where I can buy a map?" he asked the guy at the cashier.

The man in his sixties stared at him as if he had two heads.

"A map?" he asked back, which made Peter blink. Had he mixed up some words? Granted, he hadn't actively spoken English in a while beside singing along to his songs.

"Yeah. A map. With cities and streets on it and all. I want to check where we are and where we need to go. Got lost hiking in the woods. Lost some of our gear." He spun off the top of his head. That was something couples would do here, right? The forests had looked perfect for a couple of days off the grid.

Instantly, the facial expression of the man softened.

"Oh! Are you okay? How long where you lost? Is this your girlfriend over there? Is she okay?" he asked, looking past Peter. He threw a glance over his shoulder. Gamora was standing by one of the two grocery shelves, holding a can in her hand and staring at it.

"Yeah." Peter said softly.

"What happened to her skin?"

For a moment, the question irked him. What happened to her skin? She's always green, stupid, he had nearly said. Luckily, he didn't. He remembered just in time, that humans weren't used to people with green skin. Good, that Gamora could pass as a human otherwise. Traveling with Mantis or Drax would be rough. Even though Drax would be doable. Just act as if he was a tattooed wrestler. Who said the weirdest things.
"She lost a bet." He said on a whim. Why else should a human woman paint her skin green?

"Oh." The man chuckled. "Crazy young folk. Well, where do you wanna go?"

"Well, somewhere with a bed for starters. Afterward… we need to get back to Saint Charles."

"Missouri?"

"Yeah."

"Do you guys have a car somewhere nearby?"

Peter tried to keep his face calm. That sounded as if they were quite a distance away from his hometown.

"No. We hitchhiked into the area. Planned to get out the same way."

Once again, the man shook his head and called them crazy young folks. Peter managed to not frown at that. Wouldn't that guy have done the same in his youth if he hadn't had a car?

"May I ask why you looked that surprised when I asked for a map?" Peter asked, trying to sound casual. He didn't want to get stared at too often. If he had done a mistake, better ask now than later.

The man shrugged. "Just used to you guys having smartphones."

You guys? The crazy young folks again? And what were smartphones?

Peter simply shrugged and smiled, trying to avoid looking like a moron.

"Anyone going up to Missouri who could give this lad and his girl a lift?" The man yelled into the room, making the other people look at them.

A moment later, they had all said no, but a woman could take them to Mount Ida if that helped in any way. As Mount Ida would at least have accommodation, Peter thanked her and accepted the offer.

Gamora joined him again. "Can we buy this?" she asked, holding up a can. Canned pineapple.

"Sure." He looked at the cashier. "Ehm... can we pay with..." he pulled his bag from his shoulders, shifted through his stuff and pulled a small black card from it. They had exchanged a bunch of units into dollars before getting here. Saved them on the card. Just to be safe. Besides, units would most likely not be accepted on Earth.

"Credit card?" the man asked and looked at it. "Only above 10 Dollars. You need to buy more for that. May I ask what language you two just spoke?"

Peter was tempted to reply Galactic Standard, but he guessed that wouldn't further his cause. Which was the most exotic earth-country he could think of? Oh God, he really couldn't tell. He had never paid much attention in school.

"Thai." He replied with a smile. Thailand was a country, wasn't it? Turning back to Gamora he said: "We need more stuff to pay with the card. Just pick whatever you want to try."

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They needed two days to get to Saint Louis. They hitchhiked all the way. Seven people picking them up and dropping them off. Seven people asking why Gamora's skin was green. Sometimes multiple times as if they had forgotten. Or why she had done it. No bet was worth having green skin
afterward. A child asked her if she cosplayed a female Piccolo, whoever that was. A dog barked at her for three hours straight. On top of that, of course, they answered all sorts of questions to stay polite. Obviously, they couldn't tell the truth. Like that, his girl and he invented all sorts of crazy stories, about where they had been born, how they had met, what they worked as and what they wanted to do in Saint Louis. Visiting relatives or just staying the night had reached a tie.

Finally, standing on the sidewalk with their bags shouldered and watching people pass by, Peter felt oddly disconnected. Sure, he was on his home planet, the planet he had been born on, but he didn't really feel at home. He had at least hoped he would feel some kind of happiness to be back, but there was none. All he saw were oblivious people, following their everyday life. Not knowing about the vastness of the universe. Not knowing about other species. Not knowing anything at all about the things out there.

Yet, standing on a sidewalk wasn't time to get lost in thoughts. They needed to find a place to stay. Preferably better than the one they had been staying in last night. He wasn't too upset about the mouse. Or the cockroaches. It simply added up perfectly to the color of the bedsheets. Once upon a time, they may have been white.

Passing by hotels, walking along streets, they finally ended up at a park. While Gamora stared up at the leaves, all Peter did was watch people. They really… ripping his gaze away from other humans, he instead watched his girlfriend marveling the simple things. Leaves. Trees. Flowers.

"Can we see native animals somewhere? I really want to see a raccoon. Check if it really looks like Rocket. Take some pictures for him."

Peter chuckled amusedly. "We can visit a zoo while we are here. With some luck they have raccoons." Watching her looking around, he wanted to show her some terranean animals. She seemed to enjoy seeing things. She seemed to be curious about everything native. (Maybe only because it was his home planet). Were they tourists now?

Little time later, they found a hotel where they wanted to stay. Honestly, they were just tired of walking around. Looking forward to chill some. Take a shower. Search for an internet café. Start to search for the others. Make a plan how to find them. Find a zoo for Gamora. Search for Footloose and where to watch it. And, of course, more music for his Zune.

"Hey." He greeted the receptionist with a wry smile, who straight up stared at Gamora.

"She lost a bet and painted her skin green." He told the man in front of them annoyed, who simply hummed lowly.

"Can we get a room? Two nights."

"We have one room with a double bed left if you'd like it. It's a bit expensive, though." He said as if expecting they couldn't pay for it. Did they look cheap? Because his girl had green skin? Was he afraid the 'color' would rub off into their perfect sheets?

"I don't care about the price. Just want a bed." He replied calmly, fiddling around with his bag and pulling his credit card from it.

The man looked at it and back at him. "Can I have your ID?"

Peter blinked. "My ID?"

"We need an ID of yours and your girlfriend to check you in. Proof of your identity."
Peter didn't know what to say for a moment. Throughout the universe, most of all knew them by now, knew of the Guardians of the Galaxy, knew about Star-Lord and Gamora, but here, on damn old Earth, they wanted an ID.

"We don't have IDs with us." Gamora said, joining him after having looked around the lobby. The man shrugged. "No ID no check-in. I'm sorry."

"Can't we do something?" she asked lowly.

"We could pay in cash. Give you a tip." Was he trying to bribe the receptionist?

"I don't—" the man started.

"We could give you a big tip. As a thank you. Like… however much the room costs."

The man stared at him. And seemed to cave.

"If you pay cash."

Peter shot a fake, bright smile at him. "Be right back."

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"Did we just pay 800 units to get a room?" Gamora asked while undressing herself. She wanted to take a bath while Peter planned to get out and find information. If the bathtub had been bigger, he would definitely have stayed. Yet, with how things were, he could go collect information while Gamora took a little timeout. He guessed it annoyed her most of all to be stared at non-stop. Uh, look. A woman with green skin!

"Yep." Peter said weakly. "Should've tried another hotel." He said lowly.

"Might be we end up in one that's even worse than the last one." she paused and frowned. "That guy never wanted to see our IDs." She added thoughtfully. "Maybe that's a thing with good places. That they want to know who stays in their rooms."

Peter hummed lowly. "Might be." Back when he was a child no one had cared for IDs. His mum and he had stayed at hotels on some occasions. Never had one asked for their paper-strip with a name on it.

Sighing, he took a step and hugged a halfway naked Gamora against him. "I'm sorry it's been a hassle up until now. I swear, if the next person asks why you have green skin, I'll tell them you're an alien and going to eat them alive."

She chuckled lowly. "I should try that, but I fear I'm not into eating humans."

"What a shame." He replied with a smirk and kissed her softly. Which eventually turned into desperate kissing.

Leaving Gamora was even rougher after their first real making out since being on Earth, but the bathtub was still too small, and she still wanted a bit of time for herself.

After asking the guy they had bribed for the closest internet café, he went on his way. Paid a few dollars to use a computer. Sitting at place 12, he stared at the thin screen. At least on that field, humans had advanced a little. Thinner screens. He was greeted by a white page, showing a logo and a field to type in. Very slowly as he wasn't used to using physical keyboards at all anymore, he typed
A v e n g e r s

Grabbed the mouse and hit search.

To his surprise, the search happened instantly. When he was a child, he had witnessed his mum downloading a photo once. It had needed the whole damn day. He had expected something similar. To be in here for hours, waiting for the search to finish. Instead, the screen simply changed and showed him results.

About 396 million of them, according to a small text below his search term.

"Fuck."

Chapter End Notes

In the following chapters, I'll intertwine their stories. Explain everything. I'm really looking forward to that.

I hope you enjoyed the chapter! I'll add every tagged character to the story. In their own time.

(Wuhu, I managed to update on a Saturday!!)

See you next week!
Finally!

On top of that, I'm currently on holidays and don't have my laptop (or any other means of useful keyboards I love to write with) with me. The chapter might still have some typos. I'll fix them eventually. If you find something really annoying, shout it out in a comment and I'll fix it asap.

This chapter you'll meet: Peter, May, Pepper, Tony, Starlord, Gamora

Have fun reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Waiting for May to finally get to the hospital was nearly as bad as waiting for the doctor to finally clear him. After all, they might have found something odd. Something which said 'I was bitten by a spider and got superhuman powers', now that the blood poisoning wasn't screwing up his results. Sure, he had asked Christine to get peace of mind, but what if no one had realized something was off due to more worrisome stuff going on? Now that he was better, maybe they saw it. What would happen to him? Get questioned all over how it happened? Where it had happened? Maybe he was taken into custody. Could the state do something like that? Lock him up for good? His stomach clenched and a shiver ran along his spine. He was a superhero and hadn't signed the Sokovia Accords. To the States, no, to the world, he was an outlaw. Meant to be locked up in a high-security facility at the earliest opportunity. Maybe he could run, find Captain America and the others and hide with them. Would May get into troubles because of him? She had to have known, right? Knowing about him and not telling was surely a crime too. Swallowing hard, he raised his voice.

"Friday?" of course, she didn't answer. She was only there to analyze stuff. Surely, she couldn't even hear him. Would be a huge breach of privacy if she could. Sighing lowly, he took hold of his phone. What did he want to do? Write Tony and ask if Friday had picked up on something? Text May that she didn't need to pick him up? He would just run away, yes. Hide.

Peter was out of his bed and halfway done with pulling on his clothes when he realized what he was doing. He was acting completely irrational. Out of his mind. Paranoid. Crazy on a whole different level. No one would come looking for him. His doctor hadn't been here yet, because he wasn't the only patient in this damn hospital, not because the staff was plotting how to turn him in. Taking a very long breath, he finished putting on his clothes, because starting to put them on and then pulling them off again looked even more stupid. Laying down on the bed, he tried to relax. Everything was okay. The doctor was just busy. Everything would be fine. He would come by and tell him he was good to leave. He had told him so yesterday. Just one more night to make sure everything was okay. If FBI agents, the police or a SWAT team turned up first, he could still simply jump out the window and be gone. Nothing easier than that.

His doctor did turn up eventually. All alone, without police, the FBI or Shield accompanying him. Within the first sentence, Peter learned he was fine again. Safe to go home, the doctor said with an oddly happy, yet tired smile, which made Peter feel bad for freaking out. The poor guy was probably working a 30-hour shift and he was freaking out over silly 5 minutes. On top of being allowed to go
home, he should see a doctor within the month. Just to be safe. Afterward, Peter picked up a confirmation for his school, that he had indeed been hospitalized. Back in his room, he waited once again. This time for May.

Within no time at all, he started to worry again. What if she had an accident? What if she was carjacked? What if she was robbed with a gun pointed at her head? What if she was run down after getting out of the car? What if...

Taking another very deep breath, he got out of his bed again and started to gather his belongings. He had to do something. Keep his head busy. The alternative drove him mad, obviously. May was a grown-up adult. She survived day to day in this city. She would surely not die today of all days. Obviously, she was running late because she was caught up in traffic. The most normal thing to happen in this city.

After looking in every drawer, below his bed, below and inside the closet and in his bed, Peter was certain he had collected everything he owned. Stuffing everything into the little bag May had brought for him, he went through every item once again. Change of clothes, check. Slippers, check. Book to kill his boredom he had never looked into, check. Phone charger? Where was his... Rolling his eyes at himself, he unplugged it and added it to the rest of his belongings. Then he went to get everything from the bathroom. Afterward, he double checked the room to keep himself busy. Definitely better than boring himself and freaking out along the way.

Checking the still empty drawers for the fourth time, he heard a knock on the door. Standing up straight, he looked at it, watched it open. Seeing how his aunt entered the room, made him smile brightly, all his fears exchanged by happiness. May. She had made it. Within a second, he was through the room and hugged her tightly. She was here. She had made it.

"Hey." He greeted her lowly.

Her arms wrapped around him and gave him a gentle squeeze. "Hey, you too." She replied, holding him for a moment before letting go and looking him over. He was wearing normal clothes instead of hospital robes.

"You are ready to go?" she asked, her gaze wandering to his bed and most likely eyeing his bag which rested on top. He turned around to look at the room for a final time. He had checked everything, hadn't he?

"Yep. Checked everything. There can't possibly be anything left inside this room."

"You sure? You usually stuff everything into your closet and pretend it isn't there." She teased him amused.

Err... "Yeah, but I have no need to tidy up this place. Don't want to forget anything." Besides, his stuff had to go somewhere at home. He couldn't simply throw it away. His closet was as good a place as any. Just not obviously visible anymore.

"Well, if you have everything..." May's gaze went through the room, checking for forgotten belongings of his. "Let's get you home."

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Waking up slowly, Pepper rolled around and buried herself in her pillow. For a moment, she was close to drifting off to sleep again. No stupid comment on her going back to sleep. She had expected one. Was Tony still asleep? Prying her eyes open, she turned around. The bed beside her was empty.
No Tony. Was he working on something again? Or maybe sitting in the living room and sipping coffee? Slowly getting to her feet, she very nearly sleep-walked through the rooms.

"Tony?"

No answer. He wasn't up here. Reaching the elevator, she hit the call button. Tony had to be in his workshop, doing something. Maybe run some calculations. Test a new technology and only barely not break his neck while doing so.

Swaying sleepily from side to side and waiting for the elevator to arrive, Pepper suddenly realized what she had done. She had called the elevator. While wearing nothing else than her underwear. What if someone other than Tony was riding up? A security guy wanting to check the lower levels, someone from the cleaning company, hell, a FedEx delivery guy carrying a random package Tony had to sign personally? She would die of embarrassment on the spot.

"Friday?"

The low ding announced she was too late. The doors slid open. With a hammering heart, Pepper stared into the small, empty space before her. The elevator was empty. Oh God, how could she be so lucky?

"Yes?" Friday asked.

"Oh, it's nothing." Pepper replied and wanted to turn around to pull on some clothes, maybe slip into a bathrobe. She didn't move a single inch, though. Instead, she continued to stare at the elevator. The doors would close soon. No one would need to board between her and the workshop 20 levels down if they hadn't already gotten into it.

"Is a cleaning crew in the building?" She asked while stepping into the elevator. She should safely get to Tony without being seen. Please, let no one see her! She would surprise him like that. Distract him a little from whatever he was up to again. The elevator started moving down before she could press a button. Friday seemed to know where she wanted to go.

"No cleaning crews in the house, Miss Potts." Friday told her, while she rode down. The doors slid open. While they did, Pepper wanted to scold her again. What if Tony wasn't alone? What if...

Seeing only her man, back to the elevator, listening to music and working on something she couldn't see, she sighed in relief. He was alone. Her worries had luckily been for nothing. Maybe she should buy some stocks or head over to Las Vegas to try some gambling with how lucky she was today. Finally leaving the elevator, she listened to the doors closing.

"Boss?"

Oh, dare you Friday! If she announced her, she couldn't surprise him! All her mild panic of being seen would be for nothing! Besides, she still hadn't decided if she wanted to sneak up on him or simply call out to him. He would be able to turn around and look at her all surprised. If Friday announced her that decision would be taken from her.

"Peter just left the hospital."

Oh. That... that was good. A worry gone from his mind.

"Good."

Tony moved, grabbed something to his right and continued working.
"Text him and Strange in an hour or so. Ask when they have time to meet."

Watching him work, she considered her options. She could sneak up on him and probably get blasted into oblivion by accident. Tony was incredibly jumpy ever since the last light flash. If she just suddenly stood beside him, he would freak out. The safer bet was calling out for him, surely. Yet, just standing here, in front of the elevator, was a tiny bit boring. With a smile on her lips, she decided to get the best of both worlds. Very slowly, she moved through the room, trying to make no sound. Hitting something, which would clatter to the ground with much noise, would not be helpful to her cause. While she tiptoed through the room, she wondered what Friday made of them right now. After all, there was no way in hell his AI wasn't seeing her. Reaching a table, she leaned against it, trying her best to look sexy.

"Tony?"

He hummed, turned around and simply stared at her.

The immediate lack of words from a man who could literally always speak made her smile. She had to have stunned him, which meant she had to look gorgeous. Or he was too surprised to burst into laughter.

"Did you get down like this?"

"Mmm... was really sleepy. By the time I realized what I was doing I was basically down here. Could as well go with it." She told him while moving towards him and settling on his lap. She felt his arms wrap around her and pull her close for a kiss. For a moment, she forgot her own worries. Just Tony, his warmth, his lips on hers were on her mind. After they broke the kiss, she tried to peek over his shoulder to see what he was working on. As if he knew what she was trying, he turned his chair and her as a result around.

"Not yet."

"I just want to..." she started but was cut off by him.

"It's nearly done. You'll see it then."

Pepper rolled her eyes at that much secrecy but let him have his way. Closing her eyes, she tried to focus on his shifting body, the occasional kisses pressed against her neck or shoulder, his moving arms and hands. What the hell was he doing? Why couldn't she know right now? Was it a present? In the end, she didn't need to wait all that long. Maybe five minutes, maybe ten. He really had to be as good as done by the time she had gotten here. Eventually, he presented a necklace to her. A light blue, a tiny bit odd looking stone set in silver, a thin silver chain attached to it to hold it.

"Do you like it?"

"Yes." she replied softly, looking at it curiously. He had worked on it. It wouldn't be just a necklace. If it would be just a necklace, he wouldn't have been so secretive. He would have simply gifted it to her. "What is it?" she asked while he placed it around her neck.

Pepper found herself being pushed off his lap. He moved a bit away from her, amusement sparkling in his eyes. Oh God, this couldn't be good.

"Tap it twice."

"Are you kidding me?"
"When have I ever..."

"Last night during dinner." Friday provided helpfully, leading to him huffing annoyed.

"Tap it twice." He repeated, watching her. Sighing softly, Pepper did as told.

Watching her surprised face and hearing her yell, Tony couldn't help but smile while the nano-tech started to cover her.

"What the fuck is that?" Pepper yelled surprised.

"Nano-tech." He replied calmly, getting up while a silver-blue suit formed around her.

"Nano-tech?" she asked back in a high pitched, scared voice.

Seeing her reaction, Tony scolded himself. Maybe he should have warned her. Showed her his newest, securely locked away suit first. She would have seen it coming at 'tap it twice'. Like that, he had only freaked her out.

"Yes. Like my glove, just better." He replied calmly, taking hold of her hand. "Calm down. It's just a suit."

"It came out of the necklace!" she said dumbfounded, taking a step back to look at it.

"Yes. That's a housing unit. I made it look like a necklace."

"You made it look like a necklace?" Pepper repeated, her voice still confused.

"Yes. Friday, lower the helmet."

"Sure thing, boss."

The helmet retreated into the surrounding suit, revealing a freaked out Pepper, her gaze unsteady, flicking around to look at the suit. He had really freaked her out. Stepping closer again, he cupped her cheek. "It's just a suit. Yours. For emergencies. With me being able to pull you along into a future where an alien will wait to kill us, I couldn't stand the thought of you being unprotected." He explained, keeping eye contact at all times in hopes to calm her down. He watched, how her gaze calmed, how she leaned into his hand for a moment. Yes. Better.

"How do I...?" before she had finished her question, the suit retreated into the necklace, making her freeze and look at her now bare body. "How...? Why...?"

This time, Tony hugged her tightly, rubbing along her back soothingly. "It's run by a special copy of Friday. She can guess what you need based on your body signals. If she doesn't give you what you need immediately, you can just think and she'll do it. Most likely."

Pepper pushed herself away a bit, staring at him disbelievingly. "She can read thoughts?"

"I would say interpret wavelengths."

Finally, he earned a weak chuckle.

"It has a different color than yours." She said eventually.

"The color is the first thing you comment on?" he asked dryly and let go to look at her.
She shrugged. "It's the easiest thing to comment on."

Ah, well, yes. That was true.

"How do I control it?"

"You activate it with two taps onto the housing unit and deactivate it the same way. As long as Friday is monitoring you, all you have to do is think."

"How does she know?"

"I trained her. On myself. You don't want to see the early tests."

"Now I'm curious." She said with a happy chuckle.

"Oh, be curious all you want. Friday deleted the recordings."

"Friday? Do you have backups?"

"I'm sorry, Miss Potts, I fear I don't."

"Oh, damn it! You can't tease me like that and then I'll never see what happened."

While Pepper started to pout, obviously trying to make him feel bad, Tony smirked. "I might tell you." A small pause. "If you convince me you really want to know it." He added with a mischievous smirk.

----

The first thing Peter did was rush into his room and look around, just as if he saw it for the first time. He was home. He was actually home. He had survived an alien which could move stuff by sheer force of will. Well, actually he had beaten an alien which could move stuff by sheer force of will. With a tiny help from cloak. Looking longingly at his own bed, he wanted nothing more than to snuggle into it and feel. At. Home. Away and out of the hospital at last. Gone were the smells and odd sounds, replaced by what he knew and was most comfortable with. Instead of snuggling into bed, he grabbed a fresh set of clothes and went to take a shower. A very long, very hot shower to get rid of every last bit of odd hospital smells on him. Only after he could smell nothing else but soap and himself, he was content enough to leave the shower.

Instead of snuggling into bed as he wanted, he sat down in the kitchen, watching May prepare what had to be a lasagne.

"Our dinner?" he asked casually. Most of all, even more than happily dozing in his bed, he wanted to be with his aunt. She had worried so much because of him, he could give her some company, now that he was back again.

"Yeah." She replied casually.

"Can I help?"

She stopped what she did and eyed him skeptically.

He pouted. "I only burned the pancakes once!"

"Yeah, because I don't allow you to use pans anymore." She replied dryly and returned her attention to their food.
Peter just rolled his eyes. "I have to learn how to cook eventually." He fired back, getting up to fetch his phone.

"Not if we actually want to eat something!" she shot back without missing a beat.

Chuckling, he picked up his phone and returned to join her again. He had missed this. Her. Their familiar fighting and teasing.

While she was busy preparing dinner, he texted Tony and Ned that he was fine and home again. While he was at it, he asked Ned if they could hang out tomorrow after school.

School.

The word alone reminded him of his mountain of homework. Oh God, would he ever get it done besides his normal homework, being Spider-Man and fighting randomly appearing aliens? Should he drop by Ned today and pick it up? Start working already? Was tomorrow okay too? It would surely not run away, after all. Today... today he wanted to spend with his aunt. Tomorrow, he would keep an eye on Ned to check how he was. His friend had accepted the nearly getting killed by an alien incident far too easy. Peter could only guess, Ned ignored his worries to not freak out completely. Afterward... well... homework. Hours and hours of homework. And even more homework. God, at times he hated his school.

His buzzing phone pulled his thoughts back into the present. Tony had replied, asking...

He had just started typing a reply when he stopped and looked up at his aunt.

"May?" he asked.

"Yes?" she asked while placing their prepared dinner in the fridge. Later on, it would end up in the oven.

"Tony just texted me to ask when we can meet again. Do you want to come along?"

She stopped what she was doing, hands still in the fridge, door open and turned to look at him. She would say no, wouldn't she? She looked like saying no. She didn't want to meet Tony surely. She didn't like him, he knew as much.

"I just thought you might want to meet the others. Pepper, Christine and the doc." He added on a whim. By meeting the others, maybe talk some more with the women, she would more easily accept that he was really not insane. She did accept his story as true, but he knew she was still fighting with truly accepting everything. Murderous aliens from the future and time travel were a whole different topic than simply being Spider-Man.

"Sure, why not?"

Peter blinked. Had she just said sure?

"You want to?"

May finally moved her hands out of the fridge and closed it. "Yeah. Meeting the others will be good, I guess." She said uncertainly.

"Okay. Cool. When do you have time?" Peter did his best to not sound surprised. She had really looked like saying no. He had expected her to say no.
"Sunday to not interfere with school?"

"Sure..." he answered slowly, once again worrying about his mountain of homework. Maybe he should drop by Ned's at night?

----

Hovering 93 floors above 45th Street was definitely freaking her out. All those tiny moving dots. Cars and humans alike looked like ants from up here. If she dropped and didn't manage to steady herself, she would die, wouldn't she?

"Relax. I'm right here." Tony's voice ripped her thoughts away from moving cars, her falling to her certain death and her questionable flying abilities in the new suit. Raising her gaze, she managed a smile. He was there, hovering just an arm's length away. Even if she dropped like a stone, he would catch her. Right?

"How do you manage that? Fly in every new suit of yours without fearing for your life?"

"The flight system never changes that much. It's just flying."

The flight system never changed that much? Being able to move the damn suit with her thoughts seemed like a very drastic change to her. Carefully moving to the right, she circled him.

"I would call that a drastic change." Pepper commented dryly before returning to hovering right in front of him.

"You still control it with motion. It's just smoother." He objected with a smirk in his voice.

"Yeah, but when I think it should go right." The suit moved right. "It goes right. That's not motion."

"It's the same process. When you think you want to go right, your body leans towards that side subconsciously. The moment you think is just a few milliseconds faster than you leaning to the right. Besides, you can still just lean towards the side like earlier."

Pepper wanted to object, yet arguing while hovering in the air didn't seem all too wise. Maybe losing concentration would make her fall. She didn't want that.

"You'll get used to it. Don't worry."

Pepper snorted. She'd get used to it. "You'll give me indoor flying lessons?" Would eliminate the falling to her death problem.

"Sounds like a good plan, actually."

This time, Pepper laughed. She imagined herself hovering beneath the ceiling, losing control and crashing through the floor, her fall stopping a level lower or two, ruining their parquet, some sofas and possibly very expensive technology along the way. Not that Tony didn't crash into things or blasted holes into their walls all the time. Purely accidentally, of course.

Slowly moving past Tony, Pepper landed by letting herself drop the last few inches onto the open platform of the tower, watching Tony land beside her gracefully. It looked so damn easy when he did it. Fly, move around, land, all of it. She guessed she would have to get used to that too. For starters, flying was more important though. She'd always get down one way or another.

"Which weapons does the suit have? Besides repulsors, of course."
Tony's face mask moved down. She saw him smirking at her. "Be creative." He teased amused.

Be creative. This man... taking a deep breath, she imagined a gun. The suit reacted instantly. Her armor on her left arm retracted all the way up until her shoulder, baring her arm, while her right arm turned into some futuristic energy gun.

"What the..." she started but didn't finish her sentence. The suit knew what she wanted. She thought of a gun, she got a gun.

"As you see, a part of the suit retracted." Tony said softly, opening the suit and stepped out of it. "The container is too small for big amounts of nano-particles. You can form any kind of weapons or shields, but some part of the suit will retract to be able to form what you imagine. Its main purpose is protecting you and getting you out of danger quickly if need be."

Pepper nodded, while she imagined a dagger, watching her gun turn into a small dagger. A part of her bare arm got covered by the suit again.

"That's insane." She muttered while she ordered the suit to retract into the container before tapping it twice, turning it off.

"Just a new suit." Tony said casually and stepped closer to hug her.

"Just a new suit, he says." She joked, leaning into him. "What we could do with such technology."

"Nothing yet. I invent it in one and a half years from now. Don't want to show it off. Could change things." He said very softly.

"Oh... It's future tech?" Should she feel honored?

"Kinda." Tony replied with a chuckle.

"Will you make suits for the others too? They would surely be safer." She paused. "Do you have such a suit?" she asked with sudden worry in her voice. She didn't want to have it if he didn't. He should stay safe too. Besides, him dying would have a far greater impact on their current situation. Namely, it would simply dissolve and he would end up in front of Thanos.

"Sure I have. Locked away. I guess I'll get it out now. I feel safer having it with me. Peter can't defend us all the time." He looked upset, sad and guilty all at the same time. Thank God, Peter was fine again. He would never forgive himself if something happened to the boy, wouldn't he? "I'll make a suit for him. Doubt Strange wants one. Would mess up his odd look."

Pepper chuckled. His odd look. "Why not? A futuristic wizard! I'm sure I can talk Christine into it." she said with an amused snicker, imagining Strange wearing a suit, with cloak on his shoulders.

Tony didn't look all too happy at her words though. "Oh, come on. You just don't want to share your cool stuff. Give him a version without anything. Literally just armor. He can fly with his cape and has magical weapons, after all." She said amused.

He opened his mouth to say something, probably object some more, but Pepper just went on talking.

"Friday? Did Strange already reply?"

"Not yet."

"Okay. Ask him if Christine can come along."
After having left the internet café, Peter (Quill) had wanted to go straight to the hotel. Discuss and show Gamora what he had found. The Avengers had split up apparently, half of them on the run, with Stark in charge of what remained.

While backtracking the streets he had come, he passed the small video store yet again. He had seen it earlier when he was searching for the internet café. Like before he went straight past it. He had more pressing issues than look through videos, he tried to tell himself. He had to meet up with Gamora, tell her what he had found, show her the printouts he had made. Finding the others was top-priority. He wasn't here for fun. Besides, Gamora would surely wonder what the hell he was doing. He had spent hours reading through other peoples lives. Most likely she would even be worried. Yet, who was he kidding? Five minutes more or less wouldn't hurt. Gamora was surely relaxing, enjoying the fact that she was alone for the first time in ages. She wouldn't mind. Maybe she would even be happy... With a small groan towards himself, very well knowing he invented stupid reasons to be able to go looking, Peter turned around and walked back to the store. He would only look for Footloose! Gamora would surely understand, that he had to buy the movie.

Entering the small store, he looked around confused. They were surely not selling videos. Those weren't VHS tapes. Or Betamax, for that matter. Looking through the rows, he took one of the containers into his hand. Flipping it from side to side, he looked at it. Surely was a movie. Cover on the front, description on the back. Eventually, he found a small print, together with supported languages and the like. The thing he was holding was a DVD. After having stared at it for some long moments, he couldn't help but chuckle. Humans had created better technology, just like his Zune was a newer version of cassettes, DVD was a better version of video storage. Placing the DVD back into its shelf, he went on looking for Footloose. He nearly yelled in joy, when he found it. Pulling the DVD out of its place on the shelf all eagerly and excited, he nearly dropped it when he saw the cover. That wasn't his movie. That wasn't Footloose, even though it had the same name. It was some movie from 2011. Not the one he wanted and was looking for. Searching some more, he didn't find it. They didn't have the movie. How could a store not have the greatest movie ever made?!

Walking up to a customer service counter, he forced a smile onto his face.

"Hey. Do you have Footloose from the eighties?"

The man smiled politely at him. "From the eighties? I don't know."

He walked to the DVD section which Peter had already looked through. Really? That was considered helpful?

"No, but we have the 2011 one." The man said, showing him the DVD he had already held in his hands. He could buy it. See what they had done to his movie. Yet again...

"No, sorry. I want the one from the eighties."

"I could order it for you." The man replied, smiling at him again while returning to the counter.

Peter was tempted to reply yes please, but he didn't know how long they would stay in the city. They really had more pressing issues than waiting for a DVD to arrive.

"Can't do. I'll leave the city tomorrow."

The man hummed. "You could check BestBuy. They have a bigger collection."

BestBuy? Was the man talking about that electronic store? The chain still existed? "Where is the
Gamora sat upright in their bed, staring at the entertainment device on the wall. She had needed a little to figure out how it worked. After her bath, she had looked around the room. She had found a fridge, a ton of lamps, a clock and that odd, thick screen on the wall. She had tried to turn it on via touch, but nothing had happened. Looking around once more, she found a little black thing with several buttons. For what was it? It was surely a control of some kind. Pressing all buttons randomly, she froze when voices suddenly filled the room. Swirling around, she looked around alarmed. There was no one besides her in the room. Maybe outside? Tiptoeing to the door, she pressed her ear against the wood. No. The voices had to come... her gaze moved through the room and stopped at the screen. It had turned on. The voices came from it. Taking the screen control, she tried all buttons until it switched off. Turning it on again, she paid close attention, realizing that the voices came first. The pictures followed after a few seconds.

Flipping to another story on the entertainment screen, Gamora stopped. Fox News? News as in what was happening? Happening right now on Earth? Maybe she learned something about the Avengers! Oh, she would love that. Seeing Peter's astonished face when he came back after hours of research and she already knew things would be brilliant. Maybe she could learn where to find them. Unbelievably excited, she sat through story after story. A school shooting, a medicine was called back because it could cause strokes, a movie was filmed in Alaska, the latest polls on the president. She screamed frustrated and nearly threw the controller at the screen when the short clips started which wanted to sell things to her. Annoyed and eager and excited, she sat through them, waiting for the news to continue. More talks about the damn president, updates on some investigation, weather warnings, a new story. The news ended without even mentioning the Avengers. Weren't they Earth's mightiest heroes? Shouldn't they be all over the place?

While watching a story about a man killing his wife and their two children, Gamora's gaze moved to the clock. Where the hell was Peter? Was he still researching? Had he found something that needed immediate checking out? Had something happened to him? Had he got lost in the city and couldn't find their room? For a moment, Gamora entertained the idea of getting up to look for him. Yet, how big were the chances of finding him in a city of millions she didn't know? With some luck she would get lost too, then he would have to find her. Besides, she didn't feel really well among humans. All those damn stares. Had they never seen someone with green skin? Probably not. Sighing, she moved a bit, her gaze returning to the screen. Had that story really happened? Did humans do that to another? Kill their loved ones for petty reasons? If yes, Earth surely needed the Avengers. If only to protect humans from each other.

Sighing lowly, Gamora closed her eyes for a moment. She felt useless. Peter was out there doing research and she just laid there, watching one story after another. She couldn't go out and...

She opened her eyes again. She didn't need to go out. She didn't even need to leave the building. She could just ask the people working here. Preferably not the guy who had given them their room, but still... Getting up, she pulled on her clothes, grabbed the card she needed to unlock the room, took note of the number on their door and used the elevator down to the first floor.

Approaching the employees, she picked a woman who didn't look overly annoyed.

"Hey." She started with a smile.

The woman looked at her for a moment, probably wondering why her skin was green and returned the smile.
"Hey. How can I help you?"

Just the question she had needed, even though she guessed it was a formal thing the woman always had to do.

"I was hiking with my boyfriend for a while, cut off from the world. I was wondering... were there any news on the Avengers?"

The woman blinked before her smile turned into an apologizing one. Oh, damn it! "If Captain America and the others were found? No. No, not yet. I still can't believe they are on the run. Cap was always loyal and good. He represented America, after all. He was a beacon to us all. Then he just..." she trailed off and shook her head. "Well, no. Nothing new on that front."

Gamora managed a sad smile. "Damn it. I had really hoped..." she sighed. "Anything else worth mentioning during the last days?"

"About the Avengers? The remaining ones, of course. No. Nothing new yet again. I'm sorry."

"Oh, don't worry. Thank you very much for the catch-up!" Gamora said softly and took the elevator back to their floor. The Avengers had broken up. Reaching their room, she inserted the small card into the reader. What if Stark was on the run too? What if they couldn't find him? Trying to open the door, she realized it wouldn't budge. Oh. She had to remove the card, right? Doing so, the door kept closed. Frowning, she inserted the card again, pulled it out, grabbed the handle. Still nothing.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed the chapter! I'm really sorry it took that long. (yada yada)

Thank you very much for the comments and kudos I got in the meantime!

The next chapter will have some more Stephen and Christine. Besides that... I guess you know what's coming.

See you soon!
Happy birthday, little story!
They grow up so fast.

(Edit: Endgame spoilers, proceed with caution!)

While Peter was wolfing down his lasagne as if he hadn't eaten anything good in a long while, in fact, he hadn't, he watched the damn cheesy romance movie his aunt had picked for today. Why did she always decide what they watched? Well, most likely because it was her place. It was literally her TV.

"I watched the first part of that." He said suddenly. The characters and their motives seemed all too familiar.

May looked at him. He could feel it, even though he was staring at the screen.

"How did that happen?" she asked amused while her gaze left him, most likely returning to the movie.

"I lost the remote." He said darkly, hearing how May burst into laughter. This night at the hospital had just been too damn long. First, he saw a cheesy romance movie, then he worried about May not being able to pay his hospital stay, was visited by Tony and Stephen and afterward he had to watch this stupid movie till the end, realizing it was a three-part endeavor. How slim were the chances he would watch the second part with his aunt? Well, knowing her and what she loved to watch, probably around 1000 percent.

While he was thinking back of the day, his gaze moved to look at May. She didn't know yet. He hadn't told her, that Tony would or had already paid his hospital stay. He had wanted to tell her on their ride home. Whenever he had looked at her, she seemed so tired and stressed out. He wanted to take at least one worry off her mind. Yet, he wasn't all too sure how such a conversation would go. She didn't like Tony. Telling her would probably upset her even worse. As if they needed charity.

"Did you find it? The remote?" May asked him, still chuckling. Tony telling her would probably be best. He would know what to say.

"Yes. It somehow slipped between mattress and bed box. Needed a while."

"You watched cheesy romance movies until then?" she teased, being far too amused for his liking.

Standing at the bus station, her face lowered and her hat pulled deep into her face, Natasha felt a gaze on her. Someone was staring at her, undoubtedly. Had that someone recognized her? Should she ditch the bus and make a run for it? She had tried it with inconspicuous, acting like a normal woman going to buy groceries, but right now worried her immensely. If she was found and
followed...

Moving to the side, she started to walk away. The gaze still on her.

"Miss?" Natasha stopped, turning towards the voice but never looking up. Wasn't she too old for a miss?

"Yes?"

"Do I know you from somewhere?"

Definitely recognized. Or as good as. She dared to raise her gaze, look at the man who had spoken to her.

"No. I'm sorry." She replied calmly, holding his gaze for a moment. She didn't want to kill someone, but she would surely do to protect the others. Or quietly go to prison and not say a single word.

"Are you sure? I bet I saw you somewhere..." she felt more gazes on her. The others looking at her too now. Fuck.

"No. I've never seen you. We were surely not in kindergarten, high school or college." She said casually. As if they ever could. And if he had been, this conversation would go a lot more different. "Have a nice day."

Starting to walk away, trying to look casually, she felt tenser than ever. Screw the bus, she would walk. Make sure no one followed her before she joined back up with the others. How could she have thought her going would be wise? Well, she was the most unknown of them despite Wanda. Steve would be recognized within seconds.

Well over an hour later, she entered their shady hotel room and threw her shopping bag onto her bunk bed.

"I was recognized." She said immediately before the others could even say a word.

Steve sat up, looking at her. "Are you sure?"

"Yes." Nat replied while sitting down on her bed. She held her face in her hands for a moment, breathing slowly.

"Hey..." she heard how Steve moved. Her mattress tilted and an arm slipped around her shoulders.

"We'll move on during the night. Don't worry."

Taking a deep breath, she looked up at him again. A moment later, she couldn't help but smile, which was followed by a frown nearly instantly.

"Wanda isn't back yet." She was still on her not-so-secret date with Vision.

"She will find us." Steve replied matter of factly and got up, starting to pack his little bag.

----

Opening his eyes, Stephen stared up at a strange, orange sky. The air was warm and cold at the same time. Moving to sit up, he realized he was alone. Just him and endless nothing. He had been here before. He knew this dream.
"Did you make it?"

He flinched, jumped up and looked around, staring at Christine. She just stood there, a few meters away, and looked at him. Expecting, wondering, worried, curious.

Opening his mouth, Stephen wanted to reply, but the colors were fading away already, the shapes following suit, until the dream was gone, turning into the next one.

This time, he looked at Tony. The man was laying far away and yet he was looking at him. They kept eye contact despite the distance. He knew he knew. He saw Carol being blasted away by Thanos' hit. Once the Power Stone was back in the gauntlet, Tony moved, jumping the Titan and trying to reach for the gauntlet.

It had to be him. It had always to be him.

Yet, this time around, Tony never touched the stupid thing. Thanos caught him with his free hand and threw him to the ground. Watching the Titan raise his gloved hand, the Infinity Stones still glimmering within it, Stephen closed his eyes. He knew what would come. Certain annihilation.

"Stephen?" Christine's voice floated to him. How could she be here? She shouldn't be! Still, he opened his eyes and looked around. That way he could see her one last time before they were all wiped from existence.

"Stephen!"

The dream too faded away, while someone shook him. Opening his eyes groggily, he looked at a worried Christine.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

He blinked bewildered, staring at her questioningly.

"You trashed around." She added softer, wrapping her arms around him. "A bad dream?"

If only it was. "Yes." He lied softly, hugging her tight.

----

Like always, Clint Barton woke up at the crack of dawn. The sun hadn't risen yet. Carefully, he slipped out of bed without waking Laura. Grabbing his jeans and a shirt, he sneaked out of the room like every morning. After pulling on his clothes in the living room, he stepped outside, looking around. It was chilly this morning. He could see his breath in white, cloudy puffs. Come sunlight, it would turn hot within some hours.

Walking up to the invisible line he wasn't allowed to cross, Clint sighed. This was it. His cozy prison. Yet, he would always do it again. Fight alongside Cap. Walking around his property in a circle, he felt the electronic tag on his ankle weigh down on him. He couldn't leave without putting them all into serious troubles. He couldn't do that to them. At least, he was spending time with his family, he told himself. Yet, his other family surely needed him too.

Eventually sitting down on his porch, like every morning, he watched the sunrise. Felt the yet weak warmth of the day. Soon enough, they would scramble for every shadow they could find. He should start working on a pool. He really should. He had time now.

The door opened, Laura peeking out. "Clint? Breakfast is ready."
"Will be there in a moment." He replied and like every morning got up to enter the house. He stopped before walking back inside, watching the sun for another few moments. Something was coming, he knew that much. Call it intuition, experience or a gut feeling, but something was coming. He felt it out here in the tranquil of being locked up into his own home. Or he got paranoid by now, would be plausible too.

Unlike every morning, he didn't go straight to the kitchen. He went upstairs, back to their bedroom. Grabbing the loose floorboard he always forgot to fix, he grabbed the little pager beneath. For a long moment, he stared at it. Nat had the other one. He could ask her if she felt it too, that something was off. Yet, she most likely didn't. She had other worries. Besides, the pagers were meant for true emergencies, not stupid questions in the morning.

"Clint?"

Sighing, he placed the pager back, placed the floorboard back and went down, smiling happily when seeing his family. Nothing was off. He just got paranoid.

----

Watching Pepper create and undo the suit periodically made him smile.

"It's a play-thing to you now, isn't it?" he asked, managing to sound partly annoyed.

His girl chuckled softly, moving a bit around in his lap until her cheek was resting on his thigh, her gaze fixed at the screen. Tony's gaze followed hers. 50 Shades Freed. What had he done to deserve such a treatment on date-night? He had been awesome! Given her a new plaything, had helped her fly it, had...

Feeling Pepper's gloved hand stroke along his leg, his gaze moved to her. Only then, he realized the obvious. She was bored to death too.

"Why do we watch a movie you don't like either?"

"I feel like you have to have watched them." She said darkly.

Tony snorted. "You have to have watched the original Star Wars trilogy, the Lord of the Rings, Matrix, the Shining, the original Halloween, but not this shit!"

Pepper kept silent. The movie went on and on. Even though it were only five minutes, they felt like an eternity. Torture on a whole different level. Until Pepper sat up and slipped an arm around him.

"Friday? Start Halloween."

While the screen flickered and Friday changed their programme, Pepper looked at him with a smirk.

"Don't worry, I got you."

Chapter End Notes

I hope you liked my little surprise.

See you soon(ish).
I'm back!

With the longest chapter, I've ever written in tow. Over 19 thousand words, just for you. Proofreading and all took me ages, I'm sorry about that. I hope, the chapter makes up for the long wait.

Who you'll meet? Literally everyone.

That couldn't... No. Just. No. That couldn't be happening to her. Feeling slightly worried, her heart beating faster, Gamora inserted the card again, pulled it out, tried the handle. Nothing. The door stayed locked.

Taking a slow, trembling breath, she closed her eyes. Here she was, on a damn unknown to her planet, locked out of her room, without any money, her belongings or means to identify herself because stupid humans liked paper-strips so much. Peter was still gone. What should she do? What... Before she could slide into an illogical panic – being locked out of a silly room was nothing against worrying about her father dropping by for a visit – Gamora opened her eyes and stared at the door grimly.

She could simply break it down. Try to break the hinges or punch a hole through the wood. Nothing easier than that. A mere centimeter of pressed tree would surely not stop her from getting to her belongings. Yet, destroying the house's property would definitely get them into trouble, especially because they had bribed the guy at the counter to let them in in the first place. On top of that, getting into trouble would harm their plan of staying unnoticed. A crazy couple demolishing a rented room after bribing the poor, oblivious guy at the reception shouldn't be the next big story on the news.

She could just wait for Peter. Whenever he would return. What was he doing anyway? Getting lost in the city? Picking a fight with someone? Had he found something interesting or was still researching? He better should be. Sighing, she shook her head. She didn't want to sit in front of their door until he popped up again eventually. Maybe just that would pull attention onto her. Sitting in front of a locked door for hours was surely not considered normal on this planet. Maybe she would get thrown out of the house because she couldn't identify herself?

Sighing once more, she considered her options. She couldn't demolish the door obviously. She didn't want to wait here until Peter returned either, she didn't feel like walking through the city to let time pass by, probably getting lost along the way. She just wanted back into their stupid room. How to, though?

Well… she could go down and ask the staff at the reception, right? Maybe they could help her. Giving in to her only choice, she rode the elevator back down. In the lobby, she glanced at the available staff. Still the same as a few moments ago, luckily. Queuing for the girl, who had answered her Avengers-related questions earlier, Gamora waited until it was her turn, throwing gazes at the guy they had bribed. Would he make sure to get her in trouble? Had he maybe deactivated the card?
"Hi again." Gamora greeted the woman weakly once it was her turn.

The woman smiled back at her, like earlier. "Oh, hi! Some more questions?"

"Ah, no. Well, yes." She tried it with a weak smile. "My door won't open." She explained.

"Oh." The woman didn't look particularly upset or bothered. Just as if this happened every day. "Can I have your card? In which room are you staying?"

Handing her the card, Gamora stared at her questioningly. In which room she was staying? Usually, if she stayed in rental places, the computer system of the place itself knew.

"Ehm..." What should she say? The room on the sixth floor, two doors down from the elevator? The one with the ice machine nearby? The...

"What is your room number?"

What her room number was? Gamora blinked. There had been a sign beside her door...

"605?" she offered unsurely. Did they really identify rooms solely by numbers?

The woman still smiled at her, typed something on her keyboard and hummed.

"Peter Quill?"

"Oh, yeah, my boyfriend. He rented the room." She said, trying to sound bright. Hopefully, she wouldn't get asked to identify herself. She couldn't, after all. She didn't have a paper-strip.

"Okay." The woman said, swiped her card over something and handed it back to her.

"If it still doesn't work come straight back to me."

"I will, thank you."

Returning to the room, she inserted the card, pulled it out, pressed the handle and let out a sigh of relief when the damn thing opened.

Entering their hotel room while somehow holding all his bags, he saw Gamora lay outstretched on the bed, the TV on, blaring something about murder cases.

His girl turned her head to look at him.

"Hey you." He greeted, closing the door with a small kick and walked into the room, placing his collection of bags on the table.

"Where were you?" Gamora asked mostly calm, a bit worried, still not sitting up but eyeing him closely now. As if she judged his every move. She did, probably.

"Well..." he moved, pulling a chocolate bar from one of the bags. "Got something for you." He chirped happily and handed it to her, hoping she wouldn't be all too mad. The chocolate had occurred to him as kind of a peace offer. Maybe she wouldn't yell at him if she was busy eating sweets. She didn't take it immediately, though. Just let him stand there like an idiot, holding the bar. All she did was watch him skeptically. Sighing, she sat up eventually and took the chocolate bar from him, not paying it much attention.
"Where were you?" she repeated again, this time slightly annoyed because he wouldn't answer her question.

"I researched." He said instantly, not wanting to admit having searched for the best movie ever made for hours.

"You researched? For…" she let her gaze move to the clock. "Five hours?"

Yeah… well… yeah…

"I did some shopping. Obviously. After I researched, of course."

Her eyes narrowed dangerously. "Why didn't you come here first to talk about what you found? Could have done shopping afterward."

Peter opened his mouth, but… "I got side-tracked?" he offered weakly, feeling her barely concealed anger.

"You see, I walked past that video store, which didn't sell videos anymore, but that's another story and went in to look for Footloose. They didn't have it! Can you imagine that? The greatest movie ever made and they don't…" his words trailed off when he saw her expression. Annoyed, mad, angry, upset. Hurt? Why would she be hurt?

"What happened?" he asked slowly. Had something happened to her while he had been gone, looking for his stupid movie?

Gamora scoffed lowly. "Yes and no. It wouldn't even bother me normally. Locked me out of the room. The card didn't work anymore." She grumbled darkly. "You have any idea how annoying it is when I have to try my best to not pull any attention towards us? Was really close to trying to punch the damn door in."

Before he could stop himself, Peter chuckled, earning a dark stare instantly.

"This isn't funny. This planet is annoying at best, no offense. Their 'technology' is so outdated, its…"

"I know." He interrupted her, finally sitting down beside her. The only thing he could do was take the blame. "I'm sorry for leaving you alone that long. I should've come back here first." He said with a sigh. He kept serious for about another second until he chuckled. "It is funny, by the way. You would have definitely managed to punch a hole through the door or the wall, whatever gave in first."

Gamora rolled her eyes, a tiny amused glimmer in them, and nudged his shoulder, effectively pushing him off the bed. Peter let it happen, falling to the ground while trying to not hit his head at the nearby wall. Laying on the ground and staring at the ceiling, he started to chuckle.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing." He managed seriously and sat up, his arms resting on the bed, his head propped up on them.

"Are we good?" he asked hopefully.

Once again, Gamora sighed.

"Should have expected you go hunt for Footloose if you are here." She said grumbling, still slightly annoyed. "I guess I'll throw the movie at you, then I'm fine." She said while getting up, rummaging
through his bags.

First, she pulled printouts of everything Avengers out he had made, getting completely distracted. Had she forgotten she wanted to throw the movie at him? Hopefully…

"This is them…?" she asked slowly, flipping through the various pages.

"Yes. Avengers, Spider Boy, the little I could find about Strange."

She looked at him, completely serious. She seemed to want nothing more than to sit down on the bed and go through the pages. Yet, she didn't do it. She placed the printouts neatly on the table and returned to rummaging through the bags. Damn it.

Pulling a bigger package from one of the bags, Gamora stared at it.

"This isn't the movie, right?" she asked, her eyes moving along the printing. "DVD-Player?" she read aloud, making him feel even more guilty.

"No, that's not the movie." Obviously. "It's a thing to play the movie. Figured we could hook it up to our monitors and enjoy some movie time."

Gamora didn't look all too happy about the prospect of movie time. Still, she put the player aside carefully and pulled out a small, rectangular package. With a short glance, she swirled around and threw the DVD at him, with perfect aim hitting his head. The front of the cover hit him and he screamed, letting himself drop to the ground again, playing dead.

He heard her footsteps.

She was definitely rolling her eyes now.

A gently nudge by her foot.

"Get up, Peter."

He didn't move for some more minutes. When he eventually sat back up, demonstrably rubbing his head, she sat on the bed, eating the chocolate, the printouts before her, her eyes scanning the lines.

"Still alive, lucky you." He exclaimed, sitting down too. This time, she chuckled, looking at him for a moment.

"So… I know that the Avengers split up."

"How?" Peter asked baffled. He hadn't printed anything about the thing in Germany.

"The lady downstairs told me."

Peter blinked and groaned. Talked with the lady… they could have simply asked people. Maybe even during their annoyingly long rides in other people's cars. God, they had to get so much better in finding information on a planet which was basically off the grid. Technologically wise, at least.

"Okay. What did you learn?" she asked curiously, looking at him expectantly.

"Well… the Avengers broke up. You know that one already. Stark is in charge of what remains…"

He told her all he knew. About the thing in Germany, about every individual Avenger, whether they were with Stark or Captain America, about the old and the new Avengers HQ, about Stark's
company, about their relationships as far as they were public...

"I didn't find anything about spider boy besides videos. He seems to not officially be a superhero as in publicly be spider boy and whoever he is in real life, nor an Avenger. Didn't find much about the wizard either, besides this world not knowing shit about actual real-life wizards or magic. Spent a while looking for his surname, Strange." He paused, sighing lowly. "I found a Stephen Strange. He kinda matches his looks… if you squint. Imagine a beard. A more rugged face. Honestly, I'm not sure if I found the right guy and even if I found him, it won't help us much anyway. Maybe-wizard had an accident and went missing. No idea where he is."

"So, our best bet is Stark?" Gamora asked with a sigh, flipping through the pages until she looked at a photo of his face, all smiley.

"Yes, I think so." He sighed and looked at the photo. Stark. Sifting through the printouts, he took hold of the page about Pepper Potts.

"I couldn't find where their new HQ is. Just 'upstate New York' and that's basically everything besides New York City and surroundings. Like, the entire rest of the state." He added to make it clearer for her. "In the city, New York City, I mean, is the old HQ, Avengers Tower. I don't know if we could find him through visiting the tower. I guess his staff won't be very happy to tell random strangers where he is." He sighed again.

"Now what? Go to this city and try find him hoping we get lucky?" she asked skeptically.

"No..." he turned the page towards her, pointing at a photo of Pepper. "His girlfriend lives in LA. Runs his company. I think… If he remembers she'll know about it. I told you. He'll have told her too."

Gamora looked at him with a frown, obviously not convinced. "Anything else about spider boy? From where are those videos you mentioned?"

"He's mostly sighted in Queens. Ehm, a district of New York City. At times within other parts as well, but yeah."

Gamora pulled one of the pictures from spider boy up. A frame of him catching a car, wearing an odd, self-made suit.

"They're all in this city? The old HQ, the little spider."

"Actually, even Strange lived there before disappearing. If I found the right guy." He stressed again. He really wasn't sure. She nodded, sorting through the pages until she pulled one of Strange's pictures out. "He has a beard, yes?" she asked softly, staring at the smiley, perfectly shaved, suit-wearing man.

"A beard, a floating cloak. Looks a bit like a Kung Fu master."

She looked at him puzzled. "Kung Fu Master?"

Damn it. Of course, she wouldn't know! "Ehm..." Someone wearing Asian robes? She wouldn't even know what Asian was. "Wearing robes."

"Robes..." she repeated, just staring at the picture. "So, we are looking for a small spider and an odd guy wearing robes and a cloak?" she summed it up quite nicely.

"Yes. In New York, we would."
He watched her frown, bite her lip. She was thinking hard about…

"Where is this New York? Where is LA?"

Having expected the question, he got up and grabbed a map of the United States from one of the bags, unfolding it and placing it on the bed.

"LA is here…” he pointed on it on the west coast. "New York is here." He said, showing her the city, all the way at the eastern coast.

"Fuck." She breathed, alternatively looking at the two points on the map, divided by the continent.

"I thought we try LA first and if we don't succeed…”

"We start all over again in New York." She said unhappy, still staring at the map.

"How long do we need from here to LA and then to New York?" she paused. "Where are we anyway?"

Once again, he pointed out Saint Louis to her. He had checked all the relevant cities earlier to be able to show them if need be. Well invested time, obviously.

"We need… one day and three hours to New York, if all things go well, one day and 17 hours to LA. From here, obviously, by bus. Wish we could fly, but paper-strips." He told her with a sigh.

Gamora was silent for a long while, just staring at the map.

"If we go to LA first, we spent nearly two days on the 'bus'? Then we go to New York, needing another… more than three days to get there, if all things go well, is that correct?"

Suddenly, he felt uneasy. He had thought about it too. Too much wasted time they didn't really have, only because they couldn't fly. Yet, there wasn't any other option, besides…

"We should split up." Gamora said out loud what he had feared to hear. "Search both places at the same time. Maybe even meet up here again, not travel through the country for days and waste even more time."

"But -" he started, not getting any further.

"I know the story. I can tell them about Thanos and see if they remember. If yes, I can work things out. If no, we are screwed anyway."

As if he was worried about that one. Of course, she knew what to tell the others in case she found them.

Taking a breath, he wanted –

"Oh, come on, I can take care of myself." She said softly.

"Yeah… but…” he didn't want her gone from his side. He didn't want to split up. He didn't want to be alone on Earth without her. "The planet is weird, you already said so. You don't know human behavior. Your skin is green, no offense, I love it, but you know…” he babbled on, until a hand cupped his cheek, a thumb stroking along his skin.

"I can take care of myself." Gamora repeated softly. "I'll simply watch others and learn." Leaning closer, she kissed him softly. "Maybe we should blend in better, though." She went on thoughtfully.
"Buy human clothes, get their odd communication devices. I saw some on the screen. Act as if we are one of them. Hide my damn, beautiful skin a little. That way we up the chances of staying unnoticed."

Peter couldn't help but smile at her and lean in to kiss her again. "Okay… we'll blend in. First thing tomorrow, we go buy clothes." Eventually, his eyes moved to the TV. She had seen their odd communication device…

"What are you watching anyway?" he had completely ignored it while they had talked, but now the murder talks made him oddly uneasy.

"Forensic Files." She said proudly, probably happy she knew the name of the show in the first place.

"Well…" getting up, he grabbed the DVD-player and started to tear open the package eagerly. "Let's see if I get this thing running." He really, really wanted to see his favorite movie after all this time, with Gamora snuggled up in his arms.

----

Watching golden sparkles turn into runes, fading away and forming anew, Christine sipped on her coffee, watching her lover do 'Tai Chi'.

Oh well. She couldn't just watch him. Getting up, she joined him. His happy smile made her heart beat faster. Even though nothing happened when she followed his motions, he was always happy when she joined him. To him, it was probably like doing sports together.

Joining in at the next rune, realizing he was moving his hands deliberately slower so she could follow, she smiled softly. Watching golden sparkles appear and fade away again. His hands barely seemed to tremble when he did magic. Yet, golden sparkles were kind of distracting, maybe she just didn't pay that much attention to his hands. While she followed his motions, nothing happened as usual. No magic from her, no nothing. It was just some odd kind of Tai Chi to her.

"What would you do if I can do sparkles?" she asked calmly while they started with the next rune.

"Completely freak out and be the happiest person ever?" he suggested with a tiny smile which made her chuckle.

"I'll work on it." She joked while following his movements, getting a bit slower. He chuckled softly, which distracted her even more. God, how good he was at doing those runes, whatever happened around him. He probably knew them in his sleep. Most likely even backward.

"You are doing good." He complimented, making her laugh softly and finally mess up the rune.

"You are just trying to be nice." She said, still laughing.

"No. Really." He said seriously, moving to hug her.

"Oh, you!" she chuckled and hugged him back. A second later, he stood behind her. Blinking bewildered, she threw a gaze behind her shoulder. Damn teleportation spell.

"Do the rune again." He ordered.

"Aye aye, sir!" she said in military fashion, only missing the salute, and did it again. She felt his hands placing themselves on hers and then her heart skipped a beat. Golden sparkles beneath her fingertips. She finished the rune, staring at it vanishing, Stephen's hands still on hers.
"You were that, right?" she asked, her voice filled with surprised wonder and disbelief.

"Would you believe me if I said no?" he asked curiously.

Chuckling, she nudged him and leaned back against him. "Thanks." She said softly. Oh, how much she would love if she could do sparkles one day. At least with runes, she'd be awesome by then. Besides, she would understand his magical world better. Right now, she sometimes felt like an accessory. Loved, yes, but not even able to comprehend what he was doing. Only time would make the odd feeling of disbelief disappear, she guessed. Until then, she would simply endure it and get used to crazy things happening around her.

"Let's do some more?" Christine asked all eager.

"Sure."

Like that, only for a little while, with Stephen's warm hands on hers and them doing the motions together, she could live a fantasy in which she could do magic and be by his side. The sorceress supreme, so to speak.

Afterward, she sat on her couch, watching Stephen nibble on his very healthy Nutella bun while she slowly ate a yogurt. The sparkles had looked as if she had created them. It had seemed so real. While being busy daydreaming, she finished her yogurt. Only after the last spoon, reality slowly returned, but still leaving a happy smile on her lips.

"I'll join you on Sunday." Christine said eventually.

Stephen looked up from his very captivating breakfast – how slow could someone eat? – and blinked.

"You really don't need to. Just boring planning and talks and stuff."

Christine smiled warmly. She was curious about the talks. The 'stuff'. Yet, she wouldn't tell him.

"Well, consider me as moral support. Besides, I can't leave Pepper alone."

"I think May is coming too?"

"What? You don't tell me?! Of course, I have to come!" she said, acting all upset before starting to chuckle. "In all seriousness, yes, I'll join you."

Watching him return to eating, her gaze stayed on him. He looked so damn far away again. Maybe she should get a Nutella bun too. Acting as if eating slowly while covering her own brooding. Yet, it didn't seem necessary. Stephen was lost in thoughts, unaware of her worries. Lately, he was trashing around nearly every night. Something had to have happened during that last light flash. Something, he hadn't told her about and freaked him out worse than being tortured by an alien with creepy needles. She really hoped she would learn something useful in that meeting. Maybe she would even be able to help him afterward. She would love that. Nothing better than stopping his crazy nightmares. He was nearly as bad as she, besides still sleeping more. Within the second, her own nightmares wanted to push into the forefront of her mind, that knife slicing along her throat, but she forced them down with all the strength she had. This wasn't about her. It was solely about him right now.

If they went to that meeting on Sunday, he'd had surely planned to go by portal. Of course, they could simply take the metro, but portals were so damn convenient, besides freaking her out like nothing else could. In the span of a second, they could be from one place in space to the next.
Nothing but that. Even she had to admit it.

Taking a very deep breath, she fought down her rising panic. Everything was okay. Stephen was here. She was the safest she could ever be. She could manage to speak about them.

"I thought…"

She waited until Stephen looked at her, waiting for her to continue speaking.

"It's the sound of the portal opening which freaks me out." Well, and seeing one too. "If I can't hear it or see it… you might just walk me through. That way we don't have to use the metro."

"Are you sure? We can just use public transport. No problem at all." Stephen said softly, watching her closely now. Portals seemed to trigger his watchful eye, probably to make sure she was okay. Or as okay she could ever be.

"Yes. 40 minutes at best versus 2 seconds of travel time to and from the Avengers Tower shouldn't even need a discussion. We can cuddle before and after to calm me down. Perfectly well used 20 minutes each time." She tried to joke but failed miserably. Her voice cracked while talking. They were talking about fucking portals, after all! "I need to get used to portals anyway. I can't expect you to not use them while I'm close for the rest of your life. Besides…" this time she managed a very timid smile. "I might want to use them too."

"You might?" Stephen asked curiously, all his attention on her.

"Yes." Her smile turned into a happier one. "For vacation abroad. I mean, we can save on plane tickets and travel time! If we want to be cheap, we can even come back here for sleeping. Sounds like a pretty big jackpot to me. I've always wanted to visit Asia and New Zealand but never dared to. The travel time is so damn long and I don't get much vacation to begin with. I can't spend at least 4 days on a damn plane or in transit on an airport. Visit Europe again. Ooh, I want to eat pasta in Rome. I know it's cliché but…"

Seeing his happy smile, she knew she was doing the right thing. If she couldn't convince herself, maybe she could convince him. All she had to do now, was somehow survive those sparkling death-traps.

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Walking through the rows and rows of tombstones, Gamora found herself reading names and dates which meant nothing to her. She didn't even know in which year humans thought they were. Why should she? The galactian universal date was the one that mattered. All those other dates were just local clutter. Fiddling with her new hoodie, the texture feeling odd on her skin, she stopped in front of a grave.


Her grave definitely looked like it. Colorful flowers, a little stone bird sitting by the side. She glanced along the row of stones. Not all of them looked well-kept. Some were completely overgrown, on others, the flowers were long dead, never even taken away, the little stone statues in complete disarray.

Gamora sighed and moved on from Ellis Jones. She threw a glance at Peter a few rows down. He was sitting on the ground, not moving much. Not yet, she guessed. Like that, she moved on. Read names and dates and looked at the well-kept graves. Somehow, it was nice to see some humans kept their dead relatives dear, even after years and years.
Walking past a young girl talking with a grave, she felt herself tear up oddly. Tears welling up in her eyes she wiped away annoyed. She had never really had time to mourn anyone. Not when she had been with Thanos. Who cared about a few more dead? It was rather celebratory! The scales of the universe tipped a little more towards balance. Every conquered planet was a reason to be happy.

When she thought about it now, she felt her belly clench. It felt so utterly wrong. She should have never reveled in those things. Yet, for a time, she had been hellbent on fighting for her father. Do whatever pleased him. She had known him collecting the stones was dangerous. One planet at a time was nothing compared to the stones. Yet, she had ventured out, trying to get the Power Stone for him. Yet again, she had never told him about the Soul Stone.

Her gaze returned to Peter. He hadn't ever told her, but she knew she was dead back in the future. She had seen it in his eyes the night future Peter had crashed into current Peter. He had looked as if he saw a ghost, completely, utterly positive he would die any second, trashig and screaming. She had turned to restraining him before he could reach his blasters, waiting until he calmed down. Then… then they had talked. He had told her about fighting Thanos on his home planet, about the odd Avenger guys and… and them starting to lose. It had looked so perfectly well in the beginning! His plans always worked, after all, and then… then things went south.

Yet, it left her with one burning question he had never answered. Had her father gotten the Soul Stone in the end? Had she told him? Why would she do it? Why would she tell him?? Not telling him she knew should have been her absolution. Her way in stopping him while never admitting to it. If she was dead, she had either told him and had gotten killed for betraying him or had been killed for not telling him. A shiver ran through her body. If Thanos had gotten her into his hands, he would know. He had ways to learn the truth.

Taking a deep breath, she tried to fight against the ever-growing feeling of dread. She had told him about the Soul Stone. She knew she had. Somehow, she knew it.

"Miss? Are you okay?" a soft voice asked. She turned to look at the young girl, only now realizing she was trembling badly. If her father snapped his fingers, it would as well be her fault. She hadn't stopped him.

"Yes." Gamora replied, hearing her own, shaky voice. "No." she admitted and then found herself in the arms of a stranger. A gentle, soft, soothing hug. What the…

Breaking away eventually, the girl smiled at her. "Things will get easier to live with." She said softly and smiled encouraging at her. Gamora blinked. How should things ever get…

Oh. She thought she was mourning someone.

"If you ever need someone to talk…" the girl offered.

Why should she talk with strangers about killing half the universe? "No, no thank you." She offered a somewhat shaky smile. "Only here for a visit."

"Oh, okay." She nodded towards her. Was that meant as a greeting? Some form of acknowledgment? "Crying isn't a shame. Just remember that." She said softly and walked by, making Gamora look after her. Odd human, to offer support to a random stranger on a graveyard. Turning, Gamora dared to look at who's grave she had been having her little breakdown over.


Her mother?
The thought nearly made her cry for real. Every now and then the reality of her abduction hit her. Her mother was dead, probably burned together with the thousands of others, gone forever from this world besides her flimsy memories. No place to mourn. No place to nothing. She had thought about visiting her home planet. Yet, just like Peter originally had planned, nothing led her there. Ever. The planet of her birth wasn't her home.

"Gamora?" Peter asked softly behind her, nearly making her jump.

"Yes?" she asked startled, looking at him, trying to look casual but surely failed.

He smiled softly, luckily not saying anything about her current state. Simply taking her hand, he led her through the rows and rows of stones until they stopped in front of one with a fresh bouquet of flowers.

"Hey, mom. I'd like you to meet Gamora."

Even though it was just a stupid stone in front of her, Gamora couldn't help but smile.

Watching Peter walk into the Avengers Tower as if he did it every day was startling. Watching him greet a skeptical security guard even more so, but the weirdest thing of all was him being greeted by thin air. May jumped when a female voice suddenly filled the lobby.

"Hello, Peter, Hello Mrs. Parker."

"Hi Friday." Peter greeted the void back, making her look around confused. Was she missing something?

When reaching the elevator, the doors slid open and closed behind them again. Without them having to push a button, the elevator started to move upwards.

"Who is Friday?" May asked Peter in a whisper, but the female voice replied herself, seemingly having heard her.

"I am F.R.I.D.A.Y., Mister Stark's natural-language user interface. I run everything he owns, but don't tell him I said that. For some reason he takes offense."

While Peter chuckled, May just blinked confused. A what?

"She runs this place. Like an advanced, self-aware security system. I'd say she has access to everything electronic in here and can remote-control it."

"She's an AI?" May asked slowly, trying to wrap her head around it.

"Basically, for lack of a better word." Peter said shrugging.

For a moment, May was silent. The place was run by a computer program.

"Can't she be hacked?" she asked eventually, imagining the elevator suddenly stopping, the entire tower locking itself down, or, even worse, Stark's Iron-Man suits being remote controlled and used for all kinds of criminal activities.

"I'm running on a highly secure Stark server, Mrs. Parker. If I get hacked, we have bigger problems."

"Is there a protocol to follow in case you should get hacked?" Peter asked curiously.
"Of course, there is." Friday replied, sounding offended. Could she mimic emotions too? Was a feeling computer program running everything Tony Stark owned?

Before May could start brooding over an AI with emotions, which therefore could get offended and angry, with the ability to remote control Iron-Man suits and destroy the entire city, the elevator came to a stop and the doors slid open. Looking into what seemed to be the living room of a spacious loft, she watched Peter enter. Once again, he acted as if he would walk in and out every day. Taking a deep breath, she followed her far too relaxed nephew, feeling terribly out of place. Were they really allowed to be here? No one had told them where to go, after all. The elevator had just started moving. What if –

"Hi!" a woman entered from another room, smiling at them and walking towards her. Shaking her hand, May tried to smile back. "I'm Pepper. You must be May, Peter's aunt, right? Feel welcomed and nice to finally meet you!"

"Hi…"

"Sit down, make yourself at home. Do you want something to drink? Tony is still in his workshop. I bet he forgot the time again." She sounded slightly annoyed and yet casual as if Stark forgetting the time happened every day. "Friday? Remind him again. The others should be here soon."

After sitting on the couch with a glass of water in hand, Peter beside her, May took some deep breaths. Obviously, she was allowed to be here, they were allowed to be here. Everything was okay. They wouldn't get escorted out by a bunch of mean looking security guards. Watching Pepper sit down in an armchair opposite of them, she took a final, deep breath.

"What is…"

A hissing sound from behind made her stop mid-sentence and turn her head towards the noise.

What she saw made her stare at it in disbelief. A golden sparkle was hovering in the air, rapidly forming a full circle. She could look through it into another flat. Stephen stood there, his back to them, and slowly walked through the circle. Was he guiding Christine along?

"What – what – wha…” she stammered, staring at the scene in front of her eyes. To top it all off, a piece of red cloth floated into the room once Christine was through.

"That's a portal. He can do magic. I told you, remember?" Peter said softly.

"Magic." May repeated to herself, staring at vanishing, golden sparks which tumbled to the ground. The 'portal' had disappeared.

"Hey." Stephen greeted softly with a nod while holding Christine close. They weren't moving. Christine didn't even greet them. She just stood there, her head leaning on Stephen's shoulder.

"Hey." May replied nonetheless, staring at the couple which had literally appeared out of thin air. He could do magic. Actual magic. There had been a portal. Her gaze moved away from the couple and towards the red cape, which had started to float through the room. Currently, it was looking out the window.

"That's cloak." Peter said. Glancing at him, May saw her nephew had followed her gaze and looked at the red floating 'cloak' too.

"Cloak?" she repeated, her gaze returning to it.
"Yeah. The cloak of levitation. It remembers as well."

Once again, May stared at it in disbelief. A time traveling, remembering cloak. The cloak seemed to have realized they were talking about it and floated towards them, seemingly nodding towards her. As if it introduced itself to her.

"It understands us?" May asked dumbfounded.

"Yes. It's self-conscious, I think. Pretty damn loyal to the doc. Helps us, Tony and me, out too."

A time traveling, remembering, self-conscious cloak.

Taking a deep breath, May stared at it.

Magic was real.

She felt, how her head started to spin. Her gaze got a bit blurry. Magic was real. The impossibility, the sheer madness of all of it threatened to overwhelm her. This couldn't all be true. This… she would have a full blown panic attack. Mental breakdown. Probably be altering between crying and laughing hysterical. Deciding she wouldn't have any of it, May jumped to her feet and extended her hand towards the cloak. If she kept in control of the situation, however insane it was, she could maybe get around freaking out completely.

"Hey. I'm May Parker. Peter's aunt."

The cloak just stared at her, unmoving.

"I think it doesn't shake hands." Peter whispered towards her.

"Oh…" May stared at the red thing, feeling embarrassed. What else could she…

"Can you let me float?" she asked on a whim, desperate to keep talking. She had to keep the situation under control. She couldn't freak out. Not in front of Peter. Not in front of all those others.

This time, the cloak tilted its collar. May felt as if it was looking at her. A thing out of cloth. Looking. At. Before she could freak out, the cloak moved towards her, gently wrapping around her hand. May watched how her feet lost the ground beneath, how she indeed started to float. A few centimeters above the ground. She was floating. Looking around in wonder, everything fled her.

She wasn't panicking anymore.

She wasn't worrying about how she should pay Pete's hospital stay. If she needed to find a new job or even get a credit. If they had to leave their neat little flat.

She wasn't wondering if she had missed something all along. Peter believing he had traveled through time couldn't be good, right? Maybe the stress was literally driving him insane.

There was nothing. All her worries gone. May felt nothing but the sheer wonder of floating.

Magic was real.

Very gently, cloak placed her back on the ground and moved past her, carefully rubbing along Christine's arm.

Christine took a very deep breath, still not moving. "I'm okay." She said eventually. "I'm okay." She repeated as if convincing herself and finally leaned away from Stephen, looking up at him. "I'm
okay." She said a third time, this time more determined. As if she actually believed it.

May watched, how cloak ruffled against her arm and placed itself on her shoulders.

After Christine took off her headphones, she looked towards them. "Hey." She finally greeted.

"Hey." Pepper responded softly. "Everything okay?"

May watched a smirk appear on Christine's face.

"As good as it could ever be."

Pepper nodded in acknowledgment and looked back towards her.

"Do you want to see the tower? I could show you around."

For the slightest second, May hesitated. She wanted to see the tower. She guessed only a few people who weren't affiliated with Stark Industries, Shield or the Avengers themselves had ever seen the tower from the inside. It would be like renting a room in the Four Seasons just because. Unimaginable for her.

"No, thank you. I'd like to listen to them… planning?" She still wasn't fully sure what to make of the whole story. Time travel. It sounded insane, even though a lot less so after realizing that magic was a thing.

Pepper nodded, her gaze returning to Christine. "Do you want to stay too?"

Christine smiled and moved to sit down on the couch beside her, cloak draping itself over the back of it. "Definitely. Can't leave May alone with those numnuts."

"Did you just call us -" Peter started but was interrupted by a chuckling Pepper.

"Good point."

----

Entering his living room, Tony glanced towards Pepper, Christine and May, all sitting on the couch and talking about something. Peter and Strange had taken to the armchairs opposite of them, watching silently.

"Hey there." He greeted the room. Pepper turned around and shot him a smile.

"Finally checked the time?" she teased.

"Never would. Friday annoyed me until I finally paid attention to her."

Strange snorted but thankfully didn't comment.

Before anyone could, he raised his voice again. "Does anyone need something to drink? Anything else?" He guessed Pepper had already taken care of it, yet he felt obliged to do so. Be a good host and all. When none jumped up, he joined Peter and Strange.

"Are they staying?" he asked lowly. Only now, he realized he was used to discussing those things alone. Having an audience paying attention to their every word felt weird.

Peter nodded. "May wants to listen. The others stay as support."
Awesome. He glanced at the women and only now realized they had fallen silent, watching them curiously. Just. Awesome.

"Well..." Where to start? There was so much to talk about. "Are you okay?" He decided on the easy one, which still bothered him. Were they okay? After seeing visions of possible futures where most of them died, being dragged into an actual future and having to fight Maw and Peter ending up in the hospital the question seemed reasonable.

"I'm fine." Strange replied calmly.

"As good as new. Besides dying from homework." Peter chimed in, which made Tony smile. He really seemed okay, cheery as ever.

"I have a question." Peter added before he could continue talking. "The vision thing. The first thing we saw. It was one of the 14 million, right? What..." while the boy hesitated, Tony realized he would ask the question, which ate him up inside. The one, he needed to get an answer to. "... what do we have to do to beat Thanos? Back in the original timeline. It doesn't matter now anymore, does it? You can just tell us."

Strange's gaze moved from him to Peter and back again. He kept silent.

"Come on. You can tell us. We won't mess this one up. Accordingly, whatever you saw will never happen and it's completely safe to tell us." Tony tried.

"He definitely knows that. Surely saw in enough futures that we make it." Peter cheered, looking at Strange excitedly.

Eventually, the man sighed.

"Thanos forces me to hand him the stone, kills Vision, snaps his fingers."

Tony stared at the wizard. Weren't they supposed to win? That really didn't sound like winning to him. He wanted to object, but Strange simply kept on talking.

"Five years or so pass. You" he motioned his head towards him "invent time travel."

Tony blinked. "I do what?"

"Scott Lang has the idea. You find a way to control it. Something about the quantum realm, I think. Don't ask me for specifics. You first try to kill Thanos in the past, but it doesn't work."

"What do you mean? It doesn't work?" Tony asked, dumbfounded and slightly distracted. He invented time travel.

"You kill him, return to the future and its still the same. You cannot change what has already happened."

Tony wanted to say something, but nothing reasonable came to mind. It was the grandfather paradox with Thanos. The Thanos paradox. If they killed him in the past the snap would never happen, therefore they wouldn't have a reason to invent time travel and would never go back to kill him.

"What about the future? Erm... the present?" Peter asked. "Can't we kill him there and get our hands on the stones? Undo the snap by snapping our own fingers?"

Strange sighed and shook his head, avoiding to look at them. "You try. You really try. You find him,
you fight him, you barely get away with your lives. You can't beat him in combat."

"How do we win, then?" Tony asked slowly. How could they possibly win if they couldn't change the past and not kill the titan in the present?

"There is... kind of a loophole. Everything in the past always occurs the same way, but at the same time, everything in connection to the stones will always be. You too get the idea. With only one time travel trip left, you argue for ages which would be your best shot, which combination of events would stop him from ever acquiring all stones. You eventually come down with the Soul Stone. It's hardest to get, so to speak."

While Stephen fell quiet, Tony frowned. "How could we ever get hands on the Soul Stone?" He knew of some other stones. He had met Space and Mind and somehow survived. Through Thanos, he had seen Power and Soul too. How to get to the latter to protect it from falling into his hands in the first place? It was somewhere out in space, wasn't it?

"Steve Rogers could. Well, kinda. Back in the forties during World War Two, he fights against Hydra. They used the Tesseract at the time, powering weapons which could have changed the outcome of the war. As you all well know, none of those weapons ever got used. Rogers is to thank for that. At the end of the struggle back then, a senior Hydra agent touches the Tesseract, which very conveniently teleports him to the Soul Stone to be a guide to all who come seek it."

Tony knew what Strange would say next. Even though he was still mad at Rogers for everything he had done, for splitting the Avengers and then disappearing into thin air, he didn't want him to do what he knew he would do. Heroically saving the day seemed to be one of Cap's most favorite pastimes.

"He takes his place." Tony whispered below his breath.

Strange nodded. "He goes back in time and while his younger self and the Red Skull fight, he touches the Tesseract and gets transported away. He turns into the guide to the Soul Stone. Once Thanos turns up years later, he tells him some bullshit story, keeping the stone locked up. Afterward, Thanos comes to Titan with only three stones, trying to get hands on the Time Stone. This time around, we defeat him."

Tony was silent, only hearing his own breath, his heartbeat. Steve sacrificing himself for the greater good. He would do it, wouldn't he? Save trillions if he had the chance.

"How does it work? Him taking the place of the Hydra guy?" He asked quietly.

"It works because it has always already happened. Rogers is always meant to be a guide to the Soul Stone. The first guide was the Hydra agent, yes. After Thanos' snap, you figure out you have an odd chance and take it, making Rogers take his place. As Rogers has always already been the guide, the future realigns itself and we get the one shot at defeating Thanos."

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May just sat there, somehow managing at taking it all in. There was so much Peter hadn't told her. Partly, she was happy about it. Hearing it detailed from him alone would have made her believe he was completely insane. Thanos and snaps and time travel and Captain America saving them all. The latter seemed to be the only reasonable part of the entire story.

"Did he really just say there is another way to time travel and Tony invents it?" she heard Pepper whisper towards Christine. May turned her head to look at the women. Even they just took it for...
for granted? Thanos snapping his fingers and stones with odd names. They were just wondering about the time travel part.

"Do you think we can ask questions?" she heard Christine whisper back.

Looking back towards the men, she took a heart to it. She felt as if she knew nothing anyway. Best she got her stupid questions out of the way. She could test whether they would get mad along the line.

"Thanos is the bad guy, right?" she asked timidly. She expected one of the men, maybe even her Pete to answer, but Pepper was faster.

"Yep. He's the bad guy."

"He snaps his fingers to…" she had heard it multiple times now. Someone snapping their fingers. Besides, it seemed essential to Cap saving them all.

"Wipeout half of all life in the universe." This time, Christine finished the sentence. The other women seemed to have taken a heart to the entire craziness.

"How does he do that? Peter said he was gathering some stones, but…" how could some small stones have the power to wipe out life on such a scale?

"He gathers the so-called Infinity Stones, which… ah…" Christine started but trailed off. Her gaze moved towards Stephen. "Could you show her the stone? I think it's easiest if she sees one."

Stephen kept quiet, not moving or showing her any stones.

"Please?" Christine tried again, looking at her boyfriend. Eventually, said boyfriend sighed and May watched, how a small, green gem appeared in front of him, floating in mid-air.

"That's one of the stones?" she asked curiously, getting up to take a closer look. Peter moved nearly instantly to get between her and the stone, keeping her out of arms reach.

"Don't touch it." Her nephew said worriedly.

She wanted to ask again, ask why she shouldn't touch it, but she saw the worry in his gaze. The fear.

"It would kill me?" she concluded quietly.

"There are six Infinity Stones." Stephen said softly. "All of them control one aspect of reality. All of them combined can do things undreamed of. Like wiping out half of life with a thought and the mere snap of a finger."

May fell quiet, staring at the small, floating gem. The fact that it floated didn't even seem to bother her anymore. Not if they were talking about trillions dying, about Thanos and snaps and…

"How do you want to go about it? Let the snap happen and then have Steve save the day again?" she heard Pepper ask. How could she even suggest such a terrible thing? How could they let something like that happen in the first place? Her gaze moved to Pete. Would he survive? Would she survive? Who else would die along the line?

"I doubt we…" she heard Stephen start. His voice turned quieter with every syllable, somehow muffled and far, far away.

Trillions would die. Half of all life in the universe. Was there even a number for that? Her gaze
returned to the small green gem. Peter was distracted, looking at Stephen. May raised her hand to touch it. Such a small gem couldn't be the cause of all that destruction, right?

A hand stopped hers. She couldn't see who's. All she could do was snap for air, at last being overwhelmed by it all. Half of all life would disappear. Just like that. With the snap of a finger.

Her breath got frantic, tears ran along her cheeks. Her head spun. The world around her got all fuzzy and blurry. Her heart hammered in her chest. When…

Someone took hold of her and before she knew it, she was out in the open. Warm, fresh air hitting her face. The sound of the city below her. All those people living their lives, unbeknownst to the danger they were all in. In only a little, half of them would be dead. May sobbed. She would be dead, wouldn't she? Would Peter make it? Grow up in a world without her. Her legs gave way and she slid to the ground, crying and sobbing. Someone was still holding her, stroking her back soothingly but not saying a word. What would there be left to say anyway? I think you survive? How could they know? How could anyone know?

When May started to breathe frantically, Peter spun around. His aunt stood an arms reach away, her hand still outstretched. Pepper was holding it. With horror, he realized what she had wanted to do. Touch the stone while all of them were distracted. Maybe Stephen had seen it, but he would have seen that Pepper had moved to stop her too. While Peter still stared at the scene in front of him, Pepper took hold of May and walked her to the doors to the balcony/landing zone. Christine jumped up and followed, getting to the doors first to open them.

Watching his aunt collapse outside, Peter wanted to dart outside, but a hand on his shoulder held him back. Looking up, he saw Tony. He looked worried, but calm, watching what was going on outside.

"Go to her once she calms down a little. One more won't help her right now." He said softly.

Even though he wanted nothing more than to run outside, Peter could see the truth in it. Still, he felt incredibly guilty. He had never wanted to see her like that. Crying and sobbing and afraid for her life. All their lives. His gaze moved to Pepper and Christine, who tried to comfort May. Had they freaked out too?

"Okay…" Tony said slowly, obviously unwilling to go back to talking, but what else should they do? "We should try to stop the snap. I'm with you on that one. How should we go about it? We surely need the others, that part is obvious. Where to fight, though? How to lure Thanos to where we want him to be?"

Peter turned around slowly. Watching May cry and shake wouldn't help him. Instead, he could distract himself with thinking and talking about his most favorite mad titan. "We have the Time and the Mind Stone. Reason enough to pay us a visit." He stated calmly.

Stephen nodded. "I still think, we have to let Ragnarok happen. We need that stupid ax."

"Can't Thor's hammer do the job?" Tony asked skeptically.

"Might, but Thor can't."

"Oh."

For a moment, they fell silent. "How many stones does it give him? Two? Three?" Tony asked thoughtfully.
"Two right after he attacks Thor. Power and Space. I think he takes Reality afterward and then goes to take Soul."

"We fought him with four. We can't beat him with four."

Once again, the three of them fell silent. How should they…

"Can't we snatch the Reality Stone away from under his nose? Get it beforehand or something like that?" Peter suggested.

"I don't know… if we steal an Infinity Stone beforehand Thanos will surely hear of it and things could change. I like us currently knowing where he will be when." Stephen responded, making him nod. Sounded reasonable. He didn't like the thought of Thanos changing plans and popping up behind him either.

Starting to chew on his bottom lip, Peter hummed. Couldn't they… "Can't we…" he hesitated. The idea was insane. Yet, they had magic, hadn't they? They had portals. They could be anywhere within a heartbeat. "Can't we… like… steal the Reality Stone right after he takes Space? It wouldn't change the order of events plus we had another stone he needs to get."

"We would only have minutes at best and seconds at worst." Stephen replied lowly.

Peter continued to chew on his bottom lip. Only seconds at worst. If they messed it up Thanos would surely kill them. Maybe take Reality and Time along, which would give him a terrible advantage. Besides, they still had to get there in the first place. While he turned around to look at May again, his gaze fell on the Time Stone. Peter stopped in his motion. It was still there, floating innocently in mid-air. That small green gem. As if it could never hurt anyone. Stephen seemed to have never bothered to let it vanish again.

"Don't we have all the time in the universe?" he asked seriously.

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May was still crying and trembling, hugging whoever was holding her. She hadn't dared to look. She didn't want to know right now. She didn't want to know anything about Thanos or snaps or Peter dying. Why had he told her? Because she had asked. He had to tell her. Earlier or later. Couldn't it have been later? Make her not worry like that? Not freak her out like that. Not…

She sobbed and snuggled closer, concentrating on the hand which rubbed her back soothingly. Trillions would die. Just like that. With the snap of a finger. Somehow, she was certain Peter would die. He wouldn't make it. Did she want to live in a world without her little Pete? She couldn't lose another one. Hadn't Peter's parents been enough? Hadn't Ben been enough? Please, not one more. Not one more.

Very slowly moving a bit away, she finally saw who held her. Pepper. Moving her head, she saw Christine standing close, the crazy cloak still on her shoulders. Both women looked at her with sympathy. No sad smiles, luckily. No pity. She hated pity. Pity didn't help her.

"How did you cope with it?" she asked in a weak, trembling whisper. Maybe hearing the other's stories would help calm her some.

"I didn't initially." Christine started to tell. "Thought he was insane and making things up. I never wanted to see him again. Was done with him breaking my heart and lying again and again." She took a breath, her gaze partly lost in memories. "I met Peter one day at a cafe. They were sitting together. I just wanted to know if he was the boy Stephen had called. He told me the same insane
story. I still didn't believe it then. Needed a while. Yet, if two tell a story…” she sighed and shook her head. "I went back. Initially only to drop his keys. Peter telling me the same still bothered me, so I asked him to show me some of his magic, believing with all my heart that he couldn't do it. Magic isn't real, after all, but then he created a rune made of light." Christine fell silent, looking thoughtfull. "If one thing is real, the other had to be too." She finished quietly.

May couldn't help but stare at her. It sounded very much and not at all like her current situation. She didn't have magic, but her Peter was fucking Spider-Man. Yet, being a superhero on its own was far more 'normal' than time travel and magic. It could happen unrelated to the crazy stuff. Yet, as Christine had said, magic was real. How far fetched was time travel, when magic was real?

Sighing softly, May looked at Pepper. "How was it for you?"

Pepper shrugged, a weak smile on her lips.

"I'm used to Tony getting into insane things. The moron threatened a terrorist once, he fought against aliens in New York and flew an atomic bomb through a portal into space, he created a murderous super-robot. Him fighting a madman wanting to wipe out half of life seemed like pretty usual business, sadly. On top of that, if he has the chance to somehow stumble into time travel accidentally, he'll find it. Don't get me wrong, all of it is still insanely insane, but it sounded like something which could have happened to him." She finished, sighing in the end.

May stared at her for a very long second. He could accidentally stumble into… and then burst into mildly frantic laughter. Christine joined her too after a few seconds, so did Pepper herself.

"This is normal for you? Business as usual?" May asked baffled, still laughing.

Pepper grinned at her, giggling. "Yes, damn it!"

"What else does he do?" Christine asked giggling.

"Oh… when he hadn't been too well after the New York incident he started to create Iron-Man suits in his free time. Like 50 of them."

"50? As in five and zero? Didn't he sleep?" May asked amused.

Something sad flashed through Pepper's eyes and she instantly knew she had asked the wrong question. Maybe even killed the mood.

"Actually, no." She had killed the mood, hadn't she? "But that didn't stop him from getting me a two-meter stuffed bunny for Christmas. A. Fucking. Giant. Bunny." Pepper went on as if nothing had ever happened, pronouncing every word to underline the silliness even more. This woman was surely brilliant in keeping a conversation going, even at her own expense.

"A giant bunny? Doesn't he know we women like jewelry, maybe even books, clothes for god's sake?" Christine threw in amused.

"He knows those things. I can only guess he thought them to be too normal for us. He is Tony Stark, after all. He has to go extravagant." Pepper stressed the last word, rolling her eyes while doing so.

Again, they burst into laughter. This time, only happy, amused laughter.

"How was Stephen? Before his accident?" Pepper asked smirking.

"Ooh…" Christine smiled back amused. "He was your standard rich guy. Got me a bunch of pretty
dresses and a few necklaces. Everything else he spent on fast cars, watches, a piano for some reason and his flat. He had a special drawer in which his watches rotated all day, every day. The most stupid expense ever." She stopped talking, her smirk turning into a tiny smile. "He pawned everything off after his accident. All he still owns is a watch I gifted to him."

"Ow. That's actually cute." Pepper said softly. "But don't tell me about useless expenses…"

"May?"

Peter's gentle voice made her stop. She didn't want to see him. Not yet, not so soon. She couldn't handle it. Knowing he would die… still, she turned around to look at him. There he was. Just an arm's reach away. She couldn't deal with it yet. All those people dying. Him dying, because he would. She knew it, somehow. She knew it.

Before she could give in to freaking out again, give in to her ever-crazier thoughts, she took the step and wrapped her arms around him, feeling his slip around her in return. He was alive. He was fine. He felt warm and steady. She heard his calm breath. He was alive.

Fighting down her tears, May whispered: "Don't you dare to die on me."

Her voice broke along the line, tears running down her cheeks again. Pete squeezed her back, hugging her that tiny bit tighter.

"Will do my best." He said softly, yet serious. It made her sob and cling onto him like a drowning woman. She couldn't lose him. Not him of all people. Never him.

"You better keep that promise." May said weakly, letting go of him to wipe along her face, vainly trying to get rid of all those tears. "Else I'll borrow one of those 50 Iron-Man suits and kick your ass myself."

"I think I'll deserve – wait, did you say 50?"

"Don't ask." Pepper threw in dryly.

"Hey. Do you want to get back inside?" Tony asked from the open door. What was this turning into? A full house party outside?

"You have 50 Iron-Man suits?" Peter asked instantly, making Tony blink.

"Blew some up, crashed some entirely, build some new. No idea how many. Do I look like counting?"

"You currently own some 8 suits, boss." The female voice called Friday informed them. Where there speakers outside? May couldn't help but look around, trying to see them, but there were none visible to the eye.

"See? 8! Completely healthy!" he said seriously before taking his time to turn around and re-enter the loft.

"Only 8," May muttered to herself. "Any chance I can borrow one once in a while?" she muttered towards Pepper while following him. Her only reply was an amused chuckle, which really wasn't an answer. Was it a yes or a no?

Once they were all back inside, Pepper looked at Tony. "Are you done?"
"Basically, yeah. Friday? You heard us. Put some markers onto our timeline and take some notes. We'll start from there once its time."

"Sure thing boss."

"Perfect. Can I talk to you for a second?" Pepper asked, looking at him.

"Sure."

They walked a bit away, whispering quietly to each other. Tony threw a glance at them. What were they talking about?

May didn't need to wonder for long when Pepper turned around already.

"Do you want to stay for dinner?"

May stared at her. Did they want to stay for dinner? What the hell would they get to eat at a billionaire's? Caviar and mussels? She really wasn't…

"Sure!" Peter replied happily, Christine joining in. Well, then it was decided anyway, wasn't it?

"Of course." May replied.

"Always?" Stephen offered with a weak smile. As if he had any other choice.

Seeing Pepper's happy smile made her feel bad for the initial hesitation. She beamed at the prospect of them staying for dinner. May could only guess that she loved to host but did it far too little.

"Friday? Get us something to eat."

"The usual?"

"Yes." There was a pause. Tiny, but it was there. "Wait. No!"

"I already ordered. Should I cancel?"

Pepper sighed lowly. "No. Keep it."

"What did she order?" May asked curiously.

"Tony's usual dinner. Random fast food. If we are lucky it'll be pizza. Don't tell me, Friday. I'll just live with what we get."

"My last dinner was a salad if I remember right." Tony complained while smiling.

"Since when do you remember your dinner?" Pepper teased back.

"You made me help. I remember that." He said oddly proud.

May blinked. "What did he do?" she asked curiously.

"I let him cut the greens. If he does anything more complicated, we'll get food poisoning."

"I make you omelets every once in a while." He pouted.

"Yes, and I love them!" Pepper said happily, walking back to her.
"I only eat them about half the time, when I know he had help." She whispered towards her, making her force down a chuckle. She didn't even eat them all the time.

"You still suck at cooking." Pepper said out loud, watching Tony affectionately.

"True enough. If I wouldn't be rich I'd most likely die of starvation."

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"… if you hear code green…"

Originally, Pepper had listened to Christine telling them about hospital daily life, emergency codes, all that. They, May, Christine and her, had talked about work, exchanged stories, passed on anecdotes, laughed and…

Yet, she simply couldn't rip her eyes away from Peter. He floated past them for a third time now, cloak on his shoulders, acting as if he was pushing himself off walls to get moving. She could only guess that the magical artifact did all the work. Made the boy float, moved him around, acted as if Peter actually had control over where they got.

"How is it to live with magic?" She blurted out, bringing the conversation about hospital security codes to a sudden end. Christine stared at her. May looked from one to the other and back again without saying a word, curiosity and uncertainty battling in her eyes.

"Woooell…” Christine said very slowly, buying time to think about what to reply.

"You don't have to answer it. Was just curious with…” Pepper let her words trail off and motioned her head towards Peter, who was floating past them again.

"No, don't worry, everything is good." Christine replied, her gaze moving to Stephen who sat solemnly in an armchair, looking quite alone. She cast her gaze down. Took a deep breath. Looked at them again, this time with a smile on her lips.

"It's insane! I guess he does the 'normal' stuff at home. The crazy stuff is for India where he kind of studies magic, but even the normal stuff is insane. We do Tai Chi” she formed parentheses with her fingers in the air "in the morning. For me, it's just that, weird Tai Chi. He draws all sorts of golden runes in the air. Once we are done with the morning session, he sometimes goes through all those other things he knows, swords, axes, shields, you name it. Sometimes, I watch him move things with the flick of a finger. The book he placed too far away, his tablet from the other room. I think I once witnessed him making coffee and then letting the mug float to him in the living room. He wasn't even in the room and he made coffee! He claims he's getting back into magic" Christine lowered her voice. "but I think he's just lazy." She told them amused.

Pepper started to giggle. "He's a magical lazy ass?"

"Kinda." Christine said extremely innocently, making May emit something between a snort and a laugh.

"Cloak is really cute. It helps me with everything around the flat. Not that Stephen isn't helping, but you don't have a sentient object helping you tidy up the place every day. I talk to it too. In the beginning, it felt really odd, but I swear, it listens to me and even gives its opinion if asked. Sometimes even without being asked."

"It's really… like… alive?" May whispered astonished.
"I think in its way it is. Not like we for sure, talking and all that, but it can nod and watch and cuddle with you. It's damn loyal to Stephen for sure, always keeping an eye on him." She fell quiet, watching Peter hang upside down in the air, quite literally. "I think it likes me too."

Watching the ground move by, Peter felt his heart hammer in his chest. He was flying. He knew cloak could float and all and actually made him float right now, but it really felt as if he was flying. On his own. Reaching the wall, he pushed himself off, his heart jumping into his throat when he got a tiny bit faster. This felt so real. Rolling around in the air, he felt completely in control. Certain that he wouldn't fall. Ever. Cloak wouldn't drop him. How could he have even thought it would drop him? Onto one of the others or some furniture, he could never hope to repay in his lifetime. Stretching out his hand, he nearly touched the ceiling. Watching it move by in wonder. He could fucking fly. Nothing beat that. Well, no. Kissing M.J. for the first time had been like that too. More than words could ever tell. Pure excitement and joy and…

Should he ask out M.J. for homecoming? He wouldn't really go, so asking her felt cheap, but he really wanted to ask her. Yet, he should bide his time, he guessed. Wait things out until they happened like in the first place, without him forcing them too badly. Maybe he would even freak her out if he turned out to know too much about her. God. He had never considered it. He knew her, but she didn't know he knew her. To her, it would only be insanely creepy. Like the worst stalker ever.

Pushing his non-existing love life to the side, he concentrated on flying again. Why would Stephen ever be on the ground? This felt more exhilarating than anything else ever. Like the first time, he had jumped off a building. Adrenaline rushing through his body, hyping him up to no end.

Another pass through the room, he eventually paid attention to his surroundings. May seemed quite well, talking with the other women. He couldn't help but chuckle when Christine called Stephen a lazy ass. Could he really make things float around by thought? How fucking awesome! Turning mid-air, he looked at the magical lazy ass, who reminded him of the sparkles he had done ages ago. Well, it felt like ages ago. He hadn't done so since the light flashes. After that, he had been in hospital and now was only school, school, school and homework and whenever he could spare a second, Spider-Man.

Moving down to the brooding wizard, Peter hung upside down in the air.

"Someone home?" he joked, waving in front of his face.

"No." Stephen replied dryly.

Still, Peter chuckled. "Could we meet somewhen for magic lessons? I really want to…" he trailed off with a smile, looking at him expectantly.

The doc frowned, looking at him. A long moment of him getting stared at followed until he eventually answered.

"Sure, why not."

Peter beamed at the man and turned around, his feet only hovering centimeters above the ground. He just wanted to push himself off again, get back into floating and knowing he would get some magic lessons sooner or later when Tony joined them.

"What are you talking about?" he asked curiously.

"I get magical tutoring." Peter beamed happily, amusedly noting that Tony had asked them what they
were talking about. Did he feel left out?

"Oh. Magic." He said dryly.

"You could surely join us." Peter suggested eagerly, completely ignoring the not all too happy facial expression of the doc.

Luckily, Tony reacted the same way.

"Ah… think magic isn't for me." He said evasively and turned to look at the women. Them chatting lowly now.

"How is she? Christine?" Tony asked lowly, making Peter turn around to look at them while wondering how cloak could know he wanted to turn around in the first place. Cloak had to have crazy intuition. Realizing they changed the topic and realized he would want to look at the others.

"She is getting better. One step at a time." Stephen paused and looked at her, smiling when she returned the gaze curiously. "Magic in itself is getting okay. The other stuff…” he sighed and shook his head.

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"Do we want to cook together sometime? Or a movie night or anything?" May asked, watching Peter push himself off the ground, starting to float again before he 'swam' to a wall, pushing himself odd again.

Pepper hummed softly. "I don't want to say no because I'd love to, I can't cook all that often with others, but I don't know when I'll have time again. My next month is pretty tight sadly. We bought a small company and I want to sort through everything. Of course, I have employees for that, but I think you need to do the most important pieces by yourself. Get to know people, decide who to keep. All messy business."

"You have to fire people?" Christine asked softly.

Pepper shrugged weakly. "Causalities. Don't get me wrong here, I don't want to, but that's how takeovers work. We simply can't keep everybody. Really don't need four more HR employees, for example. The engineering and physics guys usually get an offer for reallocation or something along, as long as they don't sleep at work."

"Ah." May said lowly, really not liking the topic. "After you are done with your messy business?"

"Sure."

They both looked at Christine now, who rolled her eyes. "You really don't have to ask. Any plans what we might cook?" she asked seriously.

"Well, I do all things pasta. Lasagne most often." May replied happily.

"Mmm… I can fry chicken?" Christine offered unsurely.

"I can pay people to cook for me." Pepper deadpanned, making the others snort.

"When I cook, I go with salads or pasta. Something quick." She elaborated after a pause.

"Soo… pasta and fried chicken?" May suggested. "And if we mess up and set the kitchen on fire you pay someone to cook for us?"
All three of them chuckled. Setting the kitchen on fire.

"How do you do that, actually? Setting the kitchen on fire? I'm a terrible cook and even I can't manage it." Christine wondered aloud, looking at them.

"Leaving something on the stove for far too long, I guess?" Pepper offered.

"Adding hot water to hot oil." May said seriously. "Never do that."

Christine hummed with a glimmer in her eyes. May blinked and looked at Pepper.

"Do you have a fire extinguisher close by?"

"Friday controls the sprinkler system. We should be safe."

Christine just smirked. Just as if planning to set the kitchen on fire was extremely normal. "By the way…" her amused smirk faded and she looked timid suddenly. "Friday? Did you order dessert?"

"I'm sorry, Doctor Palmer, I didn't, but we have ice cream in the freezer." Friday replied after a long moment of silence.

"Oh my, I thought she wouldn't answer." Christine exhaled.

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"The food was delivered to the lobby." Friday announced. The delivery guy had just walked through the doors, looking around mildly astonished, just as if he had just entered an upscale hotel building. Probably his first time here. Running a facial recognition on him, Friday learned that he was a college student, jobbing part-time as anything he could get to make a living, yet she stored his face as 'delivery guy 73'. He really hadn't been here before.

"Please take the elevator." She said down in the lobby, watching how the man with his bag of food froze for a moment, looked around and eventually complied. While she sent the elevator up and had an eye on the waiting man, she announced him being in the elevator up in the loft.

"Awesome." Her boss said, getting to his feet and walked towards the elevator. "Can you guys set the table? At least some forks and knives. Doubt we'll need plates."

"Sure."

While Pepper got up to walk to the kitchen, the odd cloak with Peter in tow following her, the elevator came to a stop, dinged and opened. Delivery guy 73 stepped out timidly, his gaze wandering through the room before he smiled politely at her boss. Surely, he wasn't that polite to everyone.

Getting all their food and handing some of it off to Stephen, who had finally moved to be helpful, her boss raised his voice.

"11 items. Is that correct, Friday?"

"Yes." She replied dutifully.

"Awesome. Wait a moment." Moving to get some cash, he handed a tip to delivery guy 73 while shaking his hand with a smile. "Thanks. Have a nice evening." And with that, her boss shooed him back into the elevator. Friday sent it back downstairs while adding another 100 dollars to the 'tips for dinner' list.
After the table was set, 6 times pizza, a cheeseburger Tony had instantly claimed, chicken wings and cheese fries, and everyone had found a seat, comfortable silence filled the room. Peter watched the others eat, while he helped himself to a combination of all 6 pizzas. A slice here, a slice there, a chicken wing for a change, some of the cheese fries, some more pizza. His gaze fell on cloak who had settled on Stephen's shoulders again, not moving the slightest. For a moment, he wondered if cloak chilled more often while floating in place or on Stephen's shoulders. It seemed quite comfortable right where it was, after all.

His gaze moved on to his aunt, who sat right beside him. Right now, she seemed okay. Chatting with the others had definitely helped to calm her down, food was always good, but how would she be once they were back in their flat, all alone with nothing to keep her busy? Silently, he vowed to watch TV with her all night until she sent him to bed. Keep her busy as long as he could. Maybe he should have told her more about Thanos before they got here, yet she would have always freaked out, he guessed. Here, she had at least some company to keep her busy, not that he wasn't company to keep her busy, but more people always helped. Luckily, they got along quite well. While he grabbed another chicken wing, his gaze inevitably moved to Christine once again. She too seemed to be cheery. In this case, seemed to be had to be the right phrase. Stephen had told them, that she had good days and rather terrible days and slept barely. At least she ate well, obviously.

Tony and Pepper were eating mostly silent, at times whispering lowly to one another. Seemingly, Tony wanted to convince her to try the cheese fries which she declined time and again. Until he stared at her with a pleading gaze and she just rolled her eyes and ate one, looking at him with a superior smile. Are you happy now? He had to be as he dropped the topic altogether. Instead, he got another chicken wing.

After having stuffed himself full, Peter leaned back with a happy sigh. Good old fast food. The others were still rather quiet, only talking here and there, fighting for the last slice of spicy salami pizza.

"We need a name." he said, feeling gazes switch to him and stay on him. "Well, I was really bored while in the hospital and realized we need a name. We can't use the Avengers, obviously already taken, but we still need a name for the group we'll assemble. Something like… I don't know… Survivors, Titan Killers, -"

"Prevengers."

"Time Travellers."

"Reversers."

"Three idiots and a cloak."

"Hey!"

"What? You could up the count for every new member."

"The Impossible."

"Sounds like a Disney movie."

"The Thanos paradox?"

"Sound's even worse."
"Infinity Stone thieves."

"Back to the future."

"Hopefully not."

"You know what you are? A ragtag team trying to save the universe." Pepper said dryly.

"Precise description doesn't exclude new members, but terrible selling point." Tony commented.

While the others went on throwing ever sillier group names at each other, Peter went silent. They were a ragtag team trying to save the universe, weren't they? A tech-genius, a sorcerer, a teenager and a magical cloak. Four beings against the most dangerous madman until now. Could they make it? Well, they had to make it. Yet, recruiting people to their cause would be a whole different story. Where to find allies, for starters? Earth didn't have all too many superheroes they didn't already know about. Maybe Tony could find some more. He had found him too, after all.

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Once the table was freed from empty pizza boxes, chicken wing containers and leftover fries, Pepper smiled at them.

"Dessert?"

"Which kind of ice cream do you have?" Stephen asked. He had heard Friday telling them they had some, yet she had sadly never bothered to say which kind exactly.

Pepper smirked. "Guess."

He stared at her. Looked at Tony. Which kind of ice cream would he… groaning, he closed his eyes. He knew very well what they would get.

"What is it?" Christine asked curiously.

"Doesn't matter. No pint for me, please!"

Yet, he got one. A pint of Ben & Jerry's Stark Raving Hazelnuts ended up in front of him.

"I won't eat that." He said firmly.

"Ow. Why not? It's really delicious." Christine said cheery, already having a spoon.

"You really should try." Peter joined in.

"Only ice cream I eat lately." Tony chimed in. As if he had wanted to know that particular piece of information.

"No. I don't eat it."

"Mm… you said it was chalky when we first met. You have to have tried it. Try again. Maybe you like it now."

"I don't eat anything with your name on it." He scoffed lowly.

The entire room stared at him after that. Wrong tone, he guessed, but why wouldn't they drop the damn topic?
"So, if I bought Walmart and Target and Whole Foods and 7 eleven and printed my name on every product, you wouldn't eat anything anymore?"

"I'd buy produce from the farmer's market."

"Don't mind, I can buy every family run farm in the surrounding area." Tony challenged with a smirk.

Stephen frowned. How to… "I go shopping in China. Portals do help with that."

Tony scoffed, yet an amused gleam appeared in his eyes, combined with a slightly worrisome smirk.

To his horror, he watched him getting up, walking around the table and leaning close to Christine, whispering into her ear. His girlfriend frowned for starters, but the frown gradually disappeared. She even whispered back!

Once Tony had left her side, Stephen got up and leaned on the table beside her, looking at his girl.

"What did he say?"

Yet, Christine only smiled sweetly at him.

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Seeing the portal in front of her, Christine's world shrunk down to a circle of golden sparkles and her own living room behind it. Only three steps away. Three tiny steps, but to her, it was the world. The portal seemed like the gate to a hellish abyss, waiting to swallow her alive, like an old, dangerous bridge which could tumble any second and make her fall to her certain death. Maybe her flat wasn't even her flat! Could Stephen be tricked into believing he sent her home but didn't actually? Maybe it was a different dimension which only looked like her place. Terrible beings waiting in the shadows for her to walk through, ready to kidnap and kill her at any second.

No. No, Stephen would know. He wouldn't send her to certain death. Yet, why the hell had she insisted on doing this alone? Walk through the portal home. She had to be insane. She couldn't do this. She felt, how she started to tremble lightly. She would start to cry soon, wouldn't she? Then, she would sink to the floor and spent ages sobbing, unable to focus on a coherent thought. There would only be fear of this fucking portal, of Mordo dragging her trough, of that stinging pain at her throat and blood gushing from the wound. At times, she could still hear her frantic heartbeat. How it had gotten weaker and weaker, her time in life running out.

If she didn't do it now, take those silly three steps, she wouldn't do it ever. Stephen would have to pick her up and get her home using the stupid metro. The others would see her break to a thousand tiny pieces. Taking another breath, she focused on the last thought. She didn't want the others to know just how bad she was. She didn't want to be around when Stephen opened a portal for Peter and May. She couldn't handle a third one. Accordingly, she had voluntarily suggested getting home before them.

Taking another breath, she took a step. The hissing of the portal grew louder. Why was she doing this? This was insane! She was going to die, surely. This time, for real. Yet, now that she had taken the step, all she had to do was set another foot forward. She couldn't stop now. She couldn't just freeze in the middle of the room. Another step. The hissing grew louder. And a final step. When she passed the portal, it was the only sound she heard. Golden sparkles and hissing and hissing and hissing. The sound filled all her being until she was sure there was nothing left. Maybe she wasn't anymore too. Already – but then her foot reached the other side. She felt the difference in atmosphere
between her flat and Stark’s place. Another step and she was fully through. Her heart was hammering like crazy, her hands shaking lightly, but she managed to place a smile on her lips and turn around, looking at the others and waved goodbye. She could focus on Stephen. Nearly ignore the portal around the small area which she could see.

"See you in a minute!"

Stephen nodded towards her and the portal closed.

Once it was gone, she sighed in relief and hurried blindly to her couch, collapsing on it. Her heart was beating frantically, her breath ragged, her body trembled. It was gone. She was alive. She was home. She had made it! Yet, she snapped for air, all she could think about was the stupid hissing. It was always there. Loudest, when the portal formed and then just telling of its presence. She had made it. She had taken the step and…

Now, all she had to do was wait for Stephen. She could do that. All alone in her flat. With the shadows growing longer. A creaking board let her jerk upwards, look around. Was she still alone? Her gaze moved through the flat. Was that a shadow or a person? Forcing herself to breathe calmly, she focused on her prior accomplishment. She had walked through a fucking portal all on her own! She had made it. She could do this now, too. Just chill and wait for her love. She could do it. She could do it. She could hear the wind outside. A shadow moved, flashed across the wall. She could do it? The board creaked again.

Screaming, she jumped up and ran to the kitchen, already feeling the hand which would grab her. She couldn't do it. She couldn't fucking do it. Grabbing the largest knife of hers she could get her hands on, she forced her breath down, pressed her back against the kitchen wall and peeked back into her living room. It was empty. Yet, it sure as hell didn't feel empty.

She stayed like this for what had to be an eternity, only once in a while wondering where the hell Stephen was, he couldn't need all that long to create another portal when she heard the lock of her door click.

Oh God, no. As fast as her heart had beat before, now it seemed to slow down and stop. A moment turning into forever. Please, let it be Stephen. Please, please, please. Who else would walk in through the door? He probably tried to be considerate, trying to not freak her out with another damn portal. Pressing her eyes shut, he heard the door close again. Definitely Stephen. Had to be Stephen. Or someone else, who didn't want to raise any suspicion. The boards creaked some more with every step her hopefully Stephen intruder took. Oh God. She would… if it wasn't Stephen…

"Back to knifing me again?" the voice of Stephen asked softly. Opening her eyes, he was there. Looking at her with a calm smile and warmth in his gaze. Stephen. It had just been her boyfriend all along, coming back home to her. No one trying to kill her. She was safe. For a long moment, she stared at him dumbfounded, not fully comprehending. Only then, reality sat in.

She was safe.

Her knife clattered to the ground. The sound seemed to come from far away, dull and silent.

With an odd mixture between frantic laughter and sobbing, she threw herself at him, luckily getting caught and pulled against his chest.

The next thing she knew was her laying in Stephen's arms and on his chest, them laying on the couch, cloak draped on top of her. How had they gotten here? Had Stephen teleported them? Had he carried her? She couldn't tell. She really couldn't tell.
All the while, he held her, stroked her, hummed songs she didn't recognize. Eventually, her trembling grew less, her sobbing stopped, her heartbeat slowed. She was only sniveling a bit.

"We should lock the knives away." She said eventually.

"Then you would simply go with the pan." He said back seriously, making her giggle frantically. She would go with the pan. Somehow, she couldn't stop imagining knocking him out cold with a pan. Poor Stephen.

After her giggling stopped, she cleared her throat. "This isn't funny." She claimed seriously, even though she had been the one giggling like crazy.

"Mm… under a certain aspect it might be." He chirped. Before she could complain, he already moved, cloak flipped away and he flipped them around, starting to cover her face with kisses. She felt his warm lips on her cheeks, her forehead, her nose, her lips, her chin. She had to be gross, after all the crying. Still, here he was, kissing her. He was kissing her tears away, wasn't he? Sighing gently, happily, she stretched out her arms and wrapped them around him, pulling him close with a surprised hum. His face was pressed against her neck, his body somehow draped on top of her. With every passing second, he grew heavier. Not that it was his fault, his arms were caught against her sides, after all.

"Can we flip?"

"Sure, we can." He replied softly. Done as said, she closed her eyes resting on his chest, listening to his slow, steady heartbeat yet again.

"I'm sorry." For nearly stabbing you. Again.

"For what?" he asked softly, his hand rubbing her back. "You were awesome! You walked through it all alone! Wouldn't have believed it if you told me earlier."

"I freaked out here." She said quietly, feeling way less excited than he sounded.

Stephen huffed. "You walked through it. That's all that matters. The other stuff will come in time."

Hearing the certainty in his voice, she was nearly willing to believe him. Yet, she wasn't sure if she could do it a second time or ever again. Walk through it on her own.

Christine stayed all snuggled up in his arms until she eventually realized a damn knife was still laying on her floor. Sitting up, she kissed him gently and slipped away, walking to pick up the knife. Halfway there, she realized the knife was gone. Turning, she looked at cloak, who floated in the corner, watching them calmly before turning away to stare out the window. Had it picked up the knife in the meantime?

"I wonder what it is looking at." Christine said softly, returning to Stephen who had sat up and leaned against the back of the couch.

"Stalking the neighbors." Stephen said jokingly. "By the way neighbors, we should really get some curtains. Don't want to know what they think when they see cloak."

"Probably guess they are going insane."

"I would if I saw a floating red cloak."

Chuckling, Christine leaned against him, gazing at cloak which was still staring out the window. She
wondered if it knew something. Maybe it knew why Stephen had nightmares and couldn't tell her. Christine blinked at the thought. Cloak had started with its odd staring out the window after the last light flash. Stephen had gotten those terrible nightmares after the last light flash. If only she knew what was going on.

Looking back at Stephen, she realized he watched her curiously. God, her thoughts must have shown on her face!

"Let's watch a movie." She said on a whim and grabbed the remote, turning on her TV. She had to distract him. TV would hopefully help with that. Zapping through channel after channel, she already considered switching to Netflix. There was absolutely nothing interesting one could watch. May it be documentary, movie, sitcom or...

"Screw it, stop here."

She blinked, actually paying attention to the TV. Superman? No, how was this thing called? Man of Steel?

"You like superhero movies now?" she asked curiously.

"Well, in a way. It's like watching others do my work." He joked.

Christine chuckled softly. "Well, that's true." Back in the day, they had watched medical stuff to make fun of the inaccuracy. This was basically the same, just with less medicine and more superheroes. The magic was missing, though.

"Do you watch Harry Potter too?" she teased.

"I'm no wizard." He scoffed like usual.

"Yeah, yeah. Sure." She whispered amusedly to herself, leaning against him some more, with her eyes on the screen.

God.

How boring.

At least Henry Cavill looked good. In a way.

Soon enough, her thoughts drifted off. Back to the time they had spent at the tower.

Moving slightly, she sighed inside her head. She hadn't learned anything helpful, really. Hadn't learned anything about why Stephen might have nightmares. They had talked about future stuff, which he would already know. Steve going back in time to save the day would surely not freak him out night after night. They had a different timeline now, after all. This wouldn't happen if everything went well. Yet, if it didn't… her gaze moved to Stephen. He was watching the movie with a smile. He could just tell her if he was scared of the future, right?

"Stephen?"

He hummed, his gaze moving towards her.

"What did you talk about while we were outside?" she asked casually. Maybe the key lay in what she hadn't heard.

Her lover shrugged. "A first outline of how to lure him to where we want him. Still, have to decide
on where exactly we want him and how exactly to do it, but we have some main points. I guess we can work from there."

She chuckled. "Very precise. Don't you already know how to do it?" He had the Time Stone after all.

Yet, he only smiled somewhat back at her. "There are many ways." He said diplomatically and moved his gaze back to the screen. Was the discussion over?

"But you know?" she insisted.

He continued to look at the screen. Suddenly, she realized he was thinking about what to say. He was using a deliberate pause, during which he acted as if watching the movie, to think about his words. Stephen Strange, the man she knew, had never deliberately thought about something when he was invested in a topic with all his heart. He just knew. He didn't need silly time to think about what to say. Unless… unless he was spinning of lies off the top of his head.

"Yes." He said softly. "There are just really many possibilities how things can go down. If we lure him to Wakanda, we might disperse his armies more, but consequently, need to face attacks from multiple sides. If we lure him to the Avenger's Headquarters, he will decimate the entire damn thing and probably hurt, with some bad luck kill some. It's just a pro and con. Really annoying. We'll discuss once things get clearer. From that far away, there are like a billion possibilities. Not going to look through all of them."

She stared at him. A moment ago, she had been convinced he was lying. Him needing this one second had always been an indicator of him lying. Other people blushed, some stared at the upper left or right corner, Stephen hesitated. Yet, his words sounded reasonable. They sounded true and logical, that logical in fact, that she wanted to believe them. From that far away, there had to be a trillion ways how things could go down, right? More choices lead to more outcomes. Right? Did it work like that?

"I see." She said softly and dropped the topic. She didn't want to think about the alternative. Of him lying. He didn't lie, period. He would never lie when it came to their lives. They would stop Thanos. End of the story.

"Which was your favorite group name?" he asked casually, obviously wanting to change the topic. She jumped at it eagerly.

"Hopefully not." She replied with all the seriousness she could muster. Christine saw his gaze move to her. Would he tell her 'hopefully not' hadn't been a group name? Seemingly, he didn't bother. His gaze returned to the TV.

"What did he tell you?" Stephen eventually asked, making Christine smirk. She had known he would ask. Truth be told, he had managed astonishingly long without asking.

"I can't tell."

His gaze returned, stayed on her. "You can't tell?"

"Nope. I can't tell."

"Really? Are you sure? Tony isn't here, you know?"

She chuckled. "I can't tell. You'll know in time. Don't worry."
Yet, Stephen being Stephen, he scoffed. Oh, her always curious lover. He couldn't wait.

"If you use the Time Stone to cheat, we'll not have sex for three months." She added, guessing what he was planning to do.

"You wouldn't do that."

"I can and I will. Just behave until I tell you."

Once Stephen was done scoffing, huffing and groaning, he simply returned to the movie as if nothing had ever happened, letting her drift away again. She eventually dozed off, snapping back awake to watch Henry Cavill break Zod's neck, saving some random family along the way. She remembered she had dreamed something, but she simply couldn't tell what exactly. Her pondering her five-minute sleep led her right back to her original problem. Stephen's nightmares. If only she could peek inside his head and know what was going on.

She blinked. Peek into his head. She couldn't do that, obviously, but maybe, just maybe…

"Can we share dreams?"

She couldn't say that stepping through a portal into her own living room was the craziest thing ever, not after learning that trillions would die, that time travel was real and that magic was a thing, yet actually stepping through a portal into her own living room was the craziest thing ever. May stood there, beside her couch and stared back through the golden circle, watching Peter say goodbye to Tony. Normally, she would have been worried about the odd closeness her nephew had with the billionaire, currently though she could only think about a golden circle in her living room connecting her to Midtown Manhattan. This was insane! Completely, utterly nuts! She placed her stuff on the couch and stepped back through the portal. She looked through it and saw her flat, back in Queens. How was that even possible?

Shaking her head and muttering to herself, she hugged Pepper goodbye and brooded over how to say goodbye to Tony. They weren't really close, but he had been an awesome host and she guessed they were somewhat acquaintances now. Before she could come to a decision, Tony smiled at her.

"Can we talk for a moment?" he asked softly. Nodding, she followed him a bit away, hearing Peter say goodbye to Stephen. Glancing at her nephew, she watched how he tried to say goodbye to cloak, but the red piece of cloth simply didn't move an inch.

"I know about Peter's hospital bills." Tony said softly. She stared at him, too shocked to say a word. With everything else on top, it was simply too much to comprehend.

"How?" she eventually managed.

"Doesn't matter." He replied softly. May wanted to object, that it fucking surely did matter, but he already went on speaking. "I paid them."

Her mouth fell open and she stared at him dumbfounded, not saying a word for what had to be hours. Maybe the snap had already happened. Maybe she was dead and imagined all of it. Maybe they stood here for two years and she was still staring at him.

"Why? No. We… we don't need charity." As if she didn't have any money! They didn't need a crazy billionaire to pay their bills! She had everything under control!
Tony shrugged. "I have an urge to watch out for the others. I'd do the same for Stephen if need be." Would he? The two seemed a bit edgy. "Honestly, though, I feel as if him getting hurt during the last light flash was my fault. I should have been better prepared." He paused, his gaze turning absent. "Even though no one could have ever guessed we can end up in the future, but..." he shook his head, smiling weakly. "I'll try to look out for him. Not that he couldn't handle things himself, but still."

May still stared at him dumbfounded. This wasn't an explanation, this was only avoiding the actual point. Skirting around the truth.

"Why do you care so much?" she asked, her eyes narrowing, watching him closely. Why had he such an interest in her Peter?

Tony sighed, cast his gaze down, looked back up at her. In a way, he looked embarrassed. "I recruited him. I have to look out for him." He said very softly. May could only guess there was more to it. She had seen it, after all. The way Peter acted around him. Just as if...

Taking a breath, she pushed the thought aside. He had seemed genuine. Embarrassed about it, yet it made sense. He had recruited her Peter, hadn't he?

"You took him with you to that airport battle with Captain America, right?" They had met Stark only shortly before that. "The entire Stark Internship never happened, right?" she asked suspiciously.

Her answer was an affirming mumble. "I got him the suit to protect him better. Fighting the others can be dangerous. He couldn't go in there with his makeshift cloth-suit." Tony shook his head lightly. "I let him have it afterward. I didn't think he would stop being Spider-Man, so I could as well keep an eye on him."

May still only stared at him. That... actually made sense, in a way. Still, something bugged her, but if she ignored that one, she could live with the explanation, she guessed. For a time, at least.

"I'll pay you back." Was the first thing she said. "As I said. We don't need charity. How much was it?"

"Ah... I guess you'll get the bill soon, listing everything and showing that it got paid. That's why I tell you. Couldn't have Peter stutter his way through it. I paid for it, I have to tell you. Just forgot about it all day until you started leaving." He smiled weakly. "Planning was more important." He made a tiny pause. "You really don't need to pay it back."

"I want to." She insisted.

Eventually, Tony nodded. "In rates. I won't get you into financial troubles."

At that, May scoffed. "How much was it?" As if she couldn't handle it.

He barked a laugh. "I have no idea. Friday or Pepper do most of my transactions. I just take a look at the summaries I get. I do know, though, that hospital stays without insurance are a lot of money to normal people, no offense."

She wanted to complain, because she surely felt offended, yet she realized it had no use. She should swallow her pride on this one and pay him back in rates. If he hadn't paid it, they would be in trouble, after all. Besides, she would soon know how much it had been. Just wait a few days and check the bill.

Taking a deep breath, she forced a definitely awfully looking smile. "Thanks."
The man, who she still didn't want to trust fully, smiled warmly back at her. "You're welcome."

Walking back to Stephen and Pepper, she said goodbye to the former with a firm handshake, feeling the trembling of his hands, waved at cloak and stepped through the portal, once again amazed by it despite having other things to brood about. Turning around, she watched how Peter hopped through, turned around and waved at the others. A moment later, the portal closed, leaving only some golden sparkles behind which soon vanished into nothingness. Midtown Manhattan was no longer connected to Queens.

"That's insane." She muttered below her breath.

Peter turned his head towards her though, looking at her curiously. Had he heard her?

"Magic. All of it." She tried it with a laugh. Peter smiled back at her for sure, but she wasn't certain if he did it to be nice or he did it because her laugh had actually helped.

"Movies together?" he offered and moved to drop down on the couch. Since when did he offer to watch movies with her? He always complained about her choice.

"Why do you want to watch movies with me?" she asked seriously while picking up her things from beside Peter.

"Well, for starters your love stories aren't yet airing, so I have a chance to actually watch something decent and besides that… just have a chill Sunday?"

He just didn't want to leave her alone, didn't he? Yet, May smiled softly at him.

"How is your homework-mountain?"

"Ahh… shrinking?"

She stared at him for a very long moment, battling her own want to keep him close and his own best interest in getting his crazy homework done.

"Fine. I'll change into something more comfortable." She finally decided.

Peter nodded. "I'll do the same."

Back on the couch, she zapped through the channels and eventually settled with a stupid superhero movie. Peter would like it for sure. If he wanted to stay around to cheer her up, she could pick a boring movie once in a while. Besides, the program wasn't all too good at that time of the day anyway.

"Do you have a different connection to superhero movies, now that you are one?" May asked after watching Superman and Zod's minions basically destroy a city.

"No, not really. They are just movies. I rather wonder how the actors feel playing superheroes, knowing about us."

May hummed. "I guess it's still awesome to play a Superman. So many people grew up with him. Maybe they feel more connected with you." She paused and looked at Peter. "Do you think movies will be made about you someday?" she asked curiously.

Peter chuckled. "A Spider-Man movie? Don't really see that coming, but one about the likes of Tony Stark? Definitely. There are all sorts of movies about celebrities, latest once they are dead. As if the
movie industry wouldn't try to capitalize to tell his story."

May smiled softly. "True enough." She said and dropped the topic. Only to pick it up in some form while the movie progressed. Watching Earth-destroying machines be deployed everywhere made her inevitable think about trillions dying. "You'll stop him, right? The guy with the stones. You'll not let him destroy everything."

She could hear Peter breathing slowly. "We will. I will." He said, determined. Suddenly, she realized it was probably the most serious thing he would ever say in all his life. Nothing would ever be able to compare. Not with saving half the universe.

"I'm counting on you." She whispered quietly.

Peter looked at her and smiled. For the first time, she could see fear in his gaze. True and utter fear. In the same moment, she wished she had never seen it. If he was afraid, what would it mean for her? For all of them?

"Ehm… what did you talk about with Tony?" Peter asked, the expression in his eyes gone. Probably well hidden behind everyday talk. Behind changing the subject, because he too didn't want to think about what was to come. How could they all live with it? Knowing what was coming every day?

"Oh, he told me he paid your hospital bills."

Watching Peter blush made her smile happily. Her cute little Pete. There he was, looking caught and embarrassed at the same time.

"I really wanted to tell you, but…" he cast his gaze down. "Didn't know how to." He mumbled. May chuckled amused, feeling happier than she normally would. Happier than in a long while, at least it felt like that.

"Of course." She teased and ruffled his hair, earning a groan and Peter pulling away, trying to fix the mess she had made.

"I'll pay him back." She said casually, her gaze returning to the movie she didn't want to see anymore, because it reminded her too much of a future, she didn't want to ever see. She would go back to love stories. Simple, shallow, perfect to put her mind at ease.

"I'll help. Was my fault I ended up in hospital."

May snorted. "No. You do school and your Spider-Man thing, with school being a higher priority. I won't have you work on top of that to earn some lousy money. If you really want to, you can take a job during summer break."

"Deal!"

Once Peter was in bed, May went on watching movie after movie, trying to distract herself, waiting to be tired enough to just drop into bed and sleep away. Yet, whenever she thought now was time, that she was tired enough and turned off the TV, her thoughts jumped back to Thanos. He, who was willing to kill trillions, half of everything in the universe. How could they live in case they failed? How should they move on after that? Just imagining her staying alive with Peter gone made her heart ache. She couldn't lose him. She couldn't watch another die and disappear from her life. How would the others make it? Tony without Pepper, Stephen without Christine or worse, the other way around. Knowing that their loved ones had tried all there was, every possible future they could take and yet
She started to sob again, cry her eyes out for what felt like hours. Without Peter, without the other women to keep her company and keep her head busy, all she could do was wonder how anyone could live with knowing about Thanos. What he would do to them. All of them. How could there be a life after Thanos, if he succeeded with his plan once again? This time, maybe, the wrong people died. With Tony dead, they would surely never figure out time travel. Without time travel, there was no second chance to begin with. Without…

Sitting up abruptly, May staggered out of bed, wiping away her tears. She couldn't keep crying for hours. She couldn't keep thinking about what if. What if didn't help her, obviously. It only drove her mad. Sneaking into the kitchen and getting herself some chocolate, she sat down in the dark living room, staring at the turned off TV and ate chocolate. Chocolate always helped, right? Eventually, once she had somewhat calmed down, she got up and tiptoed to Peter's room, peeking inside.

He laid in bed, all snuggled into his pillow, his blanket thrown off his body partly, nearly falling to the ground. He looked happy. He looked at peace. How could he be at peace if Thanos was just around the corner? If he was nearly upon, how could anyone sleep? Taking a breath, May eventually shut up her thoughts. He believed in them, didn't he? He believed that they could make it, with all his heart and all his being, because, honestly, he had no other choice. He too would be afraid to lose her. Loose Ned and Tony and… Thinking about it would only make life impossible.

Swallowing hard, May slowly and carefully closed the door again. She too had to believe that he could make it. They all could make it. Three idiots and a cloak between life as they knew it and Thanos. Returning to her bed, she grabbed her phone, added a few more alarms, after all, she would have a damn hard time to get up in the morning, and started some music, just to be save. Listening to the Beatles singing, she slowly drifted off. If Peter could sleep, so could she. If the others could make their peace with it, she had to do it too. Somehow. In time. Until then, she would listen to the Beatles singing.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed the ride.

So many things happened I wanted to write for ages.
Had to put the Ben & Jerrys in, just because. You'll get to know what Tony and Christine talked about somewhen soon, I guess. Even though, there are more important chapters waiting first. I'll see how long Stephen can live with not knowing.
Peter will get magic tutoring.
Finally, put in suggestions for a group name. You can vote for one if you want to as I haven't yet decided. It'll play a role in things to come.
Had my fun with cloak.
Yes, Superman exist in this universe.

Lastly, I'll try to publish some updates next week. Considering I'll write shorter chapters for a little, things should definitely work out.
Happy Sunday everyone!

Or Monday, depending on where you are.

This chapter starts right where the last one ended.

This time, it is all about Christine and Stephen. And dreams, obviously.

Have fun!

"Can we share dreams?" Christine asked curiously.

Stephen's gaze, which had been focused on the TV, moved to her. Christine felt, how he watched her closely now, not to miss the tiniest reaction.

"We can, yeah." His gaze was still on her. Somehow, it made her feel uneasy. As if she had asked a wrong question. "Why would you want to share dreams?"

She couldn't tell him why. He would surely find a way to change the topic if she directly asked for his nightmares. He would surely not share his dreams with her either if she told him she wanted to take a look at what went on inside his head night after night.

Sitting up straight to better look at him, Christine decided to go with parts of the truth. At least, it was true to her. He would see it, wouldn't he? Like that, she could disperse his suspicions.

"I dream about…" being abducted and killed. "Well, you know. I'd love to dream something else, anything else really. All I want is…” she sighed. "not be inside my head for a night." She said seriously, feeling uneasy at the very thought of her dreams. She hated them more than anything. They always threw her back to that day. Getting away from them once in a while would be like a free day after a 40-hour shift. Pure heaven. To see what went on in Stephen's dreams would just be the bonus, she really wanted to have.

Stephen's watchful gaze was gone. Instead, his gaze was filled with warmth. Cupping her cheek, he smiled at her.

"Okay. We'll share dreams, then. I can't promise you they'll be any better, though." He said matter of factly, leaning close to peck her lips.

Christine had to keep herself from smirking. The moment she had waited for. A chance to ask what he was dreaming about without obviously asking what he was dreaming about.

"Why? What are you dreaming about? I mean, I know about your nightmares, but…” she shrugged her shoulders, looking at him curiously.

He sighed lowly. "Things that will hopefully never be. If they come to pass, I'm not sure what I'm
going to do. If I can do anything."

Christine frowned. Things that would hopefully never be? If they were, he didn't know…

"Possible futures? Those 14 million and then some chances to be killed by Thanos?" she asked, hoping she would get an answer.

She actually got one. A simple nod, before his gaze returned to the TV.

"Anything else I have to know about dream sharing?" she asked curiously, nearly feeling bad about interrupting the movie by asking questions. He really seemed to like it. Even though she couldn't quite understand why.

"Mm…" he pulled her closer against him again. "If there is no Christine in the dream, you'll be a third party, watching. If there is a Christine, you might take her place, but will be unable to do anything on your own."

"I won't be able to do anything on my own?"

"Yeah. The dream has a script, so to speak. If you sneak into dream Christine, you have to play her role and won't have a say in how things work out. If I happen to have a lucid dream, I'd recognize you as you and we could speak freely. Might as well happen, that I see two Christines and it turns into some creepy nightmare." He paused and smirked. "Or a sex dream, whatever happens first."

Christine giggled and nudged his side playfully. "I'll remember what happens in the dreams, right?" If not, the entire affair was slightly useless. For learning what happened in his dreams, at least.

"Yeah. For you, it'll be one very long lucid dream, unless you are a dream Christine. Either way, you'd still remember the dream."

Awesome. She could literally work with that.

"So, I'll learn your dirtiest, darkest secrets?" she teased, making him chuckle.

"I fear so." He whispered back amused. "Don't go tell them around, okay?"

"Never would." She replied affectionately, wondering what he would do with two Christines. Probably have sex, if he didn't get murdered by them first, but in which positions and how?

----

Slipping into her nightgown, she threw a gaze to Stephen, who wrestled with his jeans. Every once in a while, he seemed determined to pull his jeans off without magic. Just with the help of his hands.

Usually, and today was no difference, he didn't succeed. His hands trembled too much to push the button back, which held the jeans. Watching him always reminded her to take nothing for granted. The poor man couldn't even get out of his trousers on his own! Yet, why did he have to do this today? Was he buying himself some time before he linked their dreams together?

Settling onto their bed, Christine pretended to not watch him. Well, at least not say anything. He really wasn't making any progress. None at all. Rather, he seemed to be doing even worse than some other days. Usually, he could at least move the button around, but today…

Today, Stephen spent longer fighting with the damn button. As if he was determined to finally do it. Yet, he never even got close. His hands couldn't keep a strong hold on his jeans. Eventually, he
groaned lowly and surrendered, letting his jeans vanish with magic.

While Christine wondered where his clothes disappeared to, not all of them always turned up again, she saw his hands. Trembling way worse than usual.

"Come." She said softly, making him sigh and join her on the bed. Instantly, she took hold of his hands, stroking them gently.

"I really thought I'd make it today." He whispered, his disappointment making her feel bad. She had seen he couldn't make it and hadn't said a word.

"You'll make it soon, don't worry." She said softly, turning to massage his worse trembling left.

Stephen only sighed in response and kept quiet. Christine didn't say anything either. What was there left to say anyway? Cheering him on was a delicate topic, especially if he got worse. Watching him and eventually freaking out when he made it one day seemed like the safer route. Pushing her thoughts away, Christine fully concentrated on his hand, trying to soothe his worse trembling into a moderate, normal trembling. Only after she was done, she looked up again, encountering a soft and loving gaze.

Seeing it made her heart flutter. How long had he looked at her like that? The entire time?

"Soo…" he broke the odd, but unbelievably comfortable silence between them. "Dream sharing." He said seriously, pulling his hand out of hers. "I'll draw a set of runes and then open my hand for you to touch it. Only press your fingertips against mine."

Christine took a breath and nodded. "Only touch fingertips, got that." She repeated, watching him move away a bit to get some space. Like usual, she watched the golden runes fade into each other in awe. God, how much she would love to be able to do it.

"Christine?"

She blinked, seeing his hand. Yeah. Right. Fingertips.

Touching his with her own, she gasped in surprise. Warmth rushed into her hand and down her arm, slowly filling her body.

"Wow." She whispered lowly. "That's how magic feels?" Once she moved her hand away, the feeling would stop, right? She didn't want it to stop. She wanted to be all wrapped up in this warmth, feel comfortable and safe, forever.

"Some spells do." Stephen said softly, at last pulling his hand away. The feeling stayed for some seconds longer until it faded. Only a distant, hard to describe memory.

Looking at her own hand, Christine smiled happily. Some spells felt like that. For a split second, she wondered how portals felt, fear already wanting to slip in, but she pushed the thought away. No portals right now. Only dream sharing.

"And now?" she asked, looking at Stephen curiously.

"We go to bed and both fall asleep." He said matter of factly and dropped down onto the bed, snuggling into his pillow. "Some cuddling?"

Humming, she joined in, snuggling into his arms while listening to his calm and steady heartbeat.
"Good night, my wizard."

"I'm no wizard."

"Okay. Good night, my not-Harry-Potter cult member."

He chuckled softly.

"Good night, Christine."

----

Stephen, the lucky bastard, dozed off nearly instantly, snoring lightly all the while.

Christine, in comparison, lay awake for what had to be hours, wondering what she was missing. If he had his nightmares right now, her entire plan would be for naught. Yet again, he wasn't thrashing around, which usually was a sign for his bad dreams. No. The man was sleeping soundly beside her. Hopefully, she would be by his side once his bad dreams started.

Or she would just continue to lay awake for hours on end. Fucking hell. Turning around carefully to not wake him, she spent a while trying out different positions. Laying on her stomach, her side, her back, snuggled against his chest, away from him and back in his arms. None got her any closer to dreaming.

What if she didn't fall asleep at all? Would the spell simply fade come morning? Would he cast it again, allow her a second time to escape into his dreams?

Oh, fucking hell…

Grumbling, she closed her eyes, trying to force herself to relax, willed herself to fall asleep right now, which of course didn't work. She was still awake. Laying in his arms, listening to his slow heartbeat and his snoring. At least, it wasn't a loud snore. Just a cute little one.

Turning around in his arms yet again, she grumbled. Fucking sleep which wouldn't come. What if she was missing everything important? What if all she would see was him feeding some ducks or something equally boring?

"Christine?"

Christine blinked. He had to have woken up and -

Suddenly, she wasn't laying in his arms anymore. She wasn't even in bed anymore. She stood in her bedroom, feeling badly disoriented. What the heck had just happened? How had she gotten onto her feet? Had Stephen magicked her around? Trying to grasp the situation, she realized Stephen wasn't here either. Taking a deep breath, she tried to calm down. He couldn't be far. The flat wasn't all too big. He had to be in the living room, most likely.

Opening the door to said room, she froze in her motions. Stephen sat on her couch. As well as another Christine. He was holding a sleek silver ring in his trembling hand, looking at her with love and fear and excitement.

Oh… oh God!

She… she had just walked in on him proposing to her!

Oh God, what should she do? What would her dream-self do? Would she take her place now, that
the real her was here? Could she say yes for her? Was it normal to be envious of herself? After all, he had asked her and not her.

O…okay… that one didn't make any sense. It was his dream and…

"Oh Stephen!" the dream Christine said brightly, throwing herself at him, hugging him tightly.

"Of course, I..." while she let go of him, her gaze graced her. Christine's blood went cold, when she watched herself go from happy, lovely dovely forever, he asked me to marry him, to dark and hateful within a single second.

She didn't even know she could look at someone like that.

"How dare you?" dream-her hissed and slapped the poor man. Stephen took the hit, just staring at her, not understanding the sudden mood-shift. The disbelief and hurt in his eyes spoke volumes.

"What -" he tried but was interrupted instantly.

"You made a copy of me?" dream Christine yelled, her gaze turning sad. "For what? Having your fun while I'm out?" Tears glistened in her eyes. In the meantime, real Christine still only stood in the doorway dumbfounded, her mouth slightly open. She had the odd privilege of seeing herself on her meant to be happiest day most hurt. Witnessing how she would look, when her entire life went to shit in one single second.

"I… I thought…" dream Christine stammered. "You promised me you wouldn't do this anymore!" she got out, tears running down her cheeks by now. Jumping to her feet, she stared at Stephen, sobbing and shaking her head one last time before she bolted, running down the corridor and out of her flat.

For a long moment, Stephen just stared after her, before he jumped up and followed suit.

"Ehm..." Christine just stood there and stared at her now empty living room. She had just crashed her own proposal. Broken two people's hearts. Ruined an awesome relationship, just by being here. Taking a deep breath, she finally entered her living room, feeling miserable for what she had done. Wine glasses on her table, not fully eaten pizzas. They had had a good time and she had...

Seeing something glimmering on the ground, she stopped, picking her own engagement ring from the floor.

Why was Stephen dreaming about marrying her? They had only been together for a few months. A few months weren't time for dreaming up…

The way he had looked at her earlier. His gaze full of love and affection, just for her massaging his hand.

She had been together with him for only a few months. He had been together with her for about one and a half years. One could start thinking about getting engaged then.

"Oh Stephen..." she whispered softly, letting her fingers run along the sleek silver ring. It was a gorgeous one, for sure. Even boasting a diamond and several emeralds. Knowing about his magical green stone, she somehow liked the emeralds better. Their own little secret, publicly worn for the world to see.

Was he calmly waiting for her and them to get there? Oh God, hopefully, he wouldn't lose patience. Hopefully, he would ask -
"Christine?" Stephen's soft and gentle voice floated towards her from the living room.

Blinking bewildered, Christine realized she was back in the bedroom, no ring between her own fingers anymore.

This time, she only peeked into the other room. They were sitting on the couch again, him proposing to her. He had to be dreaming the dream again, hoping for a different outcome this time around. Or he was dreaming the dream for some time already. Subconsciously repeating it over and over.

This time, she didn't enter. Instead, she sat down on the ground, leaned her back against the wall and hugged her knees, listening to herself bursting into joy.

She didn't want to be here. She didn't want to hear how happy he was marrying not her. Sure, it was a dream, but… was she envious? She blinked. Of course, she… was. She would love to marry him one day if they made it that far.

"After Thanos." She whispered to herself, trying to tune out the sound of them making out. Stephen had just proposed to her. Of course, they would make out. Probably have sex on the sofa. The thought made her stomach turn.

She really didn't want to listen to them having sex. As curious as she had been about what he would do with two Christines, her odd fantasy had always included her, not have him have sex with another her, while she sat locked away in another room.

It wasn't his fault for sure. Normally, she would be delighted knowing he had sex dreams about her. Yet, she usually wasn't around as a third person to witness.

As if her wish for not being here much longer came true, for finding a comfortable hole in the ground and never come out again, the floor beneath her suddenly gave way, making her fall. Fall and fall and fall through absolute darkness, making her scream her lungs out.

Where was she? Why was she here? What was going on?! Would she die? Could she die in his dreams?

Suddenly, she crashed into a Starbucks booth. Literally. She fell onto the table with her chest, hearing and feeling something break. The rest of her had hit the cushioned, but not much better, chairs. Her leg hurt terribly.

The employee closest to her gaped at her for a long moment. Dropping everything, he finally ran towards her.

"Oh my God, is everything okay?"

Christine groaned lowly, trying to move. A bolt of pain shot through her chest, making her stop. Really stupid idea. Moving.

"Oh, no no no." the poor man in front of her was panicking worse than she was. "Are you bleeding? Is something broken?"

He took hold of her and very carefully helped her onto a chair, checking her over. He sighed relieved when he realized she wasn't bleeding.

"Stay right here." Where else should she go? "I'll get a first aid kit." He said softly and shot away. Christine groaned again, carefully leaning against the separating wall behind her. Had she literally fallen into this place? According to her throbbing body, the answer would be yes. Had she fallen
from one dream into the next? If yes, where was -

"I would like a…" she heard Stephen's voice. There he was, ordering coffee. Did he know she was around? Or was she just someone to him? In his last dream, she had surely looked like herself.

"Oh, Captain America!"

"I need a coffee, really quick." Captain America proclaimed, thanked someone and rushed from the shop.

"Ehm… can I…" Stephen tried again.

Was he trying to order coffee, but never got one? Christine couldn't help but snicker. Served him right, him who let her drop onto tables and probably graze her rib. Grazed ribs were always worse than broken ones.

"HULK NEED COFFEE!" boomed through the room, making Christine wince. She shouldn't have snickered. Seemed like the dream took immediate revenge. The green giant walking made the ground tremble ever so slightly, sending waves of pain through her body.

"Sure, sure." After a moment and some frantic screams for more coffee, the room shook again, the door crashed open.

"I really need a…" Stephen asked quite desperate by now. Somehow, he sounded as if he was close to tears.

The employee ran back to her, opening his first aid kit and looking quite lost.

"Just call the ambulance." She managed through gritted teeth. A stupid first aid kit wouldn't help her much. The hospital was the way to go.

"One of your awfully tasting energy drinks, please."

Was that Thor?!

"Oh my God, Thor!" the entire room burst into frantic movement, even her employee darted off, which gave her the chance to move, managing to not faint while doing so, and peek out of her booth. Thor, surely, stood at the counter, his hammer hanging from his belt, ordering coffee.

Even after Thor was gone, Stephen never got his drink. Stark, Vision and Wanda walked in, one by one, always demanding coffee and instantly getting it.

By then, Christine had gotten bandaged all over, which surely wouldn't help her, but dreams weren't meant to be making sense anyway.

"I JUST WANT A FUCKING COFFEE!" Stephen screamed suddenly.

"DON'T YELL, RETARD!" Someone yelled back at him.

"May I have a coffee, please?" Natasha asked politely, once again instantly getting her one, leading to Stephen throwing a fit and stomping out the coffee shop.

The dream didn't end there, though. Christine went on being. Eventually, an ambulance was called for her. Stephen had to be still around, most likely upset about never getting any coffee.
Leaning onto a paramedic, who got her out of the Starbucks, she made it halfway to -

Her pain was gone. The Starbucks and people and New York were gone. Taking a deep breath, her hurting rib gone luckily, she blinked and looked around. She was in a desert. The air warm and cold at the same time. The sheer endless dunes of sand didn't catch her eye though. All she could look at was the sky. A dark, orange sky, clouds swirling overhead.

A whisper, softer than any sound could ever be, made her look to the ground again. A Christine stood there, looking at her with an expressionless gaze.

"You shouldn't be here." She said softly, her voice sounding like silk. A shiver ran down Christine's spine. The last Christine had been her, or Stephen's version of her, but this one

Her entire world jerked forward. Suddenly, she wasn't in that desert anymore. She stood on another wasteland, but completely different in nature. Burning debris and floating ash, burned ground, craters. Her gaze moved upwards, coming to a stop on a huge spaceship. It hovered in place, like a huge shadow overhead. Death just a few meters above her. Had it decimated the place? Would it kill them any second? Her gaze moved down again. There were the remainings of a building to her left. A river further to her right.

Thunder rolled, lightning cracked.

Stark, Steve and Thor jumped down onto the wasteland, walking towards…

Only now, she saw the huge, purple alien. It sat there, amongst all the debris, just waiting. How could she have missed it?

Even though it was far away, its voice floated to her, clear as day.

"You could not live with your own failure. Where did that bring you? Back to me." It said amused. "I thought by eliminating half of life, the other half would strive, but you have shown me… that's impossible."

Christine's breath accelerated. Eliminating half of life...Thanos. The huge alien had to be Thanos.

"Yeah, we are all kinds of stubborn." Tony replied, them walking closer.

Her whole body started to tremble. She shouldn't be here, she really shouldn't. This was no place for her.

Spinning around, she ran. Trying to tune out the words which floated towards her. Something about annihilating all there was and building a better world from the ashes. A grateful world.

She ran and ran and ran and was only back at the beginning, right from where she had started. In horror, Christine realized the dream wouldn't let her go. Turning around slowly, she had to watch Thanos beating Thor to death. Blood dripping off his fist.

She… she had to do something. She couldn't just stand here and watch Thor getting killed. Grabbing a stone, it needed all her courage to move. Set one step in front of the other, until she was close enough to throw it at the mad titan. It actually hit, but he really didn't care. He only raised his fist again, aiming for Thor's nose. If he broke it 'correctly', he could kill him in an instant.

Oh God, she had to do something! Where the hell was Stephen? Taking a deep breath, she… this was a dream, right? She could do anything in a dream, once she knew it was a dream.
Raising her hands, she willed her to be able to use magic, hoping for some golden ropes to bind the titan, but nothing happened. She was just a silly human, her hands in the air, thrown on a battlefield she had no reason to be on. Still. Watching Thor die…

She screamed, more for her own self-motivation than anything else, and ran towards the titan. While she did the most stupid thing in her entire life, she saw a huge ax on the ground. Should work as a weapon. Somehow lifting it, all the adrenaline of facing her certain death surely helped, she ran towards the alien, hoping she could chop his head off. Hurt him. Anything.

Yet, Thanos didn't even bother with her. He only went on beating Thor. The Asgardian had to be dead by now, surely, her try at saving him too late. His face rather resembled a bloodied mess than an actual face. Yet, she didn't stop running even though her head begged her to just spin around again, run off, maybe even with the huge ax in hand.

No.

She would try her shot at killing him.

Right before she reached him, the ax already raised for her one try, the titan finally did pay attention to her. He shot up, caught the handle of her weapon with ease and looked at her.

"He's dead." He said oddly soft before taking hold of her neck.

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Christine snapped awake, gasping for air frantically. Sitting up in one smooth motion, her hands found her neck, feeling her soft skin, her muscles, all intact. How it should be. The alternative, Thanos snapping her neck, had felt all too real. Somehow, it had felt more real than right now. More real than being awake.

Stephen stirred beside her, moved and hugged her trembling body against his chest.

"It felt so real." She stammered together, snuggling into him and closing her eyes, only to see Thanos again. Catching her ax and grabbing her neck. Another vision to haunt her in her dreams.

"It was just a dream." He said softly, rubbing her back.

Was it, though? Why did it feel so real?

"Was it?" She asked trembling, not wanting to hear the answer. She knew what he would say, after all. He dreamed about possible futures. One of the 14 millions in which they most likely wouldn't make it.

"Yes. More than usual. You were in it and carried Stormbreaker around."

Stormbreaker? What, please? She hadn't... oh. The ax had a name. Somehow reasonable. Thor's hammer had a name too, after all.

"Will he kill Thor?" She asked quietly, remembering the bloody mess of a face. If it had been more of a dream, maybe this part would never happen.

"Sometimes. Not very often, though. If he doesn't kill all of us, at least."

Absolutely reassuring. He knew how to disperse her worries.

"You know about 14 million versions of this..." she took a breath, looking at him. "Do they all haunt
Stephen smiled softly and shook his head. "Only a few. It started again after the light flash." She knew that one already. "I guess I'm worried about what if, but all those futures don't apply to us anymore. We are in a completely different timeline now."

Were they? At times, she wasn't so sure. Why would it haunt him so badly, if it wouldn't ever happen. Yet again, seeing the mad titan... she shivered helplessly. Knowing about him and having seen him were two completely different things. If he knew about all of this, of course it would come back to him.

"About how many do you dream?"

"Just a few. The worst ones, so to speak." He chuckled joylessly, hugging her against him again and leaning his head against hers. Awesome. Only the worst.

"Where were you anyway? I didn't see you on the battlefield."

His hug grew tighter.

"I wasn't there. I watched all of it like a movie. My own worst nightmare." He whispered. "You there. Him killing you with me unable to save you."

A cold shiver ran along her spine. He had to watch her getting killed. If it would happen to her...

"I'll try to never be close to where you fight." She said, meaning every single word. She had felt useless there, like a liability, keeping him away from more important things.

"Did you see me die? In those other visions?"

She felt him nod. Moving away a bit, she saw his face. Fear and sadness mixing in is eyes. He was afraid of losing her. Hugging him, she pulled him against her, holding him tight.

"I won't die." She whispered softly, hoping it was true. If it came to a fight and she was caught up in it, her survival chance didn't seem all too good, sadly. She would just have to try to stay alive. Hopefully, she could do magic by then and create shields. Even though, it didn't seem very likely. Maybe she could ask Pepper to borrow her a suit if need be.

For a while, she just held him. Stroking his back, feeling him relax into her arms.

"I do have a question." He said eventually.

"Shoot."

"Did you fall into the Starbucks?"

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed it!

Thank you for all the kudos and comments I got on my last chapter. Happy me :)

I wanted to post this chapter way earlier, but damn it... Couldn't decide on what the heck
the man dreams.
Chapter Notes

Once again, a happy Sunday/Monday to everyone!

This week got rather busy unexpectedly, but here I am.

Did anyone realize the story is at 30 chapters already? I didn't until I saw the heading. How did I get here? I promise some more crazy stuff and hopefully not another more 30 chapters. (Looks through her notes...) Oh... well...

Happy reading!

You'll meet: Gamora, Peter (Parker) and a tiny bit of Ned and May

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Finally stepping off the bus from Newark, Gamora sighed in relief. She could see the high-rise buildings down south Peter had told her she would see.

Midtown Manhattan. New York City.

She was here.

"Excuse me? Other people want to get off the bus too." A female voice said behind her, sounding annoyed, making her move to the side and away from the bus. She could feel the usual stares on her. Look, the woman has green skin! What's wrong with her?!

How she hated all of them. Each and everyone, who had been on the bus with her. As if she couldn't feel the stares. As if she couldn't hear the whispers when they thought she was asleep. No, she wouldn't die any second now. No, she didn't have a condition which would make everyone else sick. Narrowminded bastards. Eventually walking to the nearest subway station, she had had enough time on the bus to research the entire damn city using her human communication device, she realized to her horror that some people, who had been on the bus with her, followed suit. No! If she had to spend another second with them, she would flip. Not freaking out on the bus while they speculated whether or not she had cancer had been bad enough!

Stopping at the subway gates, she looked around confused. What did she have to do? She watched some people walk up to so-called ticket machines, tapping away at them. Taking a deep breath, she joined a queue and eventually stood in front of a machine, completely oblivious to what she had to do.

"Miss? Do you need help?" a voice behind her asked. Gamora turned around and saw a young man, looking at her. He hadn't been on the bus with her.

"Ehm..."

He smiled softly and moved beside her.

"How long are you in the city?"
Hopefully not too long.

"Three days. A week. Something around." She answered reluctantly. She would love to just run into Stark or the spider, tell them about Peter remembering and be done with it. She wanted to get off planet as soon as possible, but somehow, she guessed she would stay for a while.

"A week." She clarified silently, making him nod.

"You can buy a weekly ticket. Can use it on every subway and bus."

The man tapped away on the screen, eventually showing some amount. She knew that one. The machine wanted money from her. Digging through her little bag, she got the credit card Peter had handed to her and entered it into the right opening. They had gone through that one often enough. She knew where to stuff in the card.

Some moments later, she got her card back and a plastic card on top.

"You go through the gates with that one." The man said friendly and started to get his own ticket.

Gamora could only stare at him. What the fuck? Why was he so friendly? He hadn't even cared about her skin color.

Shaking her head, she eventually walked through the gates, took her new card along with her and stopped at the subway line she needed to take, only to realize that she was stared at immediately again. Those idiots from the bus were down here too, waiting for the same train she had to take. Walking off to the other end of the station, she decided to wait for the line for the other direction, change next station and then go down to Midtown. Better need more time than spent another second of her life with those people.

Entering the train once it arrived, she sat down on a seat, looking around carefully. She wasn't stared at. Maybe a curious glance, but she wasn't stared at.

Leaving the train and getting on the new one, the pattern continued. She didn't get stared at. Some people glanced at her more obvious, a family with huge backpacks stared at her openly, but it felt tame in comparison to the fucking bus ride. On top of that, no one whispered. What the hell was going on?

Eventually getting out of the underground train system at Grand Central, all she had to do was walk around some buildings and there it was.

Avengers Tower.

Despite all her grudge, she stared up at it. The huge, silly A. If only Stark would walk out this very moment to get something to drink.

Of course, her wish didn't come true. Still, she moved closer and waited for some ten minutes, pretending to take pictures with her human communicator, trying to blend in with the other tourists. No Stark, still. No little spider either.

Sighing eventually, she moved on. She knew her route. Along 3rd street and then off onto some bridge, cross East River and into Queens.

While she walked on, she couldn't help but stare at the many shops, big and small, glance at the many restaurants and realize she was starving. She hadn't eaten ever since Chicago, which seemed ages ago. Eventually, she stopped at a place selling salads. She knew what a salad was. It wouldn't
Sitting inside the shop and staring out at the street, she munched on her food, watching people pass by in masses. Couldn't Stark walk by? Or a freaky guy with a red cape? Where had all her luck gone? Probably out the window in Saint Louis, the second she had boarded the bus. She had looked at Peter then, feeling lost already. He had waited until her bus was gone, waving at her, waiting for his own one to LA. Hopefully, he was luckier. He wouldn't even be off the bus by now, though. Still on it for some more 20 long hours. Still, she hoped it was more relaxing for him. Sighing softly, she got her human communicator out, searched for the message icon for some minutes, send him a happier sounding text than she felt and returned to watching people pass by. No Stark still.

Back on the street, she eventually gave in and looked for a music store. She wanted to find new music for Peter's Zune. Would definitely make him happy and would raise her mood as a result.

Yet, she didn't even find a stupid music store.

While she walked on, saw people and more people and even more people pass by, Gamora once again realized no one was staring at her. Just curious glances, some amused whispers, most often not even that. The people of this city just didn't seem to care for her skin being green.

After what seemed like ages, she stood on the bridge she needed to cross, trying to not stand in the way of people passing by, and looked at the big city she was leaving. Manhattan. Somehow, she liked it. More than any other place until now, at least, which really didn't say anything at all. She loved not getting stared at every second of every day. Turning her head, she looked at Queens. Another huge place. Over two million people, as far as she knew.

How should she ever find one single person?

----

Peter Parker was busy spinning his pen from finger to finger, curious how long he could keep it going. His attention slipped from the teacher to the clock on the wall. Another thirty minutes, then he would be able to leave. He really wanted to text the doc and ask if he had time this evening, but he guessed he couldn't afford free time right now. His homework was eating him alive. The worst part was, he was getting more every day and was somehow expected to hand it all in. New homework should be handed in as expected, his old stuff had to be handed in by the end of next week. How should he ever be able to do this?

Staring at his still spinning pen, he sighed. He really wanted to do some Spider-Man stuff but May had locked his suit up until he was done homeworking. Not that he wouldn't be able to get it out of her closet, the lock was rather flimsy at best, but she'd eye it as a breach of trust, which it obviously would be.

He could use his old, self-made suit, but... He sighed again. He liked his suit. He'd just miss Karen and her ability to listen in on the police and firefighters. How should he ever know about a stupid stranded cat on a tree without her?

If Spider-Man was off duty, he was surely not allowed to visit the doc either. Maybe he'd do some magic at night, trying his luck with stupid sparkles. He could head out at night too, doing some Spider-Man stuff. Have an eye on his neighborhood again. He felt like dropping out on his most important duty.

A collective groan from the class made him snap back to attention and look around in worry. What had he missed? Leaning closer to Ned, he asked just that.
"Homework. 12 pages until next week."

"12 pages? Are you kidding me?"

How should he do 12 pages on top of everything else?

"No. He wants more grading-material." Ned said darkly, making Peter sigh once again.

At more normal schools, the grading season would be off by now, wouldn't it? Yet they had to keep on handing in papers until next Friday, then they would have a week of not really doing anything and then finally summer break.

"I'm screwed." He whispered lowly, stopping his pen spinning and resumed to pay attention. 12 pages about the Sokovia Accords. Brilliant.

---

Gamora just kept on walking along the same street the bridge had gotten her on, this time paying attention to every little detail around her, hoping she would glimpse Spider-Man. Like usual today, she didn't see him. No Spider-Man, no nothing. Just way fewer people than on the other side of the bridge. Walking on, she started to wonder where she should sleep tonight. Finding a place which didn't want any paper-strips was a huge gamble. Besides, maybe her chances of seeing the spider were better at night.

For a split second, she wished Peter was here. He knew how to handle those things. He knew how to find places which didn't want any paper-strips. Maybe… maybe she just had to look for the most rundown place she could find and flash her credit card. Sighing lowly, she passed some young humans. One of them turned around to glance at her. Whispers followed, but like usual ever since being here, they didn't seem all too hostile.

---

"Are you okay?" Peter asked Ned later while walking side by side along 21st street.

"Still yes." His friend replied.

"I mean… you nearly got killed. I understand if you want to talk about it."

"Don't worry. I'm fine. You saved me, right?"

"Yeah, but -"

"No but, I'm fine."

Yet, Peter didn't believe him. He really wanted to go visit him or have him at his place to be able to really talk about what had happened on the spaceship, but…

"You focus on your homework. Else you might not make it." Ned said seriously, sounding worried.

"God, don't remind me." If he didn't make it, he might end up taking summer school to get his grades up, even though he had promised May to earn a little money. If he messed up summer school, he might fail the semester altogether and had to repeat it. He'd go nuts if he had to attend different courses than Ned.

"My life sucks," Peter whined. "May locked my suit away. I can't even…"
"She did?" Ned sounded far too amused for his liking. "I'm sorry. I really am." He added seriously, right before he turned to look at something.

"That woman has green skin." He whispered lowly, making Peter hum and turn around, only catching a glimpse of said woman.

"Maybe she demonstrates for plant life?" he suggested, making Ned chuckle.

"Full-body commitment."

----

After hours and hours of searching for a place, the sun had started to set, Gamora was none the wiser. She hadn't found a single place which would take her in without a paper-strip. Even bribing hadn't worked this time. The people at the reception had just acted offended and shooed her out, sometimes accompanied by security. So much for staying beneath the radar. Some people knew her now. Nothing she had ever wanted.

Eventually, she stopped at a restaurant, ordered a bunch of 'burgers' and once again settled in the shop to eat, glancing out the window all the while. No stupid Spider-Man, no stupid hotel room, no nothing to show for her first day in the city. Just some stupid pictures of Avengers tower. Awesome.

She glanced at the counter. How much food would she have to order to stay here all night? Yet, would she want to sleep in a restaurant? Would make her look like a homeless, probably drawing spite onto her. She had seen some of them on the other side of the river. Finishing her odd meal, she ordered something to drink and got out again, looking around. Still no spider.

Checking her human communicator, she didn't find any news on Spider-Man either. Was he on vacation? Taking a break exactly when she was here? Sighing, she let it drop back into her pocket, pulled her hoodie up and moved on, eventually climbing onto one of the higher houses by the river. Settling on a bland rooftop, she looked down onto Queens.

He had to be here.

She just had to wait.

----

Trying to calculate the amount of electricity Thor could produce with one swing of Mjolnir for the third time in a row, Peter eventually dropped his pen, staring at the empty lines on his paper.

He was screwed. He was completely, thoroughly, utterly screwed. He had only done old stuff today, not getting any closer to being done, not even having started on the 12-page essay he had to hand in by next Friday. Ned had suggested writing in really huge letters, but he guessed that wouldn't count. He would only get a bad grade.

Letting his head hit his desk, he simply groaned.

"Everything okay in there?" May's voice floated towards him. Turning his head, which still rested on his desk, he saw she was looking at him concerned, leaning against the doorframe.

"Yeah. No. I need a break." He sighed lowly, got up from his desk and entered the living room, glancing at the usual stupid love movie. How many more were there? May had to have watched every single one ever made by now!
Aiming for the kitchen, he peeked into the fridge.

"Do we have ice cream or something? I need sugar." He yelled while checking the freezer.

"Maybe you could need some sleep!" was the affectionate yell back.

Maybe he could need some sleep. Staring at frozen chicken, Peter sighed. He definitely needed some sleep, but he had wanted to finish his physics homework and maybe do some sparkles and sneak out afterward to check on his neighborhood, and…

"You are right." He whispered to himself, closed the freezer and went back into the living room, nudging May for a good night hug before he eventually returned to his room, simply dropping into bed. How should he write 12 pages on top of everything else? Sure, he had done exactly that homework already two years ago and had worked on it for five hours today, but…

Staring at the ceiling, Peter wondered if he could ask Karen to write his homework.

Chapter End Notes

Like always, thank you for reading, all the kudos and those awesome comments! I may be a bit slow sometimes, but I answer to all of them. See you next week!
Slowly drifting into consciousness, Pepper stretched herself, only to bury her head a bit deeper into her pillow. It was so warm and comfy. She didn't want to get up. Just stay in bed and doze some more. Yet, as usual, she found herself glimpsing at the empty bedside beside her. Not that she had seen it in any other way ever. Tony had never slept in her flat in L.A. Occasionally, she wondered why the hell she had bought a king-size bed for sleeping in it alone. Then again, she loved to take all the space, if she could. Sleep in the middle of the bed or diagonally, just because.

Groggily grabbing for her phone, which rested on the bedside table, she checked the time. Not even 6. Gave her time to close her eyes again.

She did close her eyes. For about five seconds.

"Friday, call Tony." She mumbled together, prying her eye open again. The screen on her phone showed his number. Dialing and dialing and…

Eventually, Tony picked up, or better, Friday accepted the call on his end, because he wasn't even looking at her. Highly concentrated, he looked down at something outside of what she could see.

"Mornin." She mumbled.

His eyes moved up to meet hers and his face lit up like it always did.

"Morning." He replied, sounding awfully awake. Damn three-hour time difference.

"What you working at?" she asked slowly, keeping her gaze on his face, watching how he looked down again. He was in his workshop, wasn't he? She knew that wall behind him.

"Peter's suit."

Ah. The nanotech stuff.

"How long?" she asked lazily, not yet feeling up for complete sentences. He would know anyway.

His gaze moved up to her, down again.

"A few weeks, I guess. It's more complex than yours. Have to upgrade yours eventually. For now,
it's good enough."

Pepper chuckled softly. Good enough. How reassuring. Yet, she knew what he meant. Keeping her safe and able to get away was more important for now than a complex weapon- and fighting system. She didn't need to fight. Besides, she still had weapons. The futuristic gun was awesome.

She hummed, thinking about bringing up Strange needing a crazy suit too, but dropped the topic. Would need her to speak. Besides, she still hadn't hyped up Christine for it. As of now, Strange would very likely decline. One step after another.

Yawning and stretching herself again, she eventually sat up and grabbed her phone. Slowly walking her way into her bathroom, she leaned it against the mirror, fidgeting around until it wouldn't slide down again and started to brush her teeth.

"How is your schedule today?"

Spitting out, she looked at the small screen of her phone. Why wasn't she…

"Friday, put him on the mirror."

Tony's face appeared right beside hers, making her wish again he would be here. God, how she missed him during the week. It nearly felt like a long-distance relationship at times. If she didn't fly to New York every weekend, it might as well be.

"Busy. I'll get a second report for people we might have to let go." Very nice way to describe firing. Nearly as good as setting free. "Gonna look through them, decide who we can keep." The usual. If only takeovers weren't so messy. "A meeting after lunch, some reports, yadda yadda."

He chuckled softly. "I always like yadda yadda." He commented amusedly.

"Yep. Best stuff of the day." She chirped back and peeled her nightgown off, deliberately putting on a show for him. It worked, obviously, as his gaze was glued to her once she could see the mirror again.

"I'm gonna take a shower." She said teasingly, slipped out of her panties and walked towards the shower slowly, starting the water. "Ah, I almost forgot. Friday, end the call."

The last thing she heard before stepping below the stream was his protest and then silence.

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The alarm on his 'smartphone' ripped Peter Quill brutally out of his sleep. Blindly grabbing for it, he managed to shut it down, instantly returning to sleep.

The second alarm just made him grab the stupid thing again, turn it off. He had to get up, hadn't he? Yet…

The third alarm was the one which finally got him awake.

This time, he jolted upright, looking around bewildered.

Why was he still in bed?

How had this happened?

Seeing the time, way after 7, he jumped out of his tiny bed and nearly hit his head against the wall.
The room was far too small for any jumping around. Fighting with his balance, he managed to not fall back into bed again. Once he stood safely on his feet, he sighed relieved, grabbed a towel and the key to his room, even though he wasn't sure the lock would withstand any serious attempt to break in, and dashed to the shared bathroom. He needed a shower after the bus ride yesterday. Well, and probably after sleeping in that bed too. In the bathroom, he carefully edged around a huge puddle on the ground, opened the door to the shower and froze.

Nope. He wouldn't go in there. The wall was full of odd, black spots. Some tiles had come down, simply missing in the wall. Should he be happy they had been taken away?

Very carefully leaning into the shower cabin, trying to not touch anything else, he turned on the water, skeptically watching the tiny drizzle. Only after turning off the shower again, he frowned and turned around, staring at the huge puddle on the ground. How the fuck had that one came to be? Definitely not through someone showering like crazy. There wasn't enough water for any puddles.

Peter shook himself and pushed the thought away. No. He didn't want to know where the puddle had come from. Or how long it had been here. Or how long the room itself had not been cleaned. All questions he should best not ask. Knowing would make things worse. For a moment, he debated just leaving, but eventually edged closer to the sink, at least washing his face. After he was done, he looked at himself in the broken mirror and sighed. He really didn't feel much cleaner.

Returning to his room, he slipped into new clothes and grabbed his small backpack. Before leaving for the day, he would check-out. Sure, he had paid for multiple nights, but he wouldn't set another foot into this place. He should have turned away as soon as he had seen the bed. The linen hadn't particularly looked clean to him. Somehow, this place was even worse than their first hotel stay.

Slipping into the back of the car, Pepper nodded towards her driver and settled down, closing her eyes for another few moments, just trying to relax.

Her vibrating phone made her sigh softly. She didn't want to take a look at it. Friday would be sending her work emails through by now. Whatever wanted her attention would be important though. She should know about it, before entering the office. Unlocking her phone reluctantly, she smiled instantly. No work email yet. Just Tony, wishing her a good way to work.

Before she could appreciate the little gesture, her phone vibrated again, this time a work email appearing. The results of the second analysis made by Friday. Opening it, she scanned the results. More names than in the first companywide run. More names of people she might need to let go.

Sighing once more, she tapped the name of a Laura Reeds and skimmed through her report.

Damn. She couldn't even figure out what the woman had been working on during the last few weeks. Friday had made sure to give all new employees, who had joined through the takeover, assignments. Add them to existing teams, give them small assignments or push them into research projects, if applicable, to be able to judge their work and consequently create the report.

Yet, Laura had done nothing at all. How could someone come in for work and do nothing at all, all day long? Had she been unaware of… No. The new ones had learned quickly enough about Friday. Most, if not all, knew about the analysis running. A trial period, like usual if one joined a company. Some had complained about it. Not about the trial period itself, but about a computer judging them. Something about a missing human element. As if Friday was the one doing the firing. If she was, Pepper's life would be a whole lot easier.
Yet, Pepper wouldn't have it. She would take a look at all those damn reports and decide, who they could keep. Be their damn missing human element. Marking Laura's file for later review, she opened the next one, hoping to find someone, she didn't need to fire. Yet, she knew her chances. Friday wouldn't have listed those names if they had done good work.

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Standing at the bus station, Peter glanced at the homeless guy sleeping on the bench next to him. He would do the same soon, wouldn't he? Maybe not sleep on a bench, but on a rooftop, like Gamora did. Still, he would be one of those sorry guys not having a roof above their heads. At least, he would get ignored by other people. Just be one of those guys, not worthy of attention besides maybe getting a one-dollar bill or some food. At best, getting a pitiful look. Even better, be ignored completely.

Yet, as long as he kept his clothes clean and showered regularly, no one would know, he was sleeping on the streets, right? He surely wouldn't get far at Stark Industries if he looked like a homeless. Maybe be escorted off the grounds instantly. He couldn't afford that. He really couldn't. If he didn't get anywhere here, everything would rest on Gamora finding Spider-Man. He didn't want to put so much pressure on her. He… he would have to stay clean. Look like someone, who was sleeping in a hotel room.

Keeping his clothes clean should be rather easy. Just walk into a laundry and wash them.

Cleaning himself though… His gaze moved to the homeless guy involuntarily. He really didn't want to smell like him. He had to be able to take a shower somewhere. Maybe at a train station or a big mall or…

Before he could finish the thought, the bus came to a halt in front of him. Hopping on, he found a seat and pulled his phone out of his pocket. First, he messaged Gamora, telling her he was on his way. Afterward, he searched for places he could shower at. The rather obvious answers made him snort about his stupidity.

Gyms, some hotels, the beach, at the airport. Sighing relieved, he couldn't help but smile. He would make this work. Somehow. Best would be, of course, if he could talk with Pepper today. Be done with the whole ordeal. Yet, he feared things wouldn't go so smoothly.

Stuffing his phone back into his pocket, he looked outside, taking note of the stations he passed, watching the amount of homeless on the streets. Entire camps, people sleeping on the sidewalk, on benches, everywhere. Was it as bad where Gamora was? Hopefully not. She would only dislike the planet even more. Not that he cared much about her disliking the planet, but he didn't want her to be miserable. Being separated and having to sleep outside was bad enough on its own.

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Stepping out of her car, Pepper thanked the driver, tipped him a little like usual and walked towards her building. Entering the lobby, she saw Nicolle, smiley as ever.

"Good morning Miss Potts." The girl chirped happily. God. Nicolle was brilliant at being always happy. If it wouldn't be her job to always be nice, she would think her annoying. Did she stop smiling the second she went out the door?

"Good morning, Nicolle." She greeted her back. "Everything okay?"

"Sure thing. I will meet with friends later on and… Anyway, I got drinks and snacks for the meeting
later. Gonna place them in the room during lunch break."

Pepper smiled weakly. Nicolle had switched from her personal life right back to work. Obviously assuming she didn't want to hear about it.

"What are you and your friends planning to do?" Pepper asked, deciding on some small talk. Some five minutes of no report reading wouldn't hurt. Besides, as Tony always said, chatting raised the spirits.

"Oh. Just talking and stuff. They are really curious about my internship here, if I'll stay part-time afterward." She laughed politely as if the mere thought was insane. "All kinds of stuff. I'll hear about their internships. After that, Netflix I guess. Just relax a bit together."

Pepper smiled softly. "Sounds fun. Did you like your internship until now?"

"Ooh… I love it. Sure, one could say it's just a boring reception job, but you hear so much chatter, meet so many people. Some employees, who I still have no idea who they are honestly, greet me by name. It's such a huge company and I'm just a silly intern and still, they know who I am." She shook her head a bit, a tiny smile of disbelief on her lips. "I'll miss it. Guess I have to apply again after school." She paused for a moment, looking timid before she turned all serious. "Do you have a summer program?"

Pepper blinked and smirked amused. Nicolle knew what she wanted, didn't she? Straight to the point. She loved those no-bullshit people. Easier to handle, easier to talk with. She knew right from the start what she would get, so to speak.

"Only for university students."

"Oh." Nicolle looked disappointed for a moment, before she took a breath, trying to hide it. "Well, I could've known…" her words trailed off, while she looked away.

"But you could still try, I guess." Pepper added, watching how Nicolle's face lit up. "As you missed every and all deadlines for any programs we might have, you should go straight to HR."

"Wow… ehm… thanks!"

Pepper chuckled. "For what?" With that, she moved away and towards the glass doors which separated the lobby from the rest of the building, stopping right before she walked through.

"Nicolle? Can you remind me around lunch? I'll forget the time again otherwise."

"Sure, no problem!"

Pepper turned to look at her, nodded and finally walked through the doors. She had reception staff ask her why she didn't use Friday for reminding her. Those people usually complained about their job and asked for ridiculously high salaries after only a little, only because 'Stark' was part of the company's name. Needless to say, they didn't work here very long. The position had been a come and go until Lindsey came along. Nicolle didn't seem too bad either. She would have to ask Friday for a report on her. Read at least one good one today.

Walking through the corridor, she greeted people in passing and waited for an elevator to come down. Stepping into one, she held open the doors for Mary from accounting, one of the new people who seemed to do a good job, because she hadn't seen her name on the report. The poor woman smiled at her nervously and got out incredibly fast once they reached her floor.
Pepper sighed softly once she was alone in the elevator. The poor woman was terrified of being fired, wasn't she? So badly, that she had basically jumped out the elevator. God damn, she would feel so relieved once all of this was done. Best would be, to take some time off afterward. Finally relax from the hilarious stress of the takeover, from having to fire people. The longer she thought about it, the more she liked her idea. A holiday sounded really good. Just forget the world and spend time with Tony. Maybe learn to use her suit some more. While she imagined them flying around above some tropical island, her hand moved to her necklace, playing with it.


Pepper chuckled at her thoughts and left the elevator, once the doors slid open on her floor. She greeted a security guard and finally entered her office, dropped her handbag off and settled down. Opening her laptop, she had every intention to start working.

She couldn't do this without coffee and sugar.

Getting up again, she got both, coffee for concentration and a chocolate bar for motivation. Sitting down again, she took a sip of coffee and started to nibble on her chocolate, going through Laura's file again. The woman literally hadn't worked. Shaking her head, she sighed again, just taking another bite of chocolate. She wanted to get fired, didn't she? Why hadn't she left before the takeover, then? Every employee had their chance to leave before everything was finalized. Marking the file accordingly, she closed it and moved on to the next one, hoping for better results. She wanted to find at least one person she didn't need to fire.

----

Finally getting off the third bus, Peter sighed and looked around. He had to follow the street up north, and then… well, then just walk into the Stark Industries HQ. Should be easy enough, right?

It wasn't as easy. Well, getting there was, but finding the correct building turned out a tiny bit troublesome. He, in his unprepared stupidity, had expected one building. One literal headquarter with a lobby he could walk into. The HQ of Stark Industries wasn't one building. It was seven buildings. Surely, he could have asked the security guard at the gates, but he didn't feel like it after being eyed skeptically. If he wanted to pull this off, he had to act as if he belonged here. Asking around wouldn't help.

He walked up to the first building on his left, not finding anything but a card reader. No public entrance. The second building wasn't much better. Just a card reader. By now, he felt really stupid. Had the public access to this place? Could he just walk around or would he get kicked off the grounds? Loitering surely wasn't allowed.

Sighing, he tried it with the biggest building. Getting closer, he saw an actual entrance. Once again, he wanted to scold himself. Of course, the biggest building was the one with the lobby. He could have put one and one together way sooner.

Entering through sliding glass doors, he stopped for a second, staring at the space in front of him. Everything was in a perfect, spotless white. A teenage girl sat behind a counter, smiling politely, the company logo on the wall behind her, in case he had forgotten which building he had just entered. Some colorful flowers.

Peter smiled relieved. Finally. The lobby. A person, he could talk to.

Taking the last few steps, he stopped in front of the counter.
The girl looked curiously at him, still smiling. "Welcome to Stark Industries. How can I help you?"

Well… "Hi. I need to talk with Pepper Potts." Right down to business, right?

She blinked, looking at him for what felt like a moment too long.

"Okay. How is your name?"

His name? Why would she need his name? Oh well, he wouldn't give her his real one anyway.

"Stephen Strange." He said without hesitation. Maybe the name would ring some bells. If the wizard remembered too, Stark might have talked with him. Pepper would know about the man. Hearing Strange was here, she might want to talk with him.

"Stephen Strange." She whispered to herself, typing something on her keyboard, her eyes fixed on a screen in front of her.

"You don't have an appointment, Mister Strange." She said eventually, looking at him.

An… appointment?

"No."

"You can't see her without an appointment." The girl said factually, still looking at him. Somehow, her gaze made him uncomfortable. Couldn't she look somewhere else? He didn't want to be stared at.

"Well, could I get one, then?"

Now, she frowned. Oh great. Wrong question. He stopped himself from saying anything until she replied. If he went on talking, things would surely just get worse.

"I can't give you any appointments, I'm sorry."

She couldn't? What was she doing here, then?

"Well… Can I just wait? I'll talk to her once she comes down." Did Pepper even work in this building?

The girl looked at him for another few seconds, which felt like an eternity.

"I'm sorry, no."

Peter stared at her, not fully understanding her reply. Had she just said no?

"I have to talk with her!" he said angrily, raising his voice while doing so. He hadn't come all this way just to be turned away!

"I'm sorry. I can't help you." She said again, looking at him carefully now.

"Hey!" someone called. Peter turned his head, saw a man walk towards him.

He raised his hands. "Okay, okay. I'll leave." He said, threw a glance at the girl and turned to leave. He didn't want any trouble. For now.

----

A knock on her door ripped Pepper out of the report about James Holland. His semi terrible
programming skills had apparently upset an entire team. Looking up at the door, she still wasn't quite sure what exactly had happened. Something about really messy coding and obvious bugs which had crashed their testing system. Yet, wasn't a testing system there to be crashed?

"Yes?"

The doors opened and Nicolle peeked in.

"Lunch already?" Pepper asked unhappily. Where had the day gone? She had just sat down five minutes ago!

"Yes, Miss. I'm sorry."

"Damn." She whispered to herself, wanting nothing more than to take a break, but even more she wanted to get through those reports today. She would spend tomorrow double checking and reasoning her decisions before she could hand everything off to HR. "Thanks for telling me. Friday? Get me a lunch real quick."

"Of course, Miss Potts." Friday's voice replied instantly.

Nicolle stood there for a moment, looking as if she wanted to say something.

"Anything else?" Pepper asked, looking at her, while her thoughts turned back to James. She would ask Friday what had happened and why it was so bad. She would surely be able to explain it.

"No," the girl managed with another smile. "I'll go set the conference room."

"Okay." Pepper replied, watching her leave. Something about her smile bugged her, but she couldn't pinpoint her unease right now. She was too distracted by James. Had something happened in the lobby?

"Friday?"

"Your food will be here in five minutes." The AI told her, guessing she wanted to inquire about her food.

"In five minutes?" Pepper asked surprised, forgetting about her original question as she jumped up to go to the bathroom and then fetch herself a new coffee, grabbing another chocolate bar along the way.

----

Peter had dutifully left the main building, but never the complex itself. Once he was out of sight from the doors and had checked he wasn't watched, he had hurriedly made his way to some ragged bushes off the side of the building, a huge wall behind them which surrounded the area. If he kept low, he wouldn't be seen. The wall would keep him safe from gazes from one side, the bushes from the other. Perfect hiding spot for now.

Ducked away, laying on the ground, well behind the bush, he watched people come and go. One guy came with a car labeled with 'pizza', a big bag in his hand. He went in, stayed a little while and came out again, the bag gone.

The damn delivery guy.

He could have faked a delivery for Pepper, simply sneak in in plain sight. Yet, the girl knew his face.
He couldn't do that anymore. Could he take bets on how long he would be remembered? Maybe the girl wasn't there at some days. Maybe he could cover his face. Probably worth a try, if he didn't come up with anything else.

After her unbelievable boring meeting, numbers stuff about the takeover, Pepper returned to her office, signed off some reports and returned to deciding about other people's lives. Until now, she hadn't found one, she didn't have to let go.

Staring at James Holland's report again, she sighed and asked Friday about it, listening to her explanation and didn't feel much wiser. What should she do about this guy? Had he just messed up like all of them did sometimes or was he simply bad? Yet again, Stark Industries wasn't a place for messing up terribly. One should be done with the terribly messing up part before starting to work here. Yet again, he didn't have much choice in not working here. He had been bought and moved to a team and a software he had no idea about. Sighing softly, Pepper closed her eyes for a moment. Most likely, she should ask some senior engineers. When they told her no, they couldn't keep him, she would take it.

She spent the day with reading more reports, actually glancing into the one about Nicolle, talking with other employees about those, who had joined through the takeover, and then back to more reading.

She was on her fifth coffee of the day, along with her fifth chocolate bar, when the lights above her flickered on. She blinked, ripped her gaze from the file she had been reading and checked the time. Way after 8 p.m. Where had the day gone? She had barely gotten anywhere! Groaning lowly, she rested her head in her hands, closing her eyes.

Why was this so hard? She had done takeovers before, she had fired people before. This shouldn't bother her so badly. Yet, she wasn't even done with reading through all files. She wasted too much time arguing in their favor instead of against them, despite knowing she shouldn't keep most of them. They would just continue to do terrible mistakes. They were bad at their jobs, end of the story. And still...

Sighing annoyed, mostly at herself, she got up, packed her handbag and told Friday to call her driver. Once down in the dimmed lobby, she waited until her familiar car pulled up in front of the doors. Getting out, she walked to the car, like she always did. Grabbed the handle of the door to the back seat and froze. Her gaze had moved around the area, stopping on a man who stood at the far left of her, close to the wall surrounding the complex. If he hadn't moved while she looked around, she may have never seen him. Now he just stood there, not moving at all.

"Miss Potts?" her driver asked worriedly. "Is everything okay?"

She stared at the man, who still didn't move. He had chosen his spot wisely. Far enough away from any lamps to barely be visible at night. Why should someone hide in the bushes and wait for her? "Yes." She said slowly, slipping into the car and closing the door, requesting to lock all doors at a precaution. While the car started to move, Pepper tried to get a look at the man, but without any success. He was gone again, disappeared while she had gotten into the car. All she could do, was stare at ragged bushes.
Gamora had just returned to her rooftop sleeping place, she still hadn’t found a hotel which would let her in, when music started close to her. Loud music. She looked around in alarm, maybe others were up here, but it was only her and the stupid, too loud music which would surely pull attention towards her.

Letting herself drop to the ground, she tried to hide, hoping the music would just stop.

It did, eventually.

Until it started all over again.

Gamora was close to freaking out completely when she realized the music was coming from her pocket. Pulling her human communicator out, she stared at it dumbfounded. Peter's name was showing on the screen.

Oh…

Tapping the green icon, the music stopped. Instead, a timer started, running upwards. Very faintly, she could hear Peter's voice. Oh! Peter was calling her! Putting the screen against her ear, she heard him better.

"Gamora? Are you there? Hellooo?"

"Yes. Hey. I'm here." She replied softly.

"Oh my, good! How are you? I'm… well… okay. I saw her, Gamora. She is here."

She blinked. He had seen her.

"Who? Pepper?" She asked, feeling excited. At least he got somewhere.

"Yeah, Pepper."

"Did you talk with her?" she asked all eager. Maybe he was already done with everything, calling her to say they could meet up again.

"Eh… no." He fell silent. In the meantime, Gamora fought down her disappointment. She had hoped he had better news. "It was at night. Didn't want to freak her out, by running at her and screaming her name like a madman. Guess she would have punched me in the face or have the car run me over.
That's what you would have done, at least.

She snickered weakly. What could she say? It was true. If a random stranger would yell her name and run towards her, she would surely defend herself and ask questions later. If he happened to survive.

"What will you do next?"

"Well, try to talk to her, obviously. At daytime, favorably. I think…"

He went on talking about his plan, very time consuming and filled with observation to learn Pepper's behavior to catch her at a better time. Gamora sighed softly. At least, he had a plan. Spider-Man still hadn't swung by. As if the guy was on vacation.

"I could try to get into the tower." She said thoughtfully.

Peter sighed lowly. "It's our worst-case scenario. I would like to keep it that way. We will most likely trigger a ton of security alarms if we try to break in. Won't be unnoticed anymore by any means."

"Maybe that's the point. Screw not being noticed."

Peter chuckled softly. "Wait until the end of the week. After that…" She smiled weakly. After that, they would do whatever was necessary to catch the right persons attention.

Tony had just started to cut his pizza into slices when his smartphone started to ring. He groaned. Please, no! He didn't want to talk with anyone right now! He just wanted to eat! Putting the knife aside, he glanced at his phone. Please, be unimportant. Please, please, please. He wanted to ignore the caller and start stuffing himself with pizza. Yet, when he saw Pepper's name, he sighed softly and accepted the call. He could eat while talking with her, surely. He even had the first slice in his hand, ready to bite into it, when he heard her voice. "Tony?"

Her tone made him forget about his silly pizza, about being hungry altogether. Worry and fear mixed in her voice, in a way he had rarely heard in his life.

"What happened?" he asked instantly, sitting upright.

"I mean, it's surely nothing…" Sure. Her voice sounded like nothing. Waiting for her to continue, he got aware of the pizza slice again. He stared at it, wanting to both eat it and put it away at the same time. After placing the slice back into its box, he realized Pepper still wasn't talking. Why wasn't she continuing?

"What happened?" He asked again.

Pepper breathed out slowly. "I… It's nothing. I am completely overreacting. Nothing more. Shouldn't have called. I'm stressed out, that's all. I'm sorry."

"Hey, wait, Pep!" he hurried to say before she could hang up. "Come on, tell me. Please."

Once again, she was silent for a long while. He kept silent this time. Asking a third time wouldn't help.

"Tonight, when I left the company… there was a man outside. Standing close to the wall, where those damn bushes are. I guess he was just…" her words trailed off. "We don't have homeless on the
perimeter, do we?" she asked quietly.

"No. They would never get through the gates. Everything gets locked up at night, a security team patrols every hour or so and Friday is quite good at watching the surroundings. The only way would be to climb over the wall, but I guess that highly unlikely." He paused. "Tell me what happened, please."

She did. Afterward, Tony fell silent himself. She had called her driver, waited until he was there and then went outside. While she was getting into the car, she saw a movement out of the corner of her eyes and there he was. A man, staring at her.

"Could have been a crazy paparazzi." He joked, not even believing it himself.

A paparazzi would have taken a photo of her, after all. Not stared at her without moving. Who would want to watch her at night? There weren't too many possibilities.

"Can you come over?" she asked softly.

"Of course." Tony said and got up, his gaze falling onto his never eaten dinner. "Can you order me a pizza?"

Gamora stared at the starless sky without any hope of falling asleep.

Peter had seen her. Peter had already seen her on his first real day in the city.

She couldn't say the same. There were three people in this damn city, and she hadn't even seen one of them. Yet, Peter knew exactly where to find Pepper. She didn't have the same luxury. She had to work with 'Queens' and 'Manhattan'. Those were damn districts! How should she find one single person in a city of millions? Or three of them, for that matter.

Groaning, she sat up and stared at nightly Queens. How should she ever find Spider-Man?

Getting her communicator out again, she checked the Google thing for the 38th time today. Still no news about the little spider. Where the hell was he? Was he really on vacation? Might be. Everyone needed a break occasionally.

Lowering her communicator, she stared at the city again, feeling oddly hopeless.

Maybe… maybe she shouldn't look for the spider. Maybe she had better chances with Stark or a crazy guy walking around like a kung fu master plus a cloak.

Stark was the most public person of them. Maybe she should really try to get to the tower. Try her luck there. See if she could talk with him. Turning around, she looked at the next building, which blocked her view of Midtown Manhattan.

Getting up and shouldering her backpack, she carefully climbed down her building again, walked towards East River and stopped, looking at the skyline on the other side.

Avengers Tower.

Staring at it, she shook her head. She was just desperate to prove herself. She would find someone, just like Peter. In her own time. Everything she needed, was patience. Wait and look for her objective.
Eventually, she sat down on a bench by the river, looking at the city in front of her, marveling the many lights. Gradually, her appreciation faded. So many lights, so many people, so many lives, and none of them knew about her father. Well, hopefully at least one knew. Or two, as she didn't know where exactly the wizard lived.

A continues light above the tower, which reminded her of a jetpack, caught her attention. Frowning, she narrow her eyes, hoping to see better. Was Stark flying around in one of his suits? The light circled above the tower and then flew off, sadly not into her direction but towards the Hudson. Soon after, it was gone.

Nonetheless, Gamora smiled. She had seen one of them too, now.

"Boss? Boss! Wake up!"

Very slowly, Tony followed the annoyingly, nagging voice back to being awake. Why didn't she stop? He just wanted to sleep.

"Wake up!"

"Five more minutes." He mumbled, already drifting back to sleep. For some reason, he imagined Pepper yelling at him.

"Wake up." The voice sounded annoyed by now.

All he did, was mumble something in response. Couldn't she just shut up?

And then, he started to fall. The acceleration downwards ripped Tony out of his cozy slumber, made him look around in panic. All he could see, was his overlay, the lights of a city below, the ever-decreasing number of his current height.

What the…? What was going on?

The buildings and cars below him got bigger and bigger with every second.

Finally ripping himself out of his stupor, he activated the repulsors in his hands to stop his crazy fall. Carefully, he turned upright again, hovering in mid-air, listening to his own crazed heartbeat.

"Friday? What was that?"

"You told me to wake you up once we reach LA. We reached LA." His AI replied nonchalantly as if she hadn't just let him drop from the sky.

"Waking me up doesn't include deactivating the autopilot!" he snapped.

"But it reached its destination. Besides, I would have caught you before you hit the ground. You wouldn't even die through the impact, anyway. Just a few bruises and maybe a broken bone."

Just a few bruises and maybe a broken bone?!

Tony breathed out exasperated and tried to calm down. Arguing with Friday wouldn't lead anywhere.

"Don't do that again." He grumbled instead.
"Sure thing, boss." Friday replied, sounding all innocent.

Sighing weakly, Tony shook his head and flew higher, looking around. L.A. He could even see the stupid Hollywood Sign in the distance.

"Where is Pepper's flat?" He asked, feeling terrible for not knowing. He should know where his girlfriend spent her nights during the week. Then again, he didn't even know what he had for breakfast, so maybe it was okay. A new GPS point lit up on his overlay and his suit started moving again, the autopilot getting him to where he wanted to be.

"No dropping me again." He reminded Friday.

"Of course, not." Friday replied innocently, just as if she had never let him drop from the sky.

Only a few minutes later, he was low enough to see the houses passing by beneath him, saw people staring up. Good chance, they were tourists who weren't used to him flying overhead. God, he really hated L.A. for all the touristy stuff and... Of course, New York wasn't much better, but... He shook his head, pushing his thoughts aside and watched the GPS point pull up ahead. He felt how his suit descended the last few meters and landed on a balcony.

She even had a balcony. With flowers. He blinked when he saw those. Since when did his girlfriend appreciate potted flowers? Hopefully, they were just here for decoration. Would make sense, after all. An empty balcony always looked oddly sad. Getting out of his suit, he stepped towards the windows, the room behind hidden by curtains, and carefully knocked on the glass. Not even a minute went by until the curtains were drawn back carefully and Pepper looked at him.

She looked terrible. Stressed out and tired and a tiny bit fearful. Watching her open the door to the balcony, he stepped inside, hugging her before she could even say a word.

"Everything is okay. I'm here." He said softly, while she hugged him back tightly.

"I usually don't freak out that badly, but..." she let go, "I think the day was just too long and all the Thanos talk on the weekend and then someone is watching me at night." She sighed, shook her head and stepped around him to finally close the door. She peeked through the curtains one more time, before pulling them close.

"Thanks for coming."

Tony smiled. "Always." He said softly, stepping closer and hugged her from behind. She sighed softly and leaned against him, closing her eyes. Tony started to stroke along her arms gently, while he watched her. It was the first time she ever mentioned Thanos wearing her down. Obviously, it would affect her somehow. For the second time this night, he felt horrible for not paying enough attention to the woman he wanted to marry soon.

"I'm so reluctant to fire anybody." She eventually said, turning around in his arms to look at him. "It's not so hard usually. I... I think I worry about what if you don't make it. What if you can't beat Thanos. Half of everyone will die, after all. What if I fire those who survive? What if I fire those who die? I mean, I could have helped them to have a really good life until then and -"

"Pep." He interrupted her, placing a finger on her lips to shush her. She looked up at him, worry and fear and sadness mixing in her eyes. She had thought about nothing else since they had ended the call, hadn't she? Thanos, firing people and possible stalkers. Absolutely perfect for turning her insane.

"I'll help you with the firing and we will beat Thanos. We will. Don't worry." She smiled weakly
and nodded, leaning back against him, closing her eyes once more.

"I will find whoever watched you." He said after a while. "No one scares my girl." He said darkly, which made her chuckle weakly. "No making people vanish." She said softly. Most likely, she meant it as a joke, but right now it sounded terribly serious.

"Oh man, I really wanted to try this time!" he complained playfully, trying to lighten the mood, which finally made her laugh a little.

She leaned a bit away from him, a tiny smile on her lips. "I got your pizza." Her mentioning the word 'pizza' made his tummy growl loudly. Had she heard that? "But I hoped we could cuddle first, even though you sound like starving." She commented. She had heard that.

"Ah, don't worry. My stomach just wants attention." Actually, it wanted food. Badly. He hadn't eaten anything since breakfast and breakfast felt like a lifetime ago. "Let's cuddle first." He would hold her for a while and then get up again to eat his long overdue dinner.

In no time at all, he was in a bedroom he had never been in, in a bed he had never slept in, with the woman he loved cuddled up against him. While her breathing slowed down, his hand stroked her back gently, he started to look around. He had never been here. Why had he never been here? Yet, in the back of his mind, he knew why. Back in the day, he had only concentrated on the Avengers. Pep had been second, back then. If at all.

Within minutes, she was asleep. Her head resting on his chest, her breath calm and steady. Tony stayed in bed for a while, wanting to make sure she slipped into a deep sleep. He didn't want her to wake up as soon as he sneaked out the bed.

Once his stomach started to grumble loud enough to possibly wake her, he pressed a tiny kiss against her head and slipped out of the bed carefully. Tiptoeing to the door, he stopped for a moment, looking back at her. She looked peaceful at last. Just like he wanted to see her. Closing the door, he ventured out into the living room and towards the kitchen, while looking around. Had she rented the place? Did she own it? Did he own it?

Finding the pizza in the kitchen, he settled with the box in hand on the couch, having eaten the first two slices before he even realized he was eating. Or which kind of pizza he was shoveling down. Finally paying attention, he realized he was eating tuna pizza. He grimaced. Why tuna? Yet again, he was hungry. His stomach didn't seem to care about which kind of pizza he ate right now.

Accordingly, he went on eating, while he started to think about Pepper's day.

A crazy workday, which made her feel guilty worst of all. Someone staring at her at night. He frowned. Someone staring at her. Friday was watching the entire complex of Stark Industries, wasn't she? Why hadn't he thought of asking her?

"Friday?" Was Friday even installed in this place?

"Yes?" Oh, thank God, she was. Good chance, he really owned the place. Or Pepper had her installed.

"Where are you hosted?" He asked first, feeling oddly curious.

"On a secure server in the HQ. I'm linked up through Pepper's phone, connected to several speakers in every room."
Oh. He didn't own the place, then. If it was his, a local copy of Friday would be running somewhere within the building.

"Do I own this place?" He still asked. He had to be sure. Otherwise, he would think about it all night long.

"No. It's rented."

"Ah, okay." He shook his head weakly and annihilated another slice, still feeling hungry.

Only then, he asked what he had really wanted to ask. "Did you record who watched Pepper at night?"

"No, sadly not. I have her staring into a direction, but the wall isn't part of the surveillance area."

He frowned. "It's not? I thought the entire complex would be under surveillance. Remind me, to get more cameras up and running. I want the entire complex recorded." How it should be, really.

"Sure thing, boss."

He fell silent, eating the final slice of pizza and still feeling hungry. Getting up, he rummaged through Pepper's fridge. In there were only terribly healthy food choices, like vegetables.

"Does she have something sugary somewhere? Potato chips? Anything?"

"I think she has some chocolate bars in the third drawer to your right."

"Brilliant." He moved, opened the drawer and found the promised chocolate bars. Exactly what he needed right now. Leaning against the kitchen counter, he started to eat one of them.

"Did anything else happen today?" Maybe Friday had seen something unusual. Someone who shouldn't be there. Then again, maybe it had never been an outsider. Maybe one of the new employees had scared Pepper. Maybe someone got paid to play mind games on her until she was unnerved enough to step down. He shivered. Might be possible. Enough people of the upper management had fought against Pep and her takeover. Maybe someone inside wanted to get rid of her.

Before he could overthink his last thought and entangle himself in a series of very nasty consequences, Friday started to talk.

"A man came in claiming to be Stephen Strange who surely wasn't Stephen Strange."

He blinked. "What?!"

"A man came in claiming to be Stephen Strange who surely wasn't Stephen Strange." Friday repeated.

"Yes, yes, yes, ah, no. Who? Could you identify him?"

"Sadly not."

"Why didn't you tell me or Pepper?"

"No one asked." Friday replied matter of factly, nearly making him groan. His damn AI today!

"Can you show me the video?"
"Not here."

He wanted to complain before he remembered she wasn't actually running in this place and would have to move sensitive data through a not so secure network.

"I'll..." He pushed himself off the counter, dashed through the living room and opened the door to the balcony, getting back into his suit. The few seconds, until his overlay turned on felt like hours.

"Connect me to a secure server."

He watched the connection getting established, his identity being confirmed twice before he finally got logged in.

"Okay. Show me the video."

Instantly, a video flashed up in front of his eyes. He saw the back of a man, who walked towards Nicolle.

"Welcome to Stark Industries. How can I help you?" She chirped happily.

"Hi. I need to talk with Pepper Potts." The man replied.

Tony barely registered anything after those initial words.

He knew that voice.

"Show me his face." He ordered, the video freezing until Friday had selected a different recording. The scene on his overlay changed, showing him the face of a man, he had already recognized by his voice.

Starlord.

Chapter End Notes

Like always, I hope you enjoyed the chapter!

I never planned for them finding each other taking that long. My first idea was Peter and Gamora simply walking into the Avengers facility upstate, upsetting Vision badly while doing so, but here I am.

I think (hope) I can wrap it up next chapter. After all, Tony knows about Starlord now.
Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

First of all, thank you for my first 1000 kudos! (And over 30k hits! Yaay!)

This chapter was intended to finish the meeting Starlord and Gamora story arc, but after writing and writing and not getting anywhere near the end I want to write, I decided to break it into two parts (hopefully). I learned from my last never-ending chapter to not leave you waiting for even more weeks!

Accordingly, here you go, have fun with Part 1! The chapter has a nice end on its own still. Took care of that ;)

Who you'll meet: Tony, Pepper, Peter Quill

Happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Watching the working coffee machine, Tony started to drum his fingers on the kitchen counter impatiently. How long could it need to make a damn coffee? He stood around, waiting for what had to be ages. Pepper would surely be awake by now, wondering where he had gone. Fighting down the urge to go check on her, he waited. And waited. And… oh, damn it finally the coffee was done.

Taking the mug carefully, he glanced at the clock while walking back to the bedroom. Just one minute had passed since he had entered the kitchen. Couldn't be right. Surely, more time had passed. He should fix the clock later on.

Shaking his head, he carefully entered the bedroom, first looking at Pepper. She was still asleep. All wrapped up in her blanket, snuggled into his pillow, laying in the middle of the bed. She really wasn't used to sharing this bed, was she? Still, he smiled softly, tiptoeing through the room, trying to not wake her. Sitting down on the edge of the bed, he placed the mug on his nightstand.

"Good morning." He said softly, getting no reaction from her. She just laid there, sprawled out on the bed.

"Hey, Pep. Wake up." He tried again, nudging her shoulder softly, but she only grumbled and turned away from him, snuggling deeper into his pillow.

Watching her, Tony smiled happily. She was just perfect. Favoring those five more minutes of sleep above anything else, just like him. Well, or nearly anything else.

"I know, having to get up sucks." He told his sleeping girlfriend and moved, kissing along her cheek until he reached her lips, lovingly kissing her awake until he felt her kissing back. Arms wrapped around him, pulling him against her.

"Morning." She mumbled against his lips, making him smile as a response before they carried on kissing.

Before he knew it, he lay on his back with her on top of him, kissing each other slowly. God, how
much he had missed mornings like this. Usually, he was always up before her. Went down to his workshop or check on any sign of aliens or whatever else came to mind.

As if she knew what he had been thinking, she broke away and looked at him: "How long haven't we done this anymore?"

"Way too long." He hurried to reply before Friday could give a response. She surely knew exactly how long they hadn't made out in bed in the morning.

Pepper chuckled softly and slid off him, snuggling against his side. "Should start again. I like waking up like this." She said softly, her gaze warm and loving.

"Mm… I'll stay the week. We can make a routine out of it."

"You'll stay a week?" she asked surprised yet skeptical, an odd glimmer of hope in her eyes. Even though he hadn't been sure before, he was now. He didn't want to let her down. No. He wanted her all happy like she was right now, not fearful and terrified and a tiny bit paranoid like she had been yesterday.

"Yep." He replied matter of factly while realizing he didn't even have clothes here.

"I made you coffee, by the way." He said and gestured towards the nightstand. She hummed, turned and looked towards the mug. Instantly, she sat up, took hold of it and nearly took the first sip. She stopped right before the black liquid touched her lips. Lowering the mug again, she looked at it before she looked at him.

"You used the coffee machine, right?" she asked seriously, just as if he had handed her a very poisonous drink instead of coffee.

"Yep. I can use machines." He deadpanned, making her chuckle and take a sip. "Come on, I've never screwed up drinks."

"Except this one time, when you mixed Cuba Libre –" Friday chimed in.

"Friday, mute." Tony interrupted her, stopping her far too embarrassing anecdotes.

"Okay. I've never screwed up coffees." He specified seriously, which only let to Pepper chuckling and spilling coffee onto her nightgown.

"Good to know." She said after another sip of coffee, while he wondered if the spilled drink was reason enough to get her out of her clothes. "How did you sleep?"

He blinked, looking at her. What had she said? He was busy undressing her inside his head. "Hm?"

"How did you sleep?" She repeated with an amused smile before she paused. Looking at him. "Did you sleep?"

Ah, she could still see it.

"Not so much. Was brooding about…" he stopped himself. He didn't want to go down that road again. "Anyway, happy news, I'm 99 percent sure you don't have a stalker."

She raised an eyebrow, looking at him and waited. Waited for him to continue. Tell her whatever he had realized at night.

"While you were asleep, Friday and I had a little chat. Someone walked into the HQ yesterday, who
claimed to be Strange while he obviously wasn't Strange. I looked at the recording." He paused, taking a deep breath. "I know the guy who walked into the HQ. Him being here can only mean..." his words trailed off, while he tried to push down his memories of Titan. Fighting against Thanos. Nearly getting killed by Thanos. "I know him from Titan. We fought against Thanos together. Him being here can only mean he remembers too." He told her seriously, looking at her all the while. Focusing on her face helped him to not get lost in memories. "Never thought there would be more than us three." He added in a whisper, while he wondered if Thanos remembered as well. Maybe the titan was simply biding his time, waiting, until he could wipe them all out single-handedly.

"I think, he tried to get into contact with you to get to me. When Nicolle wouldn't let him see you, he sneaked off to the side, out of Friday's surveillance area and most likely waited to see when you left. Guess he got over-excited when he saw you leave and scared you along the way." He went on, clinging to Pepper's face with all might. He didn't want to freak out again. Besides, he was here to cheer her up, not the other way around.

Pepper looked at him, frowning.

"He hides in bushes to watch me?" she asked skeptically.

Tony shrugged. "Never said he was the most intelligent guy."

She burst into giggles before clearing her throat, turning serious again. "Oh, okay. Are you sure it's him?"

"Yes, I'm sure it's him." As if he would ever forget a single second of his fight against the mad titan. Maybe he would, once they had defeated him, but for now, the memory was clear as day.

A warm hand cupping his cheek made him snap back to reality. Pepper looked at him seriously.

"Okay. We'll talk to him. How can we find him?"

"I guess, he'll come back to the HQ. We just have to wait for him. I considered using Friday to track him down, but..." he shrugged. "I need a pretense to stay here for a week, right?" He winked at her. "I can wait. If he doesn't show up by the end of the week, I can still find him."

"Okay." Pepper said with a smile, before turning serious again.

"Just one more thing. If he really watched me at night from behind those bushes, I'll punch him in the face."

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"You don't have a car of your own?" Tony asked while eyeing the car which had stopped to pick her up.

"No. Saw no need lately. Besides, I like to work on my way and not have to focus on driving."

She saw how he opened his mouth to complain, but she just turned around, opening the backseat door.

"Get in or I'll leave you." She said seriously and slipped into the car, moving up onto the middle seat and waited if he would join her. Surprisingly, he did, with a very long sigh. Tony even greeted her driver, who, to his credit, didn't bat an eye at them.

Once the car was moving, she leaned against him, using his shoulder as a very convenient pillow
while starting to check her mails and appointments for the day. She should have checked them yesterday, but oh well…

Two meetings, some 'normal' reports to sign and the trial period stuff were waiting for her. If she didn't decide who to fire today, HR would be on her soon. They too wanted to know who to keep and who to let go.

Sighing, she decided to distract herself from work for the last few minutes. Firing people was depressing.

Looking at Tony, who was staring out the window, she wondered what he was thinking. Probably brooding about her not having a car or what to wear after today. He couldn't show up in the same clothes two days in a row.

"What are you thinking about?" She asked, watching his relaxed face. Car or clothes? Or her not-stalker? Should she take bets?

"How much I hate L.A." He replied casually while turning to look at her.

"Oh." Good thing she hadn't taken bets. "That's why you moved the HQ to Stark Tower originally, eh? A shame you'll sell the place."

He chuckled weakly. "Too much madness goes down in New York. Better the HQ is here. Doubt I'll have to worry about alien attacks in Los Angeles." He said dryly.

Pepper chuckled lowly, even though she knew he was right. Whatever craziness happened, it always seemed to follow the Avengers. Accordingly, New York should be safe soon, shouldn't it? Maybe she could move the HQ there again. Be closer to him.

"You're really okay with staying here for a week?" she asked carefully. Normally, if Tony didn't like a place, he simply wouldn't be around. Accordingly…

"Sure. Don't worry." He said, ripping her out of her thoughts and wrapping an arm around her.

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Getting out of the car, he helped Pepper out, looking around while doing so. Was Starlord already close by? Watching them at this very moment?

Looking back at Pepper, he smiled. "Go ahead. I'll join you in a minute." Besides, he still wanted to get his pretty useless visitor pass to not upset Happy.

As soon as she headed off towards the doors, he turned around and walked to those damn bushes, checking on them. Most were just bushes, probably watered once in a while, not worth a second thought besides not being watched by Friday. Eventually, he found the one, which had been used as a hiding spot. The ground behind it was scattered with prints, some twigs broken. Turning around, he looked at the entrance in a straight line. Perfect viewing spot. Perfect for not being seen if one laid down on the ground, with the wall behind and the bush in front.

An odd uneasiness crept into him, while he stared at the doors to the lobby. Everyone could have sneaked down here and watched his Pepper without them ever knowing. He didn't like even the slightest possibility of her having a fucking stalker. Not his girl.

Pushing the thought and his odd anger aside, he walked back, entering the lobby. He would simply bring the matter up with Happy. His forehead of security would take care of getting enough cameras
installed within an instant. No spot on their land should not be watched by his ever-faithful AI.

"Morning, Nicolle." He greeted his surprised looking intern, who hadn't even had a chance to greet him properly. "A visitor pass, please. Make it valid for a week. Don't want to bother you every morning."

"Eh… sure thing, sir." She said and started to type away. "Back again to annoy Miss Potts?"

Tony chuckled softly. "Yep. Pepper always complains how boring her work is. Thought I'd spice things up a bit." He joked, making the girl smile. She typed away, swiped the card and, again, didn't hand it to him immediately. Instead, she looked at him worriedly. As if she had done something bad. Like accidentally deleting all scheduled appointments for the rest of the year.

"What happened?" he asked softly, looking at her.

She bit her lip, fiddled with the card.

"Someone… someone was here yesterday, who wanted to talk with Miss Potts. He gave a wrong identity. I should have called the police. Lindsey told me to be careful when someone drops by and wants to talk with her without reason. Could be a crazy fan or else." Nicolle sighed, looking ever more upset with herself. "But… he left instantly and Friday knew and…" She trailed off. "I should have told Miss Potts." She said, casting her gaze down before looking back at him. "But she's so stressed out lately. Not upsetting her even further seemed in everyone's best interest." She said, sounding as if she had trained the sentence in front of a mirror, holding out the card for him to take. Drop and end the conversation, leave the lobby, but he didn't take it.

He looked at her instead. She looked tired. Just as if she hadn't slept much. Most likely, she had worried all night long how to bring yesterday up again, without looking like a fool.

"Don't beat yourself up over this."

"But -"

"No. Friday knows his face. If he would have tried to enter any other way you would have known. Tell security, if he makes a scene call the police. If need be, tell Friday to tell me." He took a breath. "Always tell Friday to tell me, if things seem fishy. Besides, I already know about yesterday."

She blinked. "You know about yesterday?"

"Friday told me."

"Oh…" Nicolle blinked, looking embarrassed. "I'm still sorry. I will tell Miss Potts from now on. I will tell you from now on. God, this is…"

He shrugged and snatched the card from her. "Don't stress about it. Friday? Where is Happy?"

"Not yet in the building, boss."

He sighed, winked at Nicolle in a try to cheer her up and left, entering the HQ through the sliding glass doors.

In no time at all, he was in Pepper's office. Halfway in, he got aware of the terribly uncomfortable guest chair.

"Really? Still no new chair?" He asked annoyed, making Pepper look up from her laptop.
"No. Still no new chair." She repeated, her gaze moving down to the screen again.

"Do we want to change chairs, then?"

"Hell no. Just sit down."

"I won't sit in that chair. I'd rather lay on your desk. More comfortable anyway."

She chuckled softly, looking at him again. "I won't have you lay on my desk. What would people think, who come in?"

"Lock the door." He shot back suggestively.

Pepper managed to hold down a laugh. "Doesn't make it any better. Can't have you lay on my desk." True. Besides, in his fantasy, she was laying on the desk. Maybe he could work on this one while they were here. "Get a chair from somewhere else or sit on the ground." She finished, looking back at her laptop.

Tony made a point to sigh over-dramatically and went to steal someone else's chair.

Some ten minutes later, he did return with someone else's reclining, not so fancy but easily movable chair. She glanced up at him, ready to ask where he got it, but thought better of it. Probably, because she knew he would start with some stupid story. Placing his new chair beside hers, he sat down, sighing happily while doing so.

"How come every chair in this place is better than your chair for visitors?"

Pepper smirked darkly. "Maybe to make them uncomfortable."

Raising an eyebrow, he looked at his girlfriend, who looked back at him seriously. "Really?"

"No, not really. Just always forget about it. Only you complain."

"Ah." Most likely, only he dared to complain.

"Anyway… on to the damn reports. I thought I'd read them, and you tell me what to do?" she suggested.

He blinked. He had thought, he'd simply read through them and be done with it, or have Friday tell him the details, but if she wanted to somehow stay involved in the whole thing…

"Sure, go ahead." He replied, leaning back and looked at her. Her face highly concentrated, her eyes moving along the lines of the report, her lips reading silently. God, how much he wanted her on this desk, all… Tony blinked and pushed his fantasy aside. He had to start listening to her.

"Keeping her is a waste of money. Accordingly, no. Fire her."

"But -" Pepper wanted to object.

"I said no. Next report, please."

Report after report, he decided for her. After her first objection, she simply went along with his decisions, writing down notes for HR. In the end, they only kept one of those Friday had listed. Put four on extended trial. The rest would be fired as soon as the paperwork was done.

"We need to compensate them." Tony said absentmindedly, playing with one of her anti-stress balls,
most likely increasing her stress levels by throwing a ball from hand to hand.

"Yeah, I know." Pepper replied with a sigh. "Otherwise the media will jump on it. 'Stark Industries buys company only to fire half its employees.'" She said, putting his worries into words. The small company only had had 30 employees to begin with. Firing half would look bad. "Some of those programmers and their accountant are good. The rest…” she shook her head.

"Probably lucky you bought them." He replied, starting to see how high he could throw the ball while still catching it. "Might be the company would have collapsed in on itself soon, with so much questionable talent." He went on, grimacing when he threw the ball in a wrong angle, watching how it bounced off the picture on her desk and crashed into her coffee cup, spilling its contents.

Pepper fell dangerously quiet, while she saved her laptop and herself from coffee.

"You get me tissues and then get your ass out of here. You're a nuisance when you are bored."

"I'm -" he wanted to apologize but never got there.

"Tony. Get me those tissues and get out of my office." She said terribly slow, making him move instantly.

----

Peter Quill looked at the to-do list on his phone, mentally crossing binoculars off, while shouldering his backpack again. A sleeping bag, food for three days and preferably a shower were left to do. Once he was done, he would return to Stark Industries. Well, as good as.

Humming lowly, he stared at his list. Food seemed like the easiest option. Entering the next supermarket he could find, he bought a ton of beef jerky, some oranges, apples, a worrisome amount of cookies and water. Lots of water. And instant coffee. He would test how well or not well it worked with cold water.

Leaving the store again, he wondered where to get a sleeping bag. The small shop where he had found the binoculars only had guns and hunting knives besides a tiny collection of other hunting-related equipment. He could have bought a folding chair there, even though it wouldn't help him much.

Leaning against the wall behind him, he ignored the homeless shuffling by, begging for money. How to… he glanced at them. They surely knew where to get sleeping bags, but he really didn't feel like asking. Besides, his phone surely knew. Starting the maps app, he typed in sleeping bags, curious what it would find. To his surprise, it suggested a bunch of stores.

----

Nicolle was checking on the appointments of the day, when Mister Stark re-entered the lobby, looking around indecisively.

"Already done annoying Miss Potts?" she asked friendly while trying to memorize her schedule for the day. Six different meetings she had to supply with snacks and drinks, best beforehand.

"Yeah, I was too good at it. She kicked me out." He said while glancing at the doors as if he wanted to leave. He didn't, though. Instead, he turned around and returned to her counter, grabbing one of the chairs hidden beneath and settled down, looking at her. Somehow, Nicolle felt uncomfortable. Like prey, circled by a hungry lion.
"What exactly do you do?" He asked, making her blink confused.

"What I do?" she repeated confused.

"Yeah, on a daily basis. What's your job?"

She stared at him for some more seconds, wondering if this was some kind of weird test she didn't know about, before taking a deep breath and telling him about her daily work. About greeting people, while being freakishly polite, getting birthday cards and gifts ready for employees, checking on the flowers in the lobby, setting meeting rooms before the meeting itself, and, most important of all, screening visitors.

After she was done, Tony Stark leaned against the counter, staring at her without saying a word. Had she missed something obvious?

The ding of the opening doors made her snap to attention, her usual line on her lips when he beat her to it, already speaking.

"Welcome to Stark Industries, how can I help you?"

Turning her head, Nicolle stared at him perplexed, watching him do her job.

"Hello, eh… I have a meeting."

Nicolle glanced back at their visitor, who looked as confused as she felt, his gaze moving from her to Tony and back again.

"That's when I ask for the name, right?" Tony asked with a whisper, leaning closer towards her. "Do I still have to ask if I know him?"

"Eeh… I guess no, but I was told to ask anyway or say their name out loud." She whispered back weakly, watching him put on a smile again.

"How's your name, please?"

"Gary Blauman." Their visitor replied slowly, staring at the duo. Stark smiled all happy and moved to access her PC.

"Okay, Gary, happy to have you here. How are you? How are the kids?" He asked casually while checking 'Gary' had a meeting. The meeting time and room flashed up on the screen, confirming he had a reason to be here.

"Eh… good, thanks. Elly started walking. We are moving everything out of her reach, but she always finds something we forgot." Gary sighed, while Tony chuckled weakly, moving on to the form for visitors, entering name, reason and assigning an access level to the company.

"Joe is doing good. In his first year of school, all that. I think he has a school play tomorrow which I somehow have to attend. Don't have time, but my wife will make a hell of it if I don't come. Guess I have to work at night, then."

"Oh my." Tony commented, grabbed a key card and activated it. Holding it out to Gary, he smiled politely. "Good luck with the school play. Really hope you can manage. Can't you offload something to your assistant?"

"No, he's on holidays." Gary replied sadly while taking his card.
"Oh damn. Well, good luck then. Your meeting is on the second floor, room 206. Please, take the elevator."

"Great, thanks." Gary replied, not moving an inch. "What exactly are you doing here?"

Tony smirked. "Let's say, I'm broadening my horizon."

After their visitor was gone, Nicolle leaned closer to him. "Who was that?" She asked in a whisper.

Tony shrugged. "CEO of somethingsomething. All I remember is listening to an endless story about his kids while wishing I had more booze. I think I wanted him to sign a contract with us. Listening to his endless talking seemed like a sure way to get there."

----

Hours later, after Tony had distributed cookies at a "not so important" meeting, forcing down a smirk, while the entire room stared at him dumbfounded, wrote a birthday card for someone he didn't even know existed and greeted an oddly high number of employees who dropped by to say hi, Nicolle and him sat in the lobby, bored for once.

"Guess we are done for today. No more meetings and all." She said after a while.

"But you still have to stay until 5 and bore yourself to death?" Tony asked, starting to fiddle around with a pen. He really couldn't do nothing for more than 2 minutes.

"Yep." Nicolle replied. "Today wasn't too bad though." She added with a wink, making Tony chuckle.

"Oh." He stopped his pen playing and looked at her. "How do you talk with people directly if need be? Just relaying messages through Friday? Call? Send an email?"

"Mm... Usually, I use Friday. If the person isn't in the house, I send a mail." She paused, looking at him before her gaze moved to a spot on the counter. "Ooor..." she added smugly, got up and tapped along the counter until a hidden container opened. Tony blinked and glanced at it curiously. Inside rested a small control with four buttons, one of them green, and what seemed to be a speaker, no bigger than the palm of his hand.

"What..." An intercom?

"The controller for the intercom. It's not really used anymore, and Lindsey told me not to play around with it, but theoretically, I could use it. The buttons" she pointed at the buttons "are digital, controlled by Friday. I was told, some receptionist upgraded it years ago. To establish the connection, you still have to press the green button."

Tony nodded, staring at it fascinated. He had thought the intercom had been removed ages ago, but here it was, even a bit upgraded.

"Friday? Room number 601." He ordered, watching the numbers appear on the three white buttons. Feeling Nicolle's gaze on him, he smirked. She knew which room he would be calling.

"Hey, Pep. Are you done yet?"

"Tony?" Pepper's surprised voice floated towards them. "No, I'm not yet done."

"Oh, okay." Tony replied, letting go of the green button and checked his watch.
Exactly five minutes later, he pressed the green button again. "Are you done yet?" he asked innocently.

"Still not." Pepper replied irritated.

Letting go of the button again, he looked at Nicolle. "Am I a bad person because I enjoy this?" He asked with a smirk.

She blinked and smiled weakly. "Maybe? A little bit."

Tony simply hummed, just as if he had no problems with being a bad person and resumed annoying Pepper in 5-minute intervals.

On the fourth iteration, Pepper spoke first. "Nicolle? Kick him out, please."

Both of them stared at each other for some very long seconds, in which Tony let go of the green button, ending the connection.

"I'm sorry, direct order from Miss Potts." Nicolle stated nonchalant, smiling apologetically while doing so.

Tony chuckled. "Tell her, I kicked myself out." He said and got up, waving a good-bye at her before leaving the lobby. As if he would let himself get kicked out by their interning receptionist!

Outside, he took a deep breath, focused his thoughts and looked around.

Was Starlord anywhere nearby? Why hadn't he come in today? He had stayed in the lobby all day long to be able to catch him on first sight, but no, the guy decided to take a break. Maybe he should ask Friday to find him.

Then again, he could live with waiting for him. As soon as he had talked with him and knew for sure he remembered, his mind would be busy planning. He wouldn't have the nerve to stay with Pepper for the rest of the week if all he wanted to do was to meet up with the others and tell them what he had learned. Accordingly, he would lay low, stay with Pep and wait his time, hoping the moron would do the same, even though he wanted nothing more than to talk with him, simply to calm his nerves.

Sighing, he started to leave the complex but stopped after a few steps. He didn't have a car, surely wouldn't use public transport, wasn't up for calling a taxi and sure as hell wouldn't walk. Only left him with... getting his phone out, he connected with Friday.

"Be a sweetheart and get me a suit, okay?"

"On my way." Friday replied while Tony started walking again. He surely wouldn't stand around like some idiot either. The moment he left the complex and stepped foot onto the public sidewalk, his suit landed in front of him.

"Perfect timing." He said happily and got inside. Flying up into the air, he hovered in place for a minute, watching his surroundings. He waited to see if a certain Starlord was close by, screaming frantically for his attention or waving his arms, but again he didn't have such luck. Just the usual gazes of bystanders following him.

Taking another deep breath, he headed off towards Pepper's flat, planning on doing nothing for a while. Maybe he would catch some sleep or order them dinner or... Like usual, he never got there. Instead, an Audi dealer caught his eye. Of course, he could fly to and from 'work' every day using
his suit… or he could simply buy a new car. Besides, Pepper needed a car of her own here. Poor girl.

Landing in front of the doors, he sent his suit home and entered, enjoying the surprised gazes. An employee hurried to him instantly.

"Hello sir, how can I help you?" The man asked overly friendly. Tony couldn't help but smile. Ah, the benefit of being him.

"Do you have an A8? Preferably in white."

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Signing the last report of the day, Pepper sighed happily and leaned back in her chair. Within the second, her phone started to ring. Grabbing it, she saw Tony's name. How could he call in the very same moment she was done working?

"Friday, are you spying on me?"

"Of course not!" Friday replied offended, making Pepper chuckle weakly. As if she would tell her if Tony had told her not to tell her.

Finally taking the call, she greeted him amusedly: "Hey, my play-child."

Tony huffed as a response. "I wasn't all that bad." He complained.

"You set my desk under coffee, caused a commotion in the lobby, as far as I was told, and played with the intercom."

"I was just helping Nicolle do her work." He stated innocently.

"Suure." As if Nicolle needed help doing her work. "You had your fun sitting in the lobby." She said dryly. "Are you going to start as receptionist soon?" She went on.

She heard Tony snort. "As if you could pay my rate. I mean, you could, but you sure as hell won't pay a receptionist that much money."

Pepper snickered, knowing his words to be true. To get a consultation by Tony, if he decided to work once in a blue moon, was freakishly expensive.

"Weeell…" An amused smirk appeared on her lips. "How I see it, you are currently working for free."

Oh, how much she would love to see his face right now. Be able to read his emotions, guess what he was thinking. Instead, she had to content herself with listening to him bursting into laughter. He went on and on, snapping for air helplessly, even starting to cry. Whenever he was close to calming down, he just started to giggle frantically again.

Eventually, after a very lot of giggling, he managed to take a deep breath and sighed happily.

"You are evil, Miss Potts."

She hummed sweetly. "Learned from the best, my love."

He snickered, luckily not bursting into frantic giggles again.

"Thank you. I love you too."
Her heartbeat accelerated hearing his words. He loved her. Of course, she knew, but hearing it always made her happy.

"Anyway, why did you call?" She asked casually.

"Wanted to ask when you are done. I'm downstairs, waiting for you. Or I can get up if you need awhile." He suggested.

Pepper blinked surprised. He had come back to pick her up. Usually, when Tony left, he was gone for good. At least, for the current day.

„Give me ten minutes. Maybe five."

With that, she ended the call, jumped up, stuffed everything necessary into her small handbag, locked her laptop, locked her room and took to the elevators.

They would fly home, wouldn't they? Sure, she was a bit freaked out by the new, thought-controlled armor, but oh god, they would fly home together, wouldn't they?!

Reaching the doors of the dimmed lobby and not seeing him in his suit made her come to a stop, squinting through the doors, hoping he couldn't see her.

Was that a car outside? Had he really bought a new car?

Fighting against her sudden disappointment of not flying home with him, she tapped her necklace twice, activating her suit. Just as a precaution. Tony's driving style was a bit... peculiar. Very often, she ended up fearing for her life, because he was driving like a suicidal maniac. At times, she was wondering if he wanted to break the world record for most speeding tickets within however-many-minutes-they-were-driving. It was a freaking miracle the man still had a driving license.

Yet again, she guessed it was way less a miracle and more Friday's doing. Warn him about police controls, tell him once he had reached a critical amount of speeding tickets, advise him... Or she repeatedly hacked into police servers and erased his record. Thinking about it, the latter option seemed more reasonable.

Taking a deep breath, she opened the doors of the lobby and walked towards him. Definitely a new car. An Audi again? Somehow, even despite fearing for her life, she looked forward to driving with him. Despite him triggering every radar control he could find, Tony was a damn good driver. He knew what he was doing. Like with all things in his life. Watching him driving was, if she wasn't screaming her lungs out, really enjoyable. He looked calm and relaxed while driving. It always reminded her of them cuddling. In her arms, he was even happier, though. Evermore relaxed.

Opening the passenger door, she smiled at him. "Went shopping?" she teased while sitting down, instantly putting on her safety belt, just to be sure it was already on her.

"Yep, my cutest devil. I even bought new clothes. Have to have a change here, if I drop by more often." Had he just said he would drop by more often? "Whenever I'm here I'd like to use the car. At all other times, it's yours."

Pepper blinked. "You bought me a car?" She asked surprised.

"Yep. All yours. Nearly all yours."

She managed a smile. She really didn't need or want a car, she liked to have her driver, but she sure as hell wouldn't show him. Tony had made an effort. Not talking down his present was the only way
to go. Accordingly, she smiled and leaned close to kiss him gently.

"Thanks." She whispered against his lips.

"Always." He whispered back, kissing her again before breaking away.

"How was your day?" He asked curiously, turning on the car again and changing gears. Grabbing the door handle hard, Pepper tried to relax. She knew what was coming.

Her damn boyfriend accelerated from zero to too fast and sped off the complex, fiddling into traffic, passing cars whenever he could.

"Besides you annoying me?" She managed, trying to give her voice a playful tone but failed.

She felt Tony's gaze on her, while she stared at the street, trying to calm down.

"I would never put you in danger." He said softly, stroking soothingly along her arm, while his gaze left her.

"I know." She managed sincerely, watching him speed through a just red turned light. "Besides you, my day was good. Meetings went well, reports got signed." She went on.

He snorted. "Sounds terrible. The me part, not the rest." He commented dryly.

She chuckled weakly, feeling how he got slower ever so slightly. Was he trying to calm her down?

"You were awesome. Despite the coffee and the intercom."

Tony hummed happily. "By the way intercom… I thought about hacking into it. I could control it from any room, after all."

Oh God no.

Chewing on beef jerky, Peter looked through his binoculars, watching a man walk out of the lobby of Stark Industries. Once again, it wasn't Pepper. Yet, after the doors fell shut, the lobby turned dark. Peter blinked and lowered his binoculars. The entire building had turned dark. Had he been the last person in the building? Had he missed Pepper? Yesterday, she had stayed even longer!

Grumbling, he flopped down onto his sleeping bag and took note on his phone, turning it off afterward to preserve energy. If she left at different times every day, catching her would be hard. Maybe... maybe last time had been the outlier, but he couldn't tell anyway, because he had missed her today. He had expected her to leave late again. Sighing lowly, he stared up at the somewhat dark sky. He should have been here earlier. Then again, he wouldn't have dared to fly up onto the roof he was currently on in broad daylight, even though the night wasn't much darker. Still, fewer people to pay attention. No one had yelled when he flew up here. The police had never turned up. He could only guess, no one knew he was here. Just the way he wanted it to be.

Glancing over the parapet wall again, he looked at the dark HQ on the other side of the wall. With some luck, Pepper would turn up at the same time every morning. If he couldn't work with her leaving times, he could try with her arrival time.

Come morning, his alarm ripped him out of a light sleep. Opening his eyes, Peter groaned. Sleeping on concrete with only a thin sleeping bag beneath him hadn't been one of his best ideas. His back
hurt like hell, his neck protested, his shoulders ached. Overall, he felt like an old, hurting man. Even sitting up felt like an impossible task. How was Gamora pulling this off night after night? Sleep on a damn rooftop without feeling 40 years older upon waking up. Carefully, he got up, starting to move and stretch and warm up his muscles despite not ever wanting to move again. Slowly, very slowly, his pain reduced, got bearable.

Sitting down again, he started to peel an orange, watching the HQ on the opposite side of the street. No cars there, the lobby still dark. Was no one there yet? Literally, nothing happened, while he ate his orange, followed by some beef jerky and topped off by some water. He hadn't yet dared to add his instant coffee to his water. Screwing up the entire bottle wasn't exactly in his best interest. If he ran out of water, he would have to get down again, maybe missing out on some more important moments, like Pepper leaving for the second time. Besides, he wasn't even tired enough for coffee. The only thing he wanted right now was a massage.

The first car showed up at 7. Peter had his binoculars ready and watched closely, but the car went on to one of the other buildings, just some man getting out.

Evermore cars showed up. Not many, but many enough to keep him on edge, checking every single car for Pepper.

The girl from the reception turned up first. She entered the complex on foot, walked up to the HQ slowly, stopping repeatedly to check her phone. She must have come by public transport, he guessed. Watching her finally enter the lobby, he witnessed how the dimmed down lights turned up. Peter blinked and snorted weakly. The receptionist was in the house, let's turn up the lights. What if she was ill and didn't come in? Would the lights just stay dimmed?

Not even 10 minutes later, he watched another car pull up in front of the main building. Binoculars ready again, he watched Pepper get out, linger for a moment beside the car, probably talking to her driver, and then walk towards the lobby. Peter watched her for another second, before he flopped down, put his binoculars aside and grabbed his phone. Turning it on, he waited impatiently for it to start. Eventually, the time showed up. 8:02. She had been here at 8. If she showed up at 8 the next morning again, he would work with it. Go down a little earlier, preferably after the lobby girl had turned up, and wait for her.

Entering the first empty office he could find, Tony looked around. Ignoring the bunch of pictures on the desk, the already gathering paperwork for when Elenore came back from holidays, the flowers which definitely needed water, he sat down in the chair, huffing lowly. Even her chair was more comfortable than Pepper's for visitors. Maybe Pepper really did it on purpose, wanting to make all her guests uncomfortable. Watch them gleefully while they kept face and did not complain about the damn chair. Yet, his girl wouldn't do that. She was better than that.

"Where is the intercom?" Tony asked thin air, expecting Friday to answer.

She did, like usual. "To your right." He turned in his way more comfortable chair and looked to his right, searching the wall until he found a small speaker.

Getting up, he eyed it curiously. "Where do the cables run?"

"From below." Friday replied, but Tony didn't quite listen anymore. Instead, he hummed to himself, returning to not-his comfortable chair, an idea forming in his head.

"Can you show me all the cables in the building?"
In front of his eyes, a holographic blueprint flickered into existence, all cables highlighted by a soft glow.

"Which are yours and which belong to the intercom?"

Two separate sets of cables highlighted, one in blue and one in red. Tony got up, walking around the blueprint. Friday's cables were mostly just for backup, in case the main electricity source for the building went down, but she could use them at any time if the need should arise. Normally, the Wi-Fi was just faster.

"The intercom is analog, right?" He asked, coming to a stop. "Do we have cables laying around I can use? A converter? A soldering gun?"

"There is a storage room in one of the other buildings. You should find everything you need." Friday told him, making him smirk like an overexcited child. Perfect.

With all his supplies under one arm, he entered a random, currently empty office once again. Sitting down in front of an unlocked laptop, which was currently showing WhatsApp Web and three unread messages, he shook his head amused and changed users, logging in with his personal admin account.

A moment later, he connected a small circuit board to the laptop and started to type, putting the program together he had already formulated inside his head. Finally hitting enter, he installed it on the board and logged himself out. Grabbing his stuff, he stopped, looking at the laptop with a logged out user, his login name still displayed.

"Friday? Log whoever in again, please." and left the room, smiling at a man, who returned with his coffee cup in hand.

Little time later, he was down in the basement of the HQ, carefully digging his way through drywall until he could see both, Friday's and the intercom's cables.

"Okay..." Pepper would yell at him, wouldn't she? Get mad. Terribly, terribly mad. Taking a deep breath, just as if his girlfriend could materialize from thin air and start yelling at him any second, he walked towards the fuse boxes. "Stop the elevators once everyone is out, please." He said, not wanting to freak out anyone. He would just give everyone a five-minute break. Nothing bad, right?

While waiting for Friday to give her okay, he turned to the highly guarded 'backup' fuse box. After scanning his eyes and confirming his identity, the sealed box unlocked, allowing him to turn off the energy.

"The elevators are clear." Friday said suddenly. Tony hummed, returned to the 'normal' fuse box and flipped the main fuse, turning off the electricity in the entire building. Searching for his flashlight in complete darkness, he turned it on, muttering to himself why he hadn't done so before, and went back to his cables.

In no time at all, he had Friday's cables cut, extended, hooked up to the small circuit board he had reprogrammed, added the converter and finally connected her to the intercom. Flashing his light across the cables, he checked his work. Seemed okay. Grabbing the soldering gun, he connected the cables carefully, humming while doing so. Again, he checked his work once he was done. Looked reasonable enough. Looked like not short-circuiting the entire system once he flipped on the fuse.

Finding his way back to the normal fuse box, he turned on the electricity again. Above him, the lights flickered on and stayed on, just as if nothing had ever happened.

"Friday? Are you with me?" He asked softly, hearing his voice and the humming of the servers
"Of course." His AI replied dutifully.

"Can you see the intercom?"

"Currently scanning the network and mapping the rooms."

"Sounds good." He said with a smile, returning to the backup fuse box, turning everything on again and closing the security case. Before leaving, he glanced at the open cables. He had to remember to repair the wall.

"How long were you off?"

"Four minutes and thirty-two seconds."

Not bad at all.

Back in not-his office, he tried extremely hard to look innocent, watching people pass by the open door. Some glanced in, but mostly no one bothered him.

Until Pepper came along. She leaned against the doorframe, looking at him.

"We had a complete blackout, did you know?" she asked while not asking. She knew he had done it. He could see it in her eyes, hear it in her voice. Who else, really? There weren't many people who could access and turn off the backup electricity.

"Yeah. I went down to the basement when I realized Friday was off. Can you believe her backup fuse was off?" He asked in an exasperated voice, doing his best to keep a straight face.

"Really? Shouldn't ever have happened." She said softly, while her eyes tracked his every move.

"Yeah, shouldn't. For what do we have a highly secure backup if it doesn't turn on?" He asked upset.

Pepper stared at him for a few long seconds, which felt like minutes, burning holes through him with her gaze.

"You have dust in your hair, by the way." She said sweetly all of a sudden.

Fuck, the drywall. He had dusted off his clothes the best he could as well as his hair, but…

"Ah, yeah. The basement was quite dusty." He said without missing a beat, watching her frown, hum, nod and smile all at the same time. She didn't believe him, obviously.

She didn't say anything else, though. Just turned away and let Tony stare after her. His worries were gone the second he saw her skirt move from side to side. Of course, he had seen her already today, but never… God, she looked so hot. Not slutty in any way or as if she wanted to seduce someone, just… just really professional. Walking along those corridors like the CEO she was.

"How long does she need to work today, based on the stuff she has to read and all?"

"Around 7 p.m., based on her usual speed." Friday reported.

"Can't you…"

"Tell legal she has some free time and to send her the remaining takeover related paperwork? Sure,
will do."

"Oh, I love you."

"I think that was meant for someone else." Friday replied dryly.

"True. How is the intercom going?"

"A few more tests and it's ready to go."

----

Staring up at the bright, blue sky, Peter nibbled on his third cookie. He was eating, simply out of boredom. At 9, a whole lot of cars had shown up, but he knew Pepper was already in the building. He hadn't really cared, just watched to have something to do.

And afterward…

Nothing.

Nothing and nothing and nothing.

Sitting up again, he glanced over the parapet wall, watching humans move. Grabbing his binoculars, he checked on them. Security guards making their rounds. They seemed to take a walk every two to three hours, checking the perimeter. Sighing, he returned to nibbling on his fourth cookie, before he eventually dug through his bag, searching his Zune. Waiting would be so much more awesome while listening to music.

He danced across the roof, singing lowly, turning in circles, trying to slide on the rough concrete, nearly falling. Twice. Once onto the ground, once off the roof, but he managed to catch himself both times. Then he was back to simple dancing, far away from the edge.

Passing the door to the roof, he stopped and tried the handle again. Like the last five times, the door was locked. The way he wanted it to be. He wasn't interested in being seen by a smoking employee or a making out couple. Too much to explain. Maybe they would even call the police on him. If someone walked in on him here, he would grab his stuff and jump off the roof, try to make a run for it.

Around midday, he was back at his watching post, looking out for Pepper. Maybe she would go eat lunch today, but she didn't. Some others left in small groups, presumably chatting their way to a restaurant around. A little later, a whole lot of different delivery guys and girls showed up, food for all those other employees in tow. Watching them, Peter sighed lowly and let his face hit the wall.

"Ouch."

He whispered, feeling ever more stupid. He really should have posed as a delivery guy. Would have made his life so much easier, but no, he had walked in there, giving his identity away. Well, kinda.

After the employees who had left for lunch returned, nothing happened once again.

This time, Peter didn't listen to his music. He wasn't sure how long the battery would last. Sure, Rocket had stuffed some alien energy source into it, claiming it would last a year, but Peter didn't want to take his chances. Besides, he couldn't remember when Rocket had put in the new 'batteries'. If his Zune died…
For an entire hour, he stared at the sky, counting airplanes, helicopters, birds, more airplanes, and got vaguely aware of a sunburn. Why hadn't he thought of sunblock?

In no time at all, he was back to listening to his Zune. He would take his chances. He couldn't sit around, stare at thin air and do nothing all day. Listening to music and dancing wasn't nothing. Yet, he couldn't go on dancing for the entire day. At some point, he was back to sitting around, watching the HQ, stare at the many windows and wonder which office belonged to Pepper. If only he knew…

At 5, his boredom was interrupted by a rush of activity. A ton of people left at the same time. Jumping to attention, he watched the entrance to the lobby, trying to see if Pepper was among those leaving. He didn't see her.

He just wanted to put his binoculars down, when he saw the lobby girl leave. He followed her all the way off the complex, saw how she walked along the side way and towards the bus stop. She really came by public transport.

During the next hour, the lights in the several buildings went on. Whenever a light turned off a person left the building soon after. He watched and watched, but never saw Pepper. He had either missed her or she was still busy working.

Putting his binoculars down, he closed his eyes. Could he have missed her? No. No, she hadn't left at 5. He would have seen her. He had stared at the entrance nonstop. He would have seen her, surely.

 Accordingly, he remained sitting, watching, eating some more beef jerky, nibbling on another cookie and gulped down water, always waiting for Pepper, but Pepper never came.

At 10 p.m. he started to wonder if he had indeed missed her. Maybe she had used another exit he hadn't seen. Sneaked out through the backdoor. Staring at the building, he realized only one office was still lit. The entire rest of the building, despite the dimmed lobby, had turned dark. What if Pepper had snuck out? Sure, she might be in the lit office. Or she have walked out another way. Left through one of the emergency exits the building surely had, simply because she didn't want to be watched by a creep hiding behind bushes. Or a creep with binoculars hiding on the opposite building.

Chuckling lowly at the very precise description of himself, Peter activated his jet boots and hopped off the building, flying down and landed in front of the building he had watched all day. Walking up to the lobby, he banged against the doors, yelled, hoping something would happen. Anything. Yet, the lobby stayed dimly lit. No one came running at him. Nothing, once again.

Sighing, he looked around, getting aware of the security camera above the door. Shouldn't someone see him? Where were the security guards anyway? Earlier, they had patrolled the complex every so often. Now, they seemed to take a break.

Shaking his head, he stepped away from the lobby and started to walk around the building, finding two other official exits as well as three emergency exits. Plenty of ways to leave. Grumbling lowly, he wondered what he should do. Well, leave the complex again and then decide how to handle the other exits. He didn't want to be caught standing around, brooding. Not at night, while sneaking around.

He didn't leave, though. He hadn't gone through all possibilities. Ending below the last lit window, Peter stared up at it. If Pepper hadn't left, she would still be in her office. He could simply fly up and knock on her window, catch her attention. Surely, he would freak her out at first, maybe get pepper-sprayed or punched in the face (or other body parts he didn't want to think about), but it would be worth it if he managed to talk to her.
He wouldn't have to sit on a building day after day.

He wouldn't get even worse sunburned.

He wouldn't have to worry how long the battery in his Zune kept working.

He wouldn't feel like a hundred-year-old after waking up.

Yet, none of those things mattered. Most of all, he wanted to meet up with Gamora again, get home and do crazy space missions with his family. Every place was better than here.

Activating his jet boots, he took his chances and flew up to the window, glancing into the room for the shortest of seconds. His eyes widened when he saw what was going on inside and he let himself drop again instantly, only catching himself before he hit the ground, not daring to take a second look.

No Pepper. Just a couple having sex on a desk.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed reading!

I thought through different endings for this chapter.

One, were Peter recognizes Pepper and freaks out badly, because he doesn't want to be the one telling Tony his girl is cheating on him.

One, were he recognizes them both and knocks on the window nonchalantly, freaking them out with Pepper probably dying of embarrassment.

The one I got was the one which (was the most boring, sadly) resonated best. If Peter accidentally saw a couple going at it on a desk, he sure as hell wouldn't take a closer look.

I'll try to be back (soonish), but I have to settle some work related stuff first sadly.

Have a nice Sunday!
Chapter Notes

Hell, I know. This one took a while, but now I'm back with a very lot of craziness.

This is still mostly a Tony/Pepper chapter, with Starlord, Peter Parker, Stephen and cloak sprinkled in for good measure
I really wanted to write even more, but its finally time to post this chapter!
Originally, Gamora had a few scenes too, but I somehow couldn't justify keeping them to my head :( 
Have fun reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Snuggling a bit deeper into Tony's loose embrace, Pepper smiled content. For a while, she didn't move, didn't talk, didn't even really think. Her world narrowed down to Tony's breathing, their combined scent, the heat radiating off his body.

With her skin cooling, the present moment caught up with her, thoughts popping up in her mind. With all her might, she tried to force them out, tried to stay a moment longer in sweet thoughtless oblivion, unaware of the world around her, all snuggled up on Tony's lap.

Her head was relentless, though. Her thoughts returned with all their might, just picking up where she had tried to silence them. Wondering, where her clothes had gone. The blazer and the blouse were obvious. She had taken the former off when Tony had offered her a massage, the latter had disappeared as collateral when the message had somehow left her shoulders. Everything else… everything else was just a blurred haze of making out.

"You are getting cold." Tony said softly, hugging her a bit closer against him. "We should have a blanket here."

Pepper hummed softly. "Would be awesome." Would make their post-sex cuddling even more comfortable for sure. "We might fall asleep though." She said softly, unable to stop herself from imagining her assistant walking in on them in the morning, them still asleep, clothes strewn across the room.

Oh God, she would die the very same second. Probably preferable to knowing she had been seen naked. How could Tony not care about those things?

Thinking about her assistant walking in on them made her mind jump back to the various times she had walked in on Tony and whoever he had had for the night. Never had she cared for them looking embarrassed. Never had she even spent a thought on his many escapades, besides at times wondering how he picked his one-night stands. Just for the looks? Or was he interested in conversations too? Some of them seemed like dumb and dumber for sure.

Lucky her, she had never been a one-night stand. If she were, she'd been picked for the conversations, surely, and had somehow managed to turn one night into quite a many nights.
Chuckling lowly, she smiled. Tony had been terrible back then. Terrible and still oddly lovely, if he wanted to be.

"What's so funny?" Tony asked softly.

"Nothing." She replied amused and kissed him softly. No one would see them. No one could see them. They were alone in the building.

"We could just tell Friday to wake us up again." She whispered against his lips, picking up their earlier topic.

Tony hummed in agreement and started to rub along her back, making her both shiver and try to snuggle even closer, seeking his warmth. "Won't help us right now, though." He said softly, while his hands went on moving along her cool skin. "Even though I hate to be the one saying it, I guess we should put on some clothes."

Pepper stared at him, too surprised to reply. Upping the temperature in the room was easy for him, as easy as telling Friday to do so, but instead, he offered to put on clothes, fully aware of her being uncomfortable all naked, with the tiny possibility of being seen ever-present.

"I love you." She breathed out.

Tony blinked, obviously not having expected her reply, but kissed her nonetheless, quick and soft.

"I love you too." He replied, making her smile. He loved her. "And now get off my lap or else I might reconsider sleeping here. Or sleep at all." He added suggestively, making her laugh and slip off his lap, getting back onto her feet. She took a second to stand still and look at him. His happy smile, the content expression on his face, his messed-up hair, his sweaty skin. Oh, he looked gorgeous. And messy. Just like her, she guessed. Turning around, she pushed her thoughts of Tony aside and started to search for her clothes. They had to be around.

Her panties were soon to be found, having ended below her table, her skirt had managed to disappear behind her pot flowers, her blouse and her blazer where were she remembered them to be, only left her…

While looking around, searching for her last piece of cloth, she eventually got side-tracked and ended up watching Tony.

He just stood there, by the window, completely visible for whoever cared to watch. For the second time within only a few minutes, she wondered how he could not care about who saw him naked. Well… She sighed in the safety of her head. Probably, because he had the means to get rid of any picture, he didn't want out there. Not that he would care much anyway. The man was the very definition of self-confidence. Or arrogance, depending on the viewpoint. He would probably even comment on a picture of him naked in some magazine. Or sue them for having publicized a nude of him, depending on his mood. Or buy the organization and fire everyone without batting an eye.

Tony turned his head to look at her. He had felt her stare, hadn't he?

"What is it?" He asked softly.

Opening her mouth, she wanted to tell him, how much she envied his carelessness about what other people thought, how much she hated his carefree attitude towards the media, how much she had liked today, even though she would never admit it, how much she just wanted to hug him and stare out into the night, let the day pass by in silence.
"I can't find my bra." She said instead, shrugging.

----

Peter Quill was walking in rather frantic circles on his rooftop, trying to get rid of the image inside his head.

"I didn't see anything. I didn't see anything. I didn't..." He repeated on and on, trying to think of Gamora, while his head was happily jumping back to the scene he had witnessed. The man...

He took a deep breath and pushed the thought aside. He hadn't seen anything. He had only seen a man, naked, with a woman bent over... and then he had dropped down towards the ground, already knowing too much for his liking.

Yet, he hadn't seen anything. No. Not really. Not. At. All.

Getting his phone out, he turned it on again, calling Gamora. He had to hear her voice. She would get him on different thoughts and the world would be okay again. While he went on pacing, he listened to the dial tone. It wasn't ending. She wasn't picking up.

Had something happened to her?

Had she maybe... No. If she had found Spider-Man, he would know instantly.

Taking a deep breath, he tried again. And again. Until the dial tone ended and a very sleepy Gamora mumbled a "What is it?" into the phone.

Hearing her voice, he stopped his pacing, simply freezing in motion, feeling dumb. She had been asleep.

"Peter?" She asked a tiny bit worried, more awake now.

"Yes, hi." God, he shouldn't have called her so frantically. He had just woken her up. Stupid him.

"Did something happen?" She asked, sounding fully awake now. As if whatever had happened to him could impact her in any way. They were a continent apart, after all.

"I just... wanted to hear your voice." He mumbled, feeling stupid. He should have just...

"What happened?" She asked again, sounding very close to annoyed now.

"Nothing. Saw a couple having sex in the stupid office I'm watching."

Gamora remained silent. The seconds ticking away, turning into forever.

"Oh." She eventually replied, sounding more relaxed. "Was it Pepper?"

Was it Pepper? The question made his mind jump back instantly, trying to get a closer look at the woman, but she had been bent over a fucking desk. No way of telling who fucked who.

"I didn't pay much attention." He replied dryly, making Gamora chuckle. She would have surely taken her time to get to know who was having office-sex, wouldn't she? Hovered in front of the window and stare at them. What if it had been Pepper? What if... Peter turned towards the building, looking at the lit window. If it had been Pepper Tony had to be here. Or she was having an affair, letting herself get fucked by whoever. Did he really want to be the one telling Stark his girl was screwing around?
"It wasn't Pepper." He decided firmly, pushing the thought away.

"Anyway, how was your day? Any progress on Spidey? Please, tell me yes…" he went on, hoping to finally put a stop to his over-imaginative mind.

He started to walk again slowly, while they talked. Eventually, after they ended their call, he sat down and watched the building. Watched the last light turn off, the lobby turn dark, a car drive away. Stark wasn't here. He couldn't be. If it had been Stark, he would have used one of his suits to leave, surely. Why drive if one could fly?

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Pepper looked at herself in the mirror skeptically, eyeing the bruises on her hipbones and upper thighs, which had formed overnight. Sure, she had known she would bruise, even during sex, but it hadn't felt all too rough, not in the heat of the moment anyway.

She heard shuffling in the other room. Steps getting closer.

"Any regrets?" Tony asked softly. She ripped her eyes away from the mirror to look at him. He leaned in the doorway, sleep tousled hair, looking decisively sleepy while his eyes were sharp and awake.

"No, never." She replied as softly as he had asked, returning her gaze to the mirror to look at herself. The black-turning bruise on her hipbone was a bit worrisome, but…

She heard Tony move again. Then he was behind her, pressing a tiny kiss against her neck, while his fingers gently traced her bruises. "I'm still sorry." He whispered gently, making her stare at him in the mirror, aware of his fingers delicately brushing along the black bruise. She turned her head, kissed his cheek.

"Don't be." She whispered back, watching a smile form on his lips and as he smiled, she felt a shiver run down her spine. How he looked at her, his gaze full of love. This tiny smile, only for her. Right now was good. Right now was perfect. One of their tiny moments, in which she felt content with herself and the world. In which she felt loved and loved him most, felt secure and at peace and as if nothing could ever worry her.

And then Tony went on speaking. "So, we'll have sex in the company more often? I do have some ideas…"

Pepper sighed lowly and rolled her eyes, while he went on talking about having sex in one of the elevators. Gone was their tiny moment. Yet, they wouldn't be so perfect, if they lasted longer, right?

She slipped out of Tony's embrace, returning to her bedroom to pick her clothes for the day, while he followed suit and just went on talking about various sex positions, the logistics of the how and when and where. He had a list, hadn't he? He surely had a list. Tony Stark had a fucking list for literally everything, most definitely for sex.

While she slipped into her clothes, she watched him do the same. One of his new trousers, a dress shirt. Then, he ended up back in the bathroom, staring in the mirror to get his hair just right. Watching him fight with one rebellious strand of hair, she leaned against the doorway this time around.

"Tony?"

He hummed lowly, not looking at her, not even stopping to fiddle with his hair. He was fully
concentrated on getting his looks right. He would end up shaving tonight or tomorrow morning to keep his neatly trimmed beard in check, wouldn't he?

"Don't shut off the electricity during business hours again."

He didn't reply immediately. Rather finished his hair and only then looked at her. The man didn't even have the decency to look caught or embarrassed or ashamed.

"Okay." Was all he said, smiling softly, leaving her with the uneasy knowledge he'd just do it again.

Waking up slowly, Peter Quill didn't move for a while. Just lay there, on the hard concrete and thought how the hell he had ended up here. On a building. Observing when people came and went. He wasn't the observing type. He really wasn't. He was rather the charge in and deal with it type. Sighing, he sat up in one swift motion to get on to his task, observing, but instantly regretted having moved, when a jolt of pain rushed down his spine, lighting up his neck, his shoulders, his entire back.

"Oh, fucking hell..." He moaned and groaned. How had he advanced to a 150-year-old man overnight? His muscles throbbing and crying out in pain so much shouldn't be humanly possible! Hell, getting fried by his completely insane father had felt better.

Grabbing the wall in front of him blindly, he pulled himself forward, groaning and whining and moaning some more. Why didn't it get better? Should he lay down again? How the fuck did Gamora do this? After some long, painful seconds, he managed to get onto his feet, groaning and cursing beneath his breath and whining. How the hell could he hurt so much?

After a bit of stretching, after a very lot bit of stretching, his pain got manageable and for now, Peter was fine with manageable. Watching single cars pull up every now and then, he turned to check his phone. 7:30. Time enough for a breakfast cookie, followed by beef jerky, while he paced along, waiting for the time to creep up to 7:50. He had to check his assumption.

At 7:50 lobby girl turned up, walking up to the HQ slowly. Once she was inside, the lights turned on.

At exactly 8, Pepper turned up. She really worked like clockwork when it came to getting to work.

Once he had seen her get out of the car, he very, very carefully sat down. If tomorrow was worse... well, if tomorrow was worse, he should set his alarm an hour early, maybe to 6:30, to get into moving before even thinking of getting off the building and getting to Pepper. Right now, he could fall off the building and somehow manage not to turn into a puddle of blood on the street.

With the pain in his back and neck and shoulders fading, he got aware of his throbbing face, heat radiating off his skin. Right. Sunburned face.

Glancing at the HQ, he hummed thoughtfully. He didn't need much more observing for now, right? He had his time frame for tomorrow. Be down at 7 something, wait for lobby girl, sneak in, talk with Pepper, be done.

And if he missed Pepper...

And if he missed Pepper, he would think of something else. Act on the moment, like usual.

For starters, he would get off the building. Get a shower to be presentable tomorrow morning, get
some lotion for his throbbing face and while he was on it, a massage. A really good massage.

Entering her place of work, Jane Collins raised her hand to greet their interning receptionist.

"Hey, Nicolle!" She greeted, getting a happy "Hey there!" back.

Even though Nicolle didn't yet know all their names – how could she? – she had learned to figure out who worked here or not. In the beginning, Jane had always gotten her 'Welcome at Stark Industries…' greeting and had always replied, she didn't need a welcome, she already knew her way around.

A key card swipe and an elevator ride later, she got out on her corridor, walking past already busy offices. Everyone was always here earlier than her. Yet again, everyone was gone earlier than her too. Maybe, she should work on her sleeping rhythm some more. Be early in and be early out.

Finally entering her office, she grinned happily when she spotted her birthday treat, a perfectly packaged muffin along with her greeting card, already waiting on her desk.

"Jaane!" A second later, she found herself in Abby's hug, her co-worker somehow even more excited than her about being back.

"How was your birthday? Are you broke now?"

Jane burst into laughter and politely slipped out of the hug, sitting down at her desk.

"Nope. I accidentally" She made quotation marks with her fingers "forgot my credit card at home. No fucking idea how that could happen." She coughed a fake cough. "Lucky me everything was already paid. I could place the cash bond on my debit card and then somehow lost that one in my hotel room. I'm so damn forgetful!" She complained in mock annoyance. "Anyway, my birthday was brilliant. Had enough cash on me to pay my way and lose at casinos." She winked and grinned again.

"Anyone in your friend group a millionaire now? Any suggestions on who I can marry?" Abby teased, winking at her playfully, which only made her chuckle again.

"Nope, sorry. James won 50k playing poker, but that's about it."

Abby whistled nonetheless. Winning 50k was something to brag about.

"We joked he stole all our luck and cashed it in. No one else even got above 100 dollars." She reported while turning to her laptop, turning it on.

"Any news I missed? Are people getting fired already?" Hopefully, meant she didn't need to work on it.

"Nope." Damn it. "News is quiet for now and no one has been fired yet." Abby reported. "Did you hear about Laura, though?" She lowered her voice to a whisper. "Vally said that Gero George said that Carol said that she saw the reports. Laura has zero hours of productive work during the entire trial period. How does one even do that?"

"Ehm… watch YouTube all day every day? Paint your nails? Stare out the window? I could find a way if I wanted to." Jane joked while entering her password. The SI logo appeared above her personalized desktop image. Instantly, a meeting popped up for in two hours.
"Oh, fuck. We need a policy of no meetings on the first day after holidays." She whined. "Did you hear me, Friday? Add it to the list!"

Like usual, Friday didn't respond to her complaining, but she guessed if she accessed the suggestion list of employees, 'no meetings on first day' would be there, along with all those other complaints uttered in the heat of the moment.

Staring at her meeting popup unhappily, she eventually clicked on it and froze. A meeting with Miss Potts and Hillary from HR. Fuck. No! Fuck. This would be about firing people. She didn't want to be involved with firing people! She was the guy for happy news, not for...

After a quick calendar search, Jane sighed. Right now, she was the most experienced employee of the PR team at the HQ. Daniel and Jerome and Tina were all on holidays, good grace. Miss Potts had most likely ordered Friday to schedule a meeting with HR and PR and Friday ended up selecting her to do the job.

Taking a deep breath, Jane tried to calm her nerves. She could do this. She had worked in PR for a while now. This was her chance to show off. Yet… a meeting with Miss Potts and Hillary...

No. She could do this! Or rather, she had to do this anyway.

Searching the public workspace of her co-workers for notes on firing people, she eventually glanced sideways and ended up staring at her muffin.

She couldn't leave it here, all alone, uneaten.

The treat would surely lift her mood again.

Grabbing the package, she carefully unpacked it, staring at this year's treat, inhaling its subtle scent. A chocolatey chocolate muffin.

"Okay…” She whispered to the muffin and finally bit down, moaning lowly.

So good!

Beyond anything, she had ever tasted. Even better than the muffins, her grandma had made.

After her first bite, she sighed content.

"I swear, they do this shit on purpose. I mean, they don't even hand out the same muffin to everyone. Everyone I talked to until now got a slightly different muffin and it was always perfect. Just like last year's chocolate."

And then she took another blissful bite. How could a stupid muffin taste so good?!

"I bet Friday watches our eating or better snacking behavior, creates profiles and comes up with the best birthday treat year after year."

Jane hummed lowly. Abby was most likely right. In actual theory, a breach of privacy policies, in actual practice probably some test program running in the background, which they had signed allowances for. They got so many updates on their privacy policies every month, that most employees didn't even bother to read them. Just a signature here and whatever would happen. They were already constantly recorded by Friday anyway. Who cared about yet another change?

After having annihilated the muffin, she sighed content. "I won't be able to eat muffins for ages."
said seriously.

Abby snorted beside her. "That's why they do it. To get you to eat healthier because everything else tastes like shit in comparison."

Jane snickered. Well, it had worked last time for sure. After her birthday chocolate, she hadn't eaten any other normal, in a shop buyable chocolate in a long while.

"Friday? Where can we buy those muffins?" She tried, even though she knew Friday wouldn't tell her.

"You don't have access to this information. I'm sorry, Jane." Friday told her as expected.

"Oh, come on! You can tell me!" She pleaded but got no further reply.

"Maybe we can bribe Nicolle. She won't stay here much longer anyway, right? She can tell us the good stuff." Abby suggested grinning.

"We really should. She has nothing to lose, right?" She replied with a smile. Yet, her smile faded away, when she saw the notes Friday had found for her. Firing people. She had to get ready for the meeting. Or…

She ended up grabbing her birthday card, carefully opening the envelope and pulling her card out.

"That's not Nicolle's handwriting." She stated matter of factly, staring at her card.

"Hey, Jane!

Happy birthday! Friday says you are on holidays in Las Vegas. Hope you didn't lose your last shirt. Or else, always have a backup shirt for the last shirt. Can come in handy, trust me.

If you do need a loan to pay your next rent, I'm sure we can sort something out. Don't worry.

I hope you enjoyed your day and had fun with family and friends.

TS"

"Tony Stark wrote my birthday card." She stated dumbfounded, still staring at it as if it could disappear at any second. Abby moved beside her, staring at her card as well.

"Wow." Her co-worker whispered lowly.

"Why? I don't have an anniversary or met special margins or came up with something awesome…” Jane stuttered together, still staring at her card. She was just doing PR!

"Well…” Abby started. "He was in the lobby a few days ago. Doing receptionist work for God knows why. Obviously, he even wrote your card."

Jane stared at her. "He did receptionist work?” she repeated, not having listened to anything afterward.
"Yep. He even gave out cookies during a meeting."

"He gave out cookies during a -"

"Where the hell is my chair?!" An angry yell from the corridor interrupted them, making them get up, scoot closer to the doorway and peek out. James stood there, not even fully in his office, already fuming.

"Who the fuck stole my chair?!" he yelled again, looking up and down the corridor as if the culprit would reveal himself. "You can't even go on a fucking business trip without your stuff disappearing!" He yelled again, turned and stomped past them while muttering something about getting someone fired.

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Carol Miller stared at her screen bored, currently watching YouTube videos. She had prepared the usual leave notices for all names on the list Miss Potts had given them and was now simply waiting, biding her time to learn what had been decided during the meeting. She could go through the always growing list of applicants, check their current job listings, look at the performances for this month to figure out who got a bonus or…

Or anything, but right now, she simply didn't want to. She was waiting for news of the current meeting. Who would get fired, who would get a money package to leave, who would stay despite being on the list. Sometimes people stayed, after all.

A tiny smile found its way to her lips. She loved takeovers. Always a little inhouse drama and she loved inhouse drama. Better than television for sure. More real and more true.

Her door crashing open made her attention snap up, stopping her video in a hurry, raising her gaze to meet a fuming, growling, heavily breathing James. Oh God, what had upset him this time around? Would he insist on someone getting fired again?

"What happened?" Carol asked softly, hoping he wouldn't yell at her.

Luckily, he didn't. He just growled at her. "I want to know who stole my chair. Friday won't show me the stream."

She blinked. All this anger for a stupid chair? "You chair was stolen?" She repeated, making sure she hadn't heard him wrong.

"Yes!" James spat at her. "I come back from Vancouver and my fucking chair is gone! I want to know who did it and tell him a few things!"

Carol stared at him for a few seconds until she smiled. More inhouse drama. Her day couldn't get any better!

"Give me a second." She said calmly, finally closed YouTube and opened her program to access the security feed. A few types later, Friday forced her to confirm her identity, give a reason why she wanted to access the feed and there it was, James office a few days ago, pretty damn early in the morning.

She watched Tony Stark venture through the corridor, pass different offices, glance into them. She saw him eventually pass by James office a second time, peek in. He stopped and then entered, dragging the chair along and back the way he had come, probably returning to the elevators.
Staring at her empty screen, after the video had closed itself, Carol very slowly moved her gaze back up to James.

"You know what? Best we simply buy you a new chair." She said with a smile, trying to sound casual, hoping he wouldn't scream at her.

----

Swiping through the current state of their various research projects using her tablet, Pepper bit her lip lightly, trying once again to read one of those summaries, but like usual today, she never made it beyond the first few lines.

Tony was back in her head.

Tony kissing her, Tony's hands all over her body, Tony bending her over this very same desk and…

Taking a deep breath, she tried to get her boyfriend out of her head, focusing her attention back onto the text in front of her.

About ten seconds later, she leaned back with a groan. Her head was far too distracted today. She had somehow managed to get through her meeting, but ever since was…

"Friday? Where is Tony?"

… a mess. A fucking mess. Her mind slipped away every few minutes. Or seconds.

Again, the AI stayed silent.

"Oh, come on!" She complained to Friday, still not getting a reply.

Whenever she inquired about Tony's whereabouts, Friday had turned to dodgy answers or simply silence.

"He told you to not tell me, right?" She asked thin air again, not expecting a reply and not getting one.

After Friday's first dodgy answer, which had told her he was 'somewhere within the building', Pepper had played with the idea of accessing the security feed and simply look for him. Before she had even started to turn her idea into reality, she had dropped it. If Friday didn't help her now, she would surely not help her to scan the various feeds for Tony. They had a ton of cameras in the building, all simultaneously recording.

She would never find him, all alone.

Hopefully, he wasn't doing any mayhem again. With their electricity still running, no one running into her office screaming about everything malfunctioning or any other odd complaints, she would have to take him at face value. During their car ride this morning, he had promised to not do anything stupid today. Whatever 'stupid' meant in his words exactly, but up until now, he seemed to stick to his words.

Yet, not knowing where he was or what he was up to wasn't especially reassuring either. Rather, the exact opposite. It very slowly drove her insane. The man couldn't do nothing for longer than a few minutes! What the hell was he up to?!

Sighing unnerved, Pepper closed her eyes, trying to force him out of her head.
Yet, Tony's lips were back on her neck, his callused, warm hands gliding down her sides towards…

Snapping her eyes back open, Pepper took a shivering breath.

"Fucking hell. No more sex in my office. We can take someone else's office."

Wait. What had she just said?

Shaking her head, she leaned back in her chair, her eyes wandering through her office. The few flowers, some pictures on the wall, some shelves for… well, books and other stuff.

Where the hell was her bra?

It had to be in her office. It just had to be. Very unlikely it had grown a pair of legs and walked out the door.

"Maybe the cleaning personnel took it." She whispered to herself, feeling uneasy at the very thought. She didn't want anyone to know what Tony and she had done last night. Finding a bra would give them away. Yet, no one knew whose bra it was. Might be someone entered her office at night for some fun, even though she knew it wasn't possible. Friday only unlocked her door for her assistant or cleaners, if she wasn't around. Maybe Alex had…

Sighing once again, she closed her eyes, finally being able to keep her damn boyfriend out of her head.

Hearing her door open, Pepper fought down a groan. Of course, her assistant needed her attention right now, during the one moment she had finally managed to relax.

Opening her eyes, she didn't see Alex though. Instead, the very personification of all her worries closed the door, looking at her with a frown.

"Everything okay?" Tony asked concerned.

Pepper took a deep breath, not answering his question. "Where were you?" She asked instead while scanning him for any hints, like the dusty hair from yesterday. This time, he had been more cautious though. Nothing gave him away.

Tony simply shrugged, dragged his stolen chair back beside hers and flopped down.

"Here and there. I met Happy, by the way. He was upset about the security personnel not making their rounds last night."

Pepper blushed at the very mention of it. They had told them to go on an extended break, after all.

"Are you sure Friday didn't record us?" She asked weakly.

Tony smirked amused. "Yes, I am. You can go check yourself if you need the peace of mind. Anyway, I talked him out of investigating, hopefully. Distracted him by telling him about the spot Friday can't see. He'll order more cameras, have them installed and all. Will probably remove the bushes too and replace them with some trees."

Pepper nodded slowly. Sounded good. Sounded like not being able to be watched at night anymore.

"He wants to switch to Asset Management, by the way. Help me move the tower, all that stuff. Enough people complaining day in, day out, does seem to wear him down."
Pepper tilted her head, looking at him with a small smile on her lips.

"He'd work for you again."

Tony nodded calmly.

"Well, yes. It's about my assets being moved, after all."

Pepper chuckled. "I should have made you sign a contract prohibiting you from hiring my people away." She mused out loud.

Tony smirked in response. "Never would have signed it."

"You nearly never read what you sign." Pepper chirped, somehow managing in making her statement nearly sound like an odd threat.

Tony hummed, his gaze fixed on her, still smirking. "Whatever you believe."

Did he imply he read the stuff he signed? Was he trying to challenge her view of him? Or was he playing mind games?

"You want him around you again, don't you?" She changed the topic, deciding to not go along.

"Sure. You had Happy for long enough."

Pepper snorted. "Sounds as if we are arguing about our dog." Or their child.

"Well, Happy, Lucky, not much of a difference if you ask me." Tony responded smirking, making her snort and shake her head.

"Never, not ever, say that to him." She stated, wondering if he hadn't already. Tony was good at saying his thoughts out loud, even the worst of them, and then somehow make them sound good, whatever he had said.

"Well, with the number of people complaining, I need a new head of security anyway." She conceded, just as if she hadn't thought about hiring a new one.

Tony cooked his head. "Why so understanding suddenly? I thought you'd put up a bigger fight."

Pepper smirked and leaned closer. "As if I could ever stop you from anything you put your mind on." She purred softly, watching him closely, saw how he relaxed. She took a breath. "I'll use my time more productively than arguing with you. Like... wondering what the hell you did during those last hours."

He grew a bit more rigid, cleared his throat. "Told you already. This and that."

"Oh, come on!"

"Nope."

"It's bad then, isn't it?"

"It's not." Oh God, it was. "It's done anyway. No need to worry about things."

She narrowed her eyes, staring at him. "What did you do?"
Tony managed to look back completely innocent, even maintaining a smile. "Nothing."
She continued staring at him. What had he done during the last days which needed fixing?
Receptionist work. No, he hadn't done anything stupid then. Only left...
... the intercom. At least of the things she knew of.
He had powered off the entire building to connect some cables, right?
The cables…
Had he not fixed the wall yesterday?
Had he let live wires, connected to Friday's backup, lay around open and damageable?
Pepper inhaled and breathed out very, very slowly.
"You are right. You just did this and that." She conceded with a very long sigh. "You owe me a favor, though, or rather two, for letting go of Happy so easily and not going after your shenanigans. Friday, plan an appointment with him to talk about everything."

Tony chuckled softly and leaned closer to peck her lips lovingly. "Whatever you ask for. Find a new head of security first, though. Will make me feel better. And have Happy fret him. He loves that part of the job, after all."

Pepper smiled softly. Whatever she asked for. "True." and took hold of her tablet again, returning to looking through research projects. With Tony beside her, reading was easier.

"What are you reading?" The man beside her asked, breaking her concentration once again. If only he would stay silent.

"State of research projects." She informed him, trying to find her sentence again.

"Uh. What was our last presentation?"

"BARF." She said lowly, trying to tune him out.

"Oh, B.A.R.F.? I love the acronym. Beck was so furious." Tony said with so much glee in his voice, she ended up staring at him again. So much to tuning him out.

Tony seemed to know what she was thinking and shrugged. "He was so overly confident of his silly work. If I hadn't decided to dump millions into it, the entire thing wouldn't ever have gotten off the ground."

Pepper looked at him for a few long seconds until she eventually shrugged and looked back at her tablet, trying to finally finish the damn sentence she had been reading.

"I could go through the projects, find things which are worth investing."

"Since when are you suggesting to work?" She asked, reading on.

"I just want to help. You could sign the remaining legal documents for the takeover in the meantime."

Again, she ended up looking at him. "You get the fun work while I sign legal documents? You
could read through them too and tell me if everything is okay."

She saw his calm face, his last expression frozen in place. Gears turning inside his head on how to best get out of his current predicament. As if he would read through legal documents without being strapped down and forced to.

"I want to read those summaries. Get up to date with something not the damn takeover. I haven't done anything else in ages. If you would help me get through the legal stuff, I'd… How to phrase it best? "… appreciate it immensely." She ended seriously.

Tony stared at her for what felt like forever. Not moving. Not budging. He wouldn't. She had just given him more time to –

He interrupted her thoughts by taking a deep breath and sighing. He moved, grabbed a legal document and started to flip through it.

Pepper stared at him disbelievingly. What the hell had she just done? More importantly, could she repeat it?

"Stop staring." Tony growled lowly, which made her lower her gaze back to her tablet instantly. Best not distract him now or he might change his mind.

Dashing into the first supermarket he could find, Peter Parker came to a stop in front of the confectioneries, staring at the chocolate bars undecisive. Which did he want to eat?

"I don't have time for this." He whispered annoyedly to himself and just grabbed whatever he could carry. A ton of chocolate with peanut butter, something with nuts, some Toffifay. Then he moved on to get himself some crackers and potato chips. Then some biscuits and finally, he queued for the cashier, arms full of sweets.

While waiting for his line to move up, he felt odd. He looked as if he was throwing a party and had run out of snacks. Just a quick dash down the road, grabbing everything he could carry. Yet, there was no party. Just him and homework. He needed to finish everything today. Well, better said tonight. Hand everything in, hopefully, get good grades for whatever he would be writing together and not get into summer school. He didn't want to get into summer school. He wanted to get a job during the break, help May pay back his hospital bills as he had promised. Finally, be Spider-Man again. He hadn't checked on his poor neighborhood in ages. People would be wondering where the hell he was. He wanted to ask the doc for his magic lessons too. Maybe he could get good enough with sparkles to make use of them. Magically reinforced webbing…

It should be possible, right? Stephen could form shields and weapons and all crazy things. If he could control magic well enough to push it into his webbing on a molecular level…

"Next, please!"

Peter blinked and stepped forward, dumping his ton of sugar on the counter and smiled. The woman just stared at him annoyed and started to scan his products.

After he had paid a shitload of money for a shitload of sugar, he stuffed everything into his backpack and hurried through the streets, bumping into slower walking people here and there. He always yelled a sorry, while never looking back. He didn't have any time to lose. Literally. Every second which he wasn't working, was a lost second. Maybe it would come down to minutes, whether he could finish everything or not and he had to finish his homework. All of it. Or else summer school
and screw up all his plans.

Getting home, he bolted into his room, dumbed his backpack on his bed, pulled out the first chocolate bar and settled at his desk, staring at the mess called his homework.

Shaking his head, Peter took his time to sort everything into individual piles. Too long stuff, like the fucking 12 pages essay, which currently consisted of a note on a post-it, semi-long stuff which needed a bit of research here and there and easy stuff, which should be done with the flick of a finger.

Staring at the three resulting piles, Peter swallowed hard, not fully believing his eyes. How could he still have so much work to do? The too-long pile was worrisome high, the moderate pile nearly non-existent and why the hell did he still have so many easy things to finish?

Unwrapping his chocolate bar, he took a bite, staring at his piles while chewing. He should start with the too-long stuff. Wasn’t even worth thinking about it. He should get everything done which needed a lot of thinking while his mind was still sharp and awake, but…

His gaze moved to the easy stuff.

Why not eliminate the piles first which didn’t need so long? He needed to finish all of it, anyway. Getting a less crowded desk would be motivating as hell. Humming lowly, he grabbed one of his easier assignments. Once he was done with this one, he could start with some of the more time-intensive stuff, he told himself, full well knowing he wouldn’t.

---

Snuggling into her pillow, Pepper watched Tony enter the room, wearing only boxer shorts, his hair still glistening wet.

"Like what you see?" He teased, only making her hum, while she stared at his freshly trimmed beard. Did Tony need more time in the bathroom than she did overall? She had never actually thought about it. Next time, she had to take notes. Or ask Friday to generate a diagram.

She felt the bed dip. Him nudging her legs slightly, complaining about her always claiming the whole bed, and slipping onto his side, snuggled onto the mattress, his head propped up on his arm, looking at her. Why... why didn't he look like sleeping? She had planned to fall asleep soon, all snuggled up in his arms, but he looked like other plans.

"We should go on vacation with the takeover finalized."

She stared at him. Vacation. He had her at the word 'vacation'. Inhaling, she pulled herself together and sat up, more awake than before.

"Can you read my mind? I've thought about needing some holidays not too long ago. I already have some ideas…"

She went on, talking about how she wanted some peace and quiet, preferably no internet connection, full-pension because she didn’t want to lift a single finger in regards to food, sun and beaches, and the sea and…

Tony lay there, calmly, listening to her ever-growing list of things she'd love to have, like backrubs after waking up and some cuddling on a beach, with no one in sight who could interrupt them.

"If you want to… I'd love some more suit training together with you. Maybe some flying lessons. Or
else." She finally ended shyly.

Tony stayed quiet for some long seconds until he hummed.

"I could rent out a beach somewhere but that wouldn't save us from getting interrupted by passersby."

"I know…" She let herself drop back into her pillow, looking at him affectionately.

"I'd love something more private than those hilarious hotel chains. Maybe… I don't know. A small cottage on the beach? With heating and nets for mosquitoes and maybe a cook for food?"

Hell, she sounded needy, but the idea was so damn lovely but damn it, she sounded needy, but Tony just hummed again.

"A private island?"

"What? No -" She wanted to protest, having absolutely not meant a private island, rather a little, not so touristy beach city, most likely in Florida, but he just went on talking.

"Would fit your wish for peace and quiet, sun and beaches, with no one able to interrupt us. We'd have to see how to do the full-pension aspect though. Maybe a full-service island? Friday?" He moved to grab his phone. "Get us a list of fitting islands, please."

A mere second later, Pepper watched a holographic list appear in front of her wall, courtesy of his phone, showing her islands she had never even heard the name of.

Laucala, Necker, Vomo Island.

Reading through the summaries and staring at the pictures of the various islands Friday had found, Pepper felt her stomach churn. How the hell had they gone from her rather ludicrous wish list to renting an island? Surely, she should have stayed more low-key knowing Tony, but she thought her list was obviously not serious when she added backrubs after waking up.

"Ha, they even have an island in the Keys, but that's a bit boring, isn't it? Like vacation at home." Tony grimaced, just as if holidaying on Key West, so close to mainland US, was the most terrible thing in the world. "Necker Island sounds good, doesn't it? You have your small cottage too, looking out on the ocean, beaches, trees, crystal clear water." Friday pulled Necker Island up again. A 30 hectares piece of land, belonging to the Virgin Islands. "When do you want to go on holidays and for how long?"

Pepper stared at the images. They surely looked alluring, but a damn island?

"Pepper?"

She turned her head to look at him, looking at her expectantly, all giddy. He really wanted this, didn't he? Spoil her with a freaking vacation. An island, just for them. Or as good as, in case some other crazy millionaire had already rented another cottage. Wouldn't the entire affair be ludicrously expensive? She hated him throwing money out the window, but...

"Ehm… after July the 4th. I want to see the fireworks in New York City. I'll talk with HR tomorrow to sort everything out. Once I know, you'll know."

As if she could stop him, especially if he had already set his mind on it. Their vacations were always a bit... different. Maybe she could donate her next paycheck to feel better.
He hummed thoughtfully. "Can you get a week at least? Maybe two?"

Two weeks? Two weeks were endless! Yet, Pepper smiled weakly. "I'll have to see."

Tony nodded before leaning closer to her, whispering conspiratorially: "Or you know… you could just take time off."

Her smile turned a bit rigid. Like he had always done? Disappeared for times on end, with no one able to track him down? Shaking her head, she chuckled, avoiding to actually have to reply.

Still smiling, Tony simply shrugged. "Okay." and locked his phone, the hologram disappearing. "We could fly down after the fireworks. Would you like flying there using the suits? Would be faster than by private plane, for sure, and kinda more romantic. Be there early, watch the sunrise at the beach. Oh God, I love this idea…"

Watching how he dropped down onto the bed, Pepper listened to his own endless wish list with a smile.

----

Yawning extensively, Peter leaned back in his chair, dropping his pen for a moment and flexing his hand. 12 pages done. Like last time, he had argued against the Accords, as they outlawed any smaller superheroes like Spider-Man, who wasn't doing anything bad. If the poor guy had to ask the United Nations if he could save a cat, the animal would starve up in the tree. What should smaller heroes do? Just watch criminality around them rise and let it happen? Didn't seem right to him.

Grabbing another chocolate bar and eating away, Peter stared at his new already done pile. Everything easy, the medium stuff and a few long things were in there. How should he get all his finished homework to school? Somehow, he had the odd feeling his backpack was too small. Especially, if he threw his suit on top because he wanted to do some Spider-Man work after school. He had been gone for far too long. His poor neighborhood!

Taking a bite, he put the half-eaten chocolate aside and got up to take a few steps, flex his hand again and eventually leaned onto his table, grabbing the next post-it.

*How does an Arc Reactor work and for how long could it power all of New York City?* the post-it read.

Peter's face lit up as he turned to do some research. More fun than estimating the net earnings for Tony solely based on Iron-Man products sold, for sure.

----

Wrapping an arm around Pepper and feeling her snuggle closer, Tony sighed content. The warm sun shining down, a gentle breeze, waves lapping at the beach.

"You were right. Peace and quiet are quite good." He said softly, hearing her chuckle.

"Ah well, I always have the best ideas anyway." He went on, leading to Pepper bursting into laughter and roll away from him and onto the beach.

"You are so humble!" She managed to mock, still laughing.

Tony smirked. If he hadn't insisted on the private island, things weren't as perfect surely. He had just taken a heart to her wishes.
Rolling over and onto her, he started to kiss her, slow and gentle and loving, effectively muffling her laughter. Her hand dug into his hair, pulling him closer. God, Pepper, she was just…

The breeze getting stronger and the waves crashing against the beach more violently made him break their kiss and sit up, her legs still between his. He looked around wearily. The sun had disappeared behind a cloud, which hadn't been there before.

A shiver ran along his spine. Something was off. Something was…

"Tony?"

He turned his head, looked back at Pepper, and saw her hand crumble to dust.

"Tony, what's…?" Pepper stared at her hand and back at him, horror and panic and tears shimmering in her eyes.

He wanted to reach out to her, cup her cheek and stroke her and comfort her, but instead of feeling her warm skin, her face started to crumble, dust fleeting through his fingers.

"Tony!" She yelled in pure, utter panic, terrified.

Tony jolted upright, breathing in short, frantic, little bursts, his heart hammering in fear, Pepper's bloodcurdling scream still ringing in his ears, her turning to dust burned into his eyes.

He… he had to…

How should he…

Turning his head, his throat clenched. Pepper was there. Right beside him. Sleeping. In her bed.

It had felt so…

Snapping for air again, he managed to get out of bed and bolted from the room, on the verge of a breakdown already.

He… he had to…

He stumbled through the kitchen blindly, Pepper turning to dust on repeat in his mind, tears running down his face. Her scream. Tony! She had known she would die. She had…

Reaching the sink, he turned the water on cold and opened the tap, holding his head right under the stream.

With ice-cold water running over his head and neck, he still snapped for air, he still cried, but his frantically beating heart slowed down, his thoughts started to clear, little by little.

It had been a dream. Just. A. Dream. Pepper was alright and alive and fine and sleeping in the other room.

Fumbling blindly, he turned off the water, took hold of the counter and very slowly, normalized his breathing, while water was dripping off him and into the sink.

She was fine. Everything was okay.

Taking a very long breath, he exhaled trembling and finally stood upright, slowly and reluctantly letting go of the counter, as if letting go would make his dream real.
Once he stood, trembling and still crying, he took another breath, wiped his face with his hand and turned around.

The dark living room lay ahead, his suit standing solemnly in a corner. Everything was normal. Just like it had been in the dream, right before...

Shaking his head, Tony leaned against the counter, staring at his suit.

Upgrades would only help so much.

Recruiting more people to their cause would only help so much.

Reuniting the Avengers would only…

They needed more…

More what?

He had to keep Pepper safe. He could not watch her turn to dust. He could not allow Thanos having his way, snapping Pepper and Peter and all those others out of existence.

Pushing himself off the counter, he let his worries behind him, paced along, trying to figure out what could help them. Like usual, he followed thoughts for split seconds, toyed with them, tossed them aside.

"We need more, more of what?" He whispered to himself, pacing and pacing, passing his suit, the window, door to the balcony, stopping, turning around and all over again.

Then, he froze. His thought clear as day and why hadn't he thought about it earlier?

"Friday? What do you think about weaponized drones?"

---

Closing the bedroom door carefully, Stephen smiled happily. He had watched Christine sleeping for a little and then turned to magically put on his clothes, slipping out the room. He loved to watch her before getting out of bed in the morning. Somehow, watching her gave him peace of mind. Things would work out. They had to. He would do his part for it, learning from the Ancient One.

Turning around, still stupidly smiling, he found cloak float in front of the window, nearly motionless. It had stopped wanting to float in their room while they were sleeping, which Stephen considered odder than odd. Hell, he had had his fair share of troubles getting cloak out of his room. Watching it stay away now…

When had it started to act so distant? With his smile fading away, he remembered within seconds. Ever since the last light flash. Ever since the vision of them dying on Titan. He still wasn't sure what it had been. If the vision was them dying on Titan, things were off, because it had never happened with them escaping, if the vision was his vision while checking the timelines, it would have to go on, but it hadn't. Not in the way he had expected things to go on, at least.

Stepping beside cloak, he said a soft "Hey." and watched his friend flinch lightly. Had he startled it? "What is it?" He asked softly.

Cloak turned and floated away a bit, shaking its collar.

Stephen sighed softly. "I know you can't speak, but… can you write about it? I saw you read on
occasion so I guess you can write. I think you should write about it. Talk about what" goes on in your head? Cloak didn't have a head. It might even interpret the phrase as an insult in its current moody state. "bothers you." Ungracefully saved?

Cloak shook its collar again, gesturing around wildly with its ends before dropping a bit lower, looking sadder than before.

"You… can't hold a pen?" Stephen offered unsure, not exactly certain what his cloak wanted to tell him. "We could try larger pens, which can be held better. Or maybe…" He pulled his phone from his pocket, unlocked it and fired up a message. "Can you hit the keys?"

Cloak tilted its collar, floated up and stared at the small keyboard on his phone. Very carefully, it tried to hit a 'y', but ended up pressing too many keys, triggering a 't' in the end. Again, cloak dropped lower, only floating a few inches above the carpet, looking even sadder.

"Hey. I'll think about something." Stephen said softly and went to pat it on the back. A second later, cloak was wrapped around him, them floating in the air. Stephen chuckled softly and hugged his relic back because it couldn't be anything else than a hug.

"We'll find something. Until then I can offer hugs?" He offered, feeling cloak ripple against him, which made him smile. He always knew how to interpret cloak rippling against him.

After a while of hugging cloak, he eventually broke the silence. "Could you let me down again?" He asked softly, feeling how cloak moved him from side to side in what had to be a 'no' motion.

"Hey!" he complained amused, cloak raising him a bit higher even upon his words. It really didn't want to let go of him, did it? Yet, after some seconds very close to the ceiling, he felt how cloak moved him downward, his feet finding the carpet again. Cloak unwrapped itself from him, slipped around and settled on his shoulders, rippling against him again.

"I'll think about something." He said again. He would. He had to. For now, though…

For now, he opened a portal and hopped through, watching it close as soon as he was on the other side. Turning away from the now-closed portal, he sat down on his bed in his room in Kamar-Taj. Before he sat, cloak flipped off his shoulders, moving to float close by, watching him. Stephen smiled softly while grabbing the book he had been reading. Nearly normal. Or at least, his normal.

Dropping his pen, Peter sighed relieved, staring at his last, now finished homework for a while. He had done it. He had finished every single one of his stupid assignments. Yet, he didn't feel excited. Rather tired. Did he have enough time for a fast nap?

Getting up, he stretched himself, once again flexing his hand, and yawned. Taking a walk into the kitchen, he checked the clock. No more time for a nap. Well, he could, but he guessed only 30 minutes of sleep would be worse than just staying awake. Yawning again, he opened the fridge to get himself a glass of cold orange juice, leaning against the counter sleepily.

He could wolf his breakfast down and then get on his way.

Yet, he'd better get his backpack packed, see how all his paperwork fit into his bag, somehow stuff his suit into the leftover space, and then see if he had time for breakfast.

Yes. Sounded better. Yawning again, he returned to his room and eyed his crazy amount of now finished homework. How had he done this? Was he sure he had written full sentences on all pages?
Maybe he had forgotten to end some and had just jumped on to the next sentence.

Cold panic trickled down his spine at the mere thought. Might be possible. He was groggy since around four. He had done a ton of homework since around four. Yet, he didn't have time to change things anyhow. Better a bad grade than not hand in all his assignments.

Taking a very deep breath, he tried to calm down and grabbed his bag. He had homework to get to school. Accordingly, he threw everything out he didn't absolutely need, like his water bottle or gym clothes, and searched his room for folders. He didn't want to run around with a bunch of loose pages. Finding some, he carefully placed his homework into them and then shoved everything into his backpack. Leaning back, he tilted his head, staring down on his mountain of homework, now all stuffed away. How the hell should he get his Spider-Man suit in there? He obviously couldn't place it on top, with all his classmates able to see his suit when he got his homework out. Sighing, he shook his head, got every folder out again, stuffed his suit in first, placed the folders on top, threw a pen and a notebook in for good measure and finally zipped his backpack close.

Returning to the kitchen, he stared at the clock for some seconds, not fully registering what he saw. Somehow, 25 minutes had disappeared. He surely hadn't needed 25 minutes to get his homework stuffed into his backpack. Yet, the clock still showed the same time, even on a second look.

For a moment, he didn't move. Just watched the second handle tick by in disbelief. He had only five minutes left. HE HAD ONLY 5 MINUTES LEFT!

Dashing past a sleepy-looking May into the bathroom, he washed his face, combed his hair while brushing his teeth, dashed out, grabbed an apple for breakfast, got his backpack and ran out the door, with a very hasty "Bye!" on his lips.

----

Waking up slowly, Pepper rolled onto the bedside next to her, wanting to snuggle against Tony's warm body, cuddle some more and maybe kiss him awake, but there was no one. Slowly opening her eyes, she stared at the empty bed beside her, blinking confusedly.

"Tony?"

Maybe he had gone to the toilet or to fetch a coffee for him or her, like some days ago.

Groggily getting out of bed, she looked through her apartment, checked the bathroom followed by a peek into her kitchen, fully expecting him to lean against the kitchen counter, waiting for the coffee machine to finally finish, but there was no one. She only found his Iron Man suit in the living room. She was alone.

Where the hell was he? Why would he leave without telling her? Had something happened? Her gaze fell onto his suit. No. No, the suit would be gone if something had happened. Besides, he always groaned loudly during a light flash, she would have woken up surely.

If nothing had happened… why was he gone? He had promised to stay with her, cuddle after waking up because they hadn't done so in ages. How could he just leave? Without telling her. Without even telling her!

Trying to force down her disappointment and anger, mostly just anger at this point, she nearly jumped when his voice filled the room.

"Morning Pep."
She looked around startled before realizing what it was. A call through Friday.

"Where the hell are you?" She asked angrily. And why the hell did Friday push him through without asking? Stupid inventor bonus.

"Ehm... in the company. Needed more processing power. Your version of Friday is pretty limited, sadly."

She huffed lowly. "You had some idea again." She stated, not even bothering to phrase it as a question. It was a fact, after all. He had had some crazy idea again. She could even hear him move around.

"Yes, I'm sorry. Not so sorry. Can we discuss this over lunch I invite you to?"

Pepper grumbled lowly. "You promised to..." Her words trailed off. There was little sense in arguing with Tony when he had one of his ideas. He just had to work on them, unable to rest until he had tried whatever his mind had come up with. At least, he was still in the same state as she was.

"Pepper?" He asked slowly, maybe realizing he had pissed her off. Would be a first while he was working. He was always in his own world as soon as he was in his workshop, oblivious to everything else around him. Until she startled him back to reality.

"Everything's okay." She grumbled.

"Are you sure?" He asked slowly once more. Had the man picked up on her mood? Was he trying to make an effort? Or was Friday telling him? She had pushed his call through without asking her first too.

"Yes, yes, yes. I'm okay. Do your stuff. As you said, we can discuss this over lunch. I expect something fancy, though. No fast food." She conceded, even angrier than before. Friday had to be spying on her.

"Okay." He said so happily, it nearly made her anger fade. Sometimes, she wondered how the man could interact with other people and get their emotions right. Yet, judging him for being concentrated on his work wasn't fair.

Pepper exhaled slowly, shaking her head. Her lovely moron.

"Wake me up next time and drag me along, okay? Better than waking up alone." She said softly, her sadness bleeding into her voice. She had wanted to snuggle up against him, maybe doze some more in his warm arms. She missed waking up beside him. More than she wanted to tell. Being away for the weekdays was rough, especially now, when she had gotten used to waking up beside him.

"Are you sure? I imagined you throwing a pillow into my face and just turning around to continue sleeping." He replied skeptically.

Pepper forced down a smile. "On the weekend, sure. Here? I have to get up early anyway."

"Okay, noted, but I might move heavy stuff out of your reach before waking you."

This time, she couldn't stop herself from chuckling, while she envisioned him moving the bedside lamp away while trying not to wake her only to wake her some moments later.

"Good. I'll get ready and see you later. Friday, end the call."
Pepper sighed lowly once silence filled her room. "The ass sneaked out on me." She mumbled annoyed, starting to move through her motions, while trying to calm her emotions. Hygiene, clothes. Being angry on him wouldn't help her. It would rather distract her from important things. Like calling her driver, because Tony had surely taken the car. "Friday? What is he working on anyway?" She asked while slipping into her blouse. At least, she wanted to know for which crazy new idea she had been left.

"Weaponized drones in space."

Friday's terrible casual reply made her freeze, not fully slipped into her blouse.

Weaponized drones in space?

Had she said weaponized drones in space?

Finally slipping into her blouse, Pepper shook her head with a sigh. Was she 1000 percent sure, her boyfriend wasn't a crazy genius aspiring world dominance? He surely had the intellect. And the money. And the weapons.

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Despite the late hour, Stephen felt exceptionally stared at. Whichever master or even apprentice he passed seemed to stop what they were doing and stare at him, watch him carefully until he had passed.

To them, he was a stranger who had come in one day, with a bleeding woman by his side and the Sorcerer Supreme leading the way. If not for her, he'd probably gotten attacked the very same second. To them, he was an outsider, having learned magic outside of Kamar-Taj or the Sanctums. Probably taught by a master, who had turned his back on the Ancient One and her teachings. Those who had lost their way were usually not tolerated. Who knew, if he was going to be loyal to his old master, planning on attacking them at any second?

Hearing cloak swish behind him, he felt a tiny bit less alone but all the more hated. How had an outsider managed to get a relic from one of the sanctums to trust him? Maybe he had confused it with dark magic.

Sighing, he wondered if things would ever get better, while he searched for the Ancient One. He found her in the library, reading through a scroll, sipping on tea. With what had she bribed Wong to be allowed to drink tea in the library? If he only got in a little wet from rain, Wong would kick his ass into another dimension.

With Wong's watchful stare in his back, he settled down in front of her and placed the book on the table. She didn't look up. Just went on reading and sip on her tea.

"Half of the spells in there are some form of elemental manipulation." He eventually said, still not getting her to look up, but at least to acknowledge his existence.

"Why does it surprise you?"

"Truth be told, I never heard of it. Didn't think it was possible."

Finally, she looked up. Beneath her curious gaze, he felt like some rare animal, which needed to be examined. Like a little child, who knew nothing of the world.
"You draw onto dimensional energy to cast spells already. How many more forms of energy are out there, waiting to be controlled? In how many different ways could you bend them to your will?"

Stephen fell silent, staring at her while she simply returned to reading her scroll and sip her tea, just as if nothing had ever happened.

"I can conjure flames? And ice? And wind?"

"Wouldn't you think there is a dimension of fire out there you can draw on?" She asked as casually as if they were talking about the weather.

Opening his mouth, he wanted to retort something smart, something witty, but alas… he just closed his mouth again and fell silent for another while, watching her sip her tea, which seemed to refill itself whenever it was nearly empty.

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Slipping into the back of the car, Pepper greeted her driver with a smile and sat down, pulling her phone out to check her mails. Yet, she didn't even look at them. Instead, she got distracted by the car accelerating. Nice and slow and orderly. Sighing relieved, she looked outside, watching the world pass by at normal speed. Only now, she realized how much she had craved her driver.

Someone, who stuck to speeding limits.

Someone, who didn't decide at the latest possible opportunity he needed to take the next turn.

Someone, who wasn't speeding through every just turned red light he could find.


Sighing happily, she put her phone away and decided to just enjoy not being scared.

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Even before his alarm could ring, Peter Quill opened his eyes. Sitting up without even a groan, he got up on his feet and started to move around, stretching himself like every morning lately. Today, his muscles seemed to hurt less, his back seemed to be more okay. He either got more used to sleeping on rough concrete, the brilliant massage from yesterday did its thing or his mind was not paying as much attention to his hurting body. Staring at the Stark Industries HQ, he guessed it was a combination of all three. He didn't have the time to cry over his aching body today. He had to be focused.

The reception of the building was still dark, with only a few offices lit. Just how he wanted it to be. He had to be down there after the lobby girl and before Pepper. He wanted to catch her before she could enter the building, avoid having to run after her.

Stripping down to his boxers, Peter shivered slightly and hurried to pull on new, fresh clothes. Afterward, he tried to tidy up his hair, applied some after-sun lotion to his sunburned face and returned to staring at the building, watching the odd employee turn up. Most weren't here before 9 anyway.

Pulling his phone out eventually, he checked the time. 7:26.

Taking one deep breath, he silenced his alarm and moved around, searching for a spot where he could get off the building with as few people as possible seeing him.
Checking on her mails eventually, Pepper smiled happily. No more takeover stuff. Just normal business. Just damn wonderful normal business. A meeting here, something to sign there. Nothing to worry about.

Closing her eyes, she leaned back. She had to go to HR and discuss her time off. Maybe she could even take two whole weeks, even though she would feel odd. Sure, Stark Industries had a gracious paid leave policy, but barely anyone took those three weeks a year.

Maybe she had to enforce vacation time. Ask Friday to send employees with days left off onto holidays in controlled schedules. Would make her feel less terrible about taking two whole weeks, for sure.

God, she wanted those two weeks, the more she thought about them. Just spent time with Tony, watch him swim while she lay on the beach lazily, get some more flying lessons in her new suit, sleep in until late, no emails, no meetings, no nothing, just them.

"Wish me luck!" He texted to Gamora while pacing up and down the opposite street, waiting for lobby girl to show up. Then, he would follow her at a respectable distance. Would minimize the chance of her seeing and calling security on him. For some reason, he imagined getting tackled down by some security guard, with Pepper walking past him unconcerned, completely ignoring his existence. He wouldn't let this happen. He wouldn't sleep another night on a stupid building.

His vibrating phone made him stop dead in his tracks and stare down at the display. "Good luck!" read Gamora's message.

The simple gesture made him nearly tear up. How much he missed her. How much he wanted to get back to her. Screw the fucking building. He wanted to get in contact with Pepper to be able to get back to Gamora. Maybe spend a day or two, until Rocket could pick them up and finally get off this sorry planet.

Taking a deep breath to calm down is emotions, he checked the time. 7:45. Five minutes of more pacing, until lobby girl would get here. He would follow her, catch and talk with Pepper and then be on his way to meet up with his girl. Easy.

Five minutes later, Peter started to feel uneasy, his pacing getting ever more frantic. Lobby girl wasn’t anywhere in sight. Was her bus running late? Might be. Had she overslept? Might be too. Hell, he wouldn’t take a chance of missing Pepper, only because she didn’t turn up. If she saw and recognized and called security on him, he would fight his way into the company. Checking his blasters, which were mostly hidden by his hilariously long hoodie, he exhaled slowly. He would do this. Whatever needed to be done, he would do it.

With the next green pedestrian light, Peter finally crossed the street and entered the complex of Stark Industries. The security man at the gates didn’t even glance at him. Just read something on his phone without ever looking up. Why should he bother? All buildings had card readers or annoying lobby girls to guard entry. The man at the gates was most likely a relic of old times when ID checks of every person entering were still a thing. Or to keep obviously not here belonging people at bay, like tourists, who wanted a quick selfie with the HQ.
Getting ever closer to the HQ, they were only a block away now, Pepper started to rummage through her purse. Didn't she have some change on her? Her non-crazy driver deserved a damn tip! She hadn't gotten to work so not afraid for her life in what felt like ages, even though it had only been a few days.

The smallest bill she found, was a 100 dollar. She didn't want to tip so much, but she couldn't leave without tipping either. Sighing softly, she accepted her tipping fate and watched, how the street outside crept by, car after car getting closer to their goal. Tony always tipped a hundred to his delivery guys and gals, so why shouldn't she do the same to her ever faithful driver? Taking hold of the dollar bill, she let her purse snap shut and stuffed it back into her handbag.

With the HQ pulling up, she smiled softly. Only another few minutes. She would ask Friday where the hell Tony was first, because as if she could wait with seeing him until lunch, and then go find someone from HR to discuss her vacation.

Of course, she could simply take the time off like Tony had suggested, who the hell would stop her, but she wasn't all too keen on explaining her liberties to the board of directors. Only, because Tony could do those things and get away with them didn't mean she could do those things and get away with them. Hell, most of her waking hours had consisted of putting out fires he had created through his deliberate carelessness.

When the car finally came to a stop in front of the HQ, she slipped out, closing the door.

"Miss Potts?" She heard instantly. Groaning inside her head, apparently, her work couldn't even wait until she was inside the building, she threw a glance at who had spoken. A man in a rather ridiculous hoodie with a really bad sunburn on his face was waiting for her a few steps away. Did she have to deal with this? Couldn't Nicolle handle it, once she was here? Her assistant? Anyone?

"A moment." She replied with a forced smile and took the few steps to her driver's window, tapping on the glass. Usually, he would just leave. Not today, though.

"Thank you very much for picking me up on such short notice." She said once the window was rolled down, still grateful she hadn't been forced to take a taxi or else. Honestly, she hadn't fully expected to be picked up today. After all, she had only called after realizing her damn lover had disappeared on her.

Her driver smiled softly. "Oh, you are welcome. Like always, a pleasure driving you, Miss Potts."

She laughed softly. He probably said the same to everyone. Work was work.

"Still, thanks." She insisted and shook his hand, handing him his tip before taking a step back, watching him drive away.

"Pepper?" Turning around, she saw Happy walk towards her. Had he waited for her?

"What is it?" She asked, walking towards her old friend.

In disbelief, Peter watched how Pepper walked towards the guy who had just left the lobby, ignoring him completely.

"Miss Potts?" He tried again, not even getting a reaction from her while the man walked her towards the lobby, all the while talking with her.
"Miss Potts?!" He tried once more, hurrying after them, but the man took care of staying between her and him, still talking with her lowly, while they entered, glass doors sliding shut behind them.

Peter stared after them dumbfounded. She had been here. Right in front of him. And he… he had just… Why had the damn man turned up? Everything would have worked out perfectly, if not for him!

Taking a deep breath, he stared at the still dark lobby, the two figures walking within. He would not have her walk away from him.

Setting one foot after another, he walked towards the doors, wondering if he could just jump against the glass and breakthrough. Yet, when he had hammered against those very same doors not too long ago, they had seemed quite sturdy. Might be, he would just bounce back and look like the galaxy's greatest idiot.

No. He would not take chances.

Accordingly, his hand moved below his hoodie, taking hold of a blaster. Right before he reached the doors, he started to run, pulled his blaster, shot at the glass and jumped through, shards raining down on him.

Sliding a little distance before coming to a stop, he watched the man, who had screwed up his completely safe plan, pull a gun. Oh damn no! Pulling his second blaster, he aimed at the other man's head.

"Don't move!" He yelled and gave a warning shot, missing his head only by inches, saw him freeze. Pepper screamed behind him.

A moment later, she was in front of her security guard, a blue suit forming around her.

"You have a suit?" The man asked surprised.

She didn't reply. Just stayed between him and her security guard, a gun forming around one of her arms, pointed at him. She really was Stark's girlfriend, wasn't she? Was he proud of her?

Despite a laser gun pointed at his head, Peter grinned. Not like he had planned things to go. Not at all. Yet, he had her attention.

Chapter End Notes

In my quest of finding spells for Stephen to learn, I stumbled upon those comic-canon lists. Wind of ..., Flames of..., Fog of... I tried to add them into the logic of this universe. Hope the explanation made sense. Guess we'll see Stephen fire... bending? Haha. (Note: Stop watching Avatar, the Last Airbender...)

And yes, I pull in storylines from Far From Home. I guessed Tony has created the drones as a defense mechanism to be able to handle... all sorts of things. When he knows about Thanos coming, he had to get the idea earlier or later. This time, it's a bit earlier.

I loved to write this chapter, even though it got off the rails again. Hope you enjoyed it!
See you soon!

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