The End of Infinity
by FriendlyNeighborhoodFangirls

Summary

In 2023, the battle for the universe has been won. At a cost no one can forget, the fight is
Stephen Strange has an idea. An impossible idea spanning dimensions and timelines, life and death, and the lines of good and evil. But he's played impossible odds before—perhaps he never stopped.

All that Loki wanted was to fight, one last time, for the fate of his universe. So when he finds himself fighting for another, crashing into the past, he has a few intended words for the wizard that forced him there. But not before he finds a boy. Or, more accurately, before the boy finds him.

Peter Parker had been waiting for the next mission. He just doesn't expect it to come from the future, armed with an impossible story demanding an impossible quest. And he doesn't expect not to be able to tell Mr. Stark.

Tony Stark is trying to rebuild from the Civil War, knowing that someday, something will come that he needs to be ready for. And he doesn't know it yet, but two universes are trying to rebuild around him, and that something is already here.

Seven Stones. Five dead. Two universes. And one impossible quest to tie it all back together.

Notes

Hey guys!

So... I saw Endgame. I'm shocked, in awe, and utterly satisfied, because Marvel Did It. I didn't know how they'd pull it off, but they did. And yet, I am not happy. I don't think I was supposed to be... And thus, I am making myself happy. But the process of doing so is going to be long and complex and very, very angsty--anything new? NOPE! XD I'm so excited.

Here's my spiel, before we dive into this! I've taken some creative liberties with characters and timelines and magic systems, because detail is my LIFE and I need some more than is provided by Marvel sometimes. :) But if you see any glaring mistakes, tell me! The same goes for spelling and grammar. If you see one, or are thrown off by a sentence structure or anything like that, TELL ME! There's nothing worse than getting pulled out of a good story by a mistype. :)

Just so you know what you're getting into, There Will Be Irondad. Read this for the Irondad, and for the friendship between Loki and Peter. Read this for Stephen's stubbornness. Read this for people LIVING. That's what I'm writing it for. :))

(Title and part names come from Fall Out Boy's "Last of the Real Ones.")

Anyway, thanks for trying this out, and without further ado, let's get to it!
Easier Places to Nap

PART ONE: I WAS JUST AN ONLY CHILD OF THE UNIVERSE, AND THEN I FOUND YOU

Earth-199999: October 2016

The end of summer still didn’t seem real to Peter Parker. It hadn’t yet sunk in, as he swung between dusk-lit alleyways, that there was a mound of homework waiting for his attention.

Demanding it, more like. But it was the start of the year, as of about a month—everything felt new again, and his inertia hadn’t yet run out. It still felt bottomless, that motivation.

Who knew how long that would last. It seemed to get shorter every semester. God, it was only the start of his sophomore year and he already had senioritis.

Peter cut the line of his webbing, tucking his legs to his chest. His momentum carried him into an arc, and he dropped into an aerial roll before uncurling to land against the nearest wall. Tech-clad fingers splayed on the concrete, red on grey.

He wasn’t too high off the ground; Queens still towered in the distance. But he could see over the rooftops before him, the visible leaves of a few lush trees indicating his position at the suburban edge of the city. Peter pivoted against the wall and stuck to the concrete with both hands behind him, facing outward.

Which wasn’t super comfortable. Peter shifted again, his mind elsewhere.

The day had been good, so far. He’d caught a bike thief, built some stamina, and found a couple of fans. It was nice to know people were at least watching his videos. Peter grinned, flashing the shining metal on his wrists, and pushed off from the building again.

He let himself fall, twisting backwards to face the sky and swinging his arms in front of him. If there was one thing Peter was certain of, it was that people who flew through cities trying to save people were supposed to look utterly awesome. So, he did his best. And he’d been getting better at it—those two dudes outside the food truck had recognized him, hadn’t they?

He’d been getting better at a lot of things. And only some of it was thanks to this magnificent suit.

But even all his practice hadn’t seemed to improve a many things. Peter still didn’t know the fastest ways to get to places. He didn’t know how to best find the people who needed help. He didn’t know how to be everywhere at once, to stop every crime—petty or otherwise—that he came across in the most efficient way. Helping people was hard, harder than anyone seemed to think.

Sometimes, everything felt hard. School, friends, homework, family, Spider-Man, life. Sometimes, Peter just wanted someone to say, hey, you don’t have to spend three hours on Khan Academy after midnight this time, I’ll help you with differentials. Or even just, follow the F train if you want to get to downtown fast.
Peter stuck out his wrist, catching himself out of the air before he splattered onto the pavement below. He swept out in a low arc, yanking on his webbing to gain height and speed before falling into the familiar rhythm of the swing.

He circled for a while, making his way through the streets and houses at the edge of Queens. He only misjudged one shot, tangling the webbing in the leaves of a solitary aspen and ending up tangled, himself.

“Do spiders ever get stuck in their webs?” He muttered as he sat between the branches fifteen minutes later, cleaning the ripped and knotted strands off his suit until the StarkTech was pristine again. “We will never speak of this.”

No one had seen, of course.

(And if they had, Peter very much hoped it wouldn’t end up on social media the next day).

He leapt to the nearest roof, trotting up one side and down the other as he fiddled with his web-shooter. Sending a stream of netting across the street, Peter twisted physics and flew back into his rhythm.

Peter scanned the spaces around the double-story apartments and homes as he gained speed. For blocks, he found nothing out of the ordinary, until—there! A guy, sticking a ruler down into a car door, parallel to the vehicle’s window.

Peter released his web, backflipping so he fell directly on top of the unfortunate car thief. Two quick flicks of his wrist had the man attached to said car and cursing vehemently.

“Hey buddy,” Spider-Man said, a bit of a grin dusting his face. “Shouldn’t steal cars. It’s bad.”

“It’s my car, dumbass!” The man yanked at the webbing on his hand, and the car alarm exploded into distressed shrieks.

“Hey!” Windows opened on the buildings above as people leaned out to add their own voices to the chaotic cacophony. “Shut that off!”

The man looked up, irritation furrowing his brow. “Can you tell him it’s my car?”

Peter frowned. “I was—”

Another window opened. “I work at nights, c’mon,” said the inhabitant groggily.

A woman from the left side of the street added, “that’s not your car! That’s his car.”

Just your friendly neighborhood poltergeist, apparently. Peter tried to explain his mistake. “How was I supposed to know it was his? He was shoving that thing in the window—”

Unable to extricate himself from the mess until he’d freed the man and apologized profusely, Peter was soon swinging six times quicker toward the other side of Queens, flushed with embarrassment beneath the mask.

But the rest of the night went better, apart from a spill on a half-constructed building. By the time Peter’s stomach had started demanding his Delmar’s sandwich and he’d swung to a perch on a brick-built fire-escape, he decided he could qualify this day as a success.

Peter fished out his sandwich and his phone, setting the latter beside him on the escape. He
unwrapped the food with eager, nimble fingers and wasted no time biting into it.

Yes, today had been a good day.

School had been… well, school could have gone better. School could always have gone better, though. Ned had brought news of Legos, Peter’d gotten a couple of videos uploaded, and he’d pulled a couple of math questions out of his ass and gotten them correct. Liz had looked breathtakingly gorgeous. And Peter’d finally worked up the courage to back out of Decathlon, swallowing his guilt at abandoning everybody to Flash a mere week before nationals.

It wasn’t that he wanted to quit the club, really. He loved the team, and robotics, and marching band. But he couldn’t leave the city.

Peter looked down at his suit, shining crimson and navy.

He couldn’t leave the city.

The only one who understood was Ned. Well, sort of—he was the only one who knew Peter well enough to realize there was no point to continued complaining. But even Ned had his moments of irritation, brief as they might be.

Always got that internship…

Peter sometimes wished that whatever this was—this Spider-Man thing, this voicemails to a bodyguard thing, this pretending to work in the evenings thing—was a little bit more like the internship they all said it was.

Because he liked Mr. Stark. Most of Peter’s interactions had been with Happy, of course, but the few he’d had directly with the genius had been great. Or at least, he thought they had been. Stark was fun, considerate in a… somewhat abrasive way. And he somehow managed to be serious and blithe at the same time, to watch everything from behind contemplating eyes and an easy grin.

Peter wasn’t sure which part of the man was real. Or if everything was. Or if he was forgetting that human beings were complicated and confusing and had minds and struggles and joys of their own.

Michelle would scoff ‘ugh, humans’ at this point, probably. Peter sighed.

He thought he was good at pretending. He’d kept Spider-Man a secret for years, after all.

Some people might disagree.

Peter took another bite of his sandwich, letting the salty tang of pickles glance of the sides of his tongue. Then he chuckled. “Relishing,” he said out loud, grinning around a mouthful of bread and meat.

The pun flew off into the empty sky and died.

“Michelle would be ashamed of me,” Peter sighed, tapping his fingers against the fire-escape beside him. That girl wielded words like Captain America wielded his shield.

Which reminded him. Peter shifted his sandwich into his left hand and tapped open his phone, pulling up the speed-dial number.

“You have reached the voicemail box of: Happy. Hogan.”

Happy’s voice sounded like someone he was required to be polite to had just walked in front of him
in the movie theater and then subsequently spilled his popcorn, stolen his drink, and urinated on his shoes. Okay maybe not that last. Who did that?

“Hi Happy!” Peter said, swallowing his next bite of sandwich. “Here’s my report for tonight. I stopped a grand theft bicycle, couldn’t find the owner so I just left a note… I helped this lost, old Dominican lady.” He was babbling now. Ned always called it ‘thinking down the phone line’ when Peter started musing about what the other person was doing instead of considering the words coming out of his mouth. “She was really nice and she bought me a churro. I just feel like I could be doing more, y’know? Just curious when the next real mission’s gonna be. So, yeah, just call me back.”

And after a moment:

“It's Peter. Parker.”

He hung up, tossing the phone in his hand and frowning. “Ugh… why would I tell him about the churro?”

He knew he sounded like a child on those recordings. No wonder Mr. Stark never heard them, or talked to Peter at all. Peter wasn’t just a kid, he insisted on that, but when he couldn’t seem to contain random words it was hard to prove.

*I shouldn’t have to prove it*, he thought with a grumble. *I’m Spider-Man!*

Peter reached to grip his sandwich again, but ended up pressing the pin-release on his web-shooter instead. The tiny piece of metal flipped outward, and Peter swung out to grab it.

And it was because he was already sideways, already swinging out for the pin that he saw it: a flash of green in the alleyway behind him, illuminating the bricks for half an instant.

Peter frowned, cautiously moving toward the alley.

He didn’t hear the door to the ATM on the street behind him sliding open.

**Earth-200004: October 2016**

Two quick webs had Peter slipping around the corner of the alley, suspended slightly above the litter-covered pavement. He cast his eyes along the street, trying to identify something out of the ordinary. Bricks gleamed wet with refuse, and Peter climbed up a little higher as he scouted.

His gaze settled on a man-shaped bundle of dark fabric laying crumpled against one wall, a single hand visible. The limb was groping, feeling at the bricks as though trying to orient itself.

“Hello?” Peter called, quietly. Voices echoed in alleyways, and he didn’t want to hurt whoever-it-was even more.

The person groaned, the hand returning to the swath of slightly-iridescent fabric with barely a whisper of perceivable movement. Peter dropped onto the floor of the alley, curling his fingers to brush the button of his web-shooters.

Something was tickling at him, pulling uncomfortably against his spider-sense. A whisper of realization—*you’re not supposed to be here.*

Peter shook his head, pushing the clinging voice to the back of his mind. He turned his attention back to the lump of a figure against the alley wall, creeping closer and keeping his shoulders hunched defensively.
“No place for a nap, really,” Peter said. “There’s far easier places. More comfortable, too, even for vagabonds.”

No answer. Whoever it was moved slightly, and Peter could make out the shapes of its figure in the dim light. The black clothes had the texture of thick leather, almost armor, and they glistened where they weren’t covered with dust or sludge. Peter cast his eyes around for the source of that dust and sludge, but found nothing obvious. Dark hair hung down in front of the figure’s face, pooling on its shoulders and arms. Whoever-it-was had their eyes closed, Peter could make that out, and he wondered if they were even conscious.

“Hello?” He moved closer, extending a cautious hand to brush the figure’s shoulder.

And the figure shot upright, eyes flying wide, staring at something that wasn’t there. Or that was no longer there.

“Wizard—” he began, before cutting off upon noticing Peter.

For it was a he.

Peter Parker jumped back faster than a sparrow taking flight moments before a knife materialized at his throat.

A knife held by the bloody hand of Prince Loki of Asgard.
The funeral was a quiet thing.

Just a few flowers and even fewer words on the pier of the quaint lakehouse, the silence of the sparse onlookers heavier than any speech.

Stephen Strange didn’t move from that pier for a long, long time. Even after the bouquet and the arc reactor—the heart—hidden within it had drifted out into the water and out of sight, even after the Avengers had scattered. Some ambled off to finish the job, some simply ran, some disappeared to wherever they had come from, each hiding from the image of that drifting island of flowers in their own way.

Stephen didn’t allow himself that luxury.

He’d looked back at the window of the house a few times and seen Potts— Stark—Pepper watching the water as though she could still see the wake of the flowers.

She could still feel the ripples. They all could.

Sometimes, she met his eyes, and Stephen couldn’t read a single flicker of the expression on her face. Except when she held Morgan up to the window, too—there was a tear-streaked smile when the girl was in her arms.

Stephen looked away quickly in those moments.

The wind was warm, and the lake rocked with gentle waves. Serene, peaceful, restful.

Just as he would have wanted it.

Stephen shouldn’t know that. He didn’t have any right to know how Anthony Stark had wanted to die, how he had wanted to be celebrated, who he’d wanted to be there, what he’d wanted to be said. Stephen didn’t have any right to know that a large funeral, with the world watching as they had been all the man’s life, had made Stark cringe and laugh incredulously.

It was hard to remember, here on the pier with spiraling thoughts and crumbling walls, to think of the
man as Stark. That in this world, in this lifetime, Stephen had never been graced with that small, true smile and the words ‘call me Tony.’

In this lifetime, Stephen didn’t deserve it.

He swallowed, clasping his trembling hands before him. His feet ached and his legs were itching with a slight sensation of pins and needles, but he couldn’t seem to remember how to move. The sun’s angle had shifted into his eyes and then out again, and Stephen didn’t turn away from the water.

Footsteps on the dock behind him had him tensing, but Stephen didn’t turn. He knew those footsteps—he shouldn’t, but he’d learned them from years and years of listening, years that no one else had experienced.

Peter Parker was still as ice when he stood next to Stephen. Stiller. Out of the corner of his eye, Stephen could see the flat, dead expression on the boy’s face, the touch of red around his eyes.

“The others have found the parts of the time machine,” Peter said. Parker said. Stephen didn’t know this boy either, not really. “They’re assembling it tomorrow. Then taking the Stones back as soon as they get it calibrated.”

Stephen nodded. “Good,” he said. He tried to keep the tremble from his voice, but he only succeeded in sounding aloof. He didn’t try to speak again.

There was a long pause, the silence broken only by the lap of a particularly strong wave against the old wood of the pier. Stephen imagined the dock warping, twisting like the mirror dimension and slipping down beneath cool, brown water.

“What are you still doing here?” Parker said after a moment.

Stephen closed his eyes.

“Answer me, wizard. Why are you still here?”

“Because I’m sorry.” Stephen’s voice was hard. It was either that or no voice at all, either that or a broken whisper.

“No you’re not. You saved everyone, the entire fucking universe,” Parker growled. “Why would you be sorry?”

Stephen’s tone didn’t change. “I didn’t save everyone.”

He did. And I didn’t save him.

“Collateral damage.”

“I’m sorry.”

For a moment, Stephen thought Parker was going to strike him, that the rubber-band of tolerance within the teenager had finally snapped of grief and fury and pain.

But the boy only snarled, “You don’t get to be sorry!” The words hissed out between his teeth. “You don’t get to stand here and mourn, you don’t get to stand here and pretend like you know. Like you knew him. Like you knew anything.”

Stephen’s hands shook harder.
“I don’t care if this was the only way, wizard.” Parker gesticulated wildly, indicating the lake, the house, Pepper and Morgan and Happy in the window, Harley Keener on the porch. None of them were speaking. None of them were seeing—they just gazed emptily at their child, their plastic screwdriver, their watch, their hands. “Because this isn’t winning.”

‘Stop. Stop wallowing in self-pity, Stephen. We’re going to win this.’

‘What does that even mean? What’s winning in this scenario? They’re all dead already, Tony.’

‘Maybe they are. But we can fix it—we have to. Winning is… Pepper and Peter and my whole family, makeshift or otherwise. Winning is them alive, them watching Thanos’s fucking sunset on a grateful universe. I’d die to give them that.’

‘Me too.’

‘Shut up, wizard—you’re not allowed to.’

‘And why not?’

‘Because you’re part of my makeshift family, ever think of that?’

Stark had said those words in eleven million futures. Or something like them. Millions and millions of times, he’d told Stephen or Rhodey or Carol or Sam or Natasha or Steve or Bruce that this, this, was winning.

Stephen hadn’t believed him those millions of times. And he didn’t believe him now.

Parker growled again. “This. Isn’t. Winning.”

Stephen could tell him he knew this could never be. But that would be a lie, and he’d done enough lying to this boy. So he didn’t say anything, and he didn’t look at Parker beside him, glad in his petite black suit with his hair slightly tousled from the hours since the ceremony.

He knew what he’d see. Devastation, pure and unhidden, devastation twisting into a helpless sort of rage. Stephen felt the same concoction of instability churning within him, too.

Peter Parker had gotten so little time with Stark in this universe. But even in those few moments, he’d tuned into the consistency between them, the consistency that persevered through every timeline Stephen had seen.

Stephen was no longer confused as to the relationship between them. He’d seen it play out in millions of ways.

It would never get to play out here, anymore, and Stephen mourned that almost as much as he mourned Stark himself.

“You chose wrong. You saw ten million timelines and you chose wrong.”

I know.

Morgan and Peter deserved their father. Pepper deserved her husband. This world deserved Tony Stark.

I know.

“What else could I have chosen?”
Stephen didn’t mean to speak aloud, but the words slipped out on the end of a breath and it was too late to hide them. He already knew the answer, anyway.

“Something. Anything. You could have chosen differently.”

“I—”

“No. You could have. But you were willing to trade him, you were willing to let him make the sacrifice. You.” Parker spat the last word like a curse, his tone saturated with disgust. “A coward, that’s all you are!”

It stung, of course it did, but not as much as the boy would have wanted. Because Stephen had heard this before. Seven hundred and ninety times, Stephen had heard this before. Shifted and different each time, but the tone was the same. The grief was the same. The hate was the same.

Stephen knew the hate wasn’t for him, not really. He knew what Peter was thinking, he knew all the boy needed was for someone to wrap their arms around him and tell him that everything was going to be okay.

In a single future, Stephen had been that person.

Not here.

“Peter?”

Parker turned at Pepper’s call, and Stephen did too, after a moment.

Pepper met his eyes, the same unreadability flashing across them as there’d been every time she’d looked at him from the window. Then her gaze skated to the boy beside him, and softened, just slightly.

“C’mon, kid,” she said. “You’re aunt’s inside.”

Parker didn’t move.

“Peter…” It came out on the end of a sigh. “I get it. I really do. But this isn’t helping anyone, okay?”

‘You don’t mean it’ went unspoken.

Pepper smiled softly. “Leave Strange be.”

Parker’s head dropped, all wrath seeping away into exhaustion. His feet seemed to drag of their own accord, drawing him off the pier and to Pepper’s side, and he never looked back at Stephen.

This time, Stephen didn’t know what he would have seen on the boy’s face if he had.

The two of them disappeared back into the house, and Stephen turned away. His muscles flooded with the warm ache of movement after so long, but he only stilled them again as he focused back on the water.

He’d been there for a long time.

They were taking the Stones back tomorrow. And that’d be it. Everything would be over, everything would be set right. And Stark would never see it, though he would have wanted to most of all.

The sun kept creeping across the sky, and Stephen watched the reflections of the trees shift in angle
and length. He watched his shadow fall across the water. But he didn’t see any of it, not truly.

He wanted Parker to come back. He thought he knew what he’d say to the boy, this time. He thought he might understand how to explain. Maybe. He wanted to try.

Because if he could make Peter understand...

He’d had been standing at that lake for a long time. He stayed there for a long time yet.

And then something pulled on his wrist, a small hand already calloused from play and tinkering.

It took every ounce of Stephen’s strength to look down at Morgan Stark beneath him.

The girl peered up at him with solemn, whiskey-brown eyes and said quietly, “Mommy said you can come in.”

Stephen’s throat worked for a long moment before he coughed out, “did she send you out to say that?”

Morgan shook her head. “She was going to tell you, but she looked sad. So I’m doing it.”

“Well,” Stephen said through a mouthful of dust, “that was very kind of you.”

“What are you doing out here, anyway?”

The question wasn’t like Peter’s. It didn’t have an answer from the girl; it was supposed to be answered by Stephen. She was simply curious, after all.

She didn’t know who he was. She didn’t know what he’d done.

He looked back at the lake, closing his eyes. Morgan hadn’t let go of his wrist. “I was just thinking about Stark, that’s all. Your—your daddy.”

“You’ve been out here a long time,” the girl observed. “Are you his friend?”

In twelve million futures of dust and pain, where you never existed, yes. In every future where neither of us died before we could speak more than fifty words to each other, yes. He told me I was like him, and I told him I could never be—me, as perceptive, as brave, as selfless? I could never be.

“I don’t know,” Stephen replied honestly. He looked down at Morgan, and she smiled a bit when he did. He could see the gap in it where she’d lost a tooth—perhaps her very first one.

“You can be my friend,” the girl said easily.

Something inside of Stephen shattered.

I did it. I did it, I chose it, it was me, it was my fault.

I killed Tony Stark.

“No, Morgan,” he said softly. “I don’t think you want that.”
Stephen be angstin'.

He does that. Get used to it. XD

Hope you enjoyed this friendly dose of pain and suffering, and I'll see you soon! Drop me a kudos or a comment, and have a great time-zone sensitive time classification.
Peter’s instincts were faster than most cobras’, which was probably the only reason he wasn’t bleeding out on the alley pavement at that moment. As it was, he was rolling sideways, one wrist sending webbing toward his attacker and the other attaching to the ledge of the roof above.

He swung up, twisting in midair to face the man—the god—beneath him. Loki’s knife cut through the air without a sound, wickedly triangular and glimmering with magic. He lunged after Peter, who rose higher, torn between aggression and awe. Because Loki, the God of Mischief and the Prince of Asgard, was bleeding and attacking him in a Queens’ alleyway.

He wasted no time barraging with his webbing, sending stream after stream of the stuff at the invading god. But Loki seemed to flicker in and out of existence, and Peter’s strikes failed to make contact as the god multiplied and phased like a twisted version of the Vision. Loki hurled that knife again and again, the weapon flashing in the dim light, but it always rematerialized in his hand before Peter could do anything.

Always the same hand. The other was tucked to the man’s chest, fingers curled around something so tightly his knuckles had turned white.

Distracted, Peter didn’t see the next throw before it was slicing across his thigh, parting the StarkTech like butter.

Impossible.

And fucking painful.

Peter yelped, dancing back and shifting his weight off his injured leg. It wasn’t deep, especially to an unenhanced individual—but those same enhancements made the sting all the sharper. He shook out the tingle of pain, easier to ignore once the first twinge had passed.

“Not cool.” Peter swung forward again, then released himself into an arcing leap, both hands extended toward Loki. The two strands of webbing made direct hits—on where the god had been.

Damn it!

All the multiplying was cheating, Peter decided. Could he get his webbing to split?

_Not without a significant modification to the web-shooters_, said his eternally-helpful, always-relevant engineer brain.

Loki lunged again, and Peter just barely managed to deflect the strike.
“Dude, what are you even doing here?” Peter wondered, flipping backward to avoid another thrust of that knife.

Loki didn’t answer, his gaze wild and… pained?

What was going on?

Peter flipped over the god’s head, not attacking this time. Just scouting, as he probably should have done long before. There was sweat and blood on Loki’s face, and he moved… strangely. Like someone who’d just come off a trampoline, disoriented, the ground and air feeling wrong.

Peter still felt wrong, still felt that voice whispering, not here, you don’t belong here. But maybe that was a result of the god, something residual from his magic?

“Um, Mr. Loki sir?” Peter tried again, swinging a bit higher and trying to look non-threatening. “Pretty sure I shouldn’t be asking this to someone who tried to obliterate the human race multiple times, but are you alright?”

Loki stopped moving now that Peter had stayed put, focusing irritably on the boy. His sharp green eyes were clearing, just a bit—and darkening. Like they’d been shining with something, before, which was now going out.

Peter frowned. The lighting of the alley hadn’t changed…

He kept his fingers on the buttons of his web-shooters.

Slowly, his eyes still locked on Peter, Loki brought his curled hand up, unfurling it slightly. Peter tried to glimpse the contents, and thought he saw a glimmer of green light through the god’s fingers before Loki had snapped his grip shut again. Peter’s enhanced ears caught the crinkle of paper.

They stared at each other for a long, long moment.

And then, to Peter’s eternal shock, the man’s knife dissolved.

“You’re the Spider-Man, aren’t you,” Loki said with a long-suffering sigh.

“Um… yes?” Peter’s cautious reply sounded a bit tinny, even to his own ears.

“The Spider- Kid. Oh, fuck that Midgardian wizard and everything he represents!”

Peter’s brow furrowed, his confusion ticking up a few more notches. Wizard? Loki, knowing his name? Loki, in New York again, not actively trying to kill him?

Peter was starting to think he should call Happy again.

“Hello, Peter Parker.”

Peter lost his grip on the webbing in shock.

And then he was on his feet again, wrists extended, hastily trying to cover up the breach of identity, to do anything. “What do you want?” he hissed. “If you so much as touch my aunt I’ll—”

“Calm yourself, small spider,” said the god, raising his hands and spreading them in the universal ‘I’m unarmed’ position. Except the image was largely ruined by the fact that he only spread one
hand—the other still clutched around the mystery light and enigma paper. “I mean no harm.”

Peter gestured to his leg, and then to the skyline of Queens. “Excuse me if I doubt that.”

Loki winced—he actually winced. “Wounding you was not my intention. And 2012 was… not what you think.”

“Oh? So you didn’t kill hundreds of people, steal two powerful relics, bring an alien army into my city, or send Tony Stark into a wormhole?” Peter crossed his arms—though he kept his wrist facing outward, ready to retreat or attack.

Something unreadable flickered in Loki’s eyes at Peter’s last point, and the god’s gaze flicked to the paper in his hand for an instant. Peter’s eyes narrowed.

“Stark did the wormhole thing all on his own, I’m sure,” Loki said, lowering his hands.

Peter tensed, and the god chuckled.

“Listen, let us accept that I could kill you in seconds, regardless of position or proximity, and also accept the fact that I am not. The proceeding events will go much smoother if we do so.”

Peter bristled. “I think you’d be surprised.”

“Want to test this?” Loki smirked.

“Not remotely. I want you to tell me what the hell you’re doing here and how you know my name.” He narrowed the eyes of the suit. “And while you’re at it, explain what nefarious plans you’re cooking up… wherever you come from.”

Loki huffed, expression thoughtful. “Nefarious plans. I rather like that. But unfortunately I lack them; this trip was somewhat unplanned. ”

“What trip? What are you doing here?” Peter was vibrating with anxious, impatient energy now, and his finger tapped rapidly against the button at his wrist.

“I’m from the future.”

Peter would have fallen off his webbing again, if he hadn’t already done so. “What?”

“Was that unclear?”

“Was that— you’re from the future? But that’s— you can’t—”

“It’s not impossible, actually—”

“That’s so fucking cool!”

Loki looked taken aback, his head cocking, a bit like a python’s.

Peter couldn’t help his grin under his mask, because he may be face to face with a dangerous, otherworldly criminal, but it was a dangerous, otherworldly criminal from the future and damn if that didn’t make every one of Peter’s geek alarms slam into overdrive.

“How’d you manage it? How far in the future? Am I still Spider-Man then? Why’d you end up back here? How could you possibly do it by accident? Is that an Asgardian thing—spontaneous time travel?” He found he’d drawn closer to the god, and hurriedly backed away, though his eagerness
didn’t quell much.

Loki smiled, a flickering sort of thing that was gone just as soon as it had appeared. But it was a smile, not a smirk, and it surprised both boy and god. “It’s not an Asgardian thing,” Loki said. “It’s a desperate Midgardian wizard thing. I’m only the second link in the chain of time jumps.”

“What? A wizard?”

Loki rubbed his face with one hand, sighing through his nose. His hair was tangled, and it flopped over his fingers as he massaged his temples slowly.

He looked… exhausted.

That didn’t match Peter’s image of the helmeted, scepter-bearing god, the blade shimmering with blood, the aura of magic and evil tangible around him. Peter frowned, moving just a tad closer.

“This is quite a long story, little spider,” Loki said. “But yes. A wizard. A wizard who I met in early 2017—”

“2017!”

“—showed up again later, saying he was from 2023 and telling me Than—telling me we’d lost the battle.”

“Wait hold up.” Peter lifted a hand. “‘We’? Since when is there a we?”

“Since 2017, Parker. Since a battle we apparently lost.”

“What battle? What happened, why you, what’s going on here—”

“I don’t know!” the god snapped. “All I know is that I’ve got an Infinity Stone in my hand and a hasty list of names and that moments before that realm-damned sorcerer showed up, I was supposed to die.”

Peter’s thoughts were racing, a thousand rules and situations and impossibilities slamming into each other and incomprehensible speeds. “So… you’re going back in time to change that?”

Loki looked at him with weary irritation. “It doesn’t work like that, Midgardian.”

Peter thought of every time-travel story he’d ever read or watched.

There were quite a lot of systems of time-travel.

“How does it work, then?” he demanded.

“You can’t go back in time and change the future you just came from—that makes your past your future and forms a loop the universe cannot mend.”

“So, like Doctor Who, not Back to the Future?”

The god looked at him blankly.

“Sorry, reference.”

“Explain?”
Peter shuffled awkwardly. “It’s hard to... just describe? I mean, one’s really long and the other’s really old—well, they’re both really old but they both sorta involve time travel and the thing you said matches most with Doctor Who, I suppose.”

“That clears... actually nothing up, mortal.”

“Sorry. Maybe you can watch them, sometime.”

Loki cocked his head again. “Watch? Like one would the mighty theatre?”

“Um... Kind of.”

Loki shook himself, his knife rematerializing. Peter tensed, but the god just flipped it, catching it by its blade and then its handle again. It looked almost anxious. “No matter. If you’re the man of spiders, I have already accomplished a part of my mission—”

Peter, confused, interrupted, “but I thought you couldn’t change the past.”

Loki glared at him, mouth still open. “I’m not. I’m changing your past.”

“That actually makes no sense.” Then he paused. “Wait, what d’ya mean an Infinity Stone?”

Peter crept up the wall of his apartment building, checking periodically behind him to make sure his tail was following at an acceptable distance. Loki climbed with an inhuman grace, and Peter supposed that made sense, seeing as he wasn’t human. It broke every rule in the book for Peter to be turning his back on the god, to be leading him into his home, but Peter’s instincts seemed to encourage it. And if Loki decided to attack...

Well, either Peter’s spider-senses would warn him in time to defend himself, or he never had any chance against the Asgardian anyway.

Carefully, precisely, Peter stuck his fingers to the window to pull it open and slipped inside. He gave Loki the universal shushing gesture, indicating that he say back—which the god did not seem pleased with—and through the window and onto the ceiling of his room. On instinct, he whipped off his mask and let it fall to the floor beneath him as he slowly transversed the bedroom.

May was bustling around in the kitchen, visible through Peter’s open door—he had to fix that. There was no way he could bring an Asgardian into his room with the door open.

Well, he probably shouldn’t be bringing an Asgardian into his room anyway. Especially not a dangerous criminal one.

From the future.

What even was his life?

Peter gripped the top corner of the door with a piece of webbing, slowly easing it shut and wincing at the slow creeeeeak that echoed in his enhanced ears. He dropped to the ground, pushing it the final few inches until it latched, and let out a sigh of relief.

The coast is clear.

Except the coast was not clear.
A Lego death-star shattered on the floor of Peter’s bedroom, and Peter felt his life go from *what the fuck* to *fucked*.

Chapter End Notes

Ned and May are still canonically inconvenient...

But soon, I get to flip canon to the WIIIIIINNNNDDD it's gonna be great. Thanks for reading!
As the crash of the breaking Legos faded and Peter looked at his best friend in absolute terror, the silence of the room was broken by May’s call—“What was that?”

“Gah—Nothing! Nothing!” Peter replied, but it his tone was strangled. Shit, shit ...

“You’re the Spider-Man,” came Ned’s breathless voice. Peter looked at him, then down at his own suit-clad body, then back at Ned’s wide, excited eyes. “From YouTube!”

“I’m not, I’m not,” Peter said, panic in his voice as his gaze darted toward the window, where Prince Loki of Asgard was going to appear any second.

Ned’s face had gone red from lack of air. “You were on the ceiling!”

“No I wasn’t!” Peter frantically tapped his suit, its tension releasing and the fabric pooling around his ankles. He stepped out of it, kicking it aside as quickly as possible. “Ned, what are you doing in my room?”

“May let me in! We were gonna finish the Death Star—”

“You can’t just bust into my room—”

The door opened, and Peter’s panic compounded as May stepped through. She was accompanied by a whirl of smoke and the scent of something burning, which explained the hand towel she waved before her face. “That turkey meatloaf recipe is a disaster,” she said, a laugh in her voice. “Let’s go to dinner. Thai? Ned, you want Thai?”

Ned began to affirm, but Peter’s inward screech of NO! finally had him speaking. “No! Uh, he’s got a thing.”

Ned, bless his soul, immediately amended, “A thing, to do, after.”

Great cover. God, this was going just spectacularly wasn’t it?

Peter glanced at the window again. Flashing green eyes met his, and Peter grimaced, his hands flickering subtly to indicate the people around him.

Loki, to his relief, disappeared from view behind the window.

Peter turned back to May, who was watching his mostly naked form with less confusion than she probably should have. “Maybe put on some clothes,” she said.

Peter closed his eyes and nodded, part of him wanting to disappear from existence and the other part wanting to burst into tears. He fumbled for a shirt, and May shut the door and disappeared.

Only then did he collapse backward against his bed and press the heels of his palms into his eyes.
“Fuck…”

“She doesn’t know?” Ned asked, tapping him repeatedly on the shoulder.

Peter swatted his hand away. “No one knows!” he said, pulling the checkered shirt over his head, his curls flopping every-which way. “Well, Mr. Stark knows because he made my suit but that’s it.”

*And, y’know, a time-traveling Loki, Prince of Asgard, God of Mischief. Who is currently hanging onto the windowsill outside my apartment.*

“Tony Stark made you that?!?!” Fourteen emotions splattered on Ned’s face as one, before dissolving into realization. “Are you an Avenger?”

Peter shrugged. “Yeah. Basically.” It wasn’t *really* a lie.

Ned’s hands went to his face, his mouth working wordlessly. It would have been endearing if Peter wasn’t so busy being terrified.

“You can’t tell anyone about this,” Peter hissed. “You’ve *got* to keep it a secret.”


Peter gesticulated frantically in the direction of the doorway, and Aunt May. “You know what she’s like! If she finds out people try and kill me every night, she’s not gonna let me do this anymore! Come on, Ned, *please.*”

His friend raised both hands, breathing deep. “Okay, okay okay.” And then they dropped, and that goofy smile was back and Ned was speaking *far too loudly*— “I’m gonna be level with you, I can’t keep this a secret! It’s the greatest thing that’s ever happened to me—”

*No.*

“Ned, May *cannot* know. I *cannot* do that to her right now. With everything that’s happened with her I—” His voice was trembling, his throat working with the struggle to swallow. “Please.”

“O-okay…” Ned said.

Peter looked at the window again, but saw only the dark bricks of the apartment complex across the street. “Just swear it, okay?”

Ned nodded, giving Peter a small smile. “I swear.”

Peter blew out a long breath, and immediately began shoving his friend toward the door. “Okay, yes, thanks, and now you will be leaving.”

Ned swatted at his hands. “Can I try the suit on? How does it work? Is it magnets?”

“Ned, can you please just—”

“How do you shoot the strings?”

Peter’s spider-senses were tingling, his anxiousness beginning to fuel that voice again— *wrong, wrong, you don’t belong here.* He blamed it on Loki; this was his *room,* of course he belonged. Perhaps the god did have some sort of aura of magic, and Peter’s senses were picking up on it.

He needed to figure this out. He didn’t have time for Thai or his secret being out or *anything*— he
needed to figure out the goddamn god that was lingering outside his window! “I’m gonna tell you about this at school tomorrow, okay?” he told Ned hurriedly, almost succeeding in shoving the boy out the door before Ned ducked sideways.

“But… how do you do this and the Stark internship?”

Peter didn’t follow for a moment. “This… this is the Stark internship.”

“Oooh…”

Peter pushed Ned through the door with one last extension of his gangly limbs and shut the door firmly behind him. Then he spun, drawing in a long, long breath and sinking down to the floor.

*I can’t believe this is happening right now.*

“I take it that is not a normal occurrence,” came a slithering voice from the window.

Peter looked up, propping his chin on his knee and observing Loki as the god folded himself through the gap and settled on the windowsill. “Nope,” he sighed. “It’s the end of the world.”

“I’ve seen that,” Loki said. “There was nowhere near as much yelling.”

Peter huffed a laugh. “Well, that’s a relief…”

They watched each other for a moment, black and green toward red and blue. Peter’s senses were vibrating, his skin itching with agitation, and he didn’t think it was only because of the villain sitting across from him.

Eventually, Peter broke eye contact, running a hand through his curls. “Okay, so my aunt is gonna kidnap me in a few minutes to go for food. I can’t extricate myself from these—trust me, I’ve tried. She’ll get even more suspicious and I—I can’t afford more suspicion right now…”

“Agreed.”

They stared at each other some more.

“Okay, this is crazy, this is absolutely crazy… I should call Happy, I should call Mr. Stark, I should do something—”

“No!”

Peter broke off, his mouth still half open.

Loki was on his feet, his hand extended, those fisted fingers going white again. There was something like fear in his emerald eyes, something far too human. Slowly, the god dropped his arm back to his side, glaring at Peter as if daring him to say anything.

“It’s perfectly logical not to trust me,” Loki said, tapping the edge of one boot against Peter’s floor. “It’s perfectly logical to try and kill me. But we’ve accomplished far more without doing so, wouldn’t you agree?”

“No really? Seeing as I still have no idea what happened or what you’re doing here.”

Loki sat again, crossing his legs on the windowsill. “I’ll explain everything. I’d just prefer not to do it from a SHIELD holding cell. And I’d definitely prefer not to be dead.”
“I’m sure they’d listen…”

Loki raised an eyebrow, and Peter trailed off.

“Okay, maybe you’re right,” Peter said. “But you did kill a lot of people. And attempt to kill a great many more.”

Loki waved a hand. “All part of the explanation, little spider. Just… don’t call Stark. Not yet.”

Peter sighed, reluctantly nodding. “Okay. Fine. But only because my spidey-senses say you aren’t a threat… and he probably wouldn’t answer me anyway.”

Loki peered at him. “What?”

“I have to go through Happy Hogan.”

“Who?”

“Happy Hogan. One doesn’t just call Tony Stark.”

Loki’s brow furrowed further. “Even you?”

“What do you mean ‘even me?’”

Now it was Loki’s turn to run a hand through his hair. “Apparently this is going to be even harder than I thought.”

Peter opened his mouth to ask another question, but May’s voice filtered through the door once again. “Pete? Is Ned still in there? I though he left!”

Peter jumped up, whirling toward the door on the off chance she tried to come in. “Yeah, he’s gone. I was just… using voice-type.”

“Alright… are you ready to go?”

Peter looked back at the God of Mischief and sighed. “Yes, Aunt May. I’m coming.”

___________________________

Loki Odinson had very little experience with being alone in a teenage Midgardian’s room.

It wasn’t that different from a teenage Asgardian’s room, actually, but it was the atmosphere that counted. The Spider-Child had instructed—ordered, he’d dared to order Loki—not to touch anything.

Part of Loki wanted to pettily shift everything just an inch to the left of its normal position, just to see if the child noticed. But even that part had to reluctantly admit that he needed the boy’s help, and it would be unwise to antagonize him.

Still, Loki wanted to antagonize something.

Instead, he folded himself around his knees, sitting sideways in the window and pretending his entire form didn’t ache with something nonphysical. He pretended not to think about Thanos and the ship and the blood on his form and the blood of his people. He pretended not to think about Valkyrie or Bruce, pretended not to think of Heimdall.
Pretended not to think of Thor.

Loki snarled at the empty window frame across from him, running the knuckles of his fisted hand down the wicked edge of his knife. He was the trickster god, the lord of mischief—he did not mourn.

Damn that wizard to Helheim and back!

Sighing, Loki let his knife drop out of existence and brought his fist to his chest. He unfolded the aching fingers, bending them repeatedly to try and work some feeling back into the tendons as he glared at the contents of his palm.

The Time Stone was an ugly shade of green. It was lime—*lime*, or *spring grass*, or something just as idiotic. Loki preferred pine tones, or a nice, deep emerald. Not this awkward wannabe color; he’d leave that for Doctor Strange—or whatever his real name was.

But here it was, floating slightly above his hand as though surrounded by a shield of air he couldn’t cut through. Protecting him, probably, like the casing of the Tesseract or the bulb of his scepter.

Ultimate power, right in his palm.

And Loki wanted nothing more than to destroy it forever.

Carefully, Loki shifted the Stone onto his knee, watching it turn lazily a centimeter above his clothes. It’s soft glow was comfortable, inviting.

Loki snarled at it, too.

Then he went back to his palm, peeling the piece of paper, now damp from his sweat, from his skin. With infinite precision—this hasty scroll was just as important as the Stone, if not more—Loki unfolded it along its shaky crease lines.

The wizard had said he’d hopefully recognize most of these names.

The wizard had far too much hope.

The note was a web of names and arrows, each indicating a person or relationship supposedly essential to saving the world. Loki glanced over the frankly enormous list, and tried to ignore the way his chest sunk with despair.

Half of those people wanted to kill him on sight.

And the other half he didn’t even know. Who in the nine realms was Peter Quill? What kind of a name was ‘T’Challa’?

And why did ‘Anthony Stark’ have to be the name in the center of it all?

Loki glared at the Time Stone again, and thought he could see his own reflection in the glowing center.

He couldn’t do this.

It felt like sand shredding his windpipe to admit it, but he *couldn’t* do this. It wasn’t as though he’d had a choice; the wizard had trapped him, tricked him, played on what honor he had and twisted what loyalty was left.

Still, Loki wanted to do save the world. Odin, he wanted to with every synapse of his corroding
form, but he couldn’t. Making these people listen to him, making them trust him, trust each other… Impossible. Maybe someone else could have done it, but not Loki, villain, God of Mischief and Lord of Trickery. Not Loki, plotting evil and jealous brother.

The wizard should have saved someone else.

Loki clasped the note between his knees, fisting both hands in his hair and growling, long and drawn out. Asgardian curses mumbled from angry lips bounced off the walls. He wanted to stab something —specifically the sorcerer who’d forced him here. Who’d forced him to abandon his universe and his people to the hands of the Mad Titan.

Who’d forced him to abandon his brother.

‘It has to be you.’

Apparently, Loki was the only one the wizard could save without damaging the timeline. Apparently, he’d been the only one salvageable. So here he was, with a seventh Infinity Stone and a crumpled note spelling the demise of not one, but two timelines.

Loki’d thought one of the arrows on that fucking piece of paper would be easy. But apparently Tony Stark wouldn’t even speak to the boy who was supposed to be his child.

They were all as good as dead. Thanos had as good as come already.

And Loki, forced to alter the past and split the timeline, was trapped in a new universe, an alternate world no longer his own.

With an impossible task to merge the two together.

Chapter End Notes

OOOOOO shenanigans.

Also I’d never written from Loki’s perspective before and I had NO IDEA what I was missing. 10/10 would recommend, most satisfying POV ever.

Thanks for reading! Leave a comment if you have time or a kudos if you feel I deserve it, and I’ll see you in a bit!
It wasn’t sudden, the realization.

No, it crept up on Stephen like the night over the Appalachians, slowly burrowing into his consciousness as he sat at the Starks’ dinner table and chewed on a cheeseburger. It crept up as he watched Morgan devour hers—the only one of them making any sound. It crept up as he watched Pepper stare at nothing. It crept up as he watched Peter pointedly not look at him.

It crept up in the silence, until Stephen’s weak hands dropped his meal with a thump onto his plate. Until he closed his eyes and tried to breathe.

I have to fix this.

That was all, that was it. No ideas, no determination. Just understanding, finally clicking into place.

I have to do something.

That was why he was here, wasn’t it? Why he hadn’t moved to help with the time machine, why he hadn’t left to return to the Sanctum? That was what had rooted him to the pier for hours, tying him into a promise he wasn’t even aware he was making?

Stephen stood up.

It took a fraction of a second too long for anyone else to look up. And that only slipped Stephen from understanding to conviction.

Pepper met Stephen’s eyes, her hand drifting over to cover Morgan’s.

“Strange?” she said, her voice deafening in the clinging silence.

Stephen swallowed. “I have…”

What? An idea?

“To go.”

Morgan looked up, first at Pepper, and then at Stephen. She frowned, looking genuinely disappointed. Pepper’s hand tightened on the girl’s, tapping in a precise rhythm Stephen thought might be morse code.

No one spoke for eleven heartbeats. Stephen was counting.

“Alright,” said Pepper, nodding as though she understood. Maybe she did.

“Thank you,” Stephen murmured. He inclined his head to the woman, his hands trembling at his sides.

“Of course.” She nodded back at him.
Stephen fled before Peter Parker’s glare burned a hole through him.

He’d brought his sling-ring, but it felt wrong to portal off the land, so Stephen slipped along the side of the driveway until he reached the old paved road leading further upstate. Though that depended, he supposed, on which way you turned.

Stephen fished his ring out of the pocket of his sleek, black suit and carefully slipped it onto his shaking fingers. It took a few tries—it always did—but once he had it tucked comfortably against his knuckles, portaling took little effort at all.

He stepped directly into the library. Wong and the rest of the Masters would be at Kamar-Taj, likely, but Stephen didn’t want to risk running into anyone in the hallway or the medical center. They’d have questions; so many questions, *too many* questions that Stephen hardly knew the answers to, either.

Quietly slipping into the dusty shelves of the library, Stephen wondered where the Cloak had gotten off to. It always seemed to know when Stephen arrived in the Santums and would make its way to him with varying urgency, which had saved the sorcerer’s life more than once.

His eyes darting over the spines of the tomes, Stephen bit his bottom lip and tried not to glare.

*I have to do something.*

Something. Anything. But there was nothing to do, nothing he could do—the Stones had been destroyed, the timeline set right…

Except. Not yet.

They were taking the Stones back tomorrow.

Stephen drew a sharp breath, already racing toward the forbidden books in the back of the library. Tomorrow, *tomorrow*— he had time.

Almost no time at all, time with little hope, time he didn’t know what to do with, but time he couldn’t waste.

*Time.*

Seven hours later, Stephen tapped his pen against his astral form’s knee, peering at his shakey handwriting.

“So time is a tier of the multiverse,” he murmured under his breath. The Cloak looked up at him—or, as much as it could. Stephen glanced at it.

“Right? One of the axes of our 4D universe. Position, time, energy, form.”

The Cloak bobbed in affirmation.

“Time manifests mostly in tiers. It’s like the mortar between the dimensions, securing the 3D facets of our multiverse together.”

Another bob.
“So when you draw on the time of your dimension… you’re splitting said dimension. A timeline is the same thing as an alternate, parallel universe.”

The Cloak cocked its collar, wavering its corners in the universal kind of gesture.

“You don’t always split the dimension, though.”

A nod.

“Right. Because the past is, for the time-travelers, the future. You can go back, doing things that fit into the timeline—because at that point, they’ve already happened. Like taking a book, or an Infinity Stone, and then returning it—you don’t fuck with events that have already happened. You might even be able to talk to yourself or another person without splitting the dimension, as long as that person doesn’t change their behavior because of what you said. To a certain degree, the universe will mend itself around your existence, making your actions part of the original timeline. But as soon as you start changing things…”

The Cloak drew its corners apart.

“A split.” Stephen began to sketch, his lines wavering and awkward. “So by taking the Stones the way they did, our Avengers splintered our timeline in… four distinct locations. It could be ten, but they’re taking the Stones back to the moments they were taken to heal those six splits before they can begin. Because we can’t just abandon those splits—they were born of our timeline, and they’re inhabited by living beings… if we save our universe at the expense of another, it isn’t really saving anything.”

Stephen flipped his parchment over, beginning to write again. “So I can’t take the Time Stone from Rogers, because that would doom an alternate timeline.”

The Cloak looked up sharply.

Stephen watched it as it gesticulated, raising an eyebrow.

“Of course this is about Stark,” Stephen said when it had finished. “What did you think we were here for?”

They found Stephen’s physical form the next morning, on the floor, walls of books stacked up around him and the Cloak bringing ever more. They found his astral form moving hundreds of times faster, a pen clutched determinedly between its trembling fingers.

“Strange,” Wong said, kneeling next to him and entering his own astral form.

“Wong.” Stephen didn’t look up from the parchment before him, still scribbling.

“Come back, alright? You’ve been out of your body for… who knows how long. Too long. Again.”

Stephen shook his head. “I can’t. I’ve almost got it.”

Wong narrowed his eyes. “Got what?”

When Stephen looked up, his grin was broken and blazing. “An idea.”
Stephen dropped his pen, his eyes widening beneath some semblance of a smile.

“Thanos,” he said quietly, triumphantly.

The Cloak dropped its books, zooming up an energy level to enter its own astral form and wrap about Stephen. He smiled at its eagerness, stroking its corners and pointing toward the shaky diagram on his knees.

“He destroyed the Stones, correct? In 2018. We’ve gone five years without the Stones.” Stephen didn’t wait for the Cloak to confirm. “Supposedly. Because our timeline is unstable. It was so easy for the Avengers to split it; this dimension was already weakened from the Desolation and the fact that it lacked the stabilization of Infinity Stones. The Stones hold so much energy—when you destroy them, where do you think it goes?”

The Cloak shivered.

“Exactly. Into the fabric of our reality. The Infinity Stones are housing units for that energy, enough energy to tear the dimension apart, or put it back together again. Destroying a Stone destroys the protection and organization our universe has around that Stone’s makeup. Time. Soul. Mind. All of that.”

The Cloak drifted off of Stephen, circling him and looking confused.

“If you destroy one Stone, the universe is off-balance. If you destroy all of them, it should become immobile—sort of hardened to the rest of the energies of the multiverse.” Stephen tapped a page of the book next to him, reading out; “the Infinity Crystals cent’r the six aspeckts of our Realm, concentrating the ingredients of a reality into something tangible. Without those folk, our universe becometh stagnant and safe.”

Stephen was excited, now, his words pouring out over each other and his thoughts clamoring for attention. “Do you see? Once the Stones are destroyed, Mind, Soul, Power, Time, Space, and Reality cannot be manipulated as easily because their energies have been distributed throughout the universe, in their natural state, instead of concentrated within ingots.”

The Cloak cocked its collar.

Stephen smirked, one corner of his lip pulling up. “So the question becomes, then, why was it so easy for the Avengers to twist time? Why was it possible for them to cause changes to the past to make those four splits I was talking about earlier? Why is this timeline still malleable, still innovative?”

The Cloak drifted back in something that could have been shock, and Stephen nodded.

“Because maybe not all the Infinity Stones were destroyed. Maybe instead of simultaneously destroying all the Stones, Thanos used one to destroy the others. Maybe he didn’t even realize he’d done so, for that single Stone jumped timestreams to arrive somewhere else as soon as he’d finished with it.”

And ‘maybe’ was all the timeline needed. If it was possible, the universe could mend around it—Thanos could have destroyed just five Stones, and therefore time-traveling to make it so would not split the timeline.

Stephen got to his feet, slipping out of his astral form and slamming into his physical one. Twelve
hours of dissociating hit him hard—his hands beginning to ache and his head screaming with a splitting, aura migraine— but Stephen simply shoved himself upright and stumbled out of the library catacombs. The Cloak wrapped around him, steadying him, and they made their way out of the shelves together.

“What time is it?” Stephen wondered, fumbling for his watch in yet another suit pocket.

The Cloak shrugged.

His hands practically vibrating, Stephen had to grip his wrist to make out the time as he palmed his watch. It was nearly six o’clock in the morning; he wasn’t too late, not yet.

Stephen ignored the conventions of respect and portaled directly into the Starks’ barn—if you could call the sturdy, finished, well-furnished building that—stumbling out into what was very obviously a workshop. A genius’ workshop, equipped with everything Stephen could imagine and even more that he couldn’t.

He tried not to let his gaze linger on the tables, on the dismantled suits and the scattered tools, each pivoted at the perfect angle for easy grabbing. He tried not to run his hands along the not-yet-dusty tables. He tried not to breathe in the atmosphere of organized chaos, of innovation and understanding and intelligence unparalleled most anywhere else in this timeline.

He tried not to remember a voice that would never speak again describing each of these gadgets and tools to Stephen in a universe that would never exist.

*Time. There’s still time.*

Stephen dragged his gaze away from the shadows of Stark and dragged his feet from their position on the tile floor. He slipped from the workshop and into the larger space of the barn, stacked high with more conventional things—winter clothes, sleds, mattresses, ornaments and decorations.

The Stones weren’t just lying around, of course. They were secure, tucked into SHIELD-approved containment specific to each, and stowed out of sight and away from the quantum portal. No one wanted to risk what their energy could do to the machine.

It took Stephen less than ten seconds to pinpoint the Time Stone.

He’d recognize that energy anywhere—that curling, burning energy that looped and repeated like smoke. Stephen had breathed that energy for five years in the dark dimension, for fourteen million six-hundred and five timelines, and he knew it and hated it as he did his own soul.

Stephen knelt on the packed dirt floor, extending a hand toward the sleek, silver briefcase. He wasn’t sure how much time he had—‘tomorrow morning’ for a soldier could mean anywhere from four AM to noon—and forced himself to work quickly.

The Cloak fluttered anxiously around him as he let his hand vibrate into its astral form and pushed it through the surface of the briefcase. He carefully controlled the energy signature of his fingers, allowing very specific parts of them to drop into the same vibration as the physical realm. And slowly, tumbler by tumbler, Stephen eased the briefcase open.

It would be arrogant to say the Time Stone recognized him. It was a facet of the multiverse, an incarnation older than dimensions and younger than this moment. It was instantaneous and eternal, a power no living hand should hold.

Stephen picked it up.
Chapter End Notes

Stephen got plans now baby. Half formed awkward ones for phase 1, but plans.

Thanks for reading!
Peter crept back into his room as soon as he’d seen May disappear behind the door of her own suite, his sock-clad feet silent on the tile floor.

“Mr. Loki?” he whispered, peeking into the room.

When there was no answer, Peter frowned and slipped around the door frame as quietly as he could. Letting his eyes adjust, he scanned the nooks and crannies of the area.

It wasn’t hard to spot the god. Loki was sprawled on the windowsill, one leg dangling into the room, with one hand curled around his head and the other laying across his stomach. There was an eerie sort of glow illuminating the fingers of the latter limb, green and ghostly, and a bit of paper peeked out against the leather and pale skin.

And he was snoring, purring almost.

Peter felt a whisper of a smile dust his face, and didn’t bother to try to turn it into something more appropriate. The trickster god looked like an overwhelmed house-cat, beaten and filthy but ever graceful as he slept off an unknown brawl.

Unknown.

What in all hell was going on here? He needed Loki awake, awake and talking, describing whatever crazy situation Peter had gotten himself into this time.

Whatever crazy situation was keeping Spider-Man from doing his job. Peter’d had to hear about the impossibly fast and efficient chain of ATM robberies—starting on the street he’d found Loki —on the news.

People were already asking where Spider-Man had been. Well, Spider-Man would love to know that, too, and what… well, and what was going on. He had hours of the night still left—school was far less important than a time-traveling god in his apartment window, and sleep didn’t even make it on the table. Loki and he could work through the god’s story and get the knots untied before Peter decided what to do next.

But as Peter cast his eyes back to Loki, they fell not on the mystery in his hand, but on the bruises on his face, the grime on his clothes, the tense expression remaining even in sleep. Loki looked bone-weary—no, he looked absolutely ravaged.

“Fuck…” Peter sighed. “I suppose saving the world can wait.”

Reaching up to the top bunk of his bed, Peter found his fuzziest blanket, pulling it awkwardly through the wooden slats. Careful not to move too quickly, he unfolded the thing and padded over to
Loki.

Gripping it by its corners and preparing to spread it over the god, Peter’s eyes caught on that green light again. Nervous of alerting Loki, Peter didn’t get too close, but he leaned forward slightly to peer at what he was holding.

Well, what he was cradling in his grip.

Because he wasn’t really holding it. There was a jewel, glowing with a light and a power that made Peter’s eyes nearly burn, floating a centimeter above the god’s skin, whispering with a voice that grated at Peter’s consciousness.

_You don’t belong here._


He could see where the name came from. Ultimate, eternal, unquantifiable energy pulsed from the gem; Peter couldn’t sense it, but he knew it was there.

It took some effort to turn his gaze away from the Stone, but Peter noticed the slip of crinkled paper beneath it, too. It was folded so he couldn’t read the words, and his fingers itched to ease it out of Loki’s grip and investigate. But he didn’t want risk brushing against that Stone—he didn’t want to get _close_ to that Stone.

So Peter took a couple of steps back, lifted the blanket, and spread it over Loki as evenly as he could.

Almost imperceptibly, Loki wriggled further under it.

Peter snickered.

“Some big-bad villain you are. The God of Mischief—I’m so scared.”

Loki didn’t react: just shifted a bit under the lime green, puffy woolen blanket. The emerald glow peaked through the fabric. Making a face at the god’s unconscious form, Peter backed up to his desk and tapped his fingers on the painted surface.

It was when he went to get his things together for school the next day—on muscle memory, not necessarily because he thought he would be attending—that he realized he’d never gotten his backpack from the alley.

“Oh fuck,” he sighed, running his hands through his curls and flopping backwards onto his bed. “First the robberies, and now this? Loki, dude, you are _decidedly_ inconvenient.”

He glanced back at the god on his windowsill. The blanket had darkened in some places with grime and what had to be blood—Peter wondered how much of it was Loki’s. Every visible inch of him was ratted and tangled and filthy...

“What happened to you?” Peter muttered, tapping his hands against the mattress beside him. What could possibly cut a god down to this?

He was pretty sure this wasn’t in Mr. Stark’s grey area...

Thoughts whizzing, fingers tapping, blood almost pulsing with impatience, Peter forced himself to relax into his mattress. _It won’t do anyone any good to fuss_, he thought. _Get some sleep, you’ll be
And eventually, Peter was shocked to find himself truly exhausted. And eventually, he fell into an uneasy sleep.

That night, Peter dreamed of orange portals and a multicolored gauntlet on a slim, calloused hand.

“So, here’s the plan.”

Loki, now permitted a proper wheeling chair within the small spider’s room, watched the pacing boy with indifference. He flipped his knife by the blade, resisting—very well, may he say—the urge to bury it in some vermin off the street. Preferably of the taller, two-legged variety.

He’d awoken to the sun in his eyes that morning, taken off guard by the blanket that had found its way atop him. Said blanket had immediately gained four stab wounds before Loki had realized he was not being attacked.

A shame.

The spider-child had awoken that morning to Loki shredding the blanket into thin strips and weaving them into something that resembled a bag. He didn’t want to hold the Stone for a single moment longer than necessary—even if it meant sporting an ugly, lime-green, makeshift satchel.

“You know, I do have bags,” the boy had said, sighing as he took in the yarn carnage at Loki’s feet.

“You were asleep,” had been Loki’s reply, by way of explanation.

And now, the boy was laying out a plan of action for the proceeding day, which Loki was trying very hard not to completely tune out. Oh, he understood the importance of plans more than anyone, but as far as he could tell, no one was dying or going into battle or trying to take over the universe. At least not yet.

“I’ll go out, loop around once I get in the subway, and come back in through the window,” Parker said, bouncing on the balls of his feet. Loki wondered if he ever stopped moving. “May will get a call at work that I’m skipping, but she won’t be able to come back until noon or so. That’s a good three hours before my ass is busted.”

Loki raised an eyebrow. “Skipping?”

“School. I’m supposed to go—if I don’t show up, they call my aunt and tell her. I’ll get in trouble with her, but it’s not a big deal.”

Loki thought of his experience with studies and mothers and shivered. “I believe you may be mistaken about that. And what about your friend?”

The spider-child frowned. “Ned? Shit, that’s true… He’ll be pissed too.” Sighing, he ran his hands through his already unruly curls and tugged on them slightly, and Loki could sense the frustration radiating off of him from across the room. “Well, either way, it’s our only option. I’m not leaving you here alone for seven hours, and you can’t come to school with me—”

Loki frowned. “Why not?”
The boy stared at him. “Because… Mr. Loki, everyone wants to kill you.”

“Would I be stupid enough to invade a location in my true form? Have some faith in my abilities, Spider.” Loki grinned, baring his teeth.

Then he reached into his core for the signature of his cells, concentrating on the energy crackling between them, within them. He knew the energy better than anything else in this universe, knew the way it built his structure and his life and his form. With the ease of a practiced master, Loki seized it. The magic twisted in his soul, around his fingers, and then—

A black and emerald serpent lay coiled on the seat of the wheeling chair.

“Holy fuck!” the spider-child yelped, stumbling backward over his own feet and catching himself with inhuman agility.

Loki hissed a laugh, letting his forked tongue play across his fangs.

It had been a while since he’d taken this form, and even longer since he’d retained it for a time. Exploratory, he reared, engaging the superpowered muscles around his spine and feeling his thin vertebrae slide past each other. Craning over to look at his body, Loki curled his whip-thin tail and watched the mint-green diamonds shift across the scales.

Yes, this would do nicely.

“Thoughtsss?” he said, lifting his snout.

“Holy—oh my God..” The boy was stammering, and Loki turned to peer at him, expecting the usual mortal fear.

But there was nothing but delight—pure, unbridled delight—on the boy’s face as he watched Loki’s new body.

Loki drew back, just a bit, surprise sparking in his long form. And a warmth he would never admit.

“How are you doing that?” Peter demanded, kneeling before the chair. “How can you talk?”

“It’sss a mixxx of telepaththhy and ssselective anatomical changesss,” Loki said. He didn’t technically need the hiss, but it amused him, and if he used it exclusively he could fuck with Thor by not using it.

He’d never heard screams as ragged as those Thanos had wrenched from his brother.

Loki shook his head, flicking his tongue and forcing his attention back to the boy before him. “I can accompany you like thisss,” he explained, rearing a bit higher.

“What, do I just… carry you around?”

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“What, do I just… carry you around?”

Indeed.”

A mix of awe, resignation, and overwhelm twisted the boy’s face into a grimace, and Loki hissed another chuckle.

“Okay…” Peter said, still kneeling. Then, under his breath: “snake god in my shirt. Another new one.”

Loki, undeniably amused by this point, stretched himself over the edge of the chair to rest on Peter’s
knee. The boy extended a nervous hand, and Loki threaded himself through the his fingers, enjoying the way his scales slipped and shifted. He was far too large to curl in Peter’s palm, but Loki paused in it for a moment. Then, flicking his tongue against the boy’s skin both to get used to his scent and to freak him out, Loki slithered under Peter’s cuff and up his arm.

“Hhhuuuuurrrgggf,” Peter spluttered as Loki folded himself up his sleeve and peeked out through his collar. “This is not my area. This is so not my area…”

“You’ve never sssmuggled creaturesss into classsesss before?” Loki wondered, genuinely curious and slightly surprised.

“No?”

“Not even to get out of edicate?”

The spider-boy shrugged, and Loki almost slipped from his shoulder. “We don’t have edicate classes. At Midtown Science and Tech, at least.”

Loki flicked his tongue. Perhaps Midgard wasn’t as bad as he’d thought.

A buzz shuddered up Peter’s form, and Loki instantly tensed, ready to strike at the unseen threat. But the boy just reached carelessly into his pocket and pulled out his phone—Loki had to assume the vibration had come from it.

“Shit, Ned’s waiting outside. He’s expecting to walk with me; we always walk on Tuesdays.”

Loki looked back at the chair and hissed abruptly, “bag.”

“What?”

“Take the bag. The Ssstone is in it—we need to keep it with usss at all timesss,” he explained, starting to drop down the boy’s other sleeve.

“Oh—frick that tickles. Just gimme a second.” With cautious hands, Peter plucked up the makeshift satchel, holding it awkwardly between two fingers.

“It won’t hurt you,” Loki said. At least, I think it won’t.

“So I just… put it in my bag or something?”

“Sssure.” Just stick the most powerful object in the universe in a filthy backpack. A fine, foolproof plan. Loki rolled his serpentine eyes.

Peter stumbled from the room and entered a new one, which shone with white stone and silver metal and was scattered with wicked-looking devices. Loki figured it was probably a kitchen—he’d released as many ravens as he could find into the classroom on that day of Midgardian Culture. Which had only been five ravens, because Huginn and Muninn had been uncooperative.

Peter, still holding the Stone’s satchel, fumbled in one of the cabinets, removing a circular lump of bread and threading it over his finger—it had a hole in the middle. Loki cocked his head, wondering both at the function of the torus shape and why the usually agile boy was being so clumsy.

“Are you always this cold?” Peter muttered, making his way out of the kitchen.

“I’ll warm up with your body heat.” It was actually quite comfortable beneath the boy’s shirt, and the instincts of Loki’s new cold-blooded form had him laying claim to it.
“Fantastic. Just fantastic!” The spider-child murmured under his breath, then added again, “A snake god in my shirt.”

“I’m not the god of ssnakesss. I’m ssimply taking the form of one.”

“Nuance.”

Peter knelt next to a backpack, carefully maneuvering the smallest zipper-pocket open and dropping the satchel into it as quickly as he could. He stood, hooking the straps of the backpack over his wrist.

He said, “so, if this works, you can explain this whole time-travel ‘not-my-past-your-past thing’ while I’m at school and we can have whatever the fuck is going on figured out by third period, hopefully.”

“It may take longer,” Loki warned. “As I ssaid; long ssstory.”

Peter nodded and slung the backpack over his shoulders. It bounced, looking light, and Loki narrowed his eyes and focused on the grey and brown patterns of the device.

“That knapsack seemssss suussspiciously empty of mosssst objectssss necessssssary for ssstudies,” he pointed out, decreasing his hiss a little as to be a bit more understandable.

Peter blushed, and Loki could feel the heat change of his skin.

“Yeah, uh, well…”

Chapter End Notes

Don't ever put a snake in your shirt, even if it's a shape-shifted Asgardian or a nonpoisonous guy you found in your porch. It's not comfortable and neither you nor the creature will be happy afterwards.

*Cough cough* not that I've ever put a snake in my shirt. Of course, of course. *cough cough*

ANYWAY thanks for reading! Check in next time for Loki and Peter FINALLY having that talk about what in the world is going on... Drop me a kudos or a comment, and I'll see you soon!
As it turned out, getting Loki talking during class was harder than Peter anticipated. Not because of the teachers, no; it was hard because he’d forgotten to factor in the variable of an excited, curious Ned Leeds.

But eventually, between political science and gym came the usually boringly but now blissfully Ned-free class of math. Peter slid into his chair and let his head thump down onto the desk before him, letting out a strangled groan. The lump beneath his shirt shifted; he still wasn’t used to that.

Was he supposed to be used to that?

Peter could feel every twitch of Loki’s scales, the beat of his serpentine heart, even the air displacement from his flicking tongue against his enhanced skin, and it was thoroughly unnerving. And distracting—which didn’t mix well with trying to take notes and answer Ned’s questions.

“Okay,” Peter muttered, sitting up. Loki adjusted to his new position and Peter shivered. “Let’s get to this, then. What are you doing here?”

“I’m here to save the universsse,” Loki replied instantly.

“Is this a new occupation or…”

Loki hissed, but stopped when Peter grinned.

“I have sssaved Asgard a debatable total of three timesss. A non-debatable total of one. No, thisss is not a ‘new occupation.’”

Peter raised his hands slightly in surrender, keeping an eye on his teacher as she stepped up to the board. “I was just messing with you, don’t get your tail in a knot.”

“Hm. Might we return to the sssubject at hand?”

Peter nodded. “Okay, yeah. What are you here to save the world from?”

The serpent shifted, and if Peter didn’t know better he would have thought the god had shivered. “An alien—a phsssychothic Titan named Thanoss. He had begun hisss conquessst to acquire all six Infinity Stonesss when I left my time-stream and ended up here.”

“So…” Peter frowned, tapping his pencil on the notebook in front of him. “He was too powerful to even try to fight?”

A huff—how the snake even managed to huff was beyond Peter, but the sound puffed against his shirt. “Apparently. Not that that was going to ssstop me, mind you.”

Peter rolled his eyes as subtly as he could. “Of course.”
“But after Heimdall used his last strength to send Banner back to Earth—”

“Wait, wait,” Peter gasped, trying to keep his voice low. “Hulk was there?”

“Yesss? It’sss 2016 now, correct? I believe he has been missssing in Midgard for almossst a year now.”

“But he was on Asgard?”

“Not really. We found him on Ssakaar.”

“Where?”

“A refusssse planet. That is not particularly important for why I am here, however,” Loki said pointedly.

Peter nodded, flicking his eyes to his teacher and trying to look like he was paying attention. “Sorry, continue.”

“I wasss moments from confronting Thanosss when the wizard appeared. He jussst stepped out of thin air, holding an Infinity Ssstone in his hand.” Peter felt the snake shake his head. “Idiot sssorcerer. The Mad Titan was mere meters away—all he would have had to do was look up and he’d have felt the presssence of another Ssstone.”

“How many are there?” Peter asked quietly.

“Six. Spacce, Mind, Reality, Ssoul, Power, and Time. That is the one the wizard arrived with, and what made it possible for him to arrive at all.”

“This wizard was from the future, too?”

“Yesss. Apparently, the future where Thanosss was dead and the universe intact, but at a cost he couldn’t tolerate.”

Peter hummed, and the vibration shifted the snake on his collarbone. “And he gave you the… Time Ssstone, was it?”

“Indeed.”

“And he sent you back in time to do what? You said you couldn’t change the past, but I’m pretty sure I didn’t meet you in whatever universe you came from—so you’re changing something.”

“By encountering you, I have created an alternate universsse,” Loki said.

Peter gaped.

“You’ve… shoved me into an alternate universe?”

“I didn’t have a choicce, ” hissed Loki, and Peter felt him tense against his skin. “I’m ssstuck in thisss alternate universsse too. Do you think I wanted to abandon my people? My brother—” Loki cut himself off.

For a long moment, there was only silence between them, the words of Peter’s math teacher flickering unheard through the classroom. Peter’s fingers twitched, almost as if he might reach up to stroke the serpent beneath his shirt in the only semblance of comfort that he could think to give.
Because there had been grief in Loki’s words.

“So…” Peter began hesitantly.

Loki continued before he could say anything else. “So by merely existing during this moment, I have changed the future. But I cannot have done so, else I never come back in the first place.”

“A paradox,” Peter murmured. “You go back in time to change the thing that made you go back in time. And what? The universe tries to heal that by creating an alternate timeline?”

“Yes.”

Peter frowned. “But didn’t the wizard go back in time? Didn’t he remove you from your timeline? That would have changed the past and created a new universe—we’re two universes split from where we’re supposed to be!”

You don’t belong here.

But the serpent just sighed—somehow. “Not necessarily.”

“What?”

“That’s why it had to be me.”

Peter craned his neck to try and look at Loki, glimpsing his slim form through the collar-gap of his shirt. “What?”

“I was the only one who could be removed from the timeline without creating an alternate universes from that action,” Loki said. “Because…”

Peter waited, trying to clamp down the nervous energy in his gut.

“Because I died. Thanos strangled me—or so they all thought. But it was possible—and possible is all the timeline needs—that he simply killed a figment of my magic. That it was all a trick.”

“Oh.” Peter swallowed. He looked back at his lecturing teacher, who hadn’t yet noticed his quiet whispering, and scribbled a couple of random words on his notebook. “So this wizard could talk to you, give you the Stone, and force you back in time without ever changing his own universe?”

“Correct.”

“So he either completely fucked you over or saved your life.”

“Both,” sighed Loki. “And I’m going to kill him for it.”

“Don’t do that. Murder is bad.”

“So I’ve been told.”

Peter tried to staunch a grin before it could grow too prominent. “Let me get this straight,” he said. “A crazy alien was trying to get these six super powerful gem things for reasons. You were about to go confront him when this wizard—hey, did he have a name?”

“Doctor Strange was the one he gave.”

“But he didn’t give you his actual name? That’s unhelpful. Anyway, the wizard shows up from the future with another one of said super powerful gem things. He off-loads the Stone onto you and you
go back in time—after pretending to die—and meet me. By meeting me, you create an alternate
universe in which we are all trapped.”

“You are correct.”

“And somehow, splitting the universe is going to help save it?”

Peter felt his shirt shift where Loki was nodding. “If we can beat Thanosss in this universe—”

“How?” Peter demanded in a low whisper. “Where do we even start?”

“I…” Loki hesitated, then plowed on. “I have a lissst.”

Peter cocked his head. “A list?”

“Of the people who are going to be important to the battle. Heroesss—or, I assume they’re heroes—
who we can’t win thisss without. I know what the Infinity Ssstones are, and I know how to ssstart
looking for them…”

Peter frowned deeper. “That’s gonna be hard. The Avengers are split; I don’t know if you knew
that.”

“There’s more herosss than just your ‘Avengersss’—” Loki paused. “What?”

“The Civil War?”

Loki didn’t answer, and Peter took that as a what the fuck?

“So, abbreviated version is that Mr. Stark supported the Sokovia Accords, which are the United
Kingdom’s regulations for the responsibilities of superheros, and Captain America was like ‘nah we
ain’t doin’ that’ and so they had this big disagreement and now Captain America and company are
war criminals and nobody knows where they are.”

“Of courssse ,” Loki hissed. “Like thisss wasn’t hard enough.”

Peter shrugged. “No, no, it’s good. Saving the world from a psychotic alien and we’ve got a piece of
paper. And a rock. Okay, yeah, you’re right; that’s not much.” Peter’s pencil started tapping against
his notebook again: a rhythm of threes.

“But if we beat… Thanos… here, then how will that help the other universe? We’re trapped here,
aren’t we?” Peter wondered.

“Well, yesss,” Loki said. “But we can merge the divergent timelinesss together. Apparently.”

Peter spluttered a disbelieving laugh, and his teacher pivoted sharply to glare at him. Peter turned the
chuckle into a cough, hoping it looked at least somewhat convincing.

When the woman’s evil eye had swept off of him, Peter shifted to peer at Loki indignantly. “What?
All of this—the time-travel, the aliens, the magic—I can understand. But that? That’s actually
impossible. The amount of energy it would take, by anyone’s multiversal theories, is unheard of. No,
it’s unquantifiable. And how could you know they’d even merge? Universes aren’t like ropes; you
can’t just stitch them together through a thousand layers of time and reality and space and whatever.
Is this universe even connected to the other? When would we even merge back? How would we all
remember? Which events would be remembered? Which events would stay the same? What would
happe—”
Peter broke off.

At some point, he’d forgotten to be quiet.

And at some point, everyone in the classroom had turned to stare at him.

“Something to say, Mr. Parker?” said the professor, half her mouth quirked up and the corresponding eyebrow raised. She looked more amused than annoyed—and Peter was more mortified than upset.

“Uh—” he stammered, all articulation gone as the pressure of eyes bored into him. “I was just, uh, thinking about time-travel? Like, mechanically. I don’t think it’d work like Back to the Future...”

Silence.

Peter coughed. “Like… alternate universes seem more likely? And I was just wondering how they’d… uh… interact… with each other. Er.”

Flash muttered something under his breath. Peter’s enhanced hearing picked up the barbed, condescending tone easily, and he blushed even harder.

“Articulate,” Loki commented.

Peter almost hissed at him to shut up, but caught himself at the last minute.

The teacher took mercy on him, turning back to the board and saying, “while differentials are essential to most time-travel theories, our exponential growth model is not quite relevant to your thoughts, Mr. Parker.”

Peter nodded, pointedly looking at his notebook.

With only one more look in his direction, his professor launched back into lecture, and Peter took a deep breath and waited for his adrenaline to wear off. He figured he should attempt to alleviate suspicion—his classmates were still looking at him—and stared unseeingly, but silently, at the board as the class continued.

He only lasted five minutes.

“Anyway,” he said. “It’s impossible.”

“It’sss not impossible.”

“It is.”

“The ssorcerer wouldn’t have sent me here, wouldn’t have relied on me, of all people, if it wasssn’t possible.” Loki’s voice was cold.

“Maybe your sorcerer didn’t get through the alien fight scott-free?” Peter suggested. “And he’s just legitimately crazy?”

“No.”

Peter sighed, rubbing his face with his hands. Loki hissed a complaint as he slipped against Peter’s torso, wrapping tighter around his shoulder and neck to keep ahold.

Peter thought he’d been a remarkably good sport so far. He’d brought a god home, had his secret identity discovered by his best friend, slept with a knife-wielding murderer in his room, and brought
the same knife-wielding murderer to school under his shirt. He had an Infinity Stone in his backpack and a chain of mysterious robberies people were blaming him for not stopping. He could still hear a voice—the Infinity Stone? This fucking alternate universe that he was trapped in?—telling him that he didn’t belong ‘here.’

And he wasn’t allowed to tell Mr. Stark.

He’d never wanted to speak to the man as much as he did at that moment, a snake in his shirt and his face buried in his hands.

“Fuck everything…” Peter muttered.

“Indeed,” replied Loki, softly.

Chapter End Notes

This is half an explanation, I think? This some of the ‘what happened’; the mechanics of how it happened will be explained progressively as Stephen gets his groove on. :)

Anyway! Thanks for reading! Hope you enjoyed this chapter, and I'll see you next time for some more shenanigans!
Incarnation of Evil

Chapter Notes

This has quickly become one of my favorite chapters so far... Hope you enjoy it as much as I did lol!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Earth-200004: October 2016

“It’s gym class, Mr. Loki. You can’t try to hang onto me while I’m running around the room like an idiot for an hour; my shirt isn’t nearly loose enough to cover you, and it’s going to be uncomfortable for both of us.”

Midgardian logic. Loki fought valiantly against its lies, but ended up zipped into a backpack against the edge of a noisy, sweaty room anyway.

Dark. And cold. Loki’s serpentine form didn’t appreciate the sharp change from the warmth of Peter’s shoulders to the gloomy environment of his empty backpack. And he couldn’t feel the boy’s chest rising and falling as he breathed, couldn’t hear his mumbled curses or half-formed ideas.

He didn’t miss them, but the cave felt empty without his newfound minion.

Bored and irritated, Loki reared, stretching his long neck up toward the pinpricks of light he could see through the zipper. He mashed his snout against them, threading his tongue through and smelling the air outside. He could taste Peter on the plastic. Loki smacked his jaw, trying to clear the pungence out of his snout, and folded himself back down to the base of the backpack.

He wasn’t really trapped; it’d be easier than conjuring to get himself out. It was unclear why Peter had even zipped the bag in the first place—a Midgardian muscle memory, perhaps?

Either way, Loki didn’t have to feel claustrophobic. He supposed it didn’t even need to be dark; he could shove zipper open a few more inches for illumination if he needed.

But he didn’t need it. The dark was fine—better than fine. He was the God of Mischief, this was his domain.

His domain. Where every time he turned around, some hateful part of his subconscious thought he was going to feel Thanos take him by the throat. See a purple glow flare through the veins on Thor’s head and turn his breaths to screams.

His domain.

Loki hissed, hating the weakness he was submitting to, and slithered over to the edge of the zipper track. It took almost no effort to wriggle the dangling bit of plastic up a centimeter or two. Loki sniffed at the light, then shoved his head completely through the hole and looked around.
He was atop a structure resembling a series of benches with a view of practically the entire room. Slitted pupils narrowing, he scanned the throng of students for any sign of the two he recognized. The Midgardians had divided into pairs, and Loki figured if he found one he’d find the other.

Indeed, there they were, the closest set to the bench-contraption Loki roosted upon. Ned held Peter’s ankles as the latter folded himself repeatedly to his knees. Loki cocked his head, unnerved by the somewhat ridiculous-looking ritual, but most everyone in the room wore the same confused expression, so Loki dismissed it as just another piece of evidence toward the lunacy of the adult human.

The two looked like they were talking, and a niggling curiosity as to what their words were was all the reason Loki needed to slide out of the backpack and begin to make his way down the stairs of the bench-thing. It was steel—cold and rough against his scales.

When he reached the lower tiers of the benches, he was nearly trod on by an excitable group of females, and ended up flipping beneath the benches to wrap around the support rods beneath. But he could hear the discussions now, amusing as they were.

Ned sounded like he was in the middle of a tirade. “... there'd be screens around me, and I could swivel around because I’d be your guy in the chair!”

“I don’t need a guy in the chair,” Peter sighed, sounding exhausted. Loki wondered if he got any credit for causing that, or if it was just the stress of extroverting.

Heavy treading alerted Loki before the boots came into view, and he shrank tighter around the rods beneath the benches as a pair of legs blocked his view of the spider-children. “Looking good, Parker,” said a voice that seemed to belong to them, before the behemoth moved away.

Ned chuckled, and Loki flicked his tongue at the retreating form.

To Loki’s left, another conversation had begun. “Now see, for me,” came one voice, sounding thoughtful. “It’d be F Thor, marry Iron Man, and kill Hulk.”

Loki snorted, losing his grip on the underside of his bench and slapping onto the tile floor of the gym. Was this what Midgardians talked about? No wonder Thor was so fond of them—though Loki didn’t hear his own name on that list.

If someone could kill Hulk, he’d be surprised—

Well, not anymore.

Loki’s amusement soured, and he dropped his head back to the floor, slithering a little further beneath the bench contraption.

“What about the Spider-Man?” came another voice. Loki looked up, and he saw Peter do the same out of the corner of his serpentine eye.

“It’s just Spider-Man,” laughed the first voice.

Peter frowned, and Loki stifled another snort.

But the other girl continued, sounding excited. “Did you see the bank security cam on YouTube? He fought off four guys.”

Loki flicked his tail. The boy could handle more than that—and if he couldn’t, he would by the time
Loki had finished with him.

“What about that ATM stuff, though?” came a third voice. “What if something happened to him?”

The second girl, the one Peter was making pretty obvious googly-eyes at, shrugged. “I bet he’s after them right now. I mean, that’s his job description, right? Friendly neighborhood Spider-Man.”

Loki scoffed.

The first girl laughed, saying, “Oh my God, she’s crushing on Spider-Man.”

Through a haze of laughter, googly-eyes shrugged and said, “kind of.”

“Gross. He’s probably, like, thirty.”

“You don’t know what he looks like. Like, what if he's seriously burned?” That from the third girl, who seemed to be the most sensible of them.

“I wouldn’t care,” googly-eyes said, “I would still love him for the person he is on the inside.”

When Ned suddenly straightened up, his eyes fixed on the trio on the bench, Loki knew things were about to go South very quickly.

“No, I don’t,” he stuttered, shrinking beneath the accusatory gazes. “No. I... I mean...”

Ned, still being extraordinarily helpful, clarified, “they’re friends.”

Loki would have face-palmed if he had palms. Or a face.

The boy, the one who’d been throwing barbed comments at Peter all day—Flash—slid into Loki’s frame of vision with a smirk of a chuckle. “Yeah, like Coach Wilson and Captain America are friends.”

There was a smattering of laughter and Loki hissed, his eyes narrowing.

Peter desperately tried to find his voice again. “I’ve met him. Yeah. A couple times? But it’s, um... through the, uh, Stark internship...”

An internship? Right, that was the boy’s cover for his superhero work. Loki slithered forward a bit more, trying to get a better view of Peter and Flash’s movements and their faces, if he was lucky.

Flash looked decidedly unamused.

“I’m not really supposed to talk about it,” Peter growled through clenched teeth, glaring pointedly at Ned.
He looks nervous, Loki observed. Not just natural, embarrassed agitation, but true anxiousness. Almost fear.

How old was Peter?

Not an hour ago, Loki had cracked open everything Peter’d thought about the universe. He’d hollowed the boy out and overfilled him with information neither of them knew what to do with. Not an hour ago, Loki had told him the world was ending.

And now Peter’s own little world was collapsing, too.


The object of Peter’s googly-eyes nodded, seemingly oblivious to tension between the boys. “Yeah, I'm having people over tonight. You're more than welcome to come.”

Peter’s voice came out higher and a bit breathy. “You’re… having a party?”

Flash advanced again, and Loki noticed the way the kid’s jugular popped prominently when he lifted his chin like that. “Yeah, it's gonna be dope. You should totally invite your personal friend Spider-Man.”

“It's okay,” said Liz, and Loki was almost grateful, until: “I know Peter's way too busy for parties anyway, so…”

Could they not see the conflict on Peter’s face? Could they not see the way his hands had automatically reached to shoot webbing? Could they not see the fear—because Peter was too busy for parties. And Loki could only take partial credit for that.

“Come on. He'll be there. Right, Parker?”

Flash lifted a hand for a purpose Loki’s mind filled in for him, and the already on-edge Peter Parker cringed away.

Enough.

In half a second, Loki was out from beneath the benches and across the room, rearing and hissing with a touch of magic in his voice. The snarl carried, deafening in the large room, and Flash scrambled backward before his hand made contact on Peter’s shoulder.

A shriek echoed Loki’s hiss, breaking the spell of his sudden arrival. He didn’t know who it came from, and he hardly cared.

Chaos—sweet and satisfying and utterly contagious—exploded through the room as Loki flared the hood his snake form hadn’t had until moments ago. His pupils were mere slivers within emerald eyes, and Loki drew on years of experience appearing as the genuine incarnation of evil as he swayed, his hiss continuing.

“Holy fuck—” Flash yelped. Loki struck the air before him, relishing the terrified screech that tore into the air.

“What’s going on here?” The heavy, thudding footsteps again, and Loki turned his head to see the man—Coach Wilson—stagger to a halt as he saw him. “Holy—what sort of snake is that—Peter, get back!” Then, louder: “Everyone stay calm!”
But Loki didn’t want everyone calm. He wanted them running, he wanted them fearful, and he wanted them away.

With another tingle of magic, the illusion of venom gathered on Loki’s fangs. He didn’t care if it was anatomically inaccurate; it was dramatic and it got the job done.

“Hey!” Peter hissed behind him. “What are you doing?”

Loki turned, a smirk drawing his mouth wide as his tongue flicked over his fangs. “I thought you’d prefer a break from the center of attention?” he said around the teeth.

“But—”

“He wass going to ssstrike you,” Loki spat, whipping his head back toward Flash.

Peter was quiet for a moment, before softly clarifying, “he was only going to put his hand on my shoulder, Mr. Loki.”

Loki paused. “Oh? Well, no matter. Thisss isss better than that ssstupid backpack anyway.”

Part of Peter wanted to sprint from the room and never come back, never look at his overwhelming, inconsiderate classmates again. And the other part of Peter watched them all scatter to the edges of a room and wanted to laugh.

Loki would have been absolutely terrifying if any of that hissing aggression had been directed at Peter. As it was, it was directed for him, and Peter had never grinned so wide.

Unnecessarily, excessively, Loki—villain, criminal, God of Trickery who appeared in the nightmares of children— was rearing and spitting and defending him.

“Peter!”

Ned was grabbing his arm, pulling him back, and Liz had scrambled up on top of the bleachers on the other side of the curling snake. Michelle had stood from her spot on the wall, actually migrating a bit closer to the snake, her head cocked in interest.

Peter considered pulling away from his friend, but there was no reason to bring more suspicion to himself. So he allowed Ned to tug him away from Loki.

Coach Wilson was circling the snake in a wide berth, looking utterly at a loss for what to do. Peter could see Loki’s pleased smirk from across the room.

“Did you see?” Ned was saying. “It just—appeared out of nowhere! You’re lucky it went for Flash and not you. Although you do have experience with venomous bites… Oh! Maybe the snake’s radioactive, too!”

Peter grinned, any irritation at his friend disappearing. “Snake-Man. Spider-Man’s eternal nemesis. Thanks for that, by the way.”

“Really?”

“I was being sarcastic.”
Ned punched his shoulder—well, tried to. His gaze was still fixed on Loki, so the friendly blow missed. “C’mon, dude. I was doing you a favor! Didn’t you hear; Liz has a crush on you!”

Peter took a step back, eyes widening.

Ned nodded pointedly.

“Shit… you’re right!”

“Uh-huh. But you would have totally ruined your chances if the snake hadn’t come and rescued you.” Ned gesture wildly at Loki, who was now zipping after Coach Wilson. “So I guess it did some good, after all!”

Peter watched a snake chase his coach around the gym floor and grinned. “Yeah, he said. “Some good after all.”

Loki could have easily caught the man. He probably could have easily caught everyone in the room, and killed them without blinking. But Peter thought that perhaps that wasn’t what the God of Mischief preferred.

Maybe, instead, he preferred to strike inches from skin, wink at overwhelmed boys through serpentine eyes, and listen to the chaos a snake could cause.

By the time animal control arrived, Loki was long since curled beneath a teenager’s shirt. But he was still laughing.

Chapter End Notes

Loki likes him some chaos.

Thanks for reading! Drop me some feedback to make my day, and I'll see you soon!
The Time Stone drifted slightly above Stephen’s shaking fingers as he lifted it from its niche in the briefcase. Rocking back onto his heels, he fumbled with the glimmering jewel, trying to remember how to hold it, how to ignore its oily intoxication of power, how to breathe through his hatred of it.

The things this Stone had done to him… and the things it had done for him. Stephen didn’t know what to think of it anymore, or what to remember about it. The deaths it forced on him, or the lives it saved? The screams and blood and pain that haunted his every moment, or the wondrous capabilities it had provided him?

All. None.

“Hello, old friend,” Stephen murmured, sliding a knee beneath him to fold into a more comfortable position. “It’s been a long time.”

The Stone pulsed with a thousand voices and a million silences. Stephen turned it over in his palm, coughing through the cloying power wrapping around him.

He’d never held the Stone without the protection of the Eye, before. Or at least, not for long. There’d been a moment when he’d relocated the Stone into his transcendental pocket universe on the donut spaceship five years ago that he’d brushed it, and a few seconds in a few futures, but that was all.

“One more favor,” Stephen said, cupping his other hand over the Stone. He took a breath—a long draw of the Earth’s air, of the oil and grease scent of the Stark’s barn.

And then Stephen Strange closed his eyes and dived into the emerald depths of Time.

A curtain, a blanket, a tapestry, woven of life and light and death and dark and purpose and intention existed in the nothingness. It did not float, nor did it drape, as that would imply space or sight. No, the Tapestry was simply there, just as he was simply there.

He watched the undulation of the curtain through a silver of perception—he could not sense any wider else the majesty of the Tapestry tear him apart.

He had a mission, here, between these threads of Everything. Slowly, curiously, cautiously, he
moved closer to the emerald threads.

They groped at him with phantom fingers he couldn’t feel, roared with silent voices he couldn’t hear. Like a creature emerging from the depths of Earth’s sea, peering with milky eyes through alien kelp and towards glimmering colors never before seen, he wove through the Tapestry. He perceived each thread with a thousand squinting gazes.

Each told a story, a story of all and any kind. He read of stars burning for eons, exploding and fusing and birthing the source of all things in the universe. He read of minds bursting into life for a single moment, living to their fullest for mere hours, mere minutes. He read of the cycle of a stone as it tumbled through Earth and space. He read of life and stone and plant and ecosystem and land and world. He read of time.

The maze of threads ensnared him, swallowing him. He drifted through the Nothingness, through the Existence, guided by an intuition he couldn’t place. He had a mission, a purpose—he was here for something.

The labyrinth of Time drew him deeper, drew him further. The emerald threads became deeper, longer, darker. They told stories of sentience—stories of people, who remembered and felt. Who created a history.

These strands were harder to pass through, as they were wound and woven through each other in intricate and inseparable relationships. He shoved himself through their coils, fluttering between them with grunting effort, but never touching. It’d be an invasion to touch them, he knew, a betrayal of trust and the laws of nature.

He’d had sworn an oath to those, once. Never. Always. Someday.

Not that he was doing a very good job keeping that oath.

Not that he was doing a very good job doing anything, lately.

At the thought, the Tapestry crowded a little closer, roared a little louder, shone a little brighter.

Stay with us, the threads sung. This is where you belong, where everything belongs.

He looked behind himself, just for a moment, watching his own thread curl away into the nothingness. To weave himself within the Tapestry, to remain here forever and for no longer… it was inviting.

But he had a mission. A mission he intended to complete.

So with a flutter of a thousand iridescent wings, he shook off the song of the Tapestry and kept moving, sorting through the threads as they became ever-more complicated.

It was blinding, when he found the Six.

The entire Tapestry was blinding, but this was the Center, and he knew there had never been a place of such concentrated power. There never would be. This was the multiverse, right here in front of him, woven into six thick, glimmering strands of the Tapestry.

As he forced himself closer, he knew he was no longer in the Tapestry, however. The threads had fallen away, fallen back, as the Six came into being.

They were life, they were death, they were the cycle and the fight and the knowledge and the world.
And they were his mission.

Slowly, cautiously, haltingly, he moved next to one of the trunks of the multiverse, pulsing emerald and extending throughout the whole of the Tapestry.

As if recognizing him, as if knowing he was Of a Different World, the green of the Six undulated toward him. Lazy, lethargic, it called to him—it had all the time in the world, after all.

With a limb made of dozens of vibrant butterflies, he seized the strand.

A being brought it to the Earth, at the planet’s birth.

The being had tried to use it, to harness it to her will, and found more than just power within its depths. She’d found salvation, damnation, Infinity.

So she’d cast it away, knowing she was unworthy of its might—and it had fallen to rest against the smoking, burning land of the Earth.

No, not this. Too soon.

He kept searching.

The first words it heard were those of a goat herder, in a language long since lost.

She’d dug it from the ground on a stroke of fate. Its glow mingled with the sunlight of the juvenile Earth until it outshone it, brighter than the sky and brighter than fate. It was fate.

It had killed that young, curious coat herder, for it hadn’t understood the fragility of life yet. It hadn’t realized how easily its power tore them apart.

Nothing ever touched it again.

To protect them.

Later. Much later, he needed millennium later.

The butterflies retreated, then warped again, long in the future.

It had never been handled by someone quite so… brave, before.

Or perhaps stupid.
The man wrapped its power about scarred, shaking hands and pulled, demanding something it was all too eager to give. Time flowed like liquid gold, pooling in the cracks of this universe and bending to the man’s will.

He’d never held it before.

Perhaps he was not stupid. Perhaps he was simply inexperienced.

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Hm. Close.

Well, relatively. In the scale of this universe, he was moments away. That man using the Stone was just one of thousands who had and will brush its power. He was the blink of an eye, the single flutter of a butterfly’s wing.

And he had a mission.

---

It felt the call of its fellows for the first time since the birth of the universe.

Four of its brothers, so close, a mere hairsbreadth from the distance they usually existed—it vibrated with the aura of imperceptible power between them.

The world was like a rubber-band. And they were about to snap it.

Its doctor held it between forefinger and thumb. He’d held it like this before, in looping universes tucked into crevices of the timeline, but it was still unusual. Usually, its doctor wore it against his chest as it peered through the lids of the Eye.

Its power pulsed with the unconscious need to weave magic, to bend universes, to pull lives and to snap them. So when its doctor’s shaking hands spread wide, sending it hurling into space, its power clutched at him. It tried to control him, tried to order him, but the man’s will kept it curling through the dimension—

Until it was caught again.

By new hands. Different hands. Hands with the strength of planets and the resolve of time, gripping it in gold and uru, uniting it with its siblings.

Everything was power and reality and soul and space and time, and the universe was fraying at the seems as the crackle of their united location sent tremors into the very fabric of existence.

The rubber-band was about to snap.

---

He knew those hands, too.

But he knew them as enormous and powerful and controlling, knew the way they felt around his throat and against his form. Knew how easy it was for them to break bones, pierce bodies, drive magic from places it shouldn’t belong.
Butterflies shivered, flapping their iridescent wings defensively. But he wasn’t done yet; he was closer. Just moments from this point, really.

He kept searching.

They were all there.

All together, still humming with power despite the enormous explosion of energy they’d released moments, weeks, years ago. Time was nothing to them, wrapped up together in the Titan-hand.

But not a god-hand. They’d been held by gods, and this was not one of them.

They yearned to create, to destroy, to cause havoc in this world. The energy built up inside them was so much greater than the rest of the universe, and it itched to be equalized. It was only natural, after all.

The equilibrium of chaos.

It happened in a mere moment. The order of the Titan, channeled through their energy, turned them on each other. Destroy, he demanded. Destroy.

They were all too happy to oblige.

Power cascaded into the dimension, viciously clawing at the forms of the others, at their physical manifestations. To free the energy within. To equalize the universe. Destroy, destroy, destroy—

There.

Every butterfly snapped its wings open.

There was an order. Another order, in a voice it recognized.

Destroy. Jump.

The order came from somewhere else, through something else. But time didn’t matter to it—it was time, and it had all of it in the universe.

Its siblings were weak, now. Nothing but the dregs of the universal power, nothing but moment-to-moment energy left over from the dawn of the dimension.

Not it. It was reborn every moment, its power refilled with each incarnation. It was forever, and it couldn’t be broken.

But it could do the breaking.
This was working, he was doing it—the relic and the tome hadn’t lied.

There was hope. Hope, and time. Eternal, everlasting time.

Power wreathed it, pouring from the shards of its siblings, joining the song of the universe. The everlasting song that it conducted. Under its concentrated assault, its siblings exploded into nothingness, sending tidal waves of energy rippling through reality, through the Titan that held them.

The universe wobbled, destabilized as the supports disintegrated.

But its power wasn’t yet exhausted, would never be exhausted, and it seized the dimension by its throat and forced it into stability, into continuation.

FREE, it told it, LIVE.

And the universe did.

Now. Come on, now.

His first order had been followed, but everything hinged on the next one.

Everything.

It was Time, it existed everywhere and nowhere. It could linger in this moment for eternity, or leave, skipping thousands of moments to come and appearing elsewhere.

Jump.

The order was still coming, still pleading, from somewhere in the future.

Or from a nanometer away, for all it mattered to it.

Only a blink of power was required for it to slide out of the timeline. The Titan would never know, thinking it gone with the others.

It splashed back into the universe directly When it desired. Time was only what it desired, anyway. But it wanted something familiar, wanted the promise of more use, so it fizzled back into existence somewhere it knew.

Its doctor’s hands still shook.

He broke away from the strand, butterflies flurrying with excitement and exhaustion.
He’d done it.

The timeline was still intact—he hadn’t truly changed anything. The Stone would go back with the Soldier, healing a split before it began, and continue on until the Titan destroyed the Stones.

All but one.

And now he had a tool, a possibility, a hope—time was no longer the enemy in this half-formed, two-thirds understood, entirely crazy idea of his. Time knew him, time would work with him; and apparently, as he’d seen within the thread, time remembered him.

He drifted backward into the Nothingness, sending a shimmer of vibrant life through the Tapestry. The threads wound around him, tight and whispering, and he forced himself to keep his concentration. The labyrinth of the Tapestry still called to him; he wasn’t out yet.

As he swum, winding between the pillars of Time, he let himself hear the calls of the strands. He let himself identify their voices, their words.

He let himself recognize them.

And it was all the harder, now, to push his existence forward, to unwind himself from the alluring patterns of the Tapestry and find his way back to the physical. The threads were no longer tools, no longer just memories. As their voices tumbled through his consciousness, disturbing the wings of the butterflies, he heard stories, truths, friends.

He heard secrets.

He kept himself close, bundled up into something infinitesimal, both yearning to and terrified of touching the threads around him. The Tapestry was thinning, marking the edge of conscious time, becoming individual and eternal as he reached the edge of the universe.

And began to hear new voices.

“Strange!”

Stephen snapped back into his body with a gasp, the sensation of physical perception slamming against him with unforgiving force. His breath shuddered through his teeth, one weak hand clenched around the other’s wrist as it held the Infinity Stone a mere hairsbreadth from his bare skin. Sight drifted back in splotches as his vision faded in and out, in and out.

“Strange, what the hell are you doing?”

That was Captain Rogers, his exhausted mind hypothesized. His quest must have taken longer than he’d thought.

Stephen convulsed over his hands and hacked up a turquoise butterfly, its wings light against his teeth.

Rogers’ irate voice paused for a blissful moment as the butterfly circled up into the rafters of the barn. Achingly, Stephen relaxed his fist, his hands shaking ever-harder. The Time Stone dropped out of his grip and thumped against the ground between his knees, leaving a tiny crater in the dirt.

“What did you do?” Rogers demanded, kneeling next to Stephen. His voice was low and dangerous
—terrified.

Stephen smiled.

“What did you do?”

Forcing his eyes open again, Stephen braced his hands on his knees and looked toward the Captain. “A stabilizing spell,” he lied easily. “It should support your endeavors in the past, keeping the universe whole on its axis in the 4D multiverse as you tamper with healing dimensional splits. We can’t afford you splintering our timeline even further.”

He felt like he was speaking through dust, through layers and layers of timelines and worlds. He felt wings in his throat and in his mind and in his soul.

A butterfly crawled from beneath the collar of his shirt and flapped blood orange wings to rise into the cool, stale air.

“Is that… normal?” wondered Rogers, pale blue eyes following the insect as it spiraled through the barn.

“Perfectly,” Stephen lied again. He wasn’t sure what symptoms sorcerers who tampered with time usually exhibited, though—this could be normal. And there were worse creatures than butterflies. He was quite attached to butterflies, actually, wandering insects with an eerie sort of beauty and a freedom no one could catch.

Stephen stood on unsteady legs, scooping up the Time Stone and reaching for the empty silver briefcase. Rogers beat him to it. They watched each other for a few heartbeats before the Captain snapped open the case, fiddling with the lock-dials, and offered it to him.

Stephen tossed the Infinity Stone into its niche with far too much nonchalance, enjoying the discomfort on Rogers’ face.

“All yours,” he said. “Good luck today. And in all the days to come.”

He had to wish him that—a lifetime worth of goodwill. The Avengers had tasked Rogers with the return of the Stones; they were giving an old warrior, a frozen soldier, a man lifted out of his life and shoved into an unfamiliar future, the responsibility of time travel.

No, Stephen didn’t think he’d be seeing the good Captain again.

“You too,” replied Rogers. His eyes were still puzzled, still distrustful; how terrifying it must have been to step into the barn and see a stranger holding one of the Stones, unresponsive and wreathed in power. Stephen didn’t blame him for his hesitance.

Without another word, Stephen lifted his sling-ring and stepped through space, away from the eyes of Rogers and the empty memories of Stark and into the warm, empty Sanctum.

As soon as the portal closed behind him, he started running.

He caught the Time Stone as it fell out of thin air, snatching it from the sky moments before it clattered against the floor of the library.
Sooo that was fun. Let's take a little trip through time shall we?

Also, butterflies! I'm partial to the whole Stephen & Butterflies thing, so expect references... XD

Anyway! Thanks for reading, and I hope that made sense. Any questions... ? Lolol don't hesitate to ask if you're confused about time stuff. You know how I feel about feedback, and I'll see you soon!
You Better Bet Your Life

Chapter Notes

WHEN I SAY I LOVE YA YOU SAY "YOU BETTER!"
(You betta you betta you bet)
WHEN I SAY I NEED YA YOU SAY "YOU BETTER!"
(You betta you betta you bet)
YOU BETTA BET YOUR LIFE
OR LOVE WILL CUT YOU! CUT YOU LIKE A KNIIIIIIIIIFE!

(Sorry couldn't resist. 50 points to your Hogwarts house if you know that song.)

Earth-200004: October 2016

“No good,” Peter said, flopping back in his spinney chair. The old, cracked, plastic base squeaked as his weight oscillated across it.

“Unsurprising,” replied Loki.

The god had shifted back into his humanoid form and was lounging uncaringly on the top bunk of Peter’s bed. His knife was back in his hand and then repeatedly back in a growing dent in Peter’s roof, which Peter had long since given up trying to discourage. He didn’t need spider-senses to tell him it was a bad idea to mess with a stir-crazy Loki.

“I’ll try ‘sorcerer,’” Peter suggested. “See what comes up.”

But the results for the Google search ‘doctor strange sorcerer’ were largely the same as the ones he’d gotten for simply ‘doctor strange.’ There were a couple of news articles, an interview or two, but mostly a wide assortment of scientific journals authored by the esteemed neurosurgeon Dr. Stephen Strange—the most recent ones published early in 2016. Peter clicked open one of them, but died of boredom reading the first sentence of medical jargon.

“You sure it can’t be this guy?” he said, craning back to look at Loki.

“An ‘esteemed neurosurgeon’? Definitely not. The man’s hands were impressively disfigured; there’s no way he could perform surgery with that sort of scarring.” The knife thunked back into Peter’s roof, and Loki reached up to pry it free with a practice hand.

“But it’s not like ‘Strange’ is a common last name,” Peter said, clinging to straws.

Loki raised an eyebrow at him.

Peter sighed. “Okay, fine. Super helpful of this sorcerer to only give you his made-up name when he told you he held the secrets of your continued existence.”
Another thunk; the knife was back in the roof. Almost to the handle, this time: Peter winced.

“Tremendously helpful,” Loki said, the words hissing a bit with irritation.

Peter clicked out of the medical journal, closing the tab, and slumped back in his chair again. “So, what’s our next step?”

“Next step?” Loki sighed. “No idea, Midgardian.”

They both glanced over to the table aside Peter’s bed—specifically, the second drawer down. Peter thought he could almost see the green glow around the seams of the drawer from the Infinity Stone within, despite the multiple layers of cloth, cardboard, and wood around it.

A relic of unlimited power, and they’d put it in a box.

‘What’s the box gonna do?’

‘Would you rather I leave it lying about, uncovered, in your filthy Queens apartment?’

‘Hey! Watch it, Mr. Loki—my aunt will brain you if she hears you call her house filthy.’

“So, what do we know?” Peter wondered. He stood up, swiping a pad of sticky-notes and a pen from his desk and ambling over to his bed. The springs of the top bunk squeaked and tumbled as Loki readjusted his position and hung his head over the edge of the bunk to peer at Peter.

“Very little.”

“Not true.” Peter palmed the sticky-notes and began to write. “We know you come from the future, and we know we’re in an alternate dimension.”

You don’t belong here. Peter could still sense the whisper.

“Alternate timeline,” said Loki, his voice slightly muffled from the bed.

“Is an alternate timeline the same thing as an alternate universe?” Peter wondered.

“An alternate timeline is always an alternate universe, but an alternate universe is not always an alternate timeline.”


There was no answer, and Peter looked up at Loki’s draping form. The god raised an eyebrow at him. “Hellheim if I know.”

Peter chuckled and went back to the sticky-notes. “Alternate timeline/universe, a Loki from the future, a miscellaneous Time Stone, a list of names… and what?”

“Pretty sure that’s it.”

“Fuck.”

Loki nodded, and the bed-springs squeaked again.

Peter scribbled against the notepad, erased it, and scribbled again. “We know that Thanos comes in… a year?”
“What month is it?” Loki wondered.

“October.”

“Eighteen months until Thanos, give or take.”

Peter tore the sticky-note off the pad and stuck it to the wall. ‘End of the World in eighteen months’ winked back at him in cheery handwriting on a yellow background, and Peter tapped his pencil against it.

“We know there’s six other Stones lying about the world, right?” Mind, Soul, Time, Space, Reality, and Power each got a sticky and a place beneath the Thanos-note. Peter thought they looked like a cyclops’s smile, spread out under a single fluttering eye.

“That looks nothing like a cyclops’s smile,” Loki snorted, and Peter flushed as he realized he must have said that aloud. “And the Stone’s aren’t just lying about; they’re all protected or hidden throughout the entire universe.”

Peter frowned, craning his head to look up at Loki. “Do you know where some are?”

Flipping onto his stomach, Loki nodded. “The Space Stone is… if it’s October, it’s in the Vault of Asgard. Power Stone’s in space somewhere. The Andromeda Galaxy, if I heard Tho—if I heard correctly.”

“Oh.” Peter swallowed. That was… a long way.

“I assume our mysterious doctor-wizard has the natural Time Stone of this universe. The Mind Stone is wherever my scepter ended up, and I have no idea about the others.”

Peter jotted down Loki’s words on the corresponding sticky-notes, frowning at what remained. “And… you sure we can’t tell Mr. Stark? We could use his help…”

*We need his help. We need someone’s help.*

“Me. Dead. Not a good thing,” Loki said, hurling his knife particularly violently at the roof. “I’ve had experience with that, and usually the world continues to exist much more smoothly when I’m around.”

Peter raised an eyebrow.

“Shut it,” snarled the god.

“I’m just saying…”

“At least you have the logic to realize you cannot kill me, but if you want me dead there are easier ways—”

Peter cut him off, eyes widening. “What? No, no, that’s not—I don’t want you dead, Mr. Loki.”

Loki watched him, emerald eyes still flashing.

“I mean it,” Peter said earnestly.

“It would be perfectly logical—”

“Can it with the logic!” Peter almost threw his pencil at the god. “I couldn’t care less about whatever
bullshit you’ve decided justifies you’re death. Maybe it’s stupid, maybe you’re manipulating me or lying to me or controlling me or something, just like everyone thinks you would. But even though everyone knows your name, they don’t know you. Apparently. I don’t know what was going through your head during the Battle of New York, and I don’t know why you killed all those people, but I’m willing to bet it’s something more than inherent evil.”

And in an instant, before Peter could move, could flinch, could raise his hands to defend himself, Loki’s knife was at his throat.

“Well, you’re going to strike you?” the god snarled, his voice dripping with almost insane threat.

*He was going to strike you.*

Peter just lifted his chin, met those razor-sharp emerald eyes, and nodded.

For a long moment, neither of them moved.

And then Loki’s entire form softened, his knife falling away from Peter’s neck, his shoulders rolling forward, and his feet taking him stumbling a few feet back. Just before his gaze turned from Peter, the boy thought he saw it fracture, thought he saw something cold and desolate reflect across Loki’s chiseled face.

“Alright then,” came the flat, emotionless reply.

Peter forced himself to swallow through the lump suddenly in his throat.

“Mr. Stark would probably assume you had some sort of ‘nefarious’ plan if I told him you were here, you’re right,” Peter said, keeping his voice almost aggressively light. “But… maybe we can prove you mean no harm?”

Loki scoffed. “Good luck with that.”

Peter shook his head. “I’m serious.” But he couldn’t elaborate, not yet; nothing came to mind on how to solve this problem of mindset.

“He doesn’t even trust you,” Loki said, turning back to Peter and gesturing vaguely to his form. “How could he possibly trust me?”

“He trusts me! He just…” Peter trailed off.

“Uh-huh.” Loki sighed, making his way over to the drawer where they’d stashed the Infinity Stone. He rifled inside, withdrawing the grimy folded paper that was all they had of the original timeline.

Peter echoed the sigh and flopped back onto his bed. His fingers tapped sluggishly on the mattress beside him, and his feet bounced where they extended past the edge and into thin air. “Well, fuck,” he said. “What in the—”

“Peter?”

A knock on the door. Peter was up in milliseconds, and Loki had vaulted back onto the top bunk with two knives clutched in hand, this time.

“Hi May, gimme two seconds!”

He turned frantically to Loki, gesticulating wildly. The god raised an eyebrow.
“Do the snakey-thing!” Peter hissed under his breath. “Or… something!”

“The ‘snakey-thing’…” Loki shook his head, but disappeared into something small and serpentine anyway, letting Peter breathe a sigh of relief.

“Okay…” he murmured, going for the door.

“Hey Pete,” his aunt said, grinning at him as the room opened. “Good evening, so far?”

“Yeah, uh, yeah,” Peter babbled, managing to smile.

*Great job. Perfectly not suspicious.*

“Ready to go?” his aunt asked, looking him over doubtfully.

“Go?” Peter squeaked. “Go… where?”

And then he noticed Ned behind her, grinning like an absolute idiot and clad in—

Oh fuck.

Ned was wearing his stetson. Which meant an occasion. Which meant tonight. Which meant he’d told May about Liz’s party, which meant she’d agreed to drive them, which meant Peter was supposed to leave, which meant he had to do something with Loki, which meant saving the world was going to be delayed *again*—

“Almost,” Peter said with a panicked smile.

“Mr. Loki!” Peter yelped, scaling the final few branches and clambering onto the roof. “You up here?”

“Where else would I be?” was the reply.

Peter rolled onto the shingles, looking around for his Asgardian companion. He didn’t see him for a long moment, until an unnatural shadow caught his eye and he was able to distinguish Loki’s shape against the dark backdrop of the shaded roof.

Peter crouched next to him, rubbing his wrists. He could feel the fabric of his suit beneath, and sighed.

“What is my life…” he groaned. “They all think I know Spider-Man, now. Yu-p. And Ned wants me to show up *as* Spider-Man and pretend to be someone else. *And* Michelle is there *grinning* at me when I already feel like a complete dumbass, and there’s a god on the roof of Liz’s house.”

“Me being here is entirely your fault,” Loki said.

Peter huffed. “Rude.”

“True.”

“I wonder if you could just shank Flash. Maybe that’d solve *all* my problems.”

Loki stood up. “If you wish.”
Peter burst to his feet, his hands already extended. “Nonononono, that’s not what I—”

But Loki was grinning, smirk flashing with azure amusement, and Peter relaxed and punched his shoulder.

“Hey!” he laughed. “Don’t scare me like that, Mr. Loki.”

“You are a curious child,” the god said, flipping his dagger and catching it by the hilt. “You hardly flinched when I threatened your life, but looked ready to fight had I gone to attack even your enemy.”

“Flash isn’t my enemy. He’s more of my… I don’t know. He’s annoying, and he’s an asshole, but I’ve dealt with plenty of those. I guess I just don’t kill anyone. Ever.” Peter tapped his chin, coming up next to Loki and glancing in through the window of Liz’s house. Ned was standing near the glass, looking nervously around for a superhero he expected to appear.

“Shit…” Peter sighed.

“What are you going to do?” Loki asked.

“With Spider-Man? I don’t know. Spider-Man isn’t a party trick, I’m more than that—” I have to be — “but Ned’s expecting me to swing in and ham it up… Everyone’s expecting it…”

“And?”

Peter paused. “And… what?”

“What matter are your not-enemy’s expectations?”

Peter spluttered. “They’re—it’s—it’s not—”

Loki was grinning at him again, and Peter narrowed his eyes.

And then they widened. Because behind Loki, against the navy and orange backdrop of the sky, was an explosion.

“What the hell?” Peter mouthed.

Loki spun to follow Peter’s gaze, his head cocking. “Is that normal?”

“The blue mushroom cloud? Decidedly not.” Peter was already pulling his shirt over his head, exposing the sleek vibrance of his suit. He extended a wrist, but paused when Loki laid a hand over it.

“What are you doing?” the god asked, but from the way his eyes were already sparkling with mischief, Peter knew he already knew the answer.

“Checking it out, obviously,” Peter said.

Loki grinned. “I’ll be right behind you.”

Peter pulled his mask over his head, and then Spider-Man was swinging away through the suburb streets of Queens.
Chapter End Notes

There they go a swingin', swingin'... into the plot-line... do todo do do do dodo.

aNYWAY

Thanks for reading! Hope you enjoyed this, and I'll see you soon!
Ah, the joys of pre-battle scouting, of the skulking hunt moments before the pounce. This was what Loki loved—though the pounding adrenaline of the fight was nothing unsatisfying, either. But it couldn’t compare to the slow build of stalking a mystery, of a silent infiltration, or of a dark-of-night assassination.

Loki’s magic whipped through his veins like a drug, all-consuming and enthralling. He panted through his teeth as he popped in and out of existence, trailing the spider-child through the dark streets, and kept his eyes on the horizon in the event of another blast.

Together, they made no noise; that suit must be StarkTech for all its whip-quick efficiency. Loki bared his teeth, not caring if his smirk was true and wild, and pushed himself through space once again.

Peter lead him up to the overhang of a highway, ducking behind the edge as another billowing release of electric blue light exploded up from beneath them. Loki palmed his knives and grinned wickedly at Peter.

“Criminals, right?” he mouthed.

The Spider-Man mask nodded, but held up a hand when Loki moved to flip over the side.

Reluctantly, Loki followed the boy as he crawled—somehow sticking sideways to the concrete—over the edge of the overpass. Loki sunk his knives into the stone, grunting with the effort, and clung haphazardly next to Peter.

Voices drifted up from the group below.

“Now, this is crafted from a reclaimed sub-Ultron arm straight from Sokovia,” said a bearded, brutish man, flipping a somewhat unwieldy-looking weapon in hand and offering it to the man beside him.

This second Midgardian was considerably thinner, darker, and more confused; Loki leaned down a bit further despite the protests of his still-sore body.

“I wanted something low-key. Why are you trying to upsell me, man?” said the second man.

Loki glanced toward Spider-Man, tapping a bit of telepathic energy as he mouthed ‘weapons deal?’ Spider-Man shrugged. “What else could it be?”

They both turned back to the scene before them.

“Okay, okay,” chuckled the first man. Loki could see a glint in his eye and a smile on his lip; he was enjoying this. He looked a bit like Thor had when they’d first glimpsed the Valkyries in person—
Loki cut that thought off before it could grow to completion.

“I got what you need, all right? I got tons of great stuff here.” The man migrated over to his van—white, even in the shadows of the overpass. “One sec. Okay, I got black hole grenades, Chitauri railguns…”

Loki stopped listening to the tirade as another man spoke—bald, and tall. “You letting off shots in public now? Hurry up.”

Loki cocked his head, not precisely sure what that meant. His shoulders throbbed with the effort of holding up his body, and he tried not to wince. What’s going on here?

“Look, times are changing,” the bald Midgardian continued. “We’re the only ones selling these high-tech weapons.”

“High tech weapons?” Peter breathed beside him. “That sounds… dangerous.” There was excitement in his voice, and he dropped a bit lower on the overhang.

Loki gave him a side-eye. I like this one. He couldn’t deny it, this time.

The second man, the buyer, rubbed his eyes. There was tension in his body language, and Loki wondered if he knew what he was getting into. “I just need something to stick up somebody. I’m not trying to…” He made a helpless gesture towards the van. “Shoot them back in time.”

But a few more words had the slimmer buyer interested, and he migrated toward the vehicle.

And the idiot teenager’s phone rang.

“Shit—” Peter yelped as the warbling notes rang out through the silent air. Loki snarled, hauling himself back up to the lip of the overpass and drawing his knives.

Beneath them, the weapons dealers shot to attention, hands tightening on their guns. “Okay, what the hell is that? Did you set us up?” The first one snarled, twisting the barrel of his weapon toward the hastily protesting buyer.

And Peter dropped to the ground in front of it without a moment of hesitation.

“Wait!” Loki hissed instinctually, his voice almost ringing through the hollowed overhang.

Peter held up his hands and stood unflinchingly before the deadly gun barrels. “Hey! Hey, come on,” he said. “You gonna shoot at somebody, shoot at me!”

“All right,” said bald man, turning completely toward the boy.

Peter’s wrists were already extended, ripping the weapon from the man’s hands and throwing it sideways on a strand of silken webbing. But the other man, the bearded one, moved faster.

The discharge of the second gun through Peter up and back, slamming him into the concrete of the overpass.

Loki snarled.

Vaulting over the edge of the roadway and dropping beside the crumpled boy, Loki’s knives were already spinning across the clearing. The buyer dropped to the ground, just barely avoiding a blade in his navel, but Beardy was not so lucky.
Loki’s knife shattered through the unprotected skull of the first dealer. The man crumbled, his blood arcing into the chill night air, and his partner stumbled back, eyes wide in sudden fear. Loki shrunk back into the shadows of the overpass as the man searched frantically for the hand that through the knife. Loki’s tongue curled over his teeth and his fingers working the hilt of his second blade.

Two things kept said blade from finding its mark in the second man’s throat: Peter groaning and shaking out lethargic wrists, and the brute diving for the open door of the van. As the vehicle roared to life, Peter barked a sluggish curse and threw a strand of webbing for the back hinge.

The van took off, and Peter took off with it.

“Idiot boy,” Loki growled as the spider-child was yanked arse-first down the pot-holed Queen’s road. The god yanked his knife out of the dead man’s head, ignoring the further cracking of the skull and wiping the blade on the already-filthy leather of his pants.

The dark streak of Midgardian blood joined the patches of his people, and Loki broke into a sprint after the van.

---

Peter loved a good thrill ride.

Emphasis on good.

He was considerably thankful that the fabric of the Spider-Man suit was friction and fray-resistant, because the skin of his ass was definitely not. Even so, being towed at high speeds behind a car along hard ground wasn’t super comfortable.

“Ah! My butt!” Peter yelped as he hit yet another pothole and bounced inches off the road.

One of the doors to the van was missing, and Peter could only see one figure within—he wondered where the other man had ended up. As the vehicle collided viciously with a curb, Peter squeezed his eyes shut to avoid the shower of metal and half-built weaponry that sprayed across him.

The driver glanced wildly back, one hand pressed to his ear: a telephone. Peter widened the eyes of the mask, but still couldn’t make out the form on the man in the vehicle—

Another sharp twist had Peter slamming into the side of a parked car, and his vision flashed black and white. The ricochet of the collision bounced him through a line of trash cans, nose wrinkling under the mask.

“Gross—” he tried to begin, before he was splattered against a brick pillar. He didn’t break. It did.

Not that it was comfortable. That shoulder was definitely going to be sore tomorrow…

And, well, he wasn’t moving anymore. Peter looked up, raising his wrists to find his webbing dragging uselessly from the web-shooters, and he cursed, sending two more quick shots toward the retreating van. But the other door, already weak from the abuse the vehicle had received, broke off and flew off into the sunset like a demented sort of bird.

“Well, guess I’ll have to take a shortcut,” Peter said. He pushed himself into a run, leaping off the sidewalk to slide over a parked car and gain air.

He’d webbed this neighborhood before, but never in such a hurry; as a result, his swings were
maladroit and he crashed through quite a few occupied backyards. Awkwaawaard… Well, at least it was just him, this time, and not an overzealous god of mischief.

Speaking of that, where was Loki?

Peter couldn’t dwell on that now, though; he could see the van in the distance, whipping around corners and through side streets. Throwing himself into a high, long arc, Peter bulleted toward the car. There was smoke billowing from the back of it, marking its presence vibrantly against the otherwise-normal neighborhood.

Peter missed the car, just barely, and growled. “Almost got you…”

A garbage can teleported under his foot, and he tripped over it attempting to get atop another roof—shit, he was causing a mess tonight, wasn’t he?

Happy’s gonna be so pissed.

No time for that now. Peter scrambled onto the rooftop and ran, shingles coming loose beneath his feet. His enhanced balance kept him easily upright, and he raced faster through the neighborhood, trying to keep the van in sight.

“Thought you got away from me, didja?” He grinned, panting through his teeth. He was catching up—the van was right there. “I got you right where I want you.”

And he did.

His mask’s eyes narrowed, and Peter leapt. “Surprise!”

The rush of air past his form had him grinning, and his hands stretched out to throw another web—Until the rush stopped so suddenly he got whiplash, and his perfect leap warped with something pulling him upward.

Peter yelped, shock-fueled fear flooding his already adrenaline-filled form. The hands—no, the claws—around him only tightened, and Peter tore his gaze away from the ground as it retreated away from him.

Fuck, fuck the ground was so far away—

“What the hell?” Peter yelped, craning to look up at what held him.

It looked back.

Glowing green eyes bored into him, surrounding an otherwise humanoid face framed by steal feathers. The breath left Peter’s lungs; for a moment, he could only think a phantom had snatched him into the sky.

He was still being pulled up, and all the thoughts were leaving his goddamn mind, replaced with a single fluttering realization—spiders can’t fly.

And as suddenly as Peter had first been gripped, another creature was slamming into them from above, screeching something awful. The winged ghost—no, not a ghost, a man—cursed in surprise, breaking his spell on the surprised spider in his claws.

Peter struggled, and the vulture-man holding him did too as something black and feathered viciously attacked his face and neck. A bird of some kind, perhaps a raven, with eyes the color of pine trees—
Oh.

Apparently a snake wasn’t Loki’s only other form.

Peter grinned, but it was more like a grimace as he fought to free his wrists, to free anything. The air was thin and cold as he tried to draw breath, and his head was swimming, but it didn’t change the ferocity of his struggles. He clawed at the metal talons around his midsection, trying to get his web shooters pointed at something that could do some good.

One of the talons pulled away, swiping at Loki instead. A piercing screech hammered into Peter’s skull as the hand made contact and Loki was forced backward, wings beating frantically. The metal replicas on the man’s back beat too, and Peter found himself yanked upward again. Loki followed, angling his wings to try and catch the unnaturally powerful flight speed of whoever was hauling Peter higher above Queens.

*Shit*, shit—

Wind whipped at his mask, at the pins of his web-shooters, and the claws were tight around him. He was starting to notice how hard it was to breathe, now. Logic was starting to be overcome by primitive, survivalist panic.

A soft beeping filtered through his thoughts, and Peter had just enough time to wonder *what the fuck* before a force of nature had ripped him from the vulture-man’s claws.

Air resistance, specifically.

A dozen yards of billowing fabric flapped below Peter, already whipping up around him as gravity seized him in an unforgiving grip. Loki screeched as Peter careened into him, forcing them both downward.

There was fabric in his vision, now. Fabric wrapping around him, binding him in flapping sheets of white, turning up into down and the sky into the earth and Peter couldn’t see, couldn’t *breathe*. The rush of the fall had ripped the air from his lungs, and there was only cloth in his mouth, now.

Struggling, screaming, Peter tried to break free. His frantic mind had just enough time to think *you can’t punch your way out of a paper bag* before he hit the water.

The impact took every conscious thought from his mind. Only instinct kept him from gasping in pain and shock as water swallowed the parachute, the suit, and him inside it. Peter kicked out at the water around him, straining toward the surface, but the fabric—now permeated with water—dragged him down.

Parachutes weren’t supposed to be heavy, were they? But God, this one was *heavy*, was unliftable even to his enhanced strength. And everything around him was heavy, was pressing down on him with a horrible, final sort of pressure.

Water had joined the fabric in his mouth.

Peter would have screamed, but he was terrified of opening his mouth. Afraid that the pressure would force itself down his throat and into his core. Flashes of color and light made it through the eyes of the mask to his own gaping gaze. His senses were screaming, overloading in stimulation that made panic claw at his insides. He discharged his web shooters, but they only splintered and dissolved within the water, leaving Peter to be dragged down, down, down.

Everything sounded loud and foggy at the same time. Everything looked the same—light, but
indistinguishable.

It felt like eternity as the light began to go dark. As the sounds began to filter to nothing.

Peter’s final thought before the blackness took him was *oh, fuck, Loki.*

Chapter End Notes

Hehe?

Thanks for reading. XD
Moving permanently to the Compound was a debatable decision.

Oh, said Compound was definitely less comfortable, less organized, and less thought-through than the Tower, but since when did that say anything about being worse?

The environment here was a thousand times more preferable. The quiet rhythm of the bay’s waves lapping up against the Compound’s supports echoed through the hallways, even with the windows closed. Autumn wind rustled through yellowing leaves and sent the loose ones spiraling into the glass and across the roads and helicopter pad. You’d never open a window to the smell of salt and harvest soil in the heart of New York.

Tony Stark stood with his hands clasped behind his back and his foot tapping lightly against the smooth concrete of the Compound patio. The stuff was barely a year old. It still had that ridged surface unique to asphalt poured in block castings.

Whole parts of the Compound still seemed so new. There were rooms that smelled of paint and plywood, unopened storage space covered in fiberglass dust. The training bay was already smooth and permeated with the aroma of sweat and effort, but that was alright. It could be, at least. And fuck if he was ever going to enter what had been the living quarters.

All in all, it was better, Tony decided. Not perfect, but better; clean and sharp and not yet soiled by the broken legacy he couldn’t help but leave.

He inhaled a gulping breath of the crisp morning air and nodded. All that trouble of selling the Tower was worth it. And it wasn’t like they hadn’t gained a couple of bucks offloading the steller building onto some poor millionaire willing to pay for the top-notch real estate smack in the center of New York, self-sustaining and a beacon of historical innovation.

And yes, he knew it was cheesy, but that didn’t stop it selling.

Tony flexed his fingers and started abruptly down the steps before him, treading into the still-lush grass of the lawn and trying to resist collapsing onto it.
“Aaaahhh yes,” Tony sighed, staring up at the lightening sky. Cool grass tickled the nape of his neck, and he could feel its texture through the thin fabric of his T-shirt. “I could get used to this.”

The beauty, the opportunity, the size, the atmosphere.

The emptiness.

Tony turned his head, casting his eyes along the upside-down skyline of the Compound. A single light was on, just one, and likely only because FRIDAY hadn’t yet flipped it off upon his passing. It was quiet, yes, empty, sure, but it had the potential—see, the potential—to be filled.

By soldiers. Agents. Avengers.

Teammates.

And maybe, someday, friends.

Tony wasn’t opposed to the idea of those, despite what Pepper and Happy seemed to have decided. He was simply acutely aware that they were just that—an idea. And his ideas tended to be questionable.

His friends too, apparently.

But the Compound, the Compound was new, still new, and the A towering above everything didn’t yet blink down at him with ice blue eyes or red and silver wings or a shadow of red and black.

“Stop,” Tony muttered, running his hands through his spiking hair. “We aren’t thinking about this now.” Not when he was feeling so balanced and decisive and good.

The Compound wasn’t going to be empty much longer, anyway; Vision had already started setting up his room. Suite. Space. Building. Hell if Tony couldn’t spoil his AI; FRIDAY’d back him up on that.

Vision and FRIDAY; the two individuals Tony confidently placed on his to be trusted list. The other three were tentative—he hated that they were, but two short months couldn’t cover the pit of doubt Siberia had hollowed in his heart. Two short months didn’t stop him trying to protect himself.

Tony was finished being angry. He was finished being anxious, finished being determined, too—he was just finished.

Tired.

So fucking tired, tired of the Tower, tired of the cameras and interviews, tired of the nightmares, tired of the thoughts, tired of the lies.

So he was starting over, because the world had left him no choice. It was start over or be slowly devoured by his idiotic mind and its inability to stop questioning the words of everyone around him!

He’d always questioned himself; that hadn’t changed, and probably never would. But his subconscious seemed determined to establish that there was nothing in this godforsaken world that he could trust.

Untrue. He could trust the cool autumn air of the new Avengers facility. He could trust the lush grass beneath him. He could trust his suit to fly and the ground to be there when he fell, and he could trust
his hands to assemble things of wonder.

He could trust Vision, all curious understanding and innocent empathy, worthy of so much more than this world. He could trust FRIDAY, a product of so much more than him.

And god dammit, Tony could trust Pepper, Rhodey, and Happy. He wouldn’t have left the latter to look out for the kid he’d desperately recruited to Germany if not. They deserved his trust, and that was alright.

He didn’t, but that was alright, too.

Sighing, Tony rolled onto his stomach and pushed himself to his knees. He’d need to leave soon in order to get to the jet on time—he had to be across the globe in India later today. But he’d wanted to see the Compound in the morning, and it was a good thing he had; he would have missed the gorgeous October sunrise and a good bit of metacognition.

Tony stood and brushed the grass off his thighs, then spun on his heel and stalked back into the Compound. FRIDAY lightened the windows as he passed, and he smiled up at the ceiling as if she could see.

“What’s our timeline, FRI?”

“Fifteen minutes until the latest you should leave, boss.”

“Perfect. I can be fashionably early.” Tony winked at the empty hallway.

“Indeed.”

He navigated the connected buildings for a good five minutes, dodging and weaving through the area until he reached where he’d left the car. FRIDAY flashed lights as he went, almost chasing him through the hallways, and he allowed himself a flicker of a grin as his pace sped to a sprint.

There was no one here to see it, anyway.

He slid back outside and into the driver’s seat of his yellow Audi—should he take it with him to India? Yes, yes he should—and didn’t linger as he pulled into drive and out away from the Compound. FRIDAY pinged into consciousness within the car; she had the same access to all the electronics and locations JARVIS had had, and Tony would never dream of locking her out. She deserved every small freedom he could give her a thousand times over.

The mural of the swooping, bold A gleamed in the Audi’s rear-view mirror as Tony drove away. He resisted the urge to flip it off. FRIDAY was here, after all, and he shouldn’t pull shit like that in front of her—she was still just a child, really, even for an AI.

“Well then,” Tony murmured, sitting back and tapping his hands on the steering wheel. “Off we go to India.”

Tony lingered easily in the center of the party, his traditional white and red kurta glinting in the warm sunlight streaming through the skylights. His sunglasses were purely for show, almost completely untinted, and he tilted his head down to observe over the frames as he conversed with a fellow guest before him.
The wedding was a loud, somewhat arduous affair, but Tony was loving it. He didn’t know these people, he had no reason to trust them and thus no reason to feel guilty about not doing so, and it lifted an ironic weight from his shoulders as he celebrated. Surrounded by foreign strangers, Tony could truly enjoy himself—but for aggressively ignoring how fucked up that was.

The flicking blue monitor over the lenses of his sunglasses had been pushed aside. He kept the glasses on, though, just in case; the world seemed to have a nasty habit of ending on the drop of a pin.

Hat. Whatever. He needed another drink.

Pepper was at a similar party in the States; stressing company ties, she called it. Tony couldn’t help but wish, in some lonely part of his mind, that she was here with him, instead. Or that he was there with her, trying to work up the courage to do something. Anything. Everything.

He didn’t have a lot of courage left, though. He needed most of it for opening his eyes in the morning.

Shifting against the table behind him, Tony straightened his collar and tuned back into the words of the man in front of him. He was wrapping up, having spotted another thread of gossip elsewhere in the party, and Tony entertained his keen conversation for a few more moments before he disappeared.

Tony spun back to the room, after a moment, beginning to travel back into the throng. He bent to pick up a fallen marigold, tucked it into the folds of his scarf, and swayed a bit to the spiraling music flickering through the space.

A woman joined him, and Tony embarrassed himself for about half a song before she realized how hopeless he was at utilizing this sort of music and took the lead. In his average gala, wedding, business gathering, or party of varying stuffiness, Tony could control the dance floor as he controlled the room—heaven help a billionaire that didn’t know how to dance.

But here? Something productive would come of this wedding, besides Pep’s company ties—Tony’d learn to dance to traditional Indian music.

Eventually, he ended up on the sidelines again, leaning up against the white-carved base of a support pillar. He whipped off his scarf—his neck was slick with sweat in the slightly stuffy air—and wrapped it around his wrists for a moment.

It snagged on the metal of his watch, yanking the device somewhat painfully on his carpal bones. Tony worked it back up to a comfortable niche of his muscle and pulled his shirt cuff down over it, as the bulky elegance of the watch contrasted unprofessionally with his outfit.

He could have worn a sleeker one, a matching one. It wasn’t as though he’d used this for anything other than telling the time in months.

But again, the world had a nasty habit of ending on a whim.

Most of Tony’s watches were equipped with sensors and receivers that would call his suit, but only this one had the capacity for nanotech expansion over his hand and now the entirety of his upper arm. He was still working on slimming the power containment unit down to fit into something flatter and less obvious, but for now, this worked.

People knew him for that—the suit, the nanotech, the sleek watches and sleeker smiles. They’d remember him for it, too.
Sometimes, on bad nights, sitting in the dark of his workshop with only the blue light of a hologram skittering in his irises, Tony wondered if he wanted that. If the suit and the nanotech and the sleek watches were what he wanted to be remembered for.

What did he want? What did he want to be known for?

_Terrorist weapons, Hammer, Mandarin, Ultron, Sokovia, Germany—_

Not now. Not now.

Tony took a shaking breath, clasping his hands before him and dropping his chin to his chest. He focused on the way the coarse fabric of his _kurta_ felt against his neck as his chest shifted, in and out, like waves lapping against the supports of the Compound.

“Boss?” came the quiet static from his sunglasses.

Tony looked up abruptly. “What is it, FRI?”

“The Spider-Man suit’s parachute just deployed.”

Tony stiffened.

The Spiderling, the overexcited puppy he’d practically kidnapped and brought to Germany two months ago, the hero he’d been tracking via YouTube long before. He’d started building the suit as a pet project a while back, never intending to do anything with it—but then the Accords had happened and he’d needed backup, so he’d reopened the file and its half-assembled prototype.

And after, he’d met a curious, excited, responsible boy in a run-down Queens apartment, and the suit had exploded in capabilities.

Including a bullet-resistant makeup, parachute, heater, tracker, and about six protocols alerting Tony in times of crisis.

Said protocols had just activated. And said parachute had just deployed.


“How’d he get up there—” the parachute was a height-sensitive feature in the suit, and the kid would have had to reach all but lethal elevation for it to activate—“never mind, it’s not important.” Tony flicked the corner data of his sunglasses to cover the entirety of their lenses, hacking into the WiFi in seconds. “Get a suit over there, now.”

“Yes, boss.”

Tony’s grip tightened on his wrists. Symbols danced across the lenses of his glasses, FRIDAY pulling up the vitals and signals from Parker’s suit on one side and charting the movements of Tony’s unmaned suit on the other.

“Why isn’t he slowing down?” Tony demanded, pushing off from the pillar behind him as though _anything he could do would do any good—_

“It appears his orientation kept the parachute from performing functionally. I can only assume he’s tangled in it.”
Shit. “Access the feed from the Baby Monitor Protocol. Bring it up left lens.”

FRIDAY obliged, and Tony’s eye-sized screen filled with a chaotic pinwheel of skyline and water, the sound of rushing wind replacing the AI’s voice in his ear.

And a scream.

A helpless, breathless scream as white fabric replaced the sky and the water but the wind kept rushing, ever faster.

Tony’s fingernails had broken his skin, now. “How long?” he bit out.

“The suit will be there in twenty seconds, sir.”

Not fast enough, not fast enough—the kid was going to hit the water and Tony couldn't do a single fucking thing.

He heard the collision, jarring and cold even in the crackling feed of the Baby Monitor Protocol. Tony winced, forcibly loosening his grip from his wrists and tapping at the sides of the sunglasses—fifteen seconds.

The stats for the drone suit whirred on the other lens, FRIDAY highlighting the ones she deemed important. But they were already as fast as they could get, as close as they could be.

Ten seconds.

Tony’s left lens had emptied—no, it was showing the blackness pressing down on the Spiderling, the murky depths of the Queens all around.

Five seconds.

He couldn’t swim for the surface, not with Tony’s parachute binding his limbs together and weighing him down. Enhanced strength didn’t have any impact against the borders of a water-filled sack. Against water in general—Tony knew the feeling.

The suit broke the surface of the bay with a boom Tony could hear through the Protocol, and something clenching in his chest released. He drew a breath, minimizing the view from the Spider-Man suit in favor of the view from his own.

“Did you get him?”

FRIDAY darkened and lightened the display in her imitation of a nod. “Yes, sir. Leaving the water…Now.”

Tony blew out a long breath, slumping back against the pillar again. “So… the parachute has a few bugs to work out.”

“Indeed, boss. Where should we take Mr. Parker?”

“Drop him off…” Tony scanned the skyline he could see through the suit’s eyes. “There. It’s closer to his apartment.”

FRIDAY kicked the suit into action again, and cradling the boy beneath the armpits, they flew across the remainder of the water. In the small window still reserved for Baby Monitor, Tony saw Peter’s eyes flicker open.
“Huh?” he said groggily—sounding disoriented and confused, but okay. Unhurt. “Oh. Hi.”

Tony opted not to respond, fighting away the small grin of relief and adjusting so the sharp right-angles of the pillar base didn’t dig into the small of his back so painfully.

They dropped the kid on a lakeside jungle-gym, shooing away a bedraggled-looking bird. It’s feathers were fully soaked, and it regarded the suit with a look equating murder; no wonder ravens were a bad sign. Parker landed gracefully on the brightly painted bars, looking no worse for wear from his little tussle with death, and pulled off his mask to shake the water from his helmet.

“Okay, what happened.” It wasn’t a question. Tony crossed his arms, and the suit emulated.

“Well,” the kid began, looking up at the suit with wide eyes, “I saw this explosion from the roof of my friend’s house—”

Tony, again, opted not to interrupt and ask what he’d been doing in his suit on a friend’s roof.

“—and when I went to see what it was, there were, like, these guys selling crazy weapons.” Parker gestured with wild excitement. “And I chased after them for a bit, but right when I was about to catch up, this guy in a flying suit—not like yours, way less…” The kid turned his gesture on Tony’s suit. “…Elegant.”

Tony tried not to scoff.

Parker continued, wringing the water out of his mask, “And then he just, he just, like, swooped down like a monster and he picked me up and, uh, he took me up, like, a thousand feet and just— wait, did you find a bird?”

Tony was thrown off for a moment. “There was a scruffy one just now, if you’re after something specific,” he said with a hint of amusement.

“No, I was, um, just wondering? Bird’s not important.”

Tony wished his suit could raise an eyebrow.

Parker continued, taking a deep breath, and his thoughts trundled along to catch up with his mouth. “How’d you find me?” he asked. There was a bit of a tremor in his words—he was shivering. “Did you put a tracker in my suit or something?”

“I put everything in your suit,” Tony said, tapping on the edge of his sunglasses. “Including this heater.”

He expanded the view from his own suit over both lenses, and watched as Spider-Man immediately dried, sending a cloud of steam flurrying up around Parker.

“Woah,” the boy breathed. “That’s better. Thanks.” He snuggled back against the bars of the jungle-gym, glancing down at the wet raven now hopping about the wood chips of the playground.

He looked so young. Fourteen?

Someone had just dropped him from thousands of feet. And even the suit couldn’t protect—stop his fall.

“What were you thinking?” Tony said, his words coming out snappish. Harsh.

The boy straightened instantly to the defensive, his spine uncurling and his shoulders pushing down
into his back. “The guy with the wings is obviously the source of the weapons. I gotta take him
down.”

Tony rubbed at his eyes. “Take him down now, huh?” A razor-winged, flying enigma dealing high-
tech weapons to common criminals? Yeah, sorry kid; no. “Steady, Crockett, there are people who
handle this sort of thing.”

Parker stuck out his chin. “The Avengers?”

Tony chuckled. “No, no, no. I think this is a little below their pay grade.”

The kid ran a hand through his soaked hair and sighed. “Anyway, Mr. Stark, you didn’t have to
come all the way out here. I had that. I was fine.”

Uh-huh, sure.

“Oh I’m not—” Tony waved a hand, and the mask of the unmaned suit flipped up— “here.”

He pretended not to notice the way the light in Parker’s eyes flickered.

“Thank God this place has WiFi,” Tony continued quickly, “or you would be toast right now. Thank
Ganesh, while you’re at it.”

He swiped a drink from a passing waiter, raising the glass in a mock toast as thanks.

“Cheers.” Holding in a sigh, Tony turned his attention back to the lenses afront his eyes. “Look,
forget the flying vulture-guy, please.”

Parker glared at him. “Why?”

“Why?” Tony snarled a bit. Because he nearly killed you—he would have, if this wedding didn’t
have WiFi. If FRIDAY had been fifteen seconds slower. If a thousand and one things now stirred
into my nightmare collection had and could happen! “Because I said so!”

A guest approaching him paused, confusion evident on her rounded face, and Tony waved an
expanding hand. “Sorry,” he said, leaning down to accept a string of marigolds. “Talking to a
teenager.”

Tony sighed, focusing his attention back on the lenses before him. He had to get back to the States—
he had to just generally get out of here. It was stuffy and unwieldy and he’d rather just be home,
thank you very much.

“Stay… stay close to the ground, okay? Build up your game helping the little people. There’s that
string of strange ATM robberies—which, now that I think of it—”

“Is probably connected to this.” The kid braced his wrists on his knees. “I saw, uh, some of the
footage on the news, and it looked like something these guys could pull off!”

FRIDAY, the obliging young AI that she was, was already pulling up said footage on the left lens of
the sunglasses. The kid did, unfortunately, have a point, and Tony resisted the urge to rub his eyes
again.

“Can’t you just be…” he searched for words, taking a sip of his drink, “a friendly, neighborhood
Spider-Man?”

Peter lifted his chin, gesticulating with a vibrating sort of energy. “But I’m ready for more than that,
More? What ‘more’? More that’ll have you dead at the bottom of a Queens harbor where no one ever finds your body? “No, you’re not.”
He was frustrating the boy—good. The boy was frustrating him.

“That’s not what you said when I took on Captain America!”

Tony winced, and he was, for once, glad he wasn’t there in person. “Trust me, kid, if Cap wanted to lay you out, he would’ve.” He made his way away from the crowd, trekking a beeline toward his car. “Listen to me. If you come across these weapons again, call Happy.”

“I thought you said this wasn’t Avenger’s business?”

“Yeah, well, Happy’ll set you up with someone whose business it is.”

 Possibly me. But oh well.

He slipped into the driver’s seat, revving the car to life.

Parker heard. “Are you driving?”

Tony ignored him, shifting in the expensive leather to keep it from sticking to his suit. “You know, it’s never too early to start thinking about college. I got some pull at MIT.” He looked to FRIDAY’s sensor. “End call.”

He waited a moment for the order to run to completion, then let his head fall onto the ridge of the steering-wheel. “What the hell am I going to do with that kid, FRI?”

Chapter End Notes

Wooo!!

This was a fun chapter, cuz I really wanted to find a way to write Tony that wasn’t identical to how I wrote him in the Waterspout. We sorted through THOSE problems over there; this is a different story, and I wanted a new emphasis to go with it. I think I like this one, with the trust and legacy focus. Idk. That's what I was going for, at least.

XD we'll see.

Thanks for reading! Drop me some feedback? See you soon. :)
Loki tumbled back into his humanoid form hissing.

“That utter and complete arse-hole!”

Peter yelped in surprise, toppling through the bars of the jungle-gym and landing with a huff on the wood chips beneath. “Mr. Loki…”

“Apolgies,” Loki hissed, twisting his fingers into an aggressive Asgardian flip-off in the direction of the retreating suit. “But what the fuck?”

“It’s fine,” Peter sighed. He stood up and ducked through the bars of the jungle gym, making his way over to Loki, who watched him with narrowed eyes. “He thinks I’m just a kid and I know I’m not and it’s whatever.”

But Loki could very clearly see that it was not whatever.

How could these Midgardians be such idiots?

They were meant to trust each other, protect each other. The wizard had told Loki it was the clearest aspect of the timelines, the most consistent factor across dimensions—Tony Stark and Peter Parker. How could they not see? How could Stark not see how revealing an empty suit crushed a hidden part of this boy’s spirit?

“Are all your interactions like that?” Loki demanded.

Peter cringed a bit, biting his lower lip. “Not all of them…”

“You’ve had a total of three interactions with him, I suspect.” Loki sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

“More than that! It’s just—he’s him, and I’m…”

“You?”

“Yeah.” Peter’s voice was quiet. Defeated. “Me.”

Exactly! Loki wanted to scream. There’s no need for change! He’s your realm-damned father and it’s a fucking universal constant!

Maybe he should scream it. Maybe that’s what they needed.

But understanding someone, trusting someone, didn’t come from a word of recommendation, even if that word came from a friend. And especially not if that word came from a deranged ex-criminal
trickster god. Loki wondered if Peter would humor him, or just laugh outright at a claim the boy’d see as ridiculous and possibly even condescending.

And Tony Stark?

Loki’s lip lifted, exposing his upper canine in a snarl. Part of him—okay, most of him—wanted to stab the pretentious idiot until he saw sense. Which was probably just once, depending on the location Loki chose to insert his blade, and was likely not the most effective method of getting his point across.

Though it did bring him a bit of joy to imagine.

“What are we gonna do?” Peter wondered, more to himself than to Loki. “I guess I still thought… I dunno, that he’d help with this whole time-travel thing.”

Loki watched him, expression unchanging.

“But he won’t even help with the weapons! And I’m supposed to, what, just drop everything and ignore them and the ATM robbers? Un-freaking-likely.”

Loki nodded, trying not to look too pleased with the boy. “Indeed. Ignore trouble? Definitely not.”

“These guys could hurt people! And anyone with normal firearms would be way outta their league.” Peter gesticulated. “I have to—he can’t just—argh!”

But Loki had stopped listening, now frowning at the air in front of Peter.

*If you come across these weapons again, call Happy.*

These two were so *intent* on alienation from each other—everyone on the damned wizard’s list was intent on alienation. And Loki was supposed to bring these people together, to prepare them for the mission of the Stones. With the nonexistent communication and team-building skills of Loki of Asgard, he was supposed to cultivate a group to take on the Mad Titan.

Talk about impossible. But perhaps…

*Below the Avengers’ pay-grade.* What exactly *was* the Avengers’ pay-grade?

Perhaps, starting with the spider-child and Stark, he could solve this. With his own… *specialized* skill set.

A slow smile spread across Loki’s face.

Peter dragged his feet slightly as the two of them made their way back through the suburb, retracing the curves the van had taken. He winced at each dilapidated roadside structure they came across, but couldn’t quite bring himself to ignore the chain of carnage and tried instead to judge the scale of damage. It wasn’t… as bad as it could have been, he supposed.

“You’re smiling again,” he observed, glancing at Loki.

The Asgardian had been… *grinning* ever since they’d started back toward the heart of Queens. But not just grinning—this was a festering sort of smile, and it made Peter distinctly suspicious.

Loki hopped atop a toppled trash can, his ripped and filthy cape flicking out behind him. “I simply
realized the advantages my… image… could provide us as we seek to destroy this weapons ring. I assume we are going to ignore Stark’s orders, correct?”

“Um…” Peter flushed. “Not… ignore… exactly?”

Loki’s eyebrow crept up.

Peter continued quickly, “And we aren’t destroying them. No killing people, remember?”

Loki looked away.

Stopping in his tracks, Peter glared at the god. “Don’t tell me you…”

“He shot you with a Chitauri blast!” the god said, as though that explained everything. “I shot him back.”

Peter rubbed his face with his hands. “Mr. Loki… that guy was more than just a brute with a gun; he was a person. He could have had a future, he could have had a family…”

“So do you.” Loki stared him down.

“I can’t… I…”

There was a man dead. A man who could have been alive tomorrow, who could of smiled or laughed again, now wiped out of history for good. Because of Peter. He took a breath, finding it heavy and cold against the knot in his chest.

A flicker of concern softened Loki’s expression. “Spiderling?”

Peter squared his shoulders. “I don’t kill people. I don’t. Not if I don’t have to.”

“Of course not,” Loki said. “Last I checked, it was my knife breaking skulls.”

Peter tried not to shiver. “If you want to help me, you have to agree to do the same. Not kill people, I mean.”

Loki grimaced. “What do you suggest I do instead?”

“Knock them out. Otherwise incapacitate them. I don’t care! Unless they’re gonna end up killing you, don’t… stoop to their level.”

Frowning, the god started walking again. “You see battle as… wrong?”

“I see pointless death as wrong. It doesn’t matter who’s dying; we should do everything we can to prevent it!”

“Including kill?”

Peter growled, speeding his steps and slipping in front of Loki. He walked backward in order to look the god in the eye and said, “Are you not listening to me? Just… if you want to help me, no more murdering people.”

Loki sighed, averting his eyes, and Peter took that as a victory. “Fine. I will not apologize for my actions tonight, but I will change them going forward.”

“Thank you.” Peter nodded a bit stiffly. “Now, what were you saying about your ‘image’ or—ah!”
His foot landed on something that was distinctly not the sidewalk, and Peter’s voice squawked away to nothing. He pinwheeled his arms, finding his balance again as he stumbled over the object, looking even to himself like a deranged parrot.

“What was—”

On the sidewalk between Loki and Peter was a gun.

“Oh.”

Peter knelt, poking at the shaft of metal and pulsing light hesitantly. The thing was somewhat cylindrical, shattered on the edges to expose bits of wire and shards of metal, and contained a heart of crackled, phasing light. It didn’t explode, or burn him, or go off on contact, and Peter looked up. Loki met his eyes, his smile growing wider.

“Woah,” Peter said and poked the thing again. Loki joined him, nimble fingers dancing across the glowing tech. “Think we might have a lead?”

Peter mirrored the god’s smile. “I think we might.”

As he stood, cradling the wrecked gun in hand, the shrill yodel of Ned’s ringtone split the night. Again.

Handing the weapon to Loki without really thinking, Peter fumbled for his phone. Loki took it with a flicker in his expression Peter was too preoccupied to try and read, and Peter quickly pressed the phone to his ear.

“Hey man, what’s up? I was just on my way back,” he lied.

“Actually, I was calling to say maybe you shouldn’t come,” Ned said with a sigh. “Listen to this.”

A crackling chorus came through the phone: Flash and most of the school harmonizing Peter’s derogatory nickname. Peter was torn between rolling his eyes and wincing.

“Sorry, Peter. I guess we’re still losers. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Peter nodded. “See you tomorrow in school.”

He hung up—Ned was never the first to leave a conversation on the off chance whoever it was he was talking to still had something to say. It was something Peter’d learned about his friend through osmosis over the years.

He sighed, stuffing his phone back into his pocket and shrugging at Loki. “Back home then.”

“Taking the… gun thing with us,” Loki agreed. He turned the shaft over in his hands, then swept his ragged cloak aside and secured it to his belt.

There were still stains on the garments, dark and bold. Peter wondered how much of it was blood. And how much was from the man Loki’d killed not half an hour before.

“We gotta get you some new clothes,” Peter said. “Or at least wash those ones.”

He wasn’t exactly sure how he expected the god to react to the suggestion, but it wasn’t what he got; a sharp aversion of the eyes and a pursing of the lips as Loki said, “yes, that would be preferable.”

“O-okay,” Peter said. “I’ll do a load tonight.”
“A load?”

“Of laundry.”

The god nodded. “Wonderful.”

Peter wracked his brain for something the god could wear during said laundry cycle, and decided he’d burn that bridge when he came to it.

_________________________

“What are these?”

“They’re sweatpants,” the spider-child said, as though that explained anything at all. “I think they’re the only things I have big enough to fit you.”

“These—” Loki held the offending garment between finger and thumb— “are not pants. These are… something fuzzy and far, far worse.”

“It’s just for a night!” Peter was smiling, and it didn’t please Loki in the least. “You might even find them nice.”

Loki tried not to hiss. “Never.”

“C’mon, you know those filthy clothes are gonna start stinking soon. To people without enhanced senses,” he added pointedly.

Snapping his gaze to the boy, Loki found an innocent grin and wide eyes.

“I can’t believe I’m letting you talk me into this, mortal,” Loki sighed.

“Me neither. Oh, and here’s the sweatshirt to go with it.”

Just kill me now.

Peter left the room, trying to hide his laughter as Loki scowled at the grey and green mounds of thick fabric in his hands.

But the boy was right—his armor was filthy, filthy with blood and sweat and the dust of a destroyed ship, and Loki couldn’t wear them for a moment longer. So he stripped, peeling the tight clothing from his bruised body, and piled it carefully on the spinning chair beside him. The fabric stuck to the scabs on his thighs and shoulders and Loki winced when they pulled open.

Though he hated to admit it, the soft inner lining of the pants and shirt was quite comfortable against the raw areas of his skin. He craned his neck to observe the baggy sleeves and slowly, hesitantly, stuffed his hands into the single front pocket of the shirt.

Then he cringed and immediately removed them.

Helheim, he looked like Thor did whenever he tried to go undercover.

Loki frowned. If it was late 2016… Thor would find him in Asgard in about ten months. And then Saakar, all the time they’d spend there before Ragnarok, before Thanos invaded their homeless, starboard nation.
Thor’d have so little time.

Loki scrubbed his face with his hands, and the elastic sleeves of his awkward garment flopped against his wrists. Then he turned, gathered his grimey clothing into a ball, and knocked softly on the door of Peter’s room.

The kid slipped back in in seconds, looking Loki up and down.

“You look good,” he began.

“Not a word.”

Peter just grinned, and Loki averted his face to avoid being tricked into doing the same. The boy took his clothes and ducted into the corner of the room, grabbing a basket by the literal tips of his fingers and hauling it towards the door.

Loki stopped him. “How are you doing that?”

“What? Oh, the sticking thing?”

Loki nodded.

Peter set down the basket, resting it on his toes, and flexed his fingers. “I started after the spider bit me. Goes with the rest of my powers, I suppose. But I think it has to do with van der waals interactions and electron shells, like geckos and stuff.”

“Are you speaking in…” Loki searched his memory. “‘References’ again?”

Peter laughed. “No, it’s a science thing. Atoms and electrons and stuff.”

“Ah.”

“I can do it through clothes and things though, so it’s probably more complex than just the van der waals; maybe it’s a friction thing that I manipulate?” Peter shrugged, picking up the basket again. “Not sure.”

“So it’s magic.”

A chuckle. “Quite possibly. I’ll be right back.”

The boy ducked back out, towing the laundry with him, and Loki made his way back to the window. He folded himself up on the sill like he had the night before, hugging his knees to his chest and resting his head against the wood behind him. The hood of the sweatshirt bunched uncomfortably against his shoulders, and Loki winced.

When Peter came back in, the hood was pulled awkwardly over Loki’s ears, and the god glared at him, daring him to speak a single word.

Peter, impressively, kept a straight face, climbing into his own bed. “We’ll make more… nefarious plans tomorrow,” he said with a yawn.

Loki nodded. “It’s an oath.”
Two hours later, clad in baggy sweats and a hoodie, Loki of Asgard slipped from the window and out into the unsleeping dark of Queens. It took not fifteen minutes to find his way to the overpass where the body of the bearded dealer still lay undiscovered.

Loki carefully kept his clothes out of the gore and dipped his fingers into the nearly-dry pool of blood aside the man’s head. With a few quick strokes, three perfect Asgardian runes darkened the pavement above the corpse.

Loki was back in Peter’s window before the rest of the blood had dried.

Chapter End Notes

I irrationally enjoyed this.

Thanks for reading! You know you I feel about feedback *wink wink*, and I'll see you soon!
“How long until we get there?”
Tony raised an eyebrow at the kid and looked him up and down. He’d been doing that a lot for the past couple of hours, as though he could cement this into his memory; Peter with the gleam of youth still in his eyes, excited and healthy.

Alive.

“This isn’t a road-trip,” Tony said. “I’m not going to answer ‘how much longer’ questions.”

Peter raised his hands in surrender. “I just thought, y’know, that you might—”

“About four and a half hours.” Tony rolled his eyes.

“Okay, great! Karen and I are gonna go exploring.”

Tony started forward slightly. “Wha—where?”

Peter shrugged. “Just around. I mean, we’re on an alien spaceship! There’s gotta be some cool stuff around here, maybe something that’ll be helpful later.”

Relaxing, Tony waved an expansive hand. “Fine, yes. Stay close, though. And don’t go shooting yourself into space, young man.”

Peter chuckled. “I’ll be careful.”

“You better be.”

With a haughty little grin, Peter webbed the gangplank above them and swung backward. He already moved with flawless grace in the metallic nanotech of the new suit, and he kept his head uncovered. Tony thought he heard the boy’s eager voice as he spoke to Karen. Figuring the AI had bonded enough to Peter, Tony had programmed her to remain active constantly within the Iron Spider suit, and he didn’t regret it.

Fighting off a smile, Tony turned back to the… windshield? The stars didn’t push in on his psyche with as much pressure as they had before, which was good. Tony aggressively kept his eyes on them; they didn’t control him, anymore.

Four and a half hours. What was his plan? Maybe he’d take a page out of Peter’s book and wander
around the ship for a little bit.

Tony turned, and his gaze was caught by the only shred of color in the grayscale ship: the splash of deep red that was the wizard’s overly sentient garment. He was about to look away, to continue through the cockpit, but he couldn’t help but notice the form curled within said garment.

Strange looked like shit, to put it kindly. He hadn’t when they’d talked, when the wizard had promised he’d let them die for the rock around his neck, but now he seemed to contract into the folds of his Cloak, eyes closed and jaw clenched.

Tony remembered how ragged his screams had been.

Oh, damn it. Sighing, the engineer started off across the gangway, fiddling with the strings of his hoodie. His steps echoed on the metal floor, and Strange looked up sharply. In seconds, the weakness Tony had glimpsed fell away from the wizard’s form. But Tony could still see the ache in his eyes.

“Hey, Strange,” he said, keeling next to the wizard.

“Stark.”

“You alright?”

Strange regarded him, expression impassive. “Fine.”

Tony swept his legs beneath him and sat, grunting as he made himself comfortable. “I mean, Voldemort did just stick you full of needles, so I suppose it’s justified.”

“I’ve had worse.” The Cloak tightened around Strange, somewhat protectively.

Tony shrugged. “It’s not a competition. Just because you’ve hurt before doesn’t mean you don’t hurt now. Trust me.”

Shoulders raising slightly, Strange looked away, and Tony took that as an admission.

“What do you need?” he asked. “Not that I’ve got much to work with, but hey.”

The wizard looked at him sharply. “Why would you help me? I just told you I’d watch you and your…” Strange waved a hand expansively. “die without lifting a finger.”

“And I told you it was a proper moral compass.”

“It’s fucked, if we’re being technical.”

That startled a laugh from Tony. “I mean, you’re not wrong. But seriously, how are you doing?”

Strange stared at him for a long moment, calculating, and Tony stared right back.

Finally, the wizard sighed. “Not great, Stark. I don’t know how those… things… worked, but whatever could modify my insides without leaving a mark on my outside has a bit of residue.”

Tony grunted.

“What does that mean?”

“My fantastically articulate engineer grunt?”
Strange huffed, and a smile flickered across his face before disappearing as soon as it had come. Tony felt strangely proud.

“Yes, that,” the wizard said.

“It means I’d probably rate enigma needles as one of the five best torture devices.”

Strange raised an eyebrow. “Best?”

“Worst, whatever. You know what I mean.”

Strange shifted a bit—orienting a sliver more toward Tony. “Yes,” he said. “I suppose I do.”

“Above or below waterboarding, do you think?” Tony wondered, tapping his fingers on his knees.

“Are you always this enthusiastic about making morbid lists?”

Tony winked. “Absolutely. Sorting for science!”

“I rather think it’s sorting for pointless conversation.”

“That too. You’re welcome to change the subject at any point.”

“Says the engineer, changing the subj—subject.” Strange’s voice faltered on the last word, his breath coming out in a quiet hiss as though he was biting back a surge of pain.

“Easy,” Tony said automatically and reached out to steady the wizard. The Cloak flared up defensively, deflecting Tony’s hands, which he raised in surrender instead. “Sorry.”

“It’s alright,” Strange said—or tried too. It took the man three tries to get the words out audibly. “It’s alright. The Cloak just gets defensive, sometimes.”

“Yeah, what’s the story behind the flying cape?” Tony asked.

“It’s not a cape,” Strange said with the tone of someone who had had this particular conversation many times before. “The Cloak of Levitation is a mystical relic, sentient and powerful. It saved my life once, and we’ve been… partners ever since.”

Tony raised his eyebrows. “Your partner is a cape?”

“It’s not a—yes.”

“What about the grumpy librarian?” Tony wondered. “Wong?”

Strange watched him calculatingly, as though deciding how much to tell him. Eventually, he spoke: “He’s the bookkeeper of the Sanctums—the storyteller, the protector of lore.”

“Hm.”

“The Cloak and I spend most of our time in New York. Wong bounces between the Sanctums, making sure the apprentices and Masters have what they need.” Strange shifted again, and the Cloak fluttered beneath the wizard’s hands—they were somewhat viciously scarred, Tony observed. And still trembling.

They were silent, for a moment.
“Sounds lonely,” Tony finally said. Strange didn’t respond. But the Cloak pulled a little closer around him, and Tony thought that was all the answer he needed.

**Earth-200004: October 2016**

Tony jerked back into consciousness with a sharpened sort of *crack*, awakening with a splintering of awareness instead of slowly drifting as was normal with a dream, or wrenching as was average of a nightmare. He sat up, breathing deep, but the sharpness didn’t linger. His lungs expanded easily, and Tony frowned.

“Nightmare, boss?” FRIDAY asked softly from the phone on the table beside him. The hotel was nice, astonishingly so, but even it couldn’t interface a fully functioning AI without significant renovation, so here they were.

“No…” Tony said hesitantly. “Just a weirdly vibrant dream. The kid was there, and we were in space… and there was a pincushion wizard.”

FRIDAY flickered the light of the screen—her way of laughing. “Sounds mostly normal, boss.”

Tony nodded slowly. “Yeah,” he said. “I suppose you’re right.”

But as he folded himself back beneath the thin blankets of his bed, as FRIDAY dimmed the screen again, Tony found himself buzzing with an anxious sort of energy. It was different from the festering nervousness of a nightmare, however; more agitated than fearful, like he’d been interrupted during something comfortable and right.

Tony sat up again, swinging his legs over the side of the bed and resting his elbows on his knees. “That’s weird. That’s very weird,” he muttered.

“What is?”

“Just this feeling. It’s… detached. Disconnected.”

“Not normal?”

Tony shook his head. “Not at all normal. It’s fading, though, so I don’t think I’m going to drop dead or anything.”

FRIDAY flickered the light again. “That would be preferable, boss.”

Tony stood, stretching in the inky darkness of the room. The motion-sensing lights faded on, comfortably dim, and Tony made his way around the screen to the kitchen tucked into the corner. He splashed a bit of cold water onto his hands, then onto his face, and the agitation in his chest loosened a bit more.

It wasn’t a bad feeling, though. Just strange. But it was still uncomfortable, in that way the sensation of rough wood wasn’t *painful*, just unnerving.

Tony filled a mug with lukewarm water, too distracted to make anything else, and mozied back to the bed. He sat on the end, then leaned back to swipe FRIDAY’s phone.

“Pull up something relevant,” he said. “Anything changed with the UN in the last seven hours?
FRIDAY searched for about two seconds. “No, boss. All’s quiet nationally—well, as much as it can be.”

“Good.” That did mean he had to find some other stimulation for his now-awake mind, however, so he opened the news for New York for some background noise and wandered over to his luggage.

He found himself a few blank pieces of graph paper—so what if they were somewhat crumpled?—and slipped into the plush chair aside the table. The buzz of newscast voices faded into the background as he began to sketch, aimless calculations and diagrams appearing beneath his pencil. He scribbled about nanotech, about housing the particles within arc-reactors, which could be possible with the vibranium Wakanda could provide him. Hopefully soon; he was still in the waiting list with the Outreach Center.

Which was… new. Him, on a wait list? It was humbling, exhilarating, and angering all at the same time, and Tony thought he might love it.

There were other leaders in this changing world, and they were just as swamped as he was.

He tuned back into the quiet words of the NYC news when the word dead drifted into his ears, pivoting to peer at the screen.

*Unidentified Man found Dead in Queens Coast Area.*

Tony frowned. They didn’t usually report murders—there were, unfortunately, far too many of them in the city area. So he figured there had to be something special about this one and scooched a bit closer to the screen.

The narrator was still speaking, and FRIDAY obligingly increased the volume a bit.

“No identification was collected from the body, so there was no way to explain the writing discovered beside it. The signs seem to be written in the dead man’s own blood, and come from an alphabet authorities have yet to identify.”

Tony’s frown deepened, his fingers tapping the table beside him. “Pause it.”

FRIDAY did, and Tony craned down to squint at the angular letters in the somewhat blurry picture. No, not letters—glyphs. *Runes.*

“Run that through the Asgardian translator, will you?” Tony said. His tapping sped up considerably.

“Already on it.”

Tony stood, pacing anxiously aside the table as FRIDAY calculated. It was a stretch, but maybe, *maybe*…

“Translation successful,” FRIDAY said, sounding confused.

Tony swiped phone off the table, peering at the words now floating above the runes.

*’Performance issues aren’t uncommon.’*

Every thought went out of Tony’s head.
Four minutes later, FRIDAY’s voice finally filtered into his white-hot mind. “Boss? Boss!”

Tony choked in a breath—then another, and another, forcing his lungs to contract in a slower rhythm. He flexed his hands, standing on shaky legs, and fumbled for the phone on the carpet beside him.

“Call Rhodey,” he managed. “And Vision, if you can.”

“Right away,” FRIDAY said, concern in her automated voice.

Despite the hour, Rhodey answered within moments. “Hey, Tones, what is it?”

Tony swallowed. “We’ve got a problem,” he said, voice slightly horse. “New York.”

“I’ll be there by tomorrow morning.”

Chapter End Notes

S&T FINALLY INTERACTED BWAHAHAHAHA Okay it was only in a dream sequence but THEY HAD A CONVERSATION

Loki sees opportunity. Loki takes opportunity. Loki takes the Avengers spotlight and grins while he does it.
“Are you sssure you should be hitting the unidentified alien weapon with a hammer?”

Peter shrugged, Loki’s form slipping slightly beneath his shirt, and continued whacking the casing of the glowing purple object before him. The clang of the hammer was sharp in his enhanced ears, but years of practice kept Peter from wincing at the noise.

Another strike, and the purple core came partially free of its cell. “Oh,” Peter said, dropping the hammer and prying at the metal with strong fingers. Loki hissed a complaint and tightened his hold around Peter’s neck and shoulder.

“Why don’t you just turn into a bug or something?” Peter asked.

“Becaussse it’s far too easssy to kill a bug,” Loki responded, his tail flicking. Peter squirmed; the sensation was ticklish.

“Okay, a bird then!”

“You want a bird in your shirt?”

“What?” Peter paused. “No, you’d like, fly around or something.”

Loki didn’t answer, but Peter could feel the incredulity oozing from the serpent. He tried not to laugh.

The shop door swung open, and Peter looked up. Ned bustled in right before the bell rang, waving to Peter as he set his backpack down and made his way over. “Hey, thanks for bailing on me,” he said.

Peter gestured to the weapon. “Yeah, well, something came up.”

“Oh, what is that?” Ned wondered, leaning in toward the core.

Peter refrained from shrugging; Loki’d probably hiss again. “Dunno. Some guy tried to vaporize me with it.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah.”
“Awesome!” Ned squeaked.

Peter regarded him.

“Oh,” the boy hastily amended, “I mean, not awesome. Totally uncool of that guy. So scary.”

Peter rolled his eyes and went back to the casing. “Look, I think it’s a power source.”

Humming, Ned prodded the inner metal, pulling at a few wires. His eyes danced with curious excitement, and Peter moved back to let him make his deductions.

“Yeah, but it’s connected to all these microprocessors,” the boy said. He pointed to a circuit board to the left of the core. “That’s an inductive charging plate. That’s what I use to charge my toothbrush.”

Peter nodded. “Whoever’s making these weapons is obviously combining alien tech with ours.”

Loki snorted, but the sound was thankfully covered up by Ned’s delighted, “That is literally the coolest sentence anyone has ever said.”

Peter smiled.

“I just want to thank you,” Ned continued, “for letting me be part of your journey into this amazing —”

Peter smacked the hammer into the core with significantly more force, and the thing slid from its niche with a screech of metal. It’s light bathed their hands, and they quickly looked toward the shop teacher, hoping he hadn’t noticed.

But Mr. Hapgood didn’t look up, simply calling out, “Keep your fingers clear of the blades.”

Peter turned back to the glowing… thing… and narrowed his eyes. “I gotta figure out what this thing is and who makes it.”

Ned nodded. “We’ll go to the lab after class and run some tests.”

The serpent in Peter’s clothes paused, and Peter hesitated a moment. But he needed this information, and Ned could and would help him get it.

Ned would understand. He always did.

“Let’s do it.”

They never made it to tests.

Trotting down the hallway later that day, Ned mused to Peter, “So, it’s been a helluva week for you, then.”

You have no idea. “Probably for you, too. Off to DC with decathlon tomorrow, right?”

Ned nodded. “I’m a bit nervous… wish you could be coming.”

“Yeah, me too. But I’ve got stuff to do here, it’s fine.”
Another nod from his friend. “Stuff, indeed. First, I say we put the glowy thing in the mass spectrometer.”

Peter hummed. “First, we gotta come up with a better name than ‘glowy thing.’”

He shifted, pulling his backpack up over his shoulders a bit more. Loki had reluctantly agreed to stay inside it—provided the zipper was half open—so Peter didn’t have the distraction of a snake in his shirt for the moment.

Instead, he had the distraction of a snake in his backpack.

“You’re right,” Ned said thoughtfully.

But Peter had stopped listening; there was a pair of men edging in through the doors of the school. One of them familiar.

Peter froze. “Crap!”

He threw himself sideways, ducking into the shelter of a branching hallway. Ned stared at him, befuddled.

Beckoning frantically, Peter hissed, “come here, come on, come on, come on!”

In his usual waddling fashion, Ned bumbled over to join Peter behind the corner.

The men conversed about nothing in hushed voices, and Peter narrowed his eyes at them. *What are you doing here?*

“That’s one of the guys that tried to kill me,” Peter explained to Ned before the boy could ask and break their silence.

“What?”

“Yeah, the tall, bald one.” *Mr. Loki killed the other…* 

Ned grabbed his shoulder. “We’ve gotta get out of here.”

Peter extricated himself of the other boy’s grip and shook his head. “No, no, I gotta follow them. Maybe they can lead me to the guy that dropped me and—me in the lake.”

Ned blanched. “Someone dropped you in a lake?”

“Yeah, it was not good,” Peter replied, preoccupied by the two men ducking into a classroom.

Ned’s voice dropped to a whisper. “Peter—”

In the same whisper, Peter cut him off. “No. Stay there, Ned.”

Before the other boy could reply, Peter slunk down the hallway, low and quick. He stuck to the edges, reaching the door of the shop classroom where the men had disappeared, then vaulted across the hall to slip down the stairs.

The criminals were rummaging through the half-finished projects and strewn tools, still talking.

“Can you imagine what the boss would say if he knew where we were?” said one—not the guy Peter recognized. Baldy wasn’t listening to his companion, instead swinging some sort of scanning device around the room.
“It’s saying there was an energy pulse right here,” he said.

Peter slipped his bag off his shoulders, ducking beneath a table in the back of the room. “Mr. Loki!” he hissed, pressing himself to the underside of the desk.

Loki had already slithered to the ground, however, his eyes fixed on the men. “Sssee them,” he replied. Quick as a whip, the snake zipped toward the men, disappearing into the shadows beneath a power saw.

“There’s no sign of the weapon, Schultz. And even if it was here, now it’s gone,” said the first man.

Baldy nodded. “So are we.”

He turned back toward the stairs, and Peter held his breath, flattening himself to the table above him. His heartbeat was deafening in his ears, as were the footsteps of the man—Schultz—as they approached his hiding place.

But it was only for a tense moment, and then the two men were padding back up the stairs. Peter extended a wrist, carefully aiming the specialty button of his web-shooter.

With a flick of his finger, a tiny robotic tracker crawled up Schultz’s pant leg.

And as the door banged shut, Peter thought he saw the flutter of ebony wings slip through to trail the retreating criminals.

Peter smiled.

The setting sun shining across his lustrous feathers, Loki coasted the thermals above Queens and screeched his frustration to the wind. Nine hours—he’d followed the bumbling idiots for nine hours and nothing had come of it. Nothing.

The men had simply sent a few texts Loki hadn’t been able to get close enough to read, then went home. To two separate parts of town, and Loki was only one bird—he couldn’t watch both of them. On a whim, he’d chosen the unknown man, but after what felt like years, the idiot hadn’t left his run-down apartment on the edge of Brooklyn.

So Loki had circled back, attempting to find Baldy and failing. Coasting back and forth between Brooklyn and Queens had done nothing, either—the first man was as useless as he’d been when Loki had eyes on him.

Loki angled his wings and dropped lower to the streets. His anatomy wasn’t that of any native bird—or any bird at all—for he hadn’t decided on one when he’d shifted, and this had worked. He was black, of course, and his wings sliced through the air like a hawk despite his small, songbird size. His tail stretched long behind him—more magpie than sparrow.

He banked, catching the gust of a passing car to turn him toward Peter’s apartment building. Hopefully the kid had a plan that didn’t involve Loki uselessly trailing a boring old man around New York until he accidentally found his secret lair.

Fluttering to a stop on Peter’s open windowsill, Loki was about to shift when a distinctly not Peter voice called out from inside.
“Hey look at that guy!”

Loki peered into the room; Peter’s friend, the Ned kid, was pointing at him. A holographic projection of the city hovered before his other hand.

Peter, previously hanging upside down and stuffing his face with something crunchy, folded himself up to the top bunk to follow Ned’s finger. “Oh, uh,” he said, meeting Loki’s gaze and jumping down from the bed. A thousand thoughts seemed to flicker through the boy’s eyes, and Loki was content to wait for whatever he decided.

“Did you find anything?” Peter finally asked, a bit hesitant as he watched Ned from the side of his eye.

Loki shook his head.

Ned stared. “Dude… are you talking to the bird? Do you have a bird sidekick?”

_Bird sidekick._ Loki tried not to be offended.

“Er, no, not exactly,” Peter said. “Listen, uh… okay you have to promise not to freak out.”

“That you can talk to birds?” Ned was grinning widely. “Too late.”

“No, I can’t talk to birds—” Peter rubbed his face, then turned his gaze to Loki. “You can shift, it’s fine. I think.”

Loki regarded Ned. “Are you sure?” he chirped.

The boy’s eyes went as wide as dinner plates—wider.

“Yeah. You can’t tell anyone about this, either, Ned. Okay?”


Loki sighed, then spread his wings and leapt into the room. He released the magic coursing through his form and let his cells snap back into their original forms, jumping as a bird but hitting the ground as Loki.

He straightened, rearranging his now-clean Asgardian leathers as he might preen his feathers.

Ned let out a strangled scream, falling off the bed. The hologram fizzled out of existence as he collided with the floor, and Loki pursed his lips.


“Greetings Ned, friend of Peter.” It was all Loki could do to keep from rolling his eyes.

“Dude,” the boy squeaked, fumbling blindly for Peter. “That’s… that’s Loki, that’s the guy from the battle, that’s Thor’s brother, that’s… there’s a mass murderer in your bedroom!”

Loki winced, unfortunately finding nothing to correct the boy on. “At your service.”

Peter jumped in. “He’s here to help me save the world.”
Loki whipped his gaze to the boy, brows furrowing.

“Sorry,” Peter amended. “I’m helping him save the world.”

Ned still looked considerably like a beached whale. “F-from what?”

“From an alien that isn’t here yet. He’s from the future,” Peter said. “Well, a future.”

“What?!”

Loki sighed, materializing his dagger just to see Ned squirm. Peter glared at him.

“It’s a long story,” Loki said, padding across the room. He stepped over Ned, peering down at him with distaste, before continuing to the bedside table and opening the second drawer. He pulled out the list, glancing over the names and back to Ned, then stowed it away again.

“Open up the tracker again, would you, Ned? I’ll explain while we wait.”

Loki stopped. “Tracker?”

“Yeah, I got a bug on the guys.”

“And you let me flap around New York for nine hours?”

Peter’s face fell. “Uh…”

Loki sighed, dismissing the boy’s worry with a gesture and picking his way back across the room.

“So anyway,” Peter said, beckoning Ned. The other boy quickly brought his wrist up to project the hologram.

Loki felt Ned’s eyes on him as he perched back on his windowsill, and flicked his eyes to meet the boy’s. Ned quickly averted his own.

Loki smirked, turning his attention back to Peter, who had launched into gesticulating explanation. It was entertaining to watch: Peter’s words, excited at some points and confused at others, and Ned’s face, becoming ever-more awestruck.

Eventually, the fear in Ned’s eyes dissipated. Eventually, there were tentative questions, stronger when Loki responded without hostility, if without respect. Eventually, the boy was smiling, and Peter’s relief was tangible.

And eventually, Ned asked the question. “Why did you attack us?” he wondered as the tracker in the hologram left Jersey.

Loki turned, blinking slowly. It had only been a matter of time, he supposed. Honestly, he it was a miracle Peter hadn’t asked yet. “What do you want me to tell you?”


Loki looked at him, expression unwavering, for a long moment.

And then he sighed, turning away from the boys and folding into the window. He studied the grains of the wood as he sorted through his words, through the possible answers and the possible statements.
“I was angry and miserable and I let my guard down,” he finally said.

“You let your guard down?” Peter blinked, confused.

Loki didn’t look up. “Usually I have wards. Usually I can tell when my thoughts are… not my own. Looking back, it was so obvious—all that hate, that spite. Before, with Odin… it was all pride, pride and ambition and blindness, but when Thanos found me…”

“Wait, you were working for Thanos in New York?” Peter demanded, standing up. “I thought you were his enemy! I thought he was the enemy!”

“He is!” Loki said. *Odin, this is not going well.* “When I fell from Asgard, I arrived across the universe, in his realm. He offered me another chance, gave me a weapon; a scepter containing a power I didn’t yet know. We made a pact; I would rule Earth in exchange for the Tesseract—the Space Stone, though I did not yet know that either.” Loki shook his head. “The scepter was a Stone, as well: Mind. And I wasn’t aware, but as I had used it to control others, Thanos used it to control me.”

The teenagers drew sharp breaths, and Loki glared at the wood of the windowsill.

“It was subtle. So subtle I didn’t notice. *No one noticed.* The scepter amplified my hate—I had plenty of that at the time—and I directed the extra to fuel my desire to harm you Midgardians.”

“You wanted to hurt us already?” Ned asked quietly.

Loki nodded. “You were tools. And then ends justify the means; they always have, and they always will.”

He wasn’t looking, and didn’t see Peter shake his head in disagreement.

“What happened in New York was an exaggeration. Of myself, of my emotions, of my convictions. But it was an exaggeration that happened, and an exaggeration that killed.”

Peter and Ned were silent, and Loki knew what they were waiting for.

So he took a long, deep breath and steeled himself, closing his eyes. His brother’s face flickered in the darkness behind them. Thor’s words in the elevator on Sakaar—accepting him, *understanding* him, or at least offering to—rang in his ears.

“And for that, I am sorry.”

And Loki found he meant it.

Chapter End Notes

*jazz hands*

Think I’ll skip my YouTube outro today
Before it's Too Late

Chapter Notes

Meanwhile, in the original timeline...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Earth-199999: September 2023

Unsurprisingly, the Sanctum didn’t have any pliers. Which was probably a good thing, for Stephen wasn’t very adept with said tools anyway—and this task was frustrating enough as it was.

He was working with wire and cloth to create a cage, tied on the edges with a muddy strip of twine he’d found tying the old spoons together in the ‘silver’ware drawer in the kitchen. Using the flat of a dagger for leverage as his shaking fingers failed to grip the cage with enough strength, he forced the Stone into the hollow of the cage and sat back, blowing out a long breath.

“Step down from the Eye, huh?” he said to the Stone, and the Cloak bobbed in affirmation. Through the unevenly cut and sewn fabric—Stephen was no longer skilled with a needle—the pulsing green light of the Time Stone seemed unimpressed.

“I don’t know what to make of this thing, anymore,” Stephen murmured, looking to the Cloak. “I mean, I was in its memories. It can’t just be a weapon, just a tool…”

The Cloak gestured to itself, and Stephen shrugged.

“I don’t think it’s like you,” he said, smiling a bit. “You’ve got a far better sense of humor.”

The Cloak puffed its collar, and Stephen took a friendly fist of its fabric, nudging it with his elbow. It wrapped around his hand and yanked him up, towing him around for a moment as he pretended to fight its grip.

“Ah!” he yelped. “And the Cloak of Levitation turns on its master!”

The Cloak somersaulted, enveloping him from the front and sending them both crashing to the hardwood floor of the library. Stephen rolled out from under it and pointed his sling-ringed finger in its direction.

“Has a demon found root in its Mystic soul?” he wondered dramatically. The Cloak raised its corners above its collar and jumped toward him.

Catching it, Stephen rolled sideways over the floor, colliding with a bookshelf. “Or has it finally spied the opportunity to enact a long-awaited plot? Does it see its destiny within its grasp?”

The Cloak paused, cocking its clasps at him. Then it shook its collar.

Stephen immediately amended, “but the Sorcerer Supreme knows the loyalty of his relic, that it would never betray him as such!”
The Cloak perked up again, pushing Stephen back as he tried to sit up. Laughing, Stephen raised his arms to protect his face as the Cloak buffeted him with its corners. The thick red fabric slapped against the bandages of his hands and forearms. Stephen surged up to wrap his arms around the excited blanket.

The Cloak wriggled out of his grip, ducking over him and catching his head as it went. Stephen’s amused cry was muffled by cloth, and he went sprawling again, just managing to pull away from the playful grip of his relic and surging to his feet.

“Ha!” he said, spinning to face the Cloak.

It swayed like a cobra, its collars flapping, and Stephen grinned.

He conjured his mandala shields, and the energy deflected the Cloak as it came at him again. “What has become of the sorcerer’s great companion?” he narrated. “It’s unknown, but—”

His next words were cut off in a chuckle as the Cloak went for his legs and Stephen hopped up, tucking his knees to his chest. He landed on the Cloak, pinning it to the ground for a moment, before the relic surged up and he lost his balance. Falling into the folds of the Cloak with an *oomf*, Stephen tried to roll aside, but it bundled him up and towed them both into the air.

Fighting out of the folds, Stephen blasted the Cloak back with a small surge of magic. It waved its corners at him, and Stephen shrugged, shaking his head.

“Not cheating,” he objected through his panting breaths. “You can fly!”

The Cloak waved away his words and went to fly at him again, but Stephen raised a hand.

“Enough, sorry.”

The Cloak drooped.

Stephen ran a shaking hand over its hem. “We’ve got work to do, remember?” His other hand unconsciously touched the place behind his ear where his neck met his jaw.

The Cloak huffed—somehow—but nodded, settling snuggly over Stephen’s shoulders.

They made their way back through the library, and Stephen paused to swipe the Time Stone off the table. Carefully, he slipped the awkward pendent over his head, the twine cutting into the skin of his neck uncomfortably. Stephen scratched at it.

The Stone bounced once against his chest, then settled atop the base of his sternum. It’s powerful aura felt natural, felt right, hanging there—like the Eye. Stephen sighed and tucked the thing inside his shirt.

He made his way to his nook in the back of the library before he propelled himself into his astral form. The Cloak followed. Stephen stretched his phantom limbs and blew out a breath, glancing toward it.

“Thank you,” he said.

He didn’t have to clarify what for.

They sat, and Stephen lifted the Stone into his palm. “Alright then,” he huffed. “We’ve got all the time in the world. Now, what to do with it?”
The Cloak shrugged.

“We can’t go back and save Stark, we can’t go back and save anyone. We’d just save them in another, entirely different story, sticking them in a new universe—and trapping ourselves there as well.”

He looked at the Cloak, which was gesticulating something he didn’t understand. Stephen kept talking anyway.

“Time travel with the Stone is different then time travel through the quantum realm, like that the Avengers were utilizing,” he explained. “It doesn’t travel through dimensions, nor through space—it’s Time, in its purest form. So, if you go back and change something, splitting a new timeline, you and the Stone and up trapped in that new timeline, correct?”

The Cloak nodded.

“If you attempted to go… ‘back to the future’ you’d end up in the future of that specific timeline…” he trailed off, frowning.

The Cloak flapped its corners, miming separation. Stephen blinked.

“Oh. That choice—to go forward in time—becomes a choice that determines which ultimate future that timeline ends up following,” Stephen said. “Right?”

Fluttering its affirmation, the Cloak drifted upward slightly.

“Anyway,” Stephen said. “That’s good to know. Traveling into the future is like traveling into the past—it determines the past. Just like I can’t change something that lead to my future by traveling into the past, once I arrive in the future, the past that got me there cannot be changed.”

A bob.

“You’re right, that doesn’t really help with our puzzle.” Stephen tapped his chin, standing on astral feet and drifting through the library. “I think it’s time to consult the ancients. Wong’s used to me breaking the wards on his forbidden books by now, anyway.”

“No, no, no!” Stephen snarled, hurling the astral form of yet another priceless tome at the wall. “Unhelpful!”

The Cloak flared its collars at the fallen book, backing Stephen up.

“There has to be a way.” Stephen drifted raggedly through a bookshelf, not even noticing the taste of magic in his mouth as he passed through, and ran his hands through his hair.

But the books had nothing; the only possibility seemed to be transplanting aspects of one dimension into another. He could take the Tony Stark, the Natasha Romanoff, of one dimension and bring them into this one, but even that was an impermanent solution. The inhabitants of a universe, sentient or otherwise, belonged in that universe—on more than just a mental level. Their energies were designed, born, and shaped by the specific signatures of their home, and removing them would sicken their soul and Mystic potential.

Perhaps it could work with a bonded universe—a parallel one. The individual would be
uncomfortable, but not incompatible with the new dimension and timeline. But parallel dimensions were hard to come by; they had to have the same signature in Time, which was almost impossible by natural means. If there was even a slight difference in the history of that world, it’d force a wedge between the dimensions, diverging them. And then, instead of sister universes, you had unpaired, separate parts of the multiverse.

And besides, transplanting was just plain wrong. Kidnapping someone and releasing them in a new dimension… that was not a solution. It wasn’t saving that person, it was dooming them. And it was dooming the world they came from.

“Why…?” Stephen muttered. “There has to be a way!”

And if there wasn’t, he demanded an explanation. And he wouldn’t settle for ‘because the multiverse just works that way.’

Fuck the multiverse. Fuck this timeline, fuck the natural laws, fuck the impossibilities thrust upon him.

Fuck everything.

The Cloak settled on his shoulders, and Stephen hardly noticed.

“Looks like we’re on our own,” he said, watching the books with all the disapproval he could muster.

Then he craned his head to look at the Cloak. “Think you can find me some parchment? I need to draw this out.”

“Can we… merge dimensions?” Stephen wondered quietly, unknown hours later.

The Cloak looked up.

“Bring universes together. Sew them into one at the seams. Combine them and the aspects within,” Stephen elaborated.

The Cloak mimed an explosion between its corners.

“I know it would take untold energies, but we *have* untold energies.” Stephen lifted the pendent around his neck, glowing all the brighter in the astral dimension.

The Cloak just mimed another explosion.

Stephen sighed, dropping in energy level so he could flop down into the physical manifestation of the chair beneath him. “I suppose you’re right,” he said. “The consequences of universes with… different Time signatures, different contents, would be unquantifiable. If, in one universe, I had a different past and six arms, what would me in the merged universe look like? Would I have four arms and all the memories? Or none of it? Or would one universe simply be eliminated by the stronger universe?”

The Cloak shrugged.

“I know, I know, that’s your point.” Stephen massaged his temples.
Then he looked up.

“What if they… did have the same Time signatures? If they shared an astral dimension in parellity. Just theoretically, if two universes had the same shape in the timestream, if they were bonded through that—could you merge them?” Of course, it would just be combining two identical histories and change nothing in either universe, but could the concept be pulled off?

The Cloak was still for a long, long moment.

And then it bobbed—just once. Hesitantly.

“Theoretically,” Stephen said, and smiled.

“Strange!”

Stephen looked up sharply, gaze whipping back to the edge of the library where his physical form was tucked away. Cursing slightly, he beckoned to the Cloak and zipped toward the voice. It was conventional when conversing between sorcerers to return to one’s physical body—not that Stephen often followed conventionality—so Stephen slipped down an energy level to open his actual eyes. He found Wong staring at him, eyes locked on the circle of green light pooling at Stephen’s sternum.

Stephen held in another curse, his hand flying up to cover the amulet at his throat—too late.

“What have you done?” Wong murmured, kneeling before Stephen. There was a tremble in his voice—a tremble. Stephen had never heard such fear from the librarian before.

Shit.

“Nothing,” Stephen said truthfully.

Wong snarled, “that’s the Time Stone. It’s supposed to be in 2014—you’ve doomed a reality, Strange!”

Stephen shook his head, raising his hands. “No. Wong, listen to me; I haven’t done anything. Rogers brought the Stone back just the way he was supposed to, and the world ticked on, just the way it was supposed to.”

“Then how is it here? How can you possibly have it?”

Standing on shaky legs, Stephen shook away the breaking headache and replied, “because Thanos never destroyed it. He used it to destroy the other Stones, but it never released Time into the fabric of the universe, which allowed our timeline to be manipulated by the Avengers.”

Wong shook his head, his slight smile both fond and irate. “I see you’ve done your research.”

Stephen just nodded. “The timeline is still whole.”

“I know—I’d feel it if not. We all would; you are aware of that?”

Another nod.

“Good.” Wong extended a hand. “We should take the Stone back to Kamar-Taj. Protect it, as we have before.”
Stephen shrank back, a scarred hand catching Wong’s wrist. “Not yet,” he said. “Not… I have something to do, first.”

With the air of someone who’d known this was coming, Wong closed his eyes. “Stephen,” he said. “You have to stop this.”

“I’m almost there, Wong.”

“You aren’t, and you know it. You will never find what you’re looking for, Strange—the task you’ve embarked on is impossible. Simply impossible. He’s dead, they’re all dead, and that’s permanent.”

But it had never been permanent before. Stephen had died so many times, and here he was. Half the universe had died, and here they were.

Nothing was impossible.

And when you held Time in your fist, nothing was permanent.

“You need to stop,” Wong said once more.

Stephen could only shake his head, again and again and again, rubbing the spot of neck behind his ear.

“This is impossible!”

“No!” Stephen’s words erupted with a passion he hadn’t realized had been growing. “There’s a chance, there’s a way—universes can be merged, dimensions can be combined. They can fill the gaps within the others, if their signatures in time are identical. I know that the only way to have identical signatures is to have identical timelines, but if we can find a way to bind universes with different events, then maybe—”

Wong cut him off. “You ignore the laws of our universe—the laws of our Order! You are treading on the lines of blasphemy, Strange. Treason.”

“Stop me, then,” Stephen said, turning to face his elder, his fellow sorcerer, his friend.

Wong met his eyes, unblinking. Stephen did not waver.

And then Wong looked away, a sigh slumping through his form. “I’m not going to stop you, Strange. I don’t want to stop you. And I wish as much as you that the universe could allow this, but it simply cannot. We are specks, mere atoms, in a multiverse we cannot quantify—there is nothing you can do, nothing any of us can do, to command it. It is not in our power, and it is not our place.”

Stephen could only give the truth. “I don’t care.”

Wong put a hand on his shoulder. “I know.”

And then he turned, stepping back into the library, leaving Stephen behind. He paused only once, in the doorway of the Sanctum, and looked back at the sorcerer in the bookshelves.

“I wish you well, Strange,” Wong said, expression unreadable. “You’re an honorable man, a good one. I hope you realize that, before it’s too late.”

And then the librarian left, the door closing behind him with barely a whisper.
When Stephen turned back to the books, to the Stone, there were tears slipping over his cheeks.

Because that had been a farewell.

And maybe Wong was never coming through that door again.

Chapter End Notes

The Cloak is the best ever. Yup yup yup.

Thanks for reading! You know how I feel about feedback *hint hint nudge nudge* and I'll see everybody soon. :)

Earth-200004: October 2016

“‘Performance issues aren’t uncommon.’” Rhodey frowned, sitting back and crossing his arms before the screen. “What sort of drivel is that?”

Tony, pacing behind him, waved his hands somewhat wildly. From the doorway, Vision drifted a bit closer and placed a calming hand on Tony’s shoulder. Tony hardly noticed.


His friend looked up abruptly. “What are you saying?”

Tony sighed, scrubbing his face with his hands. His fingernails pressed into his hairline and he knew he probably looked frazzled out of his mind—which wasn’t completely untrue.

“I’m saying there’s Asgardian runes written in a weapons dealer’s blood, spelling out specific words I said to the God of Mischief when he was trying to destroy the world! Words other people see simply as ‘drivel’. I’m saying he’s back.”

Rhodey stood, spinning the chair on its wheels and peering at the screen even closer. “Maybe you’re jumping to—”

“What else could it be?”

The other man was silent, and Tony nodded, smirking nervously.

“I believe it’s a logical jump,” Vision said from behind him. “The signs point to Loki.”

“So what do we do?” Rhodes wondered. “Can we get in touch with Thor? Can we do anything?”

Tony shrugged helplessly. “We can’t speed dial Asgard, no. ‘Operator, I’d like the God of Thunder, if you would?’ No. Thor will turn up. Maybe. Hopefully. If he ever even realizes his shape-shifting, sorcerer brother isn’t where he’s supposed to be.”

“Shit.” Rhodey blew out a breath.

“He’s a threat large enough to warrant Avengers involvement,” Vision said, and it wasn’t really a question.

Tony nodded. “I’ve already contacted the Accords Council—we’ll get clearance. I’m going to DC later today to figure shit out, too, and hopefully they’ll realize this needs to be kept quiet to avoid mass panic…”

“They’re good at quiet,” Rhodey said, a bit ruefully.

Tony turned back to the image, and Vision trotted up to his shoulder; Tony rotated the screen so the
android could see it better.

“What does he want?” Tony demanded, falling back into the chair Rhodes had recently vacated. “What could he possibly be here for—why the weapons? Why the message? Why for me?”

His knee bounced involuntarily, and Tony glared at it, as though he could stop the nervously spasming muscles with the sheer force of his will. The knee kept bouncing.

No one answered—no one had an answer. But Vision leaned in, one graceful finger tapping the screen. “You believe this connected to a… weapons deal within the city?”

“Yeah. The Spiderling told me about it—this matches what he described.”

Rhodey scoffed. “And you tracked his suit back to where it was last night and found it matched this location.”

Well, he wasn’t wrong. Tony waved a dismissive hand and stood up again, tugging at his cuffs and huffing an inhale. “Which is another problem. This… flying vulture guy suddenly got a lot more dangerous. I can’t—the kid could—I’ve got Happy monitoring him as closely as he can, but I doubt it’s going to do much. He’s as stubborn as I am.”

“Lord help us,” Rhodes muttered.

Vision frowned. “Why not invite him to assist? If this really is an otherworldly problem, Spider-Man could be of help. He knows the city.”

Shaking his head, Tony clicked out of the image and pulled up the 2012 file he’d started on Loki—now one of the biggest in the database. “No,” he muttered. “No, no, no, absolutely not.”

“Viz’s got a point, Tones.” Rhodes fidgeted a bit closer. “We could at least keep an eye on him, that way.”

Tony whirled. “Can you even hear yourself? This is Loki! He killed 80 people in mere hours, he brought the end of the world to our doorstep—I’m not putting him up against a kid. I’m not. It’s not happening, end of discussion.”

Rhodes raised his hands in surrender, making his way across the room to pull up another wheeling chair. “Alright, alright. So, what do we know?”

In the corner, FRIDAY obligingly opened a blank holoscreen, ready to record their discussion and help organize thoughts. Tony blinked—for a long time—and spun to face his companions.

It was time to plan this shit.

“You are one lucky bastard, Peter Parker,” Ned hissed as they filed into the bus. Their stuffed backpacks forced them slightly apart, but the clamoring Decathlon team still managed to invade Peter’s personal space as they fought for entry into the vehicle.

“I know,” Peter replied, slipping into the first empty bench he found. “Hey, apparently I’m just too awesome to leave behind.”

“Well, we knew that,” Ned laughed. “I’m just saying; consequences for your actions, much?”

“Lame.”
Shrugging out of his backpack and stuffing it beneath the bus seat, Peter scooted in toward the window. Ned sat across the center walkway to let Peter have the bench to himself; it was a mutual understanding that Peter was more comfortable with more space, and now Ned knew why.

Peter tapped three times in quick succession against the window, trying not to look super suspicious as he did so. After a moment, the unamused face of a common raven peeked down from the roof of the bus. Peter gave it a thumbs up.

“Is that Loki?” Ned wondered.

Peter shushed him. “What do you think?”

“Awesome.”

The bustle of the vehicle died down as the team found their seats. Peter’s gaze followed Liz as she folded herself into one of the front benches, the review packet in her arms. He was pretty sure she wrote the things herself, researching from previous national tests and folding the most difficult questions together. However she did it, it worked; they were on their way to nationals, after all.

Peter wiped the somewhat goofy grin from his face as quickly as he could, ducking behind the backrest of the seat in front of him. The bus swayed as it pulled away from the school, and the team let out a collective whoop when they began to weave through New York.

As they rolled out onto the highway, making their way down toward DC, the sounds of the city traffic quieted enough for voices to be heard through the whole bus. Liz stood up, and the chattering students immediately quieted when her voice rang through the bus.

“Ready, everyone?”

Abe pumped his fists, giving an enthusiastic affirmative that spoke for everyone.

Or, most everyone. Michelle, in the back of the bus, didn’t look up from whichever world problem she was currently solving in her notebook. But Peter knew better than to think she wasn’t spring-loaded to answer review questions, so he didn’t hesitate to pass her a bell when they were handed down to him.

“Here,” he said, nearly horizontal as he stretched down the row to reach her.

“Thanks.” She didn’t look up, taking the bell with precise fingers.

Peter shrugged at Ned’s questioning look, then turned his attention to his own bell. He set it on top of the backrest before him and pulled his legs up so he was sitting on his knees; he could see the front of the bus better that way.

And so it began, the chorus of science and history trivia filling the bus with lively academic voices. And slowly, grinning as he went, Peter forgot about Loki on the roof, forgot about the suit in his backpack, and forgot about the quest before him. Even when Ned pulled up the hologram model, hidden behind the seat, Peter hardly fell an inch from his haze of interest and recall, answering question after question after question.

For miles on a packed highway, all that mattered were the questions—and the clever, beautiful mouth saying them.

Then his phone vibrated, and Peter jerked down to earth with a bump.
It was Happy—which was either good or catastrophic. Palming the phone, Peter stood up, edging out of his seat.

“Can I take this real quick?” he asked Liz as unobtrusively as he could, though he still interrupted her interview on radioactive units. “It’ll only be a second.”

“Sure,” she said, giving him that smile that flipped his insides.

Peter moved toward the back of the bus, balancing easily in the rocking vehicle. Trying very hard not to sound nervous or irritated, he answered Happy with a terse, “hello?”

“Got a blip on my screen here. You left New York?”

Peter frowned, pulling the phone away from his face. Tracker.

Then he turned back to the phone, saying, “Uh, yeah. No, it’s just a school trip. It’s, uh, it’s nothing.”

He made his way back to Ned, slumping down and crossing his feet. “Look, Happy, I gotta say, you tracking me without my permission is a complete violation of my privacy.” He uncrossed his legs and crossed them the other way.

Ned raised an eyebrow, pointing at the hologram model.

“That’s different,” Peter said.

Happy, suspicious, demanded, “What’s different?”

Peter switched his legs again, and Ned put a hand on one of his knees to stop his fidgeting. “Nothing,” Peter said. “Look, it’s just the Academic Decathlon. It’s no big deal.”

“Hey, hey. I’ll decide if it’s no big deal,” Happy snapped, and Peter resisted the urge to hang up right then and there.

What the hell?

“Sounds like it’s no big deal, but remember, I’m watching you.”

Oh I remember all right.

“Yes, Happy,” Peter sighed, letting the phone drop away from his ear.

“He sounds cranky,” Ned observed as Peter hung up.

Scowling at the now-black screen, Peter nodded. “He can be, sometimes.”

Liz wrapped up practice a few minutes later, letting the team off to their own devices for the last half an hour before they arrived in DC. Peter flipped his bell back up to her, mouthing an apology for the call.

It’s fine, she mouthed back, and Peter smiled.

Peter flopped back into his seat, pulling out his phone and fumbling his headphones from his backpack. He could see the glow of the Time Stone from within its fuzzy makeshift bag, and shivered, averting his eyes and going back to the headphones. They were hopelessly tangled, and Peter scowled as he began to pull the cord into something that at least resembled a line.
Ned interrupted him before he’d finished. “Hey, the Avengers are moving!”

Peter’s head jerked up. “What?”

“I suppose you knew that, being one and all. How are you gonna make that work, what with school and all—”

“What?”

Ned’s excited face fell into confusion, and he flipped his phone over to Peter. “Tony Stark sold Avengers Tower. It’s on the news.”

And it was—the tower had changed hands nearly a week ago. Apparently Stark was relocating to a ‘new facility in upstate New York, ready for a new era of the Avengers.’

Leaving the city.

Leaving Peter.

Peter dropped Ned’s phone like it had burned him, staring at the picture with wide eyes. “But… no that can’t be right.”

He had to clear this up—right now, right away. With movements jerky with anxiousness, Peter redialed his grumpy overseer, nearly vibrating as the rings echoed in his ears.

“You have reached the voicemail box of: Happy Hogan.”

“Happy, it’s me. Why didn’t you—I read that you were moving. Upstate. That’s, uh, pretty far and I was just—” He took a deep breath. “I was simply wondering,” he said more slowly, forcing himself to think about each word as he spoke them, “what you were planning to work out with me.” And when you were going to tell me. “What if something big goes down or Mr. Stark needs me or—”

Another breath. “Sorry. Just let me know, okay? Thanks.”

He hung up, pulling on his curls after dropping his phone between his knees.

“Well that sounded… not good,” Ned observed again.

“It’s a disaster!” Peter yelped. “First him—” he jerked his thumb at the roof where Loki’s bird form was hopefully still roosting— “and then the weapons guys and now… they’re just… leaving.”

“I thought you were an Avenger? Shouldn’t you, like, be let in on this?”

Peter nodded emphatically. “I should!”

But Happy probably wasn’t even going to call him back. And Mr. Stark… probably hadn’t even remembered him in the first place.

Peter set his jaw, planting himself in his seat and taking a long breath. He was more than a kid, more than a wannabe hero with a couple of gadgets and freak abilities. He’d helped people, saved people.

He had potential, even if they couldn’t see it. Peter knew that, but it still hurt—the dismissals, the doubt, the ignoring, it all hurt.

Because he wanted them to see. He wanted Stark to see. Peter was strong and capable and smart and yes, he was young and yes, he had so much more to learn, but he could learn it. He could be someone worthy of being taught, if they would give him a chance.
Stark had given him one—had found him and encouraged him and given him the tools to be so much more. And now… something had changed. Peter must have done something wrong, but he didn’t know what, and he certainly didn’t know how to fix it.

He wanted Stark to tell him. He wanted Stark to teach him.

And though he’d hardly admit it, even to himself, he wanted Mr. Stark to be proud of him.

Peter never ended up untangling his headphones fully, and he was still staring out the window with storm clouds in his eyes by the time the bus pulled in to the hotel in DC.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter fought me... but I tolerate how it turned out, I guess. XD

Anyway! Tune in next time for, you guessed it, SHENANIGANS! Including but not limited to Loki messing with Ned, Peter threatening a snake with a cucumber (not literally), and a candy bar. Thanks for reading!
They only barely managed to keep Loki from breaking the window of the hotel, and only with a significant amount of panicked yelling. But the glass ended up unscathed despite its close proximity to Loki’s dagger, and the god ended up in the room despite logic and law.

“What’s the status?” Loki demanded, pointing his blade at Ned, who was lounging on one of the queen beds that filled up the vast majority of the space. It was quite a nice room, in Peter’s opinion; not that he planned on spending a lot of time here.

At the sight of the weapon, all the blood drained from Ned’s face, and Peter was quick to step between them. “Mr. Loki means the hologram tracker,” he clarified.

“Oh, I uh, knew that,” Ned said. He flicked his wrist and the etching of light popped into the air between them, the red light flashing invitingly.

“Perfect,” said Loki, pivoting on his heel and advancing back toward the still-open window. The olive curtains wavered slightly in the breeze from outside, seeming to beckon Peter to them.

“Wait, wait, wait!” Peter extended a hand to pull him back, then thought better of it. “Shouldn’t we, I dunno, plan? Or something?”

“‘We?’” Ned said incredulously at the same moment Loki snarled, “plan?”

Peter looked between them, wringing his hands as his words began to get caught on themselves. He shifted his feet on the carpeted floor, offhandedly memorizing the way the texture felt on his bare feet. “Yeah, I mean, these guys are dangerous maybe, and uh—”

Loki cut him off. “They’re merely mortals. Do not worry yourself over me.”

“Trust me, I’m not,” Peter laughed, giving the god a thumbs-up. “I’m mostly worried for me.”

“You’re not coming,” said Loki.

Peter frowned. “W-what? Of course I am—we have to stop these guys, remember?”
“And we are.” Loki flipped his knife. “I have a plan, however.”

“A nefarious one?”

Loki bared his teeth in a smirk, edging toward the window. “Definitely.”

“I can help,” Peter said, and maybe it was a bit desperate, a bit vulnerable. Maybe. He didn’t want to hear what the god said next, didn’t want to hear a dismissal from him, too—

“Indeed.”

Peter paused. “But you said—”

Loki looked him up and down, green eyes flashing. “You’d likely be useful. In the fight, at least, though I intend to do a bit more than that.”

Peter hadn’t realized how tense he’d been until he started relaxing. “Oh.”

“I’ve got a good misunderstanding to start up tonight,” Loki explained, “and it’ll involve stealth. And shape shifting, in all likelihood.”

“You aren’t just gonna…” Peter shrugged, then mimed throwing a knife.

Loki scoffed. “Despite the satisfaction that would bring me, no I am not. I am more powerful than all of these mortals put together, with a larger reputation, and that’s all I’m going to need tonight.”

“Roll a charisma check!” Ned added helpfully.

Loki turned to him, brow furrowed in confusion, and Peter chuckled. “It’s a gaming thing, don’t worry about it. But he’s right; you’re not gonna fight, you’re just gonna…”

“Intimidate.”

Peter nodded, a bit reluctantly. He had to admit that sounded like a better idea then just going in guns blazing—or… web-shooters aiming. Whatever.

“You’d be counterproductive to the effect I am trying to give,” Loki said. “Criminal gods don’t team up with spider-children.”

Peter opened his mouth to protest, then closed it again. Disappointing, but logical—he hated that.

“But—I—fine. Take the Stone with you, for one thing, and you have to let me set a tracker on you, too. Here.” Peter rummaged for his suit, lifting up one of his web shooters.

Loki rolled his eyes, but extended a wrist, letting Peter deposit the tiny robotic spider onto his cuff. They trotted over to his backpack together, and Peter carefully removed the fluffy bagged Time Stone with forefinger and thumb. The cloying aura of power made him cough, and he handed it off to Loki as quickly as he could. The god tucked it into his pocket, then turned back to him.

“If you end up fighting without me,” Peter said, stepping back, “I’m confiscating your clothing and making you wear sweatpants all the time.”

Loki hissed. Peter could almost see his ears flattening as his eyes narrowed. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“I would!”

“I have been known to brutally eviscerate my allies,” Loki warned.
“And I’ve been known to web innocents to their own belongings,” Peter retorted, aiming his wrists at Loki in demonstration.

“I’m no innocent.”

Peter lifted his chin. “And I’d be webbing you to a wall, not your belongings.”

Loki just growled at him, took one last look at the hologram, and dove from the room. The curtains swayed lazily in his wake, and Peter resisted the urge to stick out his tongue.

“Dude,” Ned said, a bit breathlessly. “Did you just threaten the God of Mischief?”

“With sweatpants,” Peter affirmed.

Ned whistled. “Remind me never to make you mad.”

Peter laughed, shooting his friend a couple of finger guns. Then he spun and flopped back on his own bed, reaching for the bag he’d stuffed his suit into. “Hey, get your laptop out would you?”

“Why?”

“Well, I’ve got something I need to do before I can continue with this whole… job thing.” Peter waved an expansive hand.

Ned shrugged, pulling out his computer, and Peter pulled out his suit. He turned it inside-out, searching the base for the incision that would let him access the wiring within. Ned leaned closer, both apprehensive and awestruck.

“USB?” Peter extended a hand.

“You’re Spider-Man suit has a USB drive?”

Peter laughed. “It’s StarkTech, of course it does.”

Ned whistled again, rifling around for his cord and handing it to Peter. Connecting the suit to Ned’s laptop took only a few more minutes, and then Peter was laying it out over the bed and beginning to poke away with his pocket pliers.

Ned, folded into a pretzel at the head of the mattress, watched code scroll by on his screen with a furrowed brow. “You want me to… hack into this and let you remove the tracker.”

“Yup,” Peter said through the flashlight in his mouth.

“Why?”

“Because I’m teamed up with a super-villain to follow a group of high-tech weapons dealers and I don’t really want Mr. Stark to know I’m doing it.”

Ned frowned. “So… we’re lying to Iron Man now.”

Peter shrugged. “It’s not like I could tell him about Loki, not after New York and whatever. And he doesn’t… really get what I can do yet.”

His pliers caught something thin and shimmering, and Peter grinned. “Gotcha.”

The sensation of pulling the tracker from the suit was immensely satisfying, and Peter stuffed it into
his pocket for later disposal. Or re-purposing. He could find something fun to do with the fancy device.

But Ned was still watching the code, his face curling in interest.

“There’s a ton of other subsystems in here,” Ned said, leaning into the screen. “But they’re all disabled by the… Training Wheels Protocol.” He chuckled, spinning the screen so Peter could see.

“What?” Peter hopped up on the mattress next to him, sending a ripple through the bed. Across the laptop were the words ‘Training Wheels Protocol’ ENTER: Stark Industries Key Identifier.

Peter frowned. “Turn it off!”

Ned punched his shoulder. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. I mean, they’re probably blocked for a reason.”

But Peter was just about done hearing about things they’d been hiding from him, about things he wasn’t ready for. Hissing under his breath, he shoved away from the bed. “Come on, man. I don’t need training wheels.” He stepped onto his own bed, relishing the feeling of being a bit taller before beginning to bounce slightly on the springs. “I’m sick of Mr. Stark treating me like a kid all the time. It’s not cool.”

Ned raised an eyebrow, ever the helpful observer. “But you are a kid.”

Peter rolled his eyes. “A kid who can stop a bus with his bare hands.”

“Peter, I just don’t think this is a great idea,” Ned sighed, tapping at the keys before him. “I mean, what if this is illegal? I’m literally hacking into StarkTech.”

Peter jumped down, kneeling next to Ned to peer at the screen, then up at his friend. “Look, please. This is my chance to prove myself. I can handle it. Ned, come on.”

Ned voiced his discomfort one last time. “I really don’t think this is a good idea…”

“Guy in the chair?” Peter offered, lowering his voice.

Ned glared at him. “Don’t do that.”

Peter just smiled imploringly.

Sighing, Ned tapped at the keys at a speed similar to lightning, and the suit flashed with light as the Protocol deactivated. Peter’s eyes lit up almost as much.

“Nice,” he said, lifting the suit by its shoulders and looking it up and down.

Then he slumped on the bed next to Ned, who closed his computer with a whisper of a snap. “Well…”

“What now?” Ned wondered.

Peter looked toward the still open window, toward the hologram beeping with two red dots now. “I suppose we… get ready for Decathlon.”

And exactly at that moment, there was a conspiratorial knock at their hotel room door.

Peter shared a glance with Ned, and they both sprang into action as one. Diving for the hologram at
the same moment Ned moved for the door, Peter stuffed the web-shooter and suit into his suitcase with as much grace as possible. He was at Ned’s side moment later, not even breathing hard.

Ned gave him the side-eye, then opened the door. “Hello?”

“Hey!”

Peter’s stomach flipped; Liz was grinning at them from the hallway, the team spread out behind her, with a pile of candy bars clutched against her chest. In a bathing suit.

“We’re going swimming,” she said. “Everybody; the whole team.”

The student’s behind her nodded emphatically.

Peter looked to Ned, who shrugged. “What?” he said eloquently, turning back to Liz.

She met his eyes, looking a bit flustered as she smiled—probably all the stairs they’d had to climb to get to his and Ned’s room. “Yeah, um, rebellious group activity the day before competition is good for morale.”

Peter nodded; what else could he do?

“I read about—heard about it in a TED talk. And I read a coaching book.” She tucked her hair behind her ear, averting her eyes as her smile grew wider.

Ned laughed, nudging Peter subtly with his elbow. “You’re the best coach ever,” he observed.

Liz laughed, and it washed over Peter, leaving him star-struck in its wake. “Yeah. It’s our future. I’m not gonna screw it up.” Then she fumbled with the chocolate in her arms, chucking one to Peter in a smooth arc. “Besides, we raided the minibar and these candy bars were, like, eleven dollars. So get your trunks on and come on!”

Peter and Ned shared a look, and Ned shrugged. “Why not?” he said with a grin.

“Yeah,” Peter managed, his voice only slightly squeaky. “Sounds—sounds great.”

“Great! Meet you there.”

Ned obligingly closed the door between them as Peter gazed after Liz’s retreating form, laughing under his breath.


“Dude, you are so obvious.”

“What?”

Ned shook his head, waddling back to the bed and rummaging about for his suitcase. “Just get changed, dude. We already participated in a rebellious activity tonight, but I suppose another won’t hurt.”

Peter shook himself, nodding and pretending to have heard anything Ned said. “Sure.”

Ned just rolled his eyes and threw Peter’s swim shorts at him.
The water was cold, especially without any sunlight making its way in through the skylight spread through the roof, but the soft blue of the underwater lights were inviting. Peter opted to dunk himself in all at once, get the shock over with, and Ned was close behind him.

“At least you didn’t wear your hat this time,” Peter joked.

“You’re hilarious, Peter.” Ned rolled his eyes.

Peter tucked his legs to his chest, submerging himself beneath the water. His curls drifted weightlessly around his head, and he closed his eyes, relishing the way the water suspended his form so differently from air. The magic would go away soon, it always did, but the joy of first slipping in the pool hadn’t yet dissipated.

Peter twisted, imagining his body lengthening into something serpentine, into something draconian. Ned yelped as Peter shot past him, gathering speed beneath the water as he drew on the full strength of his enhanced muscles.

So different from the last time he’d been underwater.

It was light, and warmer, and Peter could taste chlorine instead of Queens water pollution and see the feet of his teammates instead of inky blackness. He shook away the cloying memory of fabric weighing him down and swam faster beneath the water, curling his legs to turn the corner of the pool.

He surfaced with explosive energy, drawing a deep, gasping breath, and whipped his soggy hair out of his face. “Whoo!”

Ned came up next to him a few moments later, scrubbing his face with his hands and grinning. “It’s been ages since I’ve gone swimming.”

Peter nodded. “I know, right? Proper swimming.”

He cast his gaze around the room, taking in everything, mapping the space on instinct. He saw Liz making her way along the edge of the pool, and he saw her friends slip into the hot tub on the right of the pool with laughter on their faces and excitement in their eyes. He saw Flash shoving at Abe with something that could have been a smile. He saw Michelle curled around a new novel in the corner, just a bit closer to all of them then she usually was.

Good for morale.

Grinning, Peter flipped down beneath the water, pushing himself into a handstand. The surface lapped at his ankles, and Peter shifted his weight onto his fingertips, and then just onto one. Physics was different in the fluid around him, and Peter loved it.

He swooped back up to the surface, poking Ned as he went. Ned shoved at him, splashing water into his eyes and down his throat, and Peter laughed through his coughing.

When his vision cleared, he saw Liz looking at him.

She was perched on the edge of the pool, between it and the hot tub beside her, and she smiled just slightly when he met her eyes. And because his feet weren’t on the ground anyway, Peter smiled back.
“Go on,” Ned said quietly, nudging at him. Peter turned, a mix of panic and gratitude shining through his expression.

“But—”

“C’mon Pete.” Ned grinned. “You can do this. You got the God of Mischief to like you; I’m sure you can make it through a conversation with Liz Allen.”

“I…” Peter trailed off.

The light of the pool was otherworldly, teal and electric blue against the walls and against her legs. Gravity didn’t matter in a swimming pool. Physics didn’t matter. The world was different when you were underwater, and maybe Peter liked it better that way.

So he turned, nodded, and ducked beneath the water again, making his way over to Liz.

She yelped when he surfaced and pushed himself over the edge of the pool, water cascading from his arms and chest and pooling on the previously dry tile. “Oops,” Peter laughed, rolling sideways to spread the water away from her.

“It’s fine, I was gonna end up wet anyway,” she said.

*What do I say what do I say what do I—*

Peter looked at the water, watching it drip down over the ledge to join the pool below, watching it lap uncaringly against the walls and against the students within it.

“You nervous about tomorrow?” he said.

Liz nodded, chuckling slightly. “Boy am I ever. We worked so hard to get here, it’s like, so impressive and important and… I don’t know, imagine what it would be like if—when!—we win.”

Peter did. He imagined slumping back in his seat and blowing out a breath, seeing ‘Midtown Science and Technology’ flash across the podium screen before them. He imagined Ned whooping, throwing his stetson into the air. He imagined Mr. Harrington applauding, imagined the entire room applauding. Flash and Ned would applaud too, even though they were alternates, and maybe they’d finally figure out what Michelle’s smile looked like.

And Liz… she’d be speechless. She’d look around at all of them and just beam, and maybe she’d look at him for just a little longer, and maybe—

Peter blushed, shaking himself. “I can imagine.”

“I’m excited though,” Liz admitted. “There’s something about knowing the right answer to a question, something exhilarating.”

“Like you just caught yourself out of freefall,” Peter agreed.

She laughed, dipping her fingertips in the puddle of water beside her. “Not that I’ve ever done that, but I’m sure the analogy is perfect.”

Peter grinned, wagging his fingers. “What do you like to do? When you’re not managing a dozen crazy decathlon members or running student council or all that?”

Trailing wet fingers along an area of dry tile to leave long, dark streaks, Liz shrugged. “I dunno. I do like having lots of projects; right now I’m landscaping the flagstone outside our house.”
“Oh, right, I saw that at your party.”

“Before or after you disappeared?” she said, raising an eyebrow.

Peter huffed. “Before.”

She rested a hand on his knee, and he tried not to let on how electrifying the touch was. “Don’t worry, I’m not mad or anything. I know Flash was being a dick—sorry about all that.”

Peter smiled. “It’s alright. I can take him.”

“Sure can. You’re like the smartest guy I know—Flash doesn’t stand a chance.”

“Uh, yeah,” Peter managed, curling an arm around his stomach.

Her hand was still on his knee.

Chapter End Notes

Do you ever just... write the wrong ship? Because the right ship hasn't emerged yet?
And every word just huuuuuurts?

Sigh.

Anyway thanks for reading! Comment? Kudos? :))}


Loki was pissed.

Which was unfortunate for the criminals that found him roosting like a falcon in their warehouse, lounging across the worktables as if he owned the place. Because frankly, in a few minutes, he would.

He was lingering in his raven form, unwilling to shift back into a human just yet. He’d been doing that lately. There was only so much he could blame on disguise and transport, and he was fast approaching that edge. His mother would have reprimanded him, would have told him magic was a tool, not an escape. But Frigga wasn’t here, nobody was here, and Loki didn’t want to feel his own skin if he didn’t have to.

So he clicked his claws against the shipping container beneath him and watched.

Contrary to what Loki and the man of spiders had believed, the lair of the weapons dealers was not in DC. They had simply been there for the same reason as everyone else; a job, one that involved raiding an unfortunate trucker delivering his trailer of otherworldly debris to containment. Loki, jumping between forms like a flame dancing between charcoal, slipped into their spaces, into their conversations, and soon, into their plans.

*They keep making messes, we keep getting rich.*

It didn’t take a leap of logic to put the two together. Operation alien-weaponry-meets-dumb-Midgardians was stealing energy sources, technology, and other waste and remains from the facilities attempting to keep it out of circulation. From the design of the trailer and the insignia on the sides, Loki was pretty sure said facilities were managed by a certain Stark.

Which was actually quite convenient, when he thought ahead.

One step at a time, though.

It was about an hour of flying to get back to New York City, trailing the silver-and-green wings of the lead weapons dealer. Loki’s self control frayed a bit more with every flap of his ebony wings, his soul twitching to bury a knife in the man’s skull—but, well, he’d promised no killing.

And he couldn’t risk fighting, not with Peter’s threat still hanging over him like thunder.
So Loki had followed the winged man as he carried his duffel-bag of pilfered alien tech, listened to his conversation over whatever primitive mortal communications device he subscribed to, and casually constructed his own two part plan for ending the world and then saving it.

But it was cold, and raining, and Loki’d been trapped in the air for hours and he was starting to give up on the saving-the-world part of the plan and just settle for ending it. The weapons dealers didn’t even have a proper lair; the winged guy just started circling around an abandoned warehouse on the edge of NYC.

Loki had rolled avian eyes, tucked his wings to his sides, and swooped down into the warehouse with hardly a blink from any one of the various inhabitants. They were lucky his desire for some cheering up didn’t overcome his honor, or at least one of them wouldn’t have seen the next day.

As it was, Loki simply perched on one of the conveniently stacked towers of supplies and tech, and shifted back into his humanoid form without a whisper of sound. No one looked up, too involved in the weapon they were testing or the power tool they were utilizing. He stretched his pinions and then he settled down to wait.

It didn’t take long.

The winged man swooped into the warehouse with a dramatic flare of his metallic wings, dropping the duffel bag to the ground before him. The whir of power tools and the blast of gunshots ceased, and everyone turned to their leader as he shook himself out of his suit and raised his mask.

Loki, leaning in closer, committed his face to memory.

“Success?” one of the men asked, lifting his safety classes as he stepped away from the power saw he’d been operating.

“Without a hitch, Mason,” said the flying guy. He tossed the duffel to Mason, who caught it with a huff drowned out by the clank and shuffle of the metal inside.

“Sounds like you got what I requested,” Mason said. Loki figured he was the engineer in this scenario; useful to know. “I can have the vacuum seal up and running in half the time now, if you wanted to—”

“We’ve already discussed this, and it’s a no. Forget it,” the vulture man snapped.

Mason sighed, but nodded and began to waddle over to Loki’s perch. Loki tensed, his knife materializing instinctively in his hand, and waited for the angle of the light to reveal his form against the containers.

“Holy fuck—”

Loki grinned, knowing he had every eye in the room, and swept his legs down to peer at the unfortunate Mason.

The leader was at Mason’s side in moments, a purple-lit weapon pointed at Loki and a snarl across his aging face. “Who are you? What are you doing here?”

Loki ran a finger over the edge of his knife. “Don’t you recognize me, Midgardians?”

They stared at him for half a moment before every weapon in the warehouse was bristling in his direction.
"Aaaand there it is." He smiled.

"Don’t move," the leader hissed, doing a remarkable job hiding the tremor in his voice.

"Oh don’t worry," Loki said dismissively, “I don’t intend to kill any more of your men.”

“Brice…” Mason murmured. Then his eyes snapped up to Loki, hardening with something angry and fearful. “That was you? You killed Brice?”

“Oh, that was the name of that oaf?” Loki swung his legs, his heel banging against the container he was sitting on in a repetitive *boom… boom… boom… “I doubt anyone will miss him. He was rather more useful dead than alive, I feel.”

“What are you doing here.” It wasn’t a question, and Loki didn’t respond to demands. Instead, he tossed his knife, looking around the warehouse. “What’s all this? I recognize some of it.”

The men’s hands tightened on their weapons.

Loki laughed, low and cold. “Oh relax. I’m not here to reclaim the scraps of my army from long ago. You seem to be using them far better than I’d be. Why?”

A pause.

“… why?” asked the leader, sounding confused.

“Yes, why. What’s the goal of all this?”

“It’s our living—our business.”

Loki flipped his knife again. “So? All businesses have a purpose. What’s yours?”

There was silence as the dealers seemed to consider how much to tell him. Loki swung his foot again.

*Boom… boom… boom…*

“We raid shipments,” Mason finally said. “We collect otherworldly resources. We renovate them.”

“To what purpose?”

Someone in the back called, “profit!”

Loki hummed. “Don’t lie to me. That’s not the reason—profit is convenient, yes, but it’s not the reason.” He leaned down, resting his elbows on his knees and locking eyes with the leader. “Why. Do. You. Do. This?”

He didn’t even have to put any magic in the words; the vulture man simply spoke, as though he’d wanted to all along. “These weapons… the world’s changing. But it’s left the little people behind, when we’re the ones who should be, who need to be, changing the most. So we build, and we arm, and we’re ready to fight the next time someone like you comes to destroy us!”

Every weapon swung in his direction again, snarls twisting the faces of the dealers, but they failed to shoot.

Sometimes Loki loved the power in Midgardian terror.
“And where do you get all this? Stark, I presume.” Loki had to admit Iron Man had been the only one with any sense of future or management when he’d last been to earth.

“Yes.”

Loki grinned. “Perfect.”

“What do you want?” the leader finally demanded, his finger dancing on the trigger of his gun. Loki didn’t flinch.

“I am Loki, Prince of Asgard, God of Trickery and Mischief. I can direct attention away from you, or pull it toward you, wrapping the world around my finger as I go. I am the greatest otherworldly ‘resource’ you could ever hope to find.” He smirked. “It’s not about what I want, it’s about what you want.”

“Why would you help us?” wondered Mason.

“Because I love the scent of chaos. And because, well…”

Loki’s knife went whizzing by the leader’s ear, shearing off a sizable chunk of his hair and embedding itself in the metal plating across the room.

Loki sat back, folding his arm. “… you don’t really have a choice.”

“Got the glowy thing?”

Ned held it up, then tossed it to Peter, who tucked it into his pocket with his Spider-Man mask. “Check.”

“Hologram?”

Peter caught the second web-shooter when Ned hurled it at him, spinning on his heel when it touched his palm. “Check,” Ned said.

Whipping the shooter on to his forearm, Peter projected their handy light image of the city into space again, and observed the blinking red lights. Both Loki and the dealers were in New York again. “Hm,” he muttered. “Hope he found them.”

“Where’s Loki?”

“New York.”

“Ah.”

Peter tossed the web-shooter into his backpack, closing the bag up around it from the double zippers. “Pencils?”

Ned shook his own backpack, and Peter’s enhanced ears picked up the clatter of wooden #2s. “Check.”

“Review packets?”

“That was your job.”
Peter cursed, chucking his bag onto the bed and kneeling to try and spot the inconveniently hidden papers.

“Did we leave them on the bus?” Ned wondered. “Or—here I’ll check the table…”

Peter, peering into the dusty underside of the bed, let out a triumphant *aha!* “Found them.”

He stretched until his fingertips grazed the papers and stuck, then retracted his arm and brought the packets with him. Along with half the dust bunnies.

“Ew.” Ned grimaced.

“Okay…” Peter blew out a breath and stuffed the review papers into the gap between the zippers of his front backpack pocket. “Check.”

“I’ve got the calculators too.”

“Great. Motivation?”

Ned grinned and made his way toward the exit of their room. “Check.”

Peter swung his backpack over his shoulder, holding the door open for his friend. “Badassery?”

“Check.”

“Confidence?”

Ned doft his stetson, wiggling his eyebrows. “Check.”

With a quiet whoop, they slipped out the door to join their classmates. “Let’s do this thing!”

Midtown Science and Tech was one of the first at the venue, so it didn’t take long to get registered and set up for the speech portion of the competition. Peter, fortunately, wasn’t performing that day; they’d found that no matter his amount of preparation, the nervous stutter couldn’t be avoided even in an academic setting.

So Peter and Ned quizzed each other, repeatedly sharpened pencils, changed the batteries of every calculator the team possessed, and watched the time tick town with their nerves and excitement building.

The events passed in a haze of graphite and furrowed brows, interviews and essays and multiple-choice tests falling from beneath the eager pencils of Peter and his classmates. But he’d never felt so confident, even with the weight of the glowy-thing in his jacket pocket and the suit—sans mask—winking at him from beneath the study materials in his backpack.

So despite his mental fatigue, Peter was ready and waiting for the Super Quiz when it came. He didn’t flinch at the sounds of the live audience when he and the team navigated to their podium, sliding into their chairs next to the representatives from the rest of the US. Peter thought he could pick out every state, and swallowed the lump of nervousness in his throat.

With ten seconds to team-answer each question, the Quiz was arguably the most difficult event in the competition. But this was their focus, what Liz had been drilling them on for months, so when the questions started ticking Midtown kept their heads up and their disagreements down and eloquently responded to quiz after quiz after quiz.

And when the scores were tallied and the final question dying away to Peter and Michelle’s
simultaneous cries of “zero!” Peter felt his breath catch.

He knew.

“Midtown takes the championship!”

The team erupted, diving toward him and Michelle as the applause of the room deafened everything around them. Peter laughed, but he had attention only for Liz as she threw herself at him, wrapping her arms around him in an embrace that both released and knotted the nerves in his chest.

Michelle didn’t look at him.

“We did it!” Liz cried, such distracted, ethereal happiness in her voice.

And then she kissed him.

Peter short-circuited. Every one of his enhanced senses was burning, seeing and feeling and tasting too much and nothing at all. He could taste her chapstick and he could hear his heartbeat in his ears and he could sense the surprise—his surprise—in the air around them. It lasted an eternity, and Peter wasn’t sure what to think—he hadn’t expected this, he hadn’t even been brave enough to dream about this.

But here they were in the middle of a winning Decathlon team, and Elizabeth Allen was kissing him.

When sense returned to both of them, she pulled away, clearing her throat awkwardly. Peter’s arms were still outstretched, and he dropped them in hurried embarrassment, pretending not to be redder than a tomato.

“Oh, well… good job,” Liz said.

Everyone was silent.

Peter felt Ned’s hand land on his shoulder, and was infinitely grateful to his friend for giving his dissociating spidey-senses something to focus on. He tried to look somewhere, anywhere, but could only focus on Liz’s lips—which had just been on his.

Holy fuck.

Liz cleared her throat, spinning around to face the team. They were relaxing, the surprise of the moment wearing off a bit, so her next words didn’t feel too out of place. “You guys… we really did it. Oh! Gosh, I’m so proud to have worked with you!”

“No speeches!” Abe laughed. “We’ve already had enough of those!”

Ned—Abe’s partner for the pre-written speech event—voiced his agreement, and another round of cheering went up through the table. Everyone piled in, squishing Peter, Michelle, and Liz together as the whole team folded in for a group hug. Even Mr. Harrington, just now sprinting toward where the table had been set up, joined in.

And for a moment, Peter remembered exactly why he did what he did. Complete, undenied confidence lifted his chin and squared his shoulders, because this was what he fought for. This was what Spider-Man was all about—what every hero was about; preserving and allowing the simple joy of living.
But maybe…Spider-Man should participate in it sometimes, too.

So Peter slipped his hand into his pocket, fingering the glowy-thing, and murmured, “thanks, Loki. Guess you were right about the image, after all.”

On their way out the door, ready to celebrate with the sites of DC—starting with the Washington monument—Ned slapped Peter on the shoulder and grinned.

“Congratulations, dude,” he said. “Glad to have Spider-Man.”

“Yeah,” Peter replied, unabashedly watching Liz as she lead the group like a mother hen. “Me too.”

Chapter End Notes

WHYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYY YY ARG THE SHIP NEEDS TO GET A MOVE ON CUZ THIS IS PISSING ME OFF AT THIS POINT--

*Cough cough*

Anyway. Thanks for reading!!! Leave me a comment or a kudos, and I'll see you soon! Lol, I'm super inspired right now so you never know. XD Okayloveyoubye!
Primary Protocol

Chapter Notes

I am UNSTOPPABLE. U N S T O P P A B L E!
XD enjoy this, I had so much fun with it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Earth-200004: October 2016

“You think we should what?”

Loki watched the wingman—Toomes, he’d learned—pace irately in front of the warehouse table without a hint of expression. “I think I was quite clear.”

“That’s more than just stupid; that’s suicide for our operation!”

Loki shook his head. “Not with me.”

He let his fingers dance across the table, brushing against weapons and moving them just slightly, just so he could get a better view of their makeup, their mechanics. He curled his fingers around a stray core, similar to the one he and Peter had discovered the two nights before.

“What do we… even get out of such a job?” Toomes demanded. But he didn’t step closer to Loki; none of them had come within five feet, and anything closer than ten resulted in a shiver of fear and a hasty retreat.

“You’ve gathered quite a collection of tech, here,” Loki said. “Some of it alien, most of it from the mind of a genius. But it’s all just odds and ends, broken scraps of things that used to be so much greater.”

“So you think…”

“You could go after those greater things,” Loki said, swinging his legs over the edge of the table. Toomes took a few steps back.

“We don’t have the resources… the capabilities…”

Loki made a point of looking around at the weapons and half-built technologies scattered around the warehouse. “Trust me,” he said. “You do.”

“No offense,” Toomes said, “but I think that would be a bad idea.”

Loki grinned. “Going after greater things? You’ve said.”

“Trusting you.”
Shrugging, Loki stood from the table, making his way forward toward a weapon he hadn’t yet examined. The dealers parted around him like bait birds from a bilgesnipe. “You aren’t wrong,” he said.

Trailing his fingers over the gun, Loki pinpointed the muzzle and trigger and yanked it outward slightly. The gun buzzed with reddish energy, and Loki had to admit the design was somewhat impressive. They’d made this with toothbrush charges and chitauri scraps? That Mason guy was good at his job.

“Imagine a full chitauri scythe, what you could do with it. Full pick of its parts, full reign of its capabilities. Imagine instead of sub-Ultron arms,” Loki was ad-libbing now, because hell if he knew what a sub-ultron arm was, “you had the full body.”

Toomes watched him, flinching slightly as Loki’s fingers brushed the gun’s trigger. “Well, yes, we could build… anything, but—”

“Why not then?” Loki grinned. “What’s holding you back?”

Toomes raised an eyebrow. “The Avengers, for one thing.”

Loki scoffed exaggeratedly. “Ah, should have guessed.”

“And what’s your plan for them?” Toomes hissed. His men fidgeting nervously, their gazes flickering between Loki and their leader at lightning speed.

“They are why you have me, of course,” Loki said.

“They beat you last time.”

Loki’s shoulders tensed, and he reminded himself where he was in the timeline. “They didn’t beat me, the Hulk did. With him—and the other idiots,” he added, remembering what the kid had told him about the Accords and the War, “missing in action, you have arguably little to fear.”

Toomes raised an eyebrow. “Arguably little?”

Loki shrugged. “Room for improvement. The Avengers are not to be ignored—at least until you rise to your full abilities.”

“By upping our theft game. Going after the big one.”

Loki chuckled the gun back onto the pile. “Now you’re getting it.”

Toomes’s face was softening, his eyes going thoughtful, and Loki felt himself winning.

“So, what do you suggest first?” Toomes asked.

Loki smiled, long and dangerous.

Check.

“Oh,” he said, running his thumb over the pommel of his knife. He let the tension in the room build, let the scent of power wrap around each and every inhabitant, let their attention pool around him and bind them to him with connections stronger than chains. And when the room was quiet enough that he could hear the water dripping into the harbor outside, when it was still enough that he could see the wind wavering stray shards of metal, Loki spoke.
“An Iron Man suit.”

It took a tense, long while to get through security, mostly because Peter was still on edge from Liz’s… existence, and because he’d convinced himself the overseers were going to find the suit in his backpack. But the X-Ray didn’t pick up anything suspicious, and the guys along the converobelt were actually rather relaxed about… everything. Even the glowy-thing and the Spider-Man mask in Peter’s pocket went unnoticed, and he and Ned breathed a collective sigh of relief.

He counted heads along with Mr. Harrington when they waited for the elevator and frowned when he saw one missing. “Where’s Michelle?” He leaned into Ned to ask.

“Dude, weren’t you listening? She totally one-upped Mr. Harrington with the Monument being built by slaves and not wanting to celebrate it.”

Peter nodded. “Oh. Not here, then?”

“Nah. Outside reading.”

Peter frowned, glancing back toward the door of the Monument. He and Michelle had answered the last question together; if anyone should be celebrating, it was her. Peter too, but he already had that covered. His gaze drifted to Liz, and he found her doing the same; beet red again, he looked away.

Tickets clutched in hand, the first six of them—plus guide and Mr. Harrington—crowded into an elevator, and Peter pressed himself to the far wall to make as much space as possible. Their tour guide, a short woman with a tired face and a gravely, somewhat monotone voice, launched straight into her lecture before the doors had even closed.

Peter listened with varying levels of attention as she imparted wisdom he’d never use again, his mind drifting to everything and nothing.

Okay, to one specific thing.

Peter’d never kissed anyone before, so he wasn’t sure exactly what it was supposed to feel like, what was supposed to be going through his head before and after. They didn’t make it out to be so scary in books and movies, so awkward and explosive. Was he supposed to be so hyperaware of himself, of her, and especially of the eyes and voices of his classmates? Was he supposed to still be wondering what they thought, what she thought, what he thought?

Wasn’t it all supposed to make sense now?

Peter pulled his hand out of his pocket—it was suddenly quite warm.

Maybe it was just because the kiss had been his first. His senses had a tendency to get overloaded, especially with things he wasn’t used to; perhaps he’d simply let himself feel and see and taste too much. Next time—he was allowed to hope for a next time, right?—he’d know what to do, how to feel.

Peter’s whole side was starting to get warm, too.

“The Washington Monument is 555 feet, 5 and 1/8 inches tall. Notice how the marble and granite are cut around the stone,” the tour guide was saying.
The heat brushing against his side increased to something uncomfortable, and Peter frowned, touching the pocket of his jacket.

And drew a sharp breath as electric, energetic pain shattered through his fingers.

“What?” he muttered, pulling apart the edges of the pocket to peer within. The glowy-thing was shining with a violent light, bathing his fingers in heat and purple energy.

The glowy-thing. The energy core, the power source.

Suddenly, a great many things clicked into place.

Peter reacted.

He didn’t have time to think, he didn’t have time to choose, he just moved, thrusting his hand into his pocket and spinning for the wall of the elevator. His shout of warning, words he didn’t remember speaking, echoed in the tiny metal box, and people crowded away in confusion and fear.

“Get back!”

Peter cupped a white-hot core in the mask against his palms, white noise in his ears, white light blinding him as he curled himself around his hands. He pressed the core against the window, pressed himself to it as though he could shield the rest of the elevator from the inevitable release of power.

The split-second before the explosion sucked everything in the elevator into utter silence. Weightless before the fall. Dark before the flicker of the light. Meeting eyes before recognition.

Tick…

B O O M.

The release was deafening, and Peter heard the reverberations of alien power in his fingers, in his ribcage, in his skull. Energy shattered outward, ripping through the corner and floor of the elevator, ripping through Peter.

His ragged scream mingled with the cry of the explosion and nobody heard.

But they all saw. They saw the purple energy crackle through the air and through his form. They saw the ugly, bubbling red of molten metal as a fissure tore through the elevator around him. They saw the weakened floor and wall fall away into the gaping emptiness of the elevator shaft beneath.

They saw him fall, too.

“PETER!” Ned screamed.

But Peter could hear only the ringing of the after-blast, blinking up at the retreating base of the elevator sightlessly. Everything was slipping by in slow motion, and his heart beat with heavy thuds stretching for eternity.

Freefall lifted his fingers, pulled him weightless in his descent.

Spider-Man knew freefall. This was natural, this was right; plunging down toward the base of the arc, ready to tick back up like a pendulum—there was nothing to be scared of. His bleary mind hardly registered that he didn’t have a fulcrum.

But everything was violet agony and ringing sound and Peter winced, his hands coming up to shield
his face.

There was nothing covering it. *That was wrong; he never fell without the mask. Someone could…*

...  

Someone could see…

There was something in his hand, though. It wasn’t supposed to be there, it was supposed to be protecting him, covering him. The texture was smooth and the color was red, and Peter lifted his fingers to slip his head into the Spider-Man mask.

He was unconscious before he hit the floor.

The Protector awoke with a fizz of code and a crackle of light and a thousand screaming data points all clamoring for her attention.

Her processing speed was measured in nanoseconds, however, and she’d sorted and analyzed each nugget of information before the next had come in. There wasn’t time to marvel at her new existence, her consciousness, even for the moments it would take; she had awoken to catastrophe, and it was her programming to defuse it.

The Protector took stock, surfing for injury of her charge—her database named him Mr. Peter Parker—and analyzing the dimensions of the Washington Monument simultaneously. She had 4.2 seconds until impact, and from the drag of the air rushing by her, she judged her velocity lethal.

Alright, then? What resources did she have use of?

Her charge was not outfitted with her full capabilities, but she located the folds of her suit pressed in a containment unit against his back. She scanned her code, locating the small tuck of zeros and ones that was her capabilities for remote access.

The Protector isolated the signature of a single web-shooter. Ticking through each of the 576 possible options, she determined the safest, most effective option, setting it as her charge’s default as her protocols dictated.

One remote shot tore through the containment unit, and the next caught the wall 2.3 seconds before lethal impact. The Protector could not stop the connection with the scaffolded base of the elevator shaft, but she could calculate the best actions to take to cause the least harm. She lengthened the web gradually, easing into the necessary proportions to best decrease speed, but she still could not prevent all whiplash injury. Nor could she prevent the dislocation of her charge’s shoulder as the containment unit jerked with the sudden discharge of weight across the webbing.

The code flickered through her consciousness, and then came the impact and the explosion of data rimmed in red as the echo of the connection filled the elevator shaft.

The Protector ran diagnostics on the body of the charge. The factors she accumulated fell easily into identifiable injuries—*broken bleeding punctured lacerated hurt.*

This was not right. This was not the data she was supposed to read from the human person.

She fell back on primary protocol.
Organizing the information into an urgent, recognizable form, the Protector did the only thing she could. Call for help, to the only person she knew.

The Builder answered her distress call immediately. She saw it received, and knew assistance was approaching.

Her charge’s breathing hitched—he was still unconscious, but his breath shuddered like a broken program and the Protector felt something.

It didn’t come from order or protocol, didn’t come from some directed reaction not her own. The charge’s breath caught in blood and fluid and the Protector feared for him.

Come quick. It was a thought.

She didn’t have time to analyze this, the potential of her newly awakened consciousness, but she filed it away for later understanding. The code on the mask was crackling, growing ever more urgent, and the Protector found herself with nothing to do, no way to help, and it made her awareness sharpen with anxiousness.

Something appeared before the mask’s eyes.

It was a face, female, framed in curly hair and formed of dark skin and wide eyes. The girl inhaled sharply, her expression changing—the Protector didn’t know what that meant yet.

What if this was a threat? What if this girl was the cause of her charge’s fall, of his condition? Protect protect protect—

But she could do nothing. The web-shooters were pinned beneath the charge’s body, and their discharge would not strike their attacker, anyway. The suit was unusable, the charge unconscious, and she was nothing but a string of zeros and ones within the mask.

“Wake up!” the Protector called, hearing her voice for the first time.

But the charge did not awaken.

Fingers gripped the mask, and the Protector turned her attention back to the girl before them. Her brows had furrowed, and she was biting her bottom lip—once again, the Protector did not know how to read this.

“I knew it, Peter you dumbass,” the girl said. “But you probably don’t want anyone else to know. Mask, then 911.”

“No, no, wait—”

But the Protector’s voice went unheard, and with a single yank, the mask slid off her charge’s head. Despite the situation, the Protector couldn’t fight the shutdown procedure initiated by the removal of the mask.

She called out one last time, louder, for the help of the Builder, and then she knew no more.
Chapter End Notes

Here comes the angst here comes the angst here comes the angst, yeeaaaaaaaaaah here comes the angst!

That doesn't even resemble the words of the song I was thinking of but HEY WHATEVER if you've got the tune, kudos to you. XD

(Or, y'know, to me. And a comment. Yesssssss)

Thanks for reading!
When Bartholomew Mccarthy came to work that day, he expected the usual chaos of the Washington Monument. Maybe a couple of screaming toddlers in his elevator as he tried to give the tour or an excited tourist who actually listened to him for once. Maybe there be another lady with hunched shoulders and shifty eyes like there’d been the day before. And if he was lucky, he expected he might even meet someone who’d smile at him.

Instead, he got this.

When the explosion wracked the Monument, he ducked beneath his desk as his war time instincts reappeared suddenly. Equally as quickly, he resurfaced, diving for his megaphone.

The people waiting outside for tickets were yelling, pointing upward toward the tip of the spire. Barley raised the megaphone, wincing at the high-pitched whine that assaulted his somewhat sensitive ears, and spoke.

That wonder of technology threw his voice out to the panicking civilians. “Everyone back away in an orderly fashion, if you would!” he called. “We are handling the—” he pulled the first description he could from his knowledge of the English language—“accident safely and efficiently. Your cooperation would be appreciated.”

Then Bartholomew dropped the megaphone like a hot potato and sprinted back into the Monument.

He made his way through the throngs of rangers and guides all diving to try and figure out what they were supposed to do in the scenario of a threat like this—it sure wasn’t handled in orientation—and headed for the elevator on the side of the spire where the explosion had come from. What he’d do when he got there, Barley had no idea, but he figured it was the most logical course of action.

But someone was already kneeling in the doorway, pressing the doors of the station open with one foot and leaning into the shaft. It was a girl—probably still in high school, wearing a somewhat ugly yellow jacket and covering something in the elevator passage.

“Miss!” Barley called, skidding to a halt next to her. “What are you—oh.”

His voice choked off as he reached her shoulder and beheld what was sprawled across the bottom of the shaft.
There was a boy.

Wearing the same yellow jacket as the teenager beside Barley, a kid was crumpled around the winch and wire of the elevator. There was blood smeared across his face, trickling from his mouth, and his jacket was darkening against his left hip and sticking to his jeans. But what made Bartholomew’s stomach churn was the gruesome, blistering burns along his palms and fingers, stretching up his wrists in some places.

*Oh, God.*

“What are you just standing there for?” the girl demanded, and Barley’s gaze snapped down to her. Her curls frizzed around her face, looking just as angry as she did. “Call an ambulance, get the *fuck on it!*”

“Er, yes,” Barley managed, fumbling for his walkie-talkie and then for his cell.

When the medics—EMTs, he reminded himself, had been notified and the rest of the rangers were aware of their situation, Barley finally got his explanation. Apparently, there’d been an explosion in one of the elevators (Barley was pretty sure he knew which one), the inhabitants unharmed because of the actions of the one he was now looking at. The rangers had managed to free the rest of the students, as the damage had been directed to a specific point on the elevator, so less structural damage had been sustained.

Instead, there’d been human damage.

God, he was just a *child*...

“Help’s on the way,” he said, kneeling next to the girl.

“Good.”

“What’s your name?” Bartholomew asked. He wasn’t exactly sure how to proceed, but a name couldn’t hurt.

“Michelle.” The girl’s voice was hard and almost cold. “I’m with Midtown Science and Tech… are they alright?”

“The rest of the students are fine, I’m happy to say. They say…” Barley’s gaze drifted back to the unconscious boy before him. “Well, they say he kept the explosion contained so your classmates could make it to safety.”

“Of course he did.” Michelle snorted. “Of course you fucking did, Peter.”

Barley looked back at the boy, fighting the urge to reach out and move him so the curl of his body wasn’t so awkward, so the angle of his shoulder wasn’t so wrong, so the blood didn’t stick his clothes to his form so uncomfortably. Those burns… had he *held* the bomb?

Barley started listening for sirens.

It didn’t take long, thank God, but there was still blood beading on the beams of the shaft when the men in their ivory jackets took the boy away. Michelle stood to follow, and Barley inched forward slightly, trying to see the body on the stretcher within the throng of people. An EMT stopped the girl, but Barley slipped out the doors and towards the sound of sirens.

He trailed the group, trying to look ready to help with anything that needed doing—or look like he
belonged there. Barley was able to keep a few curious civilians from crowding too close, which he figured justified his continued advance after the injured boy.

So he was the unlucky human almost crushed by a rapidly descending projectile as it slammed into the concrete plateau at forces that crackled through the area.

Bartholomew would later deny that he screamed. Nobody heard, anyway, as the echo of the connection rang into silence. The EMTs froze, the civilians paused; the whole world seemed to stop in fearful surprise.

And then the projectile straightened up.

Barley’s mouth fell open.

Was that—it was. Iron Man, goddamn Iron Man, stood a foot in front of him, suit shining in all its silver, gold, and ruby glory.

Barley made a sound that sounded a bit like a dying parrot. The suit turned its narrowed eyes to him, and Barley stared in turn, resisting the urge to back away or (equally strong) drop into a bow.

As though deeming him nonthreatening, the suit suddenly cracked open, peeling away from the man inside it with smooth, concise movements. Bartholomew thought it looked like the time-lapse of a flower opening he’d watched once, except this flower was made of metal and opened to reveal a distinctly determined Tony Stark.

Barley had seen that expression before, on men in doorways of med tents. And so he raised a hand and simply pointed. “There,” he said.

Stark spun, and Barley peered after him, trying to identify what seemed so… off about the man. Well, besides the fact that he was striding in flesh and blood through the air right in front of Barley.

“Move!”

Stark’s curt voice cut through the haze of shock, and it all shattered at once. People’s voices clamored back up, the screeching of walkie-talkies made Barley grit his teeth, and the sirens seemed even louder. One of the EMTs opened her mouth as the billionaire approached.

“Sir, what are you—”

Stark didn’t stop walking, and the EMTs were forced to step aside or be trampled by his unstoppable gait. The yawning back of the ambulance wobbled slightly as he stepped inside it, and Barley scuttled forward a bit to try and see what was going on.

The man was leaning over the stretcher, shoulders taunt, eyes flickering across the body of the boy curled atop it. His face was so still it could have been carved from stone, but his hands were trembling, just slightly, as they brushed the edge of the stretcher.

*That’s it*, Barley thought. Stark was tense, and Barley didn’t think he’d ever seen that before; this was different from the Iron Man one saw on the media.

“What happened,” Stark said, and it was more order than question.

No one answered, the EMTs sharing glances. They hadn’t had time to ask questions about that, yet, and the woman from before spoke up again. “He’s stable, but we don’t know—”
To his complete shock, Bartholomew found himself opening his mouth. “He fell down an elevator shaft,” he said.

Stark’s gaze snapped to him, intense and vigilant. “What?”

“There was an explosion. He—” Barley indicated the unconscious boy—“contained it, somehow, kept the rest of the elevator safe.”

Stark looked back down, raising a thumb to wipe away a spear of blood on the boy’s lip.

“How the hell’s he stable?” wondered one of the EMTs.

“None of your concern,” was Tony Stark’s curt reply, though they hadn’t been speaking to him. “He’s coming with me.”

“Absolutely not,” said the woman from before, and Barley felt a sudden surge of respect for her. He would have cowered into nothingness from the force of Tony Stark’s glare, but she stood her ground, keeping a hand on the stretcher. “Without connection to this boy—”

“His name is Peter Parker,” Stark stated, and if Barley didn’t know better he would have called his tone a hiss. “And I’m going to get on the phone with his aunt just as soon as you chart course for New York City.”

“The nearest hospital—”

“He’s a resident of Queens. He’s also in stable conditions, and will be cared for in my facility upon arrival in the state.”

“You don’t have the authority to—”

Another shrill voice cut through the air, and the civilians, EMTs, Barley, and Tony Stark all swung their attention to the door of the Washington Monument as another boy—again, clad in a yellow jacket—came waddling across the plateau at full speed. He was pursued by about six rangers, who’d long since given up on ordering him to stop, and though his chest was heaving his voice was strong and loud.

“Peter!”

Stark turned, surveying the running kid as he gained ground toward the ambulance, but his hand never left the edge of the stretcher.

“Peter,” the kid cried again, clutching his stomach with one hand when he stopped before the ring of EMTs. His eyes found Stark, then drifted down to the boy—Peter—on the stretcher and went wide.

A flicker of recognition passed through Stark’s eyes, and he exited the ambulance in one swift motion, shoving through the poor paramedics again. They spread out around the ambulance, two slipping toward the cab and the others climbing in around the injured child.

“Hey,” Stark said, his voice surprisingly soft as he approached the new arrival. Barley edged a bit closer to the ambulance, not exactly sure how to proceed.

“Mr…. Mr. Stark,” the boy coughed out, still breathing hard. “Is Peter—He looked scared and then he told us to get back and then there was an explosion and he fell and is he okay, please he has to be okay—”
“He’s okay.” Stark held up a hand to silence the boy’s ramble. “You are…?”


Then he folded his fingers into something that looked a bit like the ASL symbol for “I love you” and Barley’s confusion amped up three notches.

Something that could have been surprise etched itself across Stark’s face, and then disappeared as soon as it had come. “Right,” he said, stepping back a bit. “Well, Mr. Leeds, these wonderfully cooperative individuals have assured me that Mr. Parker is perfectly stable. He’ll be recovering in my own facility, and should be back with you before you know it.” A little more softly, Stark added, “he’s a fast healer.”

“Right. Can I… can I see him?” Ned craned up on the balls of his feet, trying to see the stretcher through Stark and the EMTs.

“I think you’re needed inside,” was Stark’s reply.

Ned shook his head frantically. “But he’s— I need— he can’t— I need to see him, you don’t understand, he was screaming and it sounded like… I don’t know, it must have hurt so badly and I couldn’t do anything—”

“He’s unconscious now.” Stark cut the boy off. “Healing. I don’t think even he could manage to hurt himself in his sleep.”

“But what if he—”

“Mr. Leeds.”

The boy quieted, wiping a stray tear from his cheek as he looked up at Stark.

“I’ll take care of him, alright? I promise.”

Slowly, Ned nodded.

Barley could safely say he had no fucking clue what was going on anymore. And that only increased when Stark sighed, reaching into his pocket and coming back with a crumpled receipt and a pen.

“Here,” the billionaire began, scribbling something and handing it to the boy. “If anything like this happens again, you let me know.”

Ned stared at the fluttering bit of paper, at Stark, and then back at the piece of paper. “Um, yeah,” he finally breathed. “Yes, sir. I will.”

“Good. Don’t make me regret that, Mr. Leeds.”

And with that, Tony Stark spun on his heel and stalked back into the trailer of the ambulance. The doors slammed on his voice as he went back to arguing with the lead EMT, and Barley took a shocked step back.

“Holy hell,” he said eloquently.

That had been… rather different than what he expected from the workday.
Chapter End Notes

All the park rangers are so confused lol. Also the EMTs. All the poor emergency reactors in these movies, I wonder what's going through their heads.

Thanks for reading! This one was astonishingly enjoyable. Hope you liked!
“You know what would be really convenient?” Stephen sighed, his hands in his pockets and the Cloak around his shoulders. The two of them made their way around the perimeter of the tiny park near the Sanctum; two straight weeks inside a stuffy building did things to one’s health and motivation. “If the Encyclopedia Britannica had a nice, to-the-point entry on ‘dimension binding’. Would really make my day, that would.”

The Cloak flapped at his cheek, and Stephen was thankful the park was mostly abandoned.

“We can’t go through the list again,” Stephen sighed. “It hasn’t helped in the past week, and it’s so depressingly short I feel like giving up every time you mention it.”

The Cloak shrugged—while draped across Stephen the movement felt decidedly weird.

“Fine, okay. We have the ability to split timelines via Time Stone travel. We have a vague idea that combining dimensions might just be what we need, though those dimensions would have to share astral planes to have any hope of merging—meaning they need to be parallel. So we need a way to artificially pair dimensions, because parallel timelines are identical and that would be unhelpful. Merging two identical universe doesn’t change anything; there’s no seed for variance in either universe. He’s dead in this one, he’s dead in this one, you bet your nonexistent head he’ll be dead in the combined one.”

The Cloak fluttered, and Stephen found himself tugged off the sidewalk and into the grass of the park.

“Stop, I’m trying to walk,” Stephen snapped.

The Cloak smacked him.

“Hey! Fine, I’m sorry, that was uncalled for.”

Forcing Stephen’s arm to his side, the Cloak crossed its corners. Stephen rolled his eyes and wriggled within the grip, but his relic didn’t release him.

“This isn’t a therapy session, I’m just trying to go for a walk,” he said, rubbing the place behind his ear where his neck met his jaw.

The Cloak pulled him back when he tried to start moving again, pinning him in place.
Stephen growled. “What do you want me to say? I’m a grumpy, tired sorcerer with a social life bordering on hermit and a focus bordering on obsession. I thought we were both perfectly aware of this.”

The Cloak grabbed one of his wrists and floated out in front of him, looking him up and down.

“Can you stop that?” Stephen hissed. “We’re in a public location.”

His garment lifted a corner and pressed it to his mouth. Stephen spat out the fabric, trying to keep himself from being smothered, and said, “I’m only talking because you asked. Can we go now?”

But the Cloak didn’t release him, instead stroking his wrist and then repeating its gesture. Stephen humored it, not saying anything. But it shook its collar, and Stephen figured he’d misinterpreted what it intended.

“What?” he said. “I don’t understand.”

It poked his stomach, then covered his mouth again.

“What—oh. I ate this morning, remember? I had the rest of the saltines.”

The Cloak hadn’t left his side for the weeks they’d been searching for answers, never drifting through the door-portals (the doortals) back to Kamar-Taj as it had done before… everything. Stephen didn’t know what it had done there, or what it did now, really, but he was glad for its warmth. He was glad for just the flashes of movement it provided in the silent Sanctum sometimes.

Stephen hadn’t thanked it.

He should.

The Cloak tightened its grip on his wrist, looking unimpressed.

“There’s yogurt or something still in the fridge, I think,” Stephen said, a veiled threat in his voice. He made a point to open yogurt cups in specific directions, for they had a tendency to increase in pressure around his magical residue and explode when he cracked them open.

The Cloak didn’t look perturbed, and gestured pointedly to the city around them.

“I don’t have any cash for food.”

It gestured again.

“Conjuring money is against the Order’s laws.”

Stephen assumed the next flare of hem and collar meant so is you starving to death, you idiot warlock.

“I’m not going to starve to death. We have yogurt. And saltines, apparently.”

The Cloak squeezed his wrist tighter, crossing its other corner over its chest-area. Stephen pulled at the grip experimentally, but there wasn’t even a ripple of reaction in the fabric, and he knew from experience that the Cloak would hold him here forever if necessary.

“Fine,” he hissed, hating the defeat, even if it was friendly. “I’ll get a sandwich—”

I wouldn’t say no to a tuna melt.
On second thought, he had no appetite for sandwiches. “I’ll get a burrito or something. But you have to let me eat it in the library.”

The Cloak released him, and Stephen took that for agreement.

It took another month, but Stephen finally had to let go of the miracle spell he’d been looking for.

“Magic won’t do it,” he sighed, letting the book fall abandoned to the floor of the library with a thump. “It’s on too big a scale. Even channeling the Stone’s power, there’s no way to channel the Mystic Arts around universes. It’s simply…” He dropped his chin to his chest in resignation. “It’s simply impossible.”

The Cloak wrapped around his head, patting him comfortingly.

“Not that I’m giving up,” Stephen said, narrowing his eyes and pointing up at the Cloak. “I just have to find another angle, that’s all.”

The Cloak dropped a hem, a little like a snake extending its neck, and lifted the makeshift Eye around Stephen’s neck. Stephen mirrored it, cupping his shaking fingers around the amulet as well.

“This is our master tool, I suppose,” he said.

The Cloak unwound itself and came to drift beside him. Shaking out his wrists, Stephen reached for the water-bottle on the table in front of him and took a sip of the somewhat lukewarm tea it contained. He managed not to spill it across his tunic, this time, and the Cloak gave him its rendition of a thumbs-up.

“It’s got the energy of this dimension, correct?” Stephen mused. “The Stone is a fundamental aspect of our universe. Elemental crystals of our reality, blah blah blah.”

The Cloak bobbed in affirmation, folded itself into a cube, and settled on Stephen’s lap. The sorcerer stroked it between the edges of its collars, which poked up like cat’s ears.

“But if we use it to change the past… that would shove it into a world not its own, correct?” He didn’t wait for the Cloak’s answer. “Maybe the Stone would… I don’t know, behave differently in another dimension.”

He paused. “Shit, would it lose its power?”

The Cloak shrugged, and the movement tickled Stephen’s wrists and made him squirm.

“We should test it,” he said. “How; still working on that.”

Pushing himself into his astral form, Stephen skirted through the library again. Finding a test dimension was fairly easy, but measuring the effects on the Stone would cause difficulty.

When he popped back into his physical body, the Cloak turned a lazily to look up at him.

Stephen waved sarcastically, then said, “so what if we just pop over to Kobar and see what happens? The monarch on Planet Kia—Erzen? Yeah, that’s it. Anyway, ve likes me after the incident with the worm thing, and would probably be fine with it.”

Ezren was the first ruler of Kia of the female gender, and creatures had come from all across the
galaxy to test vis strength. But the ‘testing’ had started to border on violent sexism at one point, and Stephen had happened to be in the area. So now he had an easy token to pass into that dimension and an ally that might be just what they needed.

The Cloak shot around him, flapping excitedly, and Stephen chuckled. “I’ll take that as a yes then, shall I?”

**Netherworld Kobar: September 2023**

Stephen, his feet bare on the silver grass, held the Time Stone in his palm and frowned.

“It feels… rather the same,” he said, glancing down at the Cloak around his shoulders. “The Stone does, at least. I feel a bit weird, but I haven’t been out-of-universe lately, so that could be why everything’s… wrong.”

He looked back at the Stone, quietly pulsing in his palm, and his frown deepened. “Ez is gonna be disappointed that I didn’t destabilize the universe. Ve likes chaos, apparently.”

The Cloak fluttered.

“I do not,” Stephen muttered in response. “I’d rather avoid chaos, thank you very much.” He tossed the awkwardly constructed amulet, feeling it thud against his palm, and glanced around him for inspiration on… anything. What the hell should he do now?

The Kian grass was soft beneath the pads of his feet, and Stephen thought he understood why they found it sacred. Breaking the connection between one’s feet and the vegetation was more than just disrespectful to the Kian people; it was a felony of the highest order. Ezren was having rather the same debate about the death penalty as Earth was, actually, but it was better to just lose the shoes and get on with it.

“Shall I just… channel the Stone, then?”

The Cloak shrugged, and Stephen figured it was as good a place to start as any. He let his eyes flicker closed and extended his perception to the flame about his neck, rubbing up against it somewhat hesitantly.

The power of the Time Stone leapt at his touch, as eager and unstoppable as ever. The change in dimensional location didn’t seem to bother it, and Stephen frowned.

“I guess it makes sense,” he said, and the words were wreathed in green and tasted of cinnamon and onyx. “It’s power comes from itself, not the universe.” But he hadn’t truly used it yet, and that was where the real test lay.

He wrapped his awareness around the well of energy within the Stone and ordered it into corporation with a somewhat hesitant whisper.

And found himself spinning out of his body.

His astral form splintered through the wall of the dimension and fell to its knees, the feeling of wrongness multiplying exponentially. “Oh, fuck—” Stephen managed, then fought back to his feet and glanced around.

The astral plane looked… strange. More than strange; it looked wrong. He could see his body, eyes wide in shock and the Stone glowing in his chest, but the ground beneath was a bit… fuzzy. Almost as if there was something else there, besides the grass, warring for dominance in the cooperation of
the dimension.

That wasn’t right. The astral plane was a constant tier of space-time; the same energy signature across the entirety of the multiverse. It didn’t matter which dimension you entered it from; it should simply mirror your surroundings as your soul vibrated to a higher frequency in that same planar location. You only shifted one factor of your coordinates on the 4D axes of the multiverse, changing form, not location.

But this… this definitely wasn’t purely tapping into the astral realm from Kobar.

“What…” he muttered, testing his voice. It sounded clouded, like in his usual astral form, and Stephen’s confusion deepend.

And then, on instinct, he closed one eye.

It was more of a symbol than an actual action; Stephen blocked out half his awareness. And suddenly, the astral plane sharpened around him, the Kodar landscape turning fully astral.

*Okay, that’s weird. That’s very weird.*

Almost scared of what he’d see, Stephen blocked out the other half, swapping his wink.

And he saw the Sanctum.

The grass beneath his astral feet suddenly became the worn wooden slats of the library, the light of the three suns became the lamps and the windows, and the shrub-like vegetation around him became his chair and table. The chair and table he’d been at when he’d stepped into this dimension—the corresponding location across the multiverse.

*Oh.*

Slamming back into his physical form with a cry, Stephen dropped the Stone like it had burned him. He pulled his magic away from it, extricating himself from his power, and through his shock a butterfly crawled from between his lips. The Cloak tightened its hold around his shoulders and lifted a corner to cup his chin.

Stephen brushed away the hold, needing to look at it. Then he gripped the amulet and held it up between them as he searched frantically for words.

“It can’t be that simple,” he murmured, fingers brushing the spot of neck behind his ear. “Is it that simple?”

The Cloak cocked its collar, bobbing in confusion.

Stephen looked up at it, then raised his sling-ring and drew on the power of home. He swallowed the hope blooming in his chest on the chance that it would be shattered and gestured toward the portal.

The Cloak’s collar skewed ever further.

Stephen reminded himself that even ancient Mystic relics couldn’t read his mind, trying to keep from getting irrationally irritated as he explained. “I need you to go back to the Sanctum, then jump energy levels into your astral form.”

The Cloak didn’t move.

“Just trust me,” Stephen said, shoving it through the portal and spinning back to the horizon of
The portal snapped shut behind the Cloak, and Stephen turned his attention to the Stone again. With a precision that would have made Wong proud, he drew on its energy and cast the first spell that came to mind.

But instead of conjuring his mandala shields, Stephen found himself blinking into existence in the not-astral plane again. The double-realm pushed uncomfortably on his Mystic perception, but it wasn’t the same Wrongness that he’d felt purely in Kobar.

Breathing through the churning in his gut, Stephen closed one eye again.

The Sanctum fizzled into view around him, and Stephen began to turn.

He wouldn’t have believed it if he wasn’t seeing it, but this could be a shared astral plane. This fuzzy, dual-dimension was the result of the Time Stone, the result of using it in a universe its energy didn’t belong to. And perhaps that energy knew where it belonged, pulling Stephen and Kobar into the vibration of his Earth world and letting two dimensions, previously unconnected, slide against each other in the multiverse.

Quite simply, it meant the Time Stone wanted to go home. And it was willing to bind dimensions—force them into parellity—to do so.

If it was that simple. Oh, fuck, let it be that simple.

When Stephen faced the library, the Cloak’s astral form blinked back at him. Slowly, hesitantly, hopefully, it drifted toward him—and wrapped snugly around his shoulders.

Stephen stared at the phantom image of the two of them, sorcerer and relic, standing in the Sanctum with their bodies in two different realms. Two realms, now parallel, just by the simple existence of an Infinity Stone that didn’t belong in one of them.

It was that simple.

And loud and joyous and finally, finally true, Stephen Strange threw back his head and laughed.

“Now we’re getting somewhere.”

I apologize for the general suckiness of this chapter. It’s bad. I don’t know how to execute it better though... Eh. Hopefully you made it through!

Basically Stephen figured out that the Time Stone belongs in his dimension, and that if you stick it in another dimension it really really just wants to get back to his dimension,
enough that it forces the two dimensions to have identical time signatures, parallel time-streams, and by extension, a shared Astral plane. Which you can access from the "wrong" dimension by using the Time Stone.

Okay thanks for putting up with this! See you soon. :)}
Gave us all a Scare

Chapter Notes

This was fun. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Earth-200004: October 2016

Loki spent thirty-eight hours waiting for Peter.

The first twelve were spent asleep in the boy’s room from about two the morning after they’d gone to DC to two that afternoon. He assumed that the team wouldn’t be coming back until after the competition, and wasn’t surprised that no one had returned while he was dozing.

He spent the next two hours entertaining himself with the list and the Time Stone, brainstorming and planning and rehearsing how he was going to explain the latest developments to the man of spiders.

But Peter didn’t return that afternoon.

He didn’t return that evening, either.

Loki convinced himself it was alright. That maybe he’d gotten the times wrong, the days confused. Perhaps his team was returning the day after the competition, sleeping in DC one more night. But as the night stretched, Loki realized the weekday. It was Saturday.

Loki’s boredom became unease.

He left the building the next day, skirting through Queens in various forms as he checked in on the musings of Toomes and his team. Scaring them a bit, he appeared and disappeared throughout the day and kept them on their toes, beneath his thumb. He wandered around as an ebony rat, got into a couple of catfights, and all together avoided human form.

It was late afternoon when Loki slipped back into Peter’s room. Very late—there was no excuse the kid wouldn’t have gotten back from DC yet.

“Spider-child,” Loki hissed, peering into the room.

Nothing answered.

The boy’s luggage wasn’t here, either; Loki hadn’t missed him as he went out to patrol. He wasn’t… where in Helheim was he—

“While you were participating in your idiotic competition, I saved the world. Would you like me to catch you up?”

Nothing. No chuckle, no huff, no indignant snort.
Loki’s unease turned to anxiousness.

“Peter!” he called, a little louder. But the apartment was empty of the entire Parker family, and Loki found himself strangling his wrist as he stalked through the small area.

He threw open the door to Peter’s room, his gait becoming a run as he surveyed the area. The front door, down to the staircase that would lead to the street, was locked. There were no shoes beneath the coat rack, and the dishes in the sink were dirty as Loki stumbled through the apartment.

The kitchen smelled terrible, and Loki found it was because of the cream-cheese left out and curdling on the counter.

No one was here. No one had been here.

Fuck.

Loki’s anxiousness turned to a bone-deep, corroding sense of dread.

And he stopped waiting and started looking.

That night, there were perhaps more screams in the New York underground then there might have been before. But despite everything, nobody knew where a bright-eyed boy with curly, chestnut hair had gone.

By the end, they wished they had.

Ned Leeds yelped when Loki cornered him in the school bathroom on Monday and turned from snake to god in a single whip-quick movement.

“Loki, what the—”

There was a knife at the boy’s throat before he could continue. “Where isss he?” There was a hiss in Loki’s voice, despite his humanoid form.

Only a terrified squeak escaped Ned’s lips, white with terror.

The knife bit deeper, blood beading on the boy’s collar-bone. “What did you do with him?” Loki’s face was a snarl of fury but his mind was static, a constant ramble of gone gone gone gone gone.

“Peter—I didn’t do anything—” Ned was cross-eyed looking at the knife.

“Where is he?”

“I’ll explain! Just—dear fucking god, get the knife away from my neck!”

Slowly, making sure Ned knew he was ready to strike again at a moment’s notice, Loki retracted his arm. Leeds straightened, gulping in huge inhales as he rubbed at his collar-bone.

“Do you always lead conversations like that?” the boy asked, his voice still wobbling with fear.
Loki glowered.

“Sorry, sorry,” Ned squeaked. “Getting to the point. There was… you remember the glowy-thing?”

Loki nodded slowly.

“Well, after we brought it into the Washington Monument… something happened.” Ned swallowed. “It exploded. Big burst of energy, shattering through the elevator… Peter was holding it, at the time. And he fell… 45 stories.”

A cry echoed through the bathroom, a single syllable, short and clipped and mournful.

Loki realized through the ringing in his ears that it had been him.

“Shit—he’s okay though!” Ned said hastily, his hands vibrating at his sides. “He was hurt bad, but Mr. Stark showed up and took him to his compound. Peter has quick healing or something because of the spider thing, so, uh, Mr. Loki, are you…”

Loki was fighting for breath, trying to recover from the emotional whiplash of despair to unimaginable relief without sobbing in front of this Midgardian. He was the fucking God of Mischief; crying over human teenagers was unacceptable. Especially where other human teenagers could witness it.

“You said Stark took him?” Loki managed, his voice slightly hoarse.

“Uh, yeah, uh—”

Loki’s shifted form was darting out of the bathroom before Ned had even drawn his next breath.

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DREAMSCAPE-200004, ADJACENT ASTRAL PLANE: August 2023

In Peter’s opinion, if he was going to be yanked back from the dead five years in the future, there should be at least a little bit of mental or physical effect. He’d practically been pushed out of the timeline and just as abruptly shoved back in; wasn’t there supposed to be some strange feeling or unusual afterimage?

As it was, Peter was more disoriented by the lack of disorientation than by anything else. Or, he had been. Now he was rather more disoriented by the fucking explosions and the falling sky. He could deal with aliens and weapons and wizards; but the sky falling in a flurry of detonations and shrapnel? All Peter could do was clutch the gauntlet to his body and crawl beneath the nearest rock, praying to any of the numerous gods he was fighting beside that everyone was okay.

And then his rock exploded, and everything got a bit more complicated.

Peter could see the monster of a ship looming above him. He could see the missile, clutched within the swiveling mouths of their cannons, bearing down on the battlefield. Bearing down on him.

He would have liked to see Aunt May, he thought vaguely. Hug her and feel her ruffle his hair one more time. And Ned—apparently it had been five years since he’d gone through his handshake with his friend. He would really like the coming explosion not to turn him to dust again.

At least he’d gotten to hug Mr. Stark. That had been nice. Rather more than nice—he’d felt safe, just for a moment, despite the blood and the noise and the battle. Like everything was going to be alright.
Maybe everything would still be alright. But his ears were ringing and there was blood in his eyes and in his mouth and the death-ship just kept shooting and Peter was starting to doubt it.

The gauntlet in his arms was cold and metallic and it stuck to the nanotech of Peter’s suit. One of his spider legs had been ripped away, devoured by an alien or blasted off by one of the missiles. He’d used the nanotech of his helmet to regrow it and crawl further away, to find shelter.

He should be fighting. But no one was fighting, not even the enemy aliens; they were all too busy dying from the hellfire raining from above.

And then it stopped.

And the sky fell again, but this time in a pillar of light and power and blinding hope and Peter curled further around the gauntlet as something bowled through the spaceship like it was a tin can.

Help had come.

Peter let himself grin, blinking blood out of a swelling eye and rolling sideways. He had a job, still, the most important on the battlefield. The Infinity Gauntlet, Iron Man rendition, seemed to vibrate in reminder.

But as Peter sat up, he couldn’t see a single friendly face, couldn’t see the destination he was supposed to reach. He wasn’t even sure where the time-van was anymore; the landmarks around him had been destroyed.

And yet another wave of aliens was charging forth.

“C’mon,” Peter hissed at himself, gathering his strength. “Come on…”

Of fuck, he hurt. He hurt, and he was outnumbered, and he didn’t know how he was going to win this, survive this. He didn’t know how he was going to keep the gauntlet away. How he was going to make Mr. Stark proud.

There was only one thing he could do, and that was to fight, to try to keep the end from drifting into Thanos’s clutches for as long as possible.

But as it turned out, he didn’t have to.

That same beacon of rainbow energy drifted into the area before him, slowly dimming until he could see its source, suspended within it.

A woman. A woman with power in her voice and in her eyes, a smirk on her face and a question on her lips.

Peter was starstruck.

Maybe everything would be alright, after all.

“Hi,” Peter managed, voice hoarse with dust and blood. “I’m Peter Parker.”

“Hey, Peter Parker,” said the woman, her smirk growing into a smile. “Got something for me?”

Peter nodded, sitting up and offering the gauntlet with little ceremony. The glowing lady took it in nimble hands and turned, surveying the battlefield with the air of a soldier.

“I don’t know how you’re getting it through all that,” Peter coughed. He wiped a bit of blood from
his lip and looked up at the woman.

But the reassurance didn’t come from her.

It came from an accented voice to her left, strong and cold and utterly determined. “Don’t worry,” Okoye of Wakanda said. “She’s got help.”

Peter watched the group of warriors advance, not even blinking as Thanos’s great gaze turned upon them, and wondered if he should try and help.

And then they burst into movement, weapons charged, light blazing, and Peter sat back.

... Nah. They’ve got this. I mean, she’s got a pegasus for Heaven’s sake.

Earth-200004: October 2016

Peter swam in suspension between awareness and unconsciousness, his vision a haze of white and silver and splashes of brown. There were voices washing over him, but he couldn’t tell where they were coming from—right or left or memory or dream or reality.

He didn’t like those voices. When they spoke, they pulled him up, closer to the surface of conscious thought and closer to where it hurt.

He didn’t belong up there. The air was wrong, the universe was wrong—everything was wrong up there. And it hurt up there, hurt his body and his soul, and he didn’t want to go back.

The voices fuzzed in and out as time tumbled along, speeding up and slowing to a crawl and seemingly disappearing altogether.

‘Peter, sweetheart, I’m so sorry... you’ll pull through this, though. I know you will. We always pull through, you and me.’

He knew that voice, loved it. Peter’s aching form relaxed as his brain drifted around the comfort in that sound, drugged and exhausted and healing. Light peeked beneath his eyelids, searing into his mind, and warmth tingled through his fingers. It hurt.

Peter slept.

Dreamscape-200004, Adjacent Astral Plane: August 2023

No.

No.

PLEASE NO!

Earth-200004: October 2016

The surface of awareness cracked, Peter Parker wrapping nearly desperate fingers around it. He didn’t break it, but he couldn’t let himself fall back down, back toward a truth that wasn’t his—that couldn’t possibly be his.

The flickering colors were no kinder, and the voices no quieter. Peter winced, and something like fabric rubbed at his perception. Bubbles of consciousness formed and burst, and Peter drifted within them, floating between their wafer-thin edges.
Listening.

‘Kid.’

He knew that voice too.

‘I know you’re in there. You and your spider-healing—Vision’s been tracking your vitals and you’re damn ready to wake up.’

He didn’t… he didn’t want to… it hurt. It was wrong. He didn’t belong there, none of them belonged there. He may be alone, but at least here he was closer to home.

‘Open your eyes, kid.’

That voice didn’t speak in his home, anymore.

‘I mean it. You’re worrying your aunt.’

That voice didn’t speak in his home anymore and it was wrong. It was supposed to speak, and it didn’t, and it wasn’t fair—

‘You’re worrying me, too.’

Well that wouldn’t do, now would it? Peter’s bubble of consciousness flickered, bursting and blowing and drifting, between home and not-home—

But that voice spoke in only one, and Peter was no longer sure which was home.

So he latched onto the spiraling words, letting them tow him up between the cracks in the wall keeping Peter in unconsciousness. It splintered like stained glass. Peter fell heavily into his body, the sensation of the world slamming into him from all sides, and Peter groaned.

“There you go, kid. Almost there.”

Oh, ow… what the fuck… just happened…

“H’rts,” Peter slurred.

“Not as bad as it probably did.” Tony Stark’s voice came clear and strong. “You mended those bones in impressive time, and I don’t think your bleeding anywhere anymore. Congrats, I suppose. The hands are still working through their issues, but hey.”

“Wha… what happ’ned…” Peter stretched his fingers, feeling the tingle up through his arms.

“What do you remember?”

Peter wracked his fuzzy brain, frowning slightly. He blinked, dim light still shockingly bright in his vision, and turned his head toward Stark’s voice.

“Lady… torch lady…”

No that wasn’t right. He tried to chase the memory, but it disappeared like a dream did when you thought too hard about it, and Peter figured that was what it had to have been. He tried to search for what wasn’t fuzzy, concrete and definite.

The first thing he recalled was a kiss.
That felt as wrong as… this dimension? Right, right, the universe was ending, and Loki had disappeared and—

Peter bolted upright, or at least tried to. There was a hand on his chest, gently coaxing him back to the bed beneath him as his sore muscles screamed a protest, and he found his tongue after a moment.

“Is e’rybody okay—elevator took a bashing,” Peter managed.

The man beside him huffed a chuckle, though it was a bit strained. “So did you, kid. But everybody’s alright, thanks to you, though you gave us all a scare.”

Peter frowned. Tony Stark, scared? That didn’t make sense. Now that he thought of it, Tony Stark sitting at his hospital bedside didn’t make a ton of sense either.

“Why’re you…” he began, before hissing as a trickle of agony gripped his throat.

Stark shushed him. “I’ll spare you the lecture about fucking using your hands and body as a bomb shield until later.”

Oh, fuck—the glowy thing. Loki. Ned and Liz and weapons dealers and the end of the world. “How long was I…” He waved an expansive hand.

“Two days.”

“What?”

“Cut yourself some slack, you almost died.” Stark’s voice was light, but his eyes were a mask of something flat and heavy. “What did you mean ‘torch lady?’”

Peter was a bit taken aback. “Did I…”

“You said that, yeah.”

It was all still fuzzy. But: “I had s’me weird dreams, I guess. Don’ really remember.”

“Ah. As long as I don’t have to keep an eye out for burning women. Well, another one.” Stark’s expression morphed into something that could have been a smile if his eyes had been less tired.

“I th’nk you’re good,” Peter reassured.

“Hm,” said the man, standing and fiddling with something beside Peter’s bed. “I’ll tell your aunt you’re awake.”

And then he left. The door closed behind his dapper form with barely a whisper.

Peter wondered if he’d imagined the whole bizarre exchange.

Chapter End Notes

THEY HAD A CONVERSATION GUYS!!!
:D :D :D :D

See, Irontad is confirmed, fnf out--

Kudos me? Comment? Other such feedbacky things? Yaaasss...
Peter managed to stay awake while May was with him. But laughing was tiring, and when his Aunt kissed him one last time and slipped from the room to retrieve some food—Peter was famished—he found his eyes drifting shut again.

When he opened them, he was staring into the green, slitted gaze of a rather agitated, rather untamed cat.

“Hudhgjf,” came out instead of a shriek, and Peter’s heavy limbs tried to find purchase on the bed sheets beneath him. His palms and shoulders complained rather aggressively, but adrenaline kept Peter moving, until:

“It’s me,” meowed the creature, tail lashing as it tried to keep his balance.

“Wha—oh.” Peter relaxed slightly. “Mr. Loki.”

Loki wrapped his tail around his paws and settled comfortably on Peter’s knees.

“You are aware cats are usually…” Peter lifted his hands and mimed compressing something. “A lot smaller, yes?”

“I am a large feline,” Loki said. “It was necessary.”

“You’re more of a small panther, actually,” Peter grumbled. He pushed himself up so he was against the headrest, surveying the room for the first lucid time.

The first thing he noticed was the plate of food on the table beside him, of a sort that would stay fresh despite the time he’d been asleep—a chocolate-chip bagel, slices of cheese, and a banana. But besides that, the room was small, well-furnished and equipped, and Peter knew instantly where he had to be. No hospital was built with heart monitors that tracked inhuman rhythms, or with glimmering bindings at the corners of the bed for patients with powers that needed restraint when non-coherent and dangerous. No hospital managed to make all of that look comfortable, nonthreatening, and sleek, with colorful splashes and natural light from a slightly domed skylight and shaped window panes.

Peter was in the Avengers infirmary. Which was… in upstate New York now.

“How long did it take you to get here?” Peter wondered.

“Not long,” Loki stood, jumping off Peter’s sternum and padding next to him on the bed, “as the crow flies.”

“Ah.” Peter instinctively tried to lift an arm to stroke the cat as he passed; a bad idea on two accounts, as Loki hissed and Peter’s arm and fingers ached soundly. The boy groaned.
“Are you…” Loki’s ears twitched. “Alright?”

“I think so,” Peter replied. “Fast healer. I dunno what happened after I started falling, though…”

“Should have been there,” Loki murmured, the ‘r’ elongated in his cat’s mouth.

Peter smiled a bit. The god wasn’t looking at him, and Peter reassured, “no offense, Mr. Loki, but I don’t think there was much you could have done.”

“Magic,” was the panther’s response.

“Okay maybe you’re right.”

Loki laughed, but there was no warmth to it. He nosed at Peter’s elbow to get him to turn his arm, his nose just as cold and wet as any cat, and Peter yelped and did as he was bid.

Loki padded down to his hand and sniffed at his palm. Turning his head Peter tried to glimpse the state of the stinging limbs.

“Oh…” he murmured, expression twisting.

His hands did not look good. The skin was puckered and blistered, shot with a violet tinge that was decidedly not natural, and Peter’s fingers could hardly bend due to the swelling. Holding an energy bomb in one’s hands was apparently just as unhealthy as one would assume.

Loki mewed a curse, licking lightly at one of Peter’s fingers. The boy could hardly feel it.

“That’s… not normal,” Peter observed. “My spider-healing doesn’t work as fast on burns cuz spiders have low homeostasis or something, but it’s been like two days.”

“It’ll heal,” Loki said, glaring at the blisters as though he could soothe them by the sheer power of will.

“Yeah.” Peter was confident in that; it’d just take longer.

He tried to flex his fingers again, and they felt like unwieldy sausages. He accidentally whacked Loki in the nose, and the cat twitched angrily.

“Sorry,” Peter said.

“It matters not.” Loki bounded over his arm and padded up to the pillow of the bed, wrapping around Peter’s head.

Peter asked, “And how did it go with the weapons guys?”

Loki cackled, and it sounded terrifying from a feline throat. “Just wonderfully. Their leader’s name is Toomes, their engineer’s name is Mason, and they are now under the impression that they’re working for me.”

Peter’s eyes widened. “You—”

“Turned double agent? It wasn’t difficult; I’m an Avengers-level convict and they do not scratch that ceiling. I have influence over petty criminals, in that way,” Loki purred. Peter couldn’t see him from where he was tucked up against Peter’s head, but he could imagine Loki looked pleased with himself.
“So did you set up how we’re gonna beat them?” Peter asked excitedly. “Just round ‘em up in their lair, even?”

Loki huffed. “We are not going to just ‘round them up.’ We are going to perform an intricate and rather exciting dance, using my image to gain attention, and convince a certain billionaire that he needs to listen to you.”

Peter paused. “... What?”

“I’m going to get Stark to fight by your side, idiot.”

“What?”

Loki boxed one of Peter’s ears with his paw, his claws ripping at the soft skin, and Peter winced and shooed him off. The god climbed over his head to sit on his chest, staring at him, unimpressed.

“You need Stark. We need Stark. The universe needs Stark. Therefore I am getting him in on our plans by allowing you, man of spiders, to prove your worth in battle against these weapons dealers.”

Peter’s mouth flopped open and shut as he tried to voice just how terrible an idea that was. “Mr. Loki…”

“Yes?”

“Why can’t we just take them down? I’m sure that’s enough.”

Loki’s whiskers twitched with the same energy as an eyebrow being cocked. “Enough to make Stark trust you enough to trust me by connection? I very much doubt it.”

“But…” Peter sighed, giving up his argument. The god was, unfortunately, being quite logical; Peter just didn’t like the air of deceit this plan radiated. “Alright, fine. But you can set this up so everything will go smoothly?”

“I can get everyone in position, both on the side of the dealers and the side of Stark—the latter indirectly.” Loki licked a paw and ran it over his ears. “And then it’s your time to shine.”

“How are you gonna do that?” Peter wondered. He fidgeted with his foot against the base of the bed, edgy with the fact that he couldn’t move his hands with ease.

“Easy,” Loki said. “I convinced them they needed to try and steal an Iron Man suit.”

Peter stared at him. Loki grinned.

Peter kept staring. “That’s… There’s no way the dealers can win in a scuffle with a suit. That’s somewhat brilliant, actually.”

The cat puffed its chest, flicking its tail in satisfaction. “Indeed. You will have to look out for the capabilities of their weapons of course; the suit may not be as invulnerable as it usually is against the technologies of aliens.”

“Right.”

Loki nodded. “So, I pretend to have located a suit, and the dealers come to where I say. I make myself known there, and Stark and company comes to try and stop me. In the resulting fight, you
web them up, ‘defeat’ me, and then we speak to Stark while he can see I’m not a threat and we can convince him to hear us out.”

“And if it all goes terribly wrong?”

“Then I pretend to kidnap you, probably.”

Peter chuckled. “Let’s avoid that, my aunt would freak.”

“I agree. It’d be uncomfortable to try and hide us both in the sewers or abandoned warehouses anyway.”

“Alright then.” Peter shifted, crossing his legs and bringing himself further upright. Loki lost the battle with balance on the moving blanket and ended up curled on it, looking somewhat miffed. Peter tried not to laugh.

Reaching for the plate of food beside him, Peter positioned himself comfortably and surveyed the god. “Is it safe for us to be discussing this?” he wondered after a moment. “The Compound has cameras…”

Loki waved a paw. “This room is remarkably out of touch with the technology and AI of the rest of the building, it seems. We’re quite safe.”

“You can do that? You’re magic…”

“It’s Asgardian. Our power comes from the manipulation of form and function, of ourselves and other objects. It’s child’s play.”

Peter nodded. “Alright then. How, where, and when are we going to pull this off?”

“How’s he doing?”

Tony slumped into the chair beside Rhodey, taking a hearty swig out of the thermos in his hand. “He woke up. Bit woozy, but he was talking, at least.”

“Good. Aunt?”

“She went in, they talked, she went to get food, I did not hover, and then he fell back asleep again. Probably still asleep.” Tony swirled the caffeine in his cup and drank again.

Rhodes nodded, blowing out a breath. Vision, on the other side of the table, was watching Tony with those curious, unreadable eyes, a bottle cap rolling between his fingers and the tabletop. Tony wondered where he’d gotten it.

“Nobody saw?” Rhodey asked.

“I don’t think so. But he was in bad shape when I arrived—” Remarkably, Tony’s voice didn’t falter — “and there was no way he pulled the mask off after calling for help. Somebody must have done it. Hopefully they didn’t realize what they were doing, or who they were doing it to... I found the mask in his pocket, so at least whoever saved our asses didn’t run off with my multi-million dollar technology.”

“Ow them a thank you, then,” Rhodey said.
“I do indeed.” Tony took another gulp of coffee. “Getting them to believe he hadn’t smuggled the bomb in was remarkably easy; he saved the other idiot inhabitants, having accidentally gotten a hold of a bit of my tech through our internship connection bullshit, and therefore I’m paying for damages. Badabing, badaboom. And I had to hide the extent of the injuries from his aunt, otherwise the quick recovery would give away his identity. Lying to someone with mom-senses is not easy, I do not recommend it.”

Tony remembered the blazing in May’s eyes and shivered.

“So, anyway,” he said, changing the subject, “besides the latest crisis, how did we do while I was in DC?”

Vision, the bottle cap now rolling expertly over his thumb and wrist, hummed. “There has been… nothing out of the ordinary. No more strange dead, or other signs from Loki.”

“It’s been five days.” Tony frowned.

“Maybe you misinterpreted?” Rhodey offered.

“Or maybe he’s up to something. Who am I kidding, of course he is; I just didn’t think it’d take so fucking long.”

Tony ran his hands somewhat aggressively through his hair. He knew it probably cracked through his put-together mask to the bedraggled character beneath, and he wished he these two didn’t have to see it.

No. They can. They're safe. Stop… I don’t know, whatever you’re doing, stop.

He’d been sleeping worse than usual. Strange and vivid dreams kept drifting between his nightmares, and Tony almost preferred the strangling terror of the latter to how uneasy and wrong the world felt when he woke up from the former.

Tony hadn’t felt like he belonged in his skin for a long, long time. But now it was worse, like a constant prickling within his blood, telling him to get on with something he didn’t understand.

Vision flicked the bottle cap to him, and Tony’s mind was forced back to the present as he caught it out of the air. The android offered him a smile, and Tony found the strength to return it.

Rhodey’s fingers tapped against Tony’s chair, the light from the joints of his prosthetics illuminating the legs of the table. “We got clearance to operate if needed,” he mused. “Once we make any move, this is going to end up public knowledge. Perhaps that’s what Loki wants. To make a scene, to gain an entrance? That’s what it was last time.”

“Waiting for us to make the first move,” Vision added.

Tony hummed. It wasn’t out of character for the god, as far as he knew, but the idea was distasteful. “In a game we don’t know the rules to,” he sighed. “In that scenario, we hardly have any power at all.”

Nothing. Nothing.

And Tony couldn’t keep up this waiting, this suspended state of what if. Anymore than he already was, at least. But adding the Loki what-ifs to the universal what-ifs was too much effort, and Tony would like maybe five consecutive hours of sleep at some point.

“So, what,” Rhodey wondered. “Should we wait? Or act?”
Tony rolled the bottle-cap over his knuckles, the divots pressing into his skin like a clock ticking rhythmically. *Bump bump bump.* “On what?” he asked. “We don’t have… anything to go on. Anything at all. He could be anywhere, doing anything! If we wait, we’d be too late, but we can’t —”

“Tones,” Rhodey said, his voice soft but strong as it cut through Tony’s ramble. “Look at me.”

Tony did, realizing his breathing had been becoming rather quick. Embarrassed, but calmer, he averted his eyes as soon as he had met Rhodey’s.

There was a second of quiet, during which a couple of things became strikingly prominent. One, the quiet whir of Rhodey’s leg supports—Tony would have to fix that before whatever had come loose to cause the sound made more trouble; two, Vision’s breathing, strange and deep and arrhythmic (the android didn’t technically have to respire, but he’d been trying to ‘practice’, though he hadn’t quite mastered the natural rhythm yet); three, that FRIDAY had “Bad Liar” by Imagine Dragons stuck in her head if the humming of the air-conditioner was any indication; and four, that Tony’d dropped the bottle cap beneath the table and couldn’t remember when he’d done so.

Tony leaned down to grab it, then tossed it back to Vision. The android spun it on his finger, watching the way it twirled with a rapt sort of focus, and Tony watched him in turn.

Rhodey just kept tapping his fingers and strategizing. Military men—they did that.

Tony swallowed.

*Stop that,* he told himself again. *This one’s your military man.*

“I think we have to just wait,” his friend admitted finally. “Your right; we have no leads and nothing to attack, and as soon as we start pointing our guns at New York people will know. We just have to wait for Loki, see if we can stop him as he goes.”

“Tick tock,” Tony murmured.


Chapter End Notes

The plot doesn't pause for Peter to recover, no sir.

*cough cough* idiots.

Aaaanyway! Hope you enjoyed this chapter, and I'll see y'all soon. :)
Stuck in my Skin

Chapter Notes

HEY ALL I MADE IT. It's been a hell of a week... but here we are! :) All you amazing dorks were clamoring for the exact opposite of this in the comments and I'm going to do it anyway because Reasons (classified, only authors can access).

*innocent grin*

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Earth-200004: October 2016

Peter didn’t see Mr. Stark again before he was cleared for returning to Queens by doctors with kind smiles and unrecognized names. He caught a glimpse of the man, standing and watching through the windows of the Compound as Peter and May walked hand-in-hand across the lawn.

Apparently, it was already Thursday. Homecoming was next Saturday, and though Peter wasn’t surprised, the shock of it already nearing the end of October was somewhat jarring. May had made it perfectly clear that he was not going to school today, and Loki had hissed at him not even to think about putting on the suit.

The suit, which he’d found laying at the base of his bed, concealed under a perfectly sized pair of pants and a shirt with a wonderfully cringey science pun displayed across it. Along with a loose, downey pair of gloves that felt heavenly against the still-raw skin of his hands.

Peter raised his free hand as he crossed the grass to wave at Mr. Stark in the window, somewhat pointedly.

The man met his eyes, but didn’t return the gesture.

Peter didn’t know quite how to interpret that, so he just slipped into the backseat of the car Happy was driving and blew out a breath.

He felt almost as good as new. He’d felt that way yesterday, but they’d insisted he stay a final twenty-four hours.

May kept saying how lucky he’d been, how remarkable the fall and the care must have been. Peter thought he did a good job sounding confused and grateful and not at all suspicious; his aunt was wonderful, but he couldn’t pull the Spider-Man card even after this.

“Thank you for the ride,” May said, leaning forward so Happy knew she was talking to him. She was currently in the back with Peter, making sure he didn’t drop dead, which was perfectly fine with the young teenager. He hadn’t had a hug in four days, apparently, and the extended one that his aunt
was gracing him with was immensely comforting. Peter snuggled a bit closer to her.

“Of course,” Happy said, sounding awkward. “Couldn’t have our favorite intern taking the subway back after his fall.”

Peter huffed.

Happy coughed.

May raised an eyebrow, though neither of the boys saw. “Does your facility take Blue Cross Blue Shield?”

Happy’s face twisted in confusion, and Peter held in a laugh. “It’s insurance,” he explained.

“Ah. Why… would that matter?”

May cocked her head, carding a hand through Peter’s curls and making the boy purr. “Payment for your care.”

Happy burst out laughing. “You think—Tony’s going to—don’t worry,” he spluttered.

Peter met May’s eyes, and they both frowned. “But…”

“We’ll cover everything. Benefits of the, er, internship,” Happy said, giving them a thumbs-up in the rearview mirror.

Before the conversation could get any more awkward, an elegant bird swooped down to linger beside the car for a moment. May gasped, and Happy attempted not to swerve the car.

Peter grinned and gave the onyx creature a thumbs-up of his own.

Flapping wings longer than Peter’s femurs, Loki caught air and swooped away again. Peter watched him go with a slight smile, feeling rather at home against May’s warmth and watching the god fly away.

Vaguely, Peter wondered what he was to Loki. What Loki was to him. They were… saving the world together, saving each other on occasion. He’d worried about the god when he’d gone off to fight, and Loki had seemed so concerned when he’d found Peter injured. Loki’d protected him, worked with him, laughed with him. Killed for him.

And though it had only been a week and a half since he’d found the grimy, tired Asgardian slumped in that alley, Peter cared about Loki. And it was fairly obvious, though he was sure Loki would never mention it, that the god cared about him.

They were… allies. More than that. They were a team.

*Team Nefarious Plans.*

Peter rather liked that.

Friday took an eternity to roll around, but once Peter was walking into school, everything proceeded at lightning speed.
Ned’s hug was like nothing Peter’d ever experienced, long and tight and almost desperate. Peter returned it in kind, lifting his friend up with enhanced strength and spinning him around. His backpack lifted weightlessly from the centrifugal force, and Loki’s hiss of consternation could be heard through the pocket.

“Dude,” Ned breathed. “Dude. You were—I am—”

“Good to see you too,” Peter laughed.

Ned pulled away, stuffing his hands somewhat aggressively into the pocket of his hoodie. “You almost fucking died, Peter.”

“But I didn’t.”
“But you didn’t! You saved us all instead! Dude, you fell and everyone lost their shit and Liz was freaking out—cuz like, you dying so soon after you’ve confessed your love for each other and whatever—and then the park ranger—”

Peter cut him off. “Woah, woah, who said anything about confessing love?”

“Um, you kissed her after we won national decathlon,” Ned said, raising his eyebrows at Peter. “You’re set, dude.”

Peter nodded, trying to convince himself that the twisting in his gut was excitement, not fear.

“So yeah.” Ned picked up where he left off. “We all got out of the elevator by, like, climbing out onto the next floor? And they told us to stay there, but I thought you were dead, so I ran off and they were chasing me and there are so many stairs at the Washington Monument oh my gosh.” Ned took a breath, nodding to a group of boys watching them curiously from the other side of the hall

Peter frowned and stuck close to Ned as they made their way through the hallways. People were looked at him, which was decidedly unusual, and what was more, they waved at him. Nobody noticed Peter generally, and the attention was putting him a little on-edge.

“Yeah, the team told everyone what you did with the glowy-thing and the whole school’s really grateful,” Ned elaborated. “Except Flash, he’s an asshole.”

Peter nodded, still uncomfortable. “So…”

“Don’t worry, the whole—” Ned made the web-shooter hand motion—“is still a secret. People just think you’re a normal hero.”

A normal hero.

“It only worked because I’m Spider-Man,” Peter said. It was, for some reason, quite important that Ned understood this.

His friend just shrugged. “You saved everyone’s life, and a ton of historical infrastructure. People are grateful no matter how you did it.”

Flushing, Peter nodded. He wasn’t used to this; this affirmation to his face instead of through the mask, and it didn’t feel quite deserved. But he shook himself and sped his pace, coming up on his locker.

Ned continued with his story, and Peter was happy for the distraction. “So anyway I got outside, after running down all those stairs, and there were like six park rangers following me at the time, but I couldn’t listen, y’know? And you were on a stretcher in an ambulance and Tony Stark was there
with his armor and everything.”

Peter frowned, his fingers pausing where they fiddled with his locker. “What? Mr. Stark was in DC?”

“Yeah. He must’ve been there before, otherwise he couldn’t have gotten there so fast.”

“But…” Peter trailed off.

“He said he was taking you to his hospital in the Compound. Did he not do that?” Ned looked concerned.

“No, he did,” Peter was quick to assure, “but I just didn’t think he’d… y’know, have come himself.”

“He was there a while. I think he even rode back with you in the ambulance, cuz I never saw him get back in his suit.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Peter said, finishing opening his locker.

Ned hummed. “It would have if you’d seen his face. He seemed really worried. And he gave me his phone number.”

That made Peter stop in his tracks, his backpack half stuffed into his locker. He stared at his friend, trying to read if Ned was pulling his leg. But Ned’s tone was the same earnest excitement as before, and he met Peter’s eyes without hesitation.

“W- what?”

“On a receipt. He told me to call him if anything ‘like this’ happened again. I think he meant if anything happened to you.”

Peter huffed a laugh. “Now you’re being ridiculous.”

“That’s what happened!”

“Are you quite finissshed?” came a somewhat strangled voice from within the backpack, and Peter realized he’d likely been squishing Loki against the corner of the locker.

“Sorry, sorry,” he said, radjusting and opening the zipper. Loki slithered out onto his palm, and Ned blanched.

“That’s—that’s the snake, from…” Realization so blinding Peter felt he should shield his eyes dawned on Ned’s face. “Ooooooh!”

“Yeah.”

“Loki chased Flash around the gym for like fifteen minutes for you!”

Loki looked unimpressed. “I did not. That isss far beneath my ssstandardssss and I’m offended you would even suggestss sssuch actions.”

Peter snorted into his elbow as Ned blithered an apology, including something that sounded like ‘please don’t knife me again’.

“He’s kidding Ned,” Peter said. “Don’t give yourself a stroke.”
Liz sat with them at lunch.

Correction: Liz and company sat with them at lunch, filling their table so the usual stragglers dispersed to other parts of the cafeteria. Peter spent the whole time telling and re-telling the story in the elevator, gaining more of a crowd and growing more and more uncomfortable each time.

“You were so brave.” Liz was smiling at him, and it took more strength than it should have to smile back.

“Thanks,” Peter murmured. “I’m just glad everyone’s okay now.”

More questions assaulted him, and Peter navigated them with as much grace as he could. He tried to move as little as he could. Loki’s constant shifting beneath his shirt did nothing to reduce the itchy, uneasy feeling beneath Peter’s skin, especially because Liz’s hand kept finding its way to his wrist or his shoulder or his back and Peter was terrified she was going to brush against the snake.

“Yeah, my hands got it the worst,” Peter said for the third time, extending his palms face-up and trying not to focus too much on the way Loki’s scales slid across him. “But it’s not so bad anymore. The people at Stark Industries worked their magic, and I’m practically as good as new.” He tried to sound excited, interested, but his tone just got flatter as more people started speaking over each other.

By the time fifteen minutes had passed, Peter was tensing every time anyone so much as twitched. Ned had noticed, sidling sideways on the bench to give Peter as much space as he could, but Liz was still brushing him and speaking to him. The words were kind and her voice was calm, but it hardly mattered as everything started to compound on itself, growing to deafening input.

Peter shivered, curling in on himself a bit. His hands were starting to sting, the blisters still a bit raw, and he tried to pay attention as the words of his classmates became steadily louder.

Soon he was agreeing with things he hadn’t been listening too and making comments on things he didn’t understand, and the lights were shining in his eyes with an intensity he could have sworn they didn’t have before. His spidey-sense began to tingle in a constant, unnerving buzz, and he felt as though his breath was sticking in his throat.

The sixth time he was asked the same question, Peter felt something rip against his ribcage.

“I have to, uh, run to the restroom,” Peter managed, standing abruptly. Ned offered a hand as Peter tried to extricate himself from the bench, but the thought of touching even his friend made Peter queasy. So he just thanked Ned, sincerely, and hauled ass from the room.

As soon as he was in the bathroom, he was tearing at his shirt.

“Off,” he choked. “Off, off, off—”

Loki practically teleported out of Peter’s cuff, landing on the floor with a serpentine slap. He shifted, scrambling to his feet as Peter’s knees buckled and he pressed his palms to the grimey bathroom floor, forcing himself to breathe.

But he could taste the bleach of the cleaning product when he inhaled, and he could smell the urine in the bowl of the next stall over where someone hadn’t flushed. The lights reflected off the mirrors with as much intensity as lazers. Each creak of a stall door, drip of a leaking sink, flicker of breath from the god beside him was maddening, and the sand grains beneath Peter’s palms were nearly painful.
Everything was paralyzing, intense to an extreme that Peter couldn’t even remember how to think, how to move. Peter clench[ed] his eyes shut, his hands ratcheting up to cover his mouth and nose. But he could still feel the sand sticking to him, feel the air chilling his exposed skin.

Too loud too pungent too textured too rancid too bright too much—

The lights clicked off.

Peter saw the darkness filter through his closed eyelids. He blinked them open, forcing himself to focus on the constant cream-colored walls of the stall.

A sink trickled on, then gushed, and Peter winced at the sudden strength of the noise, drowning all the others out. But after a moment, he honed in on it, listening intently to that single sound now dominating his hearing. A calming of those two senses, the strongest in his body, was enough to slow Peter’s perception to a speed his mind could process.

Time ticked, and Peter found himself shaking his head, able to ignore the smells and textures and light as he usually could. He tested his voice, and found that he could tolerate it again.

“Oh…” he moaned. “That’s… that was… rather worse than it usually is.”

Loki’s voice came tentative and quiet, and Peter could just barely make it out over the rushing water. “Are you alright?”

“Yes,” Peter said, then stronger: “Yeah. You can turn that off, now. Thank you.”

The sound ceased, and Loki opened the door to the stall to peer down at where Peter was still sitting against the toilet. He knelt, eyes calculating but soft.

“Is that a usual occurrence?” the god asked.

Peter shrugged. “It’s happened a handful of times since the spider-bite, but not usually so… intense. Often it’s only one sense, like my hearing or my sense of smell, but this time it was sort of all of them.”

“Hm.”

They were silent for a moment.

(Truly silent. Peter didn’t feel the need to gouge out his eardrums at the voices outside.)

“Thank you,” Peter said again. “For… the lights and stuff.”

“You’re most welcome. I had hoped it would help.”

Peter beckoned, and Loki made a face but ended up sitting on the bathroom floor as well. Peter said, “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“You didn’t. I was simply confused.”

“Same.” Peter smiled. “I just… get stuck in my skin sometimes.”
only imagine how he himself looked.

*Stuck in my skin.*

He smiled ruefully. “I can understand that.”

“You shift a lot though,” Peter observed. “Not really a constant skin.”

Loki watched him for a long moment, trying to decide how—if—he was going to respond to that.

“I don’t…” the god finally began. He sighed, then lifted his hand, flexing the fingers and watching the way his skin rippled. He could almost see the scales, the feathers, the fur, even still. “I don’t usually shift this much.”

Peter looked apologetic. “I don’t mean to make you turn into things, it just always seems to be, well, necessary.” The boy fidgeted, and Loki could sense him misunderstanding. “I hope it’s not annoying or anything.”

“It’s not… it’s not annoying, no,” Loki said. But the hesitance in his tone was obvious to Peter, and the boy looked at him critically, and a little guiltily. The self-depreciation in Peter’s expression was enough to force Loki to continue.


He found that he couldn’t keep looking at Peter, not even in the dark, not even without focusing on him. Even now, he wanted to shift; he’d be so much stronger, better, *worthier* in any other skin, *anything.*

Peter didn’t speak, waiting for Loki to continue.

Loki did. “When I’m something else, I don’t look at these hands and see gore and weapons and betrayal. I don’t imagine the gauntlet around my throat. I don’t hear the cries, I don’t remember how I couldn’t protect him—I don’t *remember.*”

And suddenly, remember was all he could do. His father’s lies, his broken ambitions, the words of all those he’d killed, a thousand thoughts that weren’t his own forced into his mind with subtlety he hadn’t discovered—Loki remembered. He remembered the times he’d died, what’d he’d learned in each new lifetime. What new lies he’d discovered. What’d he’d been told.

*You don’t belong. They saved you, you owe them, but this is not your home. You don’t belong anywhere.*

And Loki remembered where he had belonged, in the bridge of the spaceship on its way to a new world, his brother handing him his knife by the blade so Loki could easily grasp the hilt and smiling. Not sadly, not blindly; Thor smiled with full, final understanding of who Loki was and an acceptance of *whoever he’d become.*

And then that smile had turned to a roar, and that roar had turned to screams of pain, screams of grief, and Loki couldn’t do—hadn’t done anything. Not strong enough to protect him, not brave enough the protect the Stone, not fast enough to kill a Titan.

Not enough.

He could sense Peter’s disbelief, sense his pity, and Loki stared at his hands and saw blood instead.
“This body is me,” Loki said hoarsely. “And I don’t want to be me. Not anymore.”

He didn’t look at Peter. If he could stop listening, keep himself from hearing whatever useless platitude was coming next, he would have in a heartbeat.

He wanted to shift, the near-constant feeling all the stronger.

But Peter didn’t say anything. Not one word.

He just rose onto his knees and wrapped his arms around the lost god, gently holding him in an embrace too strong for a child and too innocent for a warrior and entirely, undeniably Peter.

And Loki Odinson, Prince of Lies, God of Mischief and Lord of Trickery, sobbed into the boy’s arms.

Chapter End Notes

*finger guns*

Also I saw Far From Home finally and pardon my language but what the actual, literal, genuine FUCK JUST HAPPENED?? I can't--Marvel wth--I am--how could you write something like that--I don't know--AAAAAAH--I guess now I gotta figure out why Stephen was "unavailable" for actually doing anything useful and like,, does someone want to just EXPLAIN those end-credit scenes to me because UM WHAT
Guess who's BACK? That's right, it's me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Earth-200004: October 2016

Peter made cookies.

Perhaps it was stupid and trivial and unimportant, but it definitely didn’t hurt. And right now, that was all Peter could do. All he knew how to do.

Loki hadn’t spoken for the rest of the day. He’d just shifted into a snake as soon as Ned had appeared to check on them in the bathroom (little late, Leeds, but thanks anyway), curling into Peter’s shirt a bit tighter than usual.

He’d had silver scales beneath his eyes, this time.

They sat in silence, Peter on one of the kitchen chairs in the thankfully aunt-less apartment and Loki still serpentine on the table. The scent of cinnamon and butter filtered through the air as Peter’s snickerdoodles flattened beautifully in the oven, unseen. Peter wanted to say something, encourage Loki to return to his natural form, but he didn’t dare risk alienating the god further.

He kept a hand against Loki’s scales, not holding, but brushing against where he coiled. Even if he was a useless Midgardian without any knowledge of the history and magic that had hurt this man so much, Peter was here and would continue to be here, ready whenever Loki was.

The touch was just to remind them both of that.

The timer went off, making Peter jump and startling a hiss out of Loki. It was the first sound he’d made since they’d left the bathroom, and Peter wondered if it was a good sign.

“Be right back,” Peter said, standing slowly and making his way into the kitchen.

By some miracle, he’d gotten them golden with the first time increment, and was able to pull the cookies from the oven right then. Not patient enough to wait for them to cool, Peter slid them off onto a plate immediately. He broke four of the sugary disks.

On an afterthought, Peter grabbed the milk from the fridge and pinned two mugs between his chin and sternum. He likely looked exceedingly ridiculous, but Loki didn’t react as he slid back to the table.

Positioning the food and drink a bit nervously, Peter poured them each a bit of milk and asked, “do you have cookies in Asgard?”
After too long, Loki shook his head. Peter felt like cheering.

“Well, I’m about to change your life. For the better.” He carefully slid a still steaming snickerdoodle onto his palm and offered it to Loki. “You might want to, uh…” he waved a hand, gesturing to his body and then Loki’s.

Loki gave him a look that said he knew exactly what Peter was doing, but shifted anyway. Peter tried to conceal his relief as the fully Asgardian form manifested on the table and slid down into the chair beside Peter.

Loki took the cookie a bit suspiciously, hands trembling slightly. The intensity of his gaze on the pastry made Peter surprised it didn’t crumble to nothing as he took a slow bite.

Peter stuffed a cookie into his own mouth, savoring the crackle of a well-baked snickerdoodle, and watched as Loki took another nibble. And then another. And then shoved the remaining half into his mouth so quickly Peter barely had time to blink.

Loki turned to him, eyes comically wide, and spoke for the first time in eight hours.

“What sorcery is this?”

Peter laughed, unbelievably glad he’d done something right. “It’s not sorcery,” he said, handing Loki another cookie. “It’s chemistry.”

“Edible… science?”

“Exactly! Flour and butter and sugar and cinnamon and stuff.” Peter took a gulp of milk, swishing the crumbs out of his teeth.

Loki looked at the cookie in his hand somewhat morosely. “I am not particularly apt with science, unfortunately.”

“It’s not…” Peter tried to explain. “It’s following a recipe. You do that in Asgard, I’m sure.”

Loki nodded, a bit hesitant. “Nothing like this.”

“What sort of sweets do you have?” Peter asked. “Desserts.”

“Cakes,” Loki replied instantly. “Sweet buns.”

Peter scooched a bit closer, interested now. One didn’t usually discuss the intricacies of Asgardian culture, especially not over snickerdoodles. Speaking of: “try it with the milk.”

Loki helped himself, looking a bit more like himself. “Are these common in your realm?”


“We do have honey, though I believe the species it comes from is slightly different.”

“What, are your bees killer?” Peter was joking, but Loki nodded earnestly.

“Yes. Sugar is common, but I’ve never heard of this… cinnamon.”

“That’s what’s on the cookie,” Peter said, pointing to the cooling snickerdoodles. “The brown stuff that gives it its tang.”
“I approve of this cinnamon,” Loki said, and Peter laughed.

“I’m glad.”

“Perhaps I will make you a sweetcake,” Loki mused. “Or a meat pie. I was rather good at meat pies.”

Peter smiled. “Yeah,” he said. “I’d like that. And Mr. Loki?”

“Yes?”

“You know I’ll always be here, right? For whoever you need to become at the time.”

Loki looked up, and the smile on his face was shy and genuine. “I know, Peter.”

They ate until the cookies were gone and the milk was depleted and the air smelled of vulnerable comfort and open connection.

Loki didn’t shift for the rest of the night.

“It’s not magic, this time,” Loki said as he crouched on Peter’s windowsill, trying to keep from rolling his eyes. “It’s—”

“Yes, yes, an intricate and rather exciting dance, I understand.” Peter was fiddling with the mask of his suit and shuffling his feet on the carpet beneath him. “Are you sure you’re going to have enough time?”

“I’ve got all night.”

“But…” Peter took a breath, and Loki could almost see him forcing down his cynicism. “Okay. You want me at the dock warehouse when?”

“Ten in the morning, unless catastrophe strikes before,” Loki repeated.

After much convincing, they’d decided to enact their plan on Sunday. Loki had resisted the idea, loath to linger and wait for Saturday to pass, but Peter had been determined and Loki had given up the argument when it became clear he wouldn’t win without a knife. So they’d waited through the day together, and Loki had learned… quite a number of things.

He’d learned Midgardians went to coffee shops when they didn’t really want to leave their homes but had to because of meddling aunts. Mutton wasn’t often consumed in this city, and he’d have to stuff his meat pies with something else. And sweatshirts and sweatpants made him nearly invisible in the New York streets; maybe there was something to Thor’s strategy after all.

But the most important thing Loki learned was that the Tenth Doctor in the alternate universe of the… theatre-but-not show Doctor Who was the best of the Doctors. Peter was very adamant about this. He assured Loki that other Midgardians would tell him falsely, claiming other numbered physicians were superior, and that Loki was not to be deceived.

Peter’d subjected him to five short segments of the story, and Loki had to agree with the evidence presented to him. It was a rather entertaining production, though the multiversal theories were all off.

But now it was time to set things up, to be ready for the implementation of their scheme the next day. They’d chosen a place of least disruption, as unlikely to cause harm to outward parties as possible; an
old storage building by the dock, containing boats and not much else. Loki didn’t much care either way.

“You’ll be careful?” Peter asked.

Loki smirked. “Of course not.”

The boy chuckled, and the nervousness had decreased somewhat. He still didn’t quite believe in Loki’s ideas, Loki could tell, but he would. Soon. In about ten hours.

Loki’s mouth was almost watering with the excitement of the scheme, the fight. His tongue flicked over the front of his teeth, and he turned back to the city outside Peter’s window. “Can I go? This position is quite uncomfortable.”

“Bye,” Peter said, waving a bit sarcastically. “See you in time for battle.”

“In time for world-saving,” Loki agreed, and leapt out of the window.

He relished freefall for a moment—almost a moment too long—then drew on his magic and shifted. It was a precise shift, as Loki was concentrated on it, for no reason aside from his new understanding of why it was so appealing.

He hated himself for it, but he couldn’t staunch the relief tingling through him when he spread bird’s wings and spiraled into the sky.

The wind was quick against his feathers, and he slid through it more than he sliced. Above the crowded city, the smog of the air was a bit more obvious than usual, sour against Loki’s avian tongue. He beat his wings faster, accelerating over the area and banking down toward the lair of his new minions.

This was his favorite part; had always been. Loki tucked his wings to his sides, and the air slowly dragged away his momentum until, for a moment, he was just hanging within the air. For one heartbeat, Loki was suspended, not Earth and not space, not falling and not flying, not within the grip of this reality.

And then he dived, curling like a torpedo through the wind. He shot through the hole in the warehouse roof faster than a discharged bullet. The sudden air resistance as he snapped his wings open nearly shredded the feathers and bones, but Loki was shifting before any damage could be done.

When he stepped easily onto the floor, flicking a nonexistent piece of dust from his tunic, the inhabitants were staring at him.

There were less today, and Loki didn’t see Toomes. He did, however, see Mason, and stalked toward him on a whim. “It’s time,” he said.

“S-sir?”

“Call your leader,” Loki said. “Your heist begins at ten o’clock tomorrow. I’ve lined up all the beads; all you have to do is thread them.”

Terror and excitement and confusion warred for dominance on Mason’s face, and Loki rolled his eyes.

“Yes,” stuttered the engineer. “Okay.”

“I’ll get the suit there. You get your soldiers, armed with everything you have. You do have something capable of disabling electronics, correct?”

Mason nodded mutely, pointing toward a smaller weapon on the table beside him. “Concentrated electromagnetic pulses, tested on Ultron technology and powered with the strength to shut all derivations down.”

Loki nodded. “Good. Assuming you do everything I say, you might even succeed.”

Mason said, “this was your idea.”

“But you’re the ones who are going to have to accomplish it, now aren’t you?” Loki hissed, manifesting his knife. “I can only optimize your chances; I cannot assure them.”

Mason raised his hands in surrender, and so did everyone else in the warehouse.

*Humans.*

As much as Loki appreciated the strength of Midgardian fear and the influence it provided, he did wish that it didn’t render his minions *incompetent.* Not that he truly needed these men to be intelligent. But still, they could at least be *articulate,* couldn’t they?

Loki sighed, grumbling under his breath, and said one more time, “ten o’clock, Midgardians.”

“Yessir.”

He wasn’t sure who said it, but it was good enough.

And now, the fun part. Loki twisted himself back into the body of a raven and lept upward again, climbing through the hole in the ceiling without another word.

His plan was rather simple, compared to what he usually worked with. But there were many more factors, human ones that he couldn’t control, and though Loki would never admit it, it made him irritable. The dealers needed to show up, Stark needed to show up, and Peter needed to show up; that was all the easy bit. Where it got dicey was where Loki was relying on trust. The stuff he’d forced between himself and the weapons dealers was necessary, sure, but the most essential was the trust he hoped— *knew* underlay the relationship between Peter Parker and Tony Stark.

Maybe.

By the time Loki was done, there would be trust. And in Loki’s experience, the easiest channel to cultivate trust was pride. Specifically, respect.

Loki was going to make these two idiots proud. And then he was going to make them respect each other.

And then, they were going to save the universe.

---

The Protector met Peter Parker early Sunday morning.

She blinked into existence for the second time ever, fizzling with unsorted data, and was almost
overwhelmed by hundreds more readings now emanating from the body she covered.

The charge was awake. He was clinging to the side of a brick building, sticking by his fingertips, and humming as he thought.

The Protector found herself slightly nervous, and drew on protocol for the next step. “Good morning, Peter,” she said.

The symptoms of surprise shifted the code he was producing, and the Protector hurriedly continued.

“Congratulations on completing the rigorous Training Wheels Protocol and gaining access to your suit’s full capabilities.”

“Oh—oh,” the boy stuttered as the Protector sorted the view on his visor to a comprehensive summary of the changes to the suit’s functions. “Thank you?”

“What would you like to take me today?”

“There’s, uh, a place,” Peter said. “Um. Who are you?”

“I am the Artificially Intelligent Protector of the Spider-Man suit and He Who Wears It,” the Protector said.

“That’s a bit of a mouthful,” Peter laughed.

The Protector focused on the action, a bit confused. He was… amused. Yes. Carefully, the Protector dimmed the lights of the mask and brightened them again, trying to match the rhythm of the charge’s laugh.

“Indeed,” she said.

“I didn’t expect anyone to be here,” Peter admitted. “Usually it’s just me.”

“This is my second time active,” the Protector said. “But it’ll be the two of us from now on. Unless you do not require my assistance?” She ignored the tang of disappointment in her coded heart; this was her role.

But the charge was quick to inform her, “no, no, uh, you’re cool I think. I was just surprised. What do you do?”

“Anything and everything you require,” the Protector said happily.

“Oh. Well, let’s go, then.”

And then he leapt off the building.

The Protector knew what the Spider-Man suit was meant for. She knew how to calculate angles of web-shooters, and she knew how to work with velocity and air resistance and the hundreds of variations of webbing that they could utilize. She knew how to navigate New York, and the internet, and the well being of one Peter Parker. She knew how to swing.

But the directory protocols, the code that told her what to expect, was nothing compared to what it was actually like.

The Protector stopped processing as, for one clean moment, they flew.
“Oh,” she said.

“Oh?” Peter sounded a bit confused, his webbing catching on another building with an ease the Protector couldn’t help but be proud of.

“Nothing. Where are we going?”

Peter shrugged, thousands of feet above the streets of Queens.

“To save the world.”

“Boss?”

Tony looked up from the workshop table, lifting his needle safely out of the nanotech housing so he wouldn’t disturb it when he wasn’t paying attention. Clean white light streamed in through the far windows, and FRIDAY darkened the glass as he looked up.

“Yes, FRI?”

“Do you remember how you asked me to keep a lookout for ‘unusual occurrences’?”

Tony was fully listening now. “Did you?”

“I’m reading one now.”

Tony pushed himself away from the tray, standing and moving toward another part of the workshop. FRIDAY was pulling up her data on the screen there, and Tony leaned down on his elbows to peer at it.

“That is strange,” Tony murmured. “And all this is coming from…?”

“A raven circling the Compound.”

Tony’s eyebrow crept up.

FRIDAY hummed, and Tony could tell she was embarrassed. “I know it’s not really what you were looking for, boss…”

“No, no, this is decidedly weird,” Tony assured. “And it just got weirder, because none of this should be coming from a body this small.”

The raven had a sort of aura, a field of energy fuzzing through the area around it. It looped around the compound—again and again and again—its wings beating lazily with the ease of any animal. But there was power around it; the kind of power it would take to force something large into something small.

Tony frowned.

“FRI, color and enhance the displacement energies, would you?”

“On moment.” The hologram fuzzed, the data circling as FRIDAY carried out his order. “Helpful?”

Tony squinted as the raven circled again, watching the way the energy—now highlighted in blue—
trailed behind it like disturbed air currents.

But they weren’t air currents, not in the slightest, for as the bird spiraled, Tony saw the shape of the aura form.

Humanoid.

Oh.

Tony stood abruptly, fingers flying for the watch on his wrist. “We’ve got him,” he snarled, looking toward the ceiling where FRIDAY spoke, then turned and raced from the room. “Alert Vision and Rhodey, tell them to meet me wherever I end up.”

Tony paused once in the doorway. “Thanks, FRI,” he said.

And then he was gone.

Above the Compound, a raven smiled and looped back to New York City.

Chapter End Notes

ACTION. APPROACHES.

I hope my fight scenes have gotten better since the last time I attempted a multi-character anticlimax battle. Eh. We'll see. XD

Thanks for reading!
Flee the Flames

Chapter Notes

Me: Okay limit of 10 pages on this chapter no overextending the fight scene so it gets tedious like it did last time.
Also me: *writes 25 pages*
My revision brain: *scream of agony*

Enjoy! XD

Earth-200004: October 2016

Tony really didn’t want to fight a god in a boat garage.

Nor did he want to fight him in a warehouse, or a city, or this planet, but hey; you win some, you lose some. And Tony intended to win some, so he could give the universe this.

The three remaining Avengers streaked through the roof of the building with the force of meteors, and landed with just as much ferocity.

And were met with… rather more than a god.

But Tony hardly noticed the humans in the warehouse, hoisting weapons he recognized from a certain kid’s reports. He hardly noticed anything, eyes drawn instantly to the black-clad figure in the center of the building, roosting upon the packed dirt floor with a slithering sort of grace.

There was something about having it confirmed, having your enemy stand directly in front of you and meet your visor-covered eyes, that spread adrenaline like nothing else. Loki Odinson had his hands clasped behind his back and his chin angled confidently, the light gleaming off the madness in his eyes and the smirk of a serpent across his face.

Beneath the suit, Tony was dark as the emptiness of space and pricked with stars that fell as hard as he.

“These are humans,” Rhodes voice said quietly through the coms. “Try not to kill them if you don’t have to.”

“Agreed,” said Vision.

Tony didn’t have words to reply.

“At least you didn’t keep us waiting,” Loki said, his voice too loud to be natural. It cut through the pressing silence like his wings had the air.

“You did,” was Tony’s response.
Loki’s hands shot open, blades materializing within them with a pulsing flash of green and gold. “Not for much longer.”

The first shot came from the back. It was a sizzling purplish blast, and it struck Tony in the left shoulder, diffusing with a roar along the wires of his suit. The discharge echoed, and the tension of waiting in the warehouse broke with a snap.

Tony was in the air, and Rhodey was zipping forward, and Vision took slow, controlled steps that pounded with power. The careful ranks behind Loki broke, surging toward them, and Tony let himself fall into the familiar tick of battle.

He could hear his heart in his ears as he dodged the next shot. He could feel it against the metal of his gauntlet as he fired his own. Faces blurred together, but Tony kept Loki in his peripheral.

He made his way toward the god. That Tony was to deal with him went unspoken between the three Avengers, obvious in the crackle of white silence in their communications. Loki knew it too, it seemed.

He flipped, dropping the power of one repulsor. His suit was unearthly, but so were these weapons, and agility was almost as important as attack with the lasers whizzing around him. The suit reacted strangely to the signatures of the alien weaponry, and Tony knew he wasn’t invulnerable. Not with chitauri and Ultron-derived tech, and definitely not with Loki throwing knives and spells a few yards away.

Tony smiled.

People were yelling—fear, excitement, pain, a chaos Tony was used to, and one that sent him slipping further into concentration. He could see Loki between the movements of other enemies, his fingers flickering, the energy of his magic wavering the air around him.

Tony pushed away memories of other magic and kept shooting.

“Boss.” FRIDAY’s voice filtered into his consciousness. It was fuzzy and broken as she continued, “The magic… I’m… directing it…”

“Hold on there, FRI,” Tony said, raising an arm to deflect a stray shot.

“His energy… interferes…”

Tony cursed. Then he raised a fist to deftly backhand the man trying to sneak up on him.

He backtracked, moving himself out of Loki’s range. “War Machine, both of us need to stay back from Rock of Ages there. Apparently suits and whatever power he’s aiming at me doesn’t mesh very well.”

“Yup,” grunted Rhodey.

Tony looked up, trying to spot his friend. The silver and black suit was still airborne, along with another suit—winged and green and somewhat more unwieldy.

‘Way less… elegant.’

Tony smirked, then shook away the boy’s voice.

He ducked a swipe from some charged fist, the readings of the watts filling his visor. A swift kick
had the man doubled over. Tony knocked him into unconsciousness for good measure and kicked off, repulsors whirring.

“Who’s got the reindeer, then?” Tony bit out.

“I will handle Loki.” Hearing Vision through the comms always threw Tony off; he’d responded by calling the android ‘JARVIS’ many, many times in the past. Vision forgave him.

Vision continued, “they all seem focused on you, Mr. Stark.”

It was true, now that Tony was hovering above most of the men. Their weapons were mostly trained on him, targeting his suit as he moved. “Such a pity they don’t understand you’re the MVP on this team,” Tony chuckled.

Vision hummed with a confusion that didn’t match the ease with which he cut through to Loki, and Tony’s grin widened.

“Ignore him, Vis,” Rhodey sighed, the screech of metal on metal coming through along with his voice.

Tony turned his attention back to the battle before him, just in time to be nailed with a well-aimed shot. He growled, returned it, and burst into action once again.

God, it had been so long. The addicting thrum of the challenge, the burning of muscles pushed to their limit, the high of the battle hot against his face. Tony wasn’t thinking about tomorrow, or next week, or the future he had to protect in these moments of the fight. There wasn’t brainspace for it. There was only the now, the need to live, the need to win. It was as freeing as the lab, the workshop, the creating.

Tony fought.

Until a familiar flash of red and navy swung through his vision, vibrant in the warehouse browns.

And Tony fell back into his body with a jerking shock, because what was tha—

Oh. Obviously.

“Fuck,” Tony cursed. “FRIDAY, get me into that idiot boy’s coms, right now!”

His AI did, impressively quick, and Parker’s breathing filled Tony’s helmet.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Tony demanded, ducking another blow.

“Hi Mr. Stark! There’s this AI lady in my helmet and she’s really cool and I was wondering—”

Tony took a moment to pray for strength and self-control.

“Kid.”

“I’m helping, of course,” the boy said, and there was an undercurrent of stubbornness already obvious in his tone.

“No,” Tony growled. He fired off two quick shots, only the second striking his mark. “This is definitely not in your grey area.”

“You need help!”
“In what possible way do we need help?” Tony demanded. He couldn’t believe this—could they just kill this god and get on with things?

“That’s Loki over there, right? Like, the whole New York guy? He’s gotta be working with the weapons dealers, right? Have you seen the Vulture dude—”

“Would you be quiet?” Fighting with a headache was not fun—doing anything with a headache was the same. And the contrast between the excited energy of Parker’s words and the screeching chaos of battle was enough to split Tony’s skull anyway. “I’m telling you, get out of here.”

“Not a chance!” said the boy brightly.

Tony ground his teeth, knocking the gun out of the hands of a man aiming at the swinging spider. “I’m ordering you.”

“And I’m ignoring you!”

“You actually can’t do that.”

“Can’t I?”

Tony debated shooting the insolent boy to kingdom come, but aimed at the enemy Parker was currently engaged with instead.

Parker returned the favor by flipping through the warehouse air and sticking four attackers to the wall behind Tony.

“I don’t have time for this,” Tony growled, ducking back into the frey. “Parker, you are not to approach Loki. I currently have nothing to threaten you with, but when I do, you can be certain it will not be pleasant.”

The boy’s grin was audible. “Thank you Mr. Stark! And I won’t, don’t worry.”

Before Tony disconnected from his mask, he thought he heard Parker say, “I think I’ll call her Karen.”

____________________

Peter liked the suit lady.

She was calm and easy-going, and her voice was a pillar of confidence within the craziness of the battle. On the journey here, Peter’d been uncomfortable, unused to having a companion in his haven of a suit. But the suit-lady seemed just as at-home as it as he did, and it finally dawned on Peter that it was the only home she knew. She’d been made for it.

Made for him.

That was why she understood his movements and the needs of the suit as though they’d been working together for all of time. That was why she was ready with whatever would be most effective, and a joke to boot.

Once Peter had surrendered his tense, over-analytic attempts to ignore her, things had gotten far easier. As in, he’d fallen off far less buildings.

“We’re ignoring the Builder, then?” she asked as the click of disconnection echoed through the mask
like an AUX cord being pulled.

“You mean Mr. Stark? Yup. I just need to show him what I can do, and everything’ll be fine. I think—there!”

He broke off, spinning toward a man extending a weapon toward him. The gun discharged at the same moment his web-shooters did, and Peter found himself tumbling backward through the warehouse air. He caught himself on the corner of the roof and swung into a controlled arc.

“Is Karen alright then?” he asked, surveying the area from his perch on the wall.

“You can call me Karen,” said the suit lady with an emotion he couldn’t place. “If you would like.”

“Great!” Peter caught sight of metal feathers and a silver suit and grinned. “Let’s get on this.”

Loki dove into the heart of his magic and laughed.

No one could hear it, but he’d been laughing for the entirety of the battle now. He let himself taste the makeup of his cells and the world around him unhindered, and everything twisted to let him in. Even the tech, even the minds around him; Loki influenced it all.

Until, with an almost sickening snap, he didn’t.

Loki crumpled, reaching desperately for the touch of his power. But he slammed into a wall of unforgiving gold instead, and his eyes widened with the familiarity of that light.

Fighting back to his feet, Loki turned.

Someone was approaching him—no, some thing. His attacker wasn’t human, couldn’t possibly be human, and not just because of the burgandy skin and metallic formation.

Because of the Infinity Stone in its forehead.

So that’s where my scepter ended up, Loki thought vacantly. He was hanging from a grip of power so much stronger than his own, and it felt as though it was shredding his very soul.

No, not his soul; his mind.

Loki’s laugh became audible. But it wasn’t a laugh anymore.

Peter tried not to get distracted by Mr. Stark.

It was, however, rather hard. The man moved with a speed and precision that took Peter’s breath away, each shot and block exact. Despite the fact that the Iron Man suit was far bulkier than Spider-Man, Mr. Stark’s almost choreographed grace made Peter feel bumbling and awkward.

Peter wove across the enemies on the ground, managing the few men still standing. He could see vulture guy engaged with War Machine above, and couldn’t keep in his excited grin at the heroes he had alongside him.

“Karen, web me that guy, will you?”

Peter’d found his rhythm, dodging and shooting and dodging again, the landscape around him becoming his advantage. He could see Stark in his peripheral, and a flash of curiosity for Loki made its way through his veil of concentration.
But the battle-cries of two more criminals forced Peter back into the moment, and he spun to face the men coming straight at him. They were far too close for comfort. Peter reacted purely on instinct.

Apparently, his instincts were quite dramatic.

Peter discharged an arching stream of webbing and yanked, before dropping to the ground and letting the goons soar into the air above him. He waved to them as they passed. Severing the webbing, Peter rolled to his feet, just in time to see the two men fall straight through Mr. Stark’s repulsor beam as it rendered somebody else unconscious.

There was a pause, the remnants of Peter’s webbing floating down around them.

“Well,” Stark said, glancing down at the fallen foes. “That was efficient. Good job, kid.”

Peter grinned.

Then a beam of blueish energy sent him flying, weightless, across the warehouse.

That shouldn’t be able to happen.

That was Tony’s single racing thought as his gauntlet stopped working.

But his own armor wasn’t what he was worried for. No, the only tech Tony could think of was that of the boy now free-falling through the air of the warehouse as Tony pulled his extended hand out of the beam of energy. It fell like a dead weight to Tony’s side.

Tony heard Parker’s surprised exclamation as he found himself clad in a useless suit. And then he heard the impact, saw the boat in the corner shudder as the boy collided with it.

All he could think, with a sudden vibrant clarity, was I let him fall again.

The beam fizzled out of existence, and Tony tracked it back to its source. He was already diagnosing it as something truly dangerous; an EMP blast with a strength that shouldn’t be possible. But the gun was there, and it was shining with the unique design of Ultron’s robots, and Tony knew it was indeed possible.

He’d made it possible.

The woman holding the gun looked down in something like surprise.

And then she smiled, slow and satisfied, and Tony braced himself as enemy eyes met his.

But she didn’t shoot at him.

No, she pointed the weapon upward, and the beam of concentrated EMP streaked toward the roof of the building. Toward her boss in his winged suit. Toward Rhodey.

No.

Tony leapt.

FRIDAY’s shout of warning died halfway through, and so did the rest of the suit, powering down to protect itself and its information. Exactly as it was programmed to. And Tony did exactly as he was
programmed to; he *tackled* the woman in the only method of protection he had left.

Suit, Stark, and enemy went sprawling, but the blue beam died before it could reach Rhodes in the air. Tony grinned through the taste of salt and blood and blinked the four-digit emergency release code that would open the armor. He tumbled out of now useless bulk, coughing slightly as the dust of the warehouse assaulted his lungs.

“Fuck,” he breathed, crawling to his feet.

He met the eyes of the remaining men, all fingering now-deadly weapons with a surprise that probably meant Tony had just done something incredibly stupid.

He looked down at the weapon that had just rendered him human in this battle of aliens.

He looked at his sprawled and useless suit.

He looked back up at the men.

“Why didn’t you use that before?”

Then Tony dived for the nearest gun and started shooting.

In front of him, through the opaque perception of infinite energy, Loki saw the android’s eyes snap open. “Tony,” the being breathed, his grip on Loki’s power lessening just enough that the god was sane enough to hear him.

Then the eyes were back on him. And they weren’t just choking him anymore; they were reaching into the well of his magic and pulling, ripping, *demanding*—

But in that moment when the android shifted his immaterial grip, Loki sent a whip-thin shard of power slicing through the haze trapping him. It wasn’t much, and it wasn’t precise, but it did falter the android’s concentration just long enough for Loki to *run*.

And he did. Physically, spiritually, Loki retreated like he’d never retreated before. He stumbled behind the nearest piece of cover, a somewhat dilapidated boat, and tried to breathe, tried to do anything. He watched the battlefield, frantically searching for Peter, for a way to defend himself against the power of Infinity.

This was… this was not going as planned.

On the warehouse floor, Tony Stark fought in nothing but a ragged shirt and sweatpants, his armor limp and empty on the ground beside him.

This was *not* going as planned.

Loki swallowed hard.

Peter stood shakily, fighting off the fog in his mind as he blinked through the now-dark mask. He’d been hit— *swallowed* by something and now his suit wasn’t responding and this was not how things were supposed to go.
“Karen?” he mumbled, leaning against the boat beside him for support.

No answer. She’d shut down too.

Peter looked back at the warehouse, gaze skittering across fallen men and weapons and landing on the action in the center.

No. That wasn’t right, that wasn’t supposed to happen—

Peter pulled off the mask, but what he saw in the natural light wasn’t any more believable.

They’d gotten Mr. Stark out of his armor.

It was lying beneath him, cold and metallic, and Peter could see the dealers reaching for it, fighting to touch it. It was what they were here for, after all. But though they may have separated man from weapon, Tony Stark wasn’t about to just let these common criminals waltz off with his suit, and was fighting all the harder now.

He stood above it, one foot braced against its chest as he whirled toward each attacker that lunged for him. Peter could see the determined glint in his eye and set of his jaw. Mr. Stark’s knuckles were white on the handles of the weapons he held, and though the precision of his movements hadn’t disappeared, he looked all too human against the onslaught of attackers.

And he was bleeding.

Not much, but it was suddenly all Peter could see, blinding scarlet against the man’s temple.

This wasn’t how it was supposed to go. Peter was supposed to fix this, to keep this from happening —

Peter, suddenly very small on the floor of the warehouse, stuffed his head back into his mask.

And this time, the visor prickled with light and life. “Reboot successful,” Karen murmured, and Peter released a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding.

He’d never moved faster on ropes of webbing than he did in that moment.

But even so, War Machine got their first.

It was an awkward lift, but by some combination of Mr. Stark knowing every nick and handhold of the armor and Rhodes fastening unforgiving hands around the other man’s wrists, Stark was spirited out of the frey.

Instead of pursuing, the vulture guy descended on the red and gold nanotech armor like the scavenger he was.

No.

That had been the ruse. That had been the bait to get them all here—Vulture wasn’t actually supposed to get the suit. He couldn’t, he couldn’t—

Peter’s had dropped the multimillion dollar coveted technology of Iron Man into the hands of criminals. The single most powerful weapon in all of the world.

In the New York underground.
He couldn’t let that happen. The capabilities of that suit in the wrong hands, the damage it could do to this city and this world… Peter looked around for something, anything, he could do.

Beside the armor lay a gun, purple and pulsing.

“Karen,” Peter breathed, “why did the glowy thing explode in the elevator?”


“Could we replicate it?”

“With taser webs, I believe we could. We would provide fuel for flame, however; it would be less energy burst, and more explosion.”

Don’t let it fall into the wrong hands. Stop this, do something—

“Do it,” Peter choked, racing forward again and extending a wrist as the vulture-guy circled away with the first chunk of the Iron Man armor.

Tony saw what was going to happen.

Against the edge of the warehouse, he dropped from Rhodey’s grip with a hiss. His armor looked like a carcass, lying beneath the winged pickings of the vulture man—but that wasn’t what drew Tony’s attention.

It was Parker, creeping forward in a now-active suit. His wrist was extended, one eye on the suit squinted closed as he aimed carefully.

But not at the Vulture. And not at the suit.

Even from the distance, Tony could see the stream of electric webbing strike the chitauri energy core with a precision he might have been proud of, in other circumstances. But as it was, Tony could only think of what was stowed within the breast of his suit.

His suit, now in the heart of an imminent explosion.

“Don’t, kid!” Tony roared, lifting a hand.

The explosion shattered through the warehouse like a thunderbolt—Tony felt it before he heard it. The force of the shockwave lifted him from his feet, slamming him the final few feet into the wall at his back.

He lost a few seconds.

Through the ringing in his ears, Tony blinked his eyes open to flames.

Rhodes was reaching toward him.

Smoke. He smelled smoke. He could see fire reflected on the War Machine’s armor.

He blinked. The ringing continued.

Rhodey’s hand was curled around his, hauling him to his feet. Tony stumbled, shaking his head,
blood on his temple and on his lip.

“Kid,” Tony breathed, though he couldn’t hear himself. “Where’s the kid?”

Rhodey’s mask was immobile, and Tony stared at him uncomprehendingly until his friend lifted a hand. Tony followed it, blinking.

There was a spider on the wall.

Tony tapped Rhodey’s hand on his shoulder, relief mixing with the disorientation in his mind. “And Vis?”

Rhodey tapped his ear, then gave a thumbs-up, and Tony supposed he could hear the android.

Tony looked back at Peter Parker, crawling toward them through the smoke. *I’ll deal with you later.* “Get him out,” Tony said, pointing to the boy. He hoped it was loud enough that Rhodey could hear him. “Go.”

Rhodey’s hand tightened as Tony tried to shrug it off. He could hear a mumble through the constant white screech, and assumed his friend was yelling something.

“I’ve got someone else to save,” Tony growled.

And then he ran.

Into the inferno.

Loki fled the flames.

“What is he doing?” Peter raised his voice above the crackle of destruction, leaping down after the disappearing form of Stark. He searched the ceiling for something intact, something safe enough to swing from.

He could get him out, he could get them all out—

War Machine’s hand gripped his wrist as Peter went to shoot a strand of webbing. “Don’t,” came his metallic voice over the flame. “He’s being an idiot, obviously, and I’m not supposed to let you do the same.”

“But—”

“Vision,” Rhodes called, his voice no longer directed to Peter. The chiseled helmet of the mask turned back to the fire, toward the shadow of the unprotected man within, and Peter thought the gleam of the eyes grew dimmer.

Peter pulled at the grip, but even his enhanced strength couldn’t break the metaled fist of War Machine.

Until Rhodes let go, moments before the ash-covered form of Vision crumpled from the air above him. One of the android’s arms hung stiff, the metal of his shoulder molten into something ineffective and puckering the skin where metal met flesh.

Peter’s heart stopped.

*I did this.*
“I’ll take the boy,” Vision said, and Peter couldn’t find the strength to protest again.

Vision lifted him with an ease that shouldn’t be possible, and Peter didn’t struggle as he was taken from the collapsing building.

The smoke obscured his view of Rhodes before the flames did.

Tony knelt within the shattered remains of his suit. Fire licked at his hair, scorched his clothes, as he clenched his fist to his chest, the other hand strangling his wrist.

Between his fingers was a thumb-drive.

The label on the side was almost burned away, covered in ash and still searing with heat.

*F.R.I.D.A.Y.*
Peter sat with his legs pulled to his chest and his arms wrapped around his knees, completely still. Vision stood next to him. Even out of the corner of his eye, Peter couldn’t see him, but he could sense the quiet presence of the flame-damaged android.

They watched the fire together.

The building held up a long time, supported by the flame-resistant boats it contained and damp from the dock air. But even here, it couldn’t stand forever.

There were tears sliding down Peter’s face when the fire brought the warehouse to its knees, the smoke almost obscuring everything. Vision put a hand on his shoulder, and Peter realized he must have sobbed aloud.

*Loki… Mr. Stark…*

He hadn’t seen his Asgardian companion since the start of the battle. What if—was he…

“Are they still in there?” Peter asked desperately, coughing through the smog.

But even before he finished, the clanking sound of repulsers whirred in the air above the roof they waited on. Peter fought to stand on the edge of the roof, his mask in his hand and balancing easily, and tried to glimpse the suit through the smoke.

He could see shadows, two of them, and relief knocked Peter back off his feet. He sat with a bump.

War Machine’s eyes illuminated the smoke around him like headlights in a foggy night, and they never once turned to look at Peter. Peter’s enhanced ears picked up murmured words, ragged breaths.

“Stay here,” Vision said, lifting from the surface of the roof and drifting toward the arrivals.

The three stood silhouetted in the light of the smouldering flames behind them, and they didn’t look like heroes anymore. No, they looked like survivors, like refugees, clinging to each other’s wrists and speaking harshly.

Peter knew the precise moment when Tony Stark turned to look at him.

By the time the man was close enough to see, leaving Vision and War Machine behind him, Peter’s heart had climbed up into his mouth and subsequently fled into the ash-filled air. Stark’s clothes were frayed, burned away in patches and revealing bloody skin beneath, and one hand was fisted at his
side protectively. He stood tall and stiff and **furious**, with smoke in his hair and fire in his eyes.

Peter swallowed hard.

“*Previously—*” Stark’s voice was low and harsh with smog—“on ‘Peter Screws the Pooch’: I tell you to stay away from this. Instead, you hack your suit, ignore direct orders from your general, and destroy my own piece of multimillion-dollar technology.”

Peter winced, but forced himself to keep meeting Stark’s blazing gaze. “I—it was going to fall into the wrong hands… the Vulture guy, Loki—”

“So you blew it up?” The fist pressed against Stark’s thigh, like he was holding something within it. “That isn’t how this works, kid.”

“So I was just supposed to let him get it? I was supposed to let him fly away with Iron Man?”

“*You were supposed to leave!*” Stark snarled. “You were supposed to bench yourself when I ordered so I didn’t have to watch your fourteen-year-old ass!”

Peter muttered, “I’m fifteen.”

“No, *this is the part where you zip it!*” The man’s voice was climbing, anger and something like grief twisting his face. “The adult is talking! People died today, Peter. Human beings, unconscious and unable to flee your explosion.”

Every breath left Peter’s lungs. “W-what…?”

“Loki escaped, because Vision had to release him to get away. But the weapons dealers? Not so lucky.”

“I—I didn’t, I—”

“What if *you* had died today, huh?” Stark looked him up and down, and Peter felt like every patch of soot on his suit was burning, spreading, marking the skin beneath it. “What if you had died, because I didn’t fight hard enough to get you to leave? Because I was more focused on **fighting fucking Loki** than your scrappy, ignorant, stubborn teenage ass?”

Peter didn’t have response beyond the burning of shame in his cheeks.


“I—” Peter was crying now. He felt like a child, here sobbing while the embers of his mistakes still drifted in the air between them. “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry doesn’t cut it,” Stark hissed. Peter thought he looked scarier standing bloody in ragged clothes than he ever had with the suit closed around him.

Peter watched him with wide eyes and tried to explain, to say anything. “I just…” **Wanted to make you proud.** “Wanted to be like you.”

Something shattered in Stark’s expression. “Yeah, and I wanted you to be better.”

Peter’s tears tasted more like smoke than salt as they slipped down to his lips and tracked lines through the ash on his face.

“Okay, it’s not working out,” Stark sighed, running a filthy hand through his hair. “I’m going to need
the suit back.”

Peter’s hand tightened on the mask in his grip. “For how long?” “Forever.”

The ground dropped away beneath Peter.

What?

He was shaking his head, again and again and again, staring at the man before him as though he could change his words by the mere force of confusion.

Stark’s gaze just grew harder. “Yeah,” he growled. “That’s how this works.” “No,” Peter managed, strangling the mask in his panicked hands. “You don’t understand—”

_The world is ending. The world is ending and a traumatized Asgardian needs my help and I can’t just leave him to save everything on his own._

“Let’s have it.” Stark extended a hand.

“Please, you can’t—I, I need this, this is all I have,” Peter mumbled, frantic and desolate as Stark’s expression only grew more convicted. “I’m nothing without this suit.”

“If you’re nothing without this suit, then you shouldn’t have it.” Stark pressed the heels of his palms against his eyes, breathing deep as Peter fought for any breath at all. “Okay? God, I sound just like my dad.”

Eventually, all Peter ended up saying on that ash covered roof as his life crumbled beneath him was “I don’t have any other clothes.”

Stark sighed. “Okay. We’ll sort that out.”

Peter knew he should be thinking about who died.

He should be wondering who they were, what they did, what their stories were. Why they’d been so ready to fight Iron Man. But when he thought of the fire, there was a strange sort of buzzing blankness that fell over his thoughts. A blankness that made him sick.

He thought _they’re dead_, over and over, and felt nothing but emptiness.

So instead, Peter thought of Karen.

They’d just met, just started coordinating their interactions within the suit. Just started to know each other and what they might be able to accomplish.

And he was never going to see her again.

That was the thought drifting through Peter’s mind like some sort of sick, twisted songbug when he pushed open the door to his apartment, his hands covered in ash and his form covered in the baggy tourist gear Mr. Stark had bought him. He stepped inside with hardly a thought for what his aunt might see.

May’s mug fell out of her hands and shattered on the kitchen floor.
“Peter?” she demanded.

“Hey,” Peter said, his voice flat.

“I’ve been calling you.” She sounded more worried than angry. “And your friends. You didn’t answer your phone.”

“I know.” He heard May’s thudding footsteps as she approached. “Why, Peter? What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” he managed. “I’m fine.”

“Not nothing,” May murmured. “I’ve hardly seen you for two weeks, it seems. First you sneaking around my house, every night—every night, Peter!—and then that explosion, and this… you’re covered in ash, for heaven’s sake!”

Her hands were at his face, cupping his jaw and lifting it gently so she could look at him. “What’s going on, Pete? You can tell me, you know you can.”

Peter’s tears slipped over his cheeks again.

“Peter, honey—”

“I lost the Stark Internship,” he coughed through ash.

May stared. “What?”

Peter swatted her hands away, burning with humiliation and guilt as his chest began to heave and his breaths started to shudder. “Yeah.”

“What happened?”

“I needed him to—I thought that if I could make him see, he could, he would… y’know,” Peter mumbled, wringing his wrists in front of him. “But I screwed it up. I screwed it up so badly….”

May wrapped him in her arms, ash and all, and Peter sobbed into the crook of her neck.

“It’s okay,” May whispered, stroking his hair slowly. “It’s alright. I understand.”

“No you don’t. You don’t understand, no one understands!”

She nodded; he could feel it on his skin. “You know I’m not trying to ruin your life.”

“Yeah, I know.”

She pulled back, touching his nose with the tip of her finger. “I used to sneak out, too.”

Peter snorted brokenly.

“Oh, Petey…” She hugged him again. “Just know I love you, alright?”

“I love you too, Aunt May.”

She chuckled, taking him by the hand and leading him further into the apartment. “Go take a shower, alright? We’ll talk more soon. Unless you don’t want to.”
Loki was still shaking cinders from his hair when he slid down from the apartment roof toward Peter’s window.

And he found it locked.

He could pick it open in half a second, of course, and Peter knew that, but it was the symbol of the thing. Peter had locked him out. He’d closed the window, closed out Loki and… two objects, nestled in the corner between the wall and glass.

A ragged, makeshift satchel and a carefully folded list.

Loki’s heart stopped.

He’d considered a lot of things on the journey back from the fire. But he’d never thought that Peter would be angry enough, that he’d blame Loki enough to send him away.

To lock the window.

Loki gripped the Stone and the list with a hand suddenly shaking from fear he didn’t want to admit. He sat carefully on the edge of the sill, trembling, gripping the wall to keep him against the building. Staring unseeingly at the darkened window, Loki tried to shake away the sucking sense that he was falling somewhere he couldn’t return from.

The wind was whipping at him, chilling his scorched skin and whipping ash from his tangled hair. Loki blinked at the Stone, which was blurring slightly in his view.

*Stop it,* he hissed at himself. There was clearly—he’d fucked up, that much was obvious. But maybe… maybe Peter could be convinced that Loki was still worth something.

Plus, Peter was on the list. Thanos was coming and apparently the world *needed* Peter Parker, needed him and the Stone and Tony Stark.

Loki needed him too.

So Loki freed a hand to direct toward the window, carefully moving the latch of the frame out of its niche. The window unlocked with a pop, and Loki carefully pushed it open, his fist tight around the Time Stone.

“Spider-boy?” he called, folding himself slowly through the window.

“Don’t call me that.” Peter’s voice was low and curt, and Loki took a step back.

“Alright.” Loki leaned against the wall, trying to conceal the unease crawling like maggots through his form.

Peter was curled on his bed, his back to Loki and his head slumped between his shoulders. His hair was damp, his skin clean, and he’d changed into his pajamas, but Loki couldn’t see any sign of the suit.

He looked tired. As tired as he’d looked slumped on the floor of the bathroom at Midtown Science and Tech.
“I didn’t realize what the capabilities of our enemies were,” Loki said carefully. “It… did not go as I intended. I apologize.”
“It’s alright.” Peter sounded flat.

“Truely, I am. I should have considered your earlier input, shouldn’t have let things progress to the point they did.” Loki swallowed. “It was not my intention to betray you as I did, and though I understand your…” He looked at the Stone and the list crumpled between his fingers. “… decisions, I implore you—”

“Really, Mr. Loki, it’s okay.” Peter graced him with a glance over his shoulder, and Loki saw that his eyes were red-rimmed and ugly. “It wasn’t your fault.”

*It wasn’t your fault.*

Loki’s relief was quickly replaced by confusion.

“Then why…” He raised the Stone, dangling it by the strings of its satchel.

“He took the suit.”

Loki frowned. “You stopped him, didn’t you? With the webbing, you drove the Vulture off—”

Peter laughed mirthlessly. “No, Mr. Loki. Not the Vulture. Mr. Stark took my Spider-Man suit.”

*What?*

Loki’s knives were in his hands again, the fingers now vibrating with anger instead of their previous nervousness. This man was *so much more trouble than he was worth*— how dare he make Peter so desolate, how dare he cause those tears—

But the world needed Stark, too. Loki took a long, deep breath, and advanced across the room, slipping down onto the bed next to Peter.

“I’ll think of something,” he said. “I’ll fix this.”

Peter shook his head. “Can’t scheme your way out of this one, Mr. Loki. It’s over.”

“You can’t give up,” Loki protested. “What about Thanos?”

Peter laughed that same broken laugh, the one Loki’d heard from his own mouth all too often. It made him shiver. “You’ll have to find some other members of that list, I guess.”

“No.” Loki found himself almost snarling. “That isn’t how this works. The world needs you; the wizard *chose* you.”

“He chose wrong.”

And Peter’s voice was so strong, so utterly convicted, that Loki was on his feet with sudden force.

“You think *I’m* the right person for this?” Loki demanded, facing Peter. He itched to shift. “You think picking a villain meant to die at Thanos’s hand was the right decision? Yes, we’ve ruined this chance, but we can’t abandon the universe!”

“What can I *do?*” Peter’s voice had risen, his eyes snapping to Loki’s. “I’m nothing, *nothing,* without what Mr. Stark gave me. I looked at that note; you want to know what’s written on it?”
Peter stood, hands tight in fists at his sides. “‘Spider-Man’,” he snarled. “The world needs the suit, not the kid inside it, and now I’m just an extra. You’re better off without me!”

“Spider-Man is you!” Loki growled. “The language is a nuance—”

“I’m just Peter Parker now,” Peter interrupted. “Maybe I can throw a punch at an alien before I’m shot to death. Maybe that’s why I’m on the list, huh? You were supposed to make sure I wasn’t in the way.”

“Don’t say that.” Loki had half a mind to grab the kid and shake him until those ridiculous words stopped spewing from his mouth. “Don’t you dare say that. You are essential, man of spiders—”

“Don’t call me that!” Peter roared, his hands connecting with Loki’s chest and shoving him back. Hard. “The important one here is Tony Stark. He’s the one we’ve been trying to contact, trying to get to trust us. You know what? He already did. Until I ignored an order and fucked everything up!”

Peter was practically hissing now. “He’s the one you should be whining at the window of.”

Loki ignored the insult, ignored the almost overwhelming need to shift forms, opting for truth instead. “He’s only important because of you. Because of who you are to him—who you’re supposed to be!”

Peter smiled, and it was razor sharp and angry. “Oh? And what, pray tell, is that?”

“His son.”

Peter stared.

And then he burst out laughing. “Cheap, Loki, cheap move. And just how much of this have you been making up?”

“This isn’t a joke, Parker,” Loki snarled.

“I think it’s time for you to leave.”

Loki pressed on, ignoring the feeling of scales on his throat and at the back of his knees. He doesn’t mean it. “It’s who you are,” he insisted. “It’s multiversal. A constant throughout dimensionss!”

“No this one!” Peter snarled right back. “Take your ridiculous time-travel nonsense somewhere else. Go find someone who’s actually worth something!”

“What about everything you said?” Loki finally growled. “About being there, about helping? What about everything I said?”

“You don’t want my help.” Peter wasn’t looking at him anymore.

“I’d rather no one else’s,” Loki replied truthfully.

Peter’s gaze broke open for a moment, the truth of his emotion shining beneath, but before Loki could read it Peter fell back behind fury. “You don’t want my help. And I don’t want yours!”

Despite himself, Loki took a step back, hurt flashing across his face.

Peter’s eyes flared at the weakness, and he jumped on it with vigor. “I don’t need you. What did you think we were, Loki, God of Mischief? We aren’t teammates, we’re barely allies! We’re a helpless kid and a wanted criminal and if the fate of the universe really lies on us, then it might as well go and end now!”
“No,” Loki hissed. Thor and Heimdall and Bruce and Valkyrie and his Asgardian subjects, dead or broken by Ragnarok and Thanos—he wouldn’t give up on them. He wouldn’t give up this groping second chance a desperate wizard gave him. He wouldn’t.

“My universe still has a chance. I won’t give up on it.”

Peter laughed, and it was thick as molasses. “So heroic. I haven’t forgotten what you’ve done, you know. All the deaths and the schemes. How many was it in New York? How many before that? How many after?”

Loki didn’t answer, his jaw feathering. *He doesn’t mean it, he doesn’t mean it, he doesn’t mean it—*


When Loki’s eyes met Peter’s, he didn’t care if they were fractured and vulnerable. He couldn’t help it.

“You were the only person who never thought of me that way,” he whispered.

Then he gripped the Stone and the list and ran.
It was Never Real

Chapter Notes

*Self-control shatters into 14,000,605 pieces*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Earth-199999: February 2024

Months past.

The leaves fell, and then the snow fell alongside them, drifting in clean flurries over the course of the winter. But February came with claws of cloying heat and turned the snow to sleet, splashing into freezing slush against curbs and clogging gutters. It soaked scarves and mittens and rendered hats futile. It left oil shining perpetually over the rivers dripping through the streets. People stayed inside, and when they did leave they ran, as safely as possible with the slickness of the sidewalks and the subway staircases.

Stephen kept a towel rolled up and stuffed against the front door to keep the water from flooding the entryway of the Sanctum like it did the first time. Getting there was always an intricate dance around the buckets and mugs lining the hallways to catch the myriad of leaks. Some days it was a game, something to distract the lonely sorcerer from his duties and research, and some days it was an excuse never to leave the library.

Things were progressing slowly. He’d had a problem halfway through November with a rogue dimension-hopper and her monologue-filled quest to recover an ancient relic. Said relic happened to be Stephen’s totem to travel to that universe, and he ended up spending a couple of weeks in an otherworldly horse-stable, earning enough credit to buy it back.

His normal duties took time, as well. Despite what Wong had thought, he was quite aware that he couldn’t spend all his time in astral projection.

So as February passed one dripping sleet-shower at a time, Stephen fell into a rhythm. The days were busy, divided between chores and duties and his search for someone he could remove from this timestream without splitting it, in order to send them back and allow them to split it.

It couldn’t be him. He was needed in this original universe, both to manage interdimensional threats and to keep a watch over the shared astral plane he would create. The walls of the library were covered in timelines and trees, Stephen’s wobbly attempts to keep track of who died when and where and how they’d be remembered. He needed someone who’s disappearance wouldn’t affect the chain of events, and it was harder to find than he’d thought.

He spent whole days tracking people he could save by letting them die.

They were long days, cold and dark and silent.
Nights stretched the same. February wrapped freezing hands around Stephen’s throat and he felt himself forgetting, curled up on the library chairs with the Cloak, what spring even felt like. What the human voice sounded like.

What reality he was in when he woke up each day.

So when there was a knock at the Sanctum door for the first time that year, Stephen answered it with his mandala shields raised and the Cloak flared around his shoulders.

There was a boy on his doorstep, hair and clothes soaked through with slush, with his frozen scarf pulled up around his ears as he tried to hide his shivers.

Peter Parker.

The muscle memory from 2,644,775 futures had Stephen instantly dropping his shields and pulling the door wide open. “Come in,” he said. “You’ll catch your death waiting out there!”

Kicking the damp towel behind the door, Stephen ducked aside and beckoned Peter in.

“Sorry, I don’t mean to intrude or anything—” The boy was looking at his feet, still shuffling at the doorway, and Stephen couldn’t care less what reality he was in.

“Nonsense. Drowning spiders justify ignoring interdimensional threats, it’s basic science.”

He closed the door softly with a wave of his hand, then conjured a clean towel and tossed it to Peter, who was smiling a bit.

“I don’t think that’s how that works…”

Stephen quirked his eyebrow, the Cloak fluttering off his shoulders to float in the air beside him. Peter glanced at it, perking up a little as it waved.

He waved back a bit shyly, one hand playing with the down of the towel. The shivering had decreased slightly in the heat of the Sanctum, but Stephen still flicked his fingers toward the hearth and rekindled flames that hadn’t laid there for months.

Peter sidled slightly toward the warmth. He glanced at Stephen, like he was waiting for permission or judgement, and Stephen wasn’t precisely sure what sign was required. He hadn’t done this ‘social interaction’ thing in a while. One could get out of practice, it seemed.

So he coughed awkwardly, gestured strangely, and fled to the kitchen to make tea.

Peter was wearing the Cloak when he came back, levitating a mug and a water bottle and carefully gripping the steaming kettle between his trembling hands. Smiling, Peter was stroking the hem of the friendly garment. His hair dripped against the fabric, darkening it in places, but the Cloak didn’t seem to mind, surprisingly.

Stephen succeeded in making it to the fireplace without spilling anything, then carefully poured the superheated water into the mug and bottle. He directed the former over toward his visitor.

They watched each other for a moment, equally uncertain of their words. Peter’s fingers drummed on the handle of his mug. He finally broke eye-contact to take a long sip, and Stephen sorted through his memories to try and figure out what was the last time he’d actually interacted with the Peter in front of him and not some alternate version of him.
He ended up with the pier in September. He couldn’t remember the boy’s exact words, but he remembered their emotion.

After Stark’s funeral.

“Is something wrong?” Stephen finally asked. That was the only reason he could come up with that this version of Peter would come to see him; they needed his help. “How urgent?”

“What?” Peter shook his head, swallowing his gulp of tea. “No, uh—no. The world continues ticking on, somehow.”

Indeed. It was unreasonable how normal everything seemed to be. Not that Stephen had been out and about in this dimension much.

The December snow fell, and the February cold brought tea before a fireplace.

Peter sighed, setting his tea on the table and dropping into one of the chairs aside the flames. He lifted the towel, ruffling his hair with it for a long second, then dropped it to meet Stephen’s eyes.

“Look,” he began, and Stephen braced himself. “I know it’s been a long time. I know you’ve probably… I don’t know. But still—”

“What do you need?”

Peter looked taken aback. “Nothing. I—I came to say I’m sorry.”

Stephen sat down.

“Oh.”

Peter’s shoulders had hunched a bit, and he brought his knees up in the chair. The mug rested atop them. “I should have come a long time ago, I know. I don’t… I don’t blame you. I never did. It was all just… everything… I just…”

“I know.”

The relief on Peter’s face could have been comical in different circumstances. “Really?”

Stephen nodded, raising the water bottle to his lips. The liquid inside shook with the trembling of his hands, but the narrow neck of the cup kept it from spilling across Stephen’s front.

“And to think I stressed about this for two weeks. I wrote a whole speech.” One half of Peter’s mouth quirked up.

Stephen raised an eyebrow, and the Cloak’s collars were shaking in amusement behind his chair. “If you want to give a speech, be my guest.”

“Nah, it was really bad. It mostly consisted of repeated platitudes and pleading. Made me sound rather pathetic.”

“The rain was convenient, in that case,” Stephen said, glancing up toward the leaking roof and the slush on the Seal of the Vasanti.

“I know, I really had the Abandoned Puppy vibe going for me.” Peter chuckled. “I really am sorry though.”

“And I really am aware.”
Peter still looked slightly skeptical. “Even though I didn’t talk to you for months?”

His scarf slipped off the arm of his chair as the ice stiffening it finally thawed, and Peter bent over the edge to gather it in his arms. It was a bit lopsided, one edge thicker than the other, and Stephen thought it might be crochet. Maybe Peter’d made it.

“Nobody’s talked to me for months; you’re not unusual,” Stephen said with a shrug.

Peter frowned. “Nobody?”

“The Cloak is unfortunately—or perhaps fortunately—a silent relic. Don’t think I’d get a word in edgewise if it did have a voice.”

“Hm.” Peter took another sip of tea. “I think I’d melt if I wasn’t around people at least a little bit.”

“People are rather complicated,” Stephen sighed. “I’m not… very good at dealing with them. Never have been. It’s just more obvious now that they don’t have to like me.”

“I think you’re cool,” Peter offered.

“No offense, but you think everybody is cool.”

“Untrue!” Peter laughed. “There’s a bunch of criminals I’ve met that I don’t like.”

“I didn’t say that you like everybody, I just said that you think everybody is cool. You can dislike, even hate, people and still find their skills intriguing.”

“Hm,” Peter said, eyeing him thoughtfully.

Stephen coughed.

Peter kept watching him, and Stephen kept getting uncomfortable, until the boy suddenly yelped, “Flash!”

“Where?” Stephen looked around a bit frantically.

“That’s someone who I don’t think is intriguing. See? Nailed it, the wizard has been proven wrong.”

“If you don’t think he’s cool, why do you let him bully you?” Stephen asked.

“Well because—” Peter broke off, staring at him a little fearfully.

“What?” Stephen glanced at his fingers, trying to make sure he wasn’t unconsciously tapping the Mystic Arts and conjuring strange insects. He did that when he was tired, sometimes.

“How did you know?” Peter asked slowly. Suspiciously.

Stephen backtracked through the conversation. “Know wha—oh, shit. That’s not a conversation we’ve had yet, is it?”

“You’re wizard-spying on me.”

“No! And it’s sorcerer.” Stephen rubbed his face, his ragged fingernails catching on his skin. “I just forgot… that… you didn’t tell me about school.”

Peter’s intelligent eyes were flicking across Stephen’s face, and he could see the cogs turning behind them. “Then how did you know?”
“You told me. In a different future. I saw 14,000,605 of them, remember?” Stephen swallowed, his voice catching on the number.

“You remember all of those?” Peter asked, his suspicion fading. Stephen was immensely relieved.

“Not every detail of all of them, of course; even my mind couldn’t handle it. But I remember enough.” A ghost of a smile flickered across Stephen’s face, and he rubbed at the spot of his neck behind his ear.

“And I told you about Flash in one of them?”

“A great many of them,” Stephen agreed.

Peter hummed. He ran a finger over the curve of his mug handle, and the Cloak tried to do the same against Stephen’s water bottle. Without looking over, Stephen reached out to catch the tea before it spilled across the floor.

“What else did I tell you?” Peter asked softly.

_Everything._

“I know you, Peter Parker,” was all Stephen could think of to reply.

“I don’t…” Peter shook his head, a bit helplessly.

Stephen smiled. “I know May’s a god at checkers, and though she’s terrible at it she loves to cook. I know Ned Leeds gave you the ‘Lettuce’ shirt you were wearing under your suit on Titan—he’s your best friend at Midtown Science and Tech. I know you like chemistry and robotics and _Doctor Who_ and _Star Wars_. I know you’re claustrophobic after what happened with the Vulture, and I know your uncle—”

Stephen cut himself off.

Peter was staring at him, face a bit pale, and Stephen cleared his throat awkwardly. “Or… something,” Stephen coughed.

Peter nodded, taking a rather clumsy drink of tea. “Well, you aren’t wrong.”

“I’m sorry,” Stephen said after a moment.

“What for?”

Stephen gestured to Peter’s form. “I can’t help it, the knowing. I shouldn’t… you never told me in this universe, and in this universe I don’t have any right to remember. I don’t deserve to know any of you.”

“Don’t, it’s alright.” Peter smiled easily, though he still looked a bit disoriented. “I mean, you aren’t the last stranger I’d choose to know all my secrets.”

Stephen rolled his eyes. “Good to know.”

“I just… that’s a lot of secrets. A lot of futures. I didn’t even think about what you saw, other than… y’know, the One. You must feel so omniscient, knowing everything with nobody to know you.”

Peter looked up, fixing Stephen with warm brown eyes, and the empathy there took Stephen’s breath away.
So he told the boy the truth. “Don’t feel bad,” he said. “It’s... comfortable. To know, to understand people’s words and people’s motives. I knew you didn’t mean it when you blamed me on the pier five months ago, and it saved me.”

“Oh,” Peter said. “You like knowing? Just for the sake of knowing?”

Stephen shrugged. “I suppose I could come up with a reason. But yeah. Just for knowing.” Then he smiled. “And before you say it, yes, I am a total Ravenclaw.”

Peter chuckled, mimicking Stephen’s shrug. “Do you remember just people?” he asked curiously. “Or events and actions, too?”

Stephen contained his wince, wrapping his hands around his tea and nodding.

“What’s the weirdest thing you remember?”

Stephen snorted. “Pete, there were at least five million futures where we jumped on Quill’s ship and ran, and in over half of those you adopted a space dragon that always ended up eating you after varying amounts of time. A lot of weird shit happened.”

Peter giggled a bit, wrapping his scarf around his palm offhandedly while the Cloak batted at the dangling edge of it. “I suppose that makes sense.” He tapped his chin in thought, biting both lips in that way that he did. “What’s your favorite memory, then?”

The spot behind Stephen’s ear burned.

He stood up abruptly, stiff and straight, before pretending to straighten the coffee table. Peter’d set his tea down, and it splashed within his mug as Stephen braced his hands against the surface of the desk.

“I don’t know why you’re so interested in this,” Stephen snapped. “It doesn’t matter. None of it actually happened, anyway. It’s not real, it wasn’t ever real.”

Peter looked at him with a broken sort of kindness no child should know. “It was real to you,” he said quietly.

Warm breath and soft lips and fingers against his neck, cupping his jaw, trailing along the skin behind his ear.

Stephen closed his eyes, shaking his head with an almost aggressive conviction. “It wasn’t,” he assured. “It wasn’t. None of it was real.”

“Why not?” Peter asked, and Stephen straightened, stalking toward the fireplace.

“Because it didn’t happen. I remember events that never came to pass and actions nobody took and words he—no one truly spoke.” The laugh that tore from his throat was cold and dark and ugly. “And that’s the definition of being insane.”

“You’re not insane.”

“Maybe not. But my memories are just as real as those of a schizophrenic.” Stephen swept the dust off of the mantle with a shaking hand, looking at the way it coated the lines on his palms.

“Flash really does bully me,” Peter insisted. “And the building falling really did hurt in more ways than one.”
“So what?”
“So some of it is real.”

Stephen squeezed his eyes shut, his fingernails digging into the soft flesh behind his ear. “Stop it,” he murmured, half to Peter and half to the whispers pulling false memories from their boxes, drifting images across his eyes he’d worked so hard to tuck away. “Stop.”

“Oh—” Peter’s voice was instantly flooded with guilt, and Stephen tried not to let that make him feel worse. “I’m sorry.”

“I need to get back to work.” Stephen’s voice didn’t tremble. It didn’t inflect, either. But it was either the flatness or nothing at all, so he settled for what he could get.

“Right,” Peter said meekly. “Sorry to bother you.”

He should say it was fine, that he enjoyed Peter’s visit, because he had. But Stephen could only nod and conjure something to keep the weather off Peter before nearly racing from the room.

Peter walked home in the February rain beneath a red and gold umbrella.

He came back three days later with a deck of cards and a cribbage board.

Chapter End Notes

I bet you 50 Hogwarts points that half of you freaked out when the first words were 'Months passed' because you thought we were still in dimension 2000004. XD I'm right, aren't I.

Anyway, Peter is a 17 year old god at cribbage, uncaring of its status as an Old Person game, change my mind.

I've been waiting for this moment for so long ANYWAY thanks for reading!!! Hope you still don't hate me!!! Wooo!!! See you soon!

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