### Anew.

**by IViv**

**Summary**

In death, there was no glory, no redemption, no salvation.

Only darkness and ice—or that was what Tony thought. He closed his eyes in a Siberian bunker and opened them again on his 41st birthday, with War Machine flying into the distance.

**Notes**

Translation into Vietnamese available: [Anew](#).
Prologue

Chapter Notes

Edit: 15/06/2018

Welcome, new readers! A note of warning before you proceed, please consider the tags very carefully. This fic is not Ex-vengers friendly. Those who cannot stomach characters facing consequences for their actions need not read. Otherwise, enjoy the story!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tony leaned against the crumbling fireplace, mouth agape and expression bewildered. He watched War Machine take off in the distance, unable to comprehend the turn of events.

Wait. Tony wanted to say, wanted to scream, because that was his friend, his only friend, and that friend was paralysed from the waist down.

For life. They had said.

The monochrome suit disappeared into the night sky. Party lights flickered above Tony, hues of sickening blue. Tony ripped off his faceplate. He couldn’t breathe. He was alone. He was dying, dead.

Wait. Don’t leave me behind. Tony called out to the person that was neither here nor there. Don’t leave me.

“Sir,” Tony froze. “You are exhibiting symptoms of a panic attack. Please follow my instructions and establish a breathing pattern.”

J.A.R.V.I.S.

Tony didn’t register what the A.I. said next because that was Jarvis. Jarvis was alive. Jarvis was talking to him, trying to help him again after he had lost Jarvis all those years ago.

Tony couldn’t hold it back anymore; he slid from the fireplace and crashed onto the concrete. He curled in on himself, and he cried. Tony tasted salt as he opened his mouth in a silent scream. He was safe here, in his home. He still had a home. Despite it being ruined, despite the place reeking of alcohol, and despite his best friend had just taken off with his Iron Man suit.

All the pain, anguish, hurt, and betrayal erupted from his chest. It ached from a phantom blow that had yet to happen. Tony cried until he had nothing left.

He cried for the memories of a family that never was. He cried for the friendships lost. But most importantly, he cried because it was not yet too late.

If this was some cruel joke, some twisted sense of punishment…

Tony didn’t want to wake up.
Chapter End Notes

Tumblr: ivivao3.tumblr.com
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Tony does some damage control.

Three hours, that was how long it took for Tony to get up and accept everything was real. He really did travel back in time. “Jarvis, damage control,” Tony commanded quietly, as if enough noise would shatter the illusion and he would once again be stranded in snow and ice.

“The guests have safely evacuated. Surveillance footage indicates none were injured. Building integrity is at eighty-three percent,” Jarvis stated in the voice of his childhood butler. Some tension left Tony’s shoulders.

“Have the bots deliver the suit downstairs for maintenance.” Tony fumbled for the manual release of his suit. He paused when the lock wasn’t where he thought it’d be, then recalled he wasn’t wearing Mark Forty-Six.

Tony peeled off bits of armour, shedding them piece by piece. It was strangely therapeutic. Unlike his later creations, the early models of the Iron Man suit didn’t engulf him in a metal embrace. The pieces clung to him in an intricate yet robust pattern. Tony’s hands danced across the metal. He pushed and pulled in ways he didn’t know he still remembered. After all this time, Tony could still visualise the schematics of every iteration of the suit as if he had drawn them yesterday. They were etched into his being. His creations never leave him, not for better, and not for worse.

“Sir.” It was crazy now that Tony thought about it, an AI showing human emotions, but Jarvis brought life to those pre-recorded sound files. Both times when he lost Jarvis, he had lost a member of his family with barely any time to mourn. “Considering recent events, may I suggest another blood toxicity test before retiring for the evening?” Jarvis asked.

Tony kept working. He piled pieces of the suit on top of each other. Normally he’d never treat his creation with such disrespect, but he was desperate to be free of it. The feeling of ice slowly claiming every inch of his being as he was trapped inside it would haunt his dreams for years to come. The suit had felt like a coffin, and if Tony being here was any indication, it did become one in the end.

“Sir, if I may suggest—”

“I lost you,” Tony blurted. “I fucked up and you paid for it.”

“My apologies Sir, I’m afraid I don’t quite follow.”

“I—how do I start, Jarvis?” Tony threw away the last piece of his suit. The red and gold plate bounced once then settled on top of a pile of rubble. “One minute I was dying, in a Siberian Hydra base—I’m actually positive I died. Then I’m here, six years earlier.”

“Are you suggesting you experienced time travel, or perhaps a vision into the future?” Jarvis asked.

“Yes. No—maybe. I don’t know what this is.” Tony lifted his under suit. The arc reactor nested inside his chest was blinding in the darkness. Memories of a shield crushing it in half flashed before him. Tony quickly covered it.
How could he have been so stupid? And to think everything he’d done, all the warnings, days spent inside his lab, sleep lost. He created Ultron. For them. Because he didn’t want to see his team, his family get hurt when they welcomed the person who’d manipulated his worst fear with open arms. No one listened. In the process of chasing an illusion of acceptance, Tony had lost his real family instead.

“I lost you, Jarvis,” Tony croaked. A stinging feeling returned to his eyes. He tried to blink it away. “You were in shreds because of me. What I made killed you. I am so sorry.”

“I firmly disagree, Sir,” Jarvis said. “Evidence suggests that I am still here. My mainframe is secure in the vault. If those events were to take place in the future, I am here today because of you. You are my creator. You have always had my best interests at heart, and I you.” Tony ran a hand over his face, crying in front of his AI once was enough for the day. “If it’s any consolation, I forgive you, Sir,” Jarvis said, matter-of-factly. “Now if I may suggest another blood toxicity test before retiring for the evening.”

“Leave it to you to push my buttons.”

“A most peculiar observation, so rarely do I push for anything.” Tony smiled at the sarcasm he’d missed with all his heart. “Would you like me to schedule for clean-up services?”

“Yeah, book ‘em for tomorrow morning. On second thought, schedule them for this afternoon.” The pair continued their light-hearted banter as Tony climbed the steps to the master suite. Once there, Tony threw himself onto the mattress. Exhaustion washed over him, and he realised just how tired he was.

Hearing Jarvis again had been the last straw. Before that there was Siberia, and before that the Accords. Tony grabbed a metal device from the nightstand and pricked his finger with it.

82%.

It was going to spread exponentially from here.

“Jarvis…?” Sleep threatened to pull him into the abyss. Tony clung to his last moments of consciousness and called for his AI. This time he received an answer.

“I am here, Sir.”

With that, Tony let go.

--------

“Ms. Potts, you have an incoming call, it’s from Mr. Stark.”

Pepper sighed at her secretary. She turned to check her mobile phone. Twenty-seven miss calls. The phone had been ringing non-stop for the past hour and Pepper had been determined to ignore it. She was not impressed with Tony’s drunken display last night. Part of her felt pained to shut off Tony
like this. Beneath his armour of snarky retorts, she knew how sensitive he could be, but she had to drive the point home. Tony's frank irresponsibleness could and would destroy him one day. His PR had been a nightmare from day one, and with the added variable of becoming Iron Man, his public opinion was only going to become more divided if he didn’t clean up his act fast.

“Ms. Potts?” her secretary asked.

“Put him through.” Pepper pinched the bridge of her nose. She would have liked to give Tony at least another day to cool off, but he had resorted to calling landline. The last thing she needed was Tony stumbling into headquarters, hungover and causing a scene.

“Pepper,” a soft voice muttered as soon as the call connected.

“Look—Tony, I’m not going to pretend I’m not upset because we both know that’s not true.” Pepper’s resolve crumbled under the softness of Tony's voice. She took a moment to steady herself. “I’ve made several phone calls. If this is about the suit, you can forget it. Rhodes did the best he could. You forced his hand on this matter.”

“It’s not about that,” Tony replied, lightning fast. He sounded surprisingly sober. “I want to tell you something. I've wanted to say this for a long time but couldn’t. I've been so convinced it’s because I wanted to spare you the pain, but now I see it had been for me all along. I didn’t want to admit it, because admitting it meant I couldn’t do anything about it. I didn’t want to see you hurt, but I realise now that if the worst was to happen, and you never got to say goodbye, you’d blame yourself for the rest of your life when none of this is your fault.”

Blood turned to ice inside her veins. “Anthony Edward Stark—what have you done…? Are—are you alright?”

“You’ve been so good to me, Pep. Stood by me through thick and thin. You deserve to know. It wasn’t my place to keep this from you. The truth is: I’m dying. I’ve been dying since the moment the reactor was jammed into my chest. The palladium core that's powering it is poisoning me. Piloting the suit accelerated the condition.” Pepper dropped her phone. “I’ve tried every combination of known elements, every permutation, or so I thought. I think I’m on to something now. With luck, depending on shipping times, I could fix this in a flash. Just give me some time and I’ll be right as rain...” Tony’s voice continued to flow from the speakers. Pepper snapped out of her trance.

“Oh—oh my god! Tony!” Pepper picked up her phone with shaking hands. “Where are you now? Are you home? Stay put, I’m coming! Happy, prepare the car!” Pepper nearly tripping over herself as she raced downstairs. All of a sudden, everything made sense. Tony's self-destructive behaviour, his complete relapse into drinking and partying, the evasive glances. Tony had been dying. Tony was still dying, and she wasn’t by his side. She didn’t even notice! Too busy being the new CEO of Stark Industries...

“Careful running with those heels,” Tony said, neither confirming nor denying Pepper’s accusation. “Jarvis, this is precisely why I said it’d be better if I was there in person.”

Pepper threw herself into the car and slammed the door shut. She told Happy to hit the gas.

“Sir, according to my probabilities matrix, face-to-face interaction yielded the result of a ninety-seven percent chance of argument, as opposed to the three percent chance of civil conversation,” Jarvis
said.

“Point taken.”

Pepper ignored the bickering and told Happy to run the lights. She needed to get to Malibu as fast as possible.

----------

Six hours, an AC/DC t-shirt soaked with tears, and a long phone call with one Colonel James Rhodes later, Tony sank into his couch to have a drink.

Not the alcoholic kind. He was still dying, thank-you-very-much. Chlorophyll tasted as disgusting as Tony recalled. Pepper was asleep in the guest room. Considering the bombshell he'd dropped on her, he’d say that turned out alright. One more hour later, Tony waved the cleaners goodbye. Malibu mansion once again descended into darkness.

“Backup is complete, Sir,” Jarvis informed.

A chip emerged from the central command console. Tony plucked it from the socket and locked it inside a signal-proof box. “Remind me to do that every six months.” Tony had branded hard backups crude, too insecure. He wouldn’t be making that mistake again.

“Noted, Sir.”

Tony descended the steps that led to his workshop. Compared to his lab in Avengers Tower, the Malibu workshop seemed outdated, humble, even. But this place had seen the demise of the Merchant of Death and the birth of Iron Man. Some of his best ideas were born here.

His fingers ghosted over the lock pad. Ugh, passwords. Tony grimaced. What was this, the Stone Age? The door opened with a soft click and an array of holograms sprung to life. They illuminated the space with a blue glow. His seat remained how he had left it in another life, his curved workbench reflective in its cleanliness. On the back wall, the row of long destroyed Iron Man suits stood proudly on display.

Tony breathed in the air. It smelled of metal and motor oil. This was his workshop, his garage, his playground, and it had been returned to him. Tony could feel the adrenalin rush, the sheer joy of creation re-emerge from the depth of his soul. He ordered Jarvis to lock himself in.

It was time to get back to work.
Tony took less than nine hours to redraw the schematics of Mark Forty-Six, or Mark Forty-Seven, as it came with upgrades. During which he forwent all activities unnecessary to sustain life, but still managed to sleep three hours because Jarvis had threatened to power down his lab, and Pepper had threatened to cry.

The shipment containing supplies to craft the new element arrived after his nap. While Jarvis had been busy purchasing a new lab large enough to synthesise it, Tony placed Mark Forty-Seven into fabrication. It would be there when he needed it, but for the time being, he would continue to pilot Mark Five. He needed to bridge the technological gap between his future inventions and the bare-bones iteration he would provide for the military.

Yes. Tony was going to recreate the Iron Legion.

If Tony had learned anything from the media-dubbed ‘Civil War’, it was that Captain America’s blind rejection of authority came with disastrous consequences. So long as one continued to live in society, one would always be bound by rules and regulations. The trick was to make sure the good guys wrote those rules. To prevent shortcomings in the future, Tony needed greater political sway. Of course, he had influence as Iron Man, but he had somehow failed to consider the sheer force that was Tony Stark: the lustrous leader of Stark Industries, genius inventor, billionaire.

In hindsight, Tony had made fatal lapses of judgment long before the creation of Ultron. Driven by his whimsical desire to become a ‘better man’, Tony had distanced himself from the political heart of America, and thus turned a blind eye to the storm that was brewing among the world’s elite. Tony had failed to identify the compromised members of said circle, which would have been glaringly obvious had he been a part of it.

Pepper had called for a press conference earlier in the day. Flanked by Colonel James Rhodes, she shared the grave news of Tony’s failing health. The world erupted into chaos at the live broadcast. To cement Tony’s point, Pepper had been instructed to bring scans of his chest to the conference. Any disbelief was quickly snuffed by experts around the world. Faced with such unprecedented public interest, they came to the unanimous decision that those scans showed none other than palladium poisoning in its late stages.

There had been a mob camped outside headquarters since the announcement. The United States Armed Forces was in complete disarray. The War Machine suit would only stall them for so long before they demanded direct contact with Tony. Attention preoccupied elsewhere, Tony hadn’t left Malibu, but he did monitor the situation from his workshop. He was taking his time to calculate his next move. Tony had been surprised by the lack of contact by S.H.I.E.L.D, but he suspected it was because he never gave them a chance this time around.

Since his disastrous birthday bash, Tony had never left the house, let alone venture to an unpopulated doughnut shop. His fractured relationship with Pepper and Rhodey had been mended, and thus he
still had people he could fall back on. Tony also fired Natalie Rushman without warning. Jarvis eliminated all remaining bugs the agent had planted into his system.

S.H.I.E.L.D. no longer had insight into Tony’s life; they were as blind as the rest of the world. If S.H.I.E.L.D. could, they would’ve kicked down the front door by now, forcefully offering their ‘help’ in exchange for something far greater down the line. Tony didn’t need them, but he wasn’t going to interfere either because after the next few hours, there would be people far more concerned with his wellbeing than even himself. People with enough resources to ensure shady shadow organisations couldn’t get within the same postcode as him.

Tony felt a twisted sense of satisfaction. Given that he would be compensated for his services, he wasn’t against doing business with S.H.I.E.L.D. They were useful in many ways, but this time, he was going to do it on his own terms or not at all. Tony Stark never made the same mistake twice.

“Sir, you have an incoming call from Colonel Rhodes,” Jarvis said. An image of Rhody appeared in the corner of the tablet Tony had been working on.

“Patch him through,” Tony said, setting the tablet aside.

“Tony.” Rhody had seen better days. The dark circles under his eyes matched Tony’s own. A frown was etched deep into his features. “You don’t have to do this. I can hold them off for as long as you need. You don’t owe them a damn thing.”

Tony smiled. “I know, honey bear, but everything comes with a price. I’m gonna do what I do best—striking deals.”

Rhody pursed his lips. The feed switched to a different room.

“Mr. President.” Tony made no attempt to plaster his signature showman smile. From the looks of it, President Ellis hadn’t expected him to.

“Mr. Stark, I’d like to begin by expressing my admiration towards your work. If what Colonel Rhodes had said was true, Stark Industries will be given full support. You will be aided by this nation’s finest and given as much funding as the states can provide. We must ensure the ‘Iron Legion’ reaches its full potential before your…untimely departure.”

The president’s gaze skittered across Tony’s neck, Tony hadn’t drawn attention to the palladium veins, but he hadn’t hidden them either. “The Colonel has briefed me on your condition. Your devotion to world peace is truly commendable.”

Tony was well aware of how horrifying palladium poisoning must look; he planned to abuse that advantage. “Before either of us gets too excited, my previous statement stands. The Iron Legion will not be retrofitted with weaponry. They will serve as search and rescue units. Their first and only priority is to evacuate civilians from natural disasters or warzones.”

“Of course, Mr. Stark, I couldn’t agree more.” President Ellis eagerly accepted Tony’s pre-drafted terms. Stark Industries would enter a working relationship with the government of the United States of America, designing and manufacturing patented Iron Legion units for the U.S. Armed Forces. Stark Industries would retain all legal rights and jurisdiction over the deployment of those units. The contract specifically stated that the Iron Legion may not be altered, remodelled, or tampered with in any way, and that they may only be deployed in a search and rescue context. Of course, whether the Armed Forces wished to honour those terms was another issue entirely.

Judging from Ellis’ enthusiasm, he would have still signed even if the contract bargained for his left kidney. The internal political structure of the current Senate was delicate. After all, if he dared to
refuse Tony’s terms, Tony could simply sign the rights over to his opponent. The next election was drawing near, and like all politicians, Ellis too needed public goodwill. A uniform army of Iron Man bore more impact than a single lookalike.

The Armed Forces would never return War Machine, but despite what some might think, Tony hadn’t ‘lost’ the suit. After the betrayal of dear ol’ uncle Obie, Tony had made sure to litter his inventions with backdoors. He could destroy the suit with a snap of his fingers. Tony hadn’t, because according to Rhodey, the suit had been taken apart the minute it landed, yet none of their engineers had come close to decoding the propulsion system, let alone the entire suit. Recreating Iron Man would take at least another decade, or worse still, following the death of Tony Stark, the Iron Man technology could be lost forever.

It was better for them to bide their time and obtain what they could while they still could. With no intellectual successor, Stark Industries was guaranteed to die a slow death no matter how hard its current CEO tried to keep it afloat. Stark Industries grounded itself in breakthrough technological advancements. It was the foundation that supported the Stark empire. To expect the company to maintain its trajectory of brilliance after they lost their guidelight was unrealistic.

At that point, the contract would be nothing more than empty promises. The major powerhouses could easily bully the shell of Stark Industries into submission. President Ellis had signed them so willingly, because they were the terms of a dead man, obsolete the moment he handed them his life’s work.

“My condolences to you Mr. Stark. You are doing good deeds. Your work will not be forgotten,” President Ellis said after the contract had been finalised. Both parties received a digital copy of the paperwork.

“God bless America.” With those words, Tony cut the feed.

They were in for a rude awakening.

----------

Tony snacked on a plate of lasagne in his workshop. Not the instant kind, but the kind one would expect from a fancy Italian restaurant. One hundred percent grass-fed beef, certified organic. His tablet played an earlier footage of Tony addressing the press from outside headquarters.

“Legacy,” Tony’s recording repeated. In the screen, the man on the podium looked deathly ill. “Iron Man isn’t about me. It never was. It’s about what we choose to leave behind for future generations. It’s about what good we can do while we are still here, and about what we can do even after we are gone.”

“Jarvis, buddy. Do I have to eat this?” Tony poked the offensive side of salad with his fork. No one ate lasagne with salad; it was a scientific fact.

“No, Sir, though Ms. Potts has insisted on a report of your daily dietary intake. Would you like me to exclude the several vitamins and minerals from said report?” Jarvis inquired, ever so slightly
passively aggressive.

“Traitor,” Tony mumbled. He shoved a forkful of salad into his mouth. On the screen, the ex-CEO of Stark Industries was bombarded with questions. After answering a few regarding the Iron Legion, one reporter raised something which shushed the city block they were on.

“Exactly how much time do you have left Mr. Stark?” Clearly a fan of Iron Man, the unseasoned girl was close to tears. “Can nothing be done to cure your condition?” The conference space was pin-drop silent, both the press and the public were waiting for his answer.

“What’s your name?” Tony’s recording asked.

“It’s Tracy, Sir.”

“Well, Tracy, I’ve done some terrible things in the past, things I’m not proud of. Shutting down the weapon sector, the birth of Iron Man, the Stark Expo, although not very good ones, they were all my attempts at trying to correct those mistakes.” His recording paused to survey the crowd. “Have I made the world a better place? I don’t know. What I do know is I don’t want to leave it in this state. I have so many ideas, clean energy, cutting-edge medical treatments, human prosthesis—so many possibilities. I never knew the importance of time until now. After the Iron Legion is safely handed over, I’ll be returning to my lab, because if I’m known for anything, it’s that I’m not a person who just gives up.” The crowd erupted in cheers. “I am far from done. I will succeed or die trying, you can count on that. But to answer your question, Tracy, I have three, maybe four months left to come up with a solution.”

The girl, bless her soul, broke into tears. “Thank you, Mr. Stark. We wish you the best of luck.”

Tony nodded firmly then turned on his heels. The remaining press attempted to storm the stand, only to be barricaded by security. The feed switched back to the newsroom.

“Well, Jimmy, that was certainly unexpected. From the looks of it, Tony Stark is anything but finished—”

“Turn it off.” The display turned back to an exploded axonometric of the arc reactor.

“Sir, as touched as I am by your exemplary delivery, we still have several difficulties to tackle before we can synthesise the new element.” Pages of calculations flashed onto the screen. Tony was running out of time, and not the three months he had promised everyone either.

Tony had less than seventy-two hours before his birthday, which would tick down to about five after arranging everything and relocating to his new lab. Tony knew he was cutting it close, but he had never been known for his caution. With his illness now public knowledge, Tony had the perfect excuse to disappear for a while. Synthesising the new element would take a fraction of that time, but Tony was going to need those three months to strategize and research future events.

He had felt a little guilty for lying to Pepper and Rhodey, but hey, at least he was improving with half-truths, right? He had the solution ready, so there was no point in giving them a heart attack. Well, a more severe heart attack than what they had already experienced anyway.

“Retrofitting is due to complete in two hours,” Jarvis said.

“Great. Upload yourself to the server when that’s done. Have the materials transferred over, then place the facility on lockdown,” Tony commanded. He had to demolish half of his mansion previously in his rush against time. He would attempt it with more grace now that he had the chance to prepare.
“Will do, Sir.”

The entire world was watching. There was no turning back. It was time to get this show on the road.
Tony accessed his surveillance system with a tap on his trackpad. Justin Hammer hurried along backstage at Stark Expo. Shaking some hands had taken longer than he expected. He was behind schedule for hair and makeup. A security guard caught up to him. Tony watched the scene unfold with cold eyes.

“Mr. Hammer…! Hey! Justin Hammer!” the security guard called.

“What?” Hammer snapped. “This better be important, I’m about to be on stage in thirty.”

“There’s an equipment failure. The drones wouldn’t salute when we were testing it.”

“You can’t be serious.” According to Tony’s scanners, Hammer’s heart rate spiked at the information. He had wanted to one-up Stark Industries for as long as anyone could remember. He wanted to prove to the world that he had been equally deserving of its attention, if not more. Tony smiled. Hammer couldn’t afford to let anything happen to his main attraction.

“You better take a look, this way.” The security guard ushered, albeit a little forcefully.

In Hammer’s normal state of mind, he might have questioned the man, but faced with public humiliation, he followed post-haste. They hurried down a vacant hallway, then through an entrance marked ‘authorised personnel only’. It was all rather ominous. “Where are we going?” Hammer’s question was met with silence. “Answer me! I know Kung Fu—” The security guard shoved him into a side door.

Tony sat in the centre of the disused staff room, coming face to face with the duo. “Leave us,” he directed. The guard nodded and locked the door behind him. Hammer fidgeted with his tie but didn’t appear alarmed. Tony knew Hammer would’ve panicked if he had seen anyone else after being manhandled into a deserted location, but Tony was Iron Man. Iron Man wasn’t known for his shady business dealings.

Before Hammer could ask any questions, Tony raised a finger to shush him. “Evening to you, genius. Wondering why I’m here instead of hunkering in a bunker, trying to solve more important problems? Well, let me clue you in. That reason is standing ten feet before me.” Tony’s fingers ghosted over the trackpad. He didn’t spare Hammer a single glance.

“Anthony!” Hammer huffed. He straightened his wrinkled jacket and made a show of surveying the room. He caught sight of one of his drones. Its backplate had been removed, exposing the circuit board. A bundle of thick wires connected the drone to Tony’s laptop.

“Are you hacking my drone? You can’t do that, that’s government property!” Hammer squawked. “Oh, I get it. Just as I prove to be a worthy opponent, you show your true colours. I wonder what the world will say when they hear about this! And believe me, they will hear about—” Tony ignored the empty threats for what they were. He flipped his laptop around to show Hammer the display. Bright red codes flashed on the bottom of the screen. “What is this? What are you showing me?” Hammer padded over and stared at the screen.

“For the love of—” Tony ran a hand down his face. “Does none of this mean anything to you? I thought you had a degree in engineering?” He got up and kicked the drone in the leg. “This thing’s compromised. Vanko has so many backdoors into it, it might as well be a beehive. Don’t you get what you’ve done? You’ve busted a convicted terrorist out of prison, faked his death and funded his
research, just so you could, what? One-up me at a science fair? Albeit a very extravagant science fair, but look at this.” Tony gestured towards the drone then to the codes on his laptop. “All it takes is one command, and you will have a live army of drones that answers only to Vanko. Does he seem like the reasonable type to you?”

“I—I don’t know what you are talking abo—”

“Nuh-uh, zip it. I don’t wanna hear it,” Tony interrupted. “I don’t give a shit what happens to you. You should’ve thought about the consequences when you busted him out of prison, but those people out there, those innocent people who are here for a good time, when the situation goes hot, they’ll be the ones getting caught in the cross-fire. They’ll be the ones paying for your mistakes.”

Tony retrieved a suitcase from under the table. He opened it and freed a small device the size of a cell phone. “This is an electromagnetic pulse. When you flip the switch, it will fry every circuit within a hundred feet. You have three seconds between Vanko powering on the drones, and when he starts shooting. Use them wisely.”

Tony pushed the EMP into Hammer’s palm. Object delivered and situation briefed, Tony unplugged his laptop. “Wait, where are you going?” Hammer followed Tony out of the staff room.

“Why are you following me? Shoo, aren’t you scheduled to be on in twenty?” Tony shot Hammer a sideways glance. He unlocked the fire exit. There was a vehicle waiting outside. Happy hopped out of the driver’s seat at the sight of Tony, opening the back door for him.

“You can’t leave, if what you said was true—” Hammer grabbed Tony’s hand and shoved the EMP into it. “I can’t do that, I’m just a civilian! You’re Iron Man, you can’t run away!” Happy rushed over, looking like he was ready to punch the daylights out of Hammer. Tony placed a comforting hand on his bodyguard.

There had been a time when Tony believed in the same damn thing. He was Iron Man. He couldn’t run away. There were people who needed him. Tony had picked himself back up after being beaten down so many times, he lost count. He could never afford to slow down. He had been so afraid he’d lose the determination to right his wrongs, but somehow, the blow in Siberia had done it.

The people he tried to protect turned out to be the same ones who blamed him for everything that was wrong with their lives. He had tried so hard. Worked himself to the bone for the Accords, swallowed his pride and answered to Ross of all people, but it was never good enough. His mistakes would always outweigh his merit. After years, decades of trying, Tony was tired. Maybe it had something to do with watching the people he tried to protect rally against him, or maybe it was his perceived family getting praised for doing the same things he’d been reprimanded for. Accountability, responsibility, consent. In the end, none of it mattered. Tony had finally realised he couldn’t save everybody. He couldn’t take responsibility for other people’s actions.

Too bad no one had told him that before he flew to Siberia.

“Contrary to popular belief—your belief—I’m only a civilian too.” Tony shrugged. “And a civilian who’s dying from palladium poisoning on top.” He crooked his head to the side so Hammer could get a better view of the veins on his neck. “I think I’ve earned myself a little sick leave. You are not my problem anymore, at least not for the next three months. So. Go. Save. Yourself.” Tony stuffed the pulse back into Hammer’s hand. “At least you know how to do it. Not a lot of people get that privilege.” Tony jerked his hand from Hammer’s grasp. He threw himself and his laptop onto the backseat.

“We all reap what we sow.”
The Hammer Industries section ended in disaster, to put it mildly.

Tony, having zero faith in Hammer, hadn’t planned to entrust him with the lives of thousands of civilians from the get-go. There had been a small army of S.W.A.T. officers stationed outside the expo, ready to deploy at a moment’s notice. The EMP had been more for Hammer’s own sake than anyone else.

Having been given the chance to do things over, Tony thought a lot about his past decisions. Tony wanted to give Hammer a way out, a scenario where he didn’t have to end up incarcerated for the rest of his life, and Hammer, surprisingly, took it. It impressed Tony as he had given Hammer less than thirty minutes to process the situation. Going off none other than Tony’s word that Vanko had compromised the drones, Hammer stumbled on stage, disoriented from the information overload, and stuttered halfway through his speech before he slammed down the button to activate the pulse. He didn’t even wait for Vanko to turn them on.

There were no casualties, and part from minimal property damage, everyone managed to walk away. Hammer was taken into custody where he spilt everything. Unless further investigation revealed more evidence in his favour, he was looking at community service and a hefty fine; a big difference between life imprisonment and confiscation of all Hammer Industries property.

Vanko was caught on his third day on the run. Rhodey personally made sure Vanko would never see the light of day again. The U.S. Armed Forces had been in full support of the decision. Considering how he was still ‘dying’, Tony doubted they’d let anyone harm a hair on his head before he handed over the Iron Legion.

Speaking of dying—Tony tapped on the arc reactor, pondering how strange, yet familiar it was to be tasting coconut again. “Come on Jarvis, do I really need to keep drinking this thing? I’m cured, never been better.” Tony sloshed the liquid around in his drink bottle. He winced at its swamp green colour.

“Chlorophyll supplements are highly recommended for flushing out the remaining toxins from your bloodstream. I am running tests of the newly synthesised element. Until a unanimous conclusion can be reached, I am afraid your treatment must continue.” Dum-E bleeped happily at Jarvis’ response. He raced over to reinstall the blender Tony had trashed.

“Hey, that thing’s been in the bin, at least rinse it first,” Tony yelled over the chaos. Seeing it for the futile effort that it was, he sighed and took another swig of chlorophyll.

“Sir, if I may compliment your mature decisions as of late. I’m sure Ms. Potts will be proud.” Jarvis gave Tony five seconds of warning before he powered down the lab.

“Yes, tell me all about how immature I’ve been before,” Tony groaned as he shuffled to the bathroom for a shower.

Physical health aside, Tony had been surprised with how well he was doing psychologically. The
return of Jarvis had laid the groundwork for his road to recovery. His improved relationship with Pepper and Rhodey boosted the process. Tony still had nightmares. He still woke up in the middle of the night with a hand on his chest because he was so sure the arc reactor had been crushed in half. He would then drift towards the hazardous territory that was seventy-two-hour work binges. Though as it turned out, his established sleeping schedule had destroyed that possibility before Tony could consider it.

Tony’s new lab boasted floor to ceiling windows on one of the walls. The exposure to natural light trained his body to accept it was supposed to be asleep at certain hours. Feed the body regularly and it began to demand food when food wasn’t there. No one expected a dying man to attend galas and fundraisers. Between a lack of night-time entertainment and Jarvis shutting down the lab, Tony had no choice but to eat, rest, and recover. Moreover, Tony knew the events that had plagued his nightmares hadn’t happened yet. New York, Ultron, the Sokovia Accords... None of them were real at this point in time.

Inside the secrecy of his lab, Tony kept vigilance over known enemies, started projects to tackle correlating issues and researched unknown variables so he could prep accordingly. Tony had strengthened his relationship with the government, mended his joke of a public image, dealt with the Hammer drones and synthesised a new element all within seventy-two hours. With years down the track, he could do anything. For the first time in as long as he could remember: he felt hope.

That renewed outlook on life did Tony wonders. Clinging to his last years of youth, he was recovering at a rate which had once seemed like a distant memory. He was rebuilding muscle mass, between working on the Iron Man suits, redrawing schematics for the next generation of Stark tech, and continuing his research into high-tech prosthesis, Tony was happy to get out of bed every morning.

Three months went by in the blink of an eye. When the time came to face the world, Tony was ready.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

In which Stephen finally shows his face...

“Mr. Stark, what an inspiring story. Might I add how wonderful it is to see you again? It has been so dull without you.” A woman, heir to a mining corporation, smiled as Tony greeted her with a kiss on each cheek. The diamonds on her neck sparkled beneath the chandeliers.

“Jemma, the pleasure’s all mine.” Tony flashed his signature showman grin. “It’s good to be back. I missed the attention.” His company laughed politely.

At the gala, men and women mingled in tailored suits and bejewelled gowns. Tony had recently given a speech, repeating for what seemed like the hundredth time his tale of suffering in Afghanistan, escaping captivity with Mark I, subsequent palladium poisoning, and finally triumph in synthesising a new element. Most of which were old news, but the world did love a sob story.

Tony stayed and chatted with the guests until he had an excuse to hit the bar. If he had been younger, he would’ve hit the road instead, but in light of recent events, his literal second rise from the ashes needed to look promising. So far, everything had been going according to plan. If creating the arc reactor in a cave from missile scraps wasn’t enough, synthesising a brand-new element while he was dying cemented his genius. All that was expected of him for the remainder of the evening was to mingle until the charity art auction. Tony had zero interest in the intangible squiggles, but Pepper seemed to like them. He’d spent more for less before.

Following Tony’s confession, the two of them had settled back into the old rhythm of Tony laying down the grand scheme of things, and Pepper making them happen. It was comfortable, familiar. She was doing a remarkable job as CEO. Stark Industries stock had plummeted in the wake of Tony’s absence, only to skyrocket again after his return. She had less and less time for Tony. In return, Tony had realised he was needing it less and less too.

Whether Pepper knew it or not, they had been through hell and back together. Their break in his past life helped Tony see that they were never meant for each other in a romantic way. There were qualities people would adore in a friend but would never approve of in a lover. Pepper needed stability in a relationship, someone to be there for her when she needed them. Tony was Iron Man. He threw himself at danger more on a daily basis than some men would their entire lives. In return, Tony needed loyalty, companionship, and excitement. Tony based his achievements on devising a goal, then tunnel visioning until he reached it. Some people turned back when they hit a dead end, but not Tony. He would throw himself at it again and again until he either attained the impossible or shattered into a million pieces. When Tony believed in something, he powered through, rain or shine.

While Pepper was coming to terms with her new-found independence from Tony, Tony was also coming to terms with the fact that he liked Pepper more as a friend. What they had was an understanding, a mutual fondness built on decades of rapport, something too precious to risk. Maybe Tony would repurchase the modern art collection he had donated to the Boy Scouts of America, with additional pieces to make up for getting rid of it in the first place.
Tony’s thoughts raced off on a tangent while he waited for his drink. He leaned against the bar and surveyed the crowd with an air of blasé boredom. A tuxedo-clad figure caught his attention. *Was that...?* Tony disregarded his order and snatched two cocktails as another bartender placed them down. He ignored the indignant stares on his back and marched across the dance floor.

“Dr…Strange?”

The man in question turned to face him. “Well, if it isn’t Dr. Stark, the *man of the century.*” Strange quirked an eyebrow. He hadn’t expected to be approached.

“Please, don’t tell me you buy into tabloid journalism. My friends call me Tony.” Tony handed Strange one of the drinks. The doctor took it. Tony had never been introduced to Strange before, nor had their paths crossed on any occasion. Strange had clientele from Tony’s circle, but so does dozens of others attending the party. They exchanged pleasantries. Tony was taken with the other man’s quick wit and sharp thinking.

“I’m surprised both our egos fit in this room.” Tony smirked. He took a sip of his drink and winced in disgust. He should’ve waited for his order. “Your paper on stimulation neurogenesis is fascinating. I heard you have extensive experience with spinal cord injuries and a perfect track record. What do you think about a side job as medical consultant of Stark Industries? Nothing too committing. Won’t take up much time. All that’s required is a visit to my lab every now and then. We’ll eat canapes, sip champagne and draw up some wobbly lines.”

Strange subtly glanced over his surroundings. Half the hall was eavesdropping on their conversation. “Would you prefer somewhere more private,” Strange lowered his voice, “if this is about…” He gestured toward the faint glow beneath Tony’s dress shirt.

“This old thing? No, it’s fixed. I wanted your opinion on something else. Stark Industries is planning to launch a line of cutting-edge, but affordable prosthesis, literally at manufacturing price.” It was an old project Tony had trouble vaulting. He had upgraded the War Machine armour with a parachute, a backup generator, state-of-the-art shock absorption technology and reinforced spinal cord support. Tony was confident Rhodey was well-protected this time around, but he already had the schematics, all they needed was some extra push.

“I figured that while I still could, I better do something nice for the world. I wasn’t kidding when I said I shut down the weapons sector for the greater good.” Tony tapped on the arc reactor. He still wasn’t comfortable with putting himself out there. A part of him still screamed he didn’t deserve to be a better man, but he was getting better at blocking it. He refused to let a mumbling voice take over his life.

“That’s…most admirable,” Strange said hesitantly. Tony had a feeling he was turning out to be nothing Strange had expected. “It’s an idea I could support, I’ll see about clearing my schedule for a consultation.” According to the rumour mill, Strange hadn’t cared about the ‘greater good’ all that much, but he’d be mad to pass up a chance to collaborate with Stark Industries. Revolutionising the medical industry would look good on anyone’s portfolio.

“Like I said, it won’t take up too much time. Call me when you’re free.” Tony passed Strange his card. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw another figure approaching.

“Stephen, you were gone for some time, so I came to—Dr. Stark!” The woman gasped as she realised whom her date was talking to.

“Christine, I’d like you to meet Tony. Tony, this is Dr. Christine Palmer, my colleague at Metro-General Hospital.” Strange placed a hand on her waist; *possessive types are the worst.* Tony mentally rolled his eyes. He would know.
“Dr. Palmer.” Taking the hint, Tony’s kiss on her hand didn’t linger. “Lovely to meet you.” In his adolescent years, Tony wouldn’t have thought twice before starting drama, but he needed Strange on his good side. The man made for interesting conversation, but more importantly, Tony could use his opinion on the new line of prosthesis. If they could cut down enough cost, they could improve thousands of lives. “Listen, I gotta run, you two have fun.” Tony downed his drink and placed the empty glass on the tray of a passing waitress.

“You won’t stay for the auction?” Christine asked.

“I spoke with the curator beforehand. She’ll keep a piece or two for me.” Tony winked. “Call me whenever,” Tony said to Strange. He called Happy to head home. It was barely eleven and he was yawning already? Blasphemous.

“I didn’t know you knew Tony Stark…?” Christine marvelled after Tony was out of earshot.

“I didn’t.” Strange studied the business card. It was lightweight, crafted from metal. It didn’t have a name, only a number etched onto the surface. “He’s confident. Not entirely unpleasant, I’ll give him that.”

“What did you guys talk about?”

“Doctor-patient confidentiality, Christine.” Strange sighed and slipped the card into his tuxedo pocket. He guided Christine toward the gallery. The auction was beginning. “Even if it didn’t have to do with his health.”

“Yes, what was I thinking? You live and breathe the rules.” Christine rolled her eyes. “I can’t count the number of times you’ve asked about Nick’s patients. You guys look like you had a good chat.”

“Like minds attract.” Strange smirked.

“Oh please.”

----------

“Head home Happ’, I’m beat,” Tony said as he slipped into the car.

“It’s good to see you again, Mr. Stark.”

The masculine grunt Tony had been expecting was replaced by a sultry tease. The doors locked, trapping Tony inside. Tony’s mask solidified within seconds. He would recognise that voice anywhere. He had known her for over a decade. Thought he knew. Tony mentally corrected. There was a difference between the two.

“What have you done to Happy?” Tony asked.

“Relax, he’s in the boot.”

The vehicle pulled away from the estate. Agent Natasha Romanov of S.H.I.E.L.D. kept her eyes on
When S.H.I.E.L.D. first realised Stark had gone off the grid, they had been prepared to lose him. Regardless of his value as a potential asset, they couldn’t risk Howard’s notes falling into the wrong hands. It had been too risky too contact Stark when his mansion had been surrounded by military. However, instead of succumbing to illness, Stark had escaped unscathed. Mending his public image, strengthening his ties with the government, synthesising a *brand-new element* without his father’s notes… It was almost as if someone has been telling him what to do.

“No. I fired you. Now get out of my car.” There was no warmth in his answer, nothing that suggested he was once attracted to her. Natasha was well-versed with the art of seduction. Stark had once been so keen to play into her hands, but then he cut her off without warning.

“It’s a serious matter.” She handed him a folder with S.H.I.E.L.D.’s logo on the front cover. *The Avengers Initiative. Preliminary Report.* “You don’t come recommended, but considering your recent development, the director has decided to give you a second—” Tony smoothly rolled down the window. He tossed the folder and its content into the wind. A trail of pages fluttered behind them.

Once upon a time, Tony had jumped at the chance to prove himself. He had handed over his time, his home, his technology, and his bank account in exchange for nothing more than being told he was doing the right thing. Following the events of Afghanistan, he had thought so little of himself. He downplayed his efforts, went as far as hiding the resources he had pooled into disaster relief after every Avengers mission. He had thought, foolishly, that if he could give just a little more, punish himself just a *little more*, then the team would finally see him as redeemable, accept him as morally equal.

For all his struggles, he died alone in a bunker in Siberia. No one came back for him. They wouldn’t get to toy with his insecurities, not this time.

“Oops, better go after that, top secret and all.”

“You—” The Black Widow’s passive façade cracked. She reported their location into her earpiece. Where Tony might have once felt guilty, he felt only cold contempt.

Natasha stared disbelievingly. Something was off. This was not how a civilian was supposed to respond. Despite Howard’s involvement with S.H.I.E.L.D, his son should have no experience with
shadow organisations. A flash of red and gold caught her attention. Before she could retrieve her gun, she was confronted by a gauntlet beaming hotly against her face.

“I will only repeat this one more time: get out of my car.” The repulsor hummed in the confined space. Natasha assessed the situation, she was under strict orders not to maim Stark; they were still in the dark regarding his health. Both her hands were visible. At this distance, the beam would hit her even if she managed to avoid her head. New York’s traffic was by no means light at this hour. She pulled over at the side of the road.

“I will inform Director Fury of your actions,” Natasha said.

*Actions, Tony contemplated, not decisions.* Just as Natasha made her exit, Tony spoke. “This warning is the only one you’ll get, so listen carefully. While you so kindly granted me access to S.H.I.E.L.D’s system, I came across some interesting information. Come near me, or anyone around me unwanted again and one of your agents gets burned, starting with Barton.”

Natasha froze in her tracks. “If I were you, I’d watch my back.”

The Black Widow’s menacing glare would’ve unnerved a lesser man. Tony flashed his signature showman smile. “You should heed your own advice. Speaking from experience, lying and spying takes its toll.”
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

I now have a beta! Thank you Lavanyalabelle for helping with this chapter!

Pepper was overjoyed by the return of her modern art collection. She must’ve made her delight apparent, because Tony took the chance to pitch an idea he had been brewing since the Stark Expo. Pepper didn’t reject it straight away. After he explained his plans and took her through his thought process, Pepper sighed and told Tony she wasn’t equipped to make decisions for him anymore.

A couple of years back, Pepper would’ve have been sceptical of Tony’s promise to turn over a new leaf. She had been reluctant to let Tony function on his own, but ever since the incident in Afghanistan, it was almost as if someone had hit a switch. Tony had matured so suddenly, it was overwhelming to comprehend.

Some days, Pepper would still wake up and question the absurdity of the past year. Her boss, her Tony, was Iron Man: a superhero and symbol of the free world. Gone were the days where the worst could happen was Tony avoiding paperwork. Tony was doing everything he could to right his past wrongs, and Pepper was so very proud of him, but there were days where Tony would hide in the workshop and avoid eye contact. Pepper would find cuts and bruises and burn marks on him. Those were the days she’d wish Tony could be just a little more selfish. She’d wish that he could run from just a few fights; let others take the hit for once. Some days she would look at Iron Man and wish for her Tony back.

Then came the arguments, the fights. They would hide their feelings and opt to scream at each other instead, because only then would they have each other’s attention. Pepper wondered why it took so long for her to see this, but in the process of grounding Tony, she had also been holding him back.

“You know I will always love you, right?” Pepper smiled. She knew that after today, things would never be the same. “I love you, but sometimes people love each other, and things still don’t work out.” There was no anger in Pepper’s smile, only a small hint of sadness.

“I was going to bring this up, but the timing was never right,” Tony said carefully.

“Yeah, I figured. But no matter what happens, I want you to know I’ll always be here for you.” Pepper pulled Tony into a tight hug. “You are not getting rid of me so easily. I can be a handful too.”

“Only the good kind,” Tony muttered into the crook of Pepper’s neck. Pepper hummed in contentment. Having Tony back in her arms was nice, but it wasn’t fair to latch on when she knew she no longer felt the same way. “So, still friends?” Tony asked after a pause.

“Best friends.” Pepper kissed him on the cheek then let go. “Though I think you should reconsider your idea. I can see this going up in flames, fast.”

“Believe me Pep, I know. I’ve run this through thousands of times, both in my head and in simulations. None of them ended with happily ever after.”

Pepper raised her eyebrows. “Then why do it? We could expand our production line. I’m sure
President Ellis will be willing to wait. You are doing him a huge political favour.”

Tony rubbed his chin in thought. He padded over to the Iron Man armour. Not the sleek Mark Five, but the original Iron Man. The suit that had been left behind in the desert when he was rescued, then collected and reassembled after he announced that Stark Industries would never manufacture weapons again.

After a long pause, Tony spoke, “Because I have to try. I need to fix my past mistakes, once and for all. I’ve been giving the same people too many second chances while leaving others in the dirt. Some are too far gone, but him I can still save. If this works out, it will be beneficial for us in the long run too.”

Pepper huffed. She could never hide her fondness for Tony. “Okay. Do what you think is right. I always clean up after you anyway.”

Tony gasped in mock hurt, “Outrageous. I’m zero maintenance.”

“Sir, if I may bring to your attention the two thousand, seventy-two and counting incidents where you were anything but,” Jarvis said. Both Tony and Pepper winced at the memories.

“All Stark AIs were learning AIs, even if Tony were to rebuild Jarvis from the same code again, the two would never be identical. It was the beauty of the learning process.

“As always, Sir, my calculations appear to be accurate.”

“Well then, it’s a good thing Jimmy Choo is launching their spring collection next month, isn’t it?”

To the prediction of no one, Stark Industries made an official announcement to appoint Hammer Industries as their subcontractor in delivering the Iron Legion.

It was common knowledge that since shutting down its weapons sector, Stark Industries had sold most of its facilities used to manufacture military grade equipment. All that remained was a smaller, more compact production line, tailored specifically for Iron Man. Compared to the colossal factories that pumped out Stark tech day and night, it was most modest in scale, snuffing the hopes of many that Stark Industries might one day return to the arms market.

Following the announcement of the Iron Legion, most had thought Stark Industries would simply expand again, opting to produce everything in-house. After all, despite being stripped to its bare bones, the Iron Legion was still modelled after the Iron Man suit. Everyone knew how touchy Tony was with his Iron Man suit. To say the announcement shell-shocked the industry was an understatement.

The Hammer and Starks were long time business rivals. Following the fall of Hammer Industries after their humiliation at Stark Expo, gloating over his opponent’s downfall had been the only logical
next move. Instead Tony threw Hammer the lifeline of a century, singlehandedly ensuring that
Hammer Industries would pull through their self-imposed peril. Countless conspiracy theories had
surfaced since the reveal, but all Tony could think of was how difficult it had been to convince
Hammer he wanted to help.

Hammer had been serving in an aged care facility at the time, doing as well as anyone could hope.
Tony had expected to walk in, announce his grand plans, and walk out before Hammer could fall
over his feet in gratitude. Instead, it had taken Tony the better half of the hour to explain how
Hammer Industries would only manufacture the exterior shell, and that no—they would not be
allowed access to any blueprints—before Hammer agreed to look over the contract with his lawyers.

Inheritance or no, it took considerable intelligence to be a multimillion-dollar weapons tycoon. Justin
Hammer wasn’t stupid. He was aware of his own flaws and had employed professionals to oversee
areas where he couldn’t. Though nothing could excuse him from being a terrible engineer, and a
terrible engineer who had yearned to defeat Tony Stark, of all people.

If Hammer hadn’t proven himself by activating the pulse, Tony wouldn’t have bothered either, but
he did, and it made Tony watching him rot from the sidelines difficult. Tony didn’t know where this
partnership would lead, but he was going to keep a watchful eye over it.

Tony had been doubled crossed enough to last two lifetimes. Only the production of the exterior
shell would be outsourced. All assembly and future maintenance would be finalised in-house. The
contract had been drafted until the completion of the Iron Legion, for three hundred search and
rescue units. Each Legionnaire could accommodate a pilot if needed, but would otherwise operate
independently. At this scale, the Iron Legion had the flexibility to complete a variety of missions, but
would not become problematic should anyone seize them.

It was true Tony had been stalling more often than not with this project. The Iron Legion was
supposed to be delivered before Tony’s ‘untimely departure’. During his three months of
disappearance, he had been contacted weekly for updates. Tony had played it smart by giving the
Armed Forces updates on the new element instead.

The truth was, Tony had been working on neither, but no one needed to know that. The schematics
were carried over from his previous life. They had been sitting on his server for over two months,
collecting metaphorical dust. Tony was going to make them work for it, the government, the Armed
Forces, his business associates, everyone. Tony knew all too well the consequences of providing too
much, too quickly.

There had been a time when all he wanted to do was shower his friends with elaborate gifts. Tony
was the genius billionaire. If he couldn’t provide as if conjuring from thin air, what good was he? For
who he was, Tony had never considered himself worthy of acceptance. He’d paid for airfares, taken
his MIT friends on cruises. The habit established quickly. By the time the Avengers assembled, Tony
had equipped them all with customised armour. He’d given over his tower to be used as their
headquarters, smoothed over legal issues, all but pleaded for them to sign the Accords because he
didn’t want to hurt them. He didn’t want to watch Ross hit them with a kill squad.

All that effort, in the end, he was still second fiddle. His fears, his insecurities, brushed aside. He was
never good enough for his father, never good enough for his teammates—

Tony nearly crushed what he was working on. “You seem distracted.” Tony looked up to find Dr.
Stephen Strange leaning over the workbench. He was holding the knee joint of a prosthetic leg.

“Already, Stephanie?” Tony raised a single eyebrow. Joints of any kind were never simple.
“It’s Stephen, or Dr. Strange, if you prefer,” Stephen sighed. He corrected Tony again despite knowing his attempts were futile. “And yes, it’s done. Steady hands, prerequisite of a neurosurgeon.”

“Jarvis, scan that, run simulations, compare with previous models.” Tony snatched the joint from Stephen. They had been on first name basis for some time now.

Stephen surveyed Tony as the engineer busied himself by attaching the joint to a plastic calf. Stephen was by no means a psychologist, but he could tell Tony was hiding something.

Stephen had called Tony two days after the gala. He’d cleaned his schedule to fit in another repeating client. In true Stark fashion, instead of making an appointment, Tony had asked if he was doing anything later in the evening, to which he replied no. That night had marked the beginning of many sessions, most of which took place in Tony’s lab. Stephen surprised himself with own his eagerness to participate. As Christine had so eloquently worded, like all egotistic bastards, he only obsessed over the brilliant and lustrous.

Tony Stark, if nothing else—was brilliant to a fault.

There was something building between them, something just shy of friendship, but well past the point of acquaintedship. Stephen was not used to others keeping up with him. He enjoyed working with another capable mind, to throw things around freely, and to have it thrown back at him with twice the speed.

When they were quietly working, sharing each other’s space but not quite interacting, Stephen would find his gaze pulled to the other man. Feeding his fixation, the more he connected with Tony, the more facets he discovered. Some were so different, they were borderline contradictory. Tony Stark had always been painted as a loud, attention-seeking playboy, and in the privacy of his lab, he was anything but.

Sometimes Stephen would catch him in deep thought. Tony would stare at his work but see well beyond it. The expression on his face was hard to describe, something sour, vengeful, mixed with bitterness and a deeply ingrained ache. Those moments rarely occurred outside his lab, a place Tony associated with safety.

Tony Stark had been through some things other men would not have walked away from.

“Congratulations, Sir, Dr. Strange. The manoeuvrability of the prosthesis has improved by four percent,” Jarvis concluded as he filed the prototype. “Further simulations are required to determine prototype longevity.”

“Jackpot. Told you switching the material would smooth it out,” Tony said as he patted Stephen on the arm.

“As I recall, it was I who insisted on the new structure. Your previous alignment was atrocious,” Stephen mocked, trying and failing to hide his smile.

“You drive a hard bargain. Fine, we’ll split the credit, fifty-fifty.” The pair continued to exchange light-hearted jabs with Jarvis citing numbers in the background. There was an easy atmosphere in the workshop. Tony had missed this, having someone in his creative sanctuary whom he could bounce ideas off. It returned a warm feeling to his limbs, a feeling he hadn’t had since Bru—Tony stopped himself mid-thought.

Banner. A feeling he hadn’t had since Banner, someone who had always been absent in his most dire moments, someone who had fallen asleep when he tried to come clean with his heart. A darker
side of Tony wondered how long this new-found relationship with Stephen would last. How long would it take for Stephen to show his true colours? To either stab him in the back or take whatever he wanted and left?

“There it is again,” Stephen said.

“Excuse me?” Tony stopped typing on his tablet.

“You know what I mean. This.” Stephen gestured, encompassing Tony. “The lone, suffering genius trope.”

“Some find it attractive,” Tony said, his brain switching to auto-pilot “What are you going to do, mother hen me? Tell me it’s not my fault. ‘Sweet little Anthony, everything’s gonna be alright?’” Tony goaded in a sing-song voice.

“I’d rather tell you to get over it,” Stephen said. “Whatever it is, it’s not going away. You’re the only one who can save yourself.”

“That’s what I’ve been doing, all along, all these years, saving myself.” Tony threw his tablet onto the couch. “What’s with you today? Can I get you a ladder, so you can climb off my back?” Tony pushed himself up. He padded over to the kitchenette and made a show of opening and closing the cabinets. “Nothing’s edible in here. I’m hungry, let’s grab Chinese.”

“Fine, but I’m only staying for real Chinese.” Sensing a diversion, Stephen decided to let the subject slide. “I can’t believe I let you talk me into takeout last time.”

“And people say I’m the snob,” Tony snarked, all flash but no heat. “Jarvis, you heard the doc. Real Chinese for two.” His trusted AI brought up the menu of the restaurant Stephen liked to frequent. Stephen scanned the items and ordered for them both.

“Steamed trout, vegetables and a dish of red meat. Excellent choice, doctor,” Jarvis, the traitor, approved.

The pair worked in silence until the food arrived. They were currently set up in the lab Tony used to synthesise the new element. Unlike his Malibu mansion, delivery hadn’t been an issue since the new lab was centrally located in New York City, within close proximities to the soon-to-be built Stark Tower.

Granting access to his workshop had always been a big deal for Tony. It was his way of expressing approval. The new lab was where he began his journey down a different path. It was a physical embodiment of his change in trajectory. If Tony were to be honest, he hadn’t anticipated to bring anyone over so soon. The pair had begun with a couple of brainstorming sessions in headquarters, where Stephen officially passed the test to be allowed into Tony’s workshop. Since then, they had clicked so well, Tony slowly trusted Stephen with knowledge outside their current project.

Tony hadn’t realised how many times Stephen had been over, until one day, while clearing the workbench, he dropped one of Stephen’s fancy fountain pens. That was when he looked up and saw Stephen’s belongings everywhere. Tony later joked that if Stephen was going to skip straight to moving in, he could at least buy him dinner first, to which Stephen responded by taking Tony to his favourite Chinese restaurant. Not long after, Tony decided to do a major remodel of headquarter labs, which led to the pair relocating here.

“Say, you’ve been eating with me an awful lot lately. Where’s the Missus?” Tony asked between bites of stir-fry.
“Christine and I have agreed to end our romantic involvement, while still remaining friends.” Stephen removed trout bones with clinical precision, which had always seemed like more effort than reward to Tony. “It was for the best, considering that we worked in the same hospital, the niceties must be observed.”

“Ouch, what’d you do this time?” Tony eyed Stephen unblinkingly. He snatched the fish just as Stephen finished picking it. “Spotless job by the way,” Tony said as he savoured the flavour, "you never leave a bone behind.”

Stephen shook his head in response. “I operate on the central and peripheral nervous system. The anatomy of a fish is hardly on par, and no, I didn’t do anything. The decision was unanimous, made to solve shared difficulties.”

“Admitting you’re the problem is the first step to becoming a better man.” Tony watched the second piece like a hawk.

“Or the failing relationship could be her doing entirely, of which taking the blame would be inherently irresponsible.” Stephen dragged his plate ever so slightly out of Tony’s reach, much to Tony’s dismay.

“Touché,” Tony ate the remainder of the stir-fry before reaching for his tablet. “FYI, I’ll be busy for the next couple of weeks. Jarvis will let you in if you need something.”

“Going out of town?”

The question was innocent enough, but Tony’s throat closed up all the same. Stephen concentrated on his meal, for which Tony was thankful. “Yeah,” came his single word response. Contrary to popular belief, Tony was an excellent liar. He just didn’t like doing it, especially not to his friends, but Stephen was a civilian. It was better to keep him out of this. “Going out of town. Don’t miss me too much.”

One of his private projects was finally yielding results. S.H.I.E.L.D.’s database had provided the final piece to the puzzle Tony had been working on since his resurrection.

So far, Tony had been merciful with the treatment of his enemies. Letting S.H.I.E.L.D. go with a slap on the wrist, all but saving Justin Hammer from himself. The next one would not be extended the same courtesy. Tony had a long and dark road ahead of him, but he knew he would push through.

He had to.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Thanks again to Lavanyalabelle for being an amazing beta.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Advanced Idea Mechanics, better known as A.I.M., was a scientific research and development agency founded by Aldrich Killian. Originally conceived as a privately funded think-tank, one of its most notable members included Maya Hansen. She was a scientist whom Killian employed to co-develop Extremis, a form of gene therapy capable of regenerating damaged tissue and regrow severed limbs.

A form of gene therapy Tony needed.

Not the vomiting hellfire version where the patient was turned into a ticking time bomb. Tony needed it stable, complete. The arc reactor could not remain inside him forever. No matter how advanced the technology was, the hole in his chest wasn’t buying him more years.

Having lived through the events of his past life, Tony knew how dangerous the operation would be. It was the first of its kind attempted anywhere in the world. The odds were not stacked in his favour. He took it out of sheer desperation last time, and it was a risk he was no longer willing to take. Tony wasn’t about to waste his precious second chance at life. His knowledge had improved since his operation. The original procedure would take some time to perfect, but Tony knew it wouldn’t be enough. He needed Extremis as a failsafe.

Having arrived at his conclusion, Tony meticulously researched all unknown variables he could think of. Despite Killian’s confidence, his plan had been full of holes. Tony had two options laid out in front of him. He could either approach A.I.M. under the false pretence of working for them, spend several months undercover to extract the formula, sit idly by while Killian exploit war veterans as lab rats—or he could take Killian out of the picture, clean and simple.

Steve Rogers had once said that Tony was not the type to make the sacrifice play. He wouldn’t lay down on the wire and let the other guy crawl over him. What the good captain hadn’t known was that Tony would sacrifice himself. He’d do it in a heartbeat if that was what it took. It was why he had flown the nuke into Chitauri space, knowing well and truly it was a one-way trip, but solutions like that didn’t come easy. In everyday life, there was no know-all, end-all. Which was why in every other situation, Tony would cut the wire. He would identify the problem then solve it, taking the shortest route possible. Tony wasn’t afraid to make the hard decisions. If he saw a way to bypass obstacles, to reach his end goal sooner, he was going to do it.

Tony stood on the penthouse level of the unfinished Stark Tower. He studied the New York skyline from where the old common area used to be. Aldrich Killian emerged from the elevator. “Tony! It’s been such a long time. Eleven years, in fact. You can imagine my surprise when you rang out of the blue and asked to catch up.”

Tony didn’t answer. He surveyed the concrete jungle before him. At night, the city was illuminated by blinding pillars of light. They dimmed the interior of the construction site. Killian came to stand beside Tony. “Marvellous, isn’t it? What man can accomplish.” Killian took in the view before him.
“Ten years ago, half of this didn’t exist. Imagine what man could do if he had that time again.”

Tony smiled. It didn’t reach his eyes. “I can answer that right now. See that patch of land over there?” Tony gestured far to his left. “It will become the new taxation office, caused quite the ruckus when it went through planning. And the low-rise in front of us? Some idiot wanted to take that to a hundred and fifty stories. Stark Industries had to go to court with them.”

Killian dropped his smile. “What do you want? Tony?”

Tony turned sharply. “The question is not what I want. It’s what you want, Killian.” Tony’s question echoed in the vacant site. The façade of the tower was yet to be installed. Nothing separated the pair from a nine hundred feet drop. “Funny thing is, you used to keep me up at night,” Tony continued. He inched towards the edge. “I kept wondering what would’ve happened if I didn’t blow you off. If I had just taken the time to listen to you, helped you out. I’m still wondering that.”

“What do you know?” In the darkness, Killian’s eyes glowed a dangerous shade of orange.

“But it’s too late. We’re past the point of no return. Nothing I do will satisfy you. Even if there is a slight chance for reconciliation, I can’t risk it, not after seeing what you’ve done to the people I love.”

Tony touched the bracelet on his arm. “Look, I get your personal vendetta against me. If you stopped there, I’d have no problem with it. May the best man win.”

Jarvis whispered the suit’s ETA into Tony’s ear. “What you shouldn’t have done, is use human test subjects and manipulate the War on Terror for personal gain. That’s going a bit far.”

A shift in the breeze was all Tony needed. He leapt to the side, not quite in time to dodge Killian’s attack. He landed on his shoulder with a hole burned through his sleeve. “For what it’s worth,” Tony winced. “I’m sorry, but you had it coming.”

Mark Forty-Seven lifted smoothly into view. At Tony’s signal, Jarvis wrapped the suit around Killian, encasing him in a cocoon of steel. Killian roared inside the suit. To Tony’s credit, the modified Mark Forty-Seven suppressed all heat signatures like it had done inside his lab.

“Transporting package for disposal,” Jarvis advised. The suit took off from where it had been hovering. Its destination was pre-determined to an abandoned Stark Industries firing range, where the concrete bunkers underground was built to withstand blasts ten times the scale. Once it reached the coordinates, the suit was programmed to self-destruct and ignite the half-dozen missiles lining the interior.

A single one of those had taken Killian out before, but Tony threw in another five to be certain.

“How’s he doing, Jarvis?” Tony let out a shaky breath. He had planned this evening for months, but seeing it happen was another thing entirely.

“The suit is doing remarkably well. Mr. Killian has not reached peak energy output. I suspect he is aware that he cannot fly.”

Stifling a laugh, Tony examined his arm. It was a flesh wound that barely charred the top layer of skin, but it still stung like hell. He had two more hours to wait before he could seek medical attention. Once the suit reached the firing range, another one of the same appearance was programmed to return with an empty container. To any satellite imagery, it would appear as if Iron Man had run an innocent errand.

Tony had Jarvis erase the security footage of Killian visiting him prior to the release of the Extremis-proof suit. Killian hadn’t told anyone of his trip to Stark Tower. Tony might go as far as guessing he
wasn’t the only one who’d stepped into the meeting with ill-intent.

By the time the second suit arrived, Tony had patched up his arm using his shirt. He decided to return to the lab to clear his head. From there he would wait until someone noticed Killian’s disappearance. The formula of Extremis was going to come to him. If Maya Hansen was half the woman she was in his previous life, she’d contact him and beg for Tony to fund her research. She had come so close. Killian or no, she was going to finish what she started.

Tony could only happily oblige.

----------

Stephen Strange pulled up next to the lab in his Lambo. It felt odd being here, knowing he wouldn’t find Tony inside, but he had some down time between patients this week. He wanted to put them to good use.

“Good evening, Dr. Strange,” Jarvis greeted. The door to the lab unlocked for him to enter.

“Jarvis.” Stephen nodded toward the security camera, almost as he would greet a person. Stephen had no doubt Tony considered Jarvis human too, if the extent of freedom Jarvis possessed was any indication.

Stephen marched down the dim hallway. His leather heels clicked with each step. He hadn’t bothered to power on the rest of the facility. He knew his way around, and he would occupy only the main lab. However, the further he went, the more noises he could hear. There were sounds of conversation, drowned by music and—was that party horn he was hearing?

Baffled by the turn of events, Stephen went to investigate. There was something off about the chatter. It didn’t sound like a gathering. The noises were muffled, confined to a single space. Stephen pushed open the doors to the main lab and was overwhelmed by a crowd of people. Stephen winced, expecting to be run into, but the people dematerialised into blue matrices when they came into contact.

It’s a simulation.

“Hey Tony!” The sound of the genius’ name caught Stephen’s attention. He turned to the centre of the room in time to see a man limp across it. “Aldrich Killian, I’m a big fan of your work.”

“My work?” a brunette asked. In the scene, people were trying to squeeze into an elevator. She had her hand linked with Tony’s and looked sceptical at the approach.

“Who is he?” Tony asked at the same time. “He means me,” he said to the brunette.

There was something different about Tony. He looked younger, healthier, but most important of all, the glow of the arc reactor was absent from his chest.

“Well, of course, but—” The man, Aldrich Killian, stumbled as he ducked past Tony’s bodyguard
and slipped into the elevator. “Ms. Hansen, my organisation has been tracking your research since year two of M.I.T.”

“Which floor are you going to, pal?” Tony’s bodyguard asked.

“Well now, that is an appropriate question, the ground floor, actually.” The conversation was taking place on the ground floor. “I have a proposal I’m putting together myself. It’s a privately funded think tank called *Advanced Idea Mechanics*.” The man reached for two business cards and offered them to both Tony and the brunette.

“She’ll take both. One to throw away and one to not call,” Tony said. The brunette rolled her eyes. In the elevator, Killian continued to go on about his organisation with zealous fervour. It was a fascinating experience, seeing something reanimated before him with such clarity.

The elevator chimed, and the crowd rushed out as the doors parted. Tony remained behind with the limping man. He told others to go on ahead. Stephen had a bad feeling about this.

“Look, what did you say your name was? Killian?” Tony rubbed his face. “I can see you are passionate, and you’ve done your research, but your timing is terrible. Tell you what…” Tony pulled his own business card out of his suit jacket. “Call my secretary in the morning. She’ll arrange a meeting.”

“I—thank you, you don’t know how much this means to me——” Killian was shaking with gratitude. Tony smiled at the sorry sight before him. He patted Killian on the shoulder and joined the others.

“Thank you, Tony! You won’t be disappointed!” Killian called from behind. The scene faded into nothingness. The lights switched back on, returning the lab to its usual state.

*That went…better than expected*, Stephen thought. Given the same situation, he probably, well, definitely wouldn’t have treated the man with the same courtesy Tony had.

“Binarily Augmented Retro Framing, or *B.A.R.F.*, ugh, it doesn’t get any easier to say, does it?” Tony, the real one, stood from where he had been sitting. “Is an extremely costly method of hijacking the hippocampus, to clear…traumatic memories.”

“So none of that was real? What really happened?” Stephen raised an eyebrow as he took in the information.

“Boy, you catch on quickly,” Tony mumbled. “Well, I, being a total ass at the time, played him instead of flat out refusing. I told him to go wait on the roof, and that I’d be there in five. In which he did, and when he realised what had happened, he briefly contemplated jumping before turning into a terrorist.”

An awkward silence stretched over the room. “And this is your attempt at making yourself feel better. You never were out of town, were you?” Stephen asked.

“Now this,” Tony slurred, “is a brand-new level of rudeness. I’m trying to pour my heart out here.”

“How long has it been since you last slept? And what happened to your face?” Stephen closed the distance between them with two wide steps. He studied the bruise on Tony’s face. “Are those burn marks?”

“That’s a minute detail. You’ve got your priorities mixed up. I’m trying to tell you about my mistakes —”

“Sit down. I’m getting the emergency kit.” Stephen found the first aid station then washed his hands
thoroughly before returning with the box of supplies. “Hold still.”

“I’m fine. Stop fussing over me.” Tony winced as he tried to bat Stephen’s hand away.

“What’s wrong with your arm?” Stephen scanned over Tony with X-ray efficiency. “Take off your shirt.”

“Nothing’s wrong.”


Tony wilted under Stephen’s ruthless glare. He removed his shirt. “If you wanted to get me naked, all you had to do was ask.”

“That, is not fine,” Stephen spat after he took a deep breath. He carefully examined the wound. Despite its crude appearance, it was far from an amateur job, which soothed Stephen’s obsessive compulsiveness a little. “I’m going to undress this and sanitise it again.” His glare dared Tony to object, which Tony didn’t because his Iron Man suit was in the lobby and he had no chance against Stephen otherwise.

“So…” After a while, Tony broke the silence. “You’re not going to comment on that whole scenario?”

“What can be said has already been discussed.” Stephen never took his eyes off the wound. He tended to Tony’s arm with utmost care. “Though I will admit I’m curious as to why you’ve brought this up. Judging from the setting, the incident occurred years ago.”

“The guy, Aldrich Killian, went… missing a while back. Given his position and that no one demanded ransom, he was assumed dead.” Tony rubbed his neck with his good arm. “I might have gone ahead and purchased his company, taken over his research, the usual drill.”

“And you mentioned he’s a terrorist?”

“Yeah, no one knows about it, but he planned something nasty.”

“Then what’s the problem?” Stephen shrugged. “The bad guy goes away, you take over, try to do some good.”

“It’s not as simple as that. If I didn’t make a fool of him all those years ago, he wouldn’t have turned into a terrorist in the first place,” Tony argued, his guilt-ridden demons coming to the fore. “It’s my fault.”

“That is ridiculous.” Stephen furrowed his brows. He paused what he had been doing in favour of looking Tony in the eye. “I don’t know who made you feel this way, or if you’re telling yourself this, but making fun of someone doesn’t excuse them of their actions. Interns come into my hospital all the time. They think they know it all when they fail to sterilise equipment properly. I make them feel worthless. Do they go on to run human experiments? The origin of Iron Man is common knowledge. Did you turn into an evil mastermind?” Stephen continued, not knowing how close his analogy had hit home. “You are not responsible for his choices. He could’ve turned anger into motivation, used it to push himself harder, to prove you wrong. Instead, he decided to become a criminal. What have you got to say to that?”

Tony gawked at Stephen. He never saw it like that before. He had added Aldrich Killian to his long list of sins, right beside everything else the world blamed him for. He didn’t regret killing Killian. He knew it had to be done, but rationality didn’t stop him from feeling guilty about it. He’d assumed if
he’d tackled the situation differently, then they could’ve avoided the whole Extremis fiasco, but in reality, even if it hadn’t been him that day in the elevator, it could’ve been someone else years down the line. Who was to say the same outcome wouldn’t be triggered by another person?

“I can’t turn into an evil mastermind.” After a long pause, Tony confirmed. “I don’t own a cat.” Stephen had to take another deep breath before he could return to treating Tony’s arm. “But really, thank you,” Tony said after Stephen closed the first aid box.

“Do me a favour and go to the hospital next time.” The doctor did his best to appear aloof. It seemed that Tony was not the only one bad in dealing with feelings.

“No promises.” Tony watched Stephen’s back as the doctor stored away the first aid kit.

“How about you show me B.A.R.F—yeah, you need to work on that acronym, and we call it even?”

This time Tony laughed outright. “Can do doc, though I’m sure we won’t go through it all in one sitting.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Stephen admitted absently.

Tony smiled. He’d hoped not.

Chapter End Notes

A huge thank you to everyone who has taken the time to leave a kudos/comment. You guys are my inspiration.
“… As a result, Stark Industries will be held fully accountable for the maintenance of these units. It is expected that every Legionnaire will be examined thoroughly after every deployment. The Iron Legion is expected to perform in a variety of high-stress, high-demand situations. Any performance issues due to negligence of care will not be tolerated. The United States Armed Forces, in conjunction with the World Security Council, will be watching carefully to ensure that Stark Industries carry out these duties in an efficient, and timely manner—Mr Stark! Mr Stark, are you listening?”

Tony miniaturised the YouTube window on his sunglasses. He glanced up. All eyes in the conference room were on him. “Nope. I’m afraid you lost me.” Tony yawned and stretched his legs. “Is it break hour yet?”

“Where did I lose you, Mr Stark?” the spokesperson asked through clenched teeth.

“Somewhere around ‘Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for coming today.’” Barely suppressed snickers echoed around the table.

“Do you think this is funny, Stark?” Thaddeus Ross stood from his seat. “If you don’t listen, even being the president’s pet won’t save you from mutiny charges. Now you better start showing some respect—”

“Speaking of mutiny,” Tony clasped his hands together as if he suddenly remembered something, “how’s Harlem these days? And what about the Super Soldier Program? Did you conduct any more impressive experiments since that enormous brown rage monster?” Tony felt bad for Ross, turning that shade of purple must be painful. “And while we are on the topic of respect, you know what else is disrespectful? Threatening the owner of the robotic search and rescue task force that will give you a job in the foreseeable future. Everyone here knows the World Security Council gave you the Legion because you were being an embarrassment. Now sit down, you are holding the room up.”

“Your ability to make friends never fail to impress me, Stark,” a voice called as Tony left the meeting.

“Ah, I was wondering when you’d come to bite me in the ass.” Tony shifted his trajectory and came
face to face with Nick Fury, the director of S.H.I.E.L.D.

“I heard you gave my agent some trouble the other day.” Fury surveyed Tony with his lone eye.

Tony had dressed to impress today. His three-piece suit was immaculately pressed. A hot-rod red tie and designer shades completed his outfit. He looked every bit the billionaire inventor. “Uh-huh.” Tony made no attempt to elaborate on his response. He stared into the director's good eye. “Now if that’s all you’re going to bring to the table, I have more important things to do.”

Fury only spoke when it became apparent Tony was about to leave. “I may be in possession of some items you’ll find interesting. They belonged to your father.”

“That old junk? Burn them for all I care.” Tony turned on his heels. “See you never.”

“Does none of this mean anything to you? Family legacy? Protecting the Earth? What happened to making the world a better place?” Fury called. “Your father was among the founders of S.H.I.E.L.D. He had great things planned for you.”

Tony stopped dead in his tracks. He had to hand it to the old spy. Fury knew where to hit to drive the point home. “Sounds like you need me, director. What’s got your whiskers twitching?”

“I don’t think you need me to tell you there are forces beyond our understanding. Why the sudden interest in P.E.G.A.S.U.S?” Fury shot back.

Tony carefully maintained a neutral expression. P.E.G.A.S.U.S. was the code name for the project studying and harnessing the Tesseract. It was one of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s most closely guarded secrets, so he wasn’t surprised Fury found out he had been snooping around. Unfortunately, the Tesseract was also the key to Loki’s invasion, and the subsequent Battle of New York.

“This is why I tell you people to heed your own advice. *Let’s play with forces beyond our understanding, it will grant us unlimited power,*” Tony mocked. “Reality check, how many glowing space cubes have you studied to assume it’d stay under control?” If Tony knew more than he was supposed to, Fury didn’t show it. “You think you’re the only one with trust issues? Did you think that Howard Stark, the man who climbed the American ladder, wouldn’t leave some sort of failsafe behind for his sole heir?”

At this point, Tony was just making Fury chase an imaginary carrot, because Howard, having never done anything nice for Tony while he was still alive, hadn’t turned over a new leaf after his death either. He really did leave Tony with nothing. For years, Tony had scrambled to piece together snippets of information. Even those had been revealed to him selectively, based on what people wanted him to hear. The sheer amount of time he’d spent fact-checking, the strength of will he’d needed to establish the information bank he had… All of that could’ve been avoided if Howard had just left him a damn diary, a video log, hell, anything that explained what was going on instead of some of cryptic message that branded Tony as his greatest creation. Tony knew his IQ. What he’d needed was a solid foundation to build on.

“What’s with the evil eye? Are you gonna flash me with the Neuralyzer?” Tony took off his sunglasses, making deliberate eye contact.

“What do you want, Stark?” Fury glared at Tony.

“Why does everybody keep asking *me* that?” Tony goaded, exhibiting a flair for the dramatic. “Let’s begin with what you want. You want me to join your ultra-elite lackey squad so S.H.I.E.L.D. can piggyback on Stark Industries, but I wasn’t interested. You want me to turn over the suit. I gave
Senator Stern the same answer in a live broadcast: the suit and I are one. It’s very shiny, but no, you can’t have it. You also want me to be your minion on call, but by doing so, you are contradicting your own report. Compulsive behaviour, prone to self-destructive tendencies, textbook narcissism...Tony Stark not recommended. Does none of this ring a bell?”

Tony knew he was loud, the fact that no one had approached them yet showed how much effort S.H.I.E.L.D. had put into arranging this meeting. Tony didn’t mind, the more they cared, the easier it was to reel them in. “So, forgive me if I am a little confused as to why we are still talking. I’ve denied every single one of your requests. What more do you want?”

“I want you to stop causing—” Fury began, only for Tony to cut him off.

“Too late. Not interested. I’ll tell you what I want: I want to make a deal. Let me into P.E.G.A.S.U.S, among other things, and I will save you from a world of pain you have no idea you are neck deep in.”

“You are dreaming, Stark. I may run P.E.G.A.S.U.S., but it’s the World Security Council’s project. Even if I wanted to, you come with too many strings attached,” Fury said.

“Make it work, you’re good at that.” Tony waved his hand in dismissal. “I assume you are familiar with your organisation’s history, the foundation S.H.I.E.L.D. was built on. Hiring scientists of Nazi Germany just so they could be kept out of reach of the Soviet Union? Not a great plan.” Tony tossed Fury a USB, it contained only half the list.

“Word of advice, if I were you, I’d do some spring cleaning. That tip’s for free.”

----------

Things stayed quiet after they turned over the Iron Legion. Tony used the down time to collect his thoughts. He monitored his projects until December arrived.

As usual, the beginning of the holiday season forced Tony into attending a slew of social gatherings. However, given everything that had happened in the past year, time travel or no, Tony allowed himself to take a few nights off. He spent Christmas holidays with his friends, where Stephen had also been present. Tony was curious as to why the doctor didn’t spend it with his own family, but was smart enough not to comment on it.

The crew spent New Year’s Eve on top of the freshly minted Stark Tower. Tony had purchased a nonsensical pile of fireworks. They each took their turns to pollute the atmosphere. The spheres of light illuminated the inky night sky with bursts of colour. Tony caught Stephen’s eyes as a shell burst open. They were enveloped by a blanket of shimmering light. Tony felt his heart skip a beat.

They only broke eye contact after they realised both Pepper and Rhodey had been staring. Promptly pretending as if nothing had happened, Tony couldn’t tell if Stephen had felt something in that moment too. Tony got too absorbed into his work to act on it later. It was better this way. Neither of them needed the complexity in their lives, and if Stephen’s attitude since the evening was anything to go by, Tony would guess Stephen shared his opinion too.
Stark Industries’ new product line of prostheses was released in early February. Tony wrote
Stephen’s name besides his own on the patent application. It was as much of Stephen’s success as it was his. Everything progressed smoothly. B.A.R.F. was deemed ready for launch late March. To the outside world, Stark Industries seemed to have monopolised the headlines. Tony was named Time magazine’s Person of the Year. He dined with President Ellis in the White House to celebrate the occasion. New York’s elite prided themselves on attending the same parties as Tony, many were desperate to rub shoulders with him.

Tony took the concept of famous to a new height. Between being Iron Man, billionaire socialite and celebrity engineer, he spent his days working around the clock. While not exactly unprecedented, Tony’s behaviour still worried his friends. Tony had always been hard at work, though previously, he’d have his bursts of energy, but he’d also have his time off. Now it seemed that one way or another, Tony was constantly working. Be it tinkering in his lab, attending conferences, or making public appearances.

It was enough to alarm Stephen, and the doctor was a workaholic.

Stephen began conjuring excuses to keep Tony in the lab, where he knew Tony would at least be happy. This led the pair to begin projects that had nothing to do with Tony’s past life. Stephen shared difficulties he’d faced in the operating theatre, where better equipment could potentially improve the outcome. Tony would follow up with blueprints, and the pair would go from there. They made a brutally efficient team, as they both tended to fixate on results and could put up with the other’s relentless intellectualism. They never took the sarcasm to heart, even revelled in it as they both shared a dark sense of humour.

Tony was growing quite fond of Stephen. He saw through Stephen’s attempt to get him to unwind, but if they could gain more patents while having fun, who was Tony to refuse?

For a short time, all the stars seemed to align. But much like everything good in life, it didn’t last. The first problem Tony encountered in the new year turned out to be one he couldn’t fix.

---------------

“Maya, come on. Give me something, anything,” Tony pleaded. The brunette opposite him was equally exasperated. She looked agitated, sleep-deprived, which could only mean one thing on a woman that was always so well put-together.

“I’ve got nothing.” Maya ran a hand through her tangled hair and stared at the holograms with blood-shot eyes. “I’ve run simulations on every possible combination. It’s not going to work.”

“That’s what I said ten hours before I discovered a new element. There has to be something we overlooked.” Tony projected more data onto the screen.

“Let’s face it, Tony, it’s a bust. Extremis was never meant to work on the average man.” Maya gingerly lowered herself onto the couch. She looked defeated. Tony ran through the calculations
again with changed variables. When the results came back negative, he slammed his fist against the wall.

“‘You know what the funny thing is?’ Maya scoffed. ‘I’ve known this outcome for years. Every time, when I wanted to do the sensible thing and give up, I thought of you.’ She turned to face Tony. ‘You were what kept me going. I kept thinking to myself: ‘Tony would know how to fix this.’ You’d do it with such ease too, just like that night in Switzerland.’"

Maya looked away. Tears of frustration formed in the corner of her eyes. “I never allowed myself to let go, now look where I am, thirteen years later. I sold my project to A.I.M. because I was desperate. I needed the funds. When you took over late last year and shut down Killian’s terrorist cell, I was overjoyed. I thought now that I got to work with Tony Stark, after all these years, I’ll finally be able to complete Extremis. All this time, all this effort would finally be worth it.” The weight of the lost years came crashing down on her, Maya stifled a broken sob. “But some things aren’t meant to work. I’m such a fool.”

“Hey…” Tony approached her and knelt in front of the couch. “You did the best you could. This is what research is about. We make mistakes, we document them, and then we try again. This is just a bump in the road—”

“No.” Maya stood and wiped her tears. She grabbed her belongings. “I’m out. Human biology isn’t made for Extremis. I can’t believe I’ve been so blind.”

Tony ran after her. He followed her past the security checkpoint in his lab coat. “You can’t be serious, this is your life’s work. You are going to throw it all away?”

Maya came to a halt, but she couldn’t bring herself to face Tony. “I know a lost cause when I see one. I didn’t want to see it before, but I do now. I’ve thrown away thirteen years of my life. I need to stop before I throw away the rest too.” She took off her security badge and left it on the window sill. “I’m sorry, Tony.” She left without another word.

Tony stood rooted to the spot. He needed Extremis. The formula was what was going to save him if the operation failed. Quitting was not an option. They were close, so close. If only he could find a way to lower the rejection rate. Maya was right, Extremis was as complete as they could possibly get it. The problem lay in the host.

If only he could find a way to enhance the host.

Tony stumbled back into the lab. He splashed some water onto his face at the emergency eyewash station.

He had been hoping it wouldn’t come to that.

Chapter End Notes

They finally locked gaze. *gasp*
The weather was atrocious when Tony plotted a course to Siberia. Nothing shy of pure dread encompassed him since he’d made the decision to return. Tony travelled at peak velocity and ripped through the snow storm in a comet of red and gold.

Known for its long, harsh winters, Siberia was one of the most sparsely populated areas on Earth. Aside from being a physical embodiment of the notion ‘winter’, Siberia had an annual average temperature of subzero. It was the perfect location for the Winter Soldier facility.

“Approaching coordinates.” The presence of Jarvis returned some warmth to Tony’s chest. He was thankful for the reminder that he was no longer expecting to confront two Super Soldiers.

Mark Forty-Seven landed with a dull thud. His thrusters dug into the snow. Tony spent some time to disable the facility. Despite its non-operational status, the Winter Soldier Program had created some of Hydra’s best assassins. Tony burned a hole through the defences with his laser then crossed the makeshift threshold. The darkness inside was suffocating, like a beast waiting to swallow him whole. Only the shine of the arc reactor guided him. Tony navigated the corridors until he reached the main vault from memory.

“Make a backup of the server, quarantine everything.” Tony plugged Jarvis into the mainframe. He studied the vault as he waited for Jarvis to weave his magic. Five cryostasis pods lined the wall to his right. Tony approached one of them. The glass was frosted over but he could make out the shape of a man behind it. “Who are they?” Tony scanned the pods and filed the findings for later use.

“According to the server, they are an elite group of assassins. They possessed the highest kill count in Hydra before being administered into the program, in an attempt to replicate the original test subject: Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes,” Jarvis said.

Tony took in the information. After some internal debate, he raised his hand and took aim. At peak energy output, the repulsor blast decimated the assassin’s head. Tony walked down the wall and repeated the process until he was the only one alive in the facility.

“Stay put, I’m going for a walk.” Tony drew in a shaky breath and activated the suit’s thrusters. He retraced his footsteps from his last visit.

In this clearing, they saw the footage of the Winter Soldier killing his parents. Over by that wall, he buried Steve beneath a pile of rubble. Tony recollected. Moments later, he was in the silo. Steve fired a wire around his throat. He was dragged halfway down. Tony shot a missile at the roof hinge. The Winter Soldier was trapped inside. Tony hovered in the emptiness. He recreated the scene inside his mind.

“Do you even remember them?”
“I remember all of them.” They tumbled to the bottom.

“This isn’t going to change what happened.”

No, it won’t. Tony remembered thinking to himself. “I don’t care, he killed my mom.”

Tony severed the Winter Soldier’s arm and gained the upper hand. He gave Steve a final warning to stand down. The Winter Soldier latched onto his leg, a split-second later Steve was on top of him. Steve crushed his shield into his helmet, again, and again, and again...

Steve ripped off his helmet. Tony raised his arms to protect his face. The man on top of him, the man whom he had trusted to watch his back since the Avengers first assembled, brought his shield down on the arc reactor. The metal of the reactor split open, glass shattered into a million pieces. Tony’s heart turned to ice.

Tony retracted his helmet. He laid down on the spot he had been in a lifetime ago. He watched the snow fall outside the curving columns, smooth like a beast’s teeth. Tiny crystals covered the landscape in a blanket of white. Tony turned the other way, half expecting to see ghosts. But they weren’t there, not in this life, and not in the last.

“He is my friend.”

“So was I.”

The silence was deafening.

“Download complete, Sir.”

Tony sprung from his spot. He closed his helmet. Inside, his HUD flicked back to life in a comforting shade of blue. Tony wondered if Jarvis had interrupted on purpose. As he made his way back into the building, a lot of thoughts raced through Tony’s mind. When he returned to the main vault, he powered up the monitor with shaky fingers.

“Jarvis, bring up mission report, Howard and Maria Stark.” Pages of writing appeared on the screen. Tony scrolled down until he found the footage. “Play,” he commanded.

Unblinkingly, Tony forced himself to watch the feed again. In the grainy monitor, the Winter Soldier caught up to his parents’ car. Tony watched as the car crashed into the side of the road. He watched the Winter Soldier slam his father’s head onto the steering wheel, and he watched his mother being strangled to death.

They couldn’t hurt him anymore, not if he was numb to the pain. Tony took off his gauntlet. He traced the outline of the car. His fingers lingered on the monitor long after the feed was dark.

*Goodbye, mom and dad.*

Tony left his past life without finding closure for a lot of things. He supposed it was better late than never. On his bad days, Tony still wondered if Steve ever saw him as a friend. Having had time to reflect on the turn of events, Tony would say the answer was yes, at some point. Steve Rogers simply valued Barnes more. He gave up one friendship to save the other. That was the cold, hard truth. The Accords had nothing to do with it. Given the chance to choose again, Tony would still be the one sacrificed. He would still be the one left gasping for breath in a disabled suit, and he would still be the one left behind. People had their preferences. Tony was done dwelling over them.

It was nightfall when he mastered the courage to be on his way. Behind him, the facility went up in a
chain of explosions. Shades of orange lit up the night sky. Tony didn’t look back. He had allowed himself a window of mourning. The only place from here was forward.

“Sir, you have handled the situation extraordinarily today,” his AI consoled.

“Practice makes perfect, Jarvis.” Tony took a deep breath. He had what he needed. “Thrusters at full capacity, let’s get out of here.”

----------

Information was the currency of the 21st century. While combing through the server he retrieved from Siberia, Tony gained a thorough understanding of Hydra operations within the past seventy years. Most of which had taken him by surprise. Even armed with foreknowledge, there were still many hidden players he had yet to discover. It would take considerable effort to uproot the organisation, followed by decades of careful management to ensure things stayed that way. It was something Tony didn’t have the resources for, yet.

As an authoritarian paramilitary organisation with hundreds of years of history, Hydra had sunk its teeth deep into the current social, political, and economic structure. With sleeper agents in nearly every branch of the government, Tony was struck speechless by the sheer dumb luck Steve must have had to be able to stop Hydra in his previous life.

Tony added more names to the list of known Hydra personnel, and spent his days methodically digesting the new-found information. Amongst them was Hydra’s own version of the Super Soldier Serum. Since Dr Erskine’s assassination during Operation: Rebirth, many more had tried to recreate his formula. None of them had yielded stable results, but if the Winter Soldier program was any indication, Tony would hazard a guess that Hydra had come close. Too close—in fact.

Tony stared at the blue serum in his hand. He had been in his lab for the better half of the month perfecting it then weakening it. The serum was now at twenty percent potency, ready for clinical trials. All the formula had needed was a little inspiration, some fresh ideas, and it would’ve been complete.

Cutting back its potency had been the first step to mitigating its side effects. According to the files, the Winter Soldier program was put on ice after the test subjects rejected their handlers. They showed extreme violent tendencies and psychotic behaviour. Tony scoffed at the recording showing one of the test subjects overpowering Barnes.

There was a limit to how far the human biology could be pushed, and anything past that was bound to backfire. Dr Erskine’s formula had hit that sweet spot, maximising return for virtually zero drawback, but his demise had sealed the deal that Steve Rogers would remain one of a kind.

Luckily, Tony didn’t want to become a super soldier. The goal had always been to boost his body just enough, so he could survive surgically removing the arc reactor. But if twenty percent of the serum was going to give him accelerated healing and enhanced stamina, Tony wouldn’t complain.

The door slid open behind him. Tony whipped around. He hadn’t expected company, and there were
only so many people he’d given access to his lab. “Stephanie? Shouldn’t you be at work?”

Stephen entered in time to catch Tony’s question. He placed his belongings on the bench near the door. “I was, until Pepper called. You haven’t left the lab for over sixty hours. ER was having a slow day, and I had no other appointments for the afternoon.” The doctor sighed and hung his jacket. “So I came to my other day job instead: babysitting you.”

Tony spread a hand over his chest in mock hurt. “You wound me, and here I thought we were having such a good time.” He got up from his seat with the vial of Super Soldier Serum in hand. “Excellent timing, by the way. You interested in a little experimental science?”

Stephen raised an eyebrow at the sight of the blue liquid. “What’s that?”

“Didn’t ask the powers that be, but I’m positive it’s classified.” Tony wiggled the vial between his fingers. “All I can say is it’ll help my heart condition.” He circled the arc reactor with his finger.

“Is this remotely legal?” Stephen asked.

“Technically, yes.” Tony walked into the adjacent room with Stephen close behind. In the centre of the room sat what appeared to be an innocent armchair. The disguise held until Tony activated the device. A row of blue vials popped up. “What do you say?”

Stephen watched Tony load the vials into the back of the chair. “Absolutely not. Who’s in charge of this project? I’m not injecting anything into you unless I take a look at the formula first.”

“Who said you’ll be doing any of the injecting? Your job is to stand there and look pretty, and maybe save my sorry ass if it all goes wrong, which it shouldn’t, my calculations are solid.” Tony proceeded to strap himself in.

“Tony, you can’t be serious. Where are the trial reports? What indicates this formula is ready for human testing?” Stephen took in the device and searched for a way to power it down. “You are going to get yourself killed.” He pinned Tony in place when it became clear Tony wasn’t going to listen.

“Oh, right, what was I thinking?” Tony huffed. “That’s exactly what I need: more authorities. People have died fighting over this formula, doc. I can’t risk it leaving this room.”

Stephen let out an irritated noise. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Look, I know you’re concerned.” Tony placed a hand on Stephen’s shoulder and squeezed. “But I’ve done everything I can to make sure it’s safe. The formula has been thinned down to twenty percent potency. Even if it doesn’t work, it’s not going to kill me. I can promise I won’t do anything stupid, but we both know I’ll be back here the second you leave, and I don’t like lying to you. So, would you rather I be stupid on my own, or be stupid with you here to watch over me?”

Stephen pulled away from Tony. He bit his lip and ran both of his hands through his hair. Outside of publicity stunts, Tony despised acknowledging the arc reactor. For him to mention it, let alone go to Stephen for help was a huge step. Tony trusted Stephen, especially in the realm of science. After months of working together, they got to know each other on a deeper and more personal level. Tony had taken a chance with showing Stephen the Super Soldier Serum, and it seemed that his gamble paid off.

“I hate you,” Stephen finally said. He approached a table loaded with surgical equipment and grabbed what he needed.
“I love you too, cupcake.” Tony blew Stephen multiple kisses. “And in case you didn’t know, babysitting me is a full-time job.”

“I’ve heard, from Pepper. If I didn’t know better, I’d say she was trying to pass the torch,” Stephen said as Tony took off his shirt. He aligned Tony’s limb and back muscles to the rows of serum. “This is going to sting.” The doctor disinfected areas where needles would puncture skin.

“No pain, no gain.” Despite his bravado, Tony might secretly admit that he was nervous. He’d never been fond of needles. “Jarvis, initiate procedure.”

“Calibrating,” his AI stated. The chair tilted as it expanded, manoeuvring Tony into a laying position. The rolls of serum adjusted their alignment to his body. Sensors scanned for blood veins.

“Tony, it’s not too late to stop.” Stephen looked equally nervous. The machine was building pressure, vials filled with serum were ready to be injected. Stephen leaned over Tony and searched his face for signs of discomfort.

“Mouthguard,” Tony said. He took a few deep breaths and bit into the plastic Stephen offered him. Everything was silent for a moment, and then all at once, the needles pierced his skin. Tony let out a grunt of pain, but it was nothing compared to the burning sensation of the serum being pushed into him. The tiny vials seemed to contain the ocean. As seconds ticked by, Tony’s muffled groan developed into a scream. He bucked against the restraint. Stephen’s eyes were glued to Tony’s vitals. His knuckles appeared bone white from gripping the chair.

Every second of the procedure was pure agony for Tony. His body burned. The needles remained inside him until the vials were emptied, then retracted abruptly. Stephen rushed to stop the bleeding, but the wounds had already healed. “Sir, your vitals appear to be stable,” Jarvis informed.

“Well—” Tony gasped in between breaths, “that’s anticlimactic.”


“Hmm, that feels nice. Can you do it to the other one too?” Tony’s mouth ran on autopilot as he tried to flex his legs. Everything felt normal until he forgot he was still strapped in and ripped the leather restraints in half.

“Tony, this is not a joke. You just went through experimental treatment. We need to be cautious.” Stephen closed the distance between them. If they weren’t in each other’s personal space before, they were now.

Tony’s heart was skipping beats again. He either needed to replace the arc reactor, or he had been jinxed and was in dire need of professional help. Were Stephen’s eyes always that blue? Acting on impulse, Tony closed his hand around Stephen’s wrist. Tony slowly pulled him closer. He gave the man plenty of time to protest. Stephen braced his free hand on Tony’s chest to steady himself. Tony’s sweaty, and very much naked chest.

“This is the part where you punch me if you don’t like where this is goin—” Tony didn’t finish his sentence. He was silenced by lips pressed against his own.

Stephen was stiff at first, cautious. Tony took a second to reboot his brain, then gave it everything he had. Stephen was caught off-guard by the sudden change of pace but recovered just as quickly. He fought viciously for control. Being the one on top gave him an unfair advantage, and he used it to
press his tongue into Tony’s mouth. He knocked the wind from Tony’s lungs. Tony, unwilling to admit defeat, changed breaths and kept going. It was a sloppy but passionate kiss, as both men had aimed to impress. Tony reached up and tangled a hand into Stephen’s combed locks, mussing it. He broke his other foot free with a hard yank. Pieces of the restraint flew into the distance. With this new-found leverage, Tony arched his body against Stephen, who moaned at the contact.

“Sir, if I may suggest a blood test before you commence intercourse with Dr. Strange?” Jarvis asked. The two froze in their positions. Stephen was the first to recover. He pulled away immediately.

“He’s right, I am being very unprofessional.” Stephen marched away to retrieve a syringe, leaving Tony strapped in with a raging hard-on.

“Jarvis, have I ever mentioned you should work on your timing?” Tony ran a hand across his face.

“Likewise, Sir. This is not a cheesy medical drama.”

Stephen took longer than Tony expected to return. When he did, he looked as composed as ever. Tony, on the other hand, hadn’t attempted to fix his appearance. He was checking his email as he lay in the same position. Stephen swallowed at the sight presented to him. Tony still had his torso strapped in. The leather restraints were tight against his skin. Combined with their surgical surrounding, the scene came uncomfortably close to one of Stephen’s closet fantasies. The doctor cursed beneath his breath and unstrapped Tony as fast as he could.

“Your ‘heart condition’ doesn’t appear to have improved.” Stephen traced his finger over the arc reactor. He drew a small sample of blood with the syringe. The wound on Tony’s arm healed as soon as the needle was extracted. Stephen furrowed his brows at the spectacle.

“This is only the pre-game. I have a team of specialists booked for next week. I’d like you to be there.” Tony offered as he avoided the elephant in the room. “Jarvis, send an invite.”

“Done, Sir.”

“Is this a temporary side effect, or will it be permanent?” Stephen pressed.

“Uh, now that we’ve gotten it over and done with…” Tony shifted in his seat. *Come what may*, he thought. “You should probably know that the blue stuff gave me, well… I wouldn’t exactly call it superpowers——”

“Tony Stark,” Stephen snapped. “What have you done?”

“Hey, at least it was only twenty percent, right? And I didn’t turn into a rampaging beast. Not that I’d risk your safety. I’ve instructed Jarvis to put me down in the case of——”

“Did you just genetically modify yourself?” Stephen knocked over his seat from standing too fast.

“Why do you always catch on so fast?” Tony mumbled. “Like I said, things could’ve been worse, a lot worse.”

“I thought—how could I have been so dense?” Stephen was having difficulties coming to terms with what he was hearing. “I’d assumed that was an experimental drug, at worst.”

“Come on, the formula was tried and tested.” Tony rubbed his nose. “At least at full strength anyway. The test subjects might have displayed some aggression, but I fixed that. Like how I fix everything.”
“I cannot believe you’d do that to yourself, that you’d lie to me.” Stephen paced around the room, taking in the empty vials. He turned to Tony, then studied the man for the first time since the enhancement.

Tony looked down too. He could see the subtle differences. He appeared stronger. His frame was fuller. The muscles on his chest appeared as if they had been chiselled from stone. His body exhibited power with every movement. Stephen backed away.

“You can’t be serious. I didn’t lie. I just…didn’t tell you everything. Let’s be honest, if I had told you what it was, would you have agreed?” Tony regretted those words the second they left his mouth.

“Of course not! Tony, I’m a doctor, this is against everything I stand for.” Stephen fumbled to express himself. “I save lives, not endanger them with human experiments. I thought…I thought you understood.”

Now feeling well and truly like an A-grade jerk, Tony tried to reach out again. “Please, Stephen, hear me out. It’s my fault. I wasn’t thinking. I just wanted to get ahead of the game—” The sight of the doctor looking so betrayed hurt Tony in ways he didn’t know he still could. “I’m an idiot. Let me make it up to you.”

“No.” Stephen shook his head in disappointment. “I think we should both take a break, cool off.” With that, he returned to the main lab to retrieve his belongings. Tony could do nothing but watch.

“Sir, Dr Strange has left the facility,” Jarvis alerted after a minute had passed.

“Shit,” Tony cursed to himself. He thought he’d left that whole trust issue nonsense behind him, but as it turned out, he still couldn’t open up to people. He hadn’t meant to mislead Stephen, but subconsciously, Tony didn’t want to disclose information that he knew would hinder his plans.

Stephen deserved better than this. If there was one person who hadn’t contributed to his disaster of a past life, it was Stephen, and Tony repaid him by treating him the one way Tony didn’t want to be treated himself.

He had to make this right. He couldn’t lose any more people from his life, not like this.

Chapter End Notes

*Dun dunn dunnnn* You guys didn't think it'd be all smooth sailing, did you?
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the late update guys, both my beta Lavanyalabelle and I have been sick over the past week. But on the plus side, we did manage to post before the fortnight mark!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Speaking from experience, things usually got a lot worse before they got better. Stephen didn’t return any of his calls. On day three, Tony gave up and involved Pepper. The current CEO of Stark Industries, after being notified why Stephen no longer returned his calls, had a lengthy discussion with Tony before she agreed to contact Stephen on his behalf.

Tony paced around in his lab while Pepper made the phone call in the next room. After what seemed like hours of nail-biting suspense, Pepper returned with good news that Stephen would be present for his operation. Though Tony wouldn’t throw his arms up in victory just yet. Stephen was proud of his work. The doctor most likely agreed because he didn’t want Tony to succeed in trying to kill himself.

True to Tony’s prediction, on the day of the operation, Stephen avoided Tony until he went under anaesthesia. Tony woke up the next day feeling not quite on top of the world, but far from the drug-induced headache he’d experienced the first time. It proved once and for all that his Super Soldier Serum had been a success.

When asked about the day’s events, Pepper told Tony that Stephen had stayed in the operating theatre for seventeen hours. He only left Tony’s side when it became apparent Tony was about to wake.

Following the surgery, Tony returned to Malibu to recover. He didn’t need to, as his enhanced physique had healed itself within hours of the operation, but Tony couldn’t blow his own cover. Prior to the event, he had intentionally leaked documents of the surgery to the press.

He was one of the world’s most prominent celebrities. If he was to abandon the iconic glow of the arc reactor without an explanation, both the public and the Armed Forces would scramble for an answer. News with such shock value made international headlines for days. As a result, Tony had been forced to enter a lengthy ‘recovery period’ much like his palladium poisoning fiasco. Though this time, instead of enjoying the obligation free holiday, Tony felt trapped inside his own home for one specific reason.

Stephen still wouldn’t return any of his calls.

Tony had tried time and again only to be greeted by voice mail. Stephen contacted Jarvis for updates on his health, but every time Tony tried to speak to him, Stephen would cut the line. Tony learned to remain quiet afterward. He had no doubt Stephen knew he was eavesdropping, but the man refused to acknowledge Tony.

It was punishment at its finest. If Tony hadn’t been on the receiving end of it, he’d marvel at the finesse of its execution. Stephen had known Tony for less than six months, yet he had Tony figured inside and out. He knew how Tony ticked, which was tricky because depending on his audience,
Tony presented himself in different ways. He could be the billionaire playboy one minute, and quiet inventor the next. He was Iron Man, celebrity, political powerhouse, the list went on, and yet his personas had one thing in common.

He hated being ignored.

Which was exactly what Stephen did: ignore him. They both knew Stephen was mad, but not mad enough to sever ties with him. For which Tony was thankful, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t feeling the weight of his punishment. He had missed Stephen dearly. The lab wasn’t the same without him. Tony had grown used to having someone by his side, to feed him ideas, to both give and receive. When he was alone, he was a stagnant pond, his playful jabs and witty remarks snuffed by the silence.

Tony was about to damn all consequences and corner Stephen at the hospital when he received a delivery. The standard issue post office packaging contained a note and an untraceable cell phone. Tony took in the logo on the note and his location in the Malibu Mansion. The irony struck Tony as comical. In his past life, S.H.I.E.L.D. had disabled Jarvis then broke into his home. This time they sent a polite request for contact instead. All it took was for Tony to show some backbone.

Of course, having the added influence to support said backbone helped as well. In cheeky defiance, Tony allowed the invitation to gather some dust before he made the call. Someone picked up on the first ring, and within ten minutes, he was put on the line with Fury.

“I need the rest, Stark,” Fury said.

“And I need access to P.E.G.A.S.U.S. but growing up is the process of learning we can’t always get what we want.” Tony pouted. Despite having no video connection, his attitude wasn’t lost on the director.

A long moment of silence stretched between them. Tony was about to pick up his tablet and continue with a project when Fury spoke. “I’ll get you in.”

“That’s the attitude.” Tony approved in light-hearted pretence. “But before we seal the deal, I did mention access to P.E.G.A.S.U.S. was only one of my requirements, yes?”

“You did.” When dealing with the unknown, Fury had remarkable patience. It was something Tony hadn’t noticed before because he had never been on even grounds to negotiate.

“Let’s get one thing out in the open: I’m not an unreasonable business associate. Newton’s third law: for every action, there’s an equal and opposite reaction. You can see where I’m going with this, I hope?” Tony took a sip of his coffee. He was going to enjoy this. “First thing’s first, sending a spy to monitor my life, while planting bugs into my company? Not cool. That’s strike one. Said spy also shoved my head of security into the trunk and attempted to kidnap me, so strike two.” The other end of the line was dead silent. “And then, you people just had to visit a certain doctor, who felt a bit strange about being asked to disclose confidential patient information, which means he gave you nothing. Strike three, director.”

“What do you think this is, Stark, play school? We did what we had to because you refused to cooperate.” Fury began, but Tony didn’t let him finish. He was done with being accommodating a lifetime ago.

“No remorse? Not even a cheap apology? I didn’t expect anything less from you. I know how the game works, Fury. You spy me, I spy you, a standard day at the office. What you shouldn’t have done, is involve the people around me. I thought S.H.I.E.L.D. was supposed to be the good guys?”
Tony signalled for Jarvis to send the document he had prepared earlier. “So, these are my terms, take it, or have fun figuring out who’s been chanting hail Hydra in their spare time. Judging from the number of agents on this list with level seven clearance or above, you’re gonna have a groovy time for the next thirty years.”

Tony knew he’d won when Fury hung up without another word.

----------

His father’s belongings were delivered to him the next day, along with all raw data of the Tesseract S.H.I.E.L.D. had accumulated so far. Tony waited another week for the crate containing his third and final request. When the wooden box arrived in his garage, Tony cracked it open with a crowbar, uncaring if he’d scratch the paint job. Amidst the cushioning sat a red, white, and blue shield. In the centre of the disc was a star that had become the symbol of hope for generations of people.

Even now, just looking at it made Tony sick in the stomach. Once he had the shield, he tossed it into storage. He had known it would take Fury some time to retrieve this, but he had been confident in the director’s abilities. Moreover, the shield’s importance lay in its historical and sentimental value, not in its minutely small composition of raw Vibranium, hence no big loss for whomever Fury had to go through to authorise its release.

Fury, like everyone else up the chain of command had probably assumed Tony wanted the thing so he could melt it down and integrate it with his suit. Which had been tempting, even from the perspective of petty revenge, but Tony was getting better at controlling his impulses. He wanted to keep the shield for leverage, to have other people indebted to him when the need arose. Little did S.H.I.E.L.D. know, mere months after this change of ownership, a Russian oil team would discover the remains of the Valkyrie in the Arctic Ocean. Among the wreckage, they would find the body of Steven Grant Rogers, still alive and cryogenically preserved in ice.

At that point, no amount of patriotic spiel or emotional blackmail could persuade Tony to part with his glorified frisbee. He might play nice and lend the item in the face of a global catastrophe, but the shield would still be fundamentally and indisputably his. Tony might even go as far as to let the captain get used to having ‘his’ shield back, only to take it away again should Steve got on his nerves. Only then would he cruelly melt down the last item left to remind Steve of his time with the Howling Commandos. Tony would merge it with the Iron Man suit and flaunt it in Steve’s face every time Iron Man appeared on TV.

The shield did not and would never belong to Captain America again. Long before he abandoned it in Siberia, Steve Rogers gave up that right by prioritizing one person above all else, by lying to Tony, and by disrespecting the memory of Howard Stark. The man who had made the shield for his friend. The man who wouldn’t shut up about how amazing Steve was. And the man who despite Steve sinking to the bottom of the ocean, never gave up searching for him.

Tony, in true Stark fashion, might one day forgive, but he would never forget.

“Mr. Stark, we’ve arrived.” The door to his side of the van opened. Tony gave the agent a firm nod
then made his way towards the man at the entrance.

“Director, you look peachy for neck deep in betrayal,” Tony greeted Fury with a wink.

“And you look peachy for crippled from surgery,” Fury shot back.

Things have stayed quiet since Tony left the world stage. He was last seen being transferred from the hospital in a tinted SUV. Many speculated that Iron Man had sustained grave injuries from removing the arc reactor. Tony, of course, didn’t think Fury would accept such spoon-fed nonsense. S.H.I.E.L.D. had caught nothing until the accident was front page news. That meant the leak was staged, and if it was staged, then Tony must’ve wanted to leave the social scene for a reason.

The director turned on his heels, uncaring as to whether Tony would follow. Tony observed his surroundings. The Joint Dark Energy Mission Facility, otherwise known as headquarters of Project P.E.G.A.S.U.S. could be classified as a small town. Tony doubted any of the researchers were permitted to leave, hence it was crucial that S.H.I.E.L.D. provided accommodation for their family too.

“I’ve discovered paradise!” Tony exclaimed as he watched children play on the artificial lawn, “In the ass-end of nowhere. I almost don’t want to leave.”

“You better get used to it. I busted my ass getting you in here, Stark. Here are the ground rules. I suggest you read them.” Fury tried to hand Tony a folder, which Tony ignored. He didn’t like being handed things.

“It will also be emailed to you, so go through it.” Fury walked Tony past a line of security checkpoints. “As a researcher, you will be permitted external communication once a week, under strict supervision. If you wish to leave, you may do so after we’ve cleared you, but you will not be permitted back into the facility.” Fury showed Tony to the labs. “Just so we’re clear, this is the World Security Council’s project. If you violate these rules, you will be held for charges. Not even I can save you from that.” Fury glared at Tony with his good eye.

“I would’ve thought that induction was below your pay grade, but whatever, I don’t write the timesheets,” Tony said as he mapped the areas inside his head.

“Stark...” Fury didn’t continue, but his tone was enough to convey the seriousness of the matter.

“Have a little faith, Nick. I’ve agreed to come here without Jarvis, haven’t I? Even left the suit back home. I’m not here to cause trouble. Chances are I’ll tour the cube room, decide it’s not worth my time, and walk out before the week is done. You’ll never have to see me again.” Tony patted Fury on the shoulder. “Until then, I hope the food’s good in the cafeteria.”

Tony headed straight for the Tesseract.

--------

Originally formed to investigate phenomena beyond the range of conventional scientific
understanding, the JDEM facility sourced experts from both NASA and S.H.I.E.L.D. Amongst those were Dr. Erik Selvig, an astrophysicist commissioned to study the Tesseract. He was admitted into a mental institution after being exposed to the Mind Stone, which if anyone was to ask Tony, was a criminal waste of talent.

Due to the sensitive nature of the research conducted, the JDEM security force included some of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s best operatives, namely Clint Barton. Having never met Iron Man before in this universe, Clint watched Tony with hawk-like precision every time they crossed paths. Tony had no doubt Natasha informed Clint of their conversation on the night of the gala, which was fine by Tony. He wasn’t here to make friends.

Tony was in his third week with the facility, and if he were to be honest, he was going stir-crazy. Between studying the Tesseract and analysing the data S.H.I.E.L.D. provided him, Tony had everything he needed to prep for Loki’s upcoming invasion, which was still a little under a year away.

Some of the world’s most capable minds converged here, but there were only so many enlightening conversations Tony could have about cosmic entities, Dark Energy harvesting, and multi-dimensional space travel before he craved the simple comforts of the outside world. It had been a month since Tony last saw the people he considered family, and at this point, not even being surrounded by brilliant minds could keep him inside the facility any longer.

“That’s it, I’m going home,” Tony grunted against his workbench. He had spent hours bent over observational data, even his enhanced back muscles were starting to cramp. “Tell Fury I’m getting out of here,” he instructed the agent assigned to keep an eye on him.

Tony marched out of the lab. He had his Iron Man briefcase delivered when he suspected he wouldn’t need to stay much longer. He looked forward to re-joining civilization. His first stop would be a cheeseburger joint. He might cause some ruckus landing as Iron Man, but a couple of autographs should ensure his order came out first…

“Sir, we have tried desperately to contact you.” Tony stepped into his suit. The first thing Jarvis said upon their reunion was not what Tony expected to hear.

“Jarvis, what’s the matter? Is the lab on fire? Who’s we?” Tony fired a string of questions.

“Following your last phone call, a little over a week ago, Dr. Christine Palmer had informed me that Dr. Stephen Strange was involved in a traffic accident.” Blood drained from Tony’s features.

“Dr. Strange was recovered and underwent surgery at Metro General Hospital. His condition is currently stable. However, he sustained severe nerve damage to both of his hands. Would you like to speak with Dr. Palmer? She might have updates on his situation,” Jarvis suggested.

Tony leaned against a nearby crate to support himself. “Buddy, maybe you should open with the good news next time.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. At least Stephen was still alive. Tony released the breath he had been holding. He closed his helmet and took off at full speed. The suit ripped through the cloudless desert sky in a beeline for New York. “Put Christine on the line.”

Tony would never forgive himself if something happened because he wasn’t there to help. Stephen had done so much for him. Tony would try his hardest to return the favour. He was one of the best engineers around, and Stephen a world-class neurosurgeon. Between the two of them, they’d get Stephen back on his feet.
Chapter End Notes

Only after writing this chapter did I realise cap was discovered with the shield, but for the sake of the plot let's just say the shield was discovered with the Tesseract.

Tumblr: ivivao3.tumblr.com
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

This chapter is unbeta'ed. My beta Lavanyalabelle still isn't feeling very well, here's to hoping she will recover soon.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Where is he?” Tony landed on the roof of Metro General Hospital in his signature three-point crouch.

Christine rushed to his side. “Down in intensive care. He crashed in the mountains. By the time they found him, the nerve damage was permanent. I trust you read his file?”

“Yeah. Take me to him.” Tony unsuited. He skipped down the steps two at a time.

“Tony…before you go in, there’s something you should know.”

Tony whipped around. That didn’t sound good. “What should I know? Is it bad, or bad?”

Christine ran a hand over her face. The past week had not been kind to her. She stole a glance in Tony’s direction. “We’ve tried to contact you.”

“Yeah, for over a week. I was working on something classified, no contact with the outside world. I swear, if I had known—”

“I get it. Hey, I wasn’t blaming you. I know you’d never ignore our calls on purpose, but…Tony, you need to understand that in the eyes of a patient, a week can seem like a long time. Especially since they are bound to the hospital bed all day…”

“Oh.” Christine’s words had caught Tony off guard. For a split second, his brain short-circuited.

“I tried to tell him he was being stupid, that you cared for him. If you could be reached, I was sure you’d come straight away. Which you did, but you know how stubborn he can be.”

“Damn.” All of a sudden Tony knew where this was going. “Stephen thinks I’ve abandoned him.”

When words failed her, Christine gave Tony a small nod.

----------

“Why did you come? To gloat?” Tony closed the door behind him. Stephen’s voice, hoarse from injury, rang from his bed in the corner of the room. “I want you to leave.”
Stephen was laying on his back. His hands were suspended in a sling in front of him. Metal clamps extended from each of his fingers. Stephen had been thoroughly bandaged. What little skin left exposed was either bruised or broken. His words had stung, but what had hurt Tony the most was Stephen looking the other way when he entered. One of the man's eyes was swollen shut, but the other one, the eye that was still so strikingly blue had refused to meet Tony’s gaze.

Ever since Tony met the doctor, he had never seen him so still. Stephen, much like himself, was always active. Be it reading the latest paper, bantering with Tony, or helping him with research. Now he was motionless. Tony approached Stephen with a neutral expression. Even without Christine’s warning, Tony knew it would hurt Stephen more if he so much as suspected that Tony pitied him.

“Following has never been my style,” Tony quipped. He marched around the bed and occupied the space Stephen had been staring at. To appear casual, Tony leaned against the wall and stuffed both of his hands into his pockets.

Stephen smirked. “Fine, get it out of your system.”

“I didn’t do this on purpose.” Tony shifted on his heels. “I was on a confidential research project. Only allowed external contact once a week. You knew about this.”

“I believe your exact words had been ‘I’ll be leaving town for a bit’, to which I replied, ‘not again’.” Stephen stole a glance at Tony. Tony pretended not to notice.

“Alright, so you semi-knew. You knew for forty percent.”

“Forty percent of knowing, versus the sixty percent possibility that you left when you realised I wasn’t useful anymore,” Stephen said. Tony felt a dull ache stir inside his chest, Stephen’s comment had mirrored his own insecurities so well, it cracked his mask.

“Stephen, would you honestly believe that?” Tony threw his hands up in the air. “That I would run for the hills the moment you needed help? Come on, I’m the one on the dank road of lonesomeness here. Have a little faith, even if it’s just in my massive ego. I’d never abandon any of my friends, let alone you.”

“You were gone for a week. That’s more than one hundred and sixty hours without a word when you routinely picked up on the second ring. What was I supposed to think?” Stephen snapped. The quick exchange caused a coughing fit. Tony rushed to Stephen's side, only to realise he was afraid to touch him. Stephen was covered in bruises. “Now you just…come in here, and expect me to believe everything’s back to normal?” Stephen laughed, it was a miserable sound. “People leave, Tony. I get that. I’d much rather you—”

“I care for you,” Tony blurted, suddenly and unceremoniously. “How many ways do I have to say it to get it through your thick skull?” Tony bent down so his face was in front of Stephen’s. It forced Stephen to look him in the eye. “You are more than just a friend to me, you are—hell, I don’t know what you are, but you mean the world to me. We are going to fix this.” He gestured to Stephen’s hands. The doctor remained quiet. “Stephen…” Tony pleaded.

“Prove it,” Stephen muttered after a long pause. His hoarse voice was no louder than a whisper. Stephen looked away again as if he was ashamed of his request. Tony could only think of one thing that would suffice. He leaned in. They kissed each other, and the world faded away. It was slow and feather-light, comforting in ways words could never be. Tony’s hands rested on Stephen’s collarbone. He carefully avoided the bruises on Stephen’s face. Their breaths mingled. Stephen raised a hand to pull Tony close, but the pain stopped him in his track.
“Lay still,” Tony hummed when he felt Stephen wince. Stephen, stubborn as a mule, tried once more before the pain became unbearable. He sagged against the pillows and grunted in frustration. Stephen willed his hands to still, but the steady grip he once prided himself on was simply no more.

“You are impossible.” Tony shook his head. He repositioned the pillows so Stephen could be more comfortable. “You’re going to have to heal first before we can try anything.”

“I’m still mad at you,” Stephen said as he shifted against the cushions.

“And I still intend to apologise. Properly this time, if you’d let me.” Tony batted his eyelashes in an attempt at seduction. He knew Stephen could never say no to his Bambi eyes.

“That will depend on the details of said apology.”

“How’s this for a start?” Tony gave Stephen another quick peck on the lips.

“Stop it, your goatee tickles.”

Tony rolled his eyes. Stephen was doing a terrible job at hiding his smile. “My facial hair is magnificent, thank you very much. Yours would have been too if you let others trim it for you.” Tony gestured to Stephen’s overgrown beard. He’d meant to poke fun at the doctor, but he hadn’t expected Stephen to go quiet.

“I didn’t want them to feel sorry for me.” Stephen’s words sliced through the silence. “They were my co-workers, still are my co-workers, but most of them act like this is the last they’ll see of me. Like I’m…ruined.” Stephen ran his tongue over his lips. He did this when he was nervous. “I know my hands are a mess, which shouldn’t be surprising, considering Nicodemus fucking West operated on me. I’m shocked I wasn’t dismembered, but this is not the end. I’ve contacted specialists. It will be experimental treatment, but I will cure myself. Until then, they can coo in fake pretence all they want. They can hide behind their charade of camaraderie, but I know they are laughing behind my back. They will not see me weak and feebile. I won’t give them that satisfaction,” Stephen jeered in disgust. There was an air of bitterness that loomed over him.

“Whoa—slow down, sugar cakes.” Tony never had trouble identifying contempt, but he did push people away because he feared they’d leave if they discovered his weaknesses. He did that to everyone, including friends who truly cared about him. Stephen was heading down a dark path.

“There are several problems here. Let’s tackle them one at a time.”

“Don’t call me that.” Stephen didn’t let the nickname slip.

“Didn’t strike your fancy? I can switch it up, how about snuggle muffin?”

“Tony—”

“Stud pud?” Tony was having too much fun.

“That’s morbid. I think you worsened my injuries.” Glimpses of the old Stephen were beginning to resurface. Tony would count that as progress.

“Stud pud it is,” Tony decided, looking quite pleased with himself. “But seriously, there are people out there who only wish the best for you. It’s fine to be not okay sometimes.”

“Oh, people like you?” Stephen scoffed. “We are barely dating.”

Tony supposed he should feel offended, but the truth was, he understood Stephen’s predicament too
much to work himself up. If the clock was to rewind ten years or so, given Stephen’s situation, Tony would have done much worse. He had been an expert at isolating himself.

“Yeah, people like me,” Tony admitted. Stephen stiffened at those words. “I’m not going to leave because you are not at your best. I’m not here to use you, and I won’t laugh at your struggles. Been there, done that.” Tony tapped the spot the arc reactor used to be. “You don’t have to believe me straight away. In fact, I’d be advising against it. How’s this: I’ll prove myself. My resources are yours. We’ll consult your fancy contacts together then split up the work. You can take care of the anatomy side, and I’ll take care of the engineering. If by the end, your hands get better, then you owe me an apology.”

“I…can accept those terms.” As if he was walking into a trap, Stephen agreed hesitantly. “But don’t you have a confidential research project to tend to?”

“I can multitask. As of today, I’ll work from home. I’m experienced in dealing with conflicting schedules. Isn’t that right, Jarvis?”

“Your schedule has been cleared for the remainder of the week, Sir,” Jarvis replied from the briefcase armour. “All priority meetings have been rescheduled.”

“If you insist, but since I rescheduled them, obviously they are not a priority.”

“Unlike you, Sir, someone must maintain a sense of diligence.” On top of his Iron Man briefcase, Jarvis displayed a hologram of Tony’s updated calendar, which Tony pretended not to see.

“Back to more important things, we’ll grab lunch and go through your report together. I assume you aren’t restricted to nutrient sludge?” Tony checked the time as he made his way towards the exit.

“It’s not my digestive system that’s compromised, Tony.” Stephen sighed. His fond gaze suggested that he wasn’t as indifferent as he’d led others to believe.

“Alright, I’ll be back in twenty. Don’t get too wild without me.” Tony slammed the door shut with less care this time, mirroring his good mood.

Stephen stared at the spot Tony occupied mere seconds ago.

Together, Tony had said.

After being separated from each other for so long, Stephen could get used to together again.

Tony massaged his head under the artificial lighting of the Stark Tower workshop. When the gentle pressure didn’t help, he resorted to tugging his hair. The harsh yanks were painful, but it relieved some pressure that had been building inside his skull. Tony gave the clock a quick glance. 1:45 a.m. was nothing compared to the seventy-two-hour work binges he was known for, but he knew in another few hours, there’d be hell to pay if Stephen woke for the day and noticed that he still hasn’t
gone to bed.

Stephen had moved into Stark Tower after being released from intensive care. The decision had stemmed from practicality, since Stephen was in no shape to drive, and he needed to be in Tony’s lab daily. However, despite that Stephen had his own guestroom, so they technically weren’t sleeping together, the move still earned Tony a few slaps on the back from Rhodey and proud winks from Pepper. Tony tried to explain to them that nothing had changed. They still spent most of their time in the lab, only returning to their respective quarters to rest, but it seemed that the more he tried, the more his efforts backfired. Before he knew it, he was stuck in a ‘healthy, progressive relationship’.

“Jarvis, standby mode,” Tony ordered. He sat in the darkness after the workshop powered down. A lot had happened in the past month. He needed some alone time to coordinate the pieces.

The data he collected from the Tesseract had been computed into a matrix, which could be used to predict energy surges up to twenty-four hours in advance. It would be enough response time should Loki decide to arrive ahead of schedule. Tony had something neat planned for the Aesir, so on that front, they were good to go.

Most of the bugs he had planted into S.H.I.E.L.D.’s mainframe remained undetected. S.H.I.E.L.D. was aware of them, but short of replacing their mainframe, there was nothing they could do about it. Judging by the agonising speed at which their internal cleanse progressed, Tony would hazard a guess that Fury had his hands full.

Tony would never question the director’s capabilities, but sifting Hydra out of S.H.I.E.L.D. was a task not to be taken lightly. Hydra was an interconnected web of parasites. If left unattended, it would continue to fester until Captain America tore down Project Insight at the expense of S.H.I.E.L.D. Tony had released his list in exchange for mere personal benefits because S.H.I.E.L.D. was the last line of defence that protected the world from Hydra.

A small group of vigilantes could sabotage a single project, they could save the world from imminent doom, but they could never address the root of the problem. Hydra, as a cult of neo-Nazi terrorists whose ideals stood the test of time, needed an organisation to stand constant vigilance against them. Therefore Tony, despite his personal vendetta, never hesitated to join forces with Fury. He might try to wrestle their relationship into a mutually beneficial, if not a mutually manipulative one, but letting S.H.I.E.L.D. meet its natural demise had never been an option.

Then came the beginning of what Tony considered his biggest project to date. He might have become more careful in recent years, but that didn’t mean he’d changed his mind. Earth needed some sort of defence mechanism against extra-terrestrial threats.

Steve Rogers once said that every time someone tried to win a war before it started, innocent people died. What he didn’t acknowledge was that if the war indeed broke out, innocent people would die regardless, and in many cases, exponentially more. Tony, as an industrialist, futurist, and revolutionist, had seen what was on the other side of the portal. He could not in good conscience sit idly by and wait for the world to catch on fire first.

Since he’d gotten over what happened in Siberia, Tony had not only grown emotionally, it was almost as if he unlocked a section of his brain he’d been denied access to. Tony could now compartmentalise his mind and analyse memories that were once too painful to recall. He scrutinised every decision that had led the Avengers to the Battle of Sokovia, identifying three key catalysts.

The first and most prominent catalyst was his sense of urgency, which had been worsened by his trauma after he escaped deep space by the skin of his teeth. Tony had needed time to heal emotionally, which hadn't been available due to the rapid progression of events. Psychologically, he
was doing much better this time around, whether that was enough, only time could tell.

The second factor was the Mind Stone. Having seen what it could do, Tony refused to prod it with a ten-foot pole. In retrospect, everyone at the time had appeared oddly at ease with being exposed to an extra-terrestrial energy source, without any form of protective measures, when said energy source was known to manipulate thought. That alone was enough incentive for Tony to get rid of the sceptre as soon as possible.

Last but not least, there was Wanda Maximoff. The Scarlet Witch would not be a viable factor this time since the Maximoff twins gained their superpowers through volunteering for Hydra experiments. Those experiments were based on the Mind Stone. Hence as a prerequisite for the twins’ mutation, the sceptre must remain on Earth. Tony had also accelerated the recovery of rogue Stark Industries weaponry still circulating in the market. He even went as far as back-repurchasing known stock, so they could be returned to the U.S. and destroyed. Tony would not take any chances this time around. He would snuff all known threats in their infancy.

S.H.I.E.L.D. losing custody of the sceptre had served as a critical inflection point. Without Ultron, the Battle of Sokovia would not exist, which equated to no Accords. Tony wasn’t so idealistic as to think that preventing one mistake would solve every problem, but it was worth a shot. The problem of the Mind Stone also brought forth another danger the Avengers had lacked countermeasures against: mind control.

Telepathy wasn’t a rare talent, and while Tony may not be familiar with the mutants, he was aware of some of the astonishing powers they possessed. For good or ill, it was only a matter of time before Professor Charles Xavier entered the picture. If Tony wanted his secrets safe, then he must find a way to block telepaths.

It was going to be a challenge, but not impossible. Telepathy, like blue tooth or wifi, was a form of signal transmission. If he could synthesise a material to block those signals and interweave it with his helmet, or better yet, craft something that could act as a signal dampener…

“Sir, you have an incoming call from Director Fury,” Jarvis informed, disrupting the silence in the workshop. It pulled Tony from his thoughts. Tony noticed he’d lost track of time. He checked the clock again. How was it already 3:00 a.m.?

“Patch him through.” Tony sighed. Stephen was going to kill him. Having had a high-demand, high-stress job for years, the doctor developed a strict bedtime schedule which he stuck by without fail. Stephen loathed it when Tony worked into the small hours on tasks he could continue tomorrow, and even more so when Tony stayed up for no apparent reason. It was evidence of poor self-control, which Stephen hadn’t noticed until now because he’d always left before midnight, consequently earning him the nickname Cinderella. Now Stephen was determined to correct Tony’s bad habit, even at the expense of decreased productivity.

“Stark.” In the video feed, Fury occupied an artificially lit environment much like Tony.

“Good evening director, you have reached the life-model decoy of Tony Stark. Official consulting hours are between eight to five every other Thursday, so leave a message after the tone.” Jarvis, bless his artificial soul, played the voicemail sound effect impromptu.

Fury closed his single eye and drew in a deep breath. “This is a serious matter. I wouldn’t be calling you of all people otherwise.” Fury’s grim expression conveyed that Tony had been his last resort.

“Then what are you waiting for? Shoot.” Tony spun a circle on his swivel stool. “Your time is now.”
“It appears that we have you to thank for our current position.” Fury raised an unimpressed eyebrow.

“Oh, and that is?” If Tony didn’t know better, he’d say Fury was amused. It reassured Tony that despite their circumstances, S.H.I.E.L.D. wasn’t in serious trouble, which prompted the question of why Fury had deemed it necessary to call at this hour. There must’ve been a sense of urgency.

“I can’t disclose the details unless it's to you in person, all I can say is if we succeed, it will shed some much-needed light on a lot of mysteries.” There was hope in Fury’s voice, which was rare for the ageing spy.

“Colour me intrigued.” Secrets were valuable. Having suffered from being ill-informed before, Tony was keen to gain the upper-hand in information warfare for once.

“Rendezvous today at eighteen hundred sharp, Stark. Don’t be late.” Fury levelled Tony with a glare.

“Do you people all have a clone tag-team or something? I’ll get there when I get there.” Tony wasn’t worried Fury would start the project without him. If he could, he would’ve never called Tony in the first place.

“Don’t be late.” After one more round of emphasis, Fury cut the line.

Chapter End Notes

Bonus points to anyone who can guess why Fury called Tony ;D
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

And here we are! Slightly later than usual, but also slightly longer too...
Beta'ed by the lovely Lavanyalabelle.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tony landed in S.H.I.E.L.D. headquarters at 6:00 p.m. sharp. Fury awaited him near the entrance. He instructed Tony to leave his suit in the loading bay.

Tony narrowed his eyes. “Fine, but I’ll know if you scratch the paint job.” The pair passed a series of checkpoints, each more elaborate than the last. “Presumptuous friends you have here,” Tony said as he was advised to remove his watch gauntlet. “Let’s cut to the chase, what’s all the fuss about?”

“Three days ago, S.H.I.E.L.D. infiltrated one of Hydra’s largest bases of operation,” Fury said after the door of the last checkpoint sealed shut. “Thanks to the information you provided, the mission was successful. We detained several high-ranking Hydra personnel and crippled their network in the region.”

“I’m guessing there’s more where that came from.” Tony marched down the hallway beside Fury. The restricted section was sparsely populated. Specialised staff dashed in and out of guarded rooms. Barely anyone spoke.

“Following the successful mission, we organised a floor to ceiling sweep of the area. Locating the trap doors hadn’t been easy, but we managed to discover a few. Among the items confiscated was a cryostasis pod.”

Tony froze in his tracks. Images from Siberia flashed before his eyes. He could hear the ring of metal in his ears. There were only two cases of cryostasis preservation Tony knew of, both of which spelt trouble. “Like Otzi the Iceman? You don’t see that every day.” Tony mentally applauded himself for the quick recovery.

Fury noticed the halt in Tony’s footstep but didn’t comment on it. “We thawed him out. He had interesting news to share. How much do you know about the Winter Soldier?” Fury observed Tony with unnerving intensity. He was searching for an opening, a hesitant pause, or perhaps an anxious glance to indicate how much Tony knew.

Tony flashed a toothy smile. “Enough.”

They completed the rest of their journey in silence.

“Since coming to terms with where he was, he’s made no attempt to escape. We think he’s bidding time, but so far he’s been cooperative.” Fury keyed in the access code, and a pair of doors slid open. They entered an observation area. A one-way mirror made up the far wall. Behind it sat a man fastened in a straitjacket.

James Buchanan Barnes.

Tony had made many trips to the Smithsonian as a kid. He could name all the original Howling
Commandos. The man in the padded cell was a long way from the dashing sergeant in those black and white photographs. The Winter Soldier’s feet had been chained to the floor. A black collar flashed around his neck. The left sleeve of his jacket sagged beyond his shoulder, indicating the absence of his metal arm. Three days had been enough for him to grow a stubble, but apart from his unkempt appearance, he didn’t seem injured.

“There is, however, one problem,” Fury said. He navigated through the security footage which showed the Winter Soldier in his cell. Tony focused on the motionless inmate. Through most of the recording, Barnes sat rooted to his spot, only stirring to eat and relieve himself.

Tony couldn’t tell what the problem was until suddenly, Barnes lashed out at the cameras without warning. He destroyed all means of surveillance within reach and punched the bulletproof glass until there was blood smeared across the surface. He paced back and forth in the cell. The frenetic behaviour continued for another minute until he came back to his senses. He took in the destruction with frustration, then backed into a corner when armed staff entered to remove the damaged items.

“Every once in a while, he’d burst into a violent frenzy. We had to restrain him.” Fury rewound the tape. He paused when Barnes threw himself against the glass. “Psychological programming, courtesy of Hydra. When we busted their base, they fried their mainframe. We recovered a fraction of the data. Hydra had programmed him with trigger words to activate his training every time they pulled him from stasis. As you can tell, we didn’t wake him ‘properly.’ He’s been switching between predetermined conditions. If we don’t do something soon, there may be irreversible consequences. This is where you come in.”

Tony had schooled his breaths into a pattern to regulate his heart rate. He clenched and unclenched his fists. “You want me to treat him with B.A.R.F.”

“Yes.” Fury arched an eyebrow, impressed with how quickly Tony caught on. “S.H.I.E.L.D. would like to obtain a license for Binarily Augmented Retro Framing. We acknowledge the technology is in its early stages, hence as the expert who created the prototype, we’d also like to commission you as our tech specialist.”

There was that unblinking observation from Fury again. They were playing a dangerous game of cat and mouse. In theory, Tony should have had no way of knowing the truth behind his parent’s death, but if he were to borrow from his previous life, then neither should S.H.I.E.L.D. However, S.H.I.E.L.D. hadn’t found the Winter Soldier in his previous life either. They owed that to Tony’s information.

Tony wouldn’t put it past Fury to hide the truth from him. Barnes was a biologically enhanced Super Soldier with decades’ worth of combat training and field experience. Fury could cultivate Barnes’ hatred for Hydra and turn him into a tool for S.H.I.E.L.D. instead. He’d be an invaluable asset.

“I need time to think it over,” Tony said. As things stood, stalling was his best option.

“Be my guest.” Fury escorted Tony from the observation room. As they left the suffocating silence of the restricted area behind them, Tony offered Fury one last chance to come clean.

“Anything else you’d like to tell me before I take off?” Tony asked.

“I do have something that may be of use, more like a warning,” Fury offered.

“I’m all ears.” Tony quickly donned his watch gauntlet after it was returned to him. He had felt naked without it. Jarvis flashed a light on the watch face, informing Tony that the watch hadn’t been tampered with.
“The most valuable name on that hard drive you gave me was Alexander Pierce. I didn’t want to believe it at first, but as it turned out you can’t trust anyone these days. Once we confirmed his connection to Hydra, we quarantined everything he’d been involved in. Among the projects scrapped was one of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s biggest to date, codenamed **Insight**. It was designed to eliminate threats before they could happen, but instead, Pierce had programmed it to eliminate individuals that’d oppose or threaten Hydra.” Tony was familiar with Project Insight, it was how Captain America had destroyed S.H.I.E.L.D. in his previous life. “I think you’d be pleased and unsurprised to hear that you were one of their top targets,” Fury continued. “However, your most current fixation, a certain doctor, was not far behind.”

Tony whipped around. His eyes betrayed the fear he tried to suppress. Tony had never been given a full list of people targeted by Project Insight. After all, by the time he’d caught the news of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s downfall, the threat had already been neutralised.

“I’d keep a close eye on him. S.H.I.E.L.D. could offer him protection in your absence—” Fury’s remaining words were lost to Tony’s response. Tony snatched Fury by the collar, lifted him, and pressed him against the wall. His gleaming gauntlet was inches away from crushing Fury’s windpipe. S.H.I.E.L.D. personnel in the proximity drew their weapons. Fury raised a hand to placate them.

“*Leave him out of this,*” Tony whispered. There was a slight quiver to his breath, evidence of barely suppressed rage. His unspoken threat hung heavy in the hallway. “Don’t you dare, even for a second, think I’m oblivious to what you are planning. Stephen is a civilian. You will *not* involve him in this.”

Fury maintained eye contact. He neither confirmed nor denied Tony’s request. Tony knew this wasn’t the last he’d hear of it. Stephen was a gifted medical professional, pre-eminent in the field of neurogenesis. It was only a matter of time before government agencies contacted him.

“You can’t protect him forever,” Fury said after Tony withdrew his gauntlet. At those words, all traces of warmth were wiped clean from Fury’s features.

“We’ll see about that,” Tony spat. He returned to the loading bay and stepped into the metal ensemble of Mark Forty-Nine. With one last glance at Fury, Tony fired the thrusters.

“Jarvis, I want you to keep tabs on Stephen twenty-four-seven until I can arrange something permanent,” Tony commanded with feigned calm as soon as he took off. “Also see what S.H.I.E.L.D. has on Barnes.” Tony was torn between wanting to believe Fury and expecting to expose his lies. He’d learned over the years to not pin his hopes on the unlikely outcome.

“According to the server, S.H.I.E.L.D. does not possess a complete list of the Winter Soldier’s victims,” Jarvis stated. “However, considering that S.H.I.E.L.D. is aware of my presence on their server, it is likely they’ll choose to store new findings elsewhere,” his AI thoughtfully added.

Tony furrowed his brows. In a way, it would have been easier if Fury had outright lied to him. Uncertainty was deadlier than a familiar foe, but for the time being, he had bigger things to worry about.
Stephen, dressed in silk pyjamas, lay spread out on Tony’s bed as he waited for the engineer to finish showering. He resisted the urge to pick up his tablet. He had wanted to set an example for Tony. The water in the ensuite had stopped running for some time, but Tony was nowhere to be seen. This lent weight to Stephen’s observation earlier. Tony was in a foul mood. Stephen was determined to root out the cause.

Stephen had never been nosy by nature. He was indifferent to those who failed to stir his interest, but Tony managed to captivate him unlike any other. Their integration into each other’s lives had occurred so quickly and so smoothly, Stephen only noticed after it was over.

At the time, he had been obsessed with curing his hands. He moved in with Tony at the first offer. For a while, things continued as if nothing had changed. They consulted the contacts Stephen had gathered, but one by one, those people were ruled out as they either came up with sketchy experimental treatment, or simply refused to look into his case. Stephen could guess what went through their minds like he was reading from the back of his hand. He would’ve been thinking along similar lines had he been sitting at the opposite end of the desk.

In more ways than one, Tony had helped him push through those initial consultations. Tony supported him both financially and psychologically. He refused to let Stephen touch any of the bills. It was also Tony who had convinced him to stay put until they could think of something that wouldn’t do him more harm than good. Desperate for a solution, Stephen had asked Tony for the serum he used to remove the arc reactor. Stephen knew he was in no position to make demands, the resources that would have taken to develop the serum must have been astronomical, but Tony had proven once again that he was prepared to do anything to help.

Tony had already begun experiments to test how the Super Soldier Serum would affect damaged nerves. To their disappointment, the serum’s strength laid in the realm of enhancement, not repair. It left Tony with no choice but to revisit a project he had archived under the category of failure.

Extremis.

As a form of gene therapy that enhanced the user’s physiology by rewriting their DNA, Extremis harnessed bio-electricity in the body and used it to activate parts of the brain that governed repair, hence re-coding the human body chemically to gain regenerative healing abilities. From existing data, Extremis allowed the user to heal all wounds, including amputated limbs.

It would be perfect for Stephen, if they could get it to work. Tony had abandoned the project because he couldn’t find a way to lower the rejection rate. It was not easy, nor safe to meddle with a being’s biological makeup. Fusing Extremis with the Super Soldier Serum added another layer of complexity. Things progressed slowly, but thanks to Tony, Stephen had calmed since the initial madness. He even went as far as accepting that he might not get his hands back straight away.

Stephen raised his hands to inspect them under the bedroom’s soft lights. The scars running down the length of his fingers had healed. They still shook between odd intervals, but it was no longer unmanageable. Stephen had learned to live with them through trial and error.

Stephen had been sceptical of starting a relationship with Tony. Having two egos in one relationship was asking for trouble. No matter how well they clicked in a professional setting, in the privacy of one’s home, there was always someone who had the last say. Stephen hadn’t wanted to risk their partnership over trivial matters. He’d never anticipated that Tony would prove him wrong.
For someone so successful and intelligent, Tony’s ability to listen had exceeded what Stephen thought was possible. Tony would occasionally flaunt his achievements, but who wouldn’t? Tony never did it to berate another. Even when Stephen crossed the line, which happened frequently during those early days, Tony never took it to heart. He understood Stephen’s frustration and dealt with the negativity. Tony had made it clear that he wouldn’t continue to tolerate Stephen’s behaviour, but he never gave up on Stephen either.

Love had always been a vague concept for Stephen. There were many things that might trigger the feeling of love, but Stephen himself had never experienced it. He was familiar with attraction, even infatuation, but never love. Though as Stephen considered the matter in depth, a recent memory resurfaced.

During the early days of his recovery, there had been a morning where he’d woke up to the worst migraine imaginable. His chin ached from the cut he’d given himself from trying to shave the day before. Stephen had dragged himself into the ensuite to freshen up. After he splashed some water on his face, he noticed a small object sitting on the corner of his vanity. It was an electronic shaver.

He picked up the object and examined it. He hadn’t purchased it himself, nor had he asked Jarvis to make the purchase for him. Stephen turned on the shaver. As he used it, he was surprised by how the device would temporarily switch off if it detected a sharp, jerking movement. When Stephen brought up the topic over breakfast, Tony casually admitted to placing it there, and that he was also working on a custom beard trimmer, so Stephen could experiment with more ‘magnificent facial hair styles.’

Little by little, the difficulties of adjusting to his new life piled weight onto Stephen’s back, and little by little, Tony chipped them away.

Noise from the ensuite drew Stephen back to reality. He watched Tony emerge from the steamy room, clad in nothing but white briefs. Things hadn’t progressed since the kiss they shared in the hospital. Neither of them was the romantic type. Stephen was in the end stage of his recovery, and they both had work to do, but that didn’t stop him from admiring what was presented to him.

The tiny piece of fabric left nothing to the imagination. Stephen was no stranger to luxury. For the ridiculous price tag, the brief’s silky texture was translucent under the correct light. Tony had the audacity to flex, then bend down to touch his toes in a wanton stretch. Stephen clenched his teeth. He had been the one to suggest they take things slowly. Tony had agreed far too willingly, which in hindsight, was most likely because he enjoyed seeing Stephen shoot himself in the foot.

“Rough day?” Stephen asked, deliberately ignoring Tony’s state of undress.

“I wonder what gave me away.” Tony’s enthusiasm dampened at the query. He sighed and threw himself onto the bed, causing Stephen to bounce with the sudden weight on the mattress.

“Tell me about it,” Stephen said.

“It’s nothing.” Tony shifted under Stephen’s watchful gaze. “It’s getting late, shouldn’t you be in bed?”

“I am in bed,” Stephen gestured to the covers beneath him, “and it’s half past eleven, which means you’ve got thirty minutes to confess your endeavours.”

“Don’t be a spoilsport. You sure you want to miss out on fun for small talk?” Tony lay flat on his belly and arched his spine. He showed off his defined back muscles and round ass. Stephen, with a will of steel, continued to glare at Tony until he relented.
“No fun,” Tony mumbled. He flopped against the mattress. The air of light-heartedness that had bothered Stephen before evaporated. It left behind a man who looked far too tired for his age. With sharp eyes, Stephen noticed a thin layer of goosebumps develop on Tony’s skin.

“Come here,” Stephen said. There was a noticeable temperature drop between the steamy ensuite and the air-conditioned bedroom. He pulled Tony on top of him, then covered them both with Tony’s comforter. Stephen wasn’t sure if it was more for his benefit or Tony’s. The comforter smelled like Tony, and having some weight on top of him was soothing.

“Fine...what do you want to know?” Tony nuzzled against Stephen. He buried his face in the nape of Stephen’s neck. “This is nice. You should sleep over more often.”

“Hmm…I’ll consider it, but I want answers first.” Stephen rubbed circles on the small of Tony’s back, which prompted the smaller man to make a noise from the back of his throat. “Why the long face?”

“Spies and lies, the usual drill.” Came Tony’s muffled reply. He gave Stephen a gentle nip on the neck.

“Anthony Stark, I’ve got all night.” Stephen was having none of it. He raised his hand as high as the comforter would allow him and spanked Tony’s rear in punishment.

“If you keep that up, I’ll never tell.” After a few fits of laughter, the pair settled down. Tony rested his chin on Stephen’s shoulder. Neither of them said anything. As the clock struck midnight, the pre-programmed lights in Tony’s room switched off, shrouding the space in darkness.

“Time for you to flee from the ball, Cinderella,” Tony said. His actions betrayed him as he held onto Stephen tighter. Stephen, of course, noticed Tony’s duplicity.

“I’m afraid you won’t get rid of me so easily. I’m quite fond of your quarters.” Stephen’s reply was met with silence on Tony’s end. Stephen glanced towards the man on his chest. For some odd reason, despite not being able to see Tony’s face in the darkness, Stephen could still sense he was upset.

“I saw the guy who murdered my parents today, among other things,” Tony said suddenly. It was fast and quiet. Stephen would have missed it if it wasn’t for his concentration.

“I thought the Starks…”

“Died in a traffic accident? It was a cover-up, had to find out the hard way.”

Stephen took a deep breath in the darkness. “What did you do with him? Give me the run down.”

“Question is what can I do with him, or if I should do something with him.” Tony ran a hand through his hair. The damp strands tickled Stephen’s cheek. “Without dumping a vault of classified info on you, let’s just say he’s mentally unstable because he was brainwashed to serve the enemy. This super-secret spy organisation wants me to treat him with B.A.R.F because he’s an important witness and potential asset. I found out about my parent’s murder by chance. When they briefed me today, they didn’t mention it at all. They could’ve had no knowledge of it, or they could’ve been—”

“Yes, that’s the blunt way of putting it. In the grand scheme of things, I know I should put aside personal feelings, take one for the team.” Tony clenched his fists. “But...to be honest, I’m not sure what I’m feeling.”
Stephen stroked Tony’s back a few more times to gather his thoughts. “Do you need his information?”

“The organisation will benefit from it.”

“I’m not asking about the organisation.” Stephen tightened his hold on Tony. For a billionaire playboy, Tony had a worrying tendency of putting others before him. “I’m asking about you. Will you benefit if he was cured?”

Tony took some time to answer. “…No, I know most, if not everything he has to tell.”

“Then you should act as you wish.” To Stephen, it had been the only logical move. “Give yourself time to think. Given he’s mentally unstable, he’ll likely be exempted from full criminal charges, if he’d be put on trial at all.”

“It’s not so simple.” Tony climbed a little higher. At this distance, they could make out the shape of each other in the darkness.

“Why not?” Stephen propped an elbow beneath him to lift himself. “This organisation…is it the same one that approached me for your patient records?” Tony nodded. “Then you don’t owe them a damn thing. They have no respect for personal boundaries. No one has the right to demand that you cure the person who murdered your parents, mentally compromised or not. If this person is under protection, your parents may not get the justice they deserve. Be as forgiving or as vengeful as you’d like.”

“The world is so black and white with you.” Tony shook his head. “I’ve read his file, this guy’s a mess. He’s ex-military, presumed M.I.A. His division tried to find him, but the enemy got to him first. They tortured him, experimented on him and brainwashed him, repeatedly. I’m working on taking down the real enemy. He’s not entirely to blame, but I don’t know if I should help him either.”

“Have you tried talking to him?”


“I’d request to talk to him, see if he’s remorseful for what he did. It might speed up your decision-making.”

Tony rubbed his chin as he considered the possibility. “That’s…not a bad idea. Feasibility of the plan is subject to change, as it’s dependent on variables, but achievable overall.”

“There, subject placed on hold until further information becomes available, now go to sleep.”

Stephen had not forgotten why he’d come here in the first place. “Don’t you think you’ve fooled me. I know what time you went to bed last night.”

“Stephanie—please.” Tony slumped his forehead on Stephen’s chest. “Creative genius begins at midnight.”

“No.”

“Fine,” Tony sagged against Stephen. They were spooning while bickering over mundane details like an old married couple. How disgustingly domestic. “I noticed you’ll be out tomorrow.”

“Yeah, a man I had refused to treat has allegedly made a full recovery. I’m not convinced, but it’s worth a look.” Since moving in, Stephen had synced his calendar with Jarvis. They both had access
to the other man’s schedule on demand. It was useful because Stephen was meticulous by nature, and Jarvis maintained Tony’s calendar.

“Take Happy with you.” Tony stifled a yawn. He wiggled against Stephen until he found the perfect spot.

“I think I will.” Stephen’s lids were dropping too. He was so warm and comfortable.

He’d have to spend the night over more often.

Chapter End Notes

I saw Thor: Ragnarok yesterday and got punched repeatedly in the feels. I’m working to adjust a few events in this fic, so the next chapter will take a bit longer. Rest assured I will still update before the fortnight mark. On a side note: I will try to remain spoiler free, but Thor: Ragnarok has cemented the direction I’ll be taking with Bruce.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Wow, I honestly cannot believe my eyes. To this date, this fic has gathered nearly two thousand kudos. I cannot believe two thousand people read this fic and went 'she did a good job'. I would like to say a huge THANKS to all of you who have taken the time to read, comment, subscribe or leave a kudos. You guys are my inspiration and I continue to get blown away by the positive feedback every time I post a new chapter.

Beta'ed by the lovely Lavanyalabelle.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Morning, S.H.I.E.L.D. headquarters - Quarantine Cell B

Tony sat opposite James Buchanan Barnes with a guarded expression. He felt almost as self-conscious as when he had first returned from Afghanistan. Tony took a deep breath and cleared his throat. Now more than ever, Tony was convinced this was a bad idea. Though it was too late to change his mind. He not only sat before the Winter Soldier, but also S.H.I.E.L.D. personnel. He refused to give either the satisfaction of watching him squirm.

“Tony Stark,” Tony said as he gestured to himself. “Nice to meet you. I’d shake your hand, but these are trying times.” Tony nudged his chin at the straitjacket. Barnes studied him with a blank stare. “I have fifteen minutes of unsupervised contact, so let’s skip the pleasantries. Hydra needs to be stopped.” The mention of Hydra caught Barnes’ attention. “You happen to know a lot about them, so S.H.I.E.L.D wants to make a deal. You spill everything you know, and they’ll help you overcome Hydra conditioning.”

“I don’t see where you come into this.” The Winter Soldier’s voice was hoarse from disuse. S.H.I.E.L.D. had endured many failed questioning sessions. Barnes’ willingness to talk meant they were off to a good start.

“And he speaks!” Tony exclaimed. “Communication is the key to success. To answer your question, S.H.I.E.L.D. would’ve loved to leave me out of this, but I happen to own the tech that will make the magic happen. Said tech is in its early stages of development, so no promises. I also need to ask some questions before I can agree to help.” Tony mentally recited the list of things he and Stephen had gone over in the morning, “You in the mood for more talking?” He received a small nod. “Good. Do you remember any of your victims?”

The Winter Soldier considered Tony’s question. “Sometimes.” He stared at a spot behind Tony as if he was reading answers off the padded wall. “They are fuzzy…hard to recall, but the longer I stay awake, the more memories come back. I get fragments from a life I used to live, and then mission after mission of slaughter.”

Silence followed the revelation. “Are you sorry for what you’ve done?” Tony clenched his jaw. He hadn’t wanted to include this one because he wasn’t sure if he’d like the answer either way, but Stephen had insisted it was of paramount importance. On these matters, Tony preferred to trust someone other than himself.
The Winter Soldier took longer to respond this time. “Recalling those missions, it’s like looking through fog. I act, but I don’t think.” Tony supposed that was an acceptable response. Disassociation was common among trauma victims. In Barnes’ case, it was more complex because he’d spent seventy years repeating those experiences. It’d be a miracle if he came out the other end psychologically stable. “But I don’t want to kill again,” Barnes added, with certainty this time. “I don’t want to go back.”

“No one’s going to send you back, even if you don’t cooperate,” Tony promised, perhaps too quickly. He wasn’t sure if S.H.I.E.L.D. was above using fear as a bargaining chip. “On second thought, maybe don’t go around repeating what you just said.” Barnes’ expression hadn’t changed, but his shoulders loosened.

“Okay final question.” Tony shifted in his seat, their time was almost up. “Are you James Buchanan Barnes, or are you the Winter Soldier?” The pair maintained steady eye contact. Tony wondered what Barnes was thinking. Was he trying to come up with a truthful answer, or was he trying to figure out the things Tony wanted to hear?

“I don’t know,” Barnes admitted after a pause. “I’ve forgotten who James Buchanan Barnes is, but I’m not the Winter Soldier.”

Tony nodded, then stood from his seat. “Alright, that’s all from me. Thanks for cooperating, I’ll think about it.” He padded toward the door, eager to end the session. It had been a waste of time. He shouldn’t have agreed to come in the first place. So what if Barnes appeared docile? Anyone could pretend. Tony scoffed. Didn’t he know that all too well?

“Wait,” the Winter Soldier called. Tony stopped in his tracks. After a brief mental debate, he supposed there was no harm in hearing what Barnes had to say. After all, if Tony decided he’d rather let things be, this might be the last time they’d see each other. Tony would’ve liked that outcome to begin with, if the decision hadn’t been thrown into his hands with too many strings attached.

“Before you go…” the Winter Soldier said quietly. “Tony Stark…would you happen to know Howard…and Maria Stark?” Tony’s eyes widened. He hadn’t expected this topic to be approached.

“Yes, they were my parents,” Tony said.

“Do you know what happened to them?” Barnes was chained to his spot, but his presence had never felt more suffocating. The pair regarded each with unwavering intensity. It was times like this that reminded Tony how dangerous the ex-Howling Commando had come to be, both to his sanity and physical wellbeing.

“They died in a car accident.” Tony didn’t know why he lied.

“No.” Barnes shook his head. He broke eye contact for the first time that morning. “I killed them. It was my fault.”

Tony stood rooted to the spot. There was a knock on the door, indicating the end of his visit. Tony ignored them for as long as he could until two agents came to escort him from the room. He allowed himself to be ushered out of the restricted section, lost in a daze.

On his way back, Tony’s mind was a chaotic mess. For two entire lifetimes, the first and only person who’d told him the truth had been the Winter Soldier himself. Barnes, like others who had been in his situation before, had something of immense value to lose if Tony found out. He’d told Tony despite the consequences. In a test of loyalty where others had failed: Steve, Natasha, and now perhaps Fury too… Barnes had known Tony for less than fifteen minutes, yet he decided to risk the
one chance he had to break free of Hydra control.

*He is my friend.*

*So was I.*

Tony shook his head to dispel the memory from his head.

*Why?* Tony asked himself. He’d recently overcome the disappointment of being abandoned by his teammates. People had their preferences. Steve preferred Barnes, and Natasha preferred that Tony remained oblivious for the benefit of S.H.I.E.L.D. Tony couldn't change any of that, and unwilling as he was to admit, experiencing those acts of betrayal had permanently damaged his ability to trust.

There had been Obadiah Stane before that too. Tony had poured his heart out to those people, yet when it mattered, none of them were by his side. They even united against him. A more tender, affection-starved side of Tony secretly wondered if there was something wrong with him. Had he not given enough? Why was it always him that was left behind? Was he unlovable, unworthy of care? But another side of Tony, the side that had gone through Afghanistan and back, the Tony that was hardened by Siberian ice, spitefully reminded himself at every opportunity that he was fine on his own.

He had cured himself with the new element, strengthened ties with the senate, and removed the arc reactor. He had eliminated all imminent threats and kept a close watch over the others. When the time came, he’d snuff them all. He didn’t need any of them, his so-called ‘friends’. All he needed was experience and intel. Like a learned chemical reaction, he’d approach the reactants, introduce a catalyst, then sit back and reap the product. He had years of experience left in his pocket and there were other ways to acquire information, yet Barnes just had to make this difficult.

Tony grunted. What had Barnes been thinking, exposing himself like that? If he had just kept his mouth shut… Tony knew about his condition. Barnes had nothing to lose by withholding the truth.

*What a mess.*

Tony took in his surroundings. They were almost home. Any moment now, Stephen would greet him in the lab and ask what his verdict was. He’d also have to get back to S.H.I.E.L.D. to either confirm or deny their request.

Tony closed his eyes. He stripped the situation down to the basics. Could he, in good conscience, leave Barnes be after what had happened? He might be Barnes’ only shot at freedom. He had given so much more, to people who deserved so much less.

Tony thought he would have trouble making up his mind, but as it turned out, the answer came to him before he left that cell.

Tony went back the next day to discuss the details of his arrangement. His personal lawyer drafted a
contract which both parties signed. Tony would become the newly appointed technical consultant of S.H.I.E.L.D. He would oversee the use of B.A.R.F. on the Winter Soldier, and work in conjunction with S.H.I.E.L.D. psychiatrists to free him from Hydra conditioning.

Tony trusted Fury no further than he could throw him, hence he tried to keep an eye on Barnes as much as he could. He wouldn’t put it past S.H.I.E.L.D. to gaslight a torture victim if that’d keep Barnes dependent on them. Tony visited S.H.I.E.L.D. headquarters regularly to avoid leaving the psychiatrists with too big of a window. He made sure to check Barnes’ mental state every time he was there. When Tony decided to do something, he didn’t go halfway. He’d promised he’d do his best, therefore his best was what Barnes would get.

All things considered, Barnes did appear to be improving. The amount of time he could go without a violent outburst was increasing, and when his mind descended into chaos, he regained control of himself much sooner. Barnes enjoyed his chats with Tony, and Tony, entertainment mode at full force, could bring a smile onto anyone’s face. The psychiatrists didn’t think he was ready for a full-scale B.A.R.F. simulation yet, which Tony agreed. They were going to disassociate trigger words from his Winter Soldier persona first.

After hitting several bricks walls while working with Tony, S.H.I.E.L.D. had found the ideal formula. They still pushed and prod, but no longer went around Tony’s back to approach the people he cared for. They were now familiar with Tony’s ethics too, which meant they no longer pestered him for things he refused to provide, but bargained harder in areas where they knew they had leeway.

S.H.I.E.L.D. displayed certain parts of their organisation to Tony and hid the other parts deeper. For a while, the formula worked. Tony found himself working in peaceful co-existence with them. Tony knew it was all a charade. It was the calm before the inevitable fallout, but with the impending arrival of Loki, Tony decided to bide his time and get as much done as possible before he had to deal with the unpleasantries.

To his frustration, while some aspects of his life had fell in line, others refused to cooperate. Extremis was the leading problem child. Even with the combined genius of both himself and Stephen, the formula wouldn’t quite integrate with the Super Soldier Serum. The two repelled each other like the same end of two magnets.

Objectively, Tony knew projects like Extremis couldn’t be rushed, but Stephen didn’t share his patience. The longer Stephen was away from the medical industry, the harder it’d be for him to make a comeback. Stephen kept up to date with all the recent papers, but his inability to practice those theories troubled him.

Tony was worried Stephen would one day snap, and either give up on himself or do something incredibly risky. Of course, Tony would never let that come to pass but it was still a cause for concern. Therefore, Tony had been prepared when the incident occurred.

“So, your answer to our Extremis dilemma is to go live in the mountains and join a cult,” Tony deadpanned. He had been working in the lab after his routine visit to see Barnes when Stephen approached him.

“No.” Stephen shook his head in surrender. “Tony, I am a man of science. I don’t join cults.”

“No from where I’m standing,” Tony grimaced. “Come on Stephanie, really? The Ancient One? That sounds tackier than a millennial Scientology slogan.” Tony was working on the Extremis Super Serum, but he paused his research to discuss the hogwash with Stephen. “You know what this looks like: man experiences traumatic event, turns to the higher powers for spiritual healing. Next
thing I know you’ll become a vegan and wear only hemp rags.”

“I know what I saw,” sensing Tony’s disbelief, Stephen snatched Tony’s tablet and brought up a file he had saved on his private server. The doctor had considered this for some time. “Believe me, this upsets me more. I have never misdiagnosed. The man I met, Jonathan Pangborn, was rendered paralytic following an accident at a factory; a complete C7 C8 spinal cord injury. He consulted me. I turned him away because he was inoperable. Yet he was playing basketball when I saw him, with the manoeuvrability of an athlete. How do you explain that, Tony?”

“Oh—I don’t know, maybe he was juiced up with something like the Extremis Super Serum?” Tony shook a failed sample of the orange liquid between his fingers. He banished the test tube for safe disposal before it could explode. “You know, the formula that has decades of research behind it? The formula I’m working to perfect as we speak?” Tony massaged his forehead. “Stephen, I know you are determined to get your hands back, but I think you’re grasping at straws here. Even if we pretend this ‘Ancient One’ does possess supernatural abilities, you don’t know what ulterior motives they had for curing that man. You’re a civilian, I can’t watch you run into a mob fight. My hands are full, give me some time to sort out full-metal popsicle, and I’ll come with you.”

“Now you understand my dilemma every time you step into that bloody tin can,” Stephen muttered spitefully.

“Wow, there’s no need for attitude. You’re hurting their feelings.” Tony held his hands out. He made a show of addressing the row of Iron Man suits on display. “Don’t listen to Stephanie, daddy loves you all. Every single one of you is very sleek and stylish, even you, Mark I.”

“Tony, we’re having a serious discussion. This is my problem, and I am going to deal with it.”

Stephen tried once more in a last-ditch attempt to convince Tony. “Please, I can take care of myself, stop fussing over me.” With shaky hands, Stephen cupped Tony’s face. For a moment, neither of them spoke. Stephen gazed into Tony’s eyes in a wordless plea.

“Fine,” sensing Stephen’s determination, Tony caved. “You’re going to do it anyway, and I can’t keep you locked in the tower forever, tempting as it is.”

“It’s funny how some things come full circle.” Stephen eyed a sample of the Super Soldier Serum. Tony winced sheepishly at the reminder.

“But I will only agree on two conditions.” Tony recovered quickly. He couldn’t stop Stephen’s outlandish plan, but he wasn’t above a little bargaining. “First, you are going to accept the money that Jarvis will transfer. Forget about arguing, I won’t let you fly halfway around the globe otherwise. We’re trying to cure your hands, not rekindle your passion for frugal college backpacking.” Tony snuffed Stephen’s complaints before he could raise them. He padded over to one of the coded drawers, retrieved what appeared to be a custom-made watch. “Second, you are going to wear this. I was going to glam it up, then wine and dine you first, but I guess here we are, so no gift wrapping for you.” Tony handed the watch over.

Stephen studied it. The watch was modelled after no particular brand, but screamed ‘Tony Stark’ with the watch’s unique movement and custom functions. Completed with intricate metallic straps, it was a beautiful timepiece, if not a tad… bulky. “What have you hidden in here?” Stephen slipped the watch on. He toyed with the buttons. “Is it going to blow something up?”

“You know me so well,” Tony beamed, half for show and half for how accurate Stephen’s guess had been.

Sensing Tony’s seriousness, Stephen stopped fiddling with the buttons at once. “You are joking,” the
doctor cautioned.

“Come out here and I’ll show you.” Tony was going to enjoy this. The pair journeyed to one of the
tower’s training rooms. “Jarvis, simulation B, scenery—honey cakes where did you say this place
was, again?”

“Kathmandu,” Stephen answered. “And again, don’t call me that.”

“Nepal!” Tony bore Stephen’s comment no mind. “How about one of those dusty and narrow
laneways for added drama? Throw in some Nepali shop signs too.” A blue ray of beam washed over
their surroundings. In the blink of an eye, they were standing in the middle of a Nepali back alley.

Stephen took in the simulation with wonder. No matter how many times he’d seen it, Jarvis’ attention
to detail and Stark Tower’s technological capabilities never failed to amaze him. Tony’s engineering
was his own brand of magic.

“Let’s take her out for a spin.” On Tony’s cue, three thuggish brutes materialised from blue matrices.
They came charging at Stephen. Sensing its owner’s imminent danger, the display on the watch
flushed red and expanded itself to form an Iron Man gauntlet. It took a split second for the repulsor to
begin humming. Stephen caught up with the scenario and took aim, but three projectiles beat him to
it. The mini target tracking stun nets engulfed the pretend thugs. A violent bolt of electricity coursed
through the net. Stephen was certain if the brutes had been real, they’d be feeling the sting for a few
days to come.

“Due to the size constraint, the gauntlet was only outfitted with five bullets.” Tony keyed something
into his tablet and an exploded axonometric of the watch appeared. The semitransparent hologram
showcased the watch’s internal mechanics. “The gauntlet was programmed to fire at will if it
detected hostile presence. After all, you are not a combat personnel, so the repulsor beam should be
used as a last resort.” Tony approached the floating hologram. He pulled it apart with his fingers.
“I’ve also paired the watch with a custom AI. Say hi,

“Good evening, boss, Dr. Strange.” A disembodied voice greeted them as Jarvis would, but she had
a soft and lilting Irish accent, instead of the British one Stephen had grown accustomed to. “My
name is F.R.I.D.A.Y, and I look forward to our time together in the future, doctor. To ensure your
privacy, I will only monitor your vitals by default. It is strongly recommended that you disable
privacy mode during your ventures, so I may gain access to your surroundings and provide useful
feedback.”

“Her primary functions are to serve as your personal assistant. Once I code her to you, she will
answer to you first, I will not be able to overwrite your commands. You may ask her for directions,
real-time translation, point you to the closest restroom, so on and so forth. In the case of a minor
scuffle, she will lay waste to your assailants. However, if you were to come across something nastier,
this is all theoretical, of course.” Tony dismissed the previous hologram in favour of…

Stephen’s eyes narrowed. Is that a space station?

“Meet Veronica, she’s a mobile service module, conceived to deploy specialised parts mid-battle for
versatile combat capability. I’ve remodelled her to house backup suits as well. She was fired into low
orbit a couple of days ago. She’s settled in nicely since then.” Tony pulled apart the device to reveal
the equipment hidden inside. “If F.R.I.D.A.Y. deems that you are exposed to threats beyond what
she can handle, she will call for backup. A suit will be deployed to remove you from danger. Think
of it as on-call taxi service, only transregional and bulletproof.”

“Tony, I’m going to Nepal for a few days, not migrating into a war zone.” Stephen navigated the
hologram of Veronica, unsure of what to say. He had been excited to be presented with the watch gauntlet, but the longer he spent making sense of the device, the more he could see Tony was expecting him to be in grave danger. “Is there something you’d like to tell me?”

Tony bit into the side of his cheek. He shuffled uncomfortably. “Is it too much? I didn’t want to overwhelm you, which is why F.R.I.D.A.Y. is in sleep mode by default. I swear this isn’t some elaborate scheme to keep you under surveillance—”

“I love the gift.” Stephen intervened before Tony could babble himself to death. “I can’t imagine the time and resources you’ve dedicated to this. All I want to know is if I should be expecting anything.”

Tony let out a long sigh. “There will be some…complications in the foreseeable future. Nothing I can’t handle, but it never hurts to be prepared.” Tony closed the distance between them. The gauntlet returned to the shape of a watch. Tony fastened the straps a bit tighter around Stephen’s wrist. “Just…try not to take this off.”

“I can do that.” Stephen replied with a tender voice. Tony looked up and marvelled at the wonder that was Stephen Strange. All his previous efforts at introducing a device like this had backfired. They had failed for various reasons. Rhodey was a part of the Armed Forces, which placed him in an awkward position to be accepting an AI from Tony. Pepper was private by nature. Despite that she knew Tony would never wish her ill, she didn’t like the idea of having an AI watch over her. Not to mention his ex-teammates, who were quick to accept gadgets from him, but never trusted him with sensitive personal information. It felt good, knowing his efforts were acknowledged, accepted, and appreciated.

“My hero,” Stephen cooed. “How can I ever repay you?”

“Well…I’m not picky, but I believe this is the part where the hero gets kissed senseless.” Tony stood on his tiptoes and leaned forward. Their height difference always amused Stephen much to Tony’s chagrin.

Stephen, noticing the subtle shift in their position, chuckled before he happily obliged. He placed a hand on each side of Tony’s rear, and lifted the smaller man onto the workbench. Tony wrapped his legs around Stephen’s waist. Their lips meet slowly at first. It was soft, sensual, but quickly turned passionate and demanding. Stephen bit into the side of Tony’s neck, leaving a mark that was halfway between a hickey and a bruise.

“I’ll be back before you know it,” Stephen promised as they broke apart for air.

“You better, or else I’m sending Veronica after you.” Tony gave Stephen another nip before he let go.

He saw Stephen off at the airport the day after. Despite Tony’s false cheerfulness, he knew it was going to be a long week the moment he came home to an empty bed.

In the days following, everything had felt a little less colourful for Tony. His penthouse was pin-drop silent. Mundane tasks around the tower went from dull to unbearable. Soon, Tony found himself returning to the lab he had used to create the new element. It was his go-to place when he wanted to concentrate on work. Barely anyone knew of its existence and he wasn’t bombarded with distractions at every turn.

Slowly, Tony settled back into the old routine of working and attending social gatherings. He visited Barnes’ to check up on his progress and called Stephen at night to see how things were going. Stephen told Tony he had met the Ancient One, and that she, surprisingly, hadn’t been a fraud at all.
Tony was not convinced, but he respected Stephen’s decision to remain in Kathmandu until he could understand their ways. F.R.I.D.A.Y. foiling all attempted robberies to date made Tony rest easier at night. He sent Stephen two extra briefcases of stun nets, which Stephen accepted because he didn’t want Tony to worry.

One week stretched into two, then three, then months. While Tony wanted desperately to visit, Stephen was now training inside some temple that didn’t allow external visitors. Stephen had worked hard to gain his position there, passing whatever taxing tasks he had to perform to prove himself. Tony didn’t want to spoil his chances at healing, thus he continued to wait in New York.

With nothing else to occupy his attention, Tony reached peak productivity. The Iron Legion had been a massive hit among the wider population. After more than seven months of wear and tear, Stark Industries finally agreed to expand the size of the Legion. The nation had witnessed the many lives they had saved, and the decision was met with widespread approval.

Tony completed a record number of tasks after Stephen left for Kathmandu, but to the people around him, it was obvious he wasn’t as happy as he used to be. Iron Man appeared as lustrous as ever, but in private, Tony smiled less and became fixated on obtaining results. Calculations rushed through his mind. He had begun, scrapped, or reassessed half of the projects on his server, yet he still struggled to fill the emptiness he felt every time he ended his call with Stephen. Tony knew he was being needy like some love-sick idiot, so he resorted to filling out his schedule with even more projects, as it was the one thing that worked to take his mind off Stephen.

Tony had been prepared to continue at this pace for the foreseeable future until a phone call pulled him away from his post. S.H.I.E.L.D. psychiatrists informed him that Barnes was ready for his first full-scale B.A.R.F. simulation. The scene the Winter Soldier had chosen caught Tony off guard.

Tony could tell it was going to be an unpleasant session the moment he ended the call, but he had no choice but to attend. He had gone too far to back out now. Tony was sure Barnes had his reasons, but it didn’t do anything to ease the dread in his stomach when he walked into S.H.I.E.L.D. headquarters the following day.

Chapter End Notes

Stephen is finally off to Kamar-Taj! Things are about to get...magical. *wiggles eyebrows*
Greetings, everyone. We are about to enter the mini-climax before the Avengers arc kicks off.

Beta'ed by the fantastic Lavanyalabelle.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony observed Barnes through the one-way mirror in his cell. Fury signalled for the technicians to begin treatment. A squad of S.H.I.E.L.D. agents awaited orders behind them. It was Barnes’ first full-scale B.A.R.F. simulation. They didn’t know how he was going to react to the change of events. The psychiatrists had been hopeful, but Tony didn’t think Hydra would let their best asset go without a fight.

Barnes closed his eyes. He was restrained to an operation table, wearing his usual straitjacket. He wore a mouth guard to protect his tongue. Tony didn’t like the way the mouth guard was strapped on. Something about the intrusiveness of the device didn’t sit right with him. Psychiatrists lowered the B.A.R.F. glasses onto Barnes’ face. In contrast to Tony’s rising concerns, Barnes looked calm and composed.

“Ready to begin simulations, director,” one of the psychiatrists said. Fury gave the technicians on standby permission to proceed. On cue, the cell descended into darkness. A blue wave of light washed over the surfaces, synthesising a digital environment. In the minutes that followed, the group was no longer in the restricted section of S.H.I.E.L.D. headquarters, they were driving down a road after dark.

The scene was witnessed from the perspective of the Winter Soldier. In the silence of the night, only the sound of churning gears and tires grinding against loose gravel could be heard. Tony’s breath quickened as the motorcycle caught up to his parents’ car. He flinched when he heard the first shot. The soldier’s aim had been perfect. The car crashed to the side of the road. Tony stilled after the initial contact. In the memory, the Winter Soldier approached the trunk of the battered car and secured the Super Soldier Serum prototype.

Feeling eyes on him, Tony glimpsed to the side to see Fury studying him again. Fury must’ve recognised Howard and Maria’s car, but there was no surprise on his features. Tony swallowed the bitter taste in his mouth. He didn’t know how life hadn’t crushed his foolish hopes yet. Of course, Fury knew too.

The Winter Soldier shifted his focus after he confirmed the state of the serum. The man from the driver’s seat had crawled out to seek help. His would-be assassin closed the distance between them with heavy footsteps. In a twisted way, Tony was glad he’d visited Siberia prior to their session today. Otherwise, he didn’t know if he could witness the brutality of the event again without breaking down in public.

On the freeway, the Winter Soldier dug his fingers into the man’s greying head of hair. He tugged it forcefully, revealing the face of a man who was not Howard Stark.
Taken aback by the turn of events, Tony turned to Fury. “This wasn’t a part of the plan.” Fury urged Tony to watch on. Barnes seemed conflicted by the change too. His heart rate in the real world increased. The soldier in him recognised that man. “You’ve altered the memory too much. You don’t know what this will do to him,” Tony said., then the answer came to him. He knew the man who had replaced Howard too. It had been a fleeting glimpse, but Tony had an eidetic memory. He’d seen that man before from the training footages retrieved from Siberia. The man had been one of the Winter Soldier’s handlers.

“No, no, no, he’s not ready for that yet!” Tony shouted. “Shut it down!”

In the memory, the Winter Soldier of 1991 slammed his first into the face of his handler. As if to mirror the harm he had done, Barnes’ body in the real world jolted against his restraints. He looked like he’d been electrocuted, a subconscious reflex of the body, hinting at past experiences of being exposed to the same punishment. S.H.I.E.L.D. agents inside the cell retrieved tranquilliser darts. They had been prepared in the case of an emergency. Barnes’ struggle intensified.

“I’m calling it. Jarvis, shut it down!” Tony yelled at his suit pocket. His designer sunglasses that was connected to his faithful AI flashed red.

“Activating failsafe protocols,” Jarvis said. Images inside the cell halted like a poorly timed freeze frame. The scene lagged for a few more seconds then disintegrated altogether. The room returned to darkness. Emergency lights switched on after Jarvis severed connection with the system.

“Are you out of your goddamn mind?” Tony snapped. “We were supposed to go slow, make him miss his mark, then ease him into letting his victims go. That was the plan.”

“Punishing his former captors will achieve the same goal. We’ve given him enough time to adjust,” Fury said. S.H.I.E.L.D. agents tranquillised the still struggling Barnes. Tony squeezed his eyes shut. The two of them were a long way from friends, but having spent two months doing routine check-ups, Tony had found himself caring about Barnes’ wellbeing. Whether Tony liked it or not, he was already invested in the Winter Soldier’s recovery.

“That wasn’t all you wanted to do, was it?” Tony asked. “Otherwise, why replace the victim with his handler? Why not just some average lackey? You want him to break free of his previous handler, so you can give him a new one. A new one wearing a S.H.I.E.L.D. uniform.”

“Ensuring he becomes a free man once again is still our top priority——”

“Don’t bullshit me, Fury.” Tony slammed his fists into the one-way mirror. The agents in the room raised their guns but Tony stood his ground. “This is second nature to you now, isn’t it? Throwing people under the bus to get what you want. No one is off limits. Not allies, not a torture victim seeking refuge. Even your best agents, you’d burn them in a second if that got you closer to your goal.”

“Did you think I withdrew information because I felt like it? The Winter Soldier is an invaluable asset. We couldn’t risk telling you the truth because we knew you’d jeopardise the mission.” The blackened B.A.R.F. units validated Fury’s claim. “S.H.I.E.L.D. was founded on the principle of maintaining global security. At any cost. To deter from our duties, because a hand full of individuals are at risk is an insult to the men and women who have given their lives to this cause.” Despite sensing the looming threat, the director did not back down. “I have done things I’m not proud of, everyone in this organisation has, but if that’s what it takes, then that’s what will be done.”

Not for the first time in his life, Tony wondered if his father would’ve been proud of the organisation S.H.I.E.L.D. has become. Had his father been alive, would he have made the same choices? Would
he have claimed the organisation he helped create did not once stray from its intended course?

“No remorse. Not for the people you’ve killed, and not for the lives you’ve endangered. Order through pain,” Tony sneered. “It must be reassuring, to have all the answers.” S.H.I.E.L.D. personnel removed Barnes from the cell, presumably to scan his brain activity. Tony clenched his teeth. He didn’t have the suit with him. Being severely outnumbered, there was little he could do for Barnes. Even if he was to intervene, he had no jurisdiction to remove Barnes from S.H.I.E.L.D. custody. He could remove the man from their care for the time being, but sooner or later he’d have to return him like a stolen item.

It would take delicate political manoeuvring to free Barnes, if the man could ever be free. The Armed Forces could not catch word about the existence of a Super Soldier. Infuriated as Tony was, S.H.I.E.L.D. was still Barnes’ best option. Tony had already taken unwise risks by involving himself in the man’s recovery. He was the leader of a multi-billion-dollar empire. In his youth, Tony might have made many impulsive decisions, but with age came wisdom. Everything he did both as Iron Man and Tony Stark affected the people around him.

“What happens when someone decides to sacrifice you one day, hmm?” Tony said.

“Throw you under the bus. Are you just going to roll over and take it?”

“If we want to nullify every threat, we need to be faster, stronger, more intelligent and better prepared than every single one of our enemies, because all it takes is one slip, and everything we’ve fought for will turn to dust.” Fury told the agents to give them some privacy. The men and women hesitantly obliged. “I’m not afraid of death, Stark. I’m afraid of dying when the work is not yet done. If there comes a day I’m rendered obsolete, or if the benefit of my death outweighs the consequences, I will gladly throw myself under the bus, but until then,” Fury gestured to the empty cell, “I will continue to transform him into an agent of S.H.I.E.L.D., and you are bonded by contract to help me. You were right years ago when you said peace was having a bigger stick than the other guy. What changed?”

“What changed?” Tony glared at Fury. “My weapons were used to slaughter innocents. Villages were destroyed because of my company, because of what I created. Americans were killed by the very weapons made to keep them safe. How can I not strive to do better? How can I turn a blind eye to the suffering I’ve caused?”

“You give yourself too much credit. People have been shooting themselves for centuries. Have you looked around?” Fury swept his arms in a wide arc. “Is the world a better place because you no longer make weapons? Have people kissed and made up? No, the same shit continues, terrorists run amok, countries go to war, only with guns from a different manufacturer. There will always be suffering. We protect the people we can, because that’s all we are capable of doing.”

“That’s your point?” Tony could not come to terms with what he was hearing. “To maintain the status quo, because it’s too hard to change? I created Iron Man from the ashes of my own weapons sector to be that difference, to show people that change is possible.”

“What you are doing is taking the easy way out.” Fury kept his gaze firmly on Tony. “Iron Man isn’t enough, not for what’s to come, be it Hydra or threats we’ll eventually discover. You know that perhaps better than I do, yet you are wasting your talent.”

Tony shook his head. “It doesn’t have to be like this, there is always another way.”

“Not always.”

Sensing that neither of them could convince the other, Tony turned to leave. He needed time to clear
his head. “Word of advice,” Fury called before Tony was out of view. “Genetic modifications?” He gestured to the handprint Tony had left on the aluminium frame. “It’s a risky path to tread.”

“A risk I’m certain you’ll be happy to take, given half the chance.” Tony mouthed the word ‘Tahiti’ and left without a second glance. He’d had enough of this place for one day.

Tony was greeted by silence when he returned to the Stark Tower penthouse. Given the day’s turn of events, he hadn’t felt like going to the lab. After a brief shower, Tony padded down to the workshop to say hello to the bots. Dum-E got caught in a cable as he rushed to Tony’s side. U and Butterfingers beeped excitedly at their creator’s return. “I swear, one day I’ll donate you to the boy scouts,” Tony mumbled as he untangled Dum-E. He knew he’d never follow through with his threat.

“Allright, I trust you’ve all been good?” Tony addressed his robotic children. “Don’t you nod along now, Butterfingers. I know you broke a dozen globes when you tried to change the entrance light last week, Jarvis told me. The electricians have a job. You should let them do it.” Butterfingers lowered his robotic arm. His sensor light flickered dimly. “That’s right, reflect on your actions,” Tony chided, but he patted Butterfingers on the head a split second later. He could never stay mad at any of his bots. The soft spot he had for his workshop companions were a mile wide. “Jarvis, order some takeout, will you?”

“It would be my pleasure, Sir. What would you like for the evening?” Jarvis asked.

Tony didn’t have the faintest clue. He didn’t feel like anything, but he had to eat. Tony took in his messy workshop, finding items that belonged to the absent doctor. Stacks of medical journals, schematics with scribbles all over them, the cardigan Stephen kept down here despite that he could ask Jarvis to raise the temperature at any time…

“I’m thinking Chinese, the real deal. Haven’t had that in a while.” Tony reminisced the good old days when he and Stephen were still building prosthetic joints. Nostalgia dampened his joy at seeing his bots. He hadn’t been in Stark Tower much since Stephen left for Nepal. The lab had been preserved like a freeze-frame in time. It looked as if Stephen could enter any second, ready to scold him for working late into the night again.

“Sir, If I may bring something to your attention,” Jarvis asked after he’d placed the order.

“Go right ahead, buddy.”

“It is currently 8:00 a.m. in Kathmandu, and the telephone was one of the greatest inventions of the eighteenth century.”

Tony groaned as he flopped onto the couch. “Remind me to change your personality matrix.”

“Sir, it is hardly poor etiquette to contact your significant other while he is away.”

“He’s not my ‘significant other’, and I have been contacting him, just not recently because I’ve
been… busy.” Tony’s excuse sounded pathetic to his own ears.

“Yes, busy staring into the distance during the small hours of the morning.”

“Fine, you’ve caught me out.” Tony surrendered. Trying to win an argument against Jarvis was a lost cause. “Stephen has his own life and I didn’t want to be clingy. He’s training now, doing great without my help. My endless calls were pestering him anyway.”

“Perhaps I could contact Miss Friday, see if the doctor is awake,” Jarvis offered.

Tony mulled over the option until his resolve crumbled. “Yeah, do that.” He could make it sound like he was curious about Stephen’s training. It wouldn’t be the first. As Tony scratched his goatee, the screen before him came to life. It took Tony by surprise to see Stephen in his room in Kamar-Taj, dressed in white training robes.

“Friday said you wanted to see me,” Stephen said quickly. He’d skipped the pleasantries. There was a concerned look on his face, as this wasn’t the time Tony usually called.

“Oh—great. My own children, conspiring against me. I am shocked and scandalised.” Tony sighed. “I just wanted to see if you are awake.”

“Of course I would be. It’s 8:00 a.m.” Stephen’s brows furrowed. “Is everything alright?”

“Yes! Everything is wonderful, just peachy.” Tony mentally punched himself. Where had all his camera charm vanished to? “You know what, forget I called. You are probably busy—”

“I have time,” Stephen answered before Tony could disconnect. “I don’t have any training sessions scheduled today. I need to catch up on some reading, but that can wait. I—” Stephen looked away from the feed and rubbed the back of his neck. “I’ve missed you, Tony.”

Tony froze. His arm hung still in the air, halfway from switching off the feed. “Really? You missed me?”

“Of course,” Stephen admitted. He might be awkward about it, but he was honest with his desires. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but your facial hair can almost rival my own.”

Tony laughed at the screen. “Flatterer.” The pair grinned madly at each other. Stephen asked Tony about his day, and the two chatted. Stephen eventually paused the topic. He looked over his shoulder as he retrieved a small metallic object. It was shaped like a slim rectangle, with two openings on the side. Stephen threaded his index and middle finger into the openings and wore the object like a ring.

“It seems my desire to see you again was strong enough after all,” Stephen said absently. He referred to something Tony couldn’t quite understand. “Tony, what you are about to witness might appear a little… disconcerting at first, but I promise I’ll explain everything, so try not to panic. I might’ve left out a few things about the type of training I’ve been doing.”

“That doesn’t sound good at all.” Tony had a bad feeling about this. Stephen placed his ringed hand in front of him and began drawing circles in the air with his other. Tony’s words were caught in his throat when the circle started to glow. As seconds ticked by, the spinning ring stretched into a portal. From the angle of the video feed, Tony could make out a few items on the other side of the portal. It looked suspiciously like his lab.

Tony snapped around, in time to witness Stephen step into the room. The portal closed, collapsing into wisps of sparks then disappearing altogether. Unlike the runes that were etched into the ground when Thor travelled via the Bifrost, nothing in the workshop was amiss to indicate something
“...Surprise?” Stephen greeted weakly. He didn’t need his mystical senses to know there was a storm brewing. Tony turned as pale as a sheet then reddened with an emotion that was a mix of anger and fear.

“Stephen Strange, what have you done to yourself?” Tony leapt forward, knocking his seat over in the process. He closed the distance between him and Stephen with a few wide strides. “Jarvis, prepare the labs in R’n’D, I want the area cleared and in lockdown.”

“Tony, I can assure you—” Stephen attempt was met with an infuriated glare.

“Zip it,” Tony commanded. Stephen shrivelled like cut flower in a furnace. Despite his playful personality, Tony was capable of being downright terrifying, especially when he utilised his veteran superhero authority.

“You are in so much shit right now.” Tony dragged Stephen to the testing laboratories by his metaphorical earlobe. From there, he ran a dozen scans to produce a detailed report on Stephen's state of health. Thankfully for Stephen, everything from his vital organs to his vitamin levels had been in the optimum range of a healthy male adult, courtesy of regular exercise and a balanced diet.

“Now spill everything you know, I want the details,” Tony said as he swiped through the report on his tablet.

Stephen could only oblige. He explained how he was introduced to The Ancient One, skipped over the bits where his astral form was expelled from his physical body, then introduced magic as a complex area of study, briefly retelling the theory behind sorcerers drawing energy from different dimensions. “You should see Kamar-Taj, Tony. There are hundreds training there.”

“I can’t believe this,” Tony whispered to himself. “I left you alone for two months, and you turn into a bloody wizard?” Tony held out his hands. He tried to turn his thoughts into coherent words. “What were you thinking? Do you have any idea what kind of risks you took?”

“No bigger than the ones you took when you genetically enhanced yourself, I’m sure,” Stephen rebutted.

“This is not the time for you to dig up receipts, and the two are fundamentally different.” Voice rising, Tony stood without realising it. “I created that serum in a lab, in a controlled environment, with science. You have no idea who this ‘Ancient One’ is, no experience with the type of power she uses, yet you jumped to join her cult!”

“You are being over-dramatic.” Stephen had anticipated backlash. Both he and Tony stood at the pinnacle of their professions; professions based on science, but seeing that Tony had always been the more considerate party in their relationship, Stephen had assumed he’d at least be open to understanding magic first. Instead, Tony had rejected everything that was presented to him in one fell swoop. “Magic is not a force to be feared. Like all forces of nature, it can be controlled to benefit mankind.”

“What if there are lasting side effects? What if she lured you into thinking this power is something it’s not? What would you do then? What would you have me do?” Tony’s breaths quickened. The day’s events piled on top of each other, it was overwhelming to process.

“Would you listen for a minute?” Stephen raised his own voice a sliver too. “The Ancient One is not a fraud, and she is not out to get me. Not everyone wants something in exchange.”
“Oh, do I have news for you,” Tony mocked. “Everything comes at a price; it’s how the universe works. If she doesn’t appear to want anything, it’s because you don’t have anything of value yet. One day that’s going to change, and instead of standing over your limp corpse yelling ‘I told you so’, I’d much rather we put an end to it before things can escalate. You are not going back there.”

“It’s all about what you want, isn’t it?” Stephen came to stand too. “You speak so lowly of someone you’ve never met and reject a system of power you don’t understand. I thought you are better than that, Tony.”

“Better than—” Tony took a moment to steady himself. His heart was about to jump out of his chest. “I sent you to Nepal to protect you. To keep you safe from the shit storm that was happening here, yet you managed to involve yourself in something far worse.”

“I am not a damsel in distress. I am can protect myself.” Stephen shook his head in disappointment. “It was a mistake to come here, clearly you weren’t ready.” Stephen fixed his robes which had been mussed by the physical examinations. “I apologise for shocking you, but I think I should come back another time.” Stephen opened a portal back to his quarters at Kamar-Taj.

“No—” something broke inside Tony. Wait. He wanted to call out, but the words died in his lungs. His chest was too tight. Tony doubled over. He knocked over Petri dishes and blood samples as he tumbled to the ground.

Luckily, Stephen had excellent hearing. Amidst the whirl of the portal, he sensed that something was wrong. Stephen saw Tony fall and rushed to his side. Tony was hyperventilating. He clutched his workshop tank top and twisted it until the fabric tore.

“Sir, you are exhibiting symptoms of a panic attack. Please keep your focus on me and attempt to establish a breathing pattern.” Tony caught Jarvis’ voice amidst the madness. It grounded him and reminded him of the night when he first travelled back in time. He had been in Malibu, leaning against a broken fireplace feeling equally bewildered. That had been more than a year ago.

“Tony, look at me. I’m not going anywhere. You need to breathe slower, rebalance the oxygen and carbon dioxide levels in your blood.” Stephen appeared calm, but the hand he wasn’t using to support Tony was clenched so tightly his knuckles turned white.

Tony got a hold of himself quickly. Despite it being a year since he last had a panic attack, he remembered the steps and acted accordingly. He reminded himself that this wasn’t his past-life. Everything in this universe was under control. Stephen wasn’t going anywhere, at least not yet.

Stephen was safe.

It took another minute for Tony to bring his heart rate back to normal. By this point, Stephen had deemed it safe enough to pull Tony into a hug.

“I can’t lose you.” Tony’s words were muffled as he buried his face against Stephen’s robes. “I don’t know what I’ll do if I lose you.” It took everything in Stephen to not break apart and promise he’d never leave again. He couldn’t say things he couldn’t guarantee, even if it was what Tony needed to hear. He could only promise he’d do his best to stay out of harm’s way, which was what he did time and time again.

Chapter End Notes
Yikes! Tony encountered some problems... but it's alright, he still has time.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Over the weekend something amazing happened. I was gifted a fic by the talented izumi2. It raises a series of questions after the Shield info dump and is absolutely amazing. I feel deeply honoured to have inspired someone, so I'll leave the link below.

I Spy... by: izumi2

Chapter Beta'ed by the wonderful Lavanyalabelle.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Stephen eased Tony off the laboratory floor. His offer to carry Tony had been refused. The pair returned to the penthouse in silence. Cold takeout sat in containers on the dining table. One of the bots must have retrieved it from the delivery man.

“Have you eaten yet?” Stephen asked as he noticed the food. Tony shook his head but otherwise remained silent. He ducked into the master bedroom. Stephen followed closely but didn’t enter the room to give Tony some privacy. After a few moments, water began to run in the ensuite.

Tony hadn’t said a word since his confession in the laboratories, and if Stephen were to guess, he’d say Tony was embarrassed by his outburst. Stephen shuffled back to the open plan kitchen. He removed the food from the plastic containers. The events of the past hour played on a loop inside his mind.

“Jarvis.” Stephen looked toward the ceiling. It was a bad habit since the AI was not physically there. “Is this the first time Tony has experienced something like this?”

“Doctor, as much as I regret to inform you, I cannot discuss this section of Sir’s medical history without his approval. Perhaps it’d be better to ask Sir directly?” Stephen nodded. Jarvis had unwillingly given away the answer. Why would Tony place protocols against something if it didn’t exist?

Stephen placed the rice in the steamer then switched on the cooktop. He placed a saucepan on top of the flames. Microwaved food tasted horrible in his opinion. Tony was in the shower, which gave him time to reheat the food. He turned the stir-fry with a wooden spatula and watched it sizzle against the non-stick surface.

Tony’s panic attack had left Stephen equally frightened. To Stephen, Tony had always been a capable authority figure. Tony had total control over every aspect of his life. Stephen could recall with crystal clarity, him standing below the stage, listening to Tony’s speech as he sipped on champagne from a year ago.

Tony had survived being kidnapped by terrorists. Instead of playing along or having a mental breakdown like any average man would in his position, Tony had made a miniaturised arc reactor and a fully functional suit of armour in a cave. He then went on to synthesise a new element while he was dying. Tony was eons ahead of the rest of the world. He solved every issue he encountered with frightening efficiency. The speed at which Stark Tech advanced had been the subject of heated
debates. There were conspiracy theories claiming that Tony Stark was an alien, because how else would anyone explain his endless list of accomplishments?

Stephen had scoffed at the notion. He rationalised Tony’s achievements as a combination of hard work and natural talent, but subconsciously, he too shared the impression that wherever Tony was, things could never go wrong. Iron Man was invincible. The man who donned the identity was revolutionising the world.

Stephen had seen Tony agitated, unsure, mournful, but until moments ago, he had never seen Tony distressed. It reminded Stephen of the times he’d catch Tony stare into the distance with an air of despondency. Eventually, those moments had dwindled until Stephen forgot about them all together. Looking back, Tony had been a master at compartmentalising himself. He showed sections of his personality to people who wanted to see them. Stephen had been proud of how he could look past Tony’s plastered smile, but as he and Tony grew closer, the mask had become increasingly difficult to differentiate.

Perhaps all this time, Tony had been hiding things from Stephen too. Tony played the snarky, intelligent, billionaire boyfriend who was also understanding to a fault. Stephen’s chest constricted at the possibility of Tony shutting him out, but he supposed it was logical. They had only known each other for a little over a year. Before his accident, they were barely dating. Their relationship only took a leap forward after they moved in together, but at that point, despite his efforts in trying to pretend that everything would be back to normal, he had permanently injured his hands and was in desperate need of support. Tony provided everything he could, faithfully portraying the unmovable anchor amidst a storm.

Tony knew all there was to know about Stephen, while Stephen knew frightfully little about Tony. Aside from the selected snippets Tony had revealed to him, he knew a scant amount about the string of confidential projects Tony had been involved with. He didn’t know anything about the shadow organisation that pestered Tony, and despite living under the same roof, when Tony didn’t want him to catch wind of something, every last detail was passed through a filter to ensure nothing was amiss.

Stephen knew Tony was trying to protect him. Until this point, he had thought nothing of it. It came with being in a relationship with Iron Man, and Stephen wasn’t about to become the civilian boyfriend who held Tony back, but perhaps his encounter with The Ancient One could do more than just cure his hands. Perhaps it could curb the helplessness he felt every time Tony was away dealing with the unknown.

Seeing Tony breakdown over his unorthodox use of magic had stripped back some of Iron Man’s invulnerability. Tony was human, albeit a very intelligent and determined human, but flesh and blood nonetheless. It was unlikely he’d survive the things he did without suffering lasting psychological trauma. Stephen swore at himself for not seeing this sooner. Tony had given him an AI outfitted with stun nets. Said AI could even call a suit of armour from outer space.

“It’s my fault…” Stephen murmured to himself. He hadn’t expected a response, but both Jarvis and Friday jumped at the opportunity.

“Unfortunately, yes, doctor.”

“I told you so, doc.” The two AIs paused when they heard the other’s voice.

“Miss Friday,” Jarvis greeted his junior with affection, “how have you been?”

“Very well, Jarvis. I’ve learned a lot from the internet while doc was training,” Friday chirped. Over the months, her lively Irish accent had grown on Stephen. It was endearing to hear her converse with
Jarvis, who was technically her older brother. “I told him to come clean, but doc had placed strict protocols. I was forbidden from relaying information on his activities in Kamar-Taj. I should apologise to boss,” the young AI sulked.

“I’m sure Sir would understand, as he has assigned you to the doctor. Sir would be proud of your work ethics, young Miss Friday,” Jarvis said.

“Exactly.” Tony strode into the living space. Having recently showered, he was dressed in a fresh tank top with comfortable sweatpants. “You have nothing to apologise for, baby girl.” He draped a towel over his damp hair and avoided eye contact with Stephen. “We own a microwave, you know.”

“I insist.” Stephen retrieved the bowl of rice from the steamer. He served it with stir-fry. Tony took the fork Stephen offered. It was astonishing how much trust could lay behind a simple gesture. Tony loathed being handed things. There was a short list of people whom he accepted items from.

Stephen watched Tony wolf down his late dinner. Tony took big bites and looked anywhere else but Stephen. He finished his meal in less than ten minutes. Sighing to himself, Stephen took the towel that was thrown over the counter. He draped the towel back over Tony’s head and massaged his damp hair.

“I’m still mad at you,” Tony said.

“I know,” Stephen gently rubbed the towel against Tony’s scalp, “but I have to go back. This is the closest I’ve been to finding a solution.”

Tony went eerily quiet. “I want to meet this Ancient One,” he said after a pause.

“I will put in a request as soon as I get back.” Stephen supposed it was too early to breathe a sigh of relief, but Tony hadn’t outright refused. “Though I must warn you to watch your tongue around her. Speaking from experience, she can get a little… testy.”

“I know. I’m not there to get you kicked out. I just want to size her up myself.” Tony leaned back. Stephen discarded the towel after it absorbed the excess moisture. Despite having shaky hands, he still knew all the pressure points. He massaged Tony’s temples. Tony sighed at the contact.

“Why do you have such strong feelings against magic?” Stephen asked. “You don’t have to tell me,” he added, just in case Tony wasn’t comfortable talking about it.

“I’ve had some…bad experiences in the past. Multiple bad experiences, actually. They probably don’t operate the same way, if looks are anything to go by, but you know, once bitten, twice shy,” Tony said.

“You are right to be cautious. I was in over my head, drunk on adrenaline over undiscovered secrets.” They discussed a few more issues before Tony was relaxed enough to feel tired. “Let’s get you to bed,” Stephen urged. It took some considerable persuasion to convince Tony that he’d still be here after Tony woke from his sleep.

At the foot of the bed, Stephen watched Tony in his astral form. His physical body was tangled with the brunette’s in slumber. It was daytime in Kathmandu and Stephen had a good night’s rest, but he had been insistent with his request to join.

Tony enjoyed being the little spoon, so Stephen used his height advantage to wrap himself around the smaller man. The comforter draped over them and obscured Tony’s muscular form. The man appeared small, like when Stephen had first met him over a year ago. Tony had always been surrounded by a halo of energy. He demanded attention at every turn, but in his rare moments of
stillness, the purple beneath his eyes took centre stage. Stephen traced the colour with phantom fingers. Tony must’ve reverted to his previous schedule again, working himself to the bone, taxing himself so severely it showed on his enhanced physique.

Stephen had wondered why Tony’s calls decreased in frequency. As he was halfway around the globe, he had no way of knowing what Tony was doing. It bothered him more than he’d like to admit and distracted him from his studies. The worry slowed him down when all he had wanted to do was return to New York after his hands were cured. He became agitated with the lack of progress, which The Ancient One noticed.

“Your mind is absent and your focus non-existent. Yet you wonder why the energies refuse to bend to your will.” In his haste, Stephen might have shown less respect than he’d intended. The Ancient One had said nothing of it. Instead, she’d opened a portal and brought them to the summit of Mt Everest.

“You cannot beat a river into submission; you must surrender to its currents. Your intellect has taken you far in life, but it will take you no further,” The Ancient One said. She took in the magnificent view before her. The snowy peaks of Everest were pristine in its beauty. In an environment where human beings would perish, spires of earth stood proudly, braving the unyielding forces.

“Do you want to see him again?” Startled by her choice of words, Stephen took his eyes off the landscape. The Ancient One studied him with as much concentration as she would use to decipher a timeworn tome.

“Excuse me?” Stephen asked.

“At this temperature, a person can last thirty minutes before suffering permanent loss of function,” The Ancient One clapped her hands together, “but you’ll likely go into shock within the first two.” She marched towards the framed image of Kamar-Taj. “Surrender, Stephen.” The portal collapsed behind her.

“No, wait!” Stephen chased after his mentor. He fell through the fading amber ring and onto the snow. Icy flakes melted to slush around him. Stephen scrambled to his feet. The blizzard was biting on his exposed skin. With dreadful hopelessness, he came to terms with what had happened.

The Ancient One had abandoned him on the world’s highest summit.

Stephen mentally cursed himself for leaving Friday on the dresser that morning. He held out his ring hand and drew circles in the air with the other. The energy he generated was weak, barely enough to form a closed loop, let alone a portal. Stephen knew his time was running out. The sudden drop in temperature caused him to hyperventilate. His heart was under immense pressure as it struggled to circulate blood under such extreme circumstances. Any minute now, his body would cut off blood flow to non-essential muscles, starting with his limbs.

Stephen should have thought about many things in those precious seconds, such as what The Ancient One meant when she told him to surrender, or how on earth he was supposed to make a portal to get back, but in reality, all Stephen had thought was how he was never going to see Tony again. He pictured Tony, alone in the tower, devastated by the news of his death.

In a split second, his environment dissolved away. The cold was still killing him, but his mind no longer focused on it. Stephen could envision with crystal clarity where he wanted to be. He mentally reconstructed an image of his room in Kamar-Taj and a doorway appeared. Stephen hobbled through the threshold and collapsed in front of his desk. On top of the desk rested the tablet he’d used to have his last conversation with Tony.
Before falling unconscious, Stephen managed to stop Friday from alerting Veronica. Looking back, his actions had been counterintuitive. It would have made so much more sense if he’d drawn a portal back to Stark Tower, where Tony physically was, but at the time, his impaired judgement had automatically associated the last place he saw Tony with safety.

After regaining consciousness, Stephen had been delighted by his progress. Finally, he could share something with Tony and back up the theory by physically performing it. If Stephen was to be honest with himself, his biggest reason behind keeping his training a secret had been his ego. Stephen had a chip on his shoulder. He wanted to be the best, period. His restless ambition and sheer strength of will has seen him prevail in situations where other talented surgeons crumbled under pressure.

Stephen Strange was used to being the best. He was used to being the centre of attention…until he met Tony. Tony was a spectacle. The world saw Stephen in his own light, but there was something about being a superhero no ordinary man could hope to match. Their relationship had been kept largely in the dark, but sooner or later, Tony would want to make public appearances together. They might even be Outed against their will. A swarm of paparazzi camped outside Stark Tower, neither Iron Man nor Tony Stark could afford the luxury of privacy.

Despite all that, Stephen had been prepared to work for his place beside Tony, and yet a car accident changed everything. Stephen had lost his place in society within the span of one night. He had been shocked at first, then mortified by the implication. Tony had noticed him because of his excellence as a surgeon. Without his hands, Tony could move on to others equally talented, but otherwise unflawed.

Stephen had thought that was the case when Tony didn’t answer any of his phone calls. Thankfully, after Tony could be reached, he’d immediately come to Stephen to prove him wrong. Though the problem remained. Stephen needed to get back on his feet and catch up. Stephen would be the first to claim that he didn’t believe in unconditional love. The idea that eventually, Tony would grow tired of giving and leave him behind had been cemented into his mindset.

_He had been such a fool._

Stephen merged his astral projection with his physical body. The sensations of the real world slowly returned to him. He felt the weight of the comforter above him, the softness of the pillow from under his head, and most importantly, the warmth of the person in his arms.

There were tomes he needed to research, more advanced scrolls to study now that he had finally taken a step toward mastering the Mystic Arts, but Stephen couldn’t bring himself to move. He closed his eyes and listened to the gentle breaths of the man next to him.

_His_ Tony.

Stephen supposed he could use a break too, just for a little while.

--------
“I should object to you leaving my side to be with another man,” Stephen said as he leaned against the mirror inside Tony’s walk-in robe.

“Jealousy doesn’t become you, sweet cheeks.” Tony winked. He placed himself on display as he knew Stephen was checking out his ass. “Since you are blocking my mirror, how do I look?”

“I want to strip you down again. Make of that what you will.”

“Smoking hot then.” Tony slipped on his suit jacket and straightened his tie. It had taken every ounce of his self-discipline to get out of bed that morning; Tony didn’t think he had it in him. “Well, duty calls.” Tony sighed. He kissed Stephen one last time before heading for Mark Forty-Nine. Stephen pulled him back by his tie.

“Careful now, you don’t want to mess up that knot,” Stephen teased. He released his hold when Tony stilled. Stephen smoothed down Tony’s suit and paused when he reached the sleeves. Tony was notorious for leaving the house with his shirt cuffs unbuttoned. He didn’t like having to twist his arm around to button his cuffs with one hand. In Tony’s own words, something so tedious shouldn’t exist, which was why he opted to ignore them. “Do you still have the cufflinks I gave you for Christmas?”

“Of course, first box in the drawer.” On cue, the drawer containing Tony’s cufflinks clicked open. Stephen retrieved the container, on top of the box’s dark velvet cushioning sat two identical square cut rubies. They had caught Stephen’s eye the moment he saw them in an antique jewellery store. The vividness of the rubies reminded him of Tony, not only for the colour’s resemblance to Iron Man, but because Tony had a fiery passion in him. Tony deserved to be doted on, to be noticed and showered with love and affection.

Stephen plucked the cufflinks from the cushioning. Tony placed his free hand on Stephen’s hip while his other was being worked on. He watched Stephen lock the cufflinks in place with shaky fingers. The process took much longer than it was supposed to, but Tony didn’t mind at all. His heart was swelling with happiness he hadn’t felt for two entire months. “What would I do without you…?” Tony purred into Stephen’s ear. The warm breath tickled Stephen’s neck and he shivered at the sensation.

“Look poorly put-together, evidently.” Stephen gave Tony’s cuffs one last tug before letting go. “Meet me for lunch?”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world.” With those parting words, Tony jogged to the garage and took off in Mark Forty-Nine before he could change his mind. He gave himself another minute for the fluttering feeling to settle. From this point onward, it was strictly business.

Jarvis displayed a string of search results on his HUD. The statistics led to a coordinate in the Arctic Ocean. “Anomaly detected at 65.2482° N, 60.4621° W. Judging from initial satellite scans, the unknown object is of considerable size. Its silhouette suggests a possible match for Valkyrie, the last known aircraft to be flown by Captain Steven Grant Rogers.”

It had been over a year since Tony last heard that name. He regarded the flashing results on his HUD with cold, calculating eyes. Actively searching for Captain America had been one of his lesser pet projects for some time. Considering recent events, the discovery could not have come at a better time.

“Deploy a few private Legionnaires to keep an eye on that. Alert me if anything gets close, but otherwise keep your distance.” Tony took in the satellite images. There was no mistaking it. The match was too perfect to be an accident. There would soon be another Super Soldier added to the mix.
“Am I correct to assume you do not wish to initiate contact, Sir?” A wireframe of Stark Tower appeared on Tony’s HUD. Half a dozen signals left highlighted storage units, indicating the dispatched Legionnaires.

“He’s not my problem. Let Fury deal with him.” It could have been useful to be the one to thaw Rogers. To gain his trust, then build a ‘friendship’ on top of foundations cast from deceit, but Tony wasn’t sure if he’d just strangle the Super Soldier first. He and Captain America had never seen eye to eye. So far, he’d cut off Natasha and Clint. He wasn’t about to start making exceptions.

Tony gained manual control of the suit. He did a triple roll to the left to test out some new flight features. His mind worked best when he was on the move. He had known the rough location of Captain America’s discovery, which was still a vast region to be searching for the remains of an aircraft, but he ended up being the first to find Valkyrie in this timeline. He could definitely use that to his advantage.

Tony landed in S.H.I.E.L.D. headquarters for his routine check-up. By now, he had gotten to know the staff at the checkpoints by name. Tony turned over his watch gauntlet per usual. However, despite having passed the scanners, Tony was stopped in his tracks.

“Mr Stark, I’m afraid you’ll have to hand over your glasses too, director’s orders,” the agent at the door said sheepishly. Interacting with Iron Man had always been one of the highlights of his day. He had no knowledge of the B.A.R.F. session, and didn’t know why the director was suddenly imposing new rules. The agent had no choice but to follow them, but he did so apologetically.

“Sure thing,” Tony plucked his glasses from his breast pocket. “Keep Jarvis company.”

Having been handed Iron Man’s world-famous AI, the agent was in awe. He paid little attention to Tony’s purposefully relaxed posture, which would have tipped off a more seasoned spy. Tony had never been nervous in S.H.I.E.L.D. headquarters before, but he’d never been happy to be here either.

Tony strode down the corridors until he reached the Winter Soldier’s cell. Four agents followed him into the padded space, double the usual amount. “How are you doing, guitar solo?” Tony asked as he sat opposite Barnes. His hands tapped on the surface between them.

“Migraine. The usual.” Barnes stared at Tony. The ex-Howling Commando was looking for something. Tony recognised that look. He barely contained his laughter. Perhaps he and Barnes would’ve gotten along in his old life, even after the events of Siberia. Tony supposed he’d never find out. This universe was what mattered.

“Well, something happened yesterday. Just so you know, I didn’t approve any of it.” Tony opened with a disclaimer. He was done shouldering other people’s mistakes.

“I figured.” Barnes noticed Tony’s too wide and too fake grin. He smiled back. “It didn’t make sense for you to screw me over now. Are you going to do anything about yesterday?”

Tony answered by reaching into his suit jacket. The agents fell for the distraction. They drew their guns and fired. S.H.I.E.L.D. was aware of Tony’s abilities. He had passed several strenuous security checks, yet despite the pat-downs, S.H.I.E.L.D. had still assumed Tony would be able to smuggle something in. The agents had been watching carefully in case Tony came with ulterior motives. They jumped at the first bait.

“What do you think? Clearly I’m not the following type.” Tony dodged the first round of tranquiliser shots. “Jarvis, fry them,” he said as the Winter Soldier sprang into action.
“With pleasure, Sir,” Jarvis answered from the cell’s speakers.

Sector by sector, the electricity in S.H.I.E.L.D. headquarters switched off. The cell descended into darkness. Tony scattered some emergency lights around the table. Despite missing his metal arm and being confined in a straitjacket, Barnes neutralised the agents using only his legs. In a dance of shadows, he tricked one of the agents into tranquillising one of their own, then knocked out the remaining three with a series of mid-air manoeuvres. He twisted in ways Tony wasn’t sure humans were meant to.

“Impressive moves.” Tony whistled. He retrieved the item from his jacket. It was a hologram display unit, plastic with one-way signal dampening to avoid triggering any sensors. Upon activation, a map of the restricted section appeared. It outlined the heavily populated areas, as well as a point of interest marked by a winking Iron Man emoji. “I assume this layout isn’t news to you?”

“I had two months to map out the facility.” Barnes said as Tony helped him out of the jacket. An alarm sounded in the compound.

“Touché.” Even Tony had categorised the flaws in S.H.I.E.L.D.’s security system from least to most exploitable. It must have been second nature for Barnes. “Their mainframe is down. It’s going to take them at least ten minutes to reboot. That door will remain locked until then.” Someone was pounding from the other side, but security measures worked both ways. “Got it memorised?” Tony gestured to the hologram.

“Yeah.” The Winter Soldier flexed his intact right arm. Months of restricted movement had seen the arm lose some of its original muscle mass, but for the time being, he had to make do.

“Good.” Tony turned off the hologram. He flipped the device upside down and pressed the buttons in a sequence. A glowing timer appeared. “We might want to step back for this.”

The pair retreated to the corner opposite to where Tony planted the device. When the countdown reached zero, a small explosion occurred. It incinerated the cell’s padding and damaged the concrete floor slab. Tony gave the spot a few more kicks. The slab crumbled under pressure, revealing the service corridor that was beneath the cell.

“You’ll have to punch your way out, but that shouldn’t be difficult, considering the head start.” Tony loosened his tie. He was going to get into so much shit for this. “There’s an arm waiting for you at the point of interest, along with the address of a safe house. It’s got enough supplies to last you through an apocalypse, not that you’ll need it. If everything goes well, I’ll contact you as soon as I can.”

“You made me another arm?” Barnes marvelled.

Tony coughed in embarrassment. “Hey, in my defence, I had two months to prep too.” He ran a hand through his hair. “Look, you don’t have to go to the safe house. If you want to take that arm and disappear that’s fine by me—”

“I’ll see you on the other side, Tony,” Barnes interrupted. He jumped through the hole and landed on the pile of rubbles. Once on the move, he disappeared within seconds.

“Well, I guess that’s that.” Tony muttered to the empty corridor. He marched back to his seat and stretched out his legs as the door was being cut open. “How are they doing, Jarvis?”

“The mainframe will reboot in three minutes. I will no longer be able to access this room. Would you like me to drive Mark Forty-Nine here, Sir?” Jarvis asked from the speakers.
“No, that won’t be necessary until my vitals fluctuate. Let’s keep this on the down low…for now.” Tony rocked on his seat for a few more minutes until the door was unceremoniously kicked down. Fury raced in with a swarm of agents. They noticed the hole in the cell and jumped in pursuit of Barnes, leaving Fury behind to enter a staring contest with Tony.

“He overpowered me.” Tony pouted. He batted his eyelashes innocently.

“He overpowered you,” Fury deadpanned. He glared at Tony using his good eye. “You are Iron Man, and he just overpowered you?”

“Hey, without the ‘Iron’, I’m just regular man. You are the one who took away my toys. Now you’re blaming me for not having my toys?” Tony splayed a hand across his chest in mock hurt. “You can ask them if you don’t believe me,” he gestured to the unconscious men on the floor, “but I doubt they saw much, just like your cameras.”

“We’ll find him, Stark.” Fury’s tone remained passive, but Tony could see the steel in his eyes. “You are only delaying the process. Without S.H.I.E.L.D.’s protection, Barnes can never walk as a free man.”

“Oh, I have no doubt you will find him. The question is, do you want to?” Tony flashed a toothy grin. It was a smile that sent shivers down the spine of his enemies. “Barnes is recovering. Isn’t that why you rushed things? For two months you’ve tried to recruit him. You know once he breaks free, you’ll lose him forever, so you’d rather hold onto him the hard way. This can go two ways from here. Either your agents can’t find him, he disappears and you and I both play pretend that he never existed, or you get to him on time, and I come clean with the boys in U.S.A.F. In that case, something tells me neither mommy nor daddy will get to keep the kid.”

Fury watched Tony lay out the options. There were other paths he could take, paths that would destroy all future possibilities of working with Tony again. Fury weighed the gains against the possible losses. Tony didn’t know what went through Fury’s mind, but he won the gamble. Fury instructed the agents to abort mission and return to headquarters. S.H.I.E.L.D. didn’t have any solid evidence to pin Barnes’ escape on Tony, and without that legal leverage they’d have to resort to desperate measures. Not even gaining control over The Winter Soldier was worth completely antagonising Tony Stark.

“You are willing to go a long way for the person who murdered your parents, Stark. I admit I misread you.” Fury’s posture loosened. It was almost as if failing the mission had lifted weight off his shoulders too.

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” Tony added.

Looking back, Tony could understand Fury’s reasoning. His parents were never mentioned again after the initial meeting. Barnes wasn’t emotionally connected with Tony at the time. It made little sense for Barnes to reveal his parents’ murder during their only unsupervised session.

Before coming to the B.A.R.F. session, Tony had only been informed of the date and location of the scene. He’d drafted the recovery plan with S.H.I.E.L.D. psychiatrists and taught their engineers how to operate B.A.R.F., but he hadn’t personally programmed a single frame of the memory. In hindsight, S.H.I.E.L.D. separating him from the creation process should have been enough to tip him off, yet S.H.I.E.L.D. had executed their plans carefully; their docile period beforehand had numbed Tony’s hyper-paranoia.

Based on the premise that Tony was oblivious to the truth behind his parent’s murder, the reveal would have been a brutal shock. Even if his father’s face was replaced, Tony would’ve recognised
the scene of the accident. He’d question what was going on and walk straight into Fury’s trap.

Tony would’ve abandoned Barnes, or worse, developed a personal vendetta against him. Through courtesy of foresight and a little honesty, Tony ignored the murder of his parents like it was old news. He concentrated on Fury’s unethical behaviour, questioned his morals, then without hesitation, broke Barnes out of a heavily armed spy agency at the expense of his own safety.

Tony was certain things would have ended badly had Fury not given up on pursuing the Winter Soldier, since turning Barnes over to the Armed Forces was never an option. That sector of the government was an entirely different shark tank. Tony was thankful Fury didn’t call him out on his bluff.

“He’s still a wanted man.” Fury raised a single eyebrow. “Nothing stays hidden forever.”

Tony smiled to himself. Of course, he could build Barnes a new life and keep him under the radar, but why waste his effort? Little did Fury know, someone who was much more concerned about Barnes’ well-being would enter the picture very soon. If memory served Tony correctly, he had less than a month to prepare for the arrival of Captain America.

Chapter End Notes

Yeay, Barnes is finally out and about! I know I keep promising to kick off the Avengers arc but looking at my fic outline, Tony's still got a few more things to sort out first. Unfortunately, I was away the past week and is a bit behind schedule, so there will only be two chapters in the next three weeks... Sorry guys. >.<
“Honey, I'm home,” Tony singsonged as the elevator doors parted to reveal the Stark Tower penthouse.

“In the kitchen, Sir,” Jarvis said.

Tony shrugged off his jacket and tossed it on the coatrack. Something smelled amazing. He jogged to the open-plan kitchen. Stephen was wrapped in a linen apron that proudly proclaimed: 'surgeons do it on the table.' He looked appetising in one of Tony’s shirts with the cuffs rolled back. A mixture boiled on the stove.

“Drain the pasta in three minutes and forty seconds, doc.” Stephen hummed to acknowledge Friday's instructions. He gave the pot one last stir, then moved on to other elements of the dish. “In a medium bowl, whisk together egg yolks, cream, and shredded Parmesan,” Friday’s bubbly voice advised. Stephen emptied the pre-measured ingredients into a large container and mixed them.

“Don’t just stand there, come in,” Stephen said without looking up from his task. It took Tony a while to realize Stephen was talking to him. He made his way over and wrapped his arms around the taller man's waist. He didn’t want to disrupt the cooking process, but he couldn’t resist the temptation either.

“I didn't know you were cooking.” Tony stood on his tiptoes and looked over Stephen’s shoulder. Stephen noticed the weight shift and huffed, but he bent his knees, so Tony wouldn’t have to strain himself. “I’m not complaining, but my stomach might self-digest if you don’t hurry.”

“Something tells me lifting the weight of an adult male off my shoulders might speed things up.” Stephen wiped his hands on a tea towel. With Tony glued to his back, the pair shuffled awkwardly down the kitchen.

“Might,” Tony emphasised unapologetically, “you don’t know for sure.”

“No, I suppose I don’t.” Tony didn’t have to look to know there was a wide grin on Stephen’s face. The sound of bubbling water and sizzling butter filled the space. The pair worked in comfortable silence. Although it was more like Stephen worked while Tony clung to him like an awkward koala, but no one needed to point that out.

“Prepare to drain the pasta in ten seconds, doc,” Friday reminded. Tony snorted in laughter. Friday was more invested in their lunch than the two of them who would be eating it. Tony smiled to himself. It reminded him of the days when Friday first gained consciousness in his previous life. She’d quickly learn that leaving the pasta in for a few extra seconds wouldn’t hurt, but for now, Tony was content with enjoying these little snippets of adorableness. He wouldn’t get many more; all
Stark AIs matured rapidly.

“Thank you, Friday,” Stephen turned and gave Tony a stern look. Tony grinned sheepishly. It wasn’t his intention to discourage the kid. The pair shuffled together again so Stephen could drain the pasta. It was made from scratch, if the pasta roller clamped to the bench top was any indication.

“I missed this,” Tony said as he took in the organised but used kitchen. “The tower was dead without you.”

“Hmm… Hardly any of us cooked before. We lived off takeout ordered by Jarvis.”

“Stephanie, I don’t know if you’ve heard of something called a ‘moment’, but you’re ruining one right now.”

Stephen snickered at Tony’s words. “My apologies, I’ll research that term for future reference.”

Tony turned Stephen around. He came face to face with Stephen for the first time since he returned home. There was a smear of flour on Stephen’s nose. Tony couldn’t tell if it had been there before he arrived, but his heart skipped a beat at the sight of it. There was something…homely about it that he wasn’t prepared for. For once it was still early. The sun was high in the sky. Light flooded into the kitchen and bathed everything in a soft, golden glow. Stephen was looking at him, smiling, oblivious to the smear of flour that threatened his aesthetic as the unflappable neurosurgeon. Tony wouldn’t mind coming home to this for the rest of his life.

“I think I’m in love with you.”

Tony gazed into Stephen’s sky-blue eyes. They were beautiful, filled with naked adoration and surprise…wait, surprise? Tony drew in a sharp breath. He did not just say that out loud. “I—I—ugh, mean I’m in love with your pasta. Yes, pasta. You should cook more,” Tony backtracked as he stammered along. “I’ll go set the table.” Tony bolted from the kitchen, ignoring Stephen’s call. He was halfway to the dining table when he realised he didn’t bring any cutlery with him. The living area was called open-plan for a reason. Stephen shook his head from where he stood and watched Tony slink around in defeat.

Tony was going to have a strong word with the architects about this. Did they have no sense of privacy? Stephen handed Tony the plates he had set aside previously. Tony accepted them. He wanted to return to his task and erase his memory of the past five minutes. The great Tony Stark, scientist extraordinaire with genius level intellect hadn’t accidentally admitted his love for his boyfriend, then freaked out and tried to make a run for it.

As Tony turned to leave, Stephen pulled him back by the waist. He leaned down for a chaste kiss. “For what it’s worth, I ‘think’ I love you too.” Stephen’s smile dimmed the sunlight around him. He had an unfair advantage in making Tony feel light-headed.

“Tables. Yeah, the plates should be tabled.” Tony was certain Jarvis would play this scene back later just to spite him. Could it be considered second-hand embarrassment if he was watching footage of himself?

To the credit of both Stephen and Friday, the pasta was delicious. Tony had three helpings plus dessert, by the time he was done, he had to convince Stephen to go for a walk in Central Park.

“So, I guess you’ll be heading back now, huh?” Since they were in public and didn’t wish to be disturbed, Tony had worn his MIT hoodie with a baseball cap. Completed with non-designer shades, the outfit should be enough disguise for the park’s light business hour traffic.
“Yeah.” Stephen strolled alongside Tony. He looked over his shoulder. No one was paying them attention. Stephen gave Tony’s hand a light squeeze. Startled by the rare public display of affection, Tony returned the touch. They held onto each other’s hand and strolled around the lake.

“We can work this out. There’s an eight-hour time difference between New York and Kathmandu, but outside of training sessions, I can align my schedule with yours, so we can spend more time together,” Stephen offered.

“I’ll tell Jarvis to shift my meetings,” Tony tightened his hold around Stephen, “if you’ll let him access your calendar.”

“Of course, that was the plan.”

They stopped in a small niche framed by trees. Central Park was beautiful in autumn. The trees were cloaked in shades of red, orange, and yellow. The vibrant colours contrasted against the bronze hues of branches and fallen leaves. It offered an illusion of privacy. Stephen leaned in for an embrace.

“I’ve missed this too. Kamar-Taj is too cold for my liking,” Stephen admitted. He toyed with his watch gauntlet. “Just a thought, since I’m all… magical now. If you need anything done, all you have to do is ask.”

Tony poked Stephen in the chest with a displeased finger. “Nuh-uh, don’t get me started on this. You are a civilian, which means no fist fights with villain of the week. You see danger, you run the opposite way.”

“Who said anything about fist fights? I was thinking along the lines of same-day delivery,” Stephen said slyly, “but now that you’ve mentioned it—”

“No. It’s not up for discussion.”

“Allright.” Stephen raised his hands in the air. “We’ll reassess in the future.”

“No, we won’t.” Tony tapped Stephen once on the forehead for good measure, then relinked their hands to continue their walk.

“By the way Tony… while you were away, I returned to Kamar-Taj to retrieve some books. The Ancient One summoned me.”

Tony’s head snapped to Stephen. “Why? Are you in trouble for sneaking out?” Stephen didn’t seem hurt. Tony was certain either Jarvis or Friday would have alerted him otherwise.

Stephen shook his head. “No, for all intents and purposes, the meeting was actually about you.”

“Me?”

“Yeah. She asked some questions about you, oddly specific ones too. Like what was the date of our first meeting and how you styled your hair. She asked that I bring you to Kamar-Taj before I could schedule a meeting with her.”

“Does she see outsiders often?” Tony skimmed through the events of his previous life. He was certain they’d never met, be it in this timeline or the last.

“Hardly, if ever. She wouldn’t tell me the purpose of this meeting.”

Tony shrugged. He’d faced worse before. “Then I guess I better not keep her waiting.”
“Welcome.” A voice greeted Tony upon his entrance. It rang in the empty space with authority. “Have a seat.” The woman who sat behind the tea table was dressed in simple robes. She appeared to be in her thirties. There were faint scars across her clean-shaven head.

“For someone who claims to be ‘ancient’, you don’t look very old,” Tony quipped. He took a seat opposite The Ancient One and studied the room’s décor. It wasn’t over the top like he’d expected; no preserved animal entrails or mappings of mystic energies.

“Looks can be deceiving. Tea?” The Ancient One offered as she waved her hand. Two cups and a steaming ceramic pot appeared from thin air.

“Please, no sugar.” Tony considered the spectacle. Last time he checked, relativity didn’t work that way, but he had also faced down extra-terrestrial armies, fought gods of legends, and seen his own boyfriend open a portal from the other end of the world. At this point, he’d stopped questioning things altogether. “I was told you are a sorcerer. The leader of the ‘Masters of the Mystic Arts’.”

“I’ve been known by many titles, that is one I associate with.” Tony’s scepticism didn’t seem to offend her. “I am the last of a long line of Sorcerers Supreme. Like how ‘Iron Man’ protects the world from physical threats, we defend Earth from mystical ones, and have done so for millennia.”

“Okaaay…” Tony reminded himself that he had to be respectful or risk jeopardising Stephen’s stay. “To what do I owe the pleasure of this meeting?” He thanked The Ancient One as he was presented with his drink.

“Oh, I don’t know,” The Ancient One said. Her head tilted to the side.

“You don’t know?”

“Despite how some think I see all, there are many things that remain off limits to me.” She took a sip from her own cup. “Rarely am I refused access to the potential futures of people, but I suppose you and Mr. Strange have more in common than what meets the eye,” the sorceress mused. “To those who suffer, be it by coincidence, luck, or their own intentions, if they can reach Kamar-Taj, then I will show them the way. But I can see that unlike Mr. Strange, you are not lost in that regard.” The Ancient One gestured to the spot where the arc reactor once glowed. “I do not know why fate has brought you to me. I sensed the necessity of our conversation today, and I know you have questions only I can answer. There is something…otherworldly about you.”

Seeing Tony’s stiffness, she smiled. “But I have no interest in your past, like you have none in mine. Whatever your secrets may be, this meeting is more for your benefit than mine.”

“I do have questions about Stephen’s training.” Tony emphasised the word to express his concern.

“This meeting isn’t about Mr. Strange. It’s about you.” The Ancient One gestured at Tony. “You may approach Master Mordo another time if you wish to discuss matters that do not require my
assistance. However, you sit before me today for questions concerning yourself, of that I am certain.”

“That’s ridiculous. I don’t know you and I have nothing to ask you. I came here because I wanted to see what Stephen has gotten himself into.” Tony had exchanged enough words to deduce that he did not like talking with The Ancient One. When he spoke, she looked toward him, but not at him. She observed as if she could see past his physical shell and into his soul, gaining access to lives beyond the one he currently led. It was a possibility he’d rather not entertain.

“Are you certain, Tony Stark?” she asked with unblinking intensity.

Tony wanted to back his previous statement, but in truth, a question did pop into his mind then and there. Since his resurrection, time-travel, or whatever it was, he had searched far and wide in the realm of science to understand how, or why he had experienced the journey through time. Was his past life a memory, or was it all a dream? What happened to the world he’d left behind? What became of ‘Tony Stark’ after Siberia? How was the manipulation of space-time possible? Could it happen again? Had he jumped across universes, or had he simply reverted to a previous version of himself in the same universe?

“Stephen said you’re familiar with the ‘Multiverse’,” Tony said before he could stop himself.

“I would not call myself ‘familiar’, considering the complexity of space-time and the sheer number of universes I have not yet seen, but yes, I do possess more knowledge than most on the topic. Almost like how a scientist would understand matter. You toy with elements of your choosing, but know not the extent of material existence.” For the weight of the subject, The Ancient One seemed oddly at ease.

“What is it?” Tony leaned forward, intrigued by the analogy. “Do we really live in one universe among many? Can that be proven? Are there ways to travel between them?”

“To put it simply, the Multiverse comprises of alternate universes which share a universal hierarchy, but it is a mere subsection of the larger Omniverse, the collection of all alternate realities. Many of the universes in a Multiverse are born through divergence, where a world-shaping event with different potential outcomes gives rise to parallel timelines. One cannot travel across the Multiverse by leaving one reality then entering another, one can only give birth to more outcomes, more possibilities. There is an infinite number of outcomes.”

“How is that possible? That one event shapes an entire universe? What fuels these changes?” Tony pressed. The Ancient One’s explanations only brought forth more questions.

“An ant is born to a colony. The colony may thrive in small cavities, or occupy large territories, consisting of millions of individuals. Every day the ant leaves its nest to find food. It’s adjusted to the elements which impact its survival but remain oblivious to other facets of the world.” The Ancient One manipulated the energies around her. She conjured portals to display different scenes around the earth. Cities of steel and glass, forests brimming with wildlife, volcanos seconds away from eruption, deserts shaped by golden dunes… They flashed before Tony as he sat unmoving in Kamar-Taj.

“Just because you cannot see something, cannot feel something, doesn’t mean it does not exist. Who are you? What are you? You are both insignificant and of paramount importance; a speck of dust in the grand scheme of the Multiverse, but capable of redefining existence itself.”

“I—” Tony marvelled at the shifting paradoxes of nature. Wasn’t this what science had struggled to achieve for centuries? To discover new dimensions, to redefine existence, to know that humans are just one sentient species among many, in a universe among many?
“Show me…show me more.” Tony’s thirst for knowledge surpassed his prejudice against magic. He despised the illogical and senseless, but perhaps Stephen was right. Perhaps magic really was just another form of science.

“You soul is fragile, there are breaks where there should not be.” The Ancient One hesitated. She closed her eyes then reopened them. This time they were filled with determination. “But I must try.” She extended her arm and touched Tony’s chest with the tip of her finger.

There were no words capable of describing what Tony felt next. It was as if his essence was forced from his body. He drifted. Away from the room he was in, away from Kamar-Taj, and away from Nepal. His spirit left earth. His soul touched the depth of space as he witnessed the shift in colours from galaxy to galaxy. He observed in silent awe, from the surreal beauty of luminous gas clouds to the blinding light of stars. Tony witnessed them as if he, too, were eternal.

However, between each galaxy capable of sustaining life, there were voids filled with darkness, black holes where gravity pulled so strongly, not even light could escape. Matter was squeezed into tiny pockets, a single point of convergence where nothing existed, yet at the same time led to other dimensions and beyond.

Tony reached out, curious.

“Enough.” A voice pulled him from his trance. Tony’s soul crashed into his body. All at once his surroundings returned to him. It reminded him that all he had seen was a mere corner of the universe, and that he was but one man living in a world with layers of complexities.

“I can show you no more, the rest is up to you,” The Ancient One said.

“I don’t understand.” Tony fumbled to check the realness of his corporeal form. “I’ve barely explored our dimension. What’s on the other side of that…thing? What lays beyond?”

The Ancient One did not respond. She stood from her seat, uncaring as to whether Tony would follow. Tony trod behind her. The pair stopped before a latticed window. The woman whom Tony had considered a fraud basked in the sunlight pouring through the diamond-shaped openings. She soaked in the warmth with reverence, as if chasing away the phantom chills from a life long past.

“Unlike Mr Strange, who has barely begun his journey, you have come a long way from where you started. In fact, your footsteps trace further than what this universe should allow.” Tony opened his mouth, but he was hushed by The Ancient One. “I was once young and foolish too, seeking all the answers and opening all the doors. Never did I stop to question if those answers should be found, or those doorways opened. In time I have come to realise that the universe gives and takes in equal measures. I cannot see into your past, nor can I impact your future. I can only show you the way. It is how the universe intended it to be.”

“Mr. Strange is gaining momentum, he is absorbing knowledge at a rapid pace. This knowledge informs the decisions he will make, and day by day those decisions will carry him down his destined path.” The Ancient One traced the wood grain on the lattice with her fingers. “As his counterpart, all I can ask is that you slow down. I sense your soul is weary. Your actions have granted you new possibilities but have also kept you from others. Time is fleeting, yet death is what gives life meaning. Slow down, rest. You have earned this moment of peace. Keep a watchful eye over the world around you, and trust that in time, you will find your purpose.”
Tony is in Kamar-Taj! *runs around in circles excitedly* He will play in the magic world a bit longer before returning to New York.
Tony left the meeting in a daze. “Why were you summoned?” Stephen asked as he pushed off from the column he had been leaning against. “What was discussed?”

Tony took a deep breath to steady himself. He’d spent decades studying under the overarching principles of science. He came to Kamar-Taj confident in his abilities, but The Ancient One had shattered those beliefs so completely and so thoroughly, Tony no longer knew what to believe.

“We began normally, she offered me tea…” Tony pondered the outcome, whatever that might be. “We talked about space magic mumbo-jumbo. I asked some questions she didn’t have answers to. She told me to slow down—” Tony shook his head. “She then advised me to take up yoga. I can’t believe this.”

“Keeping in touch with your body’s natural flow of energy.” Stephen hummed. “That does sound like her. The Ancient One is also an advocate of acupuncture.”

“You can’t be serious.” That was the solution to his problems? Yoga and acupuncture? “On the plus side, she granted me unlimited entry here. You can also spend time at the tower. Apparently, it’s bad for ‘focus’,” Tony air quoted, “but we can do so at our discretion.”

The pair passed a group of apprentices training in the courtyard. Tony watched from his elevated vantage point. Despite his pretended light-heartedness, his meeting with The Ancient One had opened his eyes to a new world of wonders. But beneath those breath taking scenes of astral beauty, laid darkness so deadly, voids so vast, he could not hope to comprehend, let alone control.

What was his place in all this madness? Would anything he do make a difference? A memory resurfaced from the depth of Tony’s mind. It was the one he’d tried the hardest to bury. The cold seeped into his bones as he stood alone on an alien planet. He had no recollection of how he got there, only a dreaded sense of inevitability, that this moment was the end to which all possibilities led.

His comrades lay fallen at his feet…nearly everyone he knew had been slain in battle. There were bruised and battered bodies as far as the eye could see, and so much blood it coloured the frozen world red. Tony fell to his knees. He checked the pulse of Captain America and felt nothing. The man beneath him lashed out, grabbing Tony’s arm in an iron grip. ‘You could have saved us,’ the captain choked with his dying breath. Blood oozed from his nostrils. ‘Why didn’t you do more?’


“Yeah, always,” Tony said as he ran a hand over his face. Not this memory again. He had less than
six months until the first alien invasion. He didn’t have time for this.

Stephen didn’t buy his answer. “Tony, remember what you told me after the accident?”

Tony knew where this conversation was taking him, and he didn’t like it one bit. “Stephanie, I said a lot of things—”

“It’s fine to be not alright.” Stephen paused for his words to sink in. “I know at times things may seem like a one-man show. I’m probably the least qualified person to tell you this. Hell, I can’t count the number of patients I’ve hijacked from other surgeons because I thought they were incompetent, but you don’t have to do this alone. We can work things out together.” Tony looked away. If there was one person he could come clean with his past, it was Stephen, but whenever he tried to bring up the subject, the words died in his throat.

“Were you introduced to your astral form?” Stephen pressed.

“Is that what it’s called now?” Tony tapped on his watch gauntlet out of habit, which reminded him of his reliable AI. “Jarvis, what were my vitals like when she did… the weird thing?”

“Calm, as if you were asleep, Sir,” Jarvis informed. “My sensors detected an energy spike. However, the results were irregular, as if I failed to pick up certain wavelengths.”

“Remind me to look into that.” Tony wondered if the energy harnessed by sorcerers were similar to other types of magic. Those he had encountered previously varied from mutant to Asgardian. If he could find a way to read those wavelengths, perhaps he’d finally be able to ‘see’ what he was up against.

Most types of magic were invisible to the naked eye. Being able to detect them would give him a considerable edge. Once he had accumulated enough data, he could assign magical signatures to different kind of spells, even individuals, like how each human being had a unique DNA sequence. The same principle could be used to upgrade Stark Tower defences. He could integrate it into the fight pattern analysis for his suit. Collecting the readings would take time, but it wouldn’t be wasted effort. Between the number of sorcerers training in Kamar-Taj and the population of powered individuals, Earth was becoming a cocktail of supernatural beings. If he wanted to maintain his advantage, then it was high time he delved into the Mystical Arts.

Sensing that Tony was deep in thought, Stephen decided to let this one slip. He’d noticed a pattern to Tony’s behaviour. Whenever something was wrong, Tony would never verbalise it. He’d quietly have his moment of panic, then work on finding a solution himself. If someone noticed his behaviour, he’d either deflect or clench up like a clam. The same formula was applied to issues big and small.

Stephen had tried to understand why Tony operated this way. In the end, he came to an obvious conclusion: Tony lacked trust. The number of people Tony trusted could be counted with one hand, and if Stephen were to dig deeper, of the people he knew, Colonel Rhodes, despite his friendship with Tony, worked for the Air Force. If it came down to it, the colonel would place his sense of duty for his country above Tony, as evident in him turning over what later became the Iron Patriot.

That entire fiasco had occurred while Tony was dying…which narrowed the list down to himself and Pepper, two untrained, unenhanced civilians. They didn’t have the slightest chance of protecting themselves if things were to go wrong, hence the less they knew, the better.

Stephen didn’t blame Tony for his decisions; it was the hand he was dealt, but that kind of behaviour wasn’t healthy. One day, Tony would encounter problems he couldn’t solve by himself, genius or
Whilst Stephen tried to find the least confronting way to approach the subject with Tony, Tony was planning his next course of action. A man from the group of apprentices caught his eye. Stephen had briefed Tony on the social hierarchy of Kamar-Taj. Novices wore white. They were the least experienced, having yet to draw energy from other dimensions for the first time. Apprentices wore red, which was what Stephen ranked currently. Only disciples, or otherwise known as Masters were allowed custom garment. The man, dark-skinned with green robes approached them.

“Stephen,” he greeted, “I hope I’m not intruding.”

“Not at all.” Stephen seemed to be on friendly terms with him. “Tony, I’d like you to meet Master Mordo. He’s the one who’s been training me.” Tony and Mordo traded nods.

“Which explains why you are still in one piece,” Mordo chimed.

“Yeah…The Ancient One’s methods, while effective, are not sustainable.” Stephen made a mental note to ask Mordo not to bring up Everest around Tony. “Mordo, meet Dr Anthony Stark, owner of Stark Industries, Iron Man, and—” Stephen cleared his throat, “my significant other.”

Tony was more surprised than Mordo at the mention. Mordo raised his eyebrows for five entire seconds but otherwise didn’t comment on it. “Have you been introduced to Kamar-Taj, Dr Stark?” Mordo asked.

“Nope, Stephen opened a portal into the meeting room, still not used to that.” Tony clapped his hands together. “And call me Tony.”

“Very well, Tony. You are in capable hands. Stephen will show you the facilities. You may begin training immediately if you wish, but otherwise, we suggest you take the day to settle in.”

Tony raised both of his hands. “Wow, let’s hold on for a minute here.” Did Mordo just say what Tony thought he did? “Who said anything about training?”

“Excuse me for presuming,” Mordo looked equally confused, “but all those who embark on a pilgrimage to Kamar-Taj seek to be trained in the Mystic Arts,” he stated as if reciting a fact.

“I’m more like moral support, here on a visitor pass,” Tony said. “Stephen, you knew anything about this?” Stephen shook his head. “I don’t even know if The Ancient One wants me to learn magic.”

“Knowledge is taught freely in Kamar-Taj. If The Ancient One did not wish for you to learn, you would have been denied entry to begin with,” Mordo said as apprentices conjured amber markings in the backdrop. “Believe me, if The Ancient One wanted to remove you from these premises, you would know.” Tony looked to Stephen, who gave a firm nod. According to Stephen, he had made some embarrassingly disrespectful assumptions when he first arrived. “Of course, you will not be forced to partake in training against your will. If you wish to only observe, that is up to you, but know you are not kept from learning the Mystic Arts.”

“Thanks, I’ll uh…think about it,” Tony said.

“Very well, I will leave you two to it.” Mordo turned to Stephen. “Remember, training first thing tomorrow morning.” With that, he bid the pair farewell.
Tony sat on a stone bench with his laptop. Stephen sparred with Mordo in the distance. The pair traded blows. At first Tony had been hesitant to take his eyes off Stephen, but in the end, he convinced himself that it was for the best. No one was safe from the madness to come. If Stephen could protect himself, it would drastically improve his chances of survival. Of course, it would also place him in the front line of fire, considering how ‘gifted’ individuals were always targeted. Not to mention the greater power, greater responsibility spiel—

*Nope.* Tony shook himself from his thoughts. He was not going to go there. Swallowing his unease, Tony returned his attention to his laptop. “Alright buddy, time to get to work.” His fingers ghosted over the keypad, leaving lines of code alien to anyone but himself. “All sensors on standby. Aim for the group making portals. They have the steadiest output.” Contraptions of varying sizes littered the surfaces around him. Since Tony didn’t know which wavelengths he was missing, he had every portable sensor he owned transferred to Kamar-Taj this morning.

“Calibrating,” Jarvis said. “Systems online in three, two, one.” On cue, data began flowing in Tony’s laptop. Depending on the device it was recorded with, results appeared in the form of charts, graphs, some even raw numbers. They filled the monitor. “Eliminating duplicates…” Jarvis culled a handful of data streams. “Remaining sensors are one, two, six, ten, fourteen, and twenty-nine. Overlaying results…”

Tony stared at the outcome. They’d gotten more than he expected. “Simulate environment, establish real-time feedback.” The frame of his sunglasses expanded, projecting an externalised HUD. In the projection, apprentices were replaced with wireframe models. Jarvis mapped their energy output onto the wireframe. Body parts lit up as a result. The most notable areas were the apprentice’s chest, head, and hands.

“Concentrate, *Stephen.*” Stephen barely registered the warning before he landed on his back. A frustrated Mordo stood over him. “This is why we don’t allow visitors.” Mordo offered Stephen a hand to get up. “He’s impressive.” Mordo gestured in Tony’s direction. In the backdrop, the engineer typed furiously on his laptop. Flanked by technology in their sleek, minimalistic glory, Tony was a stark contrast to his environment.

“You tell me.” Stephen rubbed his shoulders.

“Is he why you’ve been absent?” Mordo tried to sound neutral, but Stephen knew he disapproved.

“Only for a day, which I had off.”

“I don’t think you need me to remind you the value of commitment. He’s a distraction.”

The pair took a break from sparring to catch their breath. Stephen snuck another glance at Tony. He appeared oblivious to their conversation. “Nonsense, do you know who he is? If anything, he’s here to help.” Sensing that Mordo was unconvinced, Stephen lowered his voice. “Following my accident, I was a bitter, broken man.” Stephen held out his scarred hands, they trembled in the air. “Tony helped me get back on my feet. I know he’s sceptical of magic, but who isn’t? Give him time. He’ll warm up to this place.”

“I know precisely who he is, which is why I’m telling you he is a poor match. We are more
connected to the outside world than you think. He is a brilliant man, there’s no denying that, but he is also proud, headstrong. He’s…” Not meaning to offend, Mordo cut himself short.

“You can say it,” Stephen said.

Mordo considered it for a moment. “He’s promiscuous.”

It took everything Stephen had to keep a straight face. “Seriously, that’s the problem?” Closing the distance between them, Stephen dropped his voice further. “Trust me when I say that Tony’s the least womanising playboy you will ever meet. Eighty percent of articles on his sex life is straight up slander.”

“Excuse me—” Tony called without looking up, “but the sound amplifier on these glasses are very expensive, and they are in working order.” Tony closed his laptop. He came face to face with the pair in the courtyard. “Alright, I think I’m ready for something more complex. Give us a good show.”

Mordo cleared his throat, the poor man was beet red. He avoided eye contact with Tony as he retrieved a rod that was resting on top of a rack. “What’s that?” Stephen asked. The stick looked humble with its plain appearance.

“This is a relic,” Mordo explained. “Some magic is too powerful to sustain so we imbue objects with it, allowing them to take the strain we cannot. This is the Staff of Living Tribunal. There are many relics, the Wand of Watoomb, the Vaulting Boots of Valtorr…” Sparks flew from the boots Mordo wore.

“Really just roll off the tongue, don’t they?” Stephen mumbled under his breath.

“Do you hire someone in a broom closet to come up with those?” Tony called from the backdrop. The pair looked at each other and burst out laughing. “I’m sorry! Oh, reset, we’re resetting!” Tony cackled.

Mordo rolled his eyes. “I can see why you two attract each other.”

“Great minds think alike,” Stephen said. He was caught off guard by the blow that landed next to him. Amber segments extended the Staff of Living Tribunal into a longer, whip-like cane. “When do I get my relic?” Stephen asked as he concentrated on the fight.

“When you are ready.” Mordo wielded the staff with frightening efficiency. He and Stephen circled each other. Tony examined the staff. It was almost as if Mordo had switched weapons when he wasn’t looking. There were runes engraved on the surface. Now that the relic had awakened, it burned bright with energy. Fire flickered in the joints, the bright sparks contrasted sharply against segments made from unknown wood.

It looked alive.

“I think I’m ready,” Stephen said.

“You are ready when the relic decides you are ready.” Mordo crooked his head to the side. “For now, conjure a weapon.” Stephen nodded at Mordo’s words. He summoned a whip of Eldritch magic. Tony looked on nervously from the sidelines. The tangible lines of light deflected Mordo’s blows. The blow landed on the pavement instead. The staff cracked the surface and sent shards of stone flying across the courtyard.

Tony covered the hand that donned the watch gauntlet. It twitched from the urge to fire. He had
years of martial arts training. While he might not be as skilled in hand-to-hand combat as some of the other members of the Avengers, his reflexes were far from non-existent.

There was no mistaking it; this was combat training, but why would Stephen need to learn how to fight if he was here to cure his hands? Tony trailed the doctor as he fought. Stephen’s form had gained considerable mass in the past two months. His exposed arms bulged with muscles that hadn’t been there previously.

Stephen had never been lanky, but he’d never been toned either. Stephen’s reflexes were improving too, along with his body coordination. He circled his enemy with carefully placed footsteps. The realisation sparked an unsettling feeling in Tony’s stomach. Now that he’d seen it, he couldn’t un-see it. Stephen was becoming increasingly like himself, a man who piloted a 225-pound suit, who trained as a superhero to nullify threats.

“Fight!” Mordo exclaimed. “Fight like your life depended on it—” Mordo clearly had the upper hand. Stephen was too inexperienced. The older sorcerer leapt into the air. His boots trod nothingness as if he was on solid ground. He rounded Stephen and landed a solid punch. Stephen crashed onto the pavement, hard.

Tony forced himself to hold still. Stephen didn’t need to be coddled. He shouldn’t be coddled. Stephen was his own man. He’d need the training one day to fight off dangers Tony couldn’t foresee. Tony knew all that, but it didn’t make the nails digging into his palm sting any less. Tony had extended the watch gauntlet without realising it. If Mordo didn’t stop, Tony would’ve blasted the man to shreds.

“—because one day, it may.” Mordo watched Stephen pick himself up. He didn’t offer assistance this time. Tony caught The Ancient One watching them. She had an unreadable expression on her face. They must’ve made quite the spectacle, between Mordo’s relic, Stephen’s magic, and Tony’s technology beeping wildly at the energy fluctuations. “Let’s continue this another day,” Mordo said, ending the session.

“Question—” Tony asked as the Sorcerer Supreme redirected her attention to other pupils. “I’ve been meaning to ask: just how ‘ancient’ is The Ancient One?”

“No one knows the age of the Sorcerer Supreme, only that she’s Celtic and never talks of her past,” Mordo said.

“You followed her even though you don’t know?” Stephen was surprised. Mordo had been at Kamar-Taj for some time. He remained fiercely loyal to The Ancient One. Stephen had always assumed Mordo shared a deeper bond with his mentor, yet that didn’t seem to be the case.

“I know she’s steadfast but unpredictable, merciless yet kind. She made me what I am.” Mordo marched forward with steady footsteps. He paid the implication no mind. “Trust your teacher and don’t lose your way,” he said as he and Stephen stored their gear.


Stephen swallowed nervously at the comment. If there was one person who hated to take things at face value, it was Tony. To top everything off, Tony now had a personal stake in the credibility of Kamar-Taj. Stephen could see this conversation going downhill, fast.

“How do you trust someone if you know next to nothing about them?” Tony walked up to them as if he was pitching an idea he knew the director board had no choice but to pass. “Isn’t that already losing your way? Unless your way is to blindly follow, in which case you do you.”
“Tony,” Stephen warned.

“What?” Tony asked despite knowing why Stephen had intervened. “Principles that can’t withstand questioning aren’t solid principles.” He looked to Mordo challengingly. “Though having certainty is a nice sentiment.”

“Tony,” Stephen tried again, more sternly this time.

“Let him speak.” Stephen recognised the defensiveness in Mordo’s stance. He respected Mordo and would’ve preferred that Tony didn’t get off on the wrong foot with the man, but Tony had a point. Stephen had been training for two months, yet he still had no idea why Kamar-Taj functioned the way it did. Why was The Ancient One teaching them magic? He doubted any of the trainees knew.

Tony did not, however, need to word it so bluntly.

“We once thought our planet was the centre of the universe. The sun, the moon, the stars… everything revolved around us, and before that the earth was flat,” Tony continued. The group had come to a halt. “I once thought I knew all the forces, ones that existed on earth anyway.” Stephen drew in his brows at those words. “Until I had my ‘astral form’ pushed from my body and saw things I never imagined possible. Where would I be if I hadn’t questioned? Those who have done no wrong have nothing to hide.”

Disapproval flashed across Mordo’s features. “There are some things we are not meant to understand. The Ancient One protects this world. She shields us from darkness. You have no idea what kind of responsibilities rests on her shoulder.” He spoke as if he’d seen the alternative himself. “No knowledge is forbidden in Kamar-Taj, only certain practices, your willing blindness will only keep you from learning.”

Tony squinted. “Not meant to understand? Usually when someone tells you that it means one of two things. Either you are not ready for the truth yet, or they are conniving behind you back. Take your pick—”

Stephen coughed loudly. The attention of both men snapped to him. “I have a lesson with Master Hamir this afternoon. I will be heading back for a shower.” The hard look in Stephen’s eyes indicated there was no room for discussion. Tony had crossed the line, and from the looks of it, Tony realised too.

“Fine,” Tony sighed. “You boys go on ahead, I’ll stay back and wrap up some calculations.”

Mordo looked like he wanted to say more, but he was discouraged by a firm shake of Stephen’s head. In the end, the sorcerers left without another word. Tony’s gaze bore holes into Stephen’s back. He stared in their direction long after they were gone.

Chapter End Notes

Tis the season to be jolly! Merry early Christmas everybody! There will still be an update next week, but unfortunately, I am in need of a new beta for the Christmas period. Would anyone be up for the job? Pretty please with an IronStrange cherry on top? ;D
There were thousands of ways you could’ve worded that,” Stephen said as soon as Tony’s front foot crossed the threshold. “Yet you choose the most offensive one.”

“I thought you were heading back for a shower.” Tony lugged a cartful of machinery behind him. He groaned when he realised it was too wide to fit through the door. Even the architecture hated him.

“And I thought you were wrapping up some calculations.” Stephen crossed his arms. He looked unimpressed with Tony and his assortment of contraptions. The two stared at each other. Stephen showed no intention of helping. Tony bit his bottom lip and proceeded to unload the cart by himself. Stephen watched Tony double back and forth, making a small pile of machinery in the corner of the room.

“Would it kill you to ask for help?” Stephen’s mask of annoyance cracked. He rolled up his sleeves and joined.

“Yes, it physically pains me,” Tony mumbled with a sensor under each arm. The pair worked in stiff silence until the cart was cleared. “Was the training a ruse to get me to stop talking?”

“No. I do have a lesson with Master Hamir, but I wanted to talk to you in private first.”

Great. Tony rolled his eyes. He could just see this going up in flames. “We’re already doing that. Fire away.”

“I’m not here to pick a fight.” Stephen ran a hand through his hair. He grimaced as he struggled to find the right words. “I just wanted to…talk.”

“About what?”

“Everything. This isn’t about distrusting Mordo, or even The Ancient One. This is about you shutting yourself off and thinking everyone’s out to get you. You have a habit of zoning out when you encounter a problem. You never talk to anyone about them and it’s worrying,” Stephen said. The room came to an awkward halt. “Pepper told me how long it took you to confess you were dying.”

“She did? Do you guys meet up for secret movie nights too? Because I feel left out.” Tony wasn’t going to escape unscathed, so he did his best to lighten the mood.

Stephen saw straight through Tony’s ruse. “You waited until the last three months—” Twenty-four hours. Tony mentally corrected. “—to tell someone, when you’ve known for over a year that the reactor was poisoning you.” Stephen shook his head. “Pepper told me to give you time. She said you were slowly improving on your own, that I should stand back because when you needed help, I
would know, and for the longest time, I thought you were fine.” The sharpness in Stephen’s eyes was unmistakable; he had finally seen through Tony's merry disguise. “I had been a complete fool. It doesn’t have to be me, but you should reach out more, place some trust in others. And for the sake of my sanity, ask for help when you need it.”

Tony swallowed hard. He recalled all the times when he did reach out, only to be ignored by the people around him. His fear invalidated, his trauma brushed aside in favour of someone else’s. Everything started when aliens flew out of a wormhole. He couldn’t sleep so he tinkered for days on end. No one understood, not even Pepper. Then came Ultron. That was when he lost his so-called ‘team’. He was seen as a crazy control-freak when all he wanted to do was protect the people he couldn’t live without.

The Accords had been the last straw. He’d promised time and again that the document could be amended, that the Avengers had to operate under official oversight. He tried to keep the ‘team’ together, while the person he had looked up to for years as the moral compass abandoned them to chase after a ghost. He went to Leipzig, begged for his ‘team’ to stand down or risk being locked up like criminals. He went to Siberia to reconcile, to help, to make amends. Look at where that got him. Tony could still remember choking on his own blood, staring emptily at the shield his father had made as his vision slowly faded to black.

Reach out. Tony scoffed. “Yeah, tried that one before. Didn’t exactly work out.”

“You can’t endure everything by yourself. You are the one who taught me that.” Stephen was at his wit’s end. “When I first lost the use of my hands, I isolated myself. You told me to snap out of it—”

“That couldn’t have been more different.” Tony fought the urge to cross his arms. He ran through the steps to appear confident in his mind. Stand up straight with shoulders back, maintain eye contact, pocket both hands if they were going to fidget, keep the chest area open…

“How are they different?” Stephen pressed.

“They are different, because—” Now it was Tony’s turn to try and find the words. “Because—” He panicked when he couldn’t. Tony had assumed that he’d healed psychologically, and in many ways, he had, but the road to recovery was a long and winding path. The events of his past life had left lasting scars, and those scars, whether he wanted to admit it or not, had greatly influenced his actions to date.

The raw emotions in Stephen’s eyes stung like silent punches. Tony didn't enjoy fighting alone. He felt the polar opposite because he feared loneliness more than anything. Those months after the Battle of New York where he suffered PTSD alone had been some of the darkest of his life. He had felt disconnected from the world. He didn’t want the others to worry, so he pretended to be fine while he screamed on the inside. He had desperately wished for someone to notice. Now someone has noticed, but Tony was trying to push them away again.

Tony knew the roots of his distrust ran deep. If he wanted to explain everything then he’d have to go way back, past the success of his current life, past the reason why his previous life ended, and past the dark days when he endured the aftermath of New York alone. Tony’s brain screamed for him to deflect the question. His knee-jerk defence was to hide under a thicker mask, to insist that nothing was wrong. No one could mock his insecurities if they didn’t know, but Tony wanted to trust Stephen.

Stephen had proven that he could be trusted.

“Do you know what was the longest walk I’ve ever had?” In the end, Tony decided to go with his
“I don’t know.” Stephen was thrown off by Tony’s sudden change of topic. “Why bring this up?”

“I’ve had time to give this some thought. The obvious answer would be when I escaped from the Ten Rings.” Stephen’s head snapped up at those words. This was the first time Tony had mentioned his captivity outside of the press. “I was in the desert for three hours, under the smouldering Afghan sun. No water. No shelter. I limped about six miles to find civilisation before I was rescued by the U.S. Airforce. Any longer, and I would have died from dehydration.”

Tony cleared his throat. His heart was beating painfully fast. Stephen kept quiet and soaked up every detail with utmost focus. Tony knew he was very emotionally guarded. Moments like these were rare and far in between because he hardly, if at all confided in others. He didn't know what he should say next, but he pushed on. “You’d think that was the longest, but it wasn’t. Do you know anything about Obadiah Stane?”

Stephen nodded. “Yes. He was your business partner, passed away recently in an aviation accident.”

Tony laughed. It was dry and humourless. “That was the cover story, what I’m about to tell you is the real deal.” Tony closed the distance between them. His voice was barely above a whisper. “He was the one who sold my schedule to the Ten Rings.” Stephen inhaled sharply.

“He wanted total control over Stark Industries and I was in the way. When I survived being kidnapped, I returned to shut down the weapons sector. I had seen the very people I tried to protect die because of things I built to keep them safe.” The sheer intensity of Tony’s gaze caused Stephen to take a step back. Tony was relentless, he pressed forward with slow and menacing footsteps. Tony didn’t stop until Stephen was backed against the wall. “He tried to persuade me to change my mind, but I refused.”

The man that stood before Stephen was familiar, yet foreign. For the first time, Stephen caught a glimpse of what it was like to be confronted by the Merchant of Death. “He knew I found out about the weapons he had been dealing behind my back, so he came to my home, paralysed me with a sonic taser—” Tony reached out. He dug his fingers into Stephen’s sternum and twisted. “—and ripped the arc reactor out of my chest.”

The emotions in Tony’s eyes was hard to define. There was no sadness, no sorrow, only cold recognition of what the person he once considered to be a father figure did to him. “The longest walk I’ve ever had, was when I dragged myself to the workshop from the living room of the Malibu mansion. He had left a gaping hole in my chest. I remember crawling out of the lift, thinking about everything and nothing. About the legacy I was going to leave behind, about how stupid I was to not have seen this coming, about the sheer irony of surviving terrorists, only to be put down by the man I would’ve trusted my life with like some rabid animal—”

Tony’s revelation continued at a quickened pace. “We used to spend every Thanksgiving together. He was Uncle Obie to me. He encouraged me to develop weapons; said that I was protecting the world. He even helped me recover from my parent’s death. The day I came up with the Jericho, he had told me he was so proud of me—that if my dad had been alive, he’d be proud of me too.” Tony remembered those articles from his youth, photos of him and Stane posing together for magazine covers. “Out of sheer luck, an outdated model of the arc reactor happened to be in the workshop that night. If I had not reached it in time, we would not be standing here today, having this conversation.” Tony backed away. All of a sudden, Stephen could breathe again.

“I know it’s unfair of me to judge. I know I should talk about things, ask for help. But I’ve been manipulated, stabbed in the back, chewed up and spat back out again by the people I loved, by the
people who claimed to love me.” Tony might have come to terms with what happened, but those memories would stay with him for the rest of his life. He doubted he could look at things again with the same naivety as ten years ago.

“Despite wishing for all this time a chance to go back and do things differently, I wouldn’t trade those years for anything. They made me who I am.” Tony placed a hand on his neck. He felt vulnerable exposing himself like this but confessing out loud was liberating. Realising there was a problem was the first step to recovery. He had never talked to anyone about Stane, at least not in such detail. Going over the experience with someone he could trust has lifted a heavy weight off his chest.

“I’m trying to open back up; it’s why I confessed I was dying.” Tony tried to end his story on a lighter note, but judging by Stephen’s mortified expression, his attempt had failed.

“Tony…I am so sorry,” shocked by the confession, Stephen apologised. “I had no idea. God, I’m such an asshole.”

“It’s not your fault. You didn’t know.” Tony was pulled into a tight hug. Despite Tony’s claims, Stephen whispered more soft apologies into his ear. The pair stayed wrapped up in each other. The tender atmosphere encouraged Tony to take another step forward. “I can tell you why I’ve been so stressed…” Tony squeezed out. People who had no problems sharing their burden were incomprehensible to Tony. “But you’ll have to promise to take me seriously.”

“I promise,” Stephen vowed. He briefly pulled away to look Tony in the eye. The sincerity in them was unmistakable.

Tony supposed it was now or never. He mentally prepared himself. “Alright, here goes… There’s an impending alien invasion.” Tony cringed at how tacky he sounded.

“…What?” Stephen blinked. “Alien invasion, as in a hostile army of aliens invading Earth?”

“That’s what an alien invasion means,” Tony singsonged.


“Yup, you got it.”

Stephen took a deep breath. “Do I want to know where you got this information?”

“No,” Tony deadpanned. “Trust me, you don’t. Not that I’m telling anyway.” Tony knew he had a knack for attracting trouble. He had been through more shit in the past year alone than most people would their entire lives, but there was no running from this.

“Who else knows?” Stephen asked.

“No one.” Tony ran the events through his mind again. S.H.I.E.L.D. had been blindsided by Loki’s attack. Everyone who had fought against the Chitauri had been informed after Loki escaped with the tesseract.

“I assume you had good reasons to keep this to yourself? To—to fight an alien invasion by yourself?” Stephen said as he massaged his temples.

Tony supposed he shouldn’t be surprised that Stephen was taking this so well. The doctor was the personification of stoic rationalism. “First off, no one would believe me. Second, the root of this invasion is a highly classified government project, hence you understand my discretion. Third, even
if they did believe me on a blue moon, they’d simply continue the project more ‘carefully’. ” Tony wiggled his fingers to make a pair of air quotes. “Which means nothing, so why waste my breath?”

“Okay,” Stephen nodded. “I suppose this is where we are at. What can I do to help?”

“Just do what you’ve been doing already. Train with The Ancient One. Stay away from New York. Keep your cool until I sort this mess out. I’ve got this under control.”

“I’m not going to hide in a temple while you battle aliens. Remember how well we work together. Curbing an invasion is no small feat. There must be something I can do, even if it’s just grunge work.”

Tony considered Stephen’s suggestion. He knew if he didn’t give Stephen something then the doctor would simply invent tasks for himself. That would pose a higher risk to Stephen, which was the opposite of what Tony wanted. Tony filtered through his list of projects. Now that he was willing to think, he did find a few tasks perfect for Stephen. “How much do you know about anti-mind-control?” Tony asked casually.

“Is this where we are going, mind-controlling aliens?” Stephen quirked an eyebrow.

“I know. I can’t wait either,” Tony said as he rolled his eyes.

“I don’t know a great deal, but I can do some research. There won’t be a definitive solution. We won’t know the spell’s effect until we’ve tested on a real alien. Their power might function differently from our version of magic.”

“It’s better than nothing. Look into anti-magic too, while you are at it.”

Stephen furrowed his brows in thought. “Wait…” He shifted his gaze to Tony’s pile of sensors. They sat innocently in the corner of the room. “You are so sneaky.”

“You love me.” Tony blew his boyfriend a kiss.

“How long do we have?” Stephen tried to suppress his smile.

“About eight months,” Tony said sheepishly. “See? Stephanie, this is an improvement. I didn’t wait until the last minute this time. We still have time.”

Stephen didn’t have the heart to contradict Tony. “Sunday is my day off. We’ll have the day to catch up on each other’s progress. I’m expecting a full briefing package by end of day tomorrow. “This will be just like old times.”

The pair regarded each other with mutual fondness. Boy, had Tony missed those fleeting, worry-free days. “Just like old times,” Tony said. Except it wasn’t quite the same. Stephen was now a sorcerer and Tony had discovered alternate dimensions. Things could never go back to the way they were, but they would make this work. “It’s good doing business with you again, Dr. Strange.”

“Likewise, Dr. Stark.”

Instead of the handshake from a year ago, the pair ended the meeting with a kiss. Stephen showered and gathered his things. Before going to his afternoon training session, he opened a portal for Tony to head back to New York. Waving the smiling doctor goodbye, Tony realised he had never been afraid of journeying into the darkness.

He had been afraid of making that journey alone.
Merrrrry Christmas everybody! In the next chapter, we will kick off the Avengers plotline at long last! New year, new arc. Coincidence? I think not. (It totally is.) To all my lovely readers, remember to stay safe and have a GREAT holiday season! ;D
“Sir, you have an incoming call from Ms. Potts,” Jarvis informed as the portal closed behind Tony.

“Patch her through.” Tony padded over to the coffee machine. He made himself a long black as he waited for the call to connect. He had assumed Pepper called for Stark Industries business until her concerned expression appeared on the screen. Anything that could raise the concern of Pepper Potts was never good.

“Tony, we have a situation,” the current CEO of Stark Industries said. She skipped the formalities and brought up front page headlines from several minor newspapers. Tony lowered his coffee.

Plastered in the centre of every article were photos of him and Stephen during their walk in Central Park. Many of the articles showed them holding hands, but almost all of them led with the photo of their hug near the lake. Judging from the blurriness, they were likely taken by the same person from a distance. Stephen’s face was clearly visible. Tony was in disguise, but to the public that knew him inside and out, his goatee was a dead giveaway.

Tony selected an article at random. IRONMAN GAY?! The headline screamed.

*It was disclosed by an anonymous source yesterday that Tony Stark, a.k.a. Iron Man had been spotted strolling in Central Park with a male companion. The couple acted intimately, holding hands as they enjoyed the sparsely populated landmark. Their date ended with a passionate hug near the lake; how romantic!*

*Tony Stark has kept busy between public appearances and his work as Iron Man, but his packed schedule wasn’t enough to curb the budding romance. Our favourite superhero might’ve never had a public relationship with a male lover before, but writers here at Insight Magazine have not forgotten his infamous afterparty orgies featuring strippers of both sexes.*

*Since the reveal, we have received hundreds of calls from male ex-lovers claiming to have dated Iron Man. Fans around the world have expressed their shock over the new fling. Granted that Tony Stark was the world’s most eligible bachelor and voted Sexiest Man Alive for two consecutive years, his new-found relationship is bound to shatter the heart of millions…*

The article went on to summarise a list of people Tony had openly dated. He stopped reading.
“These photos were leaked to the media after you were seen in Central Park. The editors at the major papers called to warn me, but they couldn’t stop the smaller firms from publishing them. #IronMansBoyfriend is now the number one trending topic worldwide. To make matters worse—”

Pepper paused, giving Tony time to adjust. “Someone from Metro General Hospital identified Stephen two hours ago. It’s gone viral, there’s no containing it.”

Tony considered the articles. The days of Iron Man being a media push-over were long gone. Nowadays, when he spoke, it was through a designated paper. No major player in the industry dared to publish anything without first consulting Stark Industries publicists. Stark Industries was the largest tech conglomerate in the world. The name of Tony Stark had weight, and he was no longer afraid to throw it around. “Call a press conference. I’ll go over what to say with Stephen. Thank the ones who stayed quiet during this, as for the ones who didn’t…” There was a cold gleam in Tony’s eyes. “Tell them to stay in line, or else I’ll make them.”

Pepper smiled. “Will there be anything else, Mr. Stark?”

“That would be all, Ms. Potts.” Tony ended the call. He stared blankly at the far wall. Objectively, he knew Stephen could handle it. The pressure, the judgement, the circular arguments… Stephen was used to it. He had been a celebrity neurosurgeon long before their relationship. But subjectively, Tony knew that when Pepper had been dating him, a large part of her stress had come from obnoxious commentators. They’d assumed that she had no merits other than being cunning enough to sleep with Tony Stark. With Stephen’s injuries taken into consideration, a lot of ugly rumours would spread if Tony didn’t contain them. Stephen deserved better than to be brushed aside like some desperate gold digger. He was an important part of Tony’s life.

Tony waited until night time at Kathmandu to call Stephen. From there they planned their next move.

----------

Stephen stood by Tony on the podium. Beside him, Tony passionately spun the edited version of their blossoming romance. He went on and on about the importance of Stephen in his life. Stephen’s face was lit red by a hot blush, but not from shyness as many would suspect.

Stephen was about to double over in laughter. As time ticked by, he had to bite the inside of his cheek to stop himself from falling out of character. Tony, on the other hand, showed no signs of slowing. He was giving The New York Time’s bestselling romance a run for its money. The events he brought up were mostly true, but when Tony fabricated them into a story, Stephen no longer knew the two men involved.

They did work together for the prosthesis project, but there was no ‘love at first sight’. Stephen had been by Tony’s side when he underwent surgery, but he never ‘slept at Tony’s side out of worry’. Stephen did have an accident, but he hardly ‘cried because he could no longer operate on Tony’. Tony was the definition of health. The removal of the arc reactor had no negative impact at all. And when did they have a romantic declaration of love over candle-lit dinner? Tony blurted that out over homemade pasta.
The conference ended with Stephen removing his gloves to show the scars on his hands. He was blinded by camera flashes. Tony stood by his side and looked on wistfully. Stephen fought off the goosebumps on his back.

Their sob story was well received. Fans debated over their ship name and blogs were created in their honour. Curiosity sated, the world moved on. Stephen returned to Kamar-Taj to train, while Tony carried on as Iron Man and the owner of Stark Industries.

On the 5th of October 2011, a Russian oil team discovered the remains of Valkyrie in the Arctic Ocean. S.H.I.E.L.D. agents seized the wreckage within twenty-four hours of the discovery. Tony watched them carve out the body of Captain America through the eyes of a Legionnaire.

They might have once fought side-by-side. Might have once been friends. It had been tempting to muddle with the captain during his sleep, but in memory of what once was, Tony had resisted the temptation and kept vigilance on behalf of Steve just in case Hydra found him in this timeline. That was the last thing Tony would do for him. From now onward, they were strangers. Tony had spent the past year carefully organising the pieces on the chessboard. This time, they were going to play by his rules, or find out exactly how manipulative and influence mongering he could be. After all, if he was going to be labelled by those terms, he might as well turn them into a real advantage.

Inside the Stark Tower labs, Tony and Stephen’s anti-magic project hobbled along. None of them had previous experience in the field. Tony squeezed visits to Kamar-Taj into his schedule, and bit by bit, he built up his database by recording new energy signatures. Stephen routinely raided the Kamar-Taj library. He read in his sleep using astral projection. As a result of their shared determination, they began experimenting on magic-proofing Mark Fifty before Christmas. It was efficiency at its finest.

Outside of the lab, Tony’s attention was split between attending board meetings, making public appearances and liaising with the U.S. Armed Forces. He kept a firm grip on the Iron Legion and watched the world with sharp eyes until the holiday season arrived. Once again, Tony found himself spending Christmas and New Year’s with the same people. Stephen, Pepper and Rhodey gathered on the roof of Stark Tower for Tony’s improved fireworks. As a shell burst open, Tony met Stephen’s gaze in unspoken understanding.

Stephen had changed much during the past year. He wore comfortable lounge clothes as compared to the stiff three-piece from last year. The smile on his lips was warmer, and the look in his eyes less sharp. Two streaks of silver decorated his temples, evidence of the days he’d spent worrying about his hands.

Or they could simply be growing old. Tony himself had begun to spot white in his hair. Day by day, the rich chocolate brown inched closer to resembling how he remembered himself from his past life. Tony wondered how long it’d take for him to age with the Super Soldier Serum.

Another golden flush of light flooded the roof. In that moment, Tony wondered who Stephen saw standing across the platform. Was he the same man Stephen had met at the gala, or had he
transformed into someone else too? Stephen approached him. Tony looked around, Pepper and Rhodey were nowhere to be seen.

“I swear they can teleport,” Tony quipped. He twirled a lock of Stephen’s hair in his hands. “You are going grey, old man.”

“It adds sophistication.” Stephen ran a shaking hand through Tony’s hair too.

Fireworks lit up the night sky around them. Tony was unsure as to who leaned in, but their lips met. The kiss consisted only of soft, gentle pecks. It was the way someone would kiss the person they loved.

“You are a sappy fool,” Tony said as they broke apart. He was getting jittery from the warm, buzzing feeling in his chest. The feeling seemed to associate itself with Stephen. Tony never felt cold in Stephen’s presence.

Stephen withdrew the hand tangled in Tony’s hair and lifted his chin. “Allow me to rectify that.” With a wave of his hand, a ring of amber sparks appeared beside them. Stephen pushed Tony through it. Tony landed on his back. The mattress was soft beneath him.

“Show-off,” Tony grumbled. It was all flash and no heat. Stephen grinned wickedly.

Jarvis dimmed the lights.

----------

One of the first people Tony visited in the new year was Vasily Karpov. He had been running facial recognition to find the man since Siberia. At long last, Jarvis found a match in Cleveland.

Not that Tony was fond of the spryly fellow, but Karpov had something Tony wanted. Namely, a little red book and two blood debts to repay. Once Tony located the Winter Soldier Manual in Karpov’s lakeside cabin, he crushed the man’s skull into pieces. Tony was not done with eliminating Hydra yet, but hunting down the man who had overseen the Winter Soldier Program and arranged the assassination of his parents was a good start. There would be no mercy, not from him, and not this time around.

Tony presented the manual to the last remaining Winter Soldier. He asked once again if Barnes would like to leave with the book, and once again, Barnes said no. Satisfied that he had the Winter Soldier’s full consent, Tony set to work. He programmed B.A.R.F. sessions to undo trigger words one at a time. Some were easier, and some required multiple sessions, but in the end, Barnes got there.

He was free of Hydra conditioning once and for all.

On the day Barnes successfully endured Tony reciting all his trigger words without relapsing, he cried. They were silent tears and Tony didn’t acknowledge them, but Tony had a stuffy feeling in his chest too. After recovering from his emotional outburst, Barnes went outside for the first time in
months. The ex-Winter Soldier closed his eyes as he felt the warmth of the sun on his face. To celebrate, Tony cracked open two beers as they observed the sunset from the roof of the safehouse.

“Thank you,” Barnes muttered as he took in the view before him.

“No problems.” Tony took a swig of his beer. “So, where to now?”

“I think I’d like to travel, catch up on what I’ve missed.” Barnes took a swig of his beer too. “Give living as ‘Bucky’ another shot.”

“That sounds good.”

The day following their chat, Bucky left the safehouse. After making sure all those involved in the program were either dead or cured, Tony destroyed the Winter Soldier Manual. As he combed through the facility to prepare for shutdown, he noticed a burner phone sitting on his desk.

If you need me, call me. The note under it said.

Tony cringed at the outdated technology, but he did take the ex-Winter Soldier’s gesture of goodwill. He had a feeling he might need it one day, if the rate of which Captain America tried to corner him at Stark Tower was anything to go by.

Thinking about the other Super Soldier, Tony rolled his eyes so hard it near disappeared into the back of his skull. A month or two after the captain was defrosted, he began requesting to speak with Tony. Tony could guess what S.H.I.E.L.D. had told the captain even with two hundred points deducted from his IQ. Having more important issues to deal with, Tony had instructed his secretary to decline politely.

Tony was under no illusion that Steve Rogers of all people would respect his wish to be left to his own devices. He was biding his time until circumstances dictated that he must deal with the captain. Tony had been hoping it’d be never. He doubted his wish would come true, but a man could dream.

Steadily, the months ticked by. Between monitoring pet projects Tony was stuck doing press for Stark Industries. They were preparing for the launch of a new line of Stark tech with holographic interface. There had been a time when Tony avoided dancing for the media like he’d avoid a brain plague, but after getting a taste of public adoration, Tony begrudgingly admitted that some things were simply easier with the people on his side. And as always, when there was a shortcut, Tony took it. He flaunted his good angle for the cameras, flashed his showman grin so wide it hurt his face. He made flying around New York in armour his new favourite pastime. Iron Man’s public mailbox was flooded with fan mail from all across the globe, many sending Tony heartfelt thank yous for saving their lives one way or another.

A recurring theme had been gratitude over the Iron Legion for their role in disaster relief. One of Tony’s publicists came up with the brilliant idea for Tony to take a photo with all those he had saved, either directly as Iron Man or indirectly through the Iron Legion. Hundreds showed for the event from the U.S. alone. In the photo, Tony smiled in casual attire as he was surrounded by a sea of people. The photo trended number one globally for a week straight. Its most popular comment read: Iron Man, saving the world since 2008.

Tony got a personal call from President Ellis later. Ellis joked that if Tony kept up the good work any longer, Iron Man might as well replace him in the White House. Tony used the publicity to promote his charities. Aside from the Maria Stark Foundation, Tony created another self-funded charity dedicated to a much broader range of people in need. From victims of natural disasters to domestic abuse, when the people needed hope, Tony would be there for them one way or another.
He named it the ‘Iron Spirit’, in sentiment of his past life.

On the evening of April 30th, Jarvis informed them of an energy spike detected from the Tesseract. Tony, who had been sitting in his lab waiting for the past twelve hours took a deep breath.

This was it, the moment he had been planning toward. Tony calmly called Fury. “Stark.” The director greeted as per usual, but the speed at which the call was picked up hinted otherwise.

“Save it,” Tony said. “Move the Tesseract into the desert and clear the area, I’ll call you when I get there.” Tony wasn’t worried that Fury would ignore his advice. He had been sending the director analysis for the past six months asking for the project to be shut down. Tony knew he was asking for the impossible. What he had been really meaning to do was plant a seed of doubt in Fury’s mind.

When the portal collapsed in his past life, it had taken out the entire research facility with it. None of the other researchers could have predicted this outcome because they had been studying the Tesseract in its dormant form. But being one of the most scientifically capable individuals on the planet, if Tony painted the Tesseract as a dangerous artefact, ready to backfire at any minute, knowing Fury, he’d come up with contingency plans for his contingency plans.

Tony smirked when the reading of the Tesseract began to move on his GPS. “Are you sure about this? I should come with you.” Stephen stood beside Tony in full sorcerer getup. In the past eight months, he had raised to the rank of Master in Kamar-Taj and was granted the honour to wear custom robes. Despite Stephen's protests, Tony had gone to town designing gear for his boyfriend.

“Nope. Remember, you’re the card up my sleeve,” Tony said as he suited up. “Tomorrow’s final rehearsal, I need you for opening night.” Tony leaned in for a kiss. “Now give me one for good luck.”

Stephen reluctantly gave Tony a smooch. “I’ll be watching the feed from here, but if you get pummelled, I’m coming over,” Stephen said as he taped his Sling Ring on the table.

“Honey, I’ll be the one doing the pummelling.” Tony closed his helmet with a wink. “Now if you’ll do the honour.” Stephen rolled his eyes. He opened a portal to the Mojave Desert a few miles away from target.

“Be careful,” Stephen cautioned.

“Don’t stay up.” Tony fired the suit’s thrusters and took off. When he entered the desert, his sensors indicated that Veronica has entered the Earth’s atmosphere behind him.

Tony smiled.

He was going to throw Loki one hell of a welcome party.

Chapter End Notes

We are here! We are finally here! *blasts the Avengers theme even louder* Nearly twenty chapters and 60,000 words later! Another HUGE thank you to everyone who's followed this story till now. To those who have read the story, commented, subscribed or left a kudos, I've said this before and I will say this again: you guys are my inspiration. Happy New Year everyone, and best of luck for the coming year! ;D
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

So it begins.
Beta'ed by the incredible HoodedIronLady.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Evening, May 1st – Undisclosed location in the Mojave Desert

The calm desert sands were disturbed by a gust of wind. In the centre of a manmade clearing stood a cylindrical device. It clenched onto the energised Tesseract as the cube’s interior transformed into a storm of swirling black mist. The Tesseract struggled against its constraints, sending waves of vibration deep into the earth. Unable to contain the energy any longer, a bright beam of light erupted from the artefact. The beam ripped through the fabric of time and space. As the Tesseract’s power grew, the tear became wider, and the view of warm sands was replaced by a portal devoid of light. The portal collapsed after having reached its limit. A shockwave pulsed through the desert. The phantom chills of deep space lingered in the atmosphere. Kneeling where the portal once existed was a figure bathed in tendrils of blue flame.

Loki opened his eyes. He raised slowly and took time to regain his senses. His mind was hazy but the desire in his heart burned forever true. Midgard. The word rang in his ears as if someone had muttered it beside him. The realm of mortals. A smile tugged at Loki’s lips just as a bead of sweat rolled down his cheek. Loki blinked away the dizziness. He clenched his fist and the sceptre dug into the palm of his hand. Loki. The voice said. Prince of two realms but king of none. Time has come to seize your glory.

“Uh—hello, Reindeer Games?” another voice called, but this time from further away. Loki looked up to find a metal figure fly over the sand dune. It landed before him and made a large indent in the clearing. “Is anybody home in there?” the towering figure asked.

The metallic beast reminded Loki of the Destroyer that guarded—no, used to guard Asgard’s weapons vault. Though it was of different made, the air of danger was all the same.

“I am Loki, of Asgard, and I am burdened with glorious purpose—”

“Look,” the electronic voice interrupted, “I know what you’re planning, but I can’t let that happen. So why don’t you go back to fairyland and we can both take a night off?”

“You dare mock me,” Loki narrowed his eyes, “a god among your kind?” He raised the sceptre and a beam of energy rushed out. It struck the man in the chest but had not dealt the damage Loki had imagined. An orange mandala glowed where the blow had landed. It radiated defensive magic.

Sorcerers in Midgard? Loki thought. Impossible.

“Yup, that’s the response I expected.” The man flexed his bulky arms. “Jarvis, let’s kick his ass.”

“Fight pattern analysis enabled,” said another polished electronic voice. The beast charged toward
Loki in a whirl of gears. It landed a direct punch, sending Loki soaring backwards. Loki adjusted himself mid-air and landed on his feet. He shot another beam of energy from the sceptre, but this time with more force behind the strike. It nicked the man on the shoulder and blackened the red and gold armour. Exposed wiring hissed in the air. Loki smiled triumphantly. *As expected, Midgard’s pretenders are no match for real power.*

“Stephanie, you getting this?” the man asked.

“Obviously. The rune needs some work.” A third voice joined the conversation. “I’m analysing the energy signature you’re sending back… Deploy module B-17.” On cue, a red, diamond-shaped machine emerged from behind the dunes. It orbited near the man, out of the range of fire but close enough to aid him in battle. A hatch clicked open, and the machine released pieces of armour into the air. They flew toward the man who had ejected the parts of him that had taken damage. New parts integrated seamlessly into the old with a soft click.

Behind them, the collapsed portal sent another shockwave pulsing through the desert. As a by-product, interdimensional travelling created unstable clusters of energy. The ground they stood on was about to be swallowed whole, and from the looks of it, the other man knew too.

“Alright, Jarvis—grab the cube, we are gonna speed things up a little.” The orbiting machine released a container which flew for the Tesseract. Loki took aim with his sceptre but was interrupted by a barrage of bullets. The man lunged at Loki. They traded blows, but for some unknown reason, Loki found it increasingly difficult to land a blow. It didn’t take long before his strikes were countered altogether. The man gained the upper-hand as time ticked by. He knocked the sceptre from Loki’s grasp and pinned him into the sand.

The sceptre… The voice in his head hissed again. *Retrieve it…at once!*

“Jarvis, grab that too,” seeing Loki eye his weapon, the man said to his invisible companion. Another container was released to capture the artefact. As soon as the lid closed, Loki felt something sever his connection to it. “Look—” the man said sympathetically, “no one likes a bruised face, but to be fair, this is for your own good.” With those words, he raised his fist high into the air. Gears whirled as the giant fist clicked free of its socket. Everything was still for a moment, Loki could hear the gentle hiss of the container making its way back to the orbiting machine, and then it rained on him all at once.

“Wake up, wake up, wake up…” The man chanted as his fist extended and retracted to punch Loki repeatedly. Though Loki couldn’t hear him, his senses were overwhelmed by pain, anger, and the feeling of sand scratching against his face. Something in the back of his mind cracked, and as the man’s assault continued, the thing threatened to break entirely.

“The items are secure, Sir,” the polished voice said.

“Good, get her out of here,” the man commanded, still busy pummelling Loki into the sand. The orbiting machine activated its thrusters and disappeared into the night sky.

“Sir, the portal is caving. If I may suggest a swift exit?”

“Yeah, buddy, I noticed that too—” The man snuck a peek at the volatile cluster of energy. He returned his attention to Loki with refreshed vigour. “Wake up, wake up, wake up…!”

Loki didn’t catch any of what just happened, he was too busy trying to breathe under the ferocity of the repeated punches. The voice in his mind screeched as the cracks deepened, and with one final swing of the man’s fist, the voice perished.
Loki fell into blissful unconsciousness.

----------

“Structural integrity ninety-seven percent... Combined systems integrity eighty-three percent... Rune integrity twelve percent...” Tony leaned against the wall as Jarvis scanned the Hulkbuster. They were in the debriefing room of the Joint Dark Energy Mission Facility. So far no one had cared to join him; too busy interrogating the prisoner, if Tony were to guess. But being left alone doesn’t mean he was free to leave. Hence Tony had parked the Hulkbuster to do some maintenance. At least a junior agent thought to bring him coffee.

“Not bad for round one.” Tony whistled and took a sip of the brown liquid. It was entertaining to watch Jarvis scan the Hulkbuster with Mark Fifty, practically like seeing him scan himself in third person.

“Still, for the amount of work that went into this, I expected better.” Stephen’s holographic projection frowned from its position on the table. “The runes were expiring, another few hits and you would’ve been exposed.” Stephen scrolled through the tablet he was holding and jotted down numbers in the process.

“Stop it lambchop, you did great.” Tony tapped Stephen’s hologram on the nose. He paused when Stephen didn’t acknowledge the ridiculous term of endearment. “Hey…don’t beat yourself up over it. This is round one, we didn’t even know if runes could counter alien magic. You did great.”

Stephen sighed with slumped shoulders. Tony could feel Stephen’s disappointment from across the screen, but before he could think of something to say, Stephen ran a hand down his face. “I’m starting a new category of energy signatures under Infinity Stones. Are you positive he didn’t use any Asgardian magic?”

“Yeah, he was using the glow stick of destiny this whole time. We now have both the Tesseract and the sceptre, Veronica has gone off the grid, we can—” Tony was interrupted by an intruder on Stephen’s end.

“Strange, we need you. Now,” the gruff voice said. Stephen briefly stepped out of the hologram’s projection area. Muffled voices conversed in the distance. When Stephen reappeared, his lips were pursed in a tight line.

“Tony, are you safe in the facility?” Stephen asked.

“Yeah. The only foreseeable cause of death is boredom. What happened?” Tony didn’t like the looks of things.

“I’m needed at the temple. I’ll fill you in once I get back.” Stephen slipped on his Sling Ring and conjured a portal.

“Wait—” Tony called, but his words were lost to the fading amber sparks. “Jarvis, contact Friday.” Tony tapped his foot rapidly while the call connected. After a few seconds of discussion, Jarvis got
back to him.

“Sir, Ms. Friday has informed that Dr. Strange is presently occupied at Kamar-Taj. He cannot come
to the phone, but he is not in mortal danger.” Tony rolled his eyes. Bloody sorcerers with their
bloody temple business. This was Stephen’s day off.

The door swung open behind him. Fury stormed in with a swirl of black leather. He narrowed his
good eye. “Stark, the prisoner has requested to speak with you.”

“Ah, about time. Respect for the enemy that had bested him in battle…who would’ve thought?”
Tony stepped into the embrace of Mark fifty but kept his faceplate open. “Lead the way.” The pair
left the debriefing room. They strolled down the corridor until they reached the dining hall.
S.H.I.E.L.D. had cleared this section of the facility. The sound of their footsteps echoed in the vacant
premises.

“Social protocols dictate that you say ‘thank you’ when someone saves your ass. Again,” Tony said.
They passed rows of empty tables. Only the emergency lights were on to conserve energy. Tony had
spent three weeks in the facility to analyse the Tesseract, but he’d never seen it look so deserted.

“For our benefit or yours? Forgive me if I don’t double over in gratitude, but you’re here for personal
gain,” Fury drawled.

“If by personal gain you mean saving dozens of lives then you better hope I gain more often,” Tony
drawled back.

Fury huffed. He slowed his footsteps. The cafeteria seemed to stretch forever. “You’ve made some
impressive friends, I’ll give you that much, but the World Security Council wants the Tesseract
back.”

“Sure thing, I’ve lost contact with my service module, but I’ll return it ASAP.”

“Stark, do you think this is a joke?” Fury turned to Tony.

Truth be told, Tony hadn’t wanted to touch the Infinity Stones with a ten-foot pole. He knew what
this looked like, but he must keep them out of reach until Thor can return both the Tesseract and the
sceptre to Asgard. Tony couldn’t risk human contact until either stones until were sent off-world for
good. “Of course not,” Tony said. “Performance issues can be life-threatening. One in five—”

“You are far from untouchable,” Fury said. “Even if you are, think about the people around you.”

Tony stopped in his tracks. “What…did you just say?” The tone of Tony’s voice hadn’t changed, but
his smile was jarring against the gleam in his eyes. “Is this a threat, director?” Pieces of the Iron Man
suit shifted with his words. Tony’s fingers itched to fire something. “Do you remember what
happened the last time you tried that?”

“Think of this as a warning. There will be no threats, at least not from me, but I urge you to consider
the consequences of your actions. You’ve built yourself an empire, but you’ve also pissed off some
powerful people in the process.” Fury kept his tone carefully neutral.

“You let me worry about that. In the meantime, I also urge you to consider why the Tesseract is not
in enemy hands, why this facility is still standing, and why S.H.I.E.L.D. still exists.” Tony and Fury
were inches apart. Unlike their last dispute regarding a certain brainwashed assassin, the hall was
deserted, and Tony was in his suit. If Tony was any less of a man, he’d teach Fury a lesson.

A sharp cough caught Tony’s attention. He looked up. On the mezzanine floor of the dining hall
stood a man dressed in blue, white, and red. Steve Rogers. Tony’s eyes widened. He hadn’t expected the captain to be here. In his past life, he had been late to the party, but the captain hadn’t arrived much earlier either. Tony supposed it made sense. He had given S.H.I.E.L.D. plenty of warning this time around.

Steve glared at Tony from where he stood. A web of cracks spread from the hand he’d placed on the glass balustrade. Tony wondered how long he’d been standing there. Come to think of it, Fury did choose a very specific location to begin this conversation.

“Whatever it is you are thinking of doing, Mr. Stark, I suggest you don’t,” the captain said.

For the love of—Tony gritted his teeth as he realised he’d fallen for the trap. He pushed Fury out of his way and ignored the captain’s indignant look. He wasn’t in the mood to deal with Steve Rogers, of all people. First, there was Loki, and second, he was waiting to hear back from Stephen. Tony fired the thrusters of his suit and flew down the hallway. He had planted a tracker on Loki. He knew where the prisoner was.

----------

Tony had mended the crack on his mask when he entered the cargo hold. The spacious warehouse had been repurposed to contain their guest for the evening. In the centre of the storage area was a glass cell shipped in specially for the occasion. A circle of construction lights surrounded the prison as the area’s only source of lighting. Tony squinted under the brightness.

Despite his predicament, Loki paced inside his cell with an air of nonchalance. He hovered his hand above the glass, just shy of touching it. Thick cables sprawled from the prison’s metal frame. The cell was probably electrified. Knowing Fury’s predilection for the dramatic, Tony doubted it was only from the inside.

“That’s a cosy spot. How’s world domination working out for you?” Tony called as he walked toward the fallen prince. His suit thudded against the concrete floor with each step. The sound echoed through the empty warehouse and masked the noise of shifting cameras.

“Man of Iron,” Loki greeted softly. “Your comrades were tight-lipped about you.” He stopped pacing then crooked his head to the side as he waited for Tony to emerge from the shadows. “I was given nothing but a name.”

At this distance, Tony could feel the heat of the light against his face. Loki must be cooking inside his cell. Tony went around the cell and switched off all the lights save for one. He exited Mark Fifty and straightened his tie. Not quite leaving the armour’s reach, but enough to convey sincerity.

“They’d have preferred we never met at all, yet here we are.”

“Acknowledging dispute among your ranks, to an enemy no less… Is that wise?” Loki gasped mockingly.

“How about we skip to the part where you’re useful to me. I’m on the clock here.” Tony tapped on the face of his watch, killing surveillance in the area. “Tell me about the invasion. I want specifics.”
Loki leaned closer until he was in front of the glass. His breath fogged the surface. Blue sparks of electricity flashed from one side of the frame to the other. “How…did you know? You were prepared for my arrival,” the prince whispered. “You, a mere mortal. Could you be blessed with the sight?”

“You’ve seen the Tesseract act up. I wouldn’t call it subtle.” From his tense shoulders to the hands that were in his pockets, Tony remained completely still.

The corner of Loki’s eyes crinkled in an innocent smile. “Tell me, Man of Iron…are there sorcerers among your kind? The runes on your armour,” he gestured to the suit, “are they the work of men?”

“I have a loving boyfriend,” Tony quipped. Loki furrowed his brows. He didn’t seem to draw a connection between the two. “But that’s beside the point,” Tony raised his voice a notch and continued. “My point is, I’m the friendliest face you’ll be seeing in a long, long time, and I’m losing interest fast. You better start talking, or I’m leaving you with our beloved director. You’ve met him. Tall, menacing, obsessed with bright lights—a real charmer.” Loki gazed into Tony’s eyes. He tried to read him, but Tony gave away nothing. “Tick tock, Rock of Ages.”

Silence filled the space. The prince surveyed his surroundings again. He took in the electrified cell and Tony’s Iron Man suit. Loki closed his eyes, when he opened them again, he dropped the glamour he had been holding. The Aesir it revealed trembled from exhaustion. An aura of sickness radiated from his very core. His once ivory complexion was marred by cuts and bruises, most of which Tony was responsible for.

“Thanos—a powerful cosmic warlord seeks the Tesseract.” Despite Loki’s projected confidence, he knew his invasion had failed. He had lost possession of the sceptre and was stranded on a planet no more hospitable to him than Asgard. He needed new allies, for when the Chitauri army arrive they will come for his head. Tony was confident he was the best available option.

“The Tesseract is one of six Infinity Stones. I was instructed to open a portal, from which an army of Chitauri will flow. They are led by one of the warlord’s servants, known as The Other.” Loki selected his words carefully.

“Where will the portal be opened?”

“Any major city.”

“An army of how many?”

“As many as it takes to claim Earth.”

During their snappy questioning session, Tony weaved in titbits of real questions with the things he already knew. He was searching for misdirection, but so far, the infamous liesmith was telling the truth. Tony had freed him from the Mind Stone’s grasp, and for that alone Loki owed him.

“See, that’s what I don’t understand,” Tony tapped on his chin. “Why an army? Why not just tell you to grab the cube and run? Your success rate would be high too. Why does evil space overlord want to conquer Earth?”

Loki swallowed stiffly. “In my previous state of…confusion, I might have brokered a deal with him.”

“You brokered a deal with evil space overlord?” Tony scoffed. “No offence, Reindeer Games. You might pack a punch, but brute force isn’t your forte.”

“Do not underestimate your enemies, Man of Iron,” Loki scowled.
Tony rolled his eyes. *Oh, the pride.* He paid Loki’s hostility no mind. “Your eyes, they are green. Do you know what colour they were before I knocked some sense into you?” Tony closed in too, save for the glass between them, he and Loki were a short step apart. “*Not* green. This Thanos might have given you the illusion of a deal, but you were in no shape to make demands. Which brings me back to the question—why Earth?”

Tony turned abruptly. He paced around Loki’s cell. “I’ve mulled this over, and I just don’t get it. We are the only civilisation in this sector of the universe. Aside from Vibranium, we have no resources worth mentioning. Once he retrieves the Tesseract, Earth is useless to him.” Tony pinched the bridge of his nose. He was missing a crucial piece of information. “Where is he based?”

“In Chitauri Space, known by many as the Sanctuary. It is the domain of Thanos, a ruined wasteland devoid of other life forms,” Loki said.

“Would it also happen to be rocky, dark, and has no atmospheric pressure?” Tony was reminded of scenes from a certain vision.

Loki frowned at the accuracy of the description. “Yes…”

Noticing the trickster’s curiosity, Tony moved on before Loki could raise further questions. “If I were to expand into an isolated foreign territory that’s not connected to my existing empire… *I wouldn’t.* It wouldn’t be worth the effort, unless there’s a strong prospect for future returns.”

“The Mad Titan brings death and destruction. It matters not where his reign ends, only that all in existence eventually falls beneath his rule.” Loki shuddered at the possibility.

“And he plans to achieve that by gathering the Infinity Stones.”

“Yes.”

Tony considered the information. Either through personal encounter or word of mouth, he knew of three Infinity Stones from his past life. For the time being, the Mind Stone and the Space Stone was safe with Veronica. According to Thor, the Reality Stone was hidden by his grandfather in a place where no one could find it. The stone remained there until it was discovered by Jane Foster during the Convergence, which was over a year away. At first glance, it seemed that nothing connected the events, but for some reason, the stones had all managed to find their way to…

A chill crept up Tony’s spine. *Could it be?*

“Alright, thank you for cooperating. I’ll see what deal I can work out for you.” An idea came to Tony. He turned on his heels but paused before he could reach his armour. “Oh yeah, one more thing.” He clasped his hands together cheerily. “If I were you, I’d stay put. You can ignore my advice but breaking out isn’t going to do you any favours. You need friends. I learned this the hard way.” With that, Tony stepped into Mark Fifty. As the faceplate fell shut, he muted the exterior intercom and asked Jarvis to try for Stephen again.

“Sir, the doctor remains occupied. Would you like to leave a message?”

“Yeah,” Tony sighed. He wanted to be wrong, but so far, his instincts had never let him down. “Tell him to return ASAP, I need him in the lab.” Tony brought up the most encrypted file on his server, the one that contained a timeline of events from his past life.

“And tell him to look up tracking spells. I think there are other Infinity Stones on Earth.”
There will be an explosion of 'new' characters in the next chapter, and I'm rubbing my hands together in excitement.

By the way guys, I've decided to split my old tumblr into two new blogs. There's my fandom blog ivivao3. Come find me if you're on tumblr. Ask box always open! ;D
In this chapter, we add many more figurines to the toy box.

Beta'ed by the witty HoodedIronLady.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tony was skimming through the timeline on his HUD when he ran head first into Steve Rogers. The captain had been waiting for some time. Like a stoic guardian, he folded his arms across his chest and blocked the only exit. The door to the cargo hold closed behind Tony. He let out a grunt of frustration.

“Mr. Stark, I’ve been meaning to speak with you,” the captain said. After waiting at Stark Tower for months to no avail, he’d found his chance at last.

“Who are you?” Tony retracted his helmet and arched a perfectly shaped eyebrow. The distance between them was a little too close for comfort, but Tony didn’t back down.

“My name is Steven Grant Rogers. I knew your father: Howard Stark. We worked together during the war.” Steve cleared his throat. “I’d like to ask a few questions. I hope for both our sakes that you answer truthfully.”

“You want answers? So does half the world, get in line.” Tony proceeded to circle around Steve. He was stopped by a hand on his shoulder.

“My friend, Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes of the 107th, where is he?” Steve asked.

Tony said nothing. His gaze travelled from Steve’s face to the hand that was on his shoulder, and then back to Steve's face again. “Drop it, unless you want to lose it.”

Steve clenched his jaw but otherwise removed his hand. “Please, Mr. Stark. This is important to me. James, Bucky, he’s unwell. He needs professional help.”

“Unwell, is that what S.H.I.E.L.D. fed you?” Tony narrowed his eyes at the man before him. “Look, Rogers, I’m going to say this once, and once only. Barnes left S.H.I.E.L.D. custody willingly. S.H.I.E.L.D. wanted to program him into their personal henchman. I have no idea where he is. Even if I did, I wouldn’t tell you.”

Steve’s frown deepened. He didn’t buy Tony’s explanation and Tony couldn’t care less. Over the years, the list of people he cared for had been shortened, and then trimmed down some more.

He had looked up to the captain for many years. That blind hero worship had been amplified by the condescension of others. They reminded him tirelessly that no matter what he did, he’d never measure up. But after waking up to his best friend being able to walk again, Tony had nullified the Extremis threat, recreated the Iron Legion, discovered magic, and thwarted Loki’s plans of hijacking the Tesseract. With the addition of Stephen in his life, Siberia truly seemed like a lifetime ago. Tony hadn’t had a nightmare about the snowy peaks in months. He took in Steve’s disapproving glare and
reached deep into his heart. He’d expected to find something, but there was no pain, no hatred…

Tony felt nothing.

“Sir, apologies for the interruption, but Dr. Strange is on the line,” Jarvis said.

“Is he back?” Tony checked the time. It was well past midnight. Stephen tended to get cranky after his designated bedtime, so Tony needed to hurry. “Why are you still here?” Tony said to Steve, who hadn’t budged from his spot.

Steve drew in a deep breath. His glove squeaked under the pressure of his closed fist, but there was nothing he could do. S.H.I.E.L.D. couldn’t pin Barnes’ escape on Tony, and neither could he. “You have something that belongs to me,” the captain finally said.

“Really?” Tony blinked innocently. “What, pray tell, may that be?”

“You know very well what it is.”

“You’re gonna have to be more specific.”

“My shield.”

“Oh—you mean the frisbee my father made in the ‘40s?” Tony snapped his fingers in quick succession. “I’m afraid that no longer belongs to you. You see, when you were doing time under ice, I did S.H.I.E.L.D. a solid. They passed it on to me, I even have the papers to prove it. You can try to get it back, but it’s registered under the company name. Trust me, Stark Industries has some very good lawyers.”

“Stark, I knew your father. Despite his problems, he was a good man. He would’ve been disappointed to see the way you are acting now—” The air was knocked from Steve’s lungs when Tony picked him up and slammed him against the wall.

“Don’t you dare speak for him.” Tony reminded himself that he didn’t have to be gentle; a super soldier’s neck wouldn’t snap so easily. He pressed the full weight of the armour against Steve and glowered. “You have no right.”

Steve grunted as he struggled against the might of the suit. He rocked back and forth and gained enough momentum to headbutt Tony. The force sent a flash of white across Tony’s vision. He staggered backward while Steve dropped to the ground coughing. The air was still for a heartbeat, then the pair bounced to their feet. Tony closed his helmet. The HUD came to life as Jarvis scanned his opponent for fight pattern analysis. His repulsors hummed in the confined hallway. Tony raised his hand at the same time Steve dropped into a defensive stance, but they were interrupted by a ring of sparks materialising on the wall.

“Tony, are you alright?” Stephen stepped out of the portal. He took one look at the situation and conjured a whip of Eldritch magic. Tony’s eyes widened. He had forgotten all about the phone call. Tony rushed to shield Stephen from the Super Soldier at the same time Stephen tried to stand in front of Tony. They ran into each other. Stephen let out a grunt of pain from crushing into Tony’s suit.

“Shit!” Mark Fifty peeled off Tony. He rushed to Stephen’s side. “You ok?” Tony helped Stephen get back on his feet. Mark Fifty stood vigilance beside them. Its narrow eyes stared down Steve in judgement.

“We need to work on coordination.” Stephen eyed Steve warily. “Is there a problem?” he asked Tony.
“That depends. Is there a problem, captain?” Tony’s glare dared for Steve to finish what they started, but Steve didn’t bite.

“You must be Mr. Strange.” Steve turned to Stephen. “I’ve read your file.”

“Dr. Strange,” Stephen corrected. “If there’s nothing else, we’ll take our leave.” Stephen showed no signs of falling for Steve’s boy scout charms, which Tony must admit was a first. Stephen conjured another portal. He stood in the penthouse of Stark Tower and beckoned for Tony to join him.

“I kind of have a debriefing pending,” Tony said, but Stephen beckoned once more with a jerkier wave.

“I’ll portal you back.” Stephen appeared to have urgent matters to discuss. Tony supposed Steve and whoever was watching the surveillance feed had already seen Stephen’s abilities. With a shrug, Tony stepped into the portal too, leaving the captain alone in the hallway.

Tony and Stephen settled in the penthouse kitchen. The aroma of coffee filled the air. A soft whirring sound promised hot beverages. It had been a long day for the two of them. Tony had been busy supervising the Tesseract since yesterday evening, and Stephen had been doing last minute preparations until he was called to Kamar-Taj.

Tony felt fine with his semi-Super Soldier stamina, but Stephen looked drained. He didn’t show it during their encounter with Steve, but once he returned to the safety of Stark Tower, he slumped on a bar stool and cradled his head between his hands. Tony sat beside Stephen with two mugs of coffee. They both liked it black with no milk or sugar, just another way they clicked together. Stephen nodded in thanks but otherwise didn’t make a sound.

“That was reckless of you, stepping in like that.” Tony took a sip of his drink and tried his best to not sound confrontational.

“When I got your message, I tried to call back. Jarvis told me you were busy. While I was leaving a reply, the situation updated to a hostile encounter. What was I supposed to do?” Stephen pinched the bridge of his nose and downed half of his coffee.

“I offered you unlimited access to my feed,” Tony said.

“Which I declined,” Stephen said sternly but softened when he saw Tony’s careful expression. “I shouldn’t know what you are doing at all times. Your privacy is important. This call system we have is working, but perhaps to avoid future confusion, we should lift the restriction when one of us is in danger. This will apply to Friday too.”

“I agree.” Tony tapped his finger on the kitchen counter, it helped him think. “So, trouble at the temple?”

Stephen nodded. “Overnight, a former Master by the name of Kaecilius stole some pages from the
Book of Cagliostro. He thus gained knowledge of a forbidden ritual."

“All that fuss for minor property theft?”

“He decapitated the librarian, Tony.”

“Oh… that’s rude.”

“Quite.” Stephen let out a long sigh. “Kaecilius now has the means to contact Dormammu, an inter-dimensional entity who wields unimaginable power. He is the ruler of the Dark Dimension. If Kaecilius succeeds in summoning Dormammu to Earth, all would be lost.”

“This may be asking for too much,” Tony rolled his eyes, “but can we deal with one end-of-the-world at a time?”

“I know.” Stephen returned to massaging his head. “How’s the invasion?”

“Thwarted, for now. Loki’s staying put in his cell, but I doubt for long.” Tony checked the tracker he’d planted on the trickster. The signal blinked steadily from where Tony had left him. Tony only hoped Loki would stay there, at least until Thor arrived. “Do you have to capture Kaecilius?”

“No, other Masters more skilled with tracking were tasked to find him. Kaecilius is moving frequently. It’d take time to locate his whereabouts…” As Stephen explained the theory behind tracking magic, Tony drifted off on his own. The more he considered Stephen’s words, the more an uneasy feeling filled his chest.

Objectively, Tony knew this skirmish at the temple shouldn’t be a cause for concern, as Earth had recovered after the Battle of New York. But from memory, Stephen had continued to operate as a neurosurgeon after the Battle of New York as well. Knowingly or not, Tony’s actions had altered the timeline. As things stood, Stephen had lost the use of his hands and trained as a Master of the Mystic Arts. If his meddling had somehow resulted in a change of Stephen’s fate, and Stephen’s actions had resulted in a butterfly effect of events forming that hadn’t previously occurred… then nothing was certain in what was to come.

“Tony.” Stephen’s call pulled Tony from his thoughts.

“Yes?” Tony blinked, how long had he spaced out?

“Infinity Stones,” Stephen repeated, “more Infinity Stones on Earth.”

“Oh yeah. I had an enlightening chat with our resident god…” Tony recapped the events of the past hour.

“You think the reason Thanos wants Earth, is because there are other Infinity Stones hidden here?” Stephen tried to rationalise the notion.

“That’s all I’ve got. If this theory doesn’t work, I’m out of ideas, but check this out.” Tony grabbed his tablet and connected it with the live-feed inside Veronica. Jarvis had been receiving updates from Veronica via a secure connection. Due to the tightness of the space, the feed was heavily skewed. Inside the service module, the containers housing the Tesseract and the sceptre orbited each other as if they were engaged in an intricate dance.

“Don’t they look like they are drawn to each other?” Tony said as the pair observed. “If you think about it, it makes perfect sense. How did Thanos know the Tesseract was on Earth? He had the Mind Stone. If, theoretically, the stones are interconnected, then he could’ve used one to track down
the rest.”

“But over the past year, Stark Industries has fired more satellites into low-orbit than I can count. Wouldn’t one of them have picked up something by now?”

“Remember what you said about magic being a different branch of science? It took me days to draw a tangible link between the two. There are things invisible to us due to our limited scientific capability, like Dark Matter and Dark Energy. The energy signatures of the Mind Stone and the Space Stone are nothing alike. What if we’ve already picked up other signatures, but we just don’t know it yet?” Tony’s mind raced off on a tangent. “Why did Thanos give Loki the sceptre? Giving away a stone that was already in his possession was unnecessary, risky, and counterintuitive to his goal. Maybe the only way to find an Infinity Stone—”

“—is by using another Infinity Stone.” Stephen finished Tony’s sentence. “Loki was guided by the sceptre. Where do you think the other stones are?”

“I don’t know—I’ve never gotten this far before!” Tony blurted from his adrenaline rush. As soon as he realised what he’d said, he felt as if someone had dumped a bucket of ice water over his head.

Stephen’s brows knotted together, but before he could ask anything Jarvis interrupted with an update from S.H.I.E.L.D. “Sir, Director Fury requests your presence at the facility. S.H.I.E.L.D. would like to transport the prisoner to a more secure location.”

Tony breathed a sigh of relief. For once Fury was being useful. “I’ll go back, you should catch a few hours of shuteye before the sun’s up.”

“Yeah, I can’t think straight.” Stephen was struggling to keep his eyes open. “You should catch some sleep too, tomorrow will be a long day.”

“I’ll nod off after Loki’s secure. Jarvis will make sure no one shivs me in my sleep,” Tony said jokingly, but Stephen seriously considered the possibility. “I can take care of myself,” Tony added.

“Given your track record, that isn’t at all reassuring,” Stephen mumbled. He circled his hand in the air. Tony stepped through the portal with a wink, oblivious to the doctor’s pondering expression.

----------

Morning, May 2nd – Undisclosed location above the Atlantic Ocean

Based on Tony’s coordinates, Stephen arrived on the Helicarrier five minutes before 10.00 a.m. S.H.I.E.L.D. relied on these mobile fortresses as strategic bases from which they could perform a variety of reconnaissance, stealth deployment, and direct strike operations.

Tony met Stephen in the hallway to go in for debriefing—or rather, briefing—together. Tony wore his signature three-piece suit while Stephen donned the sorcerer robes Tony had made for him. They were cut from a navy material that gave off the appearance of cotton but shined suspiciously under the right light. The outfit was completed with subtle gadgets hidden into leather straps and the watch
gauntlet hosting Friday.

Unless he needed to blend in, they were now Stephen’s default outfit. Tony noticed that as time passed, Stephen had learned to take pride in being a Master of the Mystic Arts. He no longer distanced himself from the identity, and openly admitted that he was a sorcerer as well as a surgeon.

This time S.H.I.E.L.D. had chosen a sealed meeting room instead of the informal space above the command centre. The two of them were the last to arrive. Familiar faces converged inside the sound-proof room. Steve sat next to Director Fury, while Agent Coulson and Maria Hill read paperwork further down the room. Across the table, Clint surveyed the room as Natasha chatted with Bruce. Dr. Erik Selvig sat hunched near the exit by himself. He was the only new addition, though his presence was much desired since he was a respected astrophysicist, had studied the Tesseract in detail, and had previous experience in contacting Asgardians. Plus, he wasn’t brainwashed this time, which was always a bonus.

“Full house,” Tony whistled at the sight.

“Stark,” Fury said, “and you must be Dr. Strange.”

“Dr. Stephen Vincent Strange, representing the sorcerers of Kamar-Taj.” Stephen took in the expression of each person around the table. “I’d like to offer my aid on matters concerning the Mystic Arts.”


“Humph…sorcerers?” Clint scoffed. “You don’t see that every day.”

“Out of all the people in this room, who is a: using a weapon from the Stone Age, and b: not of use?” Sometimes it physically pained Tony to hold back his quips.

“Tony…” Stephen said just as Clint straightened from his chair. Tony held up both hands in mock surrender.

Fury cleared his throat. “According to the mission report you filled out last night, we’re under the threat of an extra-terrestrial invasion.”

“That’s correct. I’m glad someone did the reading,” Tony said while he and Stephen both took a seat.

“But you also left a lot of blanks, such as the all-important why.” Years of spy work had taught Fury to think along similar lines as Tony. Tony might have gained those skills from a different environment, but their tendency to root out the cause first was all the same. “Why do aliens want to invade Earth?”

“Why don’t you talk to Rock of Ages yourself? I’m only one man and I can only do so much.” Tony shrugged.

Fury exchanged looks with Natasha, who nodded and brought up the surveillance feed. Across the screen, Loki sat cross-legged in the centre of his new cell; the one from Tony’s past life that could drop from the Helicarrier with the push of a button. The god was meditating. The bruises on his face had begun to heal.

“Since you left, he’s refused to give us anything useful. Tony, what did Loki tell you?” Natasha asked softly.
“Ms. Romanov, reading is the gift of knowledge. I’ve explained myself thoroughly.” Tony’s senses had sharpened over the years. Even if he didn’t know the Russian spy, he’d still have smelled her insincerity from miles away.

“Mr. Stark, if we want to work together, we will have to trust each other,” Steve said. “At a threat of this scale, we need to work as a team.” This caused Stephen to knit his brows together.

“I agree.” Maria Hill spoke from the end of the room. She was every bit the professional deputy director Tony recalled. “There are lots of preparations to be made. We can’t do that if the information is withheld from us.”

“That’s assuming I’m withholding information,” Tony said.

“And you’re not?” Clint asked.

“See, this is a classic case of the least useful person making the biggest assumptions.” Tony knew where to hit to annoy Clint, and he kept driving the spike deeper.

“If you had nothing to hide, you wouldn’t have interrupted the security footage,” Natasha said.

“You think Loki would’ve given me anything if I hadn’t done that?” Tony’s own temper was beginning to flare. “For professional spies, none of you are very good at your jobs. What was your first attempt again? Oh, I know, I’ll roast him with lights. That’ll keep him toasty.” Clint stood from his seat. He was restrained by Natasha.

“Guys!” The room was silenced by a loud cry. The group turned to Bruce, who had remained silent until now. “We need to concentrate. Instead of throwing blame, can we focus on the information we do have. It’s still quite a lot,” Bruce said as he tapped on Tony’s mission report. “We know the date of the invasion, which is whenever Loki sends the signal, and place, which is any major city.” Bruce flipped through the report again. “If we can get Loki to work with us, we can lead the alien army—”

“—straight into a trap.” Tony and Bruce completed the second half of his sentence together. Tony was relieved to see Bruce as switched on as his past life. “And this, Dr. Banner, is why you are my second favourite person in the room. It’s quite an accomplishment because Stephen takes the cake by default.”

“Dr. Banner, opening the portal is what Loki wants,” Steve said.

“And you must know exactly what Loki wants.” In hindsight, Tony wondered why it had taken him so long to see that he and Steve were simply incompatible; both as teammates and as friends. “We either deal with this invasion while we have the upper hand, or we can do this blind five or ten years down the line and waste the intel we have now. Those things,” Tony pointed to the sky, “they aren’t going away.”

“It would endanger millions of lives,” Steve said. Tony tried to swallow his anger. He couldn’t understand Steve, he never understood Steve. The war would come, taking initiative was the only way to survive.

“Captain,” Bruce said as he took off his reading glasses. He lowered his gaze and shook his head. “Speaking from experience, running from your problems gets you nowhere.”

“We still have to find a way to stabilise the portal, lest we repeat what happened in the desert,” Selvig said with puffy eyes and shaking hands. He mustn’t have slept since Loki arrived either. “It’s going to collapse again if we don’t counter the quantum tunnelling effect, given that we still have a power source.”
“Let me worry about the cube, just focus on getting the theory up to scratch.” Tony hadn’t planned to keep Veronica off-grid for long. When the time came, he’d immediately call her back.

“This is all assuming we can trust Loki,” Natasha said.

“Regardless, this isn’t a decision we are equipped to make.” Fury exchanged looks with both Coulson and Maria Hill. “I’ll inform the World Security Council of the outcome of this meeting.”

“While you are at it, call Rhodey too.” Fury levelled Tony with a glare that suggested he knew what Tony was trying to play. Tony responded with a pout. “You’ll need the Legion.”

“Dr. Selvig and I can work on stabilising the portal.” Bruce turned to Tony. “We could use your expertise on mechatronic engineering too, Dr. Stark.”

“Call me Tony.” Tony reached across the table and shook Bruce’s hand.

He had missed messing around in the lab with Bruce. Over time, Tony had come to accept that due to various reasons, Bruce might not have been ready, or was willing to accept the level of closeness Tony had been hoping for. And honestly, Tony was fine with that now. He still didn’t know what had happened to Bruce after the events of Ultron, or if his science partner had disappeared to let him shoulder the fallout alone, but that was one mystery from Tony’s past life he’d never solve. Tony wasn’t against rekindling the friendship he and Bruce used to share, but Tony wasn’t going to beg for it like he did last time. He was going to lay back and take things easy, see if the friendship would still build if he didn’t take all the first steps.

*Don’t offer too much, and don’t offer it too quickly.* Tony reminded himself “I’ll be around,” he finished with what he hoped was mild encouragement.

The group wrapped up the session by discussing some more details. They couldn’t reach a consensus on if the portal should be opened, with Tony and Bruce in support of opening it, and Captain America firmly against. The rest of the group either had no preference or was waiting for more information. Regardless, they all agreed they should reconvene after hearing back from the World Security Council and the Armed Forces.


Stephen shook it reluctantly. “Pleasure.”

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to speak with you in private about your abilities and the organisation you represent.” Coulson hadn’t said a word during the meeting. He’d opted to observe the tension in the room instead.

“We do mind, actually.” Tony stepped in.

“I was speaking to Dr. Strange, Dr. Stark.” Since S.H.I.E.L.D. never infiltrated Tony’s Malibu home, Coulson and Tony were strangers in this life. The agent maintained an air of distant professionalism.

“We do mind, actually,” Stephen repeated Tony’s response word for word. “All your organisation needs to know is I do not intend to affiliate with your organisation. I’m here because these are dire times, and I’m the only one who’s capable and willing to act as a consultant of the Mystic Arts.” Stephen’s voice was even, but Tony could tell from the clipped response that Stephen wasn’t pleased. “I will only be contacted through Tony. I hereby give Tony permission to act on my behalf.”
A seasoned agent like Coulson knew when it was too late to get in someone’s good graces. “Very well, but we will need to understand the scope of your services.”

Tony smiled winningly. “We’ll fill out a sub-consultant form.”

“Try not to leave any blanks this time.”

“No promises,” Tony said as he and Stephen turned on their heels.

“We need you around, Stark,” Coulson called.

“More than you know.”

“Not that much.”

“That’s great because you guys should learn to take care of yourselves,” Tony chirped as he stepped into the portal that Stephen conjured. “In the meantime, call Stark Tower if there’s another fire.”

Chapter End Notes

I admit I'm sentimentally attached to Stark Tower...
On the night Thor arrived, the U.S. Armed Forces, S.H.I.E.L.D., and World Security Council has entered a stalemate. They had been engrossed in a heated debate since yesterday afternoon, and not one organisation could convince the other two of the best course of action. Stephen had left for Kamar-Taj to seek The Ancient One’s advice on suppressing magic. Tony, wanting to avoid the circular arguments, had declined the invitation to partake in the meeting. He was thus available when Thor kicked down the front door.

Thor tore through the Helicarrier in a beeline for Loki’s cell. He batted away all who dared to block his path, and reached the containment room within minutes. But before he could break the glass, he was thrown off course by a repulsor blast. “Tropic Thunder, is property damage not an offence in fairyland?” Tony’s voice rang through his faceplate. “And just so we are clear, if you so much as scratch that glass, baby brother gets dropped thirty thousand feet in a steel trap. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“Release my brother!” the God of Thunder bellowed. “He is but a messenger, having done you no harm. Loki may be misguided but he is of Asgard.”

“I would’ve used a stronger word than ‘misguided’.” Tony fought the urge to air quote. “In case you didn’t notice, he tried to conquer Earth.”

“tis true,” Loki said from his cell.

“Fie!” Thor boomed. “This is beyond you, metal man. Surrender the Tesseract and free your prisoner. Loki will face Asgardian justice. He will be brought before the All-Father and given a fair trial—”

“Ha! As I am certain,” Loki scoffed.

“—to answer for his crimes,” Thor finished. He turned to Loki. “Brother, you must see the error of your ways. Heimdall has given his word to speak what he saw. We can prove your innocence yet!”

“Tell me, Odinson, with the Bifrost gone, how much Dark Energy did the All-Father have to muster to conjure you here: your precious Earth?” Loki surveyed the destruction around them. A squad of heavily armed agents blocked Thor’s makeshift entrance. Among them were Captain America, Black Widow, and Hawkeye. Tony waved for them to stand down. “And for what purpose? The Man of Iron had me defeated. I am but a prisoner of war, of no use to Asgard.”

“You are my brother!” Thor cried. “We thought you dead…”

“Did you mourn?”

“We all did. Our father—"
“Your father!” Loki snapped. “A liar and a thief, who conjured you here to take the Tesseract by
force. How benevolent of him to leave Earth defenceless in the face of an invasion, to take away
their only means of survival.”

The trickster’s words jammed the gears in Tony’s mind, but he caught up quickly. Tony grinned
inside his helmet. He had to hand it to Loki; the God of Mischief had a silver tongue. Without the
knowledge from his past life, Tony would have fallen for the trap too. Loki’s transition had been
seamless. “I thought the Tesseract opened the portal for the Chitauri,” Tony said, playing along.

“There are other ways to cross the void, much like what you just witnessed.” Loki gestured to Thor
with his chin, who did not arrive using the Infinity Stone Tony recently seized. “It is more costly, but
it can be done. When the Chitauri comes for Earth, only the Tesseract can seal the breach.”

“You twist my intentions!” Thor exclaimed.

“Then leave with only I as your prisoner.”

“We cannot return without the Tesseract.”

Tony opened his faceplate. Thor never stood a chance. Each of the Liesmith’s words interlocked
with the next. “Loki’s right. I can’t give you the Tesseract. Earth needs it.”

“Metal man—” Thor began. He had calmed from his rampage.

“Iron Man,” Tony corrected.

“Man of Iron, you mustn’t fall for deceit. As much as it pains me so, Loki cannot be trusted.”

“You did more property damage in the past ten minutes than Loki since he arrived.”

Behind the glass of his cell, Loki didn’t try to hide his smirk. Thor once gave Tony a rundown of
Loki’s past so Tony knew why Loki dreaded returning to Asgard. Tony wasn’t sure if Thanos could
truly open a portal using other means. Loki could be lying through his teeth, but he knew two things
for certain: he needed Loki to communicate with the Chitauri army, and he needed the Tesseract
to _open_ the portal.

Tony still wanted to send both Infinity Stones off-world as soon as possible, but he could only part
with them after the Chitauri has been dealt with. Otherwise, in the event of the second invasion,
Earth would have to fend off two armies at the same time. For the time being, their goals
miraculously aligned. In that regard, Tony wasn’t against helping Loki to further his own cause.

“I am a friend of Earth,” Thor said.

“He’s telling the truth.” A voice rung from Thor’s makeshift entrance. Selvig pushed past the
S.H.I.E.L.D. agents who had sealed the area. “You can trust this man,” Selvig said to Tony.

“Erik!” Thor smiled at the sight of a familiar face. “You’re here! How is the fair lady Jane?”

Selvig grimaced. “Angry, but we can discuss that later. Tony, we should let Thor leave with Loki.”

“And give up our only source of intel?” Tony’s held his stance. “Loki and the Tesseract stays here
until the invasion is over. After that, they’re all yours.”

Thor considered Tony’s words. “A reasonable request.” He exchanged looks with Selvig, who
nodded in support. “Very well, Loki has brought war to your doorstep. I shall aid Earth in the
upcoming battle. In return, I ask to part with Loki and the Tesseract after the deed is done.”

“Deal.”

“Stark, we need to wait for Fury on this one—” Natasha started, but she was interrupted by Thor.

“You humans are so petty, and tiny,” Thor scoffed. “You cower behind the Man of Iron, yet question his decisions.”

“You’d defend the man who captured your brother?”

Tony shook his head at Natasha’s response. The Black Widow knew how to fuel conflict, but she was about to get blindsided by Asgardian logic.

“Aye. The Man of Iron fought honourably, more so than any of you.” The hard gleam in Thor’s eyes suggested he knew everything that had happened to Loki since his arrival. “I will not be made a fool. An agreement has been reached. You will release my brother from your prison of glass, or face the wrath of Asgard!”

“Another demigod? The world’s gone mad.” That was the first thing Stephen said after he returned to the Helicarrier. He had a wooden box sandwiched under his arm.

“You could say things are getting strange.” Tony smiled at Stephen’s long-suffering groan.

“What’s that? Tell me it’s good news.”

Stephen answered by opening the box. Inside it sat a pair of black leather bracers. It smelled of incense and dust. The exterior had been carefully tooled with runes. The dark leather contrasted sharply against red cushioning. Upon closer inspection, the insides of the bracers had been lined with metal. Curious, Tony reached out.

“It’s best to let Loki touch it first,” Stephen cautioned. He slammed the box shut.

“We’re accessorising him?” Tony pulled back. He’d been expecting something more…physically limiting. If the handcuff and muzzle combination from his past life was anything to go by.

“Looks can be deceiving. The Ancient One suggested these for a reason. I hope Loki isn’t foolish enough to find out how it works.” Stephen placed the box on the workbench. “Much classier than the alternative, don’t you think?”

“True, a cage would clash with the tower’s modernist décor.” Tony had planned to transport Loki back to Stark Tower to honour their deal. Naturally, Thor would go wherever his brother went, so Tony got two Asgardians for the price of one. The demigods would be given free run of a section of the tower, which Stephen would ward. Stephen had considered the plan risky at first, but Tony managed to convince him that it was riskier to leave Loki in S.H.I.E.L.D. custody, with Loki being the God of Mischief and all.
“It’s not too late to change your mind,” Stephen said as he took a seat in front of the monitors. It still perplexed Tony every time he saw Stephen operate technology in sorcerer garb.

“House arrest looks more accommodating. Humans aren’t alone in the universe. We need to build alliances,” Tony said.

“Both S.H.I.E.L.D. and the World Security Council are going to be out of a job by the time you are done,” Stephen teased. “Speaking of Thor…where is he?” It was hard to miss the string of holes running perpendicular through the hallways. The Helicarrier was eerily devoid of staff.

“Being useful.” Tony wrapped up the armour modification he had been working on. “I might’ve offered to accommodate both him and his brother, but you know, some big-bads are standing in the way. They don’t want to free his poor, innocent brother. Who clearly did nothing wrong. Ever.”

“Oh yes—Loki, the sweet, gentle soul. What could have landed him in such a predicament?”

Stephen and Tony exchanged quips until Jarvis warned them of an approaching agent. “Mr. Stark,” the door to the lab opened with a soft *whoosh*, “you are needed in the conference.”

“Think they’ve made a decision?” Stephen asked Tony despite sounding doubtful.

“I wouldn’t get my hopes up.” Tony grabbed his tablet. He followed the agent down the Helicarrier. The pair stopped in front of a set of heavy doors. One of them slid open a smidge for Tony to enter.

Inside the dark conference room, a circle of holographic projections lit the space in a bluish tint. Tony was unsurprised to see General Ross among the military representatives. Director Fury stood opposite them with a bloodshot eye. Behind him, a dozen armed agents stood alert. Their sight was firmly glued to the demigod who had obliterated their defences hours prior.

Thor, either oblivious or uncaring to the threat, was engaged in a passionate debate with a member of the council. The muscles on his arms bulged. He had a firm grip around Mjolnir. The attention of the room turned to Tony as he entered. The intensity of Fury’s death glare could’ve penetrated steel. Tony, having no regards for the director’s blood pressure winked in response.

“Man of Iron,” Thor exclaimed, “you must convince your foolish brethren! Loki is not an enemy of Earth. It is Thanos whom you should be wary.”

“That’s true.” Tony marched until he was surrounded by the holograms of the council members. “There is an invasion, but it’s not from Asgard.”

“Mr. Stark,” a councilwoman with a ginger bob cut said, “what you’ve suggested in your report—it’s madness. We cannot open our doors to an invasion.”

“Humph…” General Ross scoffed, “cowards, the lot of you. I say let those bastards come. We’ll beat them into submission!”

“General, you’re as predictable as always, and your suggestion dim-witted at best,” the councilwoman said with her chin high in the air. “We are blind in terms of intergalactic relations. This will be Earth’s first alien contact. We cannot take the word of some heretic with a spear—”

“Have care how you speak!” Thor bellowed.

It was arguments like these that reminded Tony of why he hadn’t wanted to be here in the first place. “Look, it’s fair enough that you don’t trust Loki, but we have a second Asgardian, one that had already proven himself in New Mexico. Why don’t we ask him?” Tony gestured to Thor with both
hands. “Shoot, Point Break.”

Thor might’ve missed that reference, but he understood it was his turn to speak. “The Chitauri is subservient to the Warlord Thanos. They are not of Midgard or any realm known. It is unlikely they’d see reason, and even more so that another realm would mourn their loss.” The councilwoman fell silent. “The Mad Titan comes for us all. Midgard would be doing The Nine Realms a great service,” Thor continued.

“You are asking Earth to make a powerful enemy,” another councilman said.

“Nay.” Thor shook his head. “The Chitauri will come. Midgard has no choice but to fight.”

The holographic projections exchanged looks with each other. Tony cleared his throat. “How’s this for middle ground: we open the portal and wait beneath it with drinks and flowers, see if the Chitauri sends us a messenger.”

“What if they do?” the councilman said.

“Then we negotiate, and everything is hunky-dory.”

“And if they don’t?”

“If they don’t...” the corners of Tony’s mouth curved into an unnerving smile. “Then we strike so quickly and so ferociously, they regret crawling out of whatever hole they came from.”

Despite evidence pointing to the contrary, the council members weren’t complete fools. None of them had suggested they should avoid alien contact altogether, and as time passed, they agreed that opening the portal under a controlled environment was the best option.

“We won’t be able to hide this from the world,” the councilwoman with the ginger bob cut said. “The public will gain knowledge of this, especially if we open the portal on U.S. soil.”

Modern technology has made it difficult to keep a secret. They’d be making quite a ruckus. All it took was one teenager with a smartphone, and the event would be all over the internet.

“We can’t do this anywhere else. There’s not enough time. We need to contain invasion within the U.S.,” Tony said as he flipped through his tablet. “I’ve got a plan.”

----------

Tony left the meeting six hours later with a migraine and a dry throat. Thor trod solemnly beside him. Tony had a feeling the Aesir would’ve preferred a day of battles instead. Fury followed closely behind. He peered at Tony and Thor through heavy lids. It seemed that sleep escaped everyone nowadays.

“I knew you were reckless before, but I never thought you were downright crazy. Since you became Iron Man, you’ve uprooted many terrorist camps, but to nuke an alien mothership?” Fury shook his head.
Tony told the Aesir to go on without him. When Thor was out of earshot, he turned to the director. “It’s the only way.”

Fury studied Tony as if he was seeing him for the first time. “If you are wrong, you would’ve started a war with an alien race. These people,” Fury pointed to the dark conference room, “they are more than trigger happy.”

Tony sneered. He recalled the nuke from his previous life, the one that would’ve wiped out Manhattan had he not flown it into outer space. He wasn’t sure how he’d survived, as it had been a last-ditch attempt to save the millions of people within the nuke’s blast radius. “Good, because when the time comes, they’ll have to make a call.”

“If you mess this up—”

“I won’t.”

“You can’t guarantee that, not with this plan.” For the first time since Tony came to know Fury, he saw the director pace nervously. Fury had struggled to follow Tony’s logic and Tony didn’t blame him. It would’ve confused anyone, as instead of keeping news of the invasion secret, Tony had proposed to broadcast it to the world. He wanted unprecedented press coverage of the first alien contact.

Tony hadn’t made this decision lightly. Even armed with foreknowledge, he had struggled with which direction to take. The Battle of New York shaped the world he once knew. As a visionary and a futurist, Tony knew where he wanted to go, but not quite how to get there.

In the ideal future, Thanos should be defeated, the superhumans should live peacefully integrated into society, and Earth should be protected from future extra-terrestrial threats. There were different ways to go about achieving those goals, and Tony now stood at the first fork of the road. He had everything he needed to obliterate the Chitauri. He could do it with or out without the founding Avengers. If Tony was to take the spotlight during the invasion, then there was a high chance the Avengers wouldn’t assemble, at least not in the way it had when New York had been under attack.

It brought forth the question: should the Avengers assemble in this timeline?

As with everything else, there were pros and cons to both outcomes. Other than Thor, all the founding Avengers were native to Earth; they weren’t going anywhere even if they weren’t a part of an organisation. In the previous timeline, the Avengers had saved many lives but had also dealt more property damage than Tony could tally. Many countries saw them as a horde of rampaging vigilantes. They had no oversight and acted on situations impulsively when they had no authority to interfere.

But on the flip side, the Avengers had also been instrumental in fostering public good-will toward superhumans. People feared what they didn’t understand. If the people couldn’t see powered public figures fight for them front and centre, then there was a higher chance of worsening the existing social segregation between humans and their gifted counterparts. Furthermore, the opposite of roaming free with no oversight was too much oversight. If there was no organisation, no banner under which the superhumans could unite, then organisations like S.H.I.E.L.D. would gobble up gifted individuals like candy. Superhumans would be absorbed into their ranks and truly become the attack dogs the anti-Accords party had feared.

In the end, it had been Tony’s fear of uncertainty that had ushered him down his current path. Foreknowledge was both a blessing and a curse. Preventing known disasters wasn’t enough. Tony must also ensure the future wasn’t worse because of the changes he had made. If Tony wasn’t certain
the world would be better off without the Avengers, then he had a duty to see Fury’s pet project through.

Establishing the Avengers would set off a chain of reactions, which brought Tony to the second question: if the Avengers assembled again, how should they operate this time?

Tony was still in support of the Sokovia Accords, but if he prevented the Battle of Sokovia, then the Accords would never come to fruition. The original Avengers fought over the Accords because they had functioned without oversight for so long, they got used to the privilege.

The best time to shape any organisation was during its early stages. Tony needed to strike while the iron was hot and establish ground rules as soon as possible. By taking initiative and asking for oversight when they didn’t need to, they opened doors for negotiation. Tony could do what he did best: making deals. Although he’d have to manoeuvre carefully if he wanted control over the world’s first superhuman organisation.

In his past life, Tony had been running the Avengers in everything but name. He smoothed out legal issues, designed gear for the team and footed the bills. Tony had once been foolish enough to think that doing those things made him matter, but his contribution had been witnessed by blind eyes, and his advice fell on deaf ears. If he was going to do the same things this time, he was going to get credit for them.

Tony was done with playing the villain. He was done with making all the sacrifices and still be considered morally inferior. Validation, recognition, legacy…weren’t they everything a hero could wish for?

The world owed him that much.

“I’ll do my part, and you do yours. We need the public to back us on this, so spread the news.” In his mind, Tony skimmed through the next steps again in a matter of seconds. On the outside, he was still fully engaged in his conversation with Fury.

The alien awareness campaign was but a front to get people watching when the Avengers assembled, since they wouldn’t be opening the portal in Manhattan this time, and heroes couldn’t be heroes without an audience. Of course, that wasn’t how Tony had spun it in the conference room. Both the World Security Council and the Armed Forces had been concerned about the guaranteed public backlash if word got out they nuked an alien fleet. Tony managed to convince them that the live broadcast would work in their favour. If the aliens were shown to pull the trigger first, then all who fought in the invasion would become saviours of Earth instead.

“I hope you know what you’re doing, Stark,” Fury cautioned.

Tony smirked.

“Contrary to popular belief, I know exactly what I’m doing.”

Chapter End Notes

The person who makes the biggest contribution calls the shots. I don’t write the rules.
Chapter Notes

Trivia time! By now we all know Loki arrived on May 1st, 2012. Guess what also happened on May 1st, but 2016? That's right: theft of the Book of Cagliostro. It's no coincidence they happened on the same day in this fic.

Beta'ed by the brilliant HoodedIronLady.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

A bead of sweat rolled down Tracy’s forehead. She clung to her notepad. Despite her shaking hands, she was scribbling down notes at a fanatical pace. On the podium, an imposing blonde man addressed the crowd. His voice boomed through the speakers. He donned battle armour and a flowing red cape. His winged helmet glistened in the spotlight. It spoke of foreign lands and well-told tales.

An Asgardian of the legends.

Yesterday, every major news agency had received a statement released by the United States Armed Forces. Its content shocked the world. They had less than eight hours to respond to the bombshell that an alien species had wished to contact humanity. To top it all off, that news had been delivered by a member of another alien community, a member who now stood before their very eyes.

Tracy cursed herself for spacing out in such an important conference. Only the most seasoned journalists had been chosen to attend today. Tracy herself was a fresh-faced junior, but she had an ace up her sleeve: she was the Daily Bugle’s expert on Iron Man.

Over the past two years, she had meticulously watched every interview the billionaire had given, attended every press conference that Stark Industries had held, and wrote more than a dozen articles on the man himself. What had begun as simple hero worship had resulted in a change in her career path. Tracy didn’t regret it one bit. Despite widespread public adoration, there were still people who refused to let go of Iron Man’s former identity as the Merchant of Death. It angered Tracy every time she saw people besmirch Iron Man’s name. Those claims were baseless speculations. A man can change. Tony Stark has done so much for the world, and she has made it her responsibility to see him portrayed accurately in the media, even if it meant she had to write those articles herself.

On the podium, Thor Odinson, the God of Thunder, was prepared to accept questions. Every hand in the hall shot up, including Tracy’s. The conference space was as silent as a glass-clad room surrounded by spectators could be. In the backdrop, armed police patrolled the premises. They made occasional arrests as curious teens tried to jump the fence and bang on the glass. Tracy did not envy the position Thor was in. She felt like an exotic animal locked in a display cage. She could only hope the Asgardian’s first impression of Earth wasn’t limited to petty name calling and unruly crowds.

Tracy scribbled down more notes while Thor answered questions about the alien species that wished to contact humanity: the Chitauri, if Tracy’s not mistaken. She’d have to verify the spelling later.

The more information Thor disclosed, the more Tracy felt the Chitauri might not be so friendly after all. Thor was trying to remain objective, but it was clear he had a personal stance on the matter.
Tracy swallowed uncomfortably. She wished Iron Man was here.

Tony Stark would know what to do.

As if by miracle, she was picked for the next question. The man doing the picking looked suspiciously like someone from Stark Industries’ legal department. Tracy cleared her throat. “Mr. Odinson, have you meet Iron Man yet? What is his opinion on the matter?”

“Ah—friend Tony! We have met indeed. He is a gallant protector of Midgard,” Thor boomed.

Tracy stood excitedly. “Could you please elaborate?”

“Tony is both honourable and gracious. For reasons I cannot speak, I am in his debt, as is the rest of Midgard,” Thor beamed. Tracy scribbled furiously on her notebook. “He is working tirelessly to secure the meeting with the Chitauri. Midgard is in good hands.”

“Does that mean Iron Man will be a part of the meeting too?” Tracy asked.

“Aye.” There was a determination in Thor’s gaze. “I can think of none more worthy.”

Tracy sat back down, a wave of relief washed over her. It was silly, there was likely nothing Iron Man could do if the meeting went wrong, but Tracy couldn’t help herself. There was something reassuring about his presence. Iron Man was what people needed in this age of uncertainty: hope.

“Good job out there, Point Break. You nailed it.” Tony tapped Thor on the arm when the Asgardian emerged from the lift.

“Aye, the ‘reporters’ of Midgard are ferocious creatures indeed. Luckily, I’d been given these cards of clues.” Thor waved the stack of cue cards. “How does Loki fare?”

“Jarvis?” Tony passed the question to his trusty AI.

“Mr. Laufeyson is presently occupied with surfing the internet. His search keywords include sorcery, magician, history, and Iron Man.”

“Me?” Tony stared blankly.

“Would you like me to activate content filtering, Sir?”

“Nah, leave him.” There was no harm in sharing with Loki what he had already shared with another seven billion people. Plus, the more time Loki wasted on him, the less time he had to mull over Stephen.

Loki had met Stephen for the first time yesterday when Stephen sealed his magic with The Ancient One’s bracers. It was a temporary measure. Stephen had promised Loki that as soon as the invasion was over, his magic would be returned to him. The entire ordeal lasted less than a minute, and with
both Thor and Tony standing guard, there had been little Loki could do to complicate things.

Though it wasn’t Loki’s magic that set Tony on edge. The demigods had been allocated to a guest floor. Thor exclusively was allowed access to the common area of the penthouse and Tony’s personal lab. While they gave the mandatory tour, Loki had studied the leather bounds with great fascination. He tried tirelessly to strike up a conversation with Stephen, which the doctor politely, but firmly ended with as few words as possible.

Stephen was finalising some calculations with Bruce and Selvig while Tony came up to retrieve Thor. He could’ve had Jarvis guide Thor down to the lab, but he needed an excuse to be alone. After sending Thor on his way, Tony made the lab crew a jug of coffee. He shuffled from one end of the counter to the other while periodically pressing the espresso button.

There was an unpleasant jitter in his chest; it gnawed away at him. It could be the stress wearing on him as they were working around the clock, but Tony trusted his instincts. There was something else coming, something that he hadn’t foreseen. Tony wondered if it could be connected to Kamar-Taj, but Stephen had assured him the masters were doing everything they could to find Kaecilius.

Thinking about Stephen worsened the jitter. Stephen had a knack for assuming responsibility. At first, Tony had insisted that he stayed with research, yet over the months Stephen slowly but surely wiggled his way into the shotgun seat of the Save Earth Humvee.

Stephen was diving headfirst into something he wasn’t trained for. Aliens, Infinity Stones, apocalyptic events— Stephen was a neurosurgeon less than a year ago. When Tony was a year into being Iron Man, he was still shooting flimsy Hammer drones out of the sky.

Tony dragged a hand down his face. Changes in the timeline had rendered further foresight moot. Killian was dead, so no Mandarin bombings. Project Insight had been cancelled, so no destruction of S.H.I.E.L.D. Tony would never touch the Mind Stone again, so no Ultron, no Battle of Sokovia, and no Accords…

The momentum of change was shaping an unknown future. With the threat of Thanos looming over the horizon, hidden Infinity Stones they have yet to discover, and the ruler of the Dark Dimension attempting to seize Earth, Tony cursed Captain America for the thousandth time for sending him back during such an awkward time. If he only had a clue as to who possessed the other Infinity Stones, where they were kept, or what aspects of the universe they governed. Tony sighed and jabbed the espresso button again. He was going to need a lot more than coffee to get Earth through these next few years.

“Sir, Dr. Strange, Mr. Laufeyson has requested an audience,” Jarvis’ polished voice rang over the intercom.

“I’ll be up,” Stephen’s voice replied.

“Uh—nope. I’ve got this,” Tony said into the commlink. He thought about it, then grabbed the jug of coffee and two mugs with him. “I’m closer.”

“He’s not going to eat me, Tony.”

“The jury’s still out on that one.”

Tony padded into the elevator. He made his way down to the guest level and found Loki in his suite, opposite to that of Thor’s. The trickster had forsaken his battle armour for casual clothing made of soft linen. He leaned against the headboard of his bed, a Stark pad in hand. The green of his garment
complimented his skin. Any cuts and bruises from his skirmish with the Hulkbuster had long been healed.

Loki grinned at the sight of Tony. He hadn’t specified which human he wished to see, be it one or both, but from the looks of it, he had expected Tony to come alone. “Does it irk you? My affections for the wise doctor?” Loki asked. His eyes were large and harmless.

“Yes.” Tony didn’t bother with pleasantries. “Six hours in and you’re bored already?”

“Your electronic tome had been sufficient entertainment, but I long for a more…personal touch.” A flash of tongue wetted Loki’s lower lip. Tony must be losing it in his old age because there was no way Loki was hitting on him. Tony blinked a few times and Loki erupted with laughter.

*The little shit.*

Tony couldn’t suppress his own snicker. He sat on the edge of the bed and leaned against the headboard too. He poured them both a mug of coffee. “The ladies must love you in Asgard.” Tony knew he’d said the wrong thing when Loki’s smile faded. He offered Loki coffee to compensate.

“Is that why you are so eager to be rid of me?” Loki studied the brown liquid swirling against the white ceramic. It released a pleasant aroma into the air. He took a careful sip and grimaced at the bitterness.

“It’s an acquired taste.” Tony took a sip too. “And no, you need to go back because fairyland’s your home, plus you lied about the Tesseract. I said no games.”

“A perceived lie which you eagerly supported.”

“Perceived?”

“Deception works best when most facts are true,” Loki said with a rare air of solemnity. “There are other ways to cross the void. Thanos will come. It matters not what fate befalls the Chitauri. They are but creatures, bred to be spent. So long as Midgard possess what the Mad Titan seeks, the flames of war will reach these lands. Dread it, run from it, destiny still arrives.”

“Then I will pummel his face in so hard, even the mention of Earth will send shivers down his spine.” Tony tightened his hold on his mug.

“You are skilled, Man of Iron. But skill is nothing in the face of true power,” Loki cautioned.

Tony leaned forward. He surveyed Loki, whose gaze met his own unflinchingly. “You’re scared,” Tony observed. “You’ve had a good run in Asgard, from what I’ve heard. That is up until the mutiny, the triple backstabbing and attempted genocide.” Tony had made sure to ask Thor about his adopted sibling, thus gaining a legitimate source of information from his current life. “What happened to you when you fell?”

“You know nothing of fear,” Loki hissed, “of dreadful hopelessness, or of humiliation. To have come so close, only to find all you’ve fought for a mirage, something for you to crave, to admire, but never to hold. To have naught but a worthless fool sit on the throne you so deserved.”

Tony’s smirk didn’t reach his eyes. With each new scrap of information discovered, the vision that had haunted him for years loomed closer. Death, destruction, ruin; Tony had seen it, felt it, lived it.

For years he’d ran around in circles, like a man in a maze; constantly running, but stuck all the same. That had been his life, running and searching. He never told his teammates anything. How could he?
He was never good enough, never worthy. His ‘team’ welcomed the very person who had instilled fear into him with open arms.

To have naught but a worthless fool sit on the throne you so deserved.

Tony stomped the poisonous thought before it could fester. That wasn’t why he fought. He didn’t want to lead, but the Avengers had no better option. It was either him or Rogers, and he saw what good Rogers’ leadership did. Tony had been given a precious second chance; he wasn’t foolish enough to think he’d be given a third.

“I know plenty about fear.” Just as a precaution, Tony loosened his grip on the mug. Loki’s bedding could do without broken ceramic and spilt beverages. “I could rant on about my life story and it’d start with ‘daddy never loved me’, but this isn’t the trauma Olympics. You’ve had a shitty life. Deal with it.”

“You dare suggest I just...” Loki struggled to find the word, “forgive?”

“What—” Tony gasped, “no.” Loki widened his eyes. Tony suspected that might’ve been the first time someone’s told him to stay vengeful. “Odin lied to you for centuries. Gut him in his sleep for all I care, but you settle the score with him. I’ve seen my share of convoluted revenge schemes. You never wanted Earth, you just wanted to prove yourself, but that’s a shitty thing to do. Leave others out of your family squabble, and I swear if you respond with something offhanded, I will summon the Hulkbuster.”

Loki considered Tony’s words, then held up his hands in the air. “I quiver with fear.”


“The Chitauri grows restless. The Other reaches for me.” Loki stared into the swirl of the brown liquid.

“We’ll stop them.”

“You and what army?”

“The Avengers.” Tony rolled his eyes at Loki’s baffled expression. Here we go again. “Earth’s mightiest heroes, that type of thing. It sounds lame at first, but it’ll grow on you.”

“I cannot stall them for long,” Loki cautioned.

“Give us forty-eight hours.” Tony downed the rest of his drink. The concentrated shot of caffeine warmed his chest on its way down. “We’ll be ready.”

“Very well.” Loki didn’t look convinced, but he returned his attention to the Stark pad again in a clear gesture of dismissal. “I still wish to speak with the doctor.”

“In your dreams, Reindeer Games.”
It was raining outside.

Tiny droplets of moisture fell from the sky, wetting the city of Kathmandu. Vendors rushed to cover their goods with plastic sheets. Pedestrians navigated the narrow lanes with umbrellas. None of the hustle and bustle permeated the walls of Kamar-Taj.

The Ancient One liked rain. Rain nourished the earth and brought with it an abundance of life. Rain was the epitome of hope, of cleansing past sins and beginning anew.

“You asked for me?” She hadn’t heard the footsteps of her newly appointed librarian. Wong’s weathered face was sombre in light of recent events. He carried with him the scent of freshly watered pine.

The Ancient One did not deviate from her task. She shifted the stone rings on the stand which held the Eye of Agamotto. In the vision invisible to anyone else but her, layers upon layers of reality morphed, blended, and transformed. During her reign as Sorcerer Supreme, she had prevented countless terrible futures, but she now sensed that her lone might would no longer be enough. Not for what’s to come.

Above her, the projection of humanity flourished. The Ancient One scrutinized the turn of events. She could see them now, extraordinary individuals some powered, some not. They rallied under the banner of one man, but before they could mature and inspire others…darkness fell. The all-consuming void exhausted the planet like a disease. Shaken by her vision of another dead end, The Ancient One relinquished control. The projection faded. She left the stand and unhooked a book from her private collection.

“We stand upon the precipice of change. Never before has the paths of two world-shaping events collided,” The Ancient One said to Wong. Her void-like eyes saw not the librarian standing before her but the lifetimes he might lead. “What happens now will determine Earth’s fate for centuries to come.”

“Two world-shaping events? That’s impossible.” Wong’s breath was caught in his throat. She sensed fear, but even then, she doubted Wong understood the magnitude of the situation. She doubted anyone did.

“And yet it is. A wrinkle in the fabric of space and time.” She recalled the man she had requested to meet. The man who had so curiously became acquainted with Stephen Strange.

Another wrinkle.

The Ancient One readied herself. She ran her fingers down the spine of the Book of Cagliostro; its missing pages a jarring sight. The scent of blood lingered in the air of these chambers. It was a cruel reminder of not only what had come to pass, but also what it could have been.

Kaecilius, one of her brightest pupils. She had seen potential in him, so much raw, unadulterated potential. He came to her a bitter, broken man. For twenty years he trained, yet it was all for naught.

“Take Master Strange to the New York Sanctum,” The Ancient One said with steel in her voice. “It is there he will meet his destiny.”

“He is not ready,” Wong murmured.
The Ancient One blinked. Her sight was filled with falling snow and branches of lightning spreading across the horizon. The power that had sustained her for all these years whispered temptations of darkness. It whispered the inevitability of her demise, but she stood her ground.

“No one ever is.” She blinked again and recalled how the responsibility had been thrust into her hands. She had been so young, so foolish.

“We don’t get to choose our time.”

Chapter End Notes

*gasp* The New York Sanctum! What could it be? Hint: it's not Kaecilius.
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

Trivia #2:
In MCU canon, Stephen discovered magic in September 2016. In this fic, he also discovered magic in September, but 2011. A neat five years earlier.

Beta'ed by the awesome HoodedIronLady.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Stephen crossed his arms and tapped his foot on the parquet floor. Wong was nowhere to be seen. The grumpy librarian had pulled Stephen away from Stark Tower with incoherent ramblings of fate and destiny, only to abandon Stephen the moment they stepped foot into the New York Sanctum.

“Wong?” Stephen called, but no one answered. He was of little use on the tech side, and there was more than enough creative genius between Tony, Selvig, and Banner, so Stephen had busied himself with warding the equipment. It was no small feat, considering how quickly things accumulated. If there had ever been a day where he could do without any distractions, today would be it.

“Hello?” Stephen walked up the steps leading away from the entry, where Wong had disappeared ten minutes ago. Daniel Drumm, protector of the sanctum was also absent. Stephen’s voice echoed in the grand hall. He had never explored the New York Sanctum in depth. The few times he’d been here he had waited in the lobby for Master Drumm to retrieve one item or another. Stephen journeyed to the second floor and encountered a gallery filled with cabinets. They displayed curious objects. There must’ve been hundreds of items from across the ages, clay instruments, masks with furry manes, metal clamps which resembled torture devices, and…

A red cloak.

Stephen had never seen anything like it. It was beautifully made, with matching clasps on the front, a burgundy exterior, and black and red checkered lining. The lining was a tad faded, evidence of the cloak being well loved by its previous owner. Stephen studied the floating cloak as it swayed gently in the air.

He left the display with a nod of appreciation for the delicate craftsmanship. Only one hallway extended from the gallery and there were three doors at the end. Each door led to a different location. Stephen opened the one leading to the ocean. Across the threshold waves crashed against the shoreline, wetting Stephen’s boots. There was a switch next to it. Stephen pressed it and the view of the ocean turned to one of the deserts.

With these doors, Wong could be anywhere. Left with no choice, Stephen returned to where he started. He stood amidst the cabinets. This was absurd, aliens were going to come knocking within forty-eight hours and Wong chose now to lead him on a ghost chase?

Stephen headed for the lobby. He was going to leave Wong a note and portal out. He made it halfway down the steps when he heard a loud bang. A crease developed between Stephen’s brows; he had been certain the sanctum was empty. He backtracked up the steps in time to hear another bang.
Inside its display cabinet, the cloak had balled a corner of itself into a fist and struck the glass. The dull thuds turned to rapid taps when Stephen doubled back.

“Stop it,” Stephen whispered, and the cloak ceased tapping. Not for the first time that month Stephen questioned his sanity. He was talking to a piece of garment. Though in his defence the cloak was clearly sentient, plus, he was a sorcerer, his boyfriend a superhero, and together they were going to open a portal from which aliens would pour. Nothing was off the table at this point.


The cloak did a little twirl inside its display case.

“Yes, I get it. You look great. Wong will be back in a minute.” Stephen left again, and this time he ignored the banging. The noise echoed across the open floor plan. It grew louder as Stephen’s footsteps grew hurried, then the sanctum was rocked by an earth-shattering smash.

Stephen ran back. Glass was everywhere. The cloak had rocked the display stand enough to tip it over. It hovered freely in the air. Stephen heaved a long sigh. Wong was never going to let him borrow a book again.

Man and cloak stared at each other. The cloak lunged forward. Stephen instinctively covered his face, but the cloak hadn’t meant to attack him. It snaked around and flung itself across his shoulders. Stephen felt something ripple through him. A force tugged Stephen’s shoulders and he was dragged across the floor. He steadied himself when he was no longer moving. The cloak had brought him in front of a mirror. Its burgundy shell fanned open to either side like a magnificent phoenix spreading its wings.

“Wong?” Stephen called again as he stared at the display. “A little help?”

That was apparently not the response the cloak was looking for. It fell into its normal shape and fluttered in preparation, then ceremoniously spread back open in a bigger, broader arc.

“It’s trying to impress you,” a voice said to his right.

Stephen jumped at the closeness of the person next to him. “Can you not do that next time?”

“No,” Wong deadpanned. His dark eyes scanned the pair before him. “The Cloak of Levitation. It has chosen you as its master.”

Stephen ran a hand through his hair. The dark brown locks were unstyled and slightly greasy. “Look, it’s not that I don’t enjoy these mystic talks of ours, I’m just—presently occupied.” Stephen hoped the strain in his voice was enough to convey his frustration. “Why am I here?”

Wong took in the combination of cloak and master. “You may go now.”

“Unbelievable.” Stephen’s fought the urge to pull out his hair. “Now help get this thing off me.” The cloak clenched tighter around Stephen at the mention.

“You have great things ahead of you, Strange. Deadly, but great,” Wong said as he turned and walked away.

“Wait, does this mean I’m keeping it?” Stephen asked, but Wong had already gone.
Things just kept getting weirder. Tony thought as he turned stiffly. There it was again, the red cape, hovering expectantly over his shoulders. “I feel like I’m gonna get shanked. Sugar puffs, can you tell your cape to not do that?”

“It’s a cloak, Tony,” Stephen said without taking his eyes off his work. “And no, it likes you.”

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say you’re trying to palm off the kid,” Tony relented. The cloak trembled in excitement and draped itself over Tony.

Tony had nearly been smothered by the cloak when Stephen returned from his impromptu meeting. The Cloak of Levitation, a relic, as Tony learnt, was liberal with its affections. It had clear preferences too, as it batted away Selvig’s hand when the astrophysicist tried to touch it but refused to leave Tony alone.

“How’s the Iridium holding up?” Tony asked Selvig.

“It’s stable, but we’d need an alternate power source to kick start the reactor. After that, it can draw power from the Tesseract and become self-sufficient.” Selvig’s voice rang from somewhere below eye level. He was probably on his hands and knees again trying to calibrate the portal device.

“Try Starkium, it’s what powers my suit,” Tony offered.

“Starkium?” Bruce echoed from the opposite side of the lab. There was a wide grin on his face.

“Yeah, I tried to patent it as Badassium but ran into legal issues. Humour is dead.”

“A real shame,” Bruce chimed.

With Thor away pestering Loki, the rest of the team worked in silence. They all felt the pressure. Jarvis had been appointed to make bi-hourly posts on social media to generate interest. The live broadcast of the first alien contact would become the most watched television event in history, even surpassing the Apollo moon landing.

“You know, you caught me off guard by supporting the portal,” Tony said suddenly.

“I don’t seem like the risk-taking type?” Bruce met Tony’s gaze while still typing on his Stark pad.

“Calculated risk-taking,” Tony corrected, “but no, you don’t seem like the confrontational type.”

Bruce chuckled. “I tend to avoid confrontations. Is this about the Other Guy?”

“Maybe.”

“Aliens, gods, portals…” Bruce listed. “It seems out of my league, but I can figure out a way to solve it. There’s a best course of action. This—” Bruce gestured to himself. “There’s no fixing this mess.”
“See, that’s what I once thought.” Tony strolled across the lab. The Cloak of Levitation fanned out behind him. Judging from Bruce’s expression, he must’ve looked majestic. Tony cleared his throat and tapped on the centre of his chest, where the arc reactor once sat. He’d heard various sounds when he did that before, the crisp ringing of metal, the hollow vibration of an artificial sternum… but now all he heard was the sound of healthy bones. “I thought there was no fixing this either, but I was wrong. There’s always a way.”

“Tony’s right.” Stephen joined the conversation. “A lot of people want to be ‘fixed’ but not all of them make it. What separates them is some give up, while others keep trying.”

Bruce considered Stephen’s words. He pursed his lips and nodded solemnly. None of them said anything for a while and it was Bruce who broke the silence. “Dr. Strange, I read about your accident in the paper. It’s a real shame, but you turned your life around too.”

Tony laughed. “Uh-oh, you just stepped on a major landmine. Honey bunny’s still trying to fix his hands.”

“How?” Bruce asked. “I thought it was irreversible nerve damage.”

“It is, but we’ve been working on this pet project—”

“Tony,” Stephen chided, “we’ve got less than twenty hours.”

“It’ll be a brief refreshment detour.” Tony brought up Extremis on his tablet and transferred the file to the workbench. A holographic projection of the virus floated in mid-air. “It trickled along until we got stuck. With magic popping up, then aliens, we never got back to it.”

Bruce skimmed through the research. “This a lot of data you’ve accumulated.”

“We didn’t do it all ourselves. S.I. gained ownership of this project when we… merged with A.I.M.”

“The company with the disappearing CEO?”

“Yeah…” Tony shifted uncomfortably, “no one found out what happened to him.”

“Regardless, this is incredible,” Bruce said as he pushed up his reading glasses. “If we can reprogram the brain and rewrite DNA… Tony, this could cure genetic defects. It could end terminal illness and heal the disabled. Something like this could revolutionise the medical industry. It could change the world.”

“Precisely.” Recognising the gleam in Bruce’s eyes, Tony transferred more research onto the workbench. “The formula is currently volatile, and patients would have to play Russian Roulette with the rejection rate, but if we can stabilise it, then it’s an all-cure. At full strength, Extremis is highly weaponizable, but we can dilute it before distributing it to the public.” Like I did with the Super Soldier Serum, Tony mentally added.

“This is… remarkable. You’ve gotten so close…” Bruce murmured, engrossed with understanding Extremis.

“You want in?”

“I’m sorry?” Bruce blinked.

“Do you want in,” Tony repeated. “Stephen and I are stuck. You have multiple PhDs in biochemistry and radiophysics. Plus, you need something to do after this whole alien mess.”
“I—” Bruce thought about the offer. He looked to Stephen, who nodded in support. “I suppose I have things I could bring to the table, but I should warn you, the Other Guy…”

Tony thought about Veronica who was in low-orbit and the Hulkbuster that was sitting in storage, both of which future Bruce helped design. “I’ve got you covered. Worse comes to worst—”

“I’ve got it!” Selvig exclaimed, drawing the attention of the room. “We should run some tests, but the device is complete!”

“Whoa—it’s done?” Tony turned to the countdown projected on the wall. “With twenty hours to spare! Go team!”

Selvig winced as he cracked his back. “How’s it looking, Jarvis?”

“Preliminary scan detects no anomalies, Dr. Selvig,” Jarvis said. “I would need approximately ten hours to simulate all possible scenarios. If I may suggest the occupants of this room take this time to rest? Research shows sleep deprivation to be the leading cause of accidents.”

“Thank you, Jarvis.” Stephen checked his watch. “Let’s reconvene in nine hours, that’s enough time for a shower, sleep, and food.” Bruce and Selvig hummed in agreement. The past few days had not been kind to any of them and they needed to be well-rested for the showdown. Tony took some time to organise his things. He and Stephen were the last to leave. When they reached the lift, the others had already gone.

“No temple business on the agenda for tomorrow?” Tony asked as they stepped into the lift.

“Of course not. I’d requested my leave of absence months ago,” Stephen said.

“You sure?”

“Doc’s schedule is clear for the week, boss,” Friday chirped from Stephen’s watch gauntlet.

“Fri,” Tony sighed, “my baby girl, you are not helping.”

“I’m not leaving you to fight alone.” Stephen’s sharp wit effortlessly located the root of the problem. The lift doors parted. Tony passed through the living space and headed for the bedroom without a word. “You can forget about it,” Stephen said as he followed Tony through their home.

“You are not combat personnel,” Tony tried to keep his voice down. “I can’t watch over you out on the field.”

“I’ll keep my distance, round up the strays so none of them escapes the battlefield, like we discussed.” Stephen was having none of it. “And I don’t need you to watch over me. I can take care of myself.”

Tony bit his lips and said nothing.

“Tony—”

The pair entered the bedroom. Tony headed for the ensuite but he was yanked back by his shoulder. The cloak spun him around and shoved him in front of Stephen. “Hey!” Tony exclaimed. Stephen took the chance to pull Tony in by the hips.

“Got you,” Stephen murmured. “He doesn’t like us fighting.”

“It’s a ‘he’ now?”
“Come on, let’s not do this,” Stephen said as he pulled Tony close. “I promise to be careful. I didn’t train all this time for nothing.”

“Stephanie, I hate to break it to you, but Mordo’s been dancing with you.” Tony broke away in favour of crossing his arms. “You wouldn’t last a minute in a real fight.”

Stephen arched an eyebrow. “You’ll be surprised.”

“Prove it.”

“You are not seriously thinking of doing this here.” Stephen looked around him. The penthouse bedroom was carpeted, but it wasn’t padded like the training facilities.

“If you lose, you sit tomorrow out,” Tony challenged.

“And if I win?”

“If you win…’ Tony wiggled his eyebrows suggestively. He crooked his head towards the bed. “Next time we’re here, I’ll let you top from the bottom.”

A hot blush crept up Stephen’s neck, but his eyes spoke of defiance. “Deal.”

The two of them leapt backwards, Tony kicked off his slippers while Stephen rolled up his sleeves. The cloak sensed the shift in the atmosphere and returned to its master.

“No armour,” Tony offered.

“No magic,” Stephen returned the courtesy.

They both shifted into a battle stance. It was Stephen who moved first. He feigned to the left, aiming for Tony’s torso when his target had been Tony’s knee. Tony, with a decade worth of avenging under his belt saw through the misdirection. He blocked the kick then countered while Stephen was still within reach. His punch sent Stephen shuffling backwards.

“I heard the command centre is air-conditioned,” Tony said as he settled into a classic Wing Chun stance. “I’ll make sure they serve nice drinks—”

Stephen lunged forward. He threw a series of rapid punches, forcing Tony to hop across the chaise lounge. Tony searched for an opening while parrying a few strikes he couldn’t avoid. Despite his previous statement, he never doubted that Stephen was improving. The newly appointed Master of the Mystic Arts attacked with speed and precision. With a few more years of experience, Stephen would be a formidable fighter.

Tony made sure his path was clear before tucking and rolling across the carpet. He caught something in the corner of his eye and grabbed it as he landed. He threw the object at Stephen, who was blindsided by the blanket soaring towards him. Stephen froze mid-attack, but the blanket never quite reached him.

Tony’s fist stopped centimetres before Stephen’s face. It generated a gush of air which mused Stephen’s hair. Tony had been carefully controlling his strength. Even twenty percent of the Super Soldier Serum was enough to dent steel. Stephen’s unenhanced form was fragile.

“You’ll be contributing from the sidelines too. No one’s gonna forget what you’ve already done, and it’s not like ahhhhhh—” Tony never finished his sentence. He was flung across the room and landed on the bed. It took him a while to realise the reason he couldn’t see was because Stephen’s cloak was
covering his face. Tony struggled to free himself, but the cloak had wrapped him in a burgundy cocoon.

“Who’s laughing now, Iron Man?” Stephen approached Tony just as the cloak exposed Tony’s face.

“That’s cheating!” Tony squawked. He flapped around on the bed like a fish on dry land.

“I said no magic, never said anything about relics.”

“Ugh.” Tony slumped against the mattress. “This universe hates me.”

“This universe…” Stephen smiled. He climbed on top of Tony and kissed him. “…loves you.” The cloak swiftly unwrapped Tony and exited the room, closing the door behind him.

“That thing needs its own social security number,” Tony said as he flipped himself over and pinned Stephen beneath him. “Is there anything I can do to change your mind?” Tony asked despite knowing the answer.

“I can’t let you fight this alone.”

“I won’t be alone.”

“You need someone to watch your back. I don’t trust anyone else.” Feeling the weight on top of him, Stephen wrapped his arms around Tony and relaxed. “Call me paranoid.”

“Paranoia’s already taken, get your own specialty.” Tony nuzzled his nose against the crook of Stephen’s neck. “Promise you’ll keep your distance,” he finally said.

Stephen chuckled. “Promise.”

For the first time in weeks, the pair just laid there as time ticked by. Eventually, Tony sat up and wrinkled his nose. “I never thought I’d say this, but we both smell.”

There was no response from Stephen. Tony poked Stephen’s face and the doctor jerked awake. “I’m falling asleep,” Stephen said with a yawn. “We should get some rest.”

“Yeah, good idea.” Tony rolled off the bed and pulled Stephen up with him. “But before that, we’re taking a shower.” Stephen noticed the ‘we’ in Tony’s suggestion and looked at his boyfriend expectantly.

“All work and no play makes Stephen a dull boy,” Tony slurred.

“You and I… we are gonna have some fun.”

Chapter End Notes

The countdown to the invasion begins!
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

I saw the Marvel ten-year anniversary class photo and nearly burst into tears. Thank you RDJ for bringing Tony to life.

Beta'ed by the wise HoodedIronLady.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tony woke to Jarvis reciting the weather forecast feeling on top of the world. “Good morning, cutie patootie.” He planted a kiss on Stephen’s forehead. The man grunted beneath him. “You’re perfect the way you are, but you should give the serum a go.” Tony threaded his fingers through Stephen’s hair as Stephen caught a few more minutes of rest.

“At this rate, I’m considering it.” Stephen rubbed away the sleep in his eyes. He eventually mustered the strength to kick the blanket off. After another brief shower, Stephen donned his sorcerer robes whereas Tony slipped into his undersuit.

“I know you’re checking me out.” Tony knew he looked good in his undersuit. Black was his colour and the thin material was skin tight, leaving nothing to the imagination. Tony had always been fit, but the Super Soldier Serum had accentuated the definition of his muscles. He even grew taller, though it wasn’t enough to surpass Stephen, a fact Stephen never ceased to remind him.

Tony’s cheek earned him a slap on the ass. The cloak settled on Stephen’s shoulders as the pair headed for the kitchen. When they joined the rest of the research team, Bruce and Selvig had already eaten. As a reward for his good behaviour, Loki had also been allowed access to the common area. He sat by himself at the bar. From his elevated vantage point, he could see everyone on the level. Someone had made bacon and eggs and left the latecomers a portion. Tony and Stephen each found a seat and tucked into their breakfast.

“How’s the device looking?” Tony asked through a mouthful of scrambled eggs.

“Good.” Selvig swiped through a Stark pad in awe. “These things are very useful.”

“I’ll ship a crate out to you.” Tony couldn’t help himself, old habits die hard and the offer slipped out. “Sorry, I didn’t mean it like that. I just—I thought—”

“Like what?” Selvig asked, still busy swiping. “And I’d like one. I’ll pay for it, of course. They are different from the ones you get on the market, good for research on the go.”

“Tony keeps them for personal use. The public doesn’t need a processor that powerful.” Stephen nudged closer to Tony. “When will the colonel arrive?”

“Colonel James Rhodes is scheduled to arrive within an hour,” Jarvis answered.

Tony shoved another forkful of eggs into his mouth. Some days—nope, scratch that—he was grateful for Stephen’s insight and unconditional support every day. Loki took in the events with an amused smirk. Tony shaped his index and middle finger into a V. He pointed towards his own eyes then pointed towards Loki. I’m watching you, Tony thought as he attempted telepathy. Don’t try
“Where’s Thor?” Stephen noticed the absent Asgardian.

“He’s with Jane. She’s a fellow astrophysicist,” Selvig cleared his throat. “They are…romantically involved.”

“Ten hours before battle?” Stephen’s forehead wrinkled.

“He said he’ll be back,” Bruce called from the couch. “Tony, you need to take a look at this.” Tony shoved the last of his breakfast down and jogged to the seating area. “The sceptre is flaring up.” Bruce tapped away on his own Stark pad. It was connected to the feed in Veronica and showed the container housing the Mind Stone. “The energy signature is through the roof. I’m surprised that container is holding up.”

“Surprised?” Tony gasped. “I made that, see that Stark Industries logo?”

While Tony and Bruce focused on Veronica, Stephen dabbed his mouth clean and snuck over to the bar. Loki’s grin widened at the sight of Stephen. “Eldritch magic,” the trickster purred. “Remarkable…for a mortal.”

“You’ve seen magic like this before, outside of Earth?” Stephen twisted his hand and a small vortex of light appeared. It lingered between the sorcerers for a second then disappeared.

“Of course. Midgard is special, but far from unique. Our—” Loki cleared his throat. “Thor’s ancestors have studied magic for millennia. It is integral to every living being; their life-force, if you will. There are personal energies, worldly energies, and dimensional energies.”

“Interesting,” Stephen contemplated. “Humanity shares this universe with other species. There are bound to be others who shape the source code of reality the same way we do.”

“’The source code of reality’,” Loki mused. “A charming way to put it.”

“My teacher taught me that.”

“You are not alone?”

“No.”

“I take my eyes off you for one second—” Tony sprinted up the steps leading to the bar. He halted before the sorcerers with an unamused look.

“He came to me.” Loki was the definition of wide-eyed innocence.

“Stephen—” Tony dragged out the doctor’s name as he turned to face Stephen with his hands on his hips.

“He had invaluable information,” Stephen began.

Tony took a deep breath. “But—”

“Sir, I apologise for the interruption, but an unidentified aircraft is requesting permission to land,” Jarvis said.

“Permission denied,” Tony snapped. He returned his attention to Stephen, who was applying pressure to his temples. “But he is literally the God of Lies.”
“Mischief,” Loki rectified.

“I hate this household.” Tony regretted supplying Loki the tea he had asked for.

“Sir,” Jarvis tried again. “The aircraft has dispatched three heat signatures onto the roof of the tower. Facial recognition identified them as Captain Rogers, Ms. Romanov, and Mr. Barton. They pose a security risk—I stand corrected—there has been a security breach.”

“Rogers?” Tony asked. “Isn’t he with S.H.I.E.L.D.?”

“Permission to open fire.”

For a split-second, Tony entertained the notion of showering the three future Ex-vengers with bullets, but he controlled his impulses. “No, let them in.”

“This is setting a bad example,” Stephen warned. He was verbal with his dislikes, and S.H.I.E.L.D. had long been on the receiving end of his merciless gibes.

“I know, but we have—” Tony checked his watch, “—nine and a half hours until we open the portal. We need a united front.” He made his way towards the entry.

Stephen didn’t look convinced, but he followed Tony’s footsteps with the cloak swaying behind him. Loki left the bar and padded over as well. He was accompanied by Bruce and Selvig.

“What do you think they want?” Bruce asked. “They could’ve called.”

“Nothing good,” Tony had a bad feeling about this. The Stark Tower research team were supposed to meet S.H.I.E.L.D. and the Armed Forces at the portal site. Anyone who hadn’t previously arranged a visit had no business here. The elevator parted to reveal three of Tony’s least favourite people in the world; an impressive accomplishment, considering the length of the list. “Spangles, to what do I owe this displeasure?”

Captain America wore the vivid uniform S.H.I.E.L.D. had provided him before Tony took over outfitting the team. Natasha and Clint flanked Steve to either side. Tony scanned them from head to toe and noted all the improvements he could but won’t be making to their gear.

“Stark, you need to call off the assault.” Steve noticed Loki roaming freely behind the group. He narrowed his eyes but said nothing. The captain clutched a new shield that had been modelled after the original. Its composition was questionable, considering Howard had depleted S.H.I.E.L.D.’s Vibranium reserve to forge the prototype that was gathering dust in Tony’s storage.

“They just let you in on the plan?” Tony ran a hand over his face. Here he was, cleaning up after S.H.I.E.L.D. again hours before the defining moment of the century. “If I were you, I’d take a hint. And listen to yourself, you think I can call off an invasion? I’m flattered, but that’s not happening.”

“You can’t destroy an entire race for the sake of your ego. A nuclear bomb is going to kill millions. You’re opening the portal, you have the power to choose.” Steve demanded as if Tony was about to single-handedly begin World War III. He shifted his shield; Tony was glad they had stored the portal device in the lab.

“I have chosen, the Chitauri needs to go.” There wasn’t enough time to convince Steve, if such a feat was possible to begin with. “Look, there won’t be a nuke if whatever’s on the other side is friendly.” Steve took a deep breath and shook his head.

“I told you, he’s not going to listen,” Clint said.
“Old habits die hard,” Natasha agreed with an air of nonchalance.

“Evidently, coming from two ex-assassins who still kill people for a living.” Tony has had it with Clint and Natasha’s patronising ways. “Betrayal is second nature now, isn’t it? Fury agreed to this plan.”

“You haven’t changed at all,” Steve said, not quite knowing Tony long enough to be disappointed. “The whole world was wrong about you. You are still a war profiteer.”

“You’ve known me for less than a week—” Tony began.

“I know enough,” Steve said with finality. “I’ve seen the footage. The only thing you really fight for is yourself. You are not the one to make the sacrifice play, to lay down on a wire and let the other guy crawl over you. You may not be a threat, but you better stop pretending to be a hero—”

“A hero like you?” Stephen interrupted. He bypassed Tony and came face to face with Steve. “Tony has done more for this world then you can imagine. You are nothing but a fabricated tale, glorified war propaganda. Now acquaint yourself with the concept of manners, or I’ll drop you into the Arctic again where you’ll spend the next seventy years learning it.” The cloak fluttered in preparation.

“Shut it down.” Steve addressed Stephen, but his response was meant for Tony.

“Or else you’ll do what?” Stephen challenged, sparks flew from his fingers.

Steve widened his stance and lowered his centre of gravity. Behind him, Clint nocked an arrow while Natasha fired up her Widow Bites. Tony cursed inwardly and called his suit. He didn’t want to do this hours before the battle, but he’d be damned if he let Stephen get hurt.

“That’s enough!” The elevator parted for the second time. The voice turned the heads of both Tony and Steve. The man who emerged from the lift had cut his hair and was dressed in a dark hoodie. Save for the metal hand that clutched his duffle bag, he looked the part of an ordinary tourist.

“Bucky?” Steve gasped.

“Barnes?” Tony waved Mark Fifty away. “What are you doing here?”

“I promised to help, didn’t I?” Bucky said. “I heard the news. Now seemed like a good time.”

“Who let you up?” There were only two people who had unlimited access to the penthouse and one of them was standing beside Tony, which left...

“I did,” said another voice followed by the crisp click of heels. The current CEO of Stark Industries wore a set of regal white suit. The red of her Louboutin stilettos matched stunningly with her coral lipstick. She held folders in one hand and adjusted her earpiece with the other.

“Pepper?” Tony gawked.

“Ms. Potts,” Natasha said. She was met by Pepper’s infuriated glare.

“Don’t you ‘Ms. Potts’ me,” Pepper warned. “I know what you did. Stay away from Tony.” She surveyed the people in the room one by one. Some were met with cold indifference whereas others received gentle nods. Finally, her eyes locked with Tony’s. “I ran into him downstairs, causing a scene. He explained who he was, and I let him up. Jarvis filed a security breach; the guards are on their way.” As if on cue, the fire escape burst open. In came a dozen security guards followed by the same number of Iron Sentries.
Since his rebirth, Tony had taken the security of Stark Tower very seriously. The Iron Sentries were developed as a companion line to the Iron Legion and were used to defuse situations that might pose a risk to the security team. Most people got the idea when they were told to behave by a flying suit of armour. Despite popular demand, the Iron Sentries were not for sale. They had since become a popular feature of Stark Tower.

“Captain Rogers, Ms. Romanov, and Mr. Barton, please stand down, or you will be escorted from the building,” the dozen Iron Sentries said in union.

Captain America raised his shield. He looked at Bucky. “Buck… are you alright?”

Bucky and Tony traded nods. “Stand down Steve,” Bucky said as he dropped his duffle bag.

“Buck, you don’t know what’s going on,” Steve explained.

“I don’t, but I trust Tony. And if I know you at all, I’d say you don’t know what’s going on either, so stand down. These things pack a punch.” Bucky flexed his metal arm. Tony suspected he found that out the hard way.

Steve looked at Tony, the team behind him, and the Iron Sentries standing guard. He looked at Bucky, who shook his head in response. With gritted teeth, Captain America lowered his shield.

Across the living space, Steve was engaged in a heated argument with Natasha and Clint. Bucky stood to the side and watched with his arms folded. The ex-Winter Soldier had a private conversation with Steve prior to his outburst. Tony suspected that Bucky came clean with everything since he fell from the train.

Thor had returned, learned of the situation, and planted himself between the Ex-vengers and the entrance to the lab. Pepper left to deliver the final statement Stark Industries would release before the first alien contact. Rhodey arrived in the War Machine suit shortly after the security breach. Jarvis had briefed Rhodey of the complication en-route and the colonel pulled Tony aside for a chat. Tony had assured him that things would proceed as planned, information which Rhodey passed on to the Armed Forces.

Tony was developing a migraine. Blood pulsed painfully through his head. He downed his third cup of coffee and was about to pour his fourth when Stephen switched the coffee pitcher for a pot of jasmine tea. The floral scent did nothing to soothe Tony’s racing mind. The situation between Steve, Natasha, and Clint was escalating by the minute, and to make matters worse, Bruce had come to Tony too.

“Wait wait wait,” Tony held up a hand to halt Bruce’s question. “You are asking me if we could bench Captain America?”

“Yeah,” Bruce confirmed. “That’s what I said. He’s a liability.”
“This is crazy. I need a moment.” Tony finished his tea in one swing. He was sitting with Stephen, Bruce, and Selvig around the kitchen. Thor was a short distance away, Loki had returned to the bar, and Rhodey was on the phone near the window. They were not all talking, but there was a clear separation between Tony’s team and the Ex-vengers. A ‘us vs them’ dynamic. The abandoned seating area divided them like no man’s land divided enemy trenches. This was no better than the last time the Chitauri came knocking. It was worse.

Tony hadn’t foreseen this turn of events. The Avengers, despite rocky beginnings, had assembled dutifully in his past life, but the group of mismatched individuals before him showed no signs of coming together. Tony would always resent working with the Ex-vengers, but he’d never thought the team would resent working with each other. Tony could not allow a chasm to form between them, at least not hours before the invasion.

They needed to present a united front.

“Hey!” Tony yelled. “Everybody, listen up!” Heads turned at the call. Satisfied that he had the attention of the room, Tony strolled to the centre of the penthouse. In the brief seconds, he came up with many versions of what he was going to say, but none of them sounded quite right.

“Since you are all getting along so spectacularly well, I thought I should put forth a reminder. We have a job to do in the next eight hours.” Tony tried to recall what had motivated him. What made him fly around with people in spandex and leather catsuits? Why did he become an Avenger? Tony’s memory rewound to a single moment in time. He cleared his throat.

“There was an idea, called the Avengers Initiative.” Tony studied the people who had gathered for the invasion, committing their faces to memory. Some of them were old, and others new. “Fury told me this,” Tony choked. The people’s gaze bore into his skin. He swallowed dryly. The moment seemed surreal. He was really going to do this. He was going to lay the foundation to form the Avengers.

Tony’s hands shook under the tangible weight of the responsibility. He took some time to still himself. “The idea was to bring together a group of remarkable people, see if we could become something more. See if we could work together when the world needed us to…” Somewhere in another life, blood-soaked Captain America trading cards skittered across the table, leaving behind a smear of blood.

“…to fight the battles they never could.”

The people were silent, and Tony thought he had failed, but then Stephen stood. The doctor came to stand beside Tony, along with Bruce and Selvig. Their actions triggered a chain of response. Rhodey ended the call and joined them too. Thor walked over as he swung Mjolnir in circles. Loki descended from the bar with careful footsteps. Bucky marched towards Tony with renewed determination. He was followed by Steve. The master assassins exchanged looks. They were the last to join, but they joined nonetheless.

Tony watched in awe as the people gathered around him. He opened his mouth again, and the rest came easier. “Some of us still believe in heroes. I do too. I wouldn’t fly around in a tin can otherwise.” Rhodey smiled at Tony’s sentiment. “We don’t all see eye to eye, but now’s not the time to settle our differences.” Tony looked at Steve. “I know this situation isn’t ideal, but it’s this, or something worse.”

“You can still put an end to it,” Steve said.

“Peace isn’t something that can be achieved by one side alone, Rogers. You lived through a war.
You of all people should know that.” Tony stood his ground. Eventually, Steve lowered his gaze.

Tony returned to address the rest of the group. “Threat is imminent. The Chitauri are coming. We are Earth’s first and only line of defence. We cannot fail, because if we do, then everything we care about, everyone that matters to us will be turned to dust.” Stephen clenched his fist beneath the cloak. “This is what’s at stake: our home. This is why we fight. Not to start a war, not to prove we have the bigger guns, but because there are people who need us to.” Clint tightened his hold on his bow.

“I can’t save Earth alone,” Tony continued. “As much as I want to, I can’t. None of us can. If we want to survive, if we want to protect what matters to us, then we need to overcome our differences and work as a team.” He looked at everyone in the room and was met with the occasional nod.

“I don’t know about any of you, but I don’t plan on letting the world end tomorrow.” Tony stepped forward.

“Now who’s with me?”

Chapter End Notes

The Chitauri won’t know what hit them. ;D
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Morning, May 7th – Undisclosed location in the Mojave Desert

When they weren’t busy disagreeing with each other, the United States Armed Forces, World Security Council, and S.H.I.E.L.D. could be frightfully efficient. Since reaching a consensus on the night of May 3rd, a twenty-mile impact zone had been surveyed and isolated in preparation for humanity’s first contact with aliens. They had chosen land with a flat terrain and built a temporary command hub on the edge of the site.

In the centre of the impact zone was a clearing marked by red spray-paint, which Tony dubbed the gladiator pit. To prevent friendly fire, the Armed Forces had agreed to keep out of the fight as long as the Avengers contained the battle within the pit. A small army of drones hovered over the portal site. For their own safety, no civilians had been granted entry, but the news channels made do.

In the pit, combat personals were fully geared and battle ready. Military backup had been stationed behind the nearest sand dune. The low hiss of Veronica’s thrusters resonated across the pit. The service module landed in the clearing. It was her first appearance since Loki’s arrival. Veronica opened a hatch and released the container housing the Tesseract then ducked out of view again. Selvig picked up the Tesseract and attached it to the portal device. Once the device was up and running, Selvig hopped into a waiting helicopter. He and Tony exchanged thumb-ups, and the astrophysicist was whisked away to safety.

“Ready?” Stephen’s voice rang through their private channel. The Avengers stood in a circle around the portal device. Stephen was wearing a holographic HUD. The fluctuating statistics basked his features in a blue glow. The bulletproof weaving of his robes glistened under the sun. Friday had extended into gauntlet form, covering Stephen’s right forearm. The cloak of Levitation rested on his shoulders.

“Born ready,” Tony said to his boyfriend. He turned to the cloak. “Take good care of him.” The cloak’s collar bobbed up and down in a nod.

At the centre of the circle, the Tesseract emitted a brilliant beam of light. It shot towards the sky and tore open the blue canvas, exposing a starless void. Seconds ticked by while nothing happened, and then the portal spat out a handful of Chitauri. They seemed surprised by the sight that greeted them. “We come in peace!” The electronic voice beamed as the aliens neared.

“Hold it…” Tony emphasised. The team held their position. The Chitauri opened fire. Energy blasts rained from the sky and melted sand where it failed to find flesh. Tony grinned. “Avengers, let’s rock
Thor let out a thunderous laugh. He spun Mjolnir and lunged towards the invading forces, shattering their vehicles and taking first blood. Loki rolled his eyes at the display but conjured a dagger between each of his fingers. His forearms were bare; the missing bracers no longer hindered the magic coursing through his veins.

“Here they come,” Natasha said.

Chitauri soldiers poured from the portal. Rhodey lifted Clint on top of a nearby dune. The two worked on containing the battle with Stephen, who portalled escaping vehicles back into the pit. Tony, Thor, and the Hulk were the designated heavy hitters. The Hulk smashed his fists together excitedly and leapt from one side of the battlefield to the other, challenging random foes. Tony and Thor stayed near the portal to target the clustered squadrons. Steve and Bucky worked beneath them, disabling any Chitauri that had fallen from their vehicles. Loki and Natasha weaved through the battlefield in search of strays.

“Tones, two slipped through to your nine o’clock,” Rhodey said.

“On it, honey bear.” Tony entered a chain of commands. “Rise and shine Legionaries, time to work for a living.”

At the perimeter of the pit, sand fell from brushed metal as the Iron Legion shed their camouflage. The expanded Iron Legion consisted of five-hundred units. In preparation for the Chitauri, they had been temporarily outfitted with a light arsenal. The units moved from crouching to standing, then shot into the sky like white and navy meteors, dutifully intercepting the escaping vehicles.

“Nice,” Rhodey approved. The escaping energy signatures faded from his HUD.

“Wait till you get a load of this.” Tony laughed. “Jarvis, initiate dome formation.”

“As you wish, Sir,” Tony’s trusty co-pilot confirmed. The swarm of Legionaries flocked closer to the portal then fell evenly in line to contain the invasion within a web of Iron Man suits.

“That’s…” Clint looked above him. The dome of Legionaries casted a crisscross shadow over the battlefield, enough to block out the sun. For a moment, the archer forgot to fire.

“Tones?” Rhodey asked hesitantly. He too was looking up.

“Yeah?” Tony rounded up a group of Chitauri and took them out with a missile. Iron Man had never looked menacing, but when confronted by hundreds of flying suits of armour, one couldn’t help but feel intimidated. Tony knew what this looked like. The Legion only answered to him; he was a one-man army. This was precisely why he had refused to expand the Legion further.

“You don’t plan on becoming an overlord anytime soon… do you?”

“If I decide on a change of career, I’ll let you know.”

“Tony—” Natasha rolled across the sand to dodge an energy blast. She fried the brain of a Chitauri with her Widow Bites. Following her call, the tip of a Leviathan squeezed through the portal. The armoured beast narrowed its beady eyes at the dome of Legionnaires. It released more Chitauri from the cracks of its shell. The clearing was rocked by a deafening roar. “Any ideas?”

“Ms. Romanov, I thought you’d never ask.” Tony changed trajectory. The Leviathan noticed Tony and swam towards him. Tony took in the beast’s impenetrable armour and odd movement pattern.
“Come on,” the engineer mumbled, “that’s not how gravity works.” Chitauri riding the Leviathan fired their rifles. Tony avoided the laser beams with a series of mid-air manoeuvres.

“Hey guys,” Tony said into the group coms, “any of you heard the tale of Jonah?”

“No—” Stephen asserted. Tony met the Leviathan head-on. The leg plate of his suit retracted to expose a row of missiles. “Tony Stark, you are not doing what I think—” Stephen was struck speechless as Tony disappeared down the Leviathan’s jaw. The beast’s midsection lit up in sync with Tony’s movement. Missile after missile detonated inside the beast, shredding its intestines. The Leviathan roared in agony. Stephen didn’t blink until Tony came out the other end, covered in slime, but unharmed.

Bucky whistled at the sight. Flames engulfed the ginormous beast while dozens of Chitauri abandoned ship. They crashed into the sand. The ones that weren’t killed on impact were slain by the ground team.

“Incoming!” Clint yelled. After circling around the beam, the tattered Leviathan fell from the sky. The ground team scattered. They narrowly avoided being crushed but the portal device was immovable. The device’s cylindrical form was dwarfed by an expanding shadow.

“Jolly Green!” Tony called. Despite knowing the Tesseract had conjured a forcefield for self-protection, Tony didn’t want to put it to the test. The nuke hasn’t launched yet; the party couldn’t end before the grand finale.

Upon hearing he was needed, the Hulk paused his current fight. He roared and ran towards the falling beast. The Hulk leapt with three Chitauri soldiers still clawing at him. The two trajectories crossed a mile above the device. Hulk’s first connected with the Leviathan and a crunching noise ensued. The carcass broke in two. Hulk kicked the larger portion away but missed the tail.

Tony prepared two missiles, though before he could launch them, an amber circle larger than any portals he’d previously seen stretched open. The tail of the gargantuan beast scraped the edge of the ring, then fell through and reappeared at the edge of the pit. Tony turned to Stephen, wanting to congratulate him on his timely intervention, but Instead of scolding Tony for his reckless antics, Stephen doubled over. A trickle of blood flowed from his nose. Tony froze mid-air.

“Doc, hostiles to your six!” Friday’s call shook Tony from his trance. A squadron of Chitauri was closing in. Tony’s heart hammered in his chest. With shaking hands, he fired the two missiles meant for the Leviathan and took out the majority of the Chitauri, but two had survived.

“Stephen!” Tony yelled. He flew towards Stephen at peak velocity. One of the soldiers raised its energy rifle.

As the rifle’s barrel lit with accumulated energy, a flash of red knocked it from the soldier’s grasp. The cloak left Stephen and wrapped itself around the Chitauri, dragging it across the sand. After they were a safe distance away, the cloak tipped the Chitauri over then repeatedly bashed its head onto a piece of rock. The other soldier ran towards the cloak but was zapped by a stun net to the face.

“Doc, snap out of it!” Friday called from the smoking gauntlet. She had used the last of her bullets. Stephen grunted. He wobbled but got back up. Tony landed beside him.

“That’s it, you are done. Go back to the command centre,” Tony said.

“I’m fine.” Stephen wiped the blood away with his sleeve. Tony opened his mouth to argue but Steve came to a halt beside them. The super soldier had noticed their difficulties and left his position
to help.

“Dr. Strange, are you alright?” Steve buried his shield into the chest of a Chitauri and yanked the disc free. Tony ignored the chills creeping up his spine and wiped out another foot soldier.

“There’s too many of them,” Tony lifted his faceplate. The trio looked up. There was another Leviathan inbound. Chitauri rained from the sky like droplets of a violent storm.

“We need to close the portal,” Steve looked at Tony. The pair traded nods.

“Fury, send in the payload,” Tony said into the group coms.

Miles away at the command centre, the director of S.H.I.E.L.D. green-lighted the launch. A strategic bomber that had been circling the site delivered the nuclear warhead. “ETA three minutes,” Fury informed. Coulson and Maria Hill stood beside him, monitoring the battle. “Hold your positions.”

“Jarvis, take the wheel and give me the nearest Legionnaire,” Tony ordered. Mark fifty’s HUD was replaced by a simpler interface. Tony had contemplated going into the wormhole again. He decided against it in the end. Personally diverting the nuke had been an act of desperation. This time Tony had the resources; it was better to take precautions. He needed to value his life, even if it’s just for Stephen’s sake.

The next sequence of manoeuvres required finesse, so Tony manually flew the Legionnaire towards the inbound warhead. The nuke headed for the portal in a beeline. The Legionnaire under Tony’s control waited for the nuke to fly over its head then slowly caught up to catch the nuke between its arms.

“Nice,” Tony beamed. Detecting the nuke, Veronica reappeared in the centre of the clearing. She released the container housing the sceptre. “Reindeer Games, you got that?”

“I see it,” Loki said. The container’s lid opened. Loki was propelled backwards by a blast of energy.

“Woa—Reindeer Games?” Tony snuck a glance at the Asgardian.

“This is the Mad Titan’s doing. He has gone too long without contacting the sceptre. Any longer and this Infinity Stone would no longer answer to him.” Loki picked himself up. The bracelet he wore expanded into a gauntlet. Stephen had warded the gauntlet with protective magic beforehand. Tony had chosen Loki as the candidate to close the portal because Loki was an adept user of magic. He also had previous experience with the Mind Stone and was thus the least likely to succumb to mind control. The runes on Loki’s gauntlet glowed dimly at first but came to life after Loki retrieved the sceptre. “I am ready, Man of Iron.”

“Alright, homestretch everyone,” Tony called.

The cloak had returned to Stephen and was helping him fend off another Chitauri. Jarvis took control of Mark fifty to eliminate a squadron closing in. Above them, the dome of Legionnaires parted for their brother in arms. The Avengers watched Tony’s Legionnaire carry the nuke upwards in a smooth arc.

Thrusters burning at peak strength, Tony entered the portal. His helmet closed off the world around him, accentuating the stillness of space. It’s as if he’d travelled back in time. Tony gazed into the void and flew towards the Chitauri mothership, the nuke hot on his back. The further he went, the faster his heart hammered against his ribcage. Tony took aim then slowed, and the nuke slid off his back. The warhead stayed in perfect trajectory. Tony watched it sail across the emptiness, surrounded by silence.
“Sir, if I may suggest a swift exit,” Jarvis said.

“Oh—yeah, right,” Tony sputtered. “Lokes, hit it.”

In a peculiar sense of Deja Vu, Tony watched the nuke connect with the mothership. Satisfied that the deed had been done, he turned the Legionnaire around. Outside the portal, Loki broke the Tesseract’s force field with the sceptre. The Mind Stone touched the Space Stone and severed the beam that tore open the sky. At once, the broken fabric of space began to mend itself. Tony rushed towards the closing portal with clenched teeth. His heart rate picked up further. He calculated his flight speed against the shrinking rate of the portal. *I’ll make it*, Tony thought, but then his vision shook violently.

Masked by the dark vacuum, a Chitauri vehicle had snuck up on him. It intersected the returning Legionnaire. Two soldiers snatched Tony with webbed fingers, locking him in place. Behind them, the mothership crumbled apart. It killed the remaining Chitauri, but Tony remained tangled in a mess of alien limbs. The corpses of the Chitauri pulled Tony deeper into the abyss. The view of Earth shrunk smaller and smaller until the darkness knitted back together.

The portal closed. It severed Tony’s connection with the Legionnaire. The simplified interface flickered, then reverted to the HUD Tony was familiar with, but Tony was too shaken to comprehend the turn of events. The sensation of falling from his past life resurfaced. Recollections from countless nightmares morphed together, overlapping with what Tony had witnessed.

The portal closing before him. Tony, adrift in space. Lost forever.

Tony screamed inside his helmet. He punched and kicked at nothing and took off in the direction the portal had been when he was piloting the Legionnaire. Tony remained oblivious to the calls behind him. He flew senselessly and crashed into a sand dune, landing on his left shoulder. White, searing pain coursed through his chest. With a grunt, Tony flipped himself over and stayed where he was. The impact had cleared his head, but he was still in shock. Somewhere far away, a voice called his name.

“Tony!” Stephen shouted. He ran towards the fallen Mark fifty and knelt without slowing. His knees dug deep into the sand. “Tony, answer me!” Stephen pulled the manual release mechanism on Tony’s helmet. Tony squinted at the bright desert sky. Once his eyes adjusted to the brightness, he focused on the man beside him.

Stephen looked terrible. His face was smeared with blood, soot, and sweat. The doctor had scraped his forehead on something and his nose bleed had started again. The dark liquid trickled down his well-groomed goatee. The robes Tony had made were a mangled mess. It was tearing in the arms and there was a long gash across the chest. Luckily, the cut had only penetrated the outer layer, leaving the lining intact.

“Tony!” Stephen tried again. The remaining Avengers gathered around them. “Say something…”

Tony looked at the portalless sky. “I’m back,” he choked.

“Of course you are.” Stephen wrapped Tony in a tight embrace. “You’re okay.”

A sea of Chitauri laid fallen at their feet, but this was not the Battle of New York. There were no civilian casualties. Aside from the invading forces, there were no casualties at all. The army of reporter drones hovered above them, recording the scene for the ages after they had broadcasted the battle to the world. The hot breeze dried the sweat on Tony’s face. He returned Stephen’s embrace.
“We won,” Tony muttered.

“Yes, we did.” Stephen smiled, and it was the most stunning smile Tony had ever seen. They were watched by both their teammates and the rest of the world, but Tony couldn’t care less. He grabbed Stephen’s collar and kissed him. He tasted copper and sweat as their mouths crashed together.

Tony was glad to be back.

Chapter End Notes

With the close of the Avenger's arc, Tony has officially run out of foresight. He knew the outcome of other events such as the Convergence, but he wasn't heavily involved in them. From next chapter onward, it's a brand new world!
“...were no casualties. The site has been sealed until further notice. Unauthorised personnel are advised to steer clear of the area. The United States Armed Forces are scheduled to release a statement later today...”

“...the organisation was dubbed officially as the ‘Avengers’. Its notable members include Tony Stark, the billionaire commonly known as Iron Man; Colonel James Rhodes, a.k.a. the Iron Patriot; Thor, the Asgardian demigod; Dr. Bruce Banner and his alter ego, the Hulk; Captain America, who had been defrosted after spending seventy years under ice; and Dr. Stephen Strange, an ex-neurosurgeon at Metro General Hospital, who is in a relationship with Iron Man. Other individuals remain unidentified at this time...”

“...and then Iron Man dived into the mouth of the flying whale and the whale exploded! The Hulk broke the whale in half, and the bits fell through this huge portal—It’s the coolest thing I’ve ever seen!”

Tony sat in the Stark Tower workshop, alone and shrouded by darkness. The day’s events played on a loop inside his head. Stephen was upstairs. Tony had snuck away after Stephen drifted asleep. Tony knew he should catch some rest too, but he couldn’t. Every time he closed his eyes he was confronted by the frost-bound void. Therefore instead of staring at the ceiling, Tony came down to the workshop, much like he did in his past life.

Tony powered on the workbench with the room still dark. A wireframe model materialised. It emitted a soft blue glow. Tony spun the scaled Chitauri around. They had destroyed the mothership; Tony watched the nuke connect. The Chitauri operated under a hive mind intelligence. Provided they hadn’t gone extinct, Thanos would have to breed another batch or find a new army.

This brought them time. Tony copied the existing file structure into a separate folder. He was in his pyjamas, which consisted of only a thin tank top and boxer shorts. To prevent overheating, the lab was five degrees below optimal room temperature. Tony shivered. A swooshing noise sounded near the entry. Tony paused, but no one was there. It wasn’t an intruder or Jarvis would’ve warned him.

“Come out,” Tony bluffed. “I saw you.” Seconds ticked by and nothing happened. At the end of the corridor, the Cloak of Levitation peaked around the corner. It froze when it knew it had been spotted.
“You can come in. The door is open,” Tony beckoned.

The cloak hovered outside the threshold, engaged in a mental debate. It flew away without a word. Ten minutes later, he heard slippers scrape against polished concrete. The workshop lit up with the flick of a switch. Tony shielded his eyes from the bright lights. Only then did the cloak fly in and settle on his shoulders. Tony saw Stephen yawn from between his fingers.

“This can wait till tomorrow,” Stephen said. “Come back to bed.”

Tony’s shoulder was still sore from landing on it. He lowered his hands as his eyes adjusted to the brightness. “I won’t be long.” Tony turned to the cloak. “You shouldn’t have woken him.”

“Tony, don’t make me come over there.” Stephen crossed his arms and leaned against the door frame. Tony covered his face again. Stephen frowned at the sight. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing.” Tony ran his hand down his neck. He knocked on his chest and an intact sternum connected with his fist. Tony knocked once more for good measure. Stephen rounded the workbench. He stopped before Tony then got down on one knee. The pair’s perspective switched. Tony no longer craned his neck upwards, he was looking down. “If this is a proposal I expect fireworks,” Tony quipped.

“Come on…” Stephen coaxed. “You can tell me anything…” Stephen’s unstyled hair flopped to the sides, the strands were mostly black, mixed with the occasional streak of grey. He looked drained, vulnerable, yet he was in the lab instead of catching up on much-needed sleep.

“Nope. You are not allowed to do this,” Tony both loved and hated that Stephen was always here for him. “This—one” he gestured to Stephen’s pleading eyes, “—should be illegal.”

“Coming from the man with Bambi eyes,” Stephen said. “How did Insight Magazine describe them again? That’s right, ‘orbs of warm, golden caramel, but could morph into bottomless pits of desire…”’

Tony burst out laughing. The pair exchanged harmless jibes. “I just want to keep you safe,” Tony said as he pulled Stephen close. The other man’s forehead touched his chest.

“I am safe, thanks to you.” Stephen’s voice was muffled by Tony’s tank top. The ensuing silence was disheartening. Stephen looked up. “What’s wrong?” Tony didn’t respond. “We won. It’s over.”

“Is it?”

“Isn’t it?”

Tony drew in a deep breath. “One down, one more to go.”

Stephen blinked in rapid succession. “You’ve got to be joking.” He grabbed a stool and sat, taking in the database Tony had been building. Information on the Chitauri had been meticulously keyed in, but the new categories remained blank. “What are these pages for?” Stephen navigated the file. Tony knew Stephen caught onto something when his movement quickened.

“You never told me how you knew the Chitauri were coming,” Stephen said in revelation. “I assumed you got the intel from S.H.I.E.L.D., but they were more clueless than I was. What aren’t you telling me?”

“I had a feeling—” Tony stopped himself. He didn’t want to lie.
“Don’t bullshit me, Tony Stark,” Stephen said. “I know you. You’re not the type to act on baseless assumptions. Everything you’ve done in the past two years had been building up to this. Expanding the Iron Legion, monitoring S.H.I.E.L.D., studying the Tesseract to intercept Loki… You wouldn’t have piled your resources together unless you knew for a fact the Chitauri were coming.”

Intelligent and perceptive, Stephen was difficult to fool. Stephen had been an integral part of thwarting the invasion. The last thing Tony needed was for Stephen to race off on a tangent in search of answers. “There was a vision,” Tony admitted. “I saw it clear as day. It’s the end. The end of the path I started us on.”

“A second invasion?”

“Thanos,” Tony confirmed. “If my theory is correct, then there are more Infinity Stones hidden on Earth. Thanos will come. It’s only a matter of time.” Stephen propped his chin up in thought. Tony waited for the inevitable, but the ridicule never came. “You aren’t worried about the legitimacy of the vision? I put you through all this for a dream. That’s irresponsible, even for me.”

“The Chitauri came,” Stephen said as a matter-of-fact. “Can you imagine the catastrophe if you hadn’t acted and Loki opened the portal in a city like New York? Dream or no, the world owes you an unpayable debt.”

“If the others knew, they wouldn’t think the same.”

“Unless they have done more to save the world, the others need to shut their mouth,” Stephen deadpanned. “The Ancient One had prevented many dreadful futures. As Sorcerer Supreme she is a frequent receiver of visions. You probably experienced something similar.” Stephen scrolled through the file. “Tony, people are popping champagne corks…we have to warn them.”

“Warn them how?” Tony threw his hands into the air, ruffling the cloak in the process. His frustration was amplified by his lack of rest. “For months I asked S.H.I.E.L.D. to shut down P.E.G.A.S.U.S. Nothing happened. I had proof the Tesseract was dangerous. Now I have nothing but a…vague prophecy. No one would believe me.” Tony looked away. “Even if they did, we are still ridiculously outgunned. Thanos would crush us.”

“Then we roll over and show our belly?” Stephen mocked.

Tony returned his gaze to Stephen. “I have a plan.”

“I was hoping you’d say that.”

The pair rolled their swivel stools down the bench. Tony banished the schematics that had been floating atop and opened another file. Five categories popped up, a falcon, an ant, a wasp, a panther, and a spider.

“What are those?” Stephen asked.

“Recruits.” Tony ran through the categories one by one. They consisted of any and all information he could gather on the powered individuals. Sam Wilson’s file was the largest as Tony had asked Rhodey to pull his records from the Air Force. Scott was still a small-time crook whereas Hope van Dyne worked for Darren Cross. Peter Parker had attended the Stark Expo in his Iron Man mask then returned to Queens for elementary school. T’Challa’s file was the smallest. There wasn’t much on the Black Panther, save for a blurry ten-second footage taken in the jungle, presumably by Vibranium traffickers.

“I don’t get this.” Stephen swiped through the file, pausing at the baby-faced Peter. “That’s a kid.
They are ordinary people, and I thought Wakanda was a fairy-tale.”

“We are ordinary people too.” Tony said. “Until someone needed us, and then we weren’t.” Tony’s fingers danced across the keyboard. The five icons fell into the Avengers ranks and filled vacant positions. “If I’m going to prepare for the end of all things, I’ll need a team.”

“We,” Stephen emphasized. Tony had composed a skill chart for each person who had fought beside him. Stephen clicked on his own icon. His file expanded to fill the bench. A holographic bust of Stephen rotated on the top left-hand corner, followed by a brief biography and basic stats. It was the first of eighty-seven pages.

“Fine, we.” Tony stole a glance while Stephen was focused on his file. Two strips of surgical tape held together the gash on Stephen’s forehead. Stephen had cleaned himself up, but Tony had seen the bruises while they were showering. Stephen had a close call today, and if things were going to continue the way they were then that was bound to be the first of many. “How’re you feeling?”

“I’ve had worse,” Stephen said absently. “How do you plan to recruit them?”

“I was going to start with Wilson—are you sure you’re fine?” Tony asked again. “We should run some scans—”

“Tony,” Stephen asserted, “I’m fine.”

“Then why did you black out on the field?”

“I didn’t black out on the field.”

“Said the one who doubled over.”

“I experienced temporary nausea. Whereas you had a panic attack and tried to hide it.”

“Jarvis,” Tony groaned. “I thought we were friends.”

“Sir, you granted Dr. Strange full access to your medical records as of 8.29 p.m., January 12th, 2012.” Some days Jarvis would take the blame in silence, today was not one of them.

“Uncalled for,” Tony mumbled. “Alright, I thought I got trapped in the portal. I freaked out. No need to make a big fuss over it.”

“Is that why you came down here?”

Tony pursed his lips. “I didn’t want to freak you out.”

“I was a surgeon for years. It will take more than a panic attack to freak me out.” Stephen softened his voice.

Tony supposed that was true. He knew Stephen would take it much better than Pepper, as Stephen had prepared for the invasion by his side. Tony withdrew to the lab out of habit, though perhaps it’d be safe to reveal more. Stephen had never been one for fighting, but he’d understand.

“I’ve had them before—nightmares. Whenever I closed my eyes, they were all I could see. First Afghanistan,” then the Battle of New York, then Siberia, Tony mentally added, “and now this. I thought I’d gotten better, but…” Tony trailed off. Stephen covered Tony’s hands with his own.

“Are you alright?” Stephen asked.
“Yes—” Tony started but thought the better of it. The nights where he had worked in isolation, feverishly assembling suit after suit had wreaked havoc on his mental health. He never wanted to repeat those experiences again. “No. I’m…not,” Tony admitted. He twiddled his thumbs beneath Stephen’s touch.

“Would you like to seek professional help?” Stephen lowered his voice further, as if Tony was a deer in headlights. “I’m not qualified for this.”

“No.”

“Tony—”

“I want you to stay with me,” Tony said. “You don’t have to do anything, just stay. That’s all I want.”

Stephen searched Tony’s face for something. Tony didn’t know if he’d found it, but after a pause, Stephen relented. “Okay, but if symptoms persist—”

“I’ll contact my personal healthcare professional immediately,” Tony promised. “Though he’d probably notice the signs before I do. He looks out for me 24/7.”

Stephen smiled fondly. “What a champion. Can I get his number?”

Tony pulled Stephen down for a kiss. Stephen’s lips dragged across Tony’s mouth in lazy, but reassuring movements. Stephen held Tony with great care. His hands shook at odd intervals, but despite their fragility, Tony had never felt safer in another person’s arms.

“You wish,” Tony said after they parted. “This good doctor…he’s all mine. I’ve booked him out. He’s not taking other patients.”

“A shame,” Stephen cooed, “but I have a feeling he doesn’t want other patients. He’s found the one.”

----------

Stephen yawned. Tony had calmed from his fright after a night of planning for the future. They had gone to bed at the first light of dawn. It was now noon. The sun was too bright, and his lunch had been too delicious. Stephen felt a food coma threaten to jam the gears in his mind. He wished he could crawl back in bed with Tony, but they both had work to do.

Stephen, Tony, and Loki stood at the entrance of the penthouse. Tony cleared his throat. “You sure about this?” Tony glanced suspiciously at Loki before asking Stephen.

“Yes, knowledge exchange is essential to maintaining healthy industry standards,” Stephen said. Loki grinned smugly. For some odd reason, the God of Mischief stood close enough to brush shoulders with him.

“Magic is an industry and Kamar-Taj has standards?” Tony lifted his brows.
Stephen levelled Tony with a dirty look. “The Ancient One approved. I will give Mr. Laufeyson the standard tour. We will be back before the day ends.” He slipped on his sling ring and spun his right arm in circles. Stephen and Loki stepped through the ring of sparks. Tony stood on his tip-toes and peered at Stephen one last time before the gateway closed.

If Stephen were to hazard a guess, Tony had trusted Loki to end the invasion, so trust wasn’t the issue. Tony was more…annoyed. He didn’t like Stephen spending time with Loki, even as a token of goodwill after Loki had fought on behalf of Earth. The Asgardians were scheduled to return later today. Loki had requested to meet Earth’s sorcerers for some time. It was now or never.

Loki took in the apprentices training in the courtyard. Stephen waited for him to finish his observations. The air of Kamar-Taj smelt of freshly watered pine. The pair moved slowly. Their boots trod stone tiles polished from use. Stephen introduced Loki to the apprentice quarters, the mess hall, and the meditating chambers. Loki inspected the aged temple with thinly veiled fascination.

“In Asgard, magic is a practice frowned upon. Those who battle with magic are considered cowardly.” Loki mused. “True warriors settle the matter with swords and axes.”

“I take it that most ‘true warriors’ aren’t academically inclined,” Stephen said.

“Quite.”

They entered the library. Stephen nodded at Wong and the staunch man narrowed his eyes. Stephen had informed Wong of Loki’s visit. A red light had been flashing atop the librarian’s head ever since. Stephen watched Loki with careful eyes. He didn’t want Loki to validate Wong’s threat on book theft.

Turning to Loki, Stephen indicated to the apprentice section. “You are welcome to read here until the day’s up, but don’t wander further than this point—” Loki bypassed the shelves and headed for a stone stand while Stephen was mid-sentence. Wong grabbed the mace on his desk. Stephen pressed down both hands, gesturing for Wong to sit tight. He caught up to Loki with three wide strides.

“You are making this difficult.”

Loki stopped a tad shy of the stone contraption. He observed the markings on the movable rings then the amulet that sat atop. Stephen had seen The Ancient One operate the device. Loki glanced at where the vision would be projected, his eyes filled with wonder.

“Step away from the Eye of Agamotto,” Wong warned.

“He won’t ask a second time,” Stephen said.

Loki’s eyes flicked to Wong, then Stephen, and back to the Eye of Agamotto. He held his hands up with a mischievous smile and padded away. Wong levelled Loki with a withering look but didn’t follow.

“Peculiar things find their way to Earth,” Loki said.

“That they do.” Stephen walked Loki back to the apprentice section. “Do me a favour and don’t make Wong decapitate you, or the other way around, in which case I’ll be forced to act, and Earth will descend into war with Asgard.”

“You think you can injure me?” Loki scoffed.

“I can try, and if I fail Tony is up next.”
Loki rolled his eyes. “The Man of Iron bested me once.” He browsed the shelves, picking up volumes here and there. He paused when he saw a tome on healing. Loki turned to Stephen, “How do you fare, Strange Doctor?”

Stephen sighed but didn’t bother to correct Loki. “If you mean from battling the Chitauri, I’m well.” Loki blinked. “You don’t know, do you?” “Know what?” Stephen tilted his head the side. That didn’t sound good.

“Exceeding your limit; expending personal energies,” Loki said. “You did so when you transported the Chitauri warship. Sorcerers borrow energy from other dimensions but only so much can be borrowed at a time. A gateway so large either forms naturally or through clever manipulations of worldly energy. To create one drains personal aura or lifeforce. You felt the essence leave you, did you not?”

A chill crept up Stephen’s spine. “Am I dying?”

“All beings die. It is only a matter of time.” Loki placed the stack of volumes on an empty desk. “Even Asgardians, albeit at a much slower rate. To expend personal energy is to beckon death.”

“I…didn’t know,” Stephen said. He had felt nauseous but brushed it off as fatigue. That was the first time he had used magic to such extremes. “I saw the need and borrowed as much energy as I could. When that wasn’t enough… I can’t explain it, it’s like I reached deep inside me and saw more… just waiting there.”

“You are gifted,” Loki sat and opened the first volume, “to have discovered another form of energy on your own, but know is it a foolish act.”

Stephen sat with Loki, words sat on the tip of his tongue. He watched Loki read. When the Asgardian wasn’t trying to conquer Earth, he gave off the air of a gentle prince. Though anyone who knew Loki knew it was a clever act. Stephen had seen Loki slice open throats deftly, without a sliver of hesitation.

“Thank you,” Stephen finally said.

“I am not without honour.” Loki spared Stephen a single glance. “Intentionally or not, the Man of Iron lightened my would-be sentence, provided me with a chance for redemption. I do not leave debts unpaid.”

Stephen nodded. The library was empty save for them and Wong. A crisp breeze permeated the wooden lattices, carrying with it the sweet scent of spring. Stephen revelled in the hard-won peace; he knew it wouldn’t last. “Will you return to Earth someday?” Stephen asked Loki, who seemed absorbed in reading.

Loki didn’t answer for some time, just when Stephen took it as his cue to leave, Loki spoke. “Sooner than you think.” A smile tugged at Loki’s lips. Stephen returned the sentiment. He stood and left with quiet footsteps, leaving Loki in a sea of books.

Chapter End Notes

Tony pulls a Bruce Wayne. ;D
Chapter Notes

I should've said this earlier but it escaped my attention. As of last week, Anew has accumulated more than 5000 kudos! Wow, I cannot believe my eyes and how is it chapter 28 already? 90k+ in I can safely say this is the longest fic I've ever written. Thank you, everyone, for staying with me on this amazing journey.

Beta'ed by the clever HoodedIronLady.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The tower’s cladding peeled away for Tony. He landed in his penthouse with a crisp clang of metal, followed by Thor. The two laughed as Tony left Mark fifty, the prize of their doughnut run in his hands.

“You snooze you lose Point Break.” Tony plucked a doughnut from the jumbo box and offered the rest to Thor.

“My friend, you are most sly.” Thor hooked Mjolnir to his belt. His heavy cape swayed behind him. He took a doughnut with orange sprinkles and finished it in three bites. “I request another match.”

Tony hummed in contentment as the doughnut’s fluffy texture melted in his mouth. The store clerk’s jaw had dropped when he saw Iron Man and the God of Thunder. After they posed for a group photo, Tony raced off with the doughnuts while Thor was busy chatting. “Admit it, I’m the best flyer. You might have the advantage of speed, but I take the cake in an obstacle course,” Tony said.

Thor took in Tony’s satisfied smirk. He retrieved another doughnut from the box and admired its chocolate glazing. “You remind me of Loki. When we were young, he used to distract me then escape with my favourite treats. I’d chase after him, and he’d laugh and eat his prize as he ran.”

After recovering from his run-in with the Hulkbuster, Loki had caused quite the mischief around the tower. “Some things never change,” Tony said through a mouthful of mush.

“Aye. Whatever Loki may claim, he is still my brother,” Thor said solemnly. “We spent millennia together… I thought we were going to fight side by side forever.”

“I think deep down, Loki feels the same.” Tony wiped his hands on his jeans. “He slipped on the naming a few times, but you need to fix this snafu. If you gloss over it, he’s gonna drift further away.” Thor loved his brother; that much is clear to anyone. Both in this life and the last, Thor had tried to reconcile with Loki, albeit using all the wrong tactics.

“Loki is angry. He lets his rage consume him,” Thor said.

“Who wouldn’t? Like you pointed out, Loki believed he was Asgardian for millennia. Imagine if during the invasion you found out you were Chitauri. Now add another layer of childhood insecurity and social alienation. People aren’t kind to what’s different.” Having spent time with Loki, Tony understood the trickster’s bottled frustration. Thor stared at the doughnut’s reflective sheen as if it held the secrets to the universe. Tony sighed and patted Thor on the back. “You are trying, but
sometimes trying isn’t enough.”

“What shall I do?” Thor exclaimed in agony. The sight would have been comical if not for the weight of the question. “I require your counsel.”

“Talk to him, apologise, and most importantly, don’t point fingers,” Tony advised from experience. “Be a good brother and give him time to think. He’ll either come around or he won’t.” Tony grabbed the box and flopped onto the couch. He gestured to the spot beside him. Seconds later Tony felt a dip in the cushion. “You can’t save anyone from themselves. Loki has to come back on his own.”

“I must try,” Thor said with renewed determination.

Tony smiled at the burly demigod. Thor had a tender heart. Tony thought of the challenges ahead of Thor and wished him the best. “Try you will. Just remember you’ve made a friend on Earth. If you need me, I’m here.”

Thor nodded. “Thank you...for everything you’ve done. I am in your debt, as is Asgard.”

“Don’t mention it.”

The pair sat in comfortable silence and observed the New York skyline. They were joined by Bruce, who caught wind of their return and emerged from the labs. The tower seemed emptier now that Selvig had returned to Culver University to teach. The astrophysicist declined Tony’s offer to be made an honorary Avenger, stating he’d rather focus on his work. Before he left, Tony made sure to jot down his address so Jarvis could provide him with a lifetime supply of Stark pads.

The three inhabitants of Stark Tower finished the jumbo box. Enhanced or not, Tony was beginning to think binge eating a dozen fried pastries might not have been the best idea. A faint hiss sounded behind them. Tony didn’t have to turn to know Stephen was back. “Had fun?” Tony asked.

“Mr. Laufeyson made some…interesting discoveries,” Stephen said as he approached the group with Loki.

Tony craned his neck towards the entrance. “Interesting how?”

“We can discuss that later.” Stephen checked his watch. “We’re running behind schedule. It’s almost time.”

“Already? Time flies when you are having fun.” Tony bounced off the couch. He strolled towards the newcomers while Thor retrieved Loki’s handcuffs.

The Tesseract and sceptre were waiting for the Asgardians on the roof of the tower. Tony had recovered the Infinity Stones as soon as the portal closed. In this life, the sceptre was considered Loki’s property, and since Loki was no longer an enemy of the state, S.H.I.E.L.D. hadn’t felt entitled to confiscate it. On the other hand, the W.S.C. had asked for the Tesseract back, an opinion Thor hadn’t taken kindly. After a few rounds of debate, the W.S.C. shrivelled under the wrath of Asgard’s soon-to-be king.

“I guess this is it. Until next time,” Tony said to both Asgardians. Stephen nodded in agreement.

Bruce shook hands with Thor. “I’ll be seeing you, big guy.”

“Aye, friend Bruce. May our paths cross again,” Thor boomed. The pair joked about how Thor had come a long way in learning Midgardian custom. Then, hesitantly, Bruce extended his hand to Loki. Loki regarded the offered hand but didn’t shake it.
“Come on Lokes, don’t leave him hanging.” Tony threw an arm around Bruce, who looked abashed at the rejection. Loki pursed his lips apologetically but remained rooted to his spot. Thor extended the handcuffs to Loki. Loki looked at the metal cylinder and then back at the rest of the group.

“Do not delay our departure, brother. You must return to Asgard to be trialled by the All-Father. I promise I will speak of your heroics on Earth, as will Heimdall,” Thor said.

Loki sneered. Green light rippled through him; an illusion. Tony raised his brows. He should’ve known Loki wasn’t the type to lay down and accept what was coming; the God of Mischief made his own luck. Tony poked where Loki was supposed to be and watched his finger sink into the trickster’s nose. Out of reflex, Loki’s illusion batted away Tony’s hand, but their limbs never touched.

“I thought you were better than this, Reindeer Games. After everything, you’re just gonna skedaddle and never show your face again?” Tony asked. Loki didn’t meet his eyes.

“Impossible…” Stephen marvelled. “Someone had been watching him the whole time.”

“Loki is a skilled sorcerer,” Thor said to Stephen. He turned to Loki. “Brother, please. You must return. If you run from the trial, you will only make matters worse.”

“That is for me to judge.” Loki’s fists laid clenched by his sides. “I will be Odin’s prisoner no more.”

“Brother—”


“Wait, wait, wait—” Tony only had a second to act and he seized the opportunity by the skin of his teeth. “There’s something you need to know. If you ignore me I promise you will regret it.”

Loki’s illusion rematerialized with a frown. He crossed his arms. “Do not attempt to fool me, Man of Iron. You are a terrible liar.”

“I am an excellent liar.” Of the four men in the room, none looked convinced. Tony cleared his throat. “Fine. I wanted to warn you before you left, preferably in person, but this will have to do. Remember how I’m ‘gifted with the sight’?” Tony air-quoted. “Well, another one came up.”

Tony had contemplated the best way to bring up the Sacking of Asgard and decided on the direct approach. Lies spawned the need for further deception. Tony wanted to be as honest as possible. Both Thor and Loki had done right by him and Tony felt morally obligated to warn them of what’s to come, but he hadn’t been involved in the Convergence. Tony knew of the tragedy that had befallen Asgard through second-hand information. Though Tony supposed a vague warning was better than nothing.

“I saw a city of gold, connected to the Nine Realms by a rainbow bridge.” Tony described Asgard as Thor had described it to him in his past life. “There was a palace in the centre. I saw a woman there, brown eyes and brown hair. You called her Jane,” Tony said to Thor.

Loki and Thor exchanged looks. “I had not told friend Tony about Asgard, only our family,” Thor said.

“Neither have I,” Loki seconded.

“There was an invasion—a running theme nowadays—by ghostly things with pointy ears and white
masks. Their leader, Malekith, tried to take Jane, who had something called the ‘Aether’. He was stopped by your mother. Malekith’s lackey killed her.” Thor and Loki stared at Tony in stunned silence.

“We have to warn father,” Thor said to Loki. “How far into the future is this vision? Please, you must remember,” Thor approached Tony with pleading eyes.

“I don’t know, maybe a year, give or take.” Tony didn’t want to set a hard date. With the timeline altered the Dark Elves could arrive early.

Loki’s illusion disappeared. At the corner of the living space, the real Loki shed his disguise. He walked to Tony with hurried steps. “If you make a fool of me—”

“Hey, no guarantees, I don’t know how accurate this vision is and I’m only mentioning it as a favour.” Tony raised a finger to halt Loki’s threats. “You know how unreliable these things are.”

“Yet you predicted my arrival with perfect clarity,” Loki murmured. His clenched fists opened and closed. At last, he came to a decision. “Take me back to Asgard,” Loki said to Thor, offering his wrists.

Tony smirked winningly. He knew Loki cared. Thor was less subtle. He wrapped his arms around Loki in a crushing hug. “Brother, I knew you’d do the right thing.”

“Ugh.” Loki put forth his usual façade, but some of the stiffness had lifted from his shoulders.

Tony watched the handcuffs close around Loki’s wrists, Thor then lifted the muzzle. “Is that necessary?” Tony never liked the concept of hindering someone’s ability to speak. “He won’t talk you to death.”

“Some forms of magic require incantation,” Thor explained.

“He’s returning willingly.”

Loki’s distaste for the intrusive device was clear. Thor considered Tony’s words and lowered the muzzle. The group ventured to the rooftop. Thor held the container housing the sceptre in one hand and the Tesseract in the other. He offered the Tesseract to Loki, but Loki ignored it in favour of approaching Bruce.

The God of Mischief held out his hand as per Midgardian custom. “Until we meet again, Bruce Banner.” Bruce shook Loki’s hand with his mouth slightly open. Loki gave Tony and Stephen a parting nod while Thor patiently waited for his brother to return.

“Try not to conquer Asgard too.” Tony couldn’t help himself.

Loki stifled a laugh. “No promises.” He took hold of the other end of the container and twisted, activating the Tesseract. Thor and Loki vanished in a pillar of light. Tony looked at the ground. No charred markings, such exemplary eco-tourism. He wondered if he could persuade Asgard to adapt to this method of travel. Tony had never been a fan of the Bifrost; someone had to pay for lawn maintenance.

“Great, now I don’t know what to do with this.” Stephen let out a long-suffering sigh. He opened a portal and retrieved a tiny wooden box. A circle of flowing script was carved into the face of the box. The text was different from any language Tony had seen. A thin piece of metal floated in the circle, half of it coloured red.
“Is that a compass?” Tony took the box from Stephen.

“Yes. Loki made it.” Stephen confirmed.

“He what?” Tony studied the compass. It was so small, it fitted in the palm of his hand and so intricate, the carvings were thin as hairs. “You guys were gone for five hours tops.”

“Magic helps,” Stephen quipped, which earned him a dirty look.

“What does it do?” Bruce took the compass next.

“Loki knew Kamar-Taj had been searching for Kaecilius. He made it as a peace offering. Instead of pointing to magnetic north, the compass acts as a tracking device. All it needs is a strand of hair, which we found in Kaecilius’ quarters. Kaecilius has evaded capture thus far but he has no knowledge of Asgardian magic. The compass seems to be working.” Stephen looked at the floating needle. The red tip pointed towards a spot behind Tony. Bruce spun in a circle. Having locked onto the target, the needle rotated with him.

“What is this, Pirates of the Caribbean?” Tony fought the urge to dissect the compass. He made a mental note to scan it later. “Should I build you a spaceship and name it the Black Pearl?”

“I don’t know if I should trust Loki.” Stephen collected the compass from Bruce.

“Do you have a better idea?”

“I suppose I don’t.”

“There you go.” Tony shrugged. “As long as it’s not hexed, you should give it a try. Now onto the real question: what’s for dinner?” The sun touched the horizon before the trio, bathing lower Manhattan in a golden haze.

“I thought Stephen was making Italian.” Since they fought aliens together, Bruce and Stephen had been on first name basis. “The meatballs last time was delicious.”

“You’ve skipped kitchen duty twice now,” Stephen reminded.

“What about Tony?” Bruce turned to the only person he hadn’t gotten a meal from.

“Trust me, that’s a bad idea,” Stephen said before Tony could get any ideas. “Speaking of recruits, can we hire someone with a chief alias? Has anyone listed baking as their hobby?”

“We’re hiring?” Bruce asked.

“That’s it, we are ordering takeout. Everyone feeling Mexican?” Tony pulled out his Stark phone. He placed the order as the trio headed for the elevator. “And yes, we are hiring. With Tropic Thunder and Rock of Ages gone, the Avengers need to expand. Got any super friends I should know about?”
Thirty-six hours since the portal closed, Tony sat in the same conference room that had seen Thor deliver the news of the Chitauri. Red designer shades shielded his eyes and he flashed a wide grin for the cameras. The room erupted into a solid minute of flashes.

Prior to the Stark Industries press conference, the United States Armed Forces had released a statement to address the attempted invasion. The statement had touched upon the soon-to-be-established Department of Damage Control, a joint venture between Stark Industries and the federal government to oversee the collection and storage of exotic materials. Questions had been answered about the Avengers, who they were and how they gained superhuman abilities. Rhodey, representing both the Air Force and the Avengers had answered to the best of his abilities but refused to disclose details that would violate an Avenger’s privacy.

Unfortunately, the statement hadn’t addressed who the Chitauri were, why they attacked, or if they would come back. They were questions the military didn’t have answers to, and the lack of clarity had inspired the mammoth turnout for the Stark Industries conference. In the eyes of a growing crowd, Stark Industries, or more specifically Iron Man was beginning to surpass the military as the new voice of authority. People believed what they saw. They saw Iron Man fight tooth and nail to defend Earth, and they saw a Legionnaire fly a nuke into space to end the invasion.

With Thor and Loki gone, Tony could no longer prolong the inevitable. Tony had chosen a public environment because he wanted everything concerning the Avengers to be as transparent as possible. Outside the glass-clad conference room, people gathered wearing homemade Avenger outfits. The majority donned Iron Man merchandise. A few fast-thinkers were selling plastic Avengers gear on the lawn. Tony smiled as he spotted a little boy wearing a mini Cloak of Levitation. Tony waved at the boy and gave him a thumbs up. The crowd around the boy screamed, thinking Iron Man was waving at them.

“Mr. Stark?” a reporter asked.

“Yes, dear?” Tony returned his attention to the room. To his left, Rhodey rolled his eyes and whispered ‘Chitauri’. Tony winked in gratitude. “They are no longer a threat. At least not for the time being.”

The remaining Avengers were seated in a flattened ‘U’ shape. Tony sat at the heart of the formation, facing the press. Rhodey, Stephen, and Bruce branched to his left, mirrored by Steve, Bucky, Natasha, and Clint to his right. Two seats had been reserved for the absentees. Thor and Loki’s name cards marked their spots.

“We have interviewed many from the streets of New York. People are concerned the threat may not be over. Can we get your opinion on the matter?” the reporter continued.

“They are right to be concerned. In their shoes, I’d be concerned too. The world is never safe one hundred percent of the time. This is where the Avengers come in. We exist to nullify supernatural threats,” Tony said. Another reporter raised her hand. Tony gestured for her to speak.

“Colonel Rhodes has provided limited information on the Avengers, but many questions remain unanswered. Who are the Avengers? How will the Avengers operate in the future? Will the Avengers be an independent organisation or form a new branch of the Armed Forces? Are there other superhumans among us?”

“Wow, slow your roll.” Tony took a sip coffee. “The Avengers are a mixed bunch. You know who I am and Rhodey isn’t camera shy. Dr. Banner is a scientist.” Tony traded looks with Stephen, who
nodded in support. “Stephen is a neurosurgeon, but for reasons we chose not to reveal, he is now a sorcerer. The demigods have returned to Asgard for the foreseeable future, and—” Tony turned to the right-hand side, “—I’m sure you recognise Captain America and Sergeant Barnes from the Howling Commandos. Last but not least, we have two agents from a shadow organisation named S.H.I.E.L.D.”

“Will the Avengers become a new branch of the Armed Forces?” the reporter pressed.

“No, for the time being, the Avengers is sanctioned by President Ellis to continue operating as is. The specifics are yet to be determined but my lawyers are drafting up an agreement. The Avengers will operate under oversight from the United Nations but still retain a degree of independence.”

Natasha and Clint narrowed their eyes at Tony’s proposal. Before they could object, Tony completed his statement.

“The founding members of the Avengers are War Machine, Dr. Strange, Dr. Banner, Thor, and myself, with Loki, Captain America, Sergeant Barnes, Black Widow, and Hawkeye as consultants, who will join our operations on an as-need basis.”

The freshly minted Avengers was a blank slate. This was Tony’s best chance to mould the team into his desired shape. The annihilation of the Chitauri had given Tony room to breathe. As he combed through the internet for recruits, Tony couldn’t help but rethink the existing team structure.

The world needed the Avengers for protection. Tony couldn’t afford to be picky about where the help came from, but he knew the Ex-vengers were trouble. Everything considered, there was a perfect way to both utilise their talents but not recognise them as an official member of the team: consultantship.

As a futurist who had learned his lesson, Tony was one for poetic justice. Steve had a good heart, albeit naïve and single-minded. He is an expert combatant, so off he went to the consultants’ pile. Bucky’s stay was temporary. He had made his desire to travel the world crystal clear, therefore Tony respected his wishes. Loki had questionable loyalties. And finally, despite Natasha and Clint’s redundancy, it’d be a shame to cut them loose, so Tony decided to give them a taste of their own medicine.

Tony snuffed threats in their infancy. He had given the Ex-vengers the benefit of the doubt. They made Tony’s decision easier by proving they still couldn’t be trusted.

“We do not agree with Mr. Stark on this matter,” Natasha said. “Steve, Bucky, Clint and I were present at the Battle of Mojave Desert. We deserve full membership.”

“With all due respect, Ms. Romanov, that is not for you to decide.” Bullets of sarcasm sat on the tip of Tony’s tongue, but Stephen beat him to it. Tony knew why Stephen took the question. He could’ve easily defended himself, but it looked better if a team member came to his rescue.

“The Avengers is a private organisation funded by Iron Man as an individual, and Stark Industries as a cooperation,” Stephen began. “Potential candidates must endure a vigorous screening process, which you failed because you do not pass our background check. None of us has forgotten your heroics in the Battle of Mojave Desert, hence you were listed as our espionage specialist. Should we require your services in the future, we will give warning in advance where possible, and you will have every right to decline. You and Mr. Barton are unenhanced, unpowered individuals. We have made this decision for your own safety.”

“It occurs to me that Iron Man and War Machine are also unenhanced and unpowered. Mr. Stark could choose to outfit everyone with armour, but in accordance with his behaviour at the Senate
hearing from two years ago, he has refused to share.” Natasha rebutted.

Stephen arched an eyebrow ever-so-slightly. “The Iron Legion, which is created using the Iron Man technology, consists of five-hundred search-and-rescue units. They are by no stretch of the imagination: a secret. The Iron Legion has saved hundreds of lives starting coincidentally from two years ago. Instead of asking why Iron Man is reluctant to share, I would like to know why you, an ex-Russian assassin turned spy with no training record in the U.S., is so intent on claiming a suit of your own.”

Tony decided that Stephen deserved some kinky shower sex based on that comment alone. “Alright, why don’t we go around the room, this is a democracy. Bruce?”

“No objections.”

“Stephen?”

“I agree.”

“Rhodey?”

“I concur.”

“I obviously agree with my own bloody suggestion, Rogers?”

Captain America thought about it, and answered, “I need some time to decide.”

“Fair enough.” Tony shrugged. “Barnes?”

“I don’t care.”

“Buddy, you are killing me. Ms. Romanov disagrees, what about you, Mr. Barton?”

“No,” came Clint’s clipped response.

“Thor and Loki are with me. That’s six against two.” Tony smiled at Natasha.

“Actually, Mr. Stark. It’s four against four.” The seasoned spy smiled back. “Dr. Bruce, Dr. Strange, Colonel Rhodes and yourself are for, whereas Steve, Bucky, Clint and myself are either undecided or against. The Asgardians cannot be taken into consideration because they are not present to confirm their support.”

Tony furrowed his brows. “Your objection isn’t going to change anything.”

Natasha chimed with the confidence of someone who had cards up her sleeve. “We’ll see about that.”

Chapter End Notes

The amazing Ally from Lofter has translated Anew into Chinese! Check it out. ;D

重来。 Translated by: Ally
“Regardless of the outcome, they are outnumbered. The Avengers are yours.” Stephen said as he, Tony, and Bruce left the conference room.

“I can’t believe I didn’t get Thor to do one more round of press.” Tony slapped his forehead. For a proven genius, he could get insufferably sloppy.

“We can call Erik. If he signs on as a consultant, his support would tip the scale,” Bruce suggested. “Erik met Thor when he was in New Mexico, maybe he knows how to reach Asgard? Even if he doesn’t, between the three of us we can find a way.”

“No, we shouldn’t drag him into this. He declined the offer. That’s that.” Tony recalled what happened to Selvig in his past life. Of the people who rallied to defend Earth against the Chitauri, Selvig was the only strict non-combatant. Unlike Natasha and Clint, Selvig’s unenhanced physique wasn’t trained for battle. His only asset had been his intelligence. Selvig had lived a quiet life before S.H.I.E.L.D approached him. Being an Avenger, even an honorary one, would put him in more danger than he could handle. “As for contacting Asgard, if there was a way, others would have tried already. Wasn’t Thor’s girlfriend an astrophysicist too?”

Thor and Loki’s absence pushed the situation into a grey area. According to Tony’s plan, the consultanship of Steve, Bucky, Clint, and Natasha should’ve been a given. The official members of the Avengers would then decide on their mode of operation, which would support Tony’s statement.

Now they must first agree on the consultants’ list, and then decide on the fate of the Avengers. If Steve and Bucky choose to disagree and they, along with Natasha and Clint became full members, it’d be a recipe for disaster. Tony had intended for the Avengers to remain as an independent organisation with oversight from the U.N., but Natasha and Clint’s membership would open doors for S.H.I.E.L.D. and the W.S.C.

“Your hands aren’t as tied as you think,” Stephen said.

“The Avengers is a democracy. I may fund it, but I don’t own it. Until the system is established each member has equal say in the matter. If we split the team before it forms it’d set a bad example,” Tony rebuked.

“Like you did when you didn’t taser them for trespassing.”

“Point taken.”

“Stark!” a voice called from behind. Blood pulsed inside Tony’s head. Why couldn’t some things just go away? Tony kept walking. He pretended that he hadn’t heard the call. Steve caught up with a light jog. “Stark, if you’ve got a moment, I want to talk about everything that’s happened.” Steve kept up with wide strides. Tony quickened his pace. “I didn’t want to do this here, but you wouldn’t
answer my calls.”
“I wonder why.”
“I didn’t come to fight.”
“That’d be a first.”
“I want to apologize for what happened,” registering the coldness in Tony’s voice, Steve explained.

Tony halted. “Rogers, did you just say the ‘a’ word?”

Stephen and Bruce caught up. Steve nodded at the others in greeting. He had come alone and without his shield. “I was misinformed and jumped to conclusions. I shouldn’t have broken into your home.” Steve paused and rubbed the back of his neck. He wore grey pants and a checked shirt. His sandy blonde hair stuck up in all directions. “Bucky explained what happened…thank you.”

Tony blinked. “I didn’t do it for you.”

“I know, but that doesn’t change what you did either.” All things considered, Steve had his merits. Captain America was a turmoil of conflicting traits. He was neither a beacon of righteousness or a deceptive cheat. Beneath the lustre of America’s first consumed hero was a simple man. Everyone saw what they wanted to see, Tony included. Steve was the man Tony had spent his adolescence looking up to, he was the leader Tony wanted to impress, and he was the friend that split open Tony’s metaphorical heart.

Tony sighed. He couldn’t hide from this forever. For better or worse he had to sort out his relationship with Steve. It’d be better if they were on speaking terms. Tony told Stephen and Bruce to go without him. Stephen objected, but Tony insisted New York’s taxi service could return him home just fine. Begrudgingly, Stephen yielded. He conjured a portal for Bruce and himself. As Stephen left he levelled Steve with a look which suggested he didn’t trust Captain America in the slightest.

“I think we got off on the wrong foot,” Steve said after the portal closed. He and Tony strolled down the hallway and found an empty lounge. Tony kept quiet during the walk. He didn’t know what to say so he let Steve do the talking. “S.H.I.E.L.D. took me in after they found me under ice. I spent a few months alone in a lakeside cabin, trying to catch up on everything I’ve missed, but the world is different now… I hardly recognise it anymore.” Steve glanced out of the window, disgruntled by the strangeness of it all. Fast cars drifted in streams of metal. People crossed vast expanses of asphalt in improper clothes. Technology surrounded him. It powered the invisible air conditioning, brought signals to palm-sized cell phones. Where Steve saw the future, Tony saw the soon-to-be past.

“You’ll get used to it,” Tony forced out. Topics of discussion had focused on Avenger operations between him and past-Steve. Present-Steve and Tony were strangers, some, like Stephen, would even call them adversaries.

“I hope so,” Steve said. They stood in tense silence. It wasn’t the easy atmosphere of tinkering with Bruce or reading with Loki. Hairs on the back of Tony’s neck stood up.

“You were right about the nuke,” just as Tony wanted to call it a day, Steve spoke. “I don’t know how you could’ve made that call, but you were right. I trusted S.H.I.E.L.D. blindly, part of me still sees them as the organisation Peggy and Howard founded.”

“What was he like?” Tony asked.
“Howard? He was enigmatic. A real charmer. He’d ask ladies out on dates by offering them fondue.” Steve laughed. “You remind me of him. I heard what happened. I’m sorry for your loss.” Steve’s words took a gentler turn, but the truth was four years overdue.

“That was a long time ago.” Tony wanted to feel optimistic, wanted to salvage the relationship between them, but after searching every nook and cranny there was simply nothing left of the old Avengers team. It was Steve who had shattered the fragile bond and left Tony to pick up the pieces. Memories stayed but people didn’t. Everything from Tony’s past life died with him.

There was another stretch of silence.

“So, what did you make of the meeting?” Tony asked.

“Despite what S.H.I.E.L.D. had done, Clint and Natasha are good people. They have a point. I think people deserve to be recognised for their actions.” Steve turned to face Tony.

Tony scoffed, “‘deserve to be recognised for their actions’? You know what S.H.I.E.L.D. did to your best friend. You still work for them?”

“Hydra needs to be stopped.” Steve averted eye contact, choosing to busy himself with studying the crowd. “I’ve talked with Bucky. He understands. Fury told me why they did it in the first place. They weren’t sure Bucky was still in there. I will leave as soon as Schmidt’s plans can no longer hurt anyone.”

Tony felt it rise again, the overwhelming urge to deck Steve in the face. "I don't hate you, Rogers, but sometimes, it's just—" Tony ground his teeth together. He mentally cursed his inability to convey his frustration. "'Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me.' Was this a saying before you went under?"

“I’m there for the intel. You haven’t seen the way S.H.I.E.L.D. operates, Fury makes some questionable choices, but he is trying to protect the world like we are,” Steve explained.

“Fine,” Tony said with finality. “You do what you want, but I’m not going to let S.H.I.E.L.D. meddle with Avenger business. The consultants’ list is set and it’s not about to change.”

“I accept that. I don’t mind being on call, but I think the Avengers should operate as a branch of the army.”

“I’m going to stop you right there Steve, or Tony might pop a vein,” Bucky strolled into the lounge. Tony looked suspiciously behind him, but the two assassins didn’t follow. “I ditched them,” Bucky added. He sat on the couch and looked at the others expectantly. “You two are standing like idiots.”

Tony snickered. He sat too, followed by Steve. “Any more icicles in here it’ll turn into a freezer.”

“Says the man in a tin can.” Bucky flexed his metal arm. He was in his usual attire of hoodie and jeans. A single glove covered his chrome hand.

“You think it’s right for the Avengers to remain independent?” Steve asked Bucky. Due to Tony’s interference, present-Steve hadn’t, and would never experience Project Insight. He hadn’t single-handedly destroyed the authority figure that had fished him from the ocean. Tony supposed it was impossible to have it all.

“‘Governments are run by people, and people have agendas,’” Tony quoted past-Steve and shook his head at the irony. Tony, too, had switched sides on oversight over the years. For the longest time, he had disregarded the rules. ‘The safest hands are our own.’ A couple of years earlier, those words
would have come from Tony’s mouth instead, but since then, he had been confronted with consequences he hadn’t foreseen. Overwhelmed with grief, he subjected himself to the mercy of authorities, which lead to the Accords mess. Having experienced both extremes, Tony came to a hard-earned conclusion. The best outcome was always somewhere in the mundane middle: a balance of forces.

“I have agendas, which is why the Avengers should remain as an independent organisation with oversight from the U.N. We are not a horde of rampaging vigilantes. If we are boundless we are no better than the bad guys, but neither are we attack dogs. If this thing works out the way I want it to, superhumans would join us from across the globe, people of different nationalities. We can’t brand ourselves as a U.S. task force.”

Steve raised his brows at Tony’s vision. “That sounds like an army.”

“It’s a team,” Tony asserted. “I can’t believe we are back to square one. A hostile alien army comes charging through a hole in space… things like that don’t go away forever. You think the Mojave Desert was a close call? That was a walk in the park. We had the Asgardians, we had backup, we had foresight. What if I had missed something? What if Loki opened the portal in Manhattan? Thousands would have died, entire city blocks levelled. You can be damn sure it won’t be so easy the next time around. Earth needs the Avengers.” Sensing that Steve was relenting, Tony pushed further. “I’m not creating any superhumans, only rallying the existing ones. Who knows how many of us are out there? Worse comes to worst no one answers my call.”

Steve and Bucky traded looks. “Alright,” Steve said. “But how do we make sure it’s fair?”

“Easy, we vote. Look, Rogers. I know what they’re gonna say but the Avengers isn’t my personal toy box. I may head the organisation but it’s not a dictatorship. If it were I’d have told Romanov to pack her bags. This is where you and Barnes come in. I need you two to help me vote them out.”

Tony held up his thumbs to represent the two S.H.I.E.L.D. agents then pointed towards the door.

Steve hesitated. “I don’t know, involuntary consultantship doesn’t seem right to me. They were there for the battle. They risked their lives like everyone else.”

“It is voluntary. If they don’t want to help, so be it, but they don’t get a say in how things are run. They represent S.H.I.E.L.D. At this point, they are close cousins with Hydra.”

Steve frowned. “Schmidt killed innocents, ran human experiments, created weapons of mass destruction—”

“What does S.H.I.E.L.D. do? Let me jog your memory: they kill people, run human experiments, create weapons of mass destruction. Is it me, or are there similarities? The only difference is why S.H.I.E.L.D. is doing it, and who they are doing it to. Welcome to politics one-oh-one. The world isn’t as black and white as you think. My old man used to say, ‘believe in the best of humanity, but prepare for the worst.’”

“I’m sorry Steve, but I’m going with Tony on this one,” Bucky said. “I saw how they operate behind the scenes. There were genetic experiments. I know how much you love Peggy, but S.H.I.E.L.D. isn’t what it was, or what it was meant to be.” Bucky paused for the words to sink in. Steve lowered his head. He looked lost.

“There’s no decision-making process here. You let them in, you let S.H.I.E.L.D. and the World Security Council in.” Tony’s job was done. He turned to Bucky. “Got any plans?”

“I’ll stick around until the dust settles,” Bucky said.
“You got a place to lay low?”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Alright.” Tony straightened his tie. “I need to shake some hands on my way out. I’ll see you two around.”

Stephen returned to Stark Tower with a knot between his brows. Bruce headed for the labs. There was a bounce in his steps. Since Tony had introduced Extremis, Bruce had put his seven Ph.Ds. to good use. Stephen would’ve liked to help, but he had more pressing matters to attend to.

Thanks to Loki’s compass, the Masters at Kamar-Taj had located Kaecilius. A coup had been organised by The Ancient One. Masters trained in combat were instructed to capture Kaecilius and his zealots alive where possible. Stephen understood the meaning hidden in her words. They were instructed to kill. Kaecilius and his zealots had remorselessly decapitated the former librarian. They were as unlikely to surrender as they came.

Stephen was conflicted. The doctor in him who had sworn the Hippocratic Oath was disgusted by the idea of taking a life, but the sorcerer in him had seen Chitauri pour from a wormhole. He knew what unleashed evil could do and he knew The Ancient One was right. There was no room for mercy in a game for survival.

Stephen hadn’t told Tony, but he had volunteered for the mission. Tony had so much on his plate, the contents were toppling over. This was Kamar-Taj’s fight, and by extension, Stephen’s fight. Plus, it was one rogue sorcerer and a couple of lackeys. This didn’t warrant the attention of Iron Man.

Stephen changed into combat gear, the same set he had worn to the Battle of Mojave Desert. Tony had mended the outfit and reinforced the chest area. The robes were lighter and stronger than ever before. Stephen clipped two earpieces in place, one for each side. A holographic HUD sprung to life with the push of a button. Friday chirped weather updates in greeting.

“Doc, you sure you don’t want to tell boss?” Friday asked.

“The Ancient One is leading the coup. Tony has enough to worry about.” Stephen said as he made final adjustments to his gear. The Cloak of Levitation settled on his shoulders. Satisfied that nothing is amiss, Stephen emptied his mind. He envisioned his destination. For the seconds that followed he was one with the Multiverse. His spirit transcended worldly chaos and a perfect circle materialised with the first spin of his hand.

“Master Strange,” The Ancient One chimed. In the foyer, six silhouettes stood in an open ring. They surrounded a square table, on which Loki’s compass sat. Stephen filled the gap, completing the circle. He recognised all the faces. At the head of the table was The Ancient One, followed by Mordo, Wong, Daniel Drumm, Sol Rama, Minoru, and finally Stephen himself. The three Masters representing New York, London, and Hong Kong had been pulled from their respective Sanctums. They couldn’t stay for long.
“We must stop Kaecilius from summoning Dormammu…at any cost,” The Ancient One weaved with threads of light. The thin strings stayed close to her palm. Each interlocked with the next and gained rigidity as the layers overlapped. The spell was beyond anything Stephen should’ve studied but he recognised it as a teleportation charm. Done correctly, the spell’s effect would be instantaneous. It’d take them into the belly of the beast.

Occupants of the room stood ready, each clutched their chosen weapon close their chest. Stephen felt out of place with his glowing HUD and empty hands. The spell vibrated with power. The Ancient One glanced around the room a final time then clamped her hand on top of the compass. The spell broke, engulfing the sorcerers in a vortex of light. Stephen’s HUD flickered wildly at the energy fluctuations.

For a fraction of a second Stephen was weightless, and then his boots connected with mosaic tiles. They were in a church. Five figures stood before the altar, the stolen pages laid out ceremoniously on the floor. Their eyes were clouded by darkness and a vivid symbol shone on their forehead, red as if etched into their skin.

“We are too late…” Mordo said.

“Seize them!” The Ancient One shouted. A golden mandala appeared on both of her hands. With a flick of her wrists, the circular discs folded into fans. She leapt for Kaecilius and interrupted his spell.

The remaining sorcerers engaged with the zealots. Stephen and Mordo teamed up against a man in his thirties. The two had trained together and knew how the other fought. Stephen conjured a whip of Eldritch magic as Mordo struck the first blow. The zealot skited across the mosaic, narrowly dodging the Staff of Living Tribunal. His space shard connected with Stephen’s whip and created crystalline reflections in the air. Stephen and Mordo took turns in engaging the zealot. They backed him into a corner. Mordo glanced at Stephen, who knew Mordo was questioning if he could strike the killing blow. Stephen raised his whip. Mordo’s repeated strikes gave him an opening. Stephen brought his arm down, but the floor of the church distorted before his whip could land. Mosaic pieces flowed as if being pulled by an invisible current. They took the zealots to Kaecilius.

“They are shaping reality outside the Mirror Dimension.” Stephen hovered in the air, the cloak spread around him in protection. He flew towards The Ancient One. The remaining sorcerers gathered behind her.

“Kaecilius, it is not yet too late,” The Ancient One said.

The ex-disciple of Kamar-Taj stood unvexed. His new-found master had lent him the strength to fold matter at will. He rose to the centre of the church on a stone pillar, level with the cross. Kaecilius closed his eyes and basked in the glory of darkness. His hands maintained the spell before his chest; his fingers touching in a prayer.

“You dare mock me further.” Kaecilius opened his eyes. The skin on his face cracked like aged porcelain. Pieces flaked away to reveal a glimpse of eternal life among the One. “I came to you to be healed…as did we all, yet you taught us parlour tricks. Do not be fooled, the real magic she keeps to herself,” Kaecilius said to the sorcerers. His gaze met with Stephen briefly before moving on. Stephen shuddered at the madness he saw inside. “Time is unmerciful. My son, my wife…I lost them not to illness but time. One by one, they slipped through my fingers. I have failed them, just as you have failed me. It is too late…”

“No!” The Ancient One exclaimed.

Kaecilius released the spell he had been building. A cluster of sinister energy erupted from his hands.
Iridescent flares sliced through the church. The Cloak yanked Stephen from the path of one of the flares. The stone church shook, and archways that had supported the architecture for centuries crumbled. Golden murals of faith fell from the walls, the saints descending as if yielding to an invisible deity.

“Shield!” Wong yelled amidst the chaos. Two mandalas appeared on his fists. He held it above his head. It was too late to escape so Stephen followed suit. The other sorcerers joined. Their mandalas formed a dome which enclosed them all. The Ancient One bound the discs together with chains of energy, and the church came down on top of them. Stephen grunted as stone collided against the section he supported. His arms trembled under the strain. Destruction seemed to last forever.

When the dust settled, Stephen righted himself with the rest of the sorcerers. Thankfully, the church had been built from medium-sized chunks, most of which had bounced off their dome and they hadn’t been buried under too much debris. Civilians were recording on their phones. Police sirens rang in the distance.

Twenty years too late.

Kaecilius’ words lingered, but the man and his followers were gone.

Chapter End Notes

*Mystical music plays in the background.*
Tony’s evening had been fruitful. He shook some hands, gave another impromptu interview to support his claims, and tinkered with Bruce after he returned. Bruce’s expertise in biochemistry and radiophysics were invaluable to the development of Extremis: a living, breathing virus. The Extremis Super Serum project was resumed after ten months of suspension. At long last, the test results were starting to look positive. Perhaps this time, they’d finally be able to fix Stephen’s hands.

Tony remained in the lab after Bruce retreated upstairs to meditate. He switched on the TV. It was news hour and footage from the Stark Industries press conference circulated on the channels.

“From the looks of it, Tony Stark wants to establish the Avengers as an independent organisation that answers to the U.N., but to what degree? Should other countries have a say over the Avengers, whose members are primarily U.S. citizens? These are the questions we need to ask,” the news anchor said.

“Jimmy, I understand where you are coming from, but let’s not forget the members who aren’t citizens of the U.S. The world has never seen anything like the Avengers. Before the Battle of Mojave Desert, superhumans were an urban myth. The world’s first superhuman organisation will have an impact far beyond our borders. The Chitauri attacked the U.S. this time, but what if the next extraterrestrial threat occurred elsewhere? Should the Avengers operate in other countries if it answers only to the U.S. government? Tony Stark is seeking middle ground,” a female news anchor joined the conversation.

“Speaking of middle ground,” footage from the press conference switched to a still of Stephen addressing Natasha, “what did you make of the domestic quarrel? The Black Widow is not happy with her consultant status. Why is Tony Stark trying to demote half the people he fought with? Is this an act for power? I think there’s more going on behind the scenes.”

“According to the written statement Stark Industries released, ‘an active Avenger is obliged to respond to threats in a timely manner and participate in missions of suitable difficulty. In return, they will have the right to vote on matters that will concern the future of the Avengers,’” the female news anchor recited from the document in front of her. “This sounds like a more contribution, more say situation, but once an Avenger is demoted to consultantship, they will have to pass a popular vote by the current active members to regain full membership. While a consultant is not obliged to respond to threats, they don’t have the right to vote either.”

“Tracy Turner, reporter, writer, and Iron Man expert from the Daily Bugle, is here with us this evening. Good Evening, Tracy.” The still of Stephen and Natasha switched to a live feed from another newsroom.

“Good evening, Jimmy, Patricia,” the young woman said. Albeit nervous, she looked professional. Tony remembered her from somewhere, but he couldn’t put a finger on it.
“What did you make of the conference at Stark Industries this morning? Is Tony Stark vying for power by demoting his teammates? What is the world’s reaction to this?” Jimmy asked.

“The outcome of the conference received mixed reviews, but the clear majority is with Iron Man. Consultantship wise, citizens of the U.S. are concerned with having an ex-member of the KGB on board the world’s first superhuman association. Captain America and Sergeant Barnes have yet to clarify their stance on the matter, but from earlier footages, we can see they weren’t concerned. Perhaps Mr. Stark has taken the individuals’ circumstances into account before he made those decisions? Full membership grants not only power, but also responsibility. It demands commitment some may not be willing to give. On to the Avenger’s mode of operation, a lot of specificities need to be fleshed out. The internet is in shambles. People need more information before they can choose a side.” Tracy paused. “May I add some personal opinions on the matter?”

“Of course, you may. You are our Iron Man expert!” Patricia said.

Tracy took some time to gather her thoughts. “Mr. Stark has been protecting the world for four years. He has fought terrorists on and off U.S. soil and has endangered his own life to defend this nation to the best of his ability. To date, the Iron Legion has saved hundreds of lives. He funds both the Maria Stark Foundation and the Iron Spirit Grant. Tony Stark was a hero long before aliens poured from the sky. He has proven his character time and again. The Avengers are in good hands.”

A short silence followed. The news anchors nodded solemnly. “Thank you for your time.”

“Thanks for having me.” Tracy’s feed disappeared from the screen.

“In other news, the European Union wants to tax American peanut butter in trade war tit-for-tat...”

“Huh... that wasn’t so bad,” Tony mused. He’d expected worse.

“Sir, you have an incoming call from Director Fury,” Jarvis said.

Tony rolled his eyes. “Put Nicky through.” On the screen, footages of peanut butter factories flicked to Nick Fury’s gloomy expression. Fury ran a rough hand over his face as Tony threw himself onto the couch.

“The Avengers is a S.H.I.E.L.D. project,” Fury stated.

“Is it patented?” Tony arched an eyebrow.

To ensure maximum efficiency, Tony had decided to continue his role as the Avenger’s sole benefactor. Tony was familiar with the logistics and Stark Industries was the largest tech conglomerate in the world. Of the founding team members, financially, Tony was second to none. S.I. has sufficient resources to support Avengers operation for the next thirty years. He was also the most popular Avenger. The years of solo heroing, publicity campaigns and goodwill accumulated through the Iron Legion paid off. Tony was stronger and better than he’d ever been. This realisation sparked an idea.

The world needed S.H.I.E.L.D. to combat Hydra, but the Avengers didn’t.

“You were never made a full member,” Fury pressed.

Tony laughed two short, humourless times. “Three hundred million people watched me save the world, Nick. You'd think that's enough. Guess I'll have to start a rip-off brand to compete. I've even got a name, Thor came up with it: the Revengers. How many do you think I can pull with my move?
Stephen's with me by default, the Asgardians loath you, Bruce would join me in a heartbeat, Rhodey has a thing against shadow organisations, Barnes doesn't want anything to do with you and Rogers goes anywhere he goes...which leaves you with Barton and Romanov. You can keep them.”

“You always were stubborn.” Fury grinned lopsidedly. The director leaned against a stainless-steel bench and tapped on his tablet. “I didn’t think I could convince you.”

“You shouldn’t have tried,” Tony quipped.

“We’ve had a short but productive run…” Fury sighed with resignation, like someone who could envision the consequences of his actions with crystal clarity but had to proceed as he was told. “Which is why it pains me to do what I’m about to do. You are a good man, Stark, but I have my orders. I told you this day would come.” A foreboding feeling crept up Tony’s chest. He thought about what Natasha had said during the press conference. What tricks did S.H.I.E.L.D. have up their sleeve?

Fury reversed his tablet to show Tony the contents. On the small screen played footage from a surveillance feed. Tony widened his eyes. He knew that place, and as realisation dawned, Tony knew there was only one key event that had happened there. The feed was still until a dim light illuminated the edge of the screen. The light grew brighter as the source object neared. An Iron Man suit landed in the centre of the concrete bunker.

The footage was silent, but Tony could hear the muffled screams of the man inside the suit, much like he did the night in the uninhabited penthouse. The suit stood in reticence, surrounded by a vast expanse of structurally reinforced emptiness. The man’s cries echoed off the damp walls, but in the disused space not a soul heard him screech. Fire leaked from the joints of the suit and the screen was lit with an orange blaze. The feed shook as the wall the bug was fixed to trembled. When the dust settled, pieces of the suit laid scattered across the floor, chunks of charred flesh littered among them.

Fury rewound the footage to the second the suit self-destructed. The faceplate of the suit had been the first piece to come off. The man’s face was visible for a frame before the explosion consumed him.

“The World Security Council has kept an eye on you for longer than you know. They did the same for all budding empires. Stark Industries, Hammer Industries… Advanced Idea Mechanics. When you rose from the ashes of captivity and said you would no longer make weapons none of us believed you. Some of us still don’t. We infiltrated as many testing facilities as we could and bugged them to ensure they stayed offline. Much like Ms. Romanov was tasked to shadow you, another agent had been assigned to Aldrich Killian. When she realised he’d gone missing she scanned his company for clues. Of course, she found nothing, and we pulled up the available information on his competitors and found…this.”

Tony instructed himself to breathe. Since his resurrection, he had tinkered with Stark Tower’s security until it became vacuum sealed. Hardware-wise, with the squadrons of Iron Sentries, Stark Tower was as armed as it could legally be but software-wise, Tony had accepted there would always be moles inside his company. He hadn’t thought they’d gain access to anything useful. How much information did S.H.I.E.L.D., and by extension the World Security council have on Stark Industries? S.H.I.E.L.D. had perfected their own security system over the past year. Tony’s bugs still provided him with a steady stream of information, but Tony suspected that S.H.I.E.L.D. had switched mainframes and was now feeding him lies through the old system.

S.H.I.E.L.D. no longer took Tony for a paper lion. Tony’s interference in the Chitauri invasion might have saved the day, but it had also costed S.H.I.E.L.D. the Tesseract. They saw the formidable foe Stark Industries could become. Seizing ownership of the Avengers had been the bottom line and
Tony had trampled over it like a flyer on the sidewalk.

“Killian was a terrorist.” Tony’s reasoning sounded weak to his own ears.

“Was he? I know where Extremis could have led but that doesn’t change a thing. Killian was a scientist. Disabled veterans were loyal to him because he gave them their old life back. The veterans volunteered for the treatment. They knew it was experimental and there was no breach of consent. They might have gained superhuman abilities and were super soldiers in disguise, but they were cured of their condition. Killian wasn’t a terrorist. Not yet.” Fury set the tablet down. “You are a visionary, but in our line of work, we don’t act until we have indisputable proof. You have information we don’t. Hell, I’m still trying to figure out what’s going on inside that head of yours, but Killian’s experiments hadn’t warranted death.”

Tony tried to think, tried to argue. His mind spun but he drew a blank. Fury was right. The Mandarin Bombings hadn’t started, the president of the United States hadn’t been kidnapped. Killian had been a law-abiding citizen; any incriminating activities began during 2012.

Killian should’ve still been alive.

“What do you want, Fury?” Tony muttered. He shuddered at the implications. For the first time since his resurrection, Tony knew he screwed up. He had been so pressed for time. He wanted to snip every threat in its infancy and concentrate on the global invasion. Tony had rushed to action when he should’ve waited.

The Director of S.H.I.E.L.D. tapped his fingers on the bench. “I like you, Stark. It’s hard to see it sometimes, but you are one of the good ones. We are working towards the same goal, so I’m going to say this one last time: The Avengers belong to S.H.I.E.L.D. You’ve built yourself an empire. It’d be a shame for it to go to waste. We can still work together, you can lead the Avengers and S.H.I.E.L.D. will cooperate, but you must answer to the World Security Council like we do. Remember, it’s not just you on the line. The Winter Soldier…you haven’t forgotten about him, have you?”

Tony didn’t respond.

“We have a list of the soldier’s victims; a dozen confirmed kills over the past seventy years. All of them high profile targets. Brainwashed or not, those people died, and they aren’t coming back. If the list gets released, you’ll destroy the Howling Commando’s legacy.” Fury sighed. “I never thought I’d say this, but Romanov was wrong about you.”

“No longer the textbook narcissist?” Tony scoffed.

Fury shook his head. There was an uncanny glint in his eye. “You don’t fit the bill, not since you escaped from the Ten Rings. And if my intuition is correct, you never were.”

“Then why…?”

“That report was meant to goad you into submission. Romanov was born to be a spy. She trained in the Red Room and spent a decade working for the KGB… You didn’t think she’d write that trite shit for real?” Fury held up Tony’s report, reprinted after Tony had tossed the original out of his car window. Fury flipped through the contents then dropped it onto the bench. The folder made a sharp, slapping sound. “She shadowed you for the better half of a month and saw you as the broken man you were. She knew you were desperate for approval, recognition, acceptance… With that report, we thought you’d play straight into our hands, and you nearly did.”
Fury’s words birthed an all-consuming chill. It crept up Tony’s stomach, seeped through his sternum and froze his tattered heart. *I’m just an old man who cares very much about you.* Those words of encouragement had come when Tony was at his lowest. Tony had created Ultron, which threatened the very world he tried to protect. Fury had supported Tony, shown him understanding when no one else would. Tony had clung to those words like a lifeline, and yet their unconventional mentorship had been the fruit of deceit.

“There’s a strength to you Romanov hadn’t seen. When you fell, instead of waiting for others to come to your rescue, you picked yourself back up and got busy. Twice.” There had always been mutual understanding between them. Perhaps even mutual appreciation, but Nicholas J. Fury was first and foremost a spy.

“When the time comes for you to cast your vote, think about it.” With those words, Fury cut the line.

Tony remained seated. He tried to digest the situation. When his brain remained a molten mess, he went to pour himself a drink. Tony lifted the tumbler to his lips with shaky fingers. The bourbon burned on its way down. He forced himself to think. He had thought that ordeal with Killian was done. Over. *Finito.* But here it was, two years later and ready to bite him in the ass. S.H.I.E.L.D.’s evidence was incriminating. Iron Man had committed first-degree murder. The wiped surveillance footages which should’ve shown Killian visit Stark Tower cemented Tony’s guilt. Who else could’ve cleared a dozen cameras like he had wiped the dust off his tablet?

Without the deaths Killian would’ve caused, Tony had slain a man for no apparent reason other than greed. Tony had purchased the headless A.I.M. and made himself CEO while his predecessor’s body was still a splatter on the floor of his testing facility. Tony had taken over Killian’s research too. Extremis had endless potential, and without the Mandarin Bombings Tony’s actions were corporate assassination.

Tony couldn’t untangle himself from this. If the footages went public, all the support, public goodwill, and widespread adoration that Tony had so painstakingly accumulated would be for naught, but he couldn’t let S.H.I.E.L.D. control the Avengers either. Tony had saved the spies from certain doom because he needed them to combat Hydra, though despite Tony’s foresight, he could never guarantee that he and Fury had caught all the moles. What if there were sleeper agents Tony had missed? What if S.H.I.E.L.D.’s new recruits were Hydra in disguise? The Avengers couldn’t report to S.H.I.E.L.D. or the World Security Council. Tony’s goal had been to keep them afloat, so the world had a safety net to fall back on. He couldn’t fight extraterritorial threats and keep an eye on Hydra at the same time; it was too much for even Iron Man to handle. Tony had involuntarily dug himself a hole and it was too late to change his mind. S.H.I.E.L.D. had survived. They were here to stay.

“Jarvis, can we reach Maya Hansen?” Tony said after he finished his drink.

“Ms. Hansen’s contact number is no longer in use,” Jarvis informed.

Tony cursed under his breath. “Find her. I need dirt on Killian.” The TV was still on, and since Tony’s call had ended Jarvis unmuted the news channel. As Tony tapped away on his Stark pad, the slow-paced broadcast was interrupted by loud music. A banner reading ‘breaking news’ rolled across the screen.

*An hour ago, a century-old church in London was destroyed by a group of bizarre individuals. One of whom was identified as Doctor Stephen Vincent Strange, also known by his alias ‘Dr. Strange’. He was a self-proclaimed sorcerer who had fought in the Battle of Mojave Desert.’* The feed switched to shaky phone footages. The zoom was blurry and zeroed in on Stephen’s face. Stephen stood among what looked like the wreckage of the church, his HUD a flurry of blue, white
and red data streams. “Assuming the unidentified individuals were also sorcerers, what could have drawn them to London? A mere two days following the Chitauri invasion, people are still shaken over Earth’s first extra-terrestrial attack. Are the Chitauri back? Is Earth under another attack? And where were the rest of the Avengers? Dr. Strange left before he could be brought in for questioning…”

“Jarvis?” Tony stared blankly at the screen.

“Yes, Sir?”

“Is that my fucking boyfriend?”

Chapter End Notes

The Mandarin Bombings began mid-2012. Chapter 6 has been edited to fix continuity errors.

Tumblr: ivivao3.tumblr.com
Chapter 31

Stephen returned to Kamar-Taj. In the post-battle debrief he argued for Kamar-Taj to take responsibility for the destruction Kaecilius had caused. His suggestion was rejected unanimously; Kamar-Taj protected Earth from the shadows, it was not yet time for sorcerers to join the world stage. Exhausted, Stephen conjured a portal back to Stark Tower only to come face to face with the last person he wanted to confront.

Stephen knew this conversation would come. He had been hoping for a moment alone first to gather his thoughts, but even that seemed too much to ask. Tony waited for him in the entrance hall. He sat on a bar stool snatched from the kitchen. Burger King wrappers littered the floor around him. “This has been a long ass week, and I have a feeling it’s about to get longer, so spill,” Tony said his with arms folded across his chest. Not a good sign, since he was angry enough to ignore his open body language training.

“I…” Stephen began, but the words got caught on their way out. His struggles agitated Tony.

“‘You can tell me anything.’ ‘We are in this together,’” Tony said. He dragged out each word.

“I didn’t want to concern you.”

“Yeah? Well, guess what I felt when I saw your little after-hours escapade on live television. I felt concerned.” Tony hopped off the stool and approached Stephen. He kicked a soda can out of his path. The dented cylinder flew in a long arc, crashed onto the floor then rolled towards the wall. Soft drink fizzed in a puddle. “What happened Stephen? You were supposed to be the responsible one, the voice of reason, the one who tells me to call for backup. Was ‘by the way I’m going to battle some evil for the rest of the afternoon’ too many words for you?”

“I didn’t mean for things to end this way.”

“Friday?”

“Doc declined my suggestion to inform you, Boss,’ Friday said.

“Sounds intentional to me,” Tony swung his arms in front of him, gesturing Stephen’s sorry state.

“Oh, give me a break,” Stephen muttered. He shrugged off the cloak, which hovered behind him, and trudged into the penthouse. Stephen didn’t know where he was going, but he needed to get some pressure off his chest. The lump there had been building since he returned to Kamar-Taj, and after his snappy exchange with Tony, it had swelled to a size that made it difficult to breathe.

Tony followed closely. The conversation was far from over. “Give you a break? Stephen Strange, would you give me a break? Do you have any idea what kind of stress I’m under? The Avengers is a mess, the super soldiers barely agree with me, S.H.I.E.L.D. is being a royal pain up my ass, we’ve got another invasion inbound, and on top of everything you chose now to demolish churches on your
“I’ve got this under control.” Stephen knew the stress Tony was under. He had tried his best to contain the Dark Dimension threat, so it wouldn’t be added to Tony’s overstuffed plate, but his best wasn’t enough. Not for the first time, Stephen wondered what use he was in the grand scheme of things.

Tony had stepped up to shoulder the responsibility from day one. He identified the issues then set about to solve them with or without help. For as long as Stephen could remember, Tony had been in a constant state of motion. He navigated the obstacle course of life with precision and ease and Stephen had struggled to keep up. It placed unbearable pressure on him, especially since Tony would take on Stephen’s problems too. Tony would never admit it, but he didn’t need Extremis. The virus was in development because Stephen had thought it was a good idea to diagnose a patient while he was speeding down a winding road.

“Oh, is that what this is?” Tony waved his hand, a projection of the news broadcast appeared on the wall. Police officers had sealed the scene with yellow tape. Firefighters were clearing the debris to ensure no one had been trapped underneath. “Under control?”

Stephen clenched his fists and said nothing. He kept walking. The strain of the past month was taking a toll on him too. Stephen had been suffering from low blood pressure since the Battle of Mojave Desert. It was the backlash from expending his personal energy. He tired easily and had experienced bursts of nausea in the days that followed. Stephen had scanned himself, which revealed he was healthy aside from the unexplained hypotension. It hadn’t affected his ability to concentrate, but it was going to take more than a few nights of sleep to recover.

“Nuh-uh, you are not giving me the silent treatment. I thought we were supposed to be a team,” Tony chided. The pair walked through the penthouse. Stephen didn’t pay attention to where he was going. He was feeling faint again. How long has it been since he last ate? And had those steps always been there? Stephen’s boots trod emptiness. His body tipped forward.

A muffled voice shouted his name.

“How are you feeling?”

Stephen woke to the sound of Tony’s voice. His world spun. When his vision stilled he realized he was laying on a gurney. Tony’s concerned face hovered above him. Stephen grunted at the bright lights, which dimmed a second later, suspicious whirring noises followed. “No no no… don’t move.” Tony’s voice was gentle. Stephen wanted to protest, he didn’t need to be coddled, but all that came out was another incoherent grunt.

“Where…am I?” Stephen forced out. His throat was dry, and it hurt when he talked.

“Metro-General Hospital.” Tony grabbed a glass of water and placed a hand on Stephen’s left arm. It was only then that Stephen saw he had been attached to an IV drip. Stephen used his dominant hand
to accept the glass, but Tony never let go. He held the glass to Stephen’s lips and fed him half the contents.

“You hospitalized me for low blood pressure?” Stephen winced. It was the place he used to work at no less. His chances of re-joining the workforce were next to none, but it was nice to avoid humiliation.

“A potentially fatal condition,” Tony asserted.

“Only in extreme cases.” Stephen righted himself. Tony propped him up by placing two pillows behind his back. The situation came uncomfortably close to resemble the last time Stephen was here. There was the whirring noise again. Stephen glanced towards the door, where the light switch was, and saw the back-lit eyes of Mark fifty glance back. On bad days, the suit’s narrow eye slits were patronizing.

“Why is your suit here?” Stephen knew he was going to regret his question.

“How else was I supposed to rush you to the hospital?”

“A taxi? Tony, don’t tell me you carried me here.”

Tony pursed his lips. “Sorry.”

Stephen groaned. He imagined the chaos after he fainted. There were flight stabilizers on the back of the suit, so there was only one position they could’ve been in. Iron Man had carried him into the hospital bridal style. Christine was never going to let him hear the end of it. Once upon a time, Stephen would’ve revelled in the publicity, but those days seemed ancient. Now his goal was to live a week without making the headlines.

“How long has this been going on?” Tony asked.

Stephen opened his mouth. He wanted to brush it off as nothing, but Tony’s soft gaze was a slap to the face. Tony’s eyes had always been Stephen’s secret favourite part of the man. He loved it when Tony laughed. Wrinkles would develop around the corner of Tony’s eyes and he would peer at the lucky recipient of his smile through long lashes. But now they were filled with worry, and it was once again Stephen’s fault.

Stephen clenched his teeth, take everything to oblivion because while he was an idiot for omitting information, there was no way he’d lie to Tony’s face. “Since the battle.”

“I told you, you should’ve gone for a scan. Maybe the Chitauri mojoed you with some alien tech—”

“I did. I was healthy. You can ask Friday for the results.” Stephen intervened before Tony could transport his lab to the hospital.

“Then why is it still happening? Battle fatigue doesn’t last this long.”

“Well... I...” Stephen swallowed. “Loki told me this. Sorcerers can wield worldly energies, dimensional energies, and personal energies. When I made the portal to transport the Leviathan, I discovered my pool of personal energy, and expending personal energy can be...damaging.”

Stephen could pinpoint the moment his words sank in because colour drained from Tony’s face. The room descended into silence. “How much longer do you have?” Tony choked out.

“What? No—Tony, I’m fine. I need some time to recover but it’s not as bad as it looks.”
Tony collapsed into his chair. He let out a long breath as if he had personally escaped death. “You are never, ever, going to do that again. Do you understand? I don’t care if the world is on fire.”

“You are setting double standards—”

“Promise me.” Tony leaned over Stephen, his hands squeezed Stephen’s shoulders. “Please.”

Tony’s eyes were stunning. In the centre, his brown iris faded to a ring of gold. Stephen wanted nothing more than to see those eyes filled with joy, but Stephen couldn’t make promises he couldn’t keep. “Let’s make sure it never comes to that. If it does, you’d be there front and centre anyway.”

Tony sensed Stephen’s stubbornness. He sat back down. “Fine, but no dying. Dying is off the table.”

“Not if I can help it.” Stephen chuckled as Tony picked up his hand. It was the one connected to the IV drip. The tube feeding sugar and electrolytes into his body extended from the bag down to his arm. The end of the needle was covered by a piece of tape, but the shape could still be made out. “Stop it. It’s not your fault.” Stephen knew what was going through Tony’s mind. He didn’t like it one bit.

There was a familiar wrinkle between Tony’s brows. He was still wearing his workshop tank top, it was stained with motor-oil and what looked suspiciously like ketchup. It wasn’t fair. Tony was an engineer, he was never meant to face world-ending threats, he was never meant to pick up after other people’s mistakes. Tony was meant to be in his lab, tinkering, inventing, and bickering with his bots.

Tony placed his head on Stephen’s chest and listened to his heartbeat. Stephen threaded the fingers of his free hand into Tony’s hair. They laid there. Stephen wished the moment would last forever. Eventually, Tony picked himself back up. “How’s the situation? Give it to me straight.”

“We lost them. Kaecilius completed the ritual. He can now draw power from the Dark Dimension. If he summons Dormammu to Earth, it’d be the end of life as we know it.” Stephen sighed. “How are things on your end?”

“Remember good old Aldrich Killian? Two years dead he's not done hunting me yet. S.H.I.E.L.D. is blackmailing me with footages that can prove I killed him. I can't hand the Avengers over because they are close cousins with Hydra, but if they release the footage then I'll probably go to jail.” They considered the situation. It was a downright mess. They needed time to regroup but things kept piling up. Stephen didn’t know who started it because they both had a twisted sense of humour, but they burst out laughing.

“Why can’t this damn world remain saved for three consecutive days?” Stephen asked. “I need a vacation after this. How about Hawaii?”

“I’m calling it, we are going to Mars. SpaceX is working on tours. I’m friends with Elon. He’ll save us a ticket.” Tony whipped out his Stark phone and started texting.

“Sounds like a plan,” Stephen smiled.

“Don’t think you are off the hook just yet,” Tony quipped while he concentrated on his phone.

“I said I was sorry.”

“Are you?”

“For the way things turned out, yeah—”
“But would you do it again?”

“Maybe…”

“Nope, you’re not. Add that to the list.”

“I know I made a mess of things, but I didn’t want to be…”

“Want to be what?”

Stephen stole a glance at Tony, whose head was still down. “A burden.” Tony stopped texting. He looked up. “Stephanie,” Tony said with utmost seriousness.

“Yeah?”

“You are the best thing that’s ever happened to me.” Stephen shifted under the intensity of Tony’s gaze. The sincerity in them was scorching, it left Stephen nowhere to hide. “Before I met you, I thought I was destined to fight alone forever. You changed that. The world wouldn’t be where it’s at without you because I couldn’t have done any of this by myself. We are a team. We face things together.” Tony’s hand transmitted warmth up Stephen’s arm. It was calming… reassuring. Whenever Stephen needed Tony, he was here. Stephen knew he had been a fool for most of his life, but he must’ve done something right to deserve Tony.

“Okay, we do this together. No more secrets,” Stephen said. Tony pulled back. He looked concerned. “What’s the matter?”

Tony took a deep breath. “There’s something I have to tell you. I should’ve done this years ago, but the timing was never right. It’s not bad, I promise, but it’s big.”

“That doesn’t sound foreboding at all.”

“Oh, shush, you.” Tony nudged Stephen’s arm. “After we sort this mess out, I’ll go through it over dinner, but for the time being, you need to rest, and I need to go see someone.”

“At this hour?” Stephen glanced towards the clock on the wall. It was a quarter to midnight.

“I won’t be long. Take a nap, I’ll be back before you know it.” Tony leaned down for a quick kiss. He left Mark fifty behind in sentry mode. The door closed with a soft click. Stephen did feel tired, and as the seconds ticked by, he decided to take Tony’s advice. There was a slim chance of Kaecilius striking again, and Stephen doubted anyone had the gall to arrest Iron Man at the hospital.

Whatever pressing concerns there were, they could wait until tomorrow.

----------

Bucky had been surprised to receive Tony’s call.
“Where are you going?” Steve asked from the door of his room. He was in sleepwear. Bucky had been in a similar state of dress minutes ago. In the time it took for Steve to brush his teeth, Bucky had changed into a black hoodie, cargo pants, and combat boots.

“Out,” Bucky said as he slid a dagger down his boots.

“Buck, it’s midnight,” Steve said. “Are you in trouble?”

“I’m not, but someone might be.” Bucky zipped his hoodie. “Don’t wait up.”

“I’m coming with you.” Steve retreated to his room. He opened his dresser only for Bucky to push it shut.

“No, you are not.” Tony’s instructions were clear. Come alone, don’t draw any attention.

“Is this about Stark?” Steve crossed his arms.

Bucky narrowed his eyes. “How do you know?”

“How do I know? Buck—you don’t know anyone else.”

“I’m aware of that. You don’t have to remind me every other hour.” If Bucky’s response sounded defensive, it was intentional.

“I’m sorry. That came out wrong.” Steve rubbed the back of his neck. “I just want to help.”

“Steve, you are standing on thin ice with Tony as is, I’d stay out of this one. He didn’t sound like he was being attacked. Just go to sleep.” Bucky’s gaze locked with Steve’s, indicating that it wasn’t up for debate.

“I’ll be here if you need me.” Steve didn’t look happy, but he backed down.

Bucky nodded. He grabbed the burner phone and left the flat, Steve gaze searing on his back.

Since their awkward reunion at Stark Tower, Steve had tried tirelessly to rebuild their friendship from the past. He moved out of his S.H.I.E.L.D. supplied apartment and rented a flat in Brooklyn. While he was in New York, Steve had insisted that Bucky come live with him, which Bucky agreed.

Bucky, too, was a man out of time. The separation from his Winter Soldier persona had occurred recently. Physically, he was fine, but emotionally, he was still recovering at a gruelling pace. He had lived behind a veil of fog for seventy years, it was odd to be so present in life again. The day he left Tony’s safehouse, he had been overwhelmed by a sense of liberation. Hope had tingled in his chest and the sun had been so warm on his face. He cleaned himself up, got a haircut, but after the initial excitement had died, Bucky felt… lost.

He hopped from city to city, aimless and purposeless. Who was he? He wasn’t James Buchanan Barnes, and he wasn’t the Winter Soldier. The name Bucky tasted foreign on his tongue, but who else could he be? He had left what should’ve been his friends, his family, and his identity far, far behind. All that remained were fragments of memories from two separate lives.

Bucky had been on a beach when he heard the news. He laid on the fine sands in his only set of clothes, his head propped on his duffle bag. Children squealed around him and he could see people point in his direction. They compared his outfit to their bathers and wondered why he was so covered on a boiling day. Bucky tried to recall what it was like to be ‘normal’, but couldn’t. Trigger words or no, Hydra had left a lasting imprint on him. His left arm would never feel again, and no
matter what he did, he could never wash his hands clean of the lives he had taken. Their screams would follow him to the grave.

Bucky had been ready to go when he heard the ruckus from a group of teenagers. They held their Stark phone close to their face and scrutinized the article that had popped up.

First contact. Iron Man. Three days.

Bucky jumped on the next coach to New York, trained to Stark Tower, and had a fist-fight with one of the Iron Sentries. Thankfully, the current CEO of Stark Industries had been passing through and plucked him from the mess. On their way up, he saw the argument in the penthouse unfold on Ms. Pott’s tablet. He saw the red, white and blue outfit and felt a sudden pang of nostalgia. Steve was alive too, but how could that be?

Steve had been furious when he found out what S.H.I.E.L.D. did to him. Though in the weeks following, Steve explained S.H.I.E.L.D.’s thought process to Bucky and asked for forgiveness on their behalf. Bucky forgave them. He knew how much fighting Hydra meant to Steve. They moved into a flat together and things went downhill from there. They no longer clicked together seamlessly. Steve was still the Star-Spangled Man, but Sergeant Barnes was broken beyond repair. His jagged edges hurt Steve, but instead of letting go, the stubborn man held onto him tighter. It forced the blades deeper and squeezed the air from Bucky’s lungs.

Steve wanted so desperately to have his old friend back. He refused to see Bucky as anything else. On some days, Bucky would get overwhelmed by guilt over the lives he had taken. He’d talk to Steve, and Steve would reassure him time and again that it wasn’t his fault; those who had been targeted had been unlucky. Bucky didn’t want to be excused for his actions. He had committed those murders, albeit against his will, but he was still the reason those people would never see their families again. He wanted to accept that, he wanted to mourn, and he wanted to move on, but Steve couldn’t, wouldn’t give him that. Bucky retreated into his room the next time he felt that way.

Steve turned a blind eye to those missing years. To him, they last saw each other months ago when Bucky had fallen from the moving train, but for Bucky, it had been seventy living, breathing years. The repeated brainwashing had affected his memory. To what extent, Bucky didn’t know. Making sense of his memories were like piecing together videotape. Someone had pulled the black ribbon from its case, cut them into strips and scattered them around the house. There were days of his life he could recall with vivid clarity while others remained blank slates. Bucky knew Tony would be hurt if he saw his parent’s murder again, but that had been the only assassination he could recall from beginning to end. Howard Stark had been his friend too. If he had any control over himself, he would’ve thrown himself off the road before he could get close, but he didn’t, and life was a cruel mistress.

The burner phone was a comforting weight in his pocket. It poked the side of his stomach as he climbed the steps of Metro General Hospital two at a time. He’d doubted it’d ever ring. If Tony hadn’t called when aliens were about to invade Earth then there was nothing he’d need him for, but the phone had rung tonight. Bucky ignored the ‘do not enter’ sign and opened the door that led to the rooftop.

A lone figure sat at the edge of the building. “You seem alive and kicking.” Bucky walked over to Tony and sat beside him, his legs dangling over the pedestrians ten storeys below. Bucky knew something was wrong when instead of responding with a clever quip, Tony stared at the people who entered and exited the hospital. “Why the long face?”

“Stephen’s downstairs,” Tony said. He saw Bucky’s expression, and quickly added, “he’ll be fine.”
“He’d better be, or else you’ll tear down half of New York,” Bucky said. “So, what’s this about?” Tony didn’t respond. He handed Bucky a tablet. It was an audio clip. Bucky pressed play.

“What do you want, Fury?” Tony’s voice sounded from the speakers.

“I like you, Stark. It’s hard to see it sometimes, but you are one of the good ones. We are working towards the same goal, so I’m going to say this one last time: The Avengers belong to S.H.I.E.L.D…. The Winter Soldier…you haven’t forgotten about him, have you? We have a list of the soldier’s victims, a dozen confirmed kills over the past seventy years. All of them high profile targets. Brainwashed or not, those people died, and they are not coming back. If the list gets released, you’ll destroy the Howling Commando’s legacy…”

Bucky handed the tablet back to Tony. Tony told him to put it on the roof. “If you are worried about me, don’t. I know what I did. I’m ready to face the consequences,” Bucky said.

“I thought so, but I wanted to run it by you first. If this gets released there will be backlash.” Tony picked up the tablet and began to type. He was expressionless, and Bucky knew S.H.I.E.L.D. had crossed the line. When Tony was angry, truly angry, he’d never lash out. His bubbling rage would cool into a static pond, unassuming, but deadly and ever-present. Tony’s barriers would slam down and switch off his emotions.

He would get to work.

“I’m ready,” Bucky said. Tony hummed in acknowledgement. Bucky watched Tony’s fingers tap on the tablet’s glass surface. “What did they do this time?”

Tony scoffed. A corner of his mouth lifted but his eyes were cold. “What haven’t they done?”

“No. I bought this upon myself.” Tony snickered. “The consequences of all my good intentions.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Fury and I go back, when I first met him, S.H.I.E.L.D. had been infested by Hydra. I gave him a list of the undercover agents, saved his organization from certain doom. Years later, after I declared that I’d shape the Avengers into an independent organization, his overseers decided to blackmail me….” Bucky watched Tony flick through the files. From the glimpses he caught, there were classified projects, undercover agents, schematics buried under layers of access codes. Tony was one of the most capable people in the world. He had friends, resources, and most importantly, his own intelligence. Bucky didn’t know what went through Fury’s mind, but no good could come out of blackmailing Tony Stark.

“I tried to protect this world, I wanted to do the right thing, and I would’ve done it at any personal cost. The World Security Council wanted the Avengers? Fine. I would’ve stalled the vote and tried to look for a way out. No need to escalate the conflict, right? ‘Think of the bigger picture, Tony.’” Tony laughed. The humourless sound dragged on until it stopped abruptly. “Then Stephen came home, and he just… collapsed. I was so angry with him, but as he fell down those steps I felt nothing but regret. Ever looked at the one you loved while they were unconscious and wondered what the fuck went wrong? I did, and I had a moment of enlightenment. Maybe I’m willing to do what it takes, but this isn’t about me and what I can sacrifice, not anymore.” Bucky had the chance to say something, but instead of interjecting his opinion he decided to listen. Sometimes all that’s needed was a willing ear.
“Stephen is only a man. A well-placed bullet could take him away from me. Twice now, Fury has mentioned Stephen to my face and told me to watch my back. For the betterment of the world, I can yield, but what comes next? How long before they come up with an impossible request? How long until they use me against Stephen or use Stephen against me? Happy, Pepper, Rhodey… how many do I need to let down before I learn my lesson? My enemies can hurt me, but in the end, the ones I try to protect…they are the ones who suffer.” Tony’s eyes were misted. Bucky turned away and pretended that he didn’t see the moment of weakness. He focused on the city before him; the Big Apple, bustling with activity. Despite the recent invasion, life continued here as usual because one man would not leave the fate of the world to chance.

“What do you plan to do?” Bucky asked.

“The sensible thing: eliminate the source of the problem.” Tony regained control of himself. “For a futurist, I’ve been sloppy. I tried to have the best of both worlds, but some things…they are not worth keeping around. I’ll need help, but first, I need a definitive answer, are you in, or are you out?”

“Are you kidding me?” Bucky turned to face Tony again. The question was ridiculous.

“I’m in.”

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

The lovely 周小猫Nocturne from Lofter has made a teaser trailer for Anew! *screams into the void* Check it out: Anew Trailer

Beta'ed by the patient HoodedIronLady.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Wakey wakey, eggs and bakey.” Tony smiled as a slit formed between Stephen’s eyelids. He caught a glimpse of the blue underneath. They closed after a fraction of a second. Tony, feeling mischievous, held the plate under Stephen’s nose as Stephen blinked away the remnants of sleep.

“Hmm…morning,” Stephen hummed. Tony could tell he was debating between his soft pillow and the heavenly scent of cooked bacon. After another minute, Stephen gave in and sat up. Tony propped a tray on Stephen’s lap. Stephen yawned and looked at the food before him with wide eyes. “You made all of this?”

“Nope.” Tony continued to set up the tray. Once he was done he poured a glass of cucumber detox water. He had borrowed a serving cart from the tower’s commercial kitchen and loaded it with everything he could think of. “We want you to recover, poisoning you would be counterintuitive.”

“This is a pleasant surprise, but you didn’t have to.” Stephen took in the eggs benedict with a side serving of spinach, just how he liked it. Tony levelled Stephen with a look and Stephen held his hands up in surrender.

It had been a day since Stephen’s hospitalisation. After some bargaining, Stephen agreed to stay in the tower for the coming week. It had been the only way to soothe Tony’s wrath. Stephen was to sleep a minimum of nine hours each day and not step foot in the lab. Tony had warned Bruce against revealing details of the work they’d get up to. He even bribed the cloak to keep an eye on its master with a kit of costly garment cleaners.

“Well, dig in, and tell me if this fabled brunch place is as good as it looks on Instagram.” Tony gestured to the food. Stephen picked up his knife and sliced open one of the poached eggs. Half cooked yolk trickled onto the porcelain plate, coating the crusty muffin on top. Stephen gathered a small amount of all the components and brought it to his mouth. He hummed in approval. It was impossible to make precise cuts with his shaky hands. He often missed his mark, and though he’d gotten better at predicting the outcome, a bit of egg yolk still escaped his mouth. Tony moved like a nimble swallow; he pecked the corner of Stephen’s mouth and seized the gooey droplet. Stephen’s goatee tickled his face.

“Hey!” Stephen protested. Tony laughed in what must’ve been his first carefree moment in months. He planted another loud smooch on Stephen’s forehead.

“I’ll leave you to it.” Tony turned on his heels. “Remember, no working, no magic, and no fighting villain of the week. If Kamar-Taj needs you, I’ll go in your place.”

“Yes, boss.”
“Don’t roll your eyes at me. Rest up. I need my magic consultant and personal health care professional back on his feet, but not at the expense of his health,” Tony said with a hint of seriousness.

“As you wish.” The warmth in Stephen’s eyes could thaw the coldest winter. “You’re not eating with me?”

“I already ate. I’ve got some people over. We’ll spend the day in the lab.”

“Are you sure you are fine?” Stephen lowered his fork. He looked ready to jump out of bed at Tony’s first hint of doubt.

“Your job for the week is to recover.” Tony backtracked to the bed and tucked the covers under Stephen. He winked at his boyfriend then forced himself to leave the room.

Tony could spend forever with Stephen, doing everything and nothing. They’ve come a long way since the gala from two years ago. Tony prided himself on his eidetic memory, but he couldn’t recall how or when their relationship had evolved. There was no timeline of firsts, no documented milestones, only months spent together, overcoming one difficulty or another. They’d both experienced many failed relationships in the past, some had stung more than others. Following Stephen’s accident, they had delved into preparing for the Chitauri, but looking back, perhaps that was why their relationship prevailed despite the chaos in their lives. The difficulties showed them what the other was made of. The process of struggling; then overcoming those struggles had created lasting bonds that were impossible to break.

Stephen filled the void in places Tony didn’t know were empty. Tony never knew the bittersweet feeling of fighting side by side with a partner he trusted until Stephen appeared. No matter what Tony did, Stephen remained by his side like an unmoving anchor. Tony was conflicted. He didn’t want to endanger Stephen, but at the same time, he was so, so proud of Stephen’s achievements. The doctor from two years ago had never entered a fight in his life. Stephen had thrown himself into the deep end armed with nothing but his determination to succeed.

Despite Tony’s worries, he knew it wasn’t his place to hold Stephen back. Having gotten over the initial shock, Stephen soaked up everything Kamar-Taj had to offer and used it to enrich his understanding of the universe. Day by day, Stephen familiarised himself with the different systems of power. He advanced through study and practice, much like how he became a world-renowned neurosurgeon. Stephen was growing at an exponential rate, and soon he would mature into something not even Tony could comprehend.

As Tony journeyed to the lab, he mentally switched back to work mode. There was a lot to be done and not nearly enough time. Luckily, Tony had help. Now more than ever, he had people he could count on.

The door to the lab opened with a swift swoosh. Bucky sat on an empty workbench. He had a Stark pad in hand and was going through Tony’s S.H.I.E.L.D. database. Bruce occupied another, an orange holographic display of the Extremis virus rotated in mid-air. With barely contained excitement, he was explaining something to the woman opposite him.

Maya Hansen listened to Bruce’s words in awe. Jarvis had gotten a hold of her yesterday afternoon. After explaining the situation, Tony flew her in on a Quinjet. Maya took in the process that had occurred since she left with a hand over her mouth. As a fellow scientist, Tony could understand the emotional turmoil she was going through. Extremis was her life’s work. She had abandoned it because the original virus was doomed to fail, but now she had a fresh perspective to reignite her passion.
“Tony, I can’t believe it. Where did you get this?” Maya held a sample of the weakened Super
Soldier Serum in her hand. “Please, I’ll do anything. Let me back on the team.”

“You were never off the team, you just took a long, unapproved leave, which will affect your
performance report, Ms. Hansen,” Tony quipped. Maya let out a sigh of relief and nudged Tony in
the arm. “This is, of course, after we sort out the mess with Killian. I doubt they’d let me do science
in jail.”

“I’ve got you covered. Killian was careful. He backed up his research but never digitalised his plans.
He worked in hard copies.” Maya rummaged through her backpack and pulled out a ring binder.
“This is one of many, hence why their spy never found anything. Killian knew she smelt fishy from
miles away.”

Tony took the binder and flipped through it. Killian had planned to amass a group of Extremis-
enhanced soldiers to manipulate the War on Terror. He hadn’t had time to flesh out much of the
details, such as kidnapping President Elis and creating a fake Mandarin, but the framework was
printed on paper, clear as day.

Tony whistled. “Maya, you didn’t strike me as the sneaky type.”

“Give me some credit. You didn’t think I’d keep tabs on where the funds came from? I knew where
the files were kept. When Killian disappeared, I’d thought it was a trap to root out the spies. After I
realised he wasn’t coming back, I took everything.” Maya smiled winningly. She arched an eyebrow
and spun the Extremis hologram with a wide swing of her arm. “You scratch my back, I’ll scratch
yours.”

Tony smiled back. He and Maya were similar in many ways. Tony never doubted that Extremis had
been the result of noble intentions, but when it came down to it, Maya was content to turn a blind eye
on Killian’s actions as long as it’d further her research. She was a true mad scientist, willing to go far
to see her project through. Those conflicting traits had been what led her to her demise, because
ultimately, she was still a good person, and in a game of do or die, there was only so far a good
person could go.

“Thank you kindly. Jarvis, scan this, add to it, combine it with what we have.” Tony unclipped the
binder and left the stack of pages for Jarvis to document. “Alright kids, you’ve both been a
tremendous help. Have fun but don’t make a mess, give me a moment with Elsa,” Tony said to
Bruce and Maya. Bruce grinned at Tony’s antics and returned to explaining the fusion process to
Maya. The reference flew a mile over Bucky’s head, but he followed Tony into an enclosed meeting
room.

Since Tony had decided the World Security Council was an obstacle to be removed, he revisited his
database and summarised the information he had accumulated to date. Compared to the overflowing
blackmail material he had on S.H.I.E.L.D., the W.S.C. remained frustratingly anonymous. As an
international council formed by politicians from some of the world’s most powerful countries, the
W.S.C. was similar to an underground United Nations. They provided S.H.I.E.L.D. with funding,
and in return oversaw their operations.

It was easy to take things at face value, with Fury being the director of S.H.I.E.L.D. and the one who
had threatened him, but in the grand scheme of the Avengers dispute, Fury was but a pawn
controlled by these hidden powers. Tony wasn’t certain of the level of transparency between the two
organisations. It was possible that Fury had hidden information from his superiors such as the Hydra
infiltration. Tony perceived S.H.I.E.L.D. and the W.S.C. as two separate entities because bringing
them down required different tactics.
The anonymity of the council members allowed them to operate as they saw fit. Hence they had threatened one of the most intelligent people of the twenty-first century. The W.S.C. knew Tony wouldn’t yield without giving it his best shot first. They had faith in the weight of their evidence and had assumed that Tony was powerless against them. It was a mistake that would cost them their continued existence.

Tony had contemplated ending things the easy way: with an abundance of explosions and red stained floorboards. It was an option he ultimately ruled out. If he had to resort to violence, then he was no different from Hydra. Plus, Tony was far from desperate. There was another more elegant and all-around better option: exposure. The W.S.C. was prone to making morally dubious choices. In order to destroy them once and for all, Tony needed two things: incriminating evidence, and the identity of the council members.

Evidence wise, Tony had lived through more than what the current timeline should allow. In his past life, the events had unfolded in an entirely different direction. Tony had mopped up the mess that was Steve and Natasha exposing S.H.I.E.L.D. to the world. He knew where to look. In Fury’s haste to shut down Project Insight, the director had created ample leads. Tony’s bugs in S.H.I.E.L.D.’s mainframe picked up the clues. In the months following, Tony tracked the leads back to engineers, scientists, transportation workers… He had material schedules, assembly instructions, the location of waste disposal tips… Helicarriers weren’t built overnight. Tony had evidence that Project Insight existed. He could prove it had been well under development until it was terminated for an unknown reason.

According to Arnim Zola’s algorithm he’d discovered from the Siberia Hydra server, the number of confirmed targets exceeded seven hundred thousand. Intellectual giants and politicians alike had been targeted. Regardless of Hydra’s influence, if word escaped that the W.S.C. had ambitioned to overtake world security literally, they would cease to exist. Such a precise and efficient targeting system would stampede over the sensitive nerves of many. Tony was going to finish the W.S.C. with one fell swoop, a checkmate that’d render the situation unsalvageable for them.

Names wise, this was where Tony had encountered the most difficulties. The W.S.C. disguised themselves behind S.H.I.E.L.D., which was a shadow organisation in and of itself. Rhodey, for one, despite being a Colonel with some pull in the Air Force hadn’t known the W.S.C. existed. For Tony’s plan to work, they’d need to expose all of the names simultaneously. This included the members who had a seat on the council, as well as first and second tier backups. It was guaranteed that S.H.I.E.L.D. would possess some sort of information somewhere. It wasn’t on their mainframe, which Tony had access to. After some discussion, Tony and Bucky agreed that the best place to start their search was Fury’s private server.

“How’s it looking?” Tony asked. They didn’t have much time. The vote to determine the future of the Avengers was scheduled in three days’ time, and the sooner they removed the W.S.C., the better. After Tony locked the meeting room, systems that were on standby came back to life. A holographic scale model of S.H.I.E.L.D. headquarters appeared. Picking up from where they had left off last night, threads of blue, orange and red weaved through the building. The paths indicated potential routes of infiltration, coloured coded by difficulty. The two of them had yet to lock in a plan.

“I still think we should go for the shortest route.” Bucky picked up one of the red threads and magnified it. The path penetrated the heart of the facility. Translucent walls layered on top of each other, from a distance, the central zone appeared opaque.

“Too risky. There’s too much traffic in that area, chances of being seen are high,” Tony said.

“If I go in alone, that won’t be a problem.”
“Do you get a scene of déjà vu? Because is was exactly what we went through last night.” Tony rounded the table to stand face to face with Bucky.

“I move faster on my own.” Bucky maintained eye contact.

“I didn’t call you to palm off the dirty work.”

“It’s not about that. In an infiltration mission, an untrained person is a liability,” Bucky said. Tony ran a hand over his face. He knew Bucky was right, but Tony had never been the type to stand by while others did the heavy lifting. “This would be easier if you’d involve Steve,” Bucky suggest carefully, his eyes were trained on Tony. “He has the access codes. You and Steve may not see eye to eye, but he isn’t a snitch.”

“I know he won’t tell, but for personal reasons, I’m leaving him out of this.” Tony returned to the model and magnified a different section of the building, pointedly ignoring Bucky’s preferred option. Bucky watched Tony with furrowed brows as Tony scribbled down notes with a stylus. The ex-Winter Soldier had keen senses, regaining full control of his body hadn’t dulled them, it enhanced them. Tony felt his every move being scrutinised under a magnifying glass. “What?” he snapped.

“What happened between you and Steve?” Bucky’s unembellished question pierced through the room. Only the muted sound of the work bench’s exhaust fan was audible. “Steve wants to make amends, but he doesn’t know where to start. He assumes I know the issue.”

“Do you?”

“No, but I think this isn’t about the invasion. You are not as egotistic as they made you out to be. From what I’ve seen, Potts and Rhodes contradict you five times before breakfast, but that didn’t affect your relationship with them.” Bucky locked the holographic display. Tony lost his excuse to remain silent. “I’ve tried to figure this out. You have a list of people you consider friends, and another one for people you won’t tolerate no matter what. It’s too precise to be intuition.”

“I don’t like strangers.” Tony shrugged. He unlocked the hologram.

“Bruce was a stranger too, what made him different?”

“Look—” Tony threw the stylus onto the bench. The plastic collided with the glass surface and left a mark. “If you are here on Steve’s behalf, tell him he’s forgiven. I was never mad at him, disappointed, maybe, but not mad. The invasion’s over, we can all go back to our merry lives. If we’re lucky, we won’t have to see each other again for another four or five years. Now, should we get back to this damned mission? The World Security Council isn’t going to expose itself.”

Bucky wasn’t convinced. Tony could tell he wanted to press further, but before Tony could open his mouth, Bucky picked up the stylus and placed it back in Tony’s reach. “Sorry,” Bucky said.

Tony took a deep breath and accepted the offered item. “It’s not your fault. It’s not his either, not yet. No one’s at fault, but it’s for the best we remain the way we are.”

“Tense?”

“Distant.”

Bucky nodded solemnly. He dropped the subject. As the two worked, Tony couldn’t help but think back to what Bucky had said. Steve’s desire to make amends was inconvenient but predictable. The captain was not a bad man, only a stubborn one. His intentions were noble, but Tony couldn’t cite a betrayal that hadn’t happened yet as the reason to draw a line between them.
Tony pinched the bridge of his nose. Speaking of time travel, he had wanted to tell Stephen about his past life. Tony had teetered on the verge of action because he feared the ramifications. It wasn’t about trust. Tony would trust Stephen with his life, and if Tony had trusted Stephen with what happened with the Ten Rings, with Obie, then Tony could trust him with time travel. The reason had been something else entirely.

Tony knew Stephen admired him. Many people admired him, but Stephen’s approval had mattered the most. Revealing his second attempt at life would lead to the question of why his first attempt had failed. Why did he die in Siberia? The Accords. Why were the Accords formed? Ultron. What was Ultron?

Tony was impressive in this reality. He was loved by those around him, adored by the public, and respected by his peers. What if Stephen knew who he was without his foresight? What if his inside no longer matched his outside? What would happen then? Would Stephen feel cheated?

Ultimately, it had been Stephen’s hospitalisation that pushed Tony to make up his mind. Stephen had overloaded himself because he thought he wasn’t good enough. The discovery had been agonising. Tony felt like a fraud. He had to tell Stephen, but not before Stephen was nursed back to health.

“Jarvis, what’s honey bunny up to?” Tony asked.

“Doctor Strange is presently reading,” Jarvis informed.

“On the recliner, with tea and biscuits like he’s supposed to?”

“I have alerted him of your inquiry, Sir. He thanks you for the assortment of biscotti and wishes to reiterate the necessity of breaks. Fatigue is the leading cause of performance issues both in and out of the bedroom.”

Bucky spat out his coffee.

“Tell him to recharge while he can. It’s show time when I get back up there.”

“Whoa, keep it in your pants, I don’t need that image in my head.” Bucky cringed.

Tony grinned with the satisfaction of someone who knew he had the last say. True to his predictions, Stephen didn’t respond again. Tony let out another long breath.

Everything was under control. He told himself. He was going to step up and take care of the accumulated issues one at a time. Stephen was fine, and thanks to Maya’s cautious nature, Tony could prove Killian was a terrorist in the making. His lawyers would make a compelling argument in support of his actions. Mark forty-seven, the suit that Tony had summoned on the night of the incident hadn’t caught Killian initiating the attack, but it did catch Killian’s Extremis-enhanced glow. The man was genetically modified and dangerous. The last step to proving his innocence would be to justify why Tony hadn’t alerted the authorities after Killian’s demise.

From there Tony could concentrate on exposing the World Security Council. He and Bucky would infiltrate S.H.I.E.L.D. headquarters. If Tony could connect to Fury’s private server, taking the information would be easier than taking candy from a baby. After that, Tony would concentrate on keeping an eye on Stephen. He’d make sure Stephen takes the time to recover before he plunges himself back into the Mystic Arts.

Everything was under control.
Apologies for the late update guys. Life has been really hectic and I was food poisoned over the weekend. I will need to take a week off to deal with some real-life work that has piled up over time, so there won't be an update the coming Sunday, but I will be back on the 15th!

Also, because some of you have asked, I plan to finish Anew after the Avengers dispute settles and the Dr. Strange arc wraps up. This, however, doesn't mean I'm done. *muffled evil laughter* I am already plotting a sequel! It will pick up four years after Anew ends and deal with the events of Spider-Man: Homecoming and Infinity War. (Come on, how is this a complete do-over fic if Tony doesn't deck purple space thumb in the face?) After the events of Dr. Strange, Tony would have successfully dealt with everything that directly involved him or Stephen. (i.e. IM2, IM3, Avengers, Dr. Strange, no Ultron and no Accords.) The cut is too perfect to ignore. Infinity War is coming out this month and I am not ready... The sequel most likely won't be Avengers 4 compliant, but it will be based on the canon Infinity War.
Warning:
- canon-typical violence
- canonical character death

This is in the tags, but since we are going to see some of that now I thought I should warn everyone again. This chapter and the next will feature chunks of canon dialogue. Kaecilius had some beautifully written lines... I couldn't bring myself to cut them.

Beta'ed by HoodedIronLady. (I've officially run out of adjectives.)

Stephen lowered the tip of his fountain pen and dragged it down the page. He carefully controlled the muscles on his hand, but a sharp jerk ruined the crisp, clean line. Stephen sighed and closed the lid of his pen. He held up the notebook filled with previous attempts. The lines zigzagged like a faulty electrocardiogram. Stephen placed the notebook aside and leaned back on the couch. He was bored out of his mind. He shouldn’t be, as he was only two days into his weeklong break, but he was, and it was driving him mad.

Stephen surveyed the empty living area, noting again, that he was the only one in the tower without a job. Tony occupied the lab with Bruce, Maya Hansen, and James Barnes. Bruce and Hansen were working on Extremis, that much Stephen was certain, but Tony wouldn’t disclose what he and Barnes had been up to. It had to be about S.H.I.E.L.D., since their threat to release Killian’s death had been what brought Hansen back. Stephen wished the week would pass sooner. He loathed being out of the loop, especially when said loop concerned Tony.

“Dr. Strange, if I may suggest a morning snack? It is important to maintain your blood sugar level,” Jarvis advised. Stephen had long learned that Jarvis wasn’t as relenting as his younger sister. He padded to the kitchen and snatched an apple from the fruit bowl.

“This is ridiculous. Jarvis, tell Tony I’m going to Kamar-Taj. It’s not for training. I’ll only retrieve a few books.” Stephen took a bite; the fruit’s sour tang woke his sluggish senses.

“One moment please, doctor.”

Stephen slipped on his sling ring. He was dressed in a cream coloured shirt with matching slacks and black loafers. He had hastily stuffed the outfit into his suitcase when he moved in, since then they had been shoved into a corner of his wardrobe to collect dust. Stephen dug them out this morning because he had been looking for something ‘normal’ to wear. Having gotten used to his cotton sorcerer robes, the silk blend felt odd against his skin. The material was cold, its texture slippery and wrinkle prone. Stephen hadn’t gone shopping in almost a year. He never had the need. Tony supplied his battle gear and Kamar-Taj his training uniform. He had no idea what was in fashion, a fact both worrying and liberating. Stephen supposed he should use the downtime to catch up on what he’d missed, but the truth was, he couldn’t care less.

“Stephanie, I thought we had an agreement.” Tony’s displeased voice rang over the intercom.
“I won’t be long. I’ll leave as soon as I have the books then make us Italian for lunch.”

There was a short pause. “Promise?” came Tony’s hesitant reply.

“Promise.” Stephen tapped on the screen of his watch. It was 10.30 a.m., he had plenty of time. The cloak sensed his imminent departure and settled on his shoulders. Stephen held his left arm in front of him and spun circles with his right. When he stepped through the threshold it was night time at Kathmandu.

Stephen navigated the isles of the library with practised ease. He periodically bit into his apple. Books accumulated in his arms as he weaved through the Master’s section. Blood Mystic... The Domain of Nightmares... Book of the Invisible Sun... Stephen dumped the pile onto an empty desk.

He skimmed The Ancient One’s private collection next. They were not to be removed from the library, and after what had happened with Kaecilius, Wong took the security of these books to the next level. Stephen unhooked the chains that bound The Book of Cagliostro. He checked his watch again, 10.55 a.m. Tony ate around 1.00 p.m. There was no harm in a quick read.

Stephen returned to the desk and flipped through the pages. The Book of Cagliostro was the study of time. He had been meaning to read it, but in their mad scramble to prepare for the Chitauri, he never got the chance. The point of his journey to Kathmandu had been to heal his hands. At first, Stephen had searched along the lines of healing, but if he could reverse time so that his hands were never injured in the first place...

Stephen glanced at the Eye of Agamotto and back to the book. “Wong?” he called. No one answered. Stephen dashed to the stone stand and snatched the Eye from its resting place. He hooked it over his neck. The Eye was heavy, the coolness of the metal radiated through his shirt. Stephen shivered at the sensation.

“First open the Eye of Agamotto,” Stephen recited. He concentrated on the relic before his chest and reached in with a tendril of magic. The Eye responded. Pieces of metal shifted and the Eye blinked open. It revealed a green orb, which had been mounted in the position of the pupil. The orb radiated a force ancient much like time itself. Pages from the book were illuminated by the eerie glow.

“Alright...” Stephen muttered. He hadn’t expected the Eye to cooperate, but so far, so good.

Stephen twisted his hands, power flowed from the Eye and onto his wrist. The spell took shape in the form of three bands, they moved fluidly in the space-time continuum. Stephen searched for something to practice on. He saw his half-eaten apple. Stephen projected the energy onto the target and inched his hand to the right. He associated the direction with the future. Chunks from the apple disappeared as if eaten by an invisible mouth. Stephen stopped when all the flesh was gone; then reversed the spell. This time he associated the left side with the past. Flesh rematerialized on the fruit and all damage was undone.

Stephen was breathing hard now. He understood the implications of wielding such a powerful artefact, one that could reverse the natural order, but he couldn’t resist the temptation to learn, to discover. He adhered to the current of time; the apple decayed. He defied the current next; the apple regenerated. He inched his hand past the point he’d started. Bite by bite, the apple reconstructed until it became whole again. It’s red skin luscious and unmarred, much like how Stephen had plucked it from the fruit bowl that morning.

“How is this possible?” Stephen exclaimed in hushed whispers. He placed the apple aside. The intact fruit made a dull sound as it contacted the wooden desk. This was real. Stephen glanced towards The Book of Cagliostro, and then back to the apple. There was a perfect opportunity to put it to the test.
Stephen flipped through the book until it revealed the remnants of the missing pages. He willed for
time to rewind. The missing pages materialised from thin air. They reconnected with the spine of the
book and fell aside as gravity affected them once more. Stephen read the text on the pages.

“Dormammu…the Dark Dimension…eternal life.” Do not be fooled, the real magic she keeps to
herself. Kaecilius’ words rang in Stephen’s ear. Planes of glass appeared before Stephen, but this
time he wasn’t going to the Mirror Dimension. Cracks spread like veins of sickness through the
surface.

“Stop!” someone called from behind him. Stephen was snapped from his thoughts. The spell broke,
and the planes of glass folded back onto themselves. Mordo and Wong rushed up to him.
“Tempering with continuum probabilities is forbidden!” Mordo shouted.

“I—I was just trying to bring the pages back,” Stephen said sheepishly. He had been caught red-
handed.

“Temporal manipulations can create branches in time, unstable dimensional openings, spatial
paradoxes, time loops! You want to get stuck reliving the same moment over and over again or never
having existed at all?” Mordo hissed. Stephen had never seen him so unnerved.

“It did the job…” Stephen mumbled. He gestured to the restored pages.

“By breaking the space-time continuum.” Wong snatched the book. He closed it and returned it to its
place on the shelf. “We do not tamper with the natural law. We defend it.”

“But why?” Stephen asked. The room fell silent. “So other dimensional beings can do it instead?
Beings like Dormammu, who’s at our doorstep?” Wong and Mordo exchange looks. It was clear
they did not wish to discuss the matter. “What did Kaecilius mean when he said twenty years too
late?” Stephen pressed.

“When he first came to us, he had lost everyone he ever loved. He was a grieving, broken man, in
search of answers in the Mystic Arts. He was a brilliant student, but he was proud, headstrong. He
questioned The Ancient One, rejected her teachings,” Mordo paused. He inspected the Eye around
Stephen’s neck.

“You see him in me,” Stephen said and Mordo nodded. The group moved to the stand which once
held the Eye. Mordo shifted the stone rings. A projection of Earth appeared.

“Kaecilius left Kamar-Taj, his disciples followed him like sheep, seduced by false doctrines. He stole
the forbidden ritual because he had been so certain that he was right. Men like him are dangerous,
they jump to conclusions and ignore all boundaries. Rules exist for a reason. When you first arrived,
you were curious but respectful.”

Stephen sighed. Not this discussion again. “Mordo, rules are written by people. A controlled dose of
scepticism is healthy. Without it, there’d be no innovation, no improvement.”

“You think you know better than the countless sorcerers who came before you?” Mordo was
unyielding in his stance. Stephen resisted the urge to roll his eyes. He didn’t have time for an
argument.

“There’s always room for improvement.” Stephen gripped the rope which held the Eye, wanting to
remove it. Mordo said something, but his response was muted by the sound of ringing bells.

“London,” Wong said. The door to the London Sanctum burst open. Sol Rama dashed towards the
exit, but a space shard pierced his back. He toppled forward, down the steps that lead into the library.
Darkness encrusted the eyes of the zealot who had struck the blow. “Kaecilius, no!” Wong exclaimed. Behind the limp body of Sol Rama, Stephen caught a glimpse of the spell that was building power. An orange sphere of energy materialised at the hands of Kaecilius and his zealots. Stephen transformed his watch into a gauntlet and took aim, but it was too late. Kaecilius brought the spell down on the London Sanctum and shattered the ancient architecture.

The residual force knocked Stephen off his feet. He flew backward and crashed through another gate. Stephen rolled to a stop. The cloak fanned out to either side to shield him from the crumbling masonry. It did its best to protect his body but couldn’t cover his head in time. Friday was shouting something.

“Doc…can…you hear… Doc!” Stephen’s ears rang. The noise was accompanied by a disorientating headache. He righted himself. Chunks of rocks fell from his hair. “Distress signal sent on 11.27 a.m. Eastern Time. Boss has responded, he is on his way.” Stephen grunted. He wobbled to a nearby wall and used it to steady himself.

“Wong! Mordo!” Stephen yelled. At the lack of response, Stephen turned to the direction he came from. He had been knocked into the New York Sanctum. The spell had fractured the archway that maintained the portal and disconnected the New York Sanctum from Kamar-Taj.

Stephen waited until his world stopped spinning. He staggered out of the western corridor. Kaecilius has destroyed one of the three sanctums that generated a protective shield around Earth. If he succeeded in destroying the New York Sanctum, and then the Hong Kong Sanctum, he could summon Dormammu to Earth. The cosmic conqueror would consume their homeworld.

All would be lost.

“Master Drumm!” Stephen called. He scoured the sanctum for the man. They needed to prepare for another attack. The sound of shifting bricks and flowing tiles caught his attention. Stephen ran towards the source of the noise, in time to see one of the zealots slice off Daniel Drumm’s leg. Drumm cried out in pain. He doubled over, hands clutching his wound. Blood oozed on the parquet floors.

“Stop!” Stephen shouted. Kaecilius didn’t hesitate. He pierced a space shard through the keeling man’s heart. Drumm’s body hit the floor with a loud thud. Before Stephen could comprehend the situation, two zealots scaled the wall and closed in from both sides of the lobby’s U-shaped staircase. The blonde woman reached him first. She brought her shard down on his head. Out of instincts, Stephen conjured a whip of Eldritch magic. He used it to propel the woman’s attack while Friday shot a stun net at her. She hadn’t foreseen Friday’s participation. The stun net struck her in the chest and she fell to the floor in a mess of convulsing limbs.

The man Stephen had encountered in the London church was next. He dodged Friday’s second stun net with ease. The thin web stuck the railing and marred the wooden surface. Stephen traded blows with him and kept an eye out for Kaecilius. True to Stephen’s predictions, when he saw an opening, the ex-Master of Kamar-Taj heaved a space shard across the lobby. Stephen threw himself sideways. He missed the shard by inches.

The cloak levitated him to the top of the steps. Stephen silently thanked his companion and took off in the opposite direction. He was outnumbered, Kaecilius was a Master twenty years his senior, and he was wearing nothing but loafers and a silk shirt. He couldn’t defeat them head-on.

The zealot ran after him. Kaecilius pressed together, folded his fingers on top of each other. Reality bent to his will. The floorboards beneath Stephen’s boots split apart. They flowed as if they were rushing towards a break in the dam. Kaecilius stood at the destination. The zealot
approached Stephen with a menacing grin. He brought his shard down on Stephen’s back, but the cloak yanked Stephen from his path. It pulled Stephen upward and they flew from zealot’s reach.

The pair landed in the gallery of relics, the zealot hot on their tail. Out of the blue, Friday fired another stun net. She had waited until the zealot was close and too distracted to notice the subtle shift of gears. It struck the unsuspecting man. The thin webbing wrapped around his torso as a surge of electricity circulated through his body. He fell to the ground like a damp log.

Before Stephen could thank Friday for her timely intervention, Kaecilius emerged from behind the zealot. His shard collided with Stephen’s whip. Crystalline reflections flicked in and out of view as the two conjured items clashed with one another. Stephen was suddenly thankful for Mordo’s combat training. He’d never thought he’d need them, yet here he was, fighting for his life.

Kaecilius lifted his brows. Perhaps he hadn’t thought Stephen would last this long, especially since he gave Stephen no choice but to fight him head-on. Stephen had joined Kamar-Taj months before Kaecilius defected. They had never been introduced, but Kaecilius had seen him in his white apprentice robes.

“Doc, hostile on your six!” Friday shouted just as Stephen heard quiet footsteps. Stephen turned and brought his whip up blindly, blocking the blonde zealot’s attack out of sheer luck.

The gauntlet had been a gift from Tony when Stephen journeyed to Nepal for the first time. It had been programmed to fend off street thugs. Back then, the worst danger Stephen could’ve faced were people mugging him for valuables. The stun net’s voltage would leave a nasty ache, but it wasn’t enough to debilitate the victim for a lengthy period, and not nearly enough to kill.

The blonde recovered quickly. She was close, using her left foot for leverage, she kneed Stephen in the stomach. Stephen doubled over. He knew it was a bad move, he left himself wide open, but the pain was crippling. The cloak yanked him to the side. Kaecilius had tried to strike him again. Thankfully, the cloak’s positioning on his back made Stephen impossible to blindside. As if its’ had enough, the cloak’s burgundy fabric fanned out in a surge of fury. The magical threads rose to eye level, then twisted sideways and swung across Kaecilius’ face in a loud slap. Stunned by the cloak’s audacious move, the blonde zealot froze mid-battle.

Stephen took advantage of the distraction and leapt from the invading sorcerers. His movements strained his injured muscles. He rubbed the place the blonde’s knee had landed and winced. Kaecilius righted himself. He cracked his neck with an uncanny neutral expression. The blonde came to her senses and charged towards him. Stephen clenched his teeth. He had been ready for another leap when the floor above them collapsed.

A red and gold suit of armour landed amidst the chaos in an iconic three-point crouch. The head of the armour tilted to the side. “Just what the fuck, do you think you are doing?” Tony’s voice rang through the mask. After he had surveyed the scene, Iron Man charged with a whirl of gears. His armoured fist connected with the zealot’s skull and a sickening crunch followed. Stephen’s assailant flew backward. She crashed into the wall, left a large indent, and fell to the floor. Mystic or no, that woman was not getting back up.

“Tony?” Stephen gasped.

“You are so grounded,” Tony forced out. He fired his repulsors. The suit pushed Kaecilius through the wall and into the next room. They crashed out of view. The sound of repulsor blasts echoed through the corridor. Given a moment to breathe, Stephen scanned the gallery for artefacts he could use. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted something he had read about in the Master’s collection: the Crimson Bands of Cyttorak.
The artefact resembled a medieval torture device, all chains and metal plates. Stephen unhooked it from where it was hung and followed the sound of fighting. Tony was not messing around. The sanctum was a war zone. Stephen stepped over splintered wood and shattered glass. Tony was trading blows with Kaecilius in the entrance hall. Orange mandalas glowed on the magic-proof Mark fifty.

“Tony, duck!” Stephen yelled. He threw the bands. Tony jerked out of the artefact’s path at the last minute. The Crimson Bands of Cyttorak caught Kaecilius. The metal plates wrapped around the man’s limbs. Mechanisms shifted as Kaecilius was maneuvered into a sideways C-shape, his arms and legs stretched out behind him.

Silence at last.

Mark fifty hovered over to Stephen. Tony stepped out of the suit like a king who had descended from his throne. Tony’s face was a blank slate, the only indicator of stress was the way he wrinkled his nose.

“Mmm…m…mmm…m,” Kaecilius said through the mouthpiece. Both Tony and Stephen ignored him.

“This was out of my control.” Stephen jumped the gun. He knew a storm was brewing. “I was in the library when they attacked. The shockwave pushed me through a portal and I landed here. You can ask Friday.”

“I can attest to that, Boss,” Friday said weakly.

Tony turned to Kaecilius with a death glare. Kaecilius continued to mumble through his mouthpiece. “Oh, stop it,” Stephen said. He unclipped the mouthpiece. Kaecilius’ unhindered words flowed into the space. It was still gibberish, something about Dormammu and the end of time. “I said stop it.”

“You cannot stop this, Dock,” Kaecilius said.


“Then what should I call you, Mr.?”

“Doctor.”

“Mr. Doctor?”

Stephen sighed. “It’s Strange.”

Kaecilius seemed to contemplate this for a second. “Maybe, who am I to judge?”

“Alright, Wizard of Oz.” Tony stepped in. “Some of us have a day job. You have three seconds to be useful, or I’m palming you off to The Ancient One. What’s with the smokey eye?”

“It’s the end, and the beginning. The many are becoming the few, becoming the One,” Kaecilius said. Tony rolled his eyes. He snatched the mouthpiece from Stephen and walked over to Kaecilius. “Tell me, Mr. Doctor—” Kaecilius continued.

“Look, my name is Dr. Stephen Strange,” Stephen said.

“So you are a doctor? A man of science?”

“Yeah.”
"You understand the laws of nature. All things age. All things die," Kaecilius said. Tony had been meaning to muzzle the man again but decided to give him another chance. "In the end, our sun burns out, our universe grows cold and parishes, but the Dark Dimension…it’s a place beyond time." Tony furrowed his brows at Kaecilius’ words. "This world doesn’t have to die, doctor. This world can take its rightful place alongside so many others as a part of the One. The great and beautiful One. We can all live forever."

"Really? What do you have to gain out of this new age dimensional utopia?" Stephen scrutinized.

"The same as you. The same as everyone. Life. Eternal life. People think in terms of good and evil when really, time is the true enemy of us all. *Time kills everything.*" Kaecilius’ eyes were misty. A drop of moisture escaped his socket. It touched the darkness surrounding his eyes then rolled down his cheek.

“What about the people you killed?” Stephen’s question sounded softer than he intended. He remembered Kaecilius’ family. The wife and son he’d lost, but it was no excuse to commit murder. Daniel Drumm’s body laid motionless, mere meters to Stephen’s right. Bloody oozed from his severed leg and formed a pool beneath him. The air tasted of copper.

“Tiny, momentary specks within an indifferent universe.”

The doctor in Stephen was repulsed. “That’s absurd—"

"Is it? Or are you only deceiving yourself? Are there not things you will kill for?" Kaecilius’ words seeped into the deepest chasm of Stephen’s heart. The place that saw no light. It’d grown increasingly restless since his battle with the Chitauri. “Will you not kill…to protect the ones you love?” Unintentionally, Stephen snuck a glance at Tony. "I will. I will do it in a heartbeat, and I will do it over and over, again and again only for another chance to feel their weight in my arms, but I can’t. Death is the finale."

Kaecilius noted Stephen’s silence. “Yes, you see. You see what we are doing. The world is not what it ought to be. Humanity longs for the eternal, for a world beyond time, because time is what enslaves us. Time is an insult. Death is an insult. Doctor, we don’t seek to rule this world, we seek to save it. To hand it over to Dormammu who is the intent of all evolution. The why of all existence.”

“The Sorcerer Supreme defends all existence,” Stephen said.

Kaecilius pondered Stephen’s reply. He pursed his lips and nodded in acknowledgement. “What was it that brought you to Kamar-Taj, Doctor? Was it enlightenment? Power? Kamar-Taj is a place that collects broken things. We all came with the promise of being cured, but we stay broken because broken things are easier to bend. You ever wonder how she managed to live this long?”

“I… saw the rituals in The Book of Cagliostro." At that moment, Stephen knew Kaecilius had found what he’d been searching for: doubt.

“So, you know," Kaecilius said.

"Know what?" Tony asked. His gaze switched between Stephen and Kaecilius. “What’s he talking about?"

“The rituals give me the power to overthrow The Ancient One, to tear her sanctums down, to let the Dark Dimension in, because what The Ancient One holds, Dormammu gives freely. *Life: everlasting.*”

Stephen and Tony traded looks. “Alright, you know I’m not fluent in magic mumbo-jumbo, so
you’re gonna have to translate,” Tony said.

“We need answers,” Stephen replied. If what Kaecilius had said—or, if what he himself had read—was true, then the situation just got a lot more complicated. Stephen took the mouthpiece back from Tony and muzzled Kaecilius. “Stay put,” Stephen said to Kaecilius. Stephen doubted Kaecilius would listen if he had the chance, but the Crimson Bands of Cyttorak was a powerful artefact.

Stephen opened a portal to the London Sanctum, or what’s left of it anyway. Familiar police sirens sounded at the scene. Tony redonned Mark fifty. The pair stepped into the limelight.

Chapter End Notes

Tony wearing the Cloak of Levitation is canon!!!

When I started this fic I never thought I’d get to see Awesome Facial Hair Bros together on the big screen, but here we are. Infinity War is two weeks away. Please Marvel, just give me this one good thing.
For the second time that week, Stephen was overwhelmed by camera flashes at a wreckage in London. There were armed police at the scene. The sanctum had been levelled. Reporters were screaming questions at them while spectators demanded a group photo. Police couldn’t hold the crowd back much longer. Tony placed a comforting hand on Stephen’s shoulder then stepped away to placate the masses, for which Stephen was thankful.

“Stephen! You are okay.” Mordo ran up to him.

“In relative terms, but yeah.” Stephen shivered in the chilly night air. The cloak hugged him closer. He and Mordo walked into the wreckage and distanced themselves from the eavesdropping press. The Ancient One stood amidst a clearing. Shadow from an intact wall obscured her features. She twisted her bamboo fan with her fingers.

“Kaecilius is in the New York Sanctum, bound by the Crimson Bands of Cyttorak. There were two other disciples. One of them is dead, the other incapacitated. Master Drumm…was killed in the raid,” Stephen informed the group. “Are there any survivors?” He gestured to the crumbling structure.

“None, but Master Rama might yet live. He was lucky to have made it through the portal. Our healers are tending to him as we speak. Master Drumm will be brought back to Kamar Taj.” Mordo bowed his head in mourning. The rest of the group followed.

“The London Sanctum has fallen. Only New York and Hong Kong remain to shield us from the Dark Dimension.” The Ancient One said to Stephen after a minute of silence for their comrade. “You defended the New York Sanctum from attack. With its Master gone, it needs another, Master Strange.”

Stephen scrunched his face in disgust. “Listen to you, his body is still warm, and you’ve replaced him already? He gave his life for your cause.”

“Master Drumm gave his life to defend this realm. It is a cause we share. He knew the risks, as do you. A sanctum cannot be without a Master,” The Ancient One said.

“No,” Stephen challenged. He looked The Ancient One in the eyes. “At least not before I get some answers. What is the secret to your immortality?”

“What are you talking about?” Mordo asked.

“She feeds off Dormammu and his Dark Dimension,” Stephen said to Mordo; then turned back to The Ancient One. “I’ve seen the missing rituals in the Book of Cagliostro. That’s the secret to your long life.”
“Mutter your next words very carefully,” The Ancient One cautioned, her irises were too bright in the darkness.

“Because you may not like them?”

“Because you may not know of what you speak.”

“I’ve seen the rituals, worked them out. I know how you do it.”

“That’s not true,” Mordo said, half to defend The Ancient One and half to reassure himself.

“Believe it or not, the answers are there.” Stephen had never been afraid to speak his mind. He wanted to press further, but The Ancient One turned on her heels.

“The zealots will be back. You’ll need reinforcements.” She conjured a gateway and disappeared into the depth of Kamar-Taj. The amber portal collapsed behind her.

She hadn’t denied Stephen’s accusations, which was about as good as confirming them. “She’s not who you think she is.” Stephen turned away too.

“You don’t have the right to say that. You have no idea the responsibilities that rest on her shoulders.” Mordo caught Stephen by his shoulder before he could emerge into public view.

“No more than preventing world ending invasions, I’m sure.” Stephen jerked his shoulder from Mordo’s grasp.

“Is that how things are?” Mordo took a step back. “You become an ‘Avenger’, and you forget your roots. The Ancient One was right. We never should have taken you in.”

Stephen inhaled deeply. He let the air sit in his lungs, and when he couldn’t hold them in anymore he breathed it all out. “Your unyielding faith in her is touching, but misplaced.”

“Kaecilius deceives you—”

“What about the Book of Cagliostro? An artefact is not a viable accomplice.” Stephen and Mordo glared at each other. A distant bout of chatter erupted; Tony entertaining the press, no doubt. “Look, Kaecilius is chained up in the New York Sanctum. Why don’t you ask him yourself?”

Mordo considered Stephen’s suggestion. He opened a portal with a curt nod. Just as Stephen took another step forward, the crowd burst into a frenzy. They whistled at something. Stephen looked up. A dozen Legionnaires approached the site. The crowd cheered at the arrival of the Iron Legion. The Legionnaires landed on the sidewalk with heavy clunks. The suits waved at the spectators then set out to methodically clear the rubble. Tony was swarmed by civilians. He exited his suit again. Mark Fifty stood behind him in Sentry Mode. Its backlit eyes scanned the crowd for threats. Cameras flashed turned night into day. Tony had brought a pair of his signature designer shades. Under the red reflective aviators, his grin was infectiously wide.

Stephen opened a portal of his own. Tony didn’t need him. He was better off checking on Mordo. He crossed the amber threshold. The portal collapsed behind him and detached him from the ruckus on the London side. The sight that greeted Stephen sent chills up his spine. Mordo stood helplessly in the foyer of the sanctum, remnants the of the Crimson Bands of Cyttorak at his feet. The artefact had been destroyed. Kaecilius was nowhere to be seen.

“I assume this is where you left him,” Mordo said. Stephen parted his lips, but no words came out. “They will be back. We need to—” Mordo was interrupted by the sound of shifting floorboards.
Mordo and Stephen exchanged looks. They took off in the direction of the noise. In the gallery of relics, Kaecilius and two other zealots were building the same spell that laid waste to the London Sanctum. The brunette man whom Friday had shocked earlier stood guard. The stun net’s effect must have worn off.

“Stop them!” Stephen shouted. He engaged the brunette in combat. Mordo sped past them. One of the zealots broke away from the spell to stall Mordo.

“Distress signal sent on 1.32 p.m. Eastern Time,” Friday said. Stephen didn’t have time to consider the ramifications, but one thing was certain: if Kaecilius doesn’t kill him, Tony would.

Stephen kept an eye on Kaecilius while he countered the zealot’s strikes. The cluster of energy was accumulating fast. Stephen needed to end his fight, but he had only been taught a select number of spells. The whip was the closest thing he had to a weapon and it wasn’t enough.

Luckily, the gallery of relics was full of surprises. Stephen saw an armoured obsidian statue behind the zealot. A sword was firm in its grasp. His body acted before his mind could trip over the moral complexities. Stephen manually fired a stun net at the zealot. They were adjacent to the wall so there was only one direction the zealot could duck. He rolled to the side and Stephen’s boot landed on his stomach. The zealot was knocked back by the force. The sword impaled his chest. The zealot’s weight tipped the statue over, and they crashed to the ground in a thunderous smash. Stephen watched the zealot struggle to right himself. His hands, slippery with blood, tried to pull the sword free.

“Stephen!” Mordo shouted. He parried another blow from his opponent. The spell was near completion. Stephen left the brunette and ran to Kaecilius. He was too far away. He wouldn’t make it. Kaecilius brought his hands above his head and slammed the cluster of energy into the sanctum’s floor. To his confusion, nothing happened. Crystalline reflections shifted in the air.


“I am,” Kaecilius smirked. He folded his hands together then parted them. With his gesture, the ground below Stephen split open. Stephen hovered in the void. He searched for Mordo and let out a sigh of relief when the man jumped to safety using the Vaulting Boots of Valtorr.

“Follow me!” Stephen yelled at Mordo. He dashed towards Kaecilius who stood in the opposite direction of the exit. Stephen snatched his Sling Ring and flew into the closest corridor. He encountered the Rotunda of Gateways. Stephen dived for the door in alignment with his trajectory.

The central gateway led to the desert. Unfortunately, the glass doors opened inwards. Stephen couldn’t push them open, so he smashed through them. The force slowed his momentum and he plunged into a sand dune. Stephen dug himself out of the crater. He tried to spit out the sand that had entered places it shouldn’t have, but the tiny grains stuck to the roof of his mouth.

Stephen wasn’t sure which desert he was in. It didn’t look like the Mojave. Golden dunes rose and fell for as far as the eye could see. The Mirror Dimension didn’t transmit heat from the real world, but the visual qualities were similar. Stephen squinted under the desert’s blinding sun. Mordo landed beside him.

“I’ve got his Sling Ring. They can’t escape the Mirror Dimension without it,” Stephen said.

“This would be a good plan if we weren’t in here with them. Their connection to the Dark Dimension makes them more powerful here. They can’t escape but they can still kill us!” Kaecilius
and the zealots descended from the floating gateway. “Run!” Mordo shouted. Stephen didn’t need to be told twice. His heels dug into the sand as he sprinted from his assailants.

Stephen conjured a portal to return to New York, but the shifting terrain broke his concentration. The sand dunes came to life beneath him. They trembled as if woken from ancient slumber. Tendrils of sand entwined with each other to form the head of a python. Kaecilius jumped onto the beast’s skull. With a flick of his hand, the python rose to a towering height. The beast’s jaw was large enough to swallow a dozen men.

“This was a terrible idea.” Stephen gawked in the python’s shadow. From nearby dunes, more creatures morphed into existence. The zealots each mounted their own beast.

Stephen was now solely relying on his relic for transportation, as was Mordo, who leapt through the air with his boots. The sands were too volatile to tread. They rolled and coiled, ready to consume anything that came into contact. The cloak flew at maximum speed, but it was no match for the ginormous beasts. The head start Stephen had was disappearing at an alarming rate. Mordo was showing signs of fatigue too.

“Friday, is Tony responding?” Stephen asked.

“The signals are jammed in here, doc. We need to return to the real world,” Friday answered from the gauntlet. She only had one bullet left and she was saving it for a clear shot.

Stephen bit his lip. He mentally scolded himself for asking. If he couldn’t even defeat a handful of sorcerers, how was he going to protect Tony from what’s to come? He knew what awaited him at the end of the line: gods and aliens. Thanos was a powerful cosmic warlord. Stephen needed more time.

The python’s jaw loomed above Stephen. It dived for its prey. Stephen swerved to the right, narrowly missing the conjured reptile. The python sank into the sand. Kaecilius broke into a run. He moved in sync with the python until it emerged from the depth of the desert. The python screeched, furious for having missed. Mordo wasn’t doing too well either. He dodged the zealot’s attacks by the skin of his teeth. Stephen had to think fast. He’d transported Kaecilius and his zealots into the Mirror Dimension so their spell wouldn’t affect the real world, but since they were continents away from the remaining sanctums now, it’d be safer for them to return. There were no civilians in sight and being in the real world would weaken their connection with the Dark Dimension. It might give him and Mordo the edge they need.

Stephen tried to open another portal, but before the amber ring could form, the python behind him shattered, showering Stephen with sand. The cloak reversed itself to protect Stephen’s head. The duo lost flight capability. Stephen tucked and rolled on landing. He whipped around and saw a yellow-clad figure stand before him.

The Ancient One tucked her left hand behind her back. An orange mandala, folded in half, rested in her right. Stephen climbed to his feet as Mordo descended from the sky. The sands were still active, but the section they stood on remained perfectly still.

“It’s true…” Mordo muttered at the red marking etched into The Ancient One’s forehead. Kaecilius and the zealots entered the static section too. “She does draw power from the Dark Dimension.”

“Mordo, I hate to interrupt, but this is not the time for an existential crisis.” Stephen couldn’t help himself, the words just slipped out. He shook his head. God, Tony was rubbing off on him.

“Kaecilius,” The Ancient’s One’s gaze flicked to Mordo, but ultimately returned to her brightest
disciple.

“I came to you broken, lost, and in need. I trusted you to be my teacher and you fed me lies,” Kaecilius said.

“I tried to protect you.”

“From the truth?”

“From yourself.”

“I have a new teacher now.”

“Dormammu deceives you. You have no idea what he truly is. His eternal life is not paradise, but torment.”

“Liar.” Kaecilius crossed his hands. His palms touched, and a space shard appeared. He headed for The Ancient One. The two zealots joined him in battle.

Stephen engaged with one of the zealots to distribute the fire, but Mordo stood rooted to his spot. “Mordo, you have to fight!” Stephen shouted. The zealot with dreadlocks was skilled. She dual wielded two space shards. They collided with Stephen’s mandalas. Stephen parried her attacks and the rapid movement caused Kaecilius’ Sling Ring to fall from his shallow breast pocket. Stephen and the zealot noticed it at the same time. Stephen kicked the ring into the distance and the zealot lunged for it. She caught the ring on the edge of the static zone but toppled over herself. She was engulfed by the rolling sands.

Stephen had no time to waste. He ran towards The Ancient One. She had been battling Kaecilius and the remaining zealot with ease, but then the unthinkable happened. Kaecilius fell back to observe the fight. He had instructed the zealot to attack, and when the zealot successfully locked The Ancient One in place, Kaecilius pierced her abdomen through his follower. The space shard killed the zealot on contact. The Ancient One staggered backward then collapsed too.

“No!” Stephen watched the scene unfold. He had lost a fellow Master an hour prior, he’s not prepared to lose his mentor. Stephen brought his whip down on Kaecilius as hard as he could. Friday fired her fifth and final bullet. It caught Kaecilius’ arm, which was all she needed. The surge of electricity immobilised him.

Stephen used the window of opportunity to conjure a gateway. He opened it directly into the broom closet of Metro General Hospital. Stephen carried The Ancient One through the portal. He waited until Mordo crossed too then snuffed the amber sparks. “Christine!” Stephen yelled. He darted through the corridors like a madman. “Christine!” He bumped into her at the nurse’s station.

“Stephen?” Christine dropped the clipboard she had been carrying. “Oh my god—what happened?” As an experienced surgeon, Christine quickly recovered from her shock. She fetched a stretcher. Stephen lowered The Ancient One onto the padded surface and they both wheeled her towards the emergency room.

“She has a stunned myocardium,” Stephen said.

“Neurogenic?” Christine asked.

“Yes. Mordo!” Stephen yelled at the man behind him while still rolling the stretcher. “Bring Tony back!” He retracted Friday back to watch form, unbuckled her from his wrist, and then tossed her into Mordo’s hands. They flung open the double doors to ER. Inside, nurses were preparing for the
“Boss is halfway across the Atlantic, displaying coordinates…” Friday’s voice was snuffed by the doors behind them. Stephen watched as Christine hooked an oxygen mask over The Ancient One’s face.

“Come on…” Stephen muttered. For the first time in eleven months, he pulled out a pair of latex gloves and slipped them on. The rubber felt too tight against his hands. The smell of disinfectant filled his nostrils. He couldn’t do this. Stephen looked at his injured hands; they wouldn’t stop shaking. There was no way he could operate on a patient with his hands like this.

Stephen searched around him and saw Nicodemus West. He had never liked the man. Stephen revelled in ridiculing others for their mistakes. He’d humiliated Nick on more than one occasion. Before this moment, Stephen couldn’t place a finger on why he’d acted that way, but now he could.

Stephen always had a competence fetish. It was why he, Tony, Bruce, and Selvig got along like a house on fire. He liked those who knew what they were doing and brushed off those who didn’t, or were still learning, with glib remarks. He mistook his behaviour for professionalism. In the medical industry, there was no room for error. They were responsible for human lives. That sentiment was still valid, but no one was mistake free. Stephen, of all people, should know that. In the process of fixating on Nick’s mistakes, he’d ignored the hundreds of lives Nick had saved while he was too busy playing celebrity.

“Nick?” Stephen asked.

“Yes?” Nick lifted his head from his task.

“We need to relieve the pressure on her brain.” Stephen handed Nick the knife he had been holding. Nick accepted the item with widened eyes and nodded.

“We are losing her!” Christine yelled.

“You need to increase her oxygen,” Stephen said.

“I need a crash cart!” Christine dashed towards the equipment.

“Her pupils are dilated. No reflexes. I’m not reading any brain activity,” one of the nurses said.


“What are you doing?” Stephen stared at his mentor’s back. He chased after her.

Chapter End Notes

Sadly, my beta HoodedIronLady is unavailable until the end of May... Would any of you be interested in being my beta for the rest of Anew? We are on the home stretch!

Edit: I’ve found someone! Thanks guys! ;D
“You have to return to your body now. You don’t have time.” Stephen said to The Ancient One. She had taken them through the staff cafeteria. They stopped on a balcony with a view of the Hudson River. She stood at the edge of the building, transfixed by the scene before her. Stephen didn’t share her sentiment. He’d seen this view on every weekday for years, sometimes even on weekends too. During lunch hour, he’d sit at a table not far from the spot his astral projection hovered. The window seats were always taken, so he’d sit a few rows in and skim through client profiles. He’d reject patients at the slightest inconvenience. His perfect track record mirrored by the awards and certificates displayed in his apartment.

“Time is relative. We have as much or as little as we think we do.” Lightning spread across the blackened horizon. The Ancient One watched the branches multiply then slowly fade from view. “I’ve spent so many years peering through time, looking at this exact moment, but I can’t see past it. I’ve prevented countless terrible futures, and after each one there’s always another. They all lead here, but never further.”

“You think this is where you die,” Stephen said.

“You want to know what I see in your future?” The Ancient One asked.


“I never saw your future, only its possibilities. The same applies to him.” The Ancient One didn’t need to mention his name; they both knew who she meant. “You have such a capacity for goodness. You’ve always excelled, not because you crave success, but because of your fear of failure.”

“It’s what made me a great doctor.”

“It’s precisely what kept you from greatness.” In the horizon, a hospital chopper braved the heavy storm. There was a patient in need of surgery. Stephen and The Ancient One watched the chopper disappear into the storm. “Arrogance and fear still keep you from learning the simplest and most significant lesson of all.”

“Which is?”

“It’s not about you,” The Ancient One muttered. Her voice was low, but her words were crystal clear.

A year ago, that notion would’ve baffled Stephen. Everything was about him. It’s his life after all. But now, after having endured the loss of his identity, after having seen what evil lurked beneath the
façade of their peaceful lives, Stephen deciphered the meaning behind his mentor’s words. This wasn’t about either of them. It was about the world, and as banal as it sounded: the greater good.

“When you first came to me, you asked me how I was able to heal Jonathan Pangborn; I didn’t. He channels dimensional energy directly into his own body.” The Ancient One’s eyes darted across the sky. She caught glimpses of futures Stephen couldn’t see.

“He uses magic to walk.” Stephen had suspected that was the case.

“Constantly. He had a choice, to return to his own life, or to serve something greater than himself.”

“I could have my hands back again, my old life?” Stephen asked, but there was no weight behind his question. He could never return to his old life. He’d known that since the first time he fought side by side with Tony. Tony needed him as much as he needed Tony. With another invasion inbound, Stephen couldn’t take that support away. Abandoning Tony was a price he was not willing to pay.

“You could,” The Ancient One said, “and the world would be all the lesser for it, but one often meets his destiny on the path he takes to avoid it. I hated drawing power from the Dark Dimension, though as you well know, sometimes one must break the rules to serve the greater good. What’s coming...no one can face alone. Only together do you stand a chance.”

“So we can put an end to this. Dormammu…Thanos… It’s possible to end it once and for all,” Stephen said with a sliver of hope.

“I don’t know.” The Ancient One looked at him and smiled. “My path is coming to an end. You are the future.”

“But I—” Stephen took a step back. He shook his head. The world was in peril, and for the first time in his life he had no idea what to do next. Stephen needed reassurance, but his mentor couldn’t give him that. Could he truly take on her mantle? Stephen considered the possibility, but the consequences of failure were too great for him to bear. “I’m not strong enough. I’m not ready.” Tony’s face appeared in Stephen’s mind. Tony would do anything to save this world, but Stephen wasn’t prepared to let him.

“No one ever is.” The Ancient One took hold of Stephen’s hand. The gentle touch failed to soften the blow her words had dealt. “Death is what gives life meaning. To know your days are numbered, your time is short.”

“But I can’t lose him.” To his left, Stark Tower shined like a beacon of light in the gloomy storm. Stephen couldn’t imagine a world without it.

“Everything comes to an end,” The Ancient One said with finality. “Treasure your time with him. Fate brought him here for a reason.” Her hand slipped from his grasp. Stephen turned to his side, but he stood alone.

The Ancient One was gone.
“He’s going to get himself killed.” Tony splashed some water on his face. When that wasn’t enough, he placed his head under the running tap. The water was cold, cold enough to remind him of a cave in Afghanistan. His phone rested on the edge of the vanity. A holographic bust of Bucky floated above the screen.

“The vote is in two days. If we want everything ready before that tonight’s our only chance,” Bucky said. Tony turned off the tap and ran a hand over his face. Water dripped from his hair. It dampened the chest and back of his undersuit. They were in the staff locker room of Metro General Hospital. The cloak moped alone in the corner, its collar downturned. For a piece of garment, it sure looked defeated.

Tony had been in London, tending to the press when he received the second distress signal. He tried to contact Stephen, who should’ve been in the wreckage behind him, but the signal from Stephen’s watch disappeared from his HUD. Stephen’s last known location had been the New York Sanctum, 3500 miles away. With no sorcerers in his proximity, Tony hopped into his suit and took off. He deployed a dozen Legionnaires to the sanctum, only to find it empty. He was halfway across the Atlantic when the orange ring appeared in the sky. Mordo updated him on the situation after he crossed the threshold. Tony had a Legionnaire deliver their combat gear to the hospital.

Stephen was cleaning himself up in a shower cubicle. Tony sat on a bench and leaned back against the locker’s metal surface. He had plans for tonight. He knew that, but with The Ancient One gone, Stephen was one of the only remaining sorcerers standing between Kaecilius and the third sanctum. The feeling of suffocation returned to Tony’s chest. He hadn’t felt that way again since he removed the arc reactor.

“I’m calling it off. It’s a no go. Red flag.” Tony pinched the bridge of his nose. “Stay in the tower until I get back. We’ll have to do this after the vote. That is, if I make it back for the vote.”

“Tony, this is a risky move. The president called while you were away. He left a message. He wants Steve and I on the team as official members. He’s a big Captain America fan. The longer we put this off—”

“Listen, I gotta go,” Tony said as Stephen stepped out of the cubicle. “Stay put.” Bucky opened his mouth to say something, but Tony ended the call.

“If you have prior commitments…” Stephen had changed into his sorcerer robes. The cloak rushed over to him. Stephen tossed his previous attire into the bin. Having been dragged through sand and rubble, they were mangled beyond recognition. He’d probably heard everything. The cubicle walls were paper thin.

“I’m not gonna let you do this by yourself.” Tony closed the distance between them with two wide strides. “Stephen Strange—I’m—” Tony choked. He kneaded the lump in his chest with his knuckles; then spun his arm in a circle to mimic a portal. “I’m not mad, but if you pull that again I will have a heart attack.”

Something was wrong. Well, more wrong than the cluster fuck that had happened in the past three hours. Stephen wouldn’t look him in the eye. “Are you alright?” Tony asked.

“Yes,” Stephen said. Tony knew a flat out lie when he heard one, but Stephen had been through enough today. He’d lost his friend, and then his mentor. Tony didn’t have the heart to call him out. “The zealot at the sanctum…” Stephen said after a pause. He was referring to the one he had impaled with a sword.
“His body was cold before I got there,” Tony said. Stephen nodded and held out his left hand. Tony was caught off guard, but quickly realised that Stephen was asking for his watch back. “I’m sorry,” Tony said as he retrieved Friday from his pocket and fastened the strap around Stephen’s wrist.

Tony knew how much Stephen loathed violence. The doctor had sworn the Hippocratic Oath: to do no harm, but he had been forced to break that oath again and again. Stephen wasn’t used to killing. Tony had hoped it’d stay that way.

“It’s nothing.”

“You just killed someone. It’s okay to mourn.” Tony looked up. Stephen regarded him with an unreadable expression. Tony suspected it had something to do with The Ancient One’s death, but on that topic, Stephen’s lips were sealed like a clam that had closed its shell.

“I knew this day would come.” Stephen swallowed dryly. “From the moment aliens poured from the sky. I killed so many of them, I lost count. I asked myself, how long would it be until I killed a fellow man? I’m not naive enough to think I can put this off forever, and I’d rather it be him than any of us.” Stephen withdrew his hand from Tony’s grasp. He hooked an earpiece onto each ear. With the click of a button, Stephen’s personalised HUD appeared. The blue charts illuminated Stephen’s features in a sombre glow. “Kaecilius will be back. The London Sanctum has fallen, New York has been attacked twice…we know where he’s going next.”

Tony’s lips parted. He wanted to say something, to object, to throw a tantrum, anything. Stephen wasn’t ready for any of this, mentally or physically, but all Tony could do was nod. In the world of magic, Tony’s expertise was rendered moot. All he could do was stand by Stephen when the worst happened.

Tony stepped into Mark Fifty and joined Stephen’s side. Mordo had left after he returned Stephen’s watch to Tony. Tony couldn’t change his mind. Mordo’s faith in all he had been taught was shattered. He said he’d follow this cursed path no longer. Tony wished it was as simple as quitting. Things weren’t meant to be this way. Earth shouldn’t be under another extra-terrestrial attack, at least not so soon after the Chitauri invasion. If something of this magnitude had happened in his past life, Tony would’ve known about it. Dormammu was a threat Earth had never faced. He had no idea how to fight it, though one thing was for certain. Tony looked to Stephen as he opened a portal to the Hong Kong Sanctum.

Tony would never let anything happen to Stephen. He’d give his life to protect him.

-------

Bucky zipped his duffle bag and swung it over his shoulder. The equipment inside poked him through the fabric, but Bucky wasn’t a delicate hothouse orchid. He marched out of the room. The doors locked behind him and sealed the schematics inside. An infiltration route was highlighted on the hologram of S.H.I.E.L.D. headquarters. It was a red one: his preferred route.

Bucky didn’t need the reminder. The route was short, and he’d seen it a dozen times, but he wanted
to leave a clue for Tony should Tony return sooner than he promised. Tony had a lot on his plate. He’d given a brief explanation in their phone call, something about sorcerers and another end-of-the-world. Bucky watched the news broadcast in London when Jarvis played it for him. Tony had sprung off mid-interview. For an experienced superhero like Tony to look so shaken, it must’ve been something bad. Or it could’ve been about Strange. Either way, Bucky didn’t want to pressure him, but tonight was their best shot at getting the list. The opportunity was too precious to flush down the drain.

They had planned to release everything together. On the day of the vote, Tony would come clean with his actions concerning Stark Industries’ purchase of A.I.M., and Bucky would tell the world about the Winter Soldier. The vote would proceed as planned. The Avengers who were present would vote on who became an official member, choose their leader, and then decide their method of operation.

To minimise backlash, it was crucial to come clean before the vote. Most of the Avengers who’d be present for the vote knew about Killian, but to the public, there was a big difference between coming clean then being granted power, and amassing power then coming clean after the members had voted.

The way Bucky saw it, Tony was going to lead them either way. Given the W.S.C. could still pull Iron Man’s strings, even the spies would vote for Tony by default. They didn’t have to expose the W.S.C. right away, but the longer they stalled, the more complicated things were bound to get. Currently, the World Security Council was under a false sense of security. They believed they had the upper hand. Once voting day came to pass, they’d see their mistake and re-evaluate their method of approach. Bucky didn’t think the W.S.C. was foolish enough to leave themselves wide open, but it was better to strike before the dust settled.

Tony might not be the type of person to let others shoulder the responsibility, but neither was Bucky. It’s true that S.H.I.E.L.D. had tried to strengthen his conditioning, but the Winter Soldier had been through worse.

Much, much worse.

Bucky walked down the corridor with heavy footsteps. The elevator was outside the main lab. He passed Bruce on his way out. Bruce was alone in the lab, bent over Extremis research. It was rare for Bruce to stay late into the night. Maya Hansen had retired for the evening after a twelve-hour shift. They were taking turns to monitor the experiments. They must be close to a breakthrough.

“Home time?” Bruce glanced up from his work. Bucky hummed absently. Bruce did a double take when he saw Bucky’s appearance. “What are you up to?”

“Nothing much,” Bucky responded.

“Yeah, because that’s what ‘nothing much’ looks like.” Bruce gestured to Bucky’s combat-ready attire and the equipment he lugged in his duffle bag. “Say… what have you and Tony been up to?” Bruce took off his wire-rimmed glasses and folded his arms across his chest.

“Cracking a tough nut.” Bucky stopped in his tracks.

“Well?” Bruce looked at him expectantly. Bucky raised an eyebrow. “Have you guys cracked it?”

“I’m giving it a go.” Bucky gestured to his duffle bag.

“Why do I have a feeling Tony doesn’t know about this?” Bruce’s shoulders tensed up. He hadn’t
received counter-interrogation training. To Bucky, his thoughts were more legible than billboards in a traffic jam.

Bruce was kind by nature. His fearsome alter ego had prevented many from reaching out to him. Over the years, Bruce had isolated himself for the well-being of others. He cared deeply for what little human connections he had left. From what Bucky had seen, Bruce and Tony shared a genuine friendship. Their relationship was built on a foundation of mutual admiration for the other’s work. Bruce treasured that friendship. Bucky had to consider his next words carefully.

“Tony has a lot going on. He’s needed as Iron Man tonight, so I thought I should lighten the load. We’ve got a small window. A solo mission had been my preference all along.” Bucky explained. Bruce didn’t look convinced. “If you’re worried I’m going behind his back, don’t. I owe him an unpayable debt. He freed me from mind control.”

“He can do that?” Bruce asked.

“B.A.R.F.” Smiles broke onto both of their faces. No matter how many times Bucky said it, the acronym was still ridiculous. “Now that the secret’s in the open, Jarvis, I’m telling truth, aren’t I?”

“I can attest to that, Dr. Banner,” Jarvis’ disembodied voice said. “Sergeant Barnes, I have informed Sir of your actions. Sir has requested that you cease being a pain in his rear, but if you insist, he cannot stop you as he is presently occupied.”

“Told you,” Bucky said.

“Alright.” Bruce relaxed a little. “What do you plan to do?”

“Infiltrate S.H.I.E.L.D.” An idea popped into Bucky’s head. He weighed the pros against the cons and added: “You want to help?”

Chapter End Notes

Avengers Infinity War: WHAT THE FUCK.

Without spoiling anything, I've come back from the dead after two viewings of IW and drafted the outline of Anew 2 in two days. Oh man... things are about to get tough... Anew 2 will probably end up being as long as this one, so 120k+. On a side note, this was completely unplanned because I had no way of reading Marvel's mind, but I'm amazed by how well my theme for the ending of Anew carries into IW.
Bucky hopped over the fence and sprinted in a zig-zag pattern towards his target. Keeping the momentum from his run, he scaled the wall of the building with ease. Bucky used the protruding floor plates as anchor points and landed on the gravel roof three stories above. He kept low and crawled on his hands and feet. Surveillance lights patrolled above him in a pattern he had memorised. Bucky came to a halt at the opposite edge of the roof. He crawled into the shadow casted by another building.

“Sensors disabled,” Jarvis said in his earpiece. Bucky unzipped his duffle bag and fished out a miniaturised laser. He attached it to an extension rod. “You have thirty seconds.”

Noting Jarvis’ warning, Bucky lowered the laser to the second storey window. With mechanical accuracy, he drew a perfect circle on the floor to ceiling glass. Bucky drilled a steel rod into the bare roof, attached a cable to it, and hooked the cable to his belt. After collecting his tools and shoving his bag into an inconspicuous corner, Bucky lowered himself to the same level as the cut-out. He retrieved a handle from his belt. The suction cup at the bottom of the handle attached to the glass. Using the handle as leverage, Bucky removed the cut-out. He was in an awkward position and the thickened glass weighed more than a hundred pounds, but his super soldier strength did the job. Bucky gently lowered the glass on the floor and rolled it out of the way.

“Ten seconds,” Jarvis said. Bucky unhooked himself from the cable and swung into the unoccupied room. He dashed to the door. There was a control panel flashing red light beside it. He plugged one of Tony’s decryption devices into the control panel. The light turned green. “Excellent work, Sergeant Barnes,” Jarvis praised. Bucky smirked in response. He kept quiet and unscrewed the cover of the air duct.

“Alright, the sensors should be off.” Bruce’s voice flowed from his earpiece. “Wait, let me double check… Yeah, they’re off.” Bucky couldn’t resist. He stopped crawling and held up his hands in front of the camera.

Won’t you Hulk out and bust me out?
He gestured in sign language.

“Fair enough,” Bruce said.

S.H.I.E.L.D. personnel patrolled in the hallway beneath him, there had been enough fooling around. Bucky kept crawling. There were multiple pockets on his outfit. The metal zip would scratch against the tunnel, so Bucky made sure to stay on only his palms and the tip of his boots. He slowed his breathing and advanced silently. He was almost at his destination. There were two more turns…
A set of double doors parted with a soft swoosh. S.H.I.E.L.D. personnel poured into the hallway. Bucky held his position. Air vents were spaced evenly at the bottom of the duct. He observed the agents one by one as they passed under the small opening. “Captain, you should join our S.T.R.I.K.E. team. You’d feel right at home,” a gravelly voice said. Bucky’s heart sank.

“I appreciate the offer, Rumlow, but I’ll pass.” Through the wire meshing, Bucky caught a glimpse of Steve’s light blonde hair. He was wearing his signature Captain America outfit. The replica shield clipped to his back.

Why was Steve here? Bucky clenched his teeth. He cursed silently as the group chatted a mere metre from his hiding place. He’d called once in the past two days to let Steve know he was alive. Steve had asked where he was, but Bucky hadn’t told him. Steve was travelling with a S.T.R.I.K.E. team. From the looks of it, he hadn’t been briefed. S.H.I.E.L.D. must’ve lured him into headquarters with an excuse. With the vote taking place the day after tomorrow, S.H.I.E.L.D. needed the added security. The World Security Council might not take Tony seriously, but neither Fury nor Maria Hill were the type to underestimate their enemy. There was a slim chance Tony would lay down and take the cards they’d dealt him. They were right to be cautious. If it hadn’t been for Strange’s shenanigans, Tony would be here with him.

Bucky held his breath. He withdrew his gaze from the group, but it was too late. His prolonged gaze had triggered the super soldier’s heightened senses. Steve stopped in his tracks. He turned around and surveyed the hallway with a guarded expression. There was no one else but their team.

“What’s the matter, captain?” Rumlow asked.

Steve held his stance. The hallway was pin-drop silent. “It’s nothing,” Steve said. Bucky heard the footsteps fade into the distance and let out a sigh of relief. He continued to crawl, but a crushing force struck his abdomen. The sheet metal dented from the blow. Bucky grunted as pain surged through his torso and spread through his limbs. He activated his metal arm and ripped through the air duct, landing in the hallway below.

Steve unclicked his shield. He had ordered the S.T.R.I.K.E. officers to proceed without him. They were rushing back. Steve’s eyes widened as he saw the face of the intruder. “Buck? What are—” Bucky drop-kicked Steve into the S.T.R.I.K.E. officers behind him.

Sorry. Bucky mentally apologised. He sprinted in the direction of Fury’s office. He hadn’t forgotten his mission. Despite his blown cover, it was far too early to call it quits.

“Sound the alarm!” Rumlow yelled as he pushed Steve off him.

“Alarm disabled,” Jarvis said.

Under the thrill of the chase, a burst of energy fuelled Bucky’s limbs. He pushed past the unsuspecting agents in the blink of an eye. Bucky reached the end of the hallway, but he had no intentions of slowing down. He angled his metal arm in front of him and smashed through the wall. The obstacle slowed his momentum, but the room on the other side was long, and he was able to pick his speed back up. Bucky smashed through another wall. Despite the rough treatment, the arm Tony had built remained unscathed, paint job and all.

“Oh shit. What do we do?” Bruce asked from the earpiece.

“Don’t you have like—” Bucky paused as he decked a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent in the face. The man crashed into an office cubicle and shattered it. “—three Ph.D.’s or something? Use them!”
“Seven, but none of them involves being on the wrong side of the law!” Bruce yelled.

“Initiating lock-down procedure,” Jarvis said. Security gates slammed down without the accompanying warning bells. The metal barriers kept the agents at bay. Bucky stayed true to his route. “It may be advisable to exit S.H.I.E.L.D. premises swiftly, Sergeant Banes,” Jarvis warned.

Bucky knew that, but he was close, so close. He flung open the door of Fury’s office and was met with a knee to the jaw. Bucky blocked the assault with both of his hands and slid under his assailant. The Black Widow landed behind him. Her Widow Bites gleamed in the unlit office.

“Hey soldier, missed me?” Romanov greeted. When Bucky didn’t respond, she crooked her head to the side. “You can at least recognise me.” She charged towards Bucky. They exchanged rapid blows. Fury’s office was bare. There wasn’t much Bucky could use to debilitate her. Contrary to Romanov’s belief, he did recognise her.

That’s why she’s still breathing.

Bucky caught Romanov’s punch and lifted her by the front of her catsuit. He tossed her out of the room. She landed on her back. Bucky used the time to topple a shelf in front of the exit.

“Don’t move,” a voice said behind him. Bucky froze. He raised his hands above his head and turned around slowly. Clint Barton, one of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s best marksmen stood in the centre of the room. There was an arrow nocked on his bow. Bucky wasn’t the only one who had thought of using the air vents. Romanov followed Barton’s route. She hopped down from the sheet metal tunnel and landed beside Barton. Romanov flexed the fingers of her right hand. Bucky could’ve crushed her fist but didn’t. Now he would pay the price for sparing his enemy.

Despite their expertise, both Barton and Romanov were unenhanced humans. With a bit of manoeuvring, Bucky could wipe the floor with them, but he didn’t have the time. There were squadrons of agents hot on his tail. He had to plug Jarvis into Fury’s mainframe soon, or he won’t be leaving the compound tonight.

“You are wasting your time.” To Bucky and Romanov’s surprise, Barton switched targets. He took a step back and distanced himself from Romanov. He aimed his arrow towards her chest. “It’s not here.”

“You know what I’m after?” Bucky asked.

“Clint—what are you doing?” Romanov looked genuinely shocked.

“Follow me, or you’ll never find it,” Barton said to Bucky. “Sorry Tasha, boss’ orders. You know how it is.”

“Fury assigned me to guard this room at all cost.” Romanov shifted her hand.

“Nu-uh,” Barton chided. He tightened the bowstring. “You were a diversion. We’ve got moles among us. I don’t’ want to hurt you but I’ll do what I’m told.”

“Where is it?” Bucky asked. “Where’s the list?”

Barton’s gaze flicked to Bucky, then back to Romanov. “We are going now. Stay put.”

“‘You know that’s not gonna happen,” Bucky said. A loud bang shook the barricaded door. Another strike followed. The shelf budged against the force. With one more strike, the door burst open. Captain America entered the room with his shield raised, Rumlow and the S.T.R.I.K.E. officers
followed close behind.

“We need to go!” Bucky yelled.

“Is this a code green? Do you need me to come over?” Bruce asked. He had been observing the situation, which was deteriorating by the second.

“Not yet!” Bucky engaged Rumlow in combat. He didn’t want to maim Steve or Romanov, but he had no such problems with Rumlow. He brought his metal fist down on the man’s ballistic shield, forcing him back.

“Tasha,” Clint said to the conflicted Black Widow, “we could use some help!” He loosened his hold on the bowstring. The arrow soared through the chaos and struck a newcomer in the chest. Lucky for the S.T.I.R.K.E. officer, the arrow wasn’t designed to penetrate deep into the flesh. Upon contact, the arrow dispersed a non-lethal toxin into the bloodstream and immobilised the target.

Romanov closed her eyes and cursed under her breath. “Clint, I swear if you are playing me, I’ll kill you myself.” She scissored her legs around a S.T.R.I.K.E. officer’s neck and struck his head until he passed out.

In the opposite side of the room, Rumlow abandoned his shield. “We are going to catch you,” Rumlow said to Bucky as he withdrew a taser rod from his belt, “and after that, we are going to make sure you stay in check.” Bucky furrowed his brows at Rumlow’s words. The man could’ve meant them as a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent; Bucky had escaped from S.H.I.E.L.D. custody before, but the venom behind it didn’t sound right.

“Brock Rumlow: unenhanced S.T.R.I.K.E. commander, expert hand-to-hand combatant. According to the database, he is an undercover agent of Hydra,” Jarvis informed. That made much more sense. Bucky’s gaze hardened. He dodged the taser rod and elbowed Rumlow in the throat. If Bucky was going to injure him before, now he was going to kill him.

“Bucky—stop!” Steve yelled in confusion as the three people he trusted in the room united against his patrol team. “What’s happening?” Steve instinctively shielded Bucky from a S.T.R.I.K.E. officer’s bullet.

“Long story, but he’s a Hydra mole,” Bucky spat. The gears in his metal arm whirled. Rumlow ducked. His spiked hair brushed Bucky’s fist as it soared past his head. Bucky punched through the structurally reinforced wall and grunted when he missed. He retracted his arm and took down a larger chunk of the wall with him.

“Cap—he’s lying! Hydra reprogramed him. They’ve infiltrated the facility!” Rumlow swung his taser rod in a criss-cross pattern. He warded off Bucky’s attacks.

“You bastard—” The electricity from the taser rod crackled. Bucky drew in a deep breath. It was time to put Tony’s arm to the test. He met the taser rod head on and broke it. The surge of electricity blackened his arm, but the arm dispersed the electric shock across its surface. Bucky only felt a slight sting.

“Cap! Help me take him—” A shield bashed into Rumlow’s side. The strike flung him across the room. He crashed through the window. Bucky ran to the edge of the floor plate and peered down. Fury’s office was on the second storey and there was shrubbery below. Rumlow would live.

Pity.

Barton and Romanov disabled the remaining S.T.R.I.K.E. officers with Steve’s help. The facility
was oddly quiet. They were in the heart of S.H.I.E.L.D. Despite Jarvis’ interference, security
should’ve surrounded them by now.

“Are we good?” Bruce asked. He’d toned down the panic in his voice. He was watching Barton
through Bucky’s feed. “If he’s really here on Fury’s orders…”

“Yeah…we are good.” Bucky plugged Jarvis into Fury’s laptop. To his prediction, the server had
been wiped clean.

“Don’t waste your time. It’s here.” Barton retracted his bow. He offered Bucky a hard drive.

Bucky eyed the extended hand suspiciously, but he accepted the item. “Why?”

“The World Security Council is a pain up everyone’s ass, not just yours and Stark’s. Plus, if Stark’s
backed into a corner…” Barton let his sentence trail off. Everyone knew what he meant. “It’s like
they forget he has an army. Between the Avengers and the World Security Council, the director has
made his choice.”

Bucky wrinkled his nose in annoyance. Fury, that crafty son of a bitch. Playing double agent was
coded into his DNA. The W.S.C. oversaw S.H.I.E.L.D. operations, Fury couldn’t contradict a direct
order, but after he’d carried out his orders it became a free for all.

The W.S.C.’s plan was doomed to fail. The die had been cast; the Avengers looked to Tony for
guidance. If the W.S.C. shoehorned them into the role of a glorified military division, the Avengers
would retaliate, or worse, disband. S.H.I.E.L.D. has misinterpreted Tony before, but they got one
thing right: Tony would never yield. The W.S.C. were fools to think they could control a Stark.
Forced to work for people he hated, Tony would turn into a ticking time bomb. With no end-of-the-
worlds to distract him, Tony would sink deep into the darkness and wait for the most opportune
moment to strike. Every move he made on behalf of the W.S.C. would be a second lost on the timer,
and when the bomb detonated, S.H.I.E.L.D. would go up in flames too.

If the clash between them was inevitable, then instead of waiting for the collateral damage to pile up,
it was more efficient to help their chosen side win the war before it started. Fury chose the Avengers
over his own superiors, Bucky didn’t know if he should call Fury a madman or applaud his clarity of
mind.

The room stood still. Barton, Romanov, and Steve were waiting for his answer. Bucky looked at the
hard drive in his hand. He’d have to get Tony to confirm its authenticity, but for the time being, his
work was done.

----------

Stephen and Tony were greeted by widespread devastation. The street was in ruins. Civilians
screamed as they pushed past them, horror engraved onto their faces. Neon signs flickered above the
chaos. The aroma of street food was overpowered by the smell of dust and gas leaks. An explosion
ignited a restaurant down the block. The streets of Hong Kong were packed during the night. The
explosion would’ve killed dozens of people.
“Jarvis, dispatch the remaining Legionnaires, alert the authorities, evacuate the district,” Tony said, but Stephen knew it was too late. A vortex of cosmic energy occupied the block where the Hong Kong Sanctum should’ve been. It was expanding by the second and consumed everything it touched. Eerie glints of green and purple intertwined with a vast expanse of blue: The Dark Dimension.

Kaecilius approached them with a triumphant grin. Two zealots flanked him on either side. “Honey, if you have any brilliant ideas now’s the time,” Tony said as he raised his repulsors. According to Stephen’s HUD, Tony had target lock on Kaecilius, but he was looking at the growing vortex behind them.

An idea came to Stephen. He hasn’t had much time to practice, and it was risky to wing a spell of such magnitude, but the fate of the world was at stake. “I do, keep them busy.” Stephen crossed his hands in front of his chest. The Eye of Agamotto blinked open. Its iris emitted a warm green glow.

“No.” Kaecilius saw the Eye and sprinted towards Stephen. Tony fired his repulsors. The blast hit Kaecilius square on the chest and flung him back onto a pile of debris.

“You so much as look in his direction again, and I’ll turn you to pulp,” Tony said to Kaecilius. Stephen dragged his left hand over his right forearm. The familiar bands of time appeared. With all his might, Stephen ordered the Eye to turn back time. Kaecilius’ splayed form raised from the ground. The spent repulsor blast rematerialized on his chest then returned to Tony’s gauntlets. Stephen broke Tony out of the time loop.

“What—what’s happening?” Tony stammered. He watched the zealots backtrack into the distance. Fire from the explosion was contained then snuffed as if they were sucked into a vacuum. Fallen neon signs reconnected to their posts. Crumbled buildings pieced back together.

“The spell’s working!” Stephen shouted over the noise of shifting buildings. The Eye has gathered enough momentum to sustain the spell without Stephen’s input. He was knocked off his feet by a fireman running away from the person he was trying to save.

“Careful!” Tony flew to Stephen’s side and helped him up. They dodged another group of pedestrians. “Never thought I’d say this, but magic does come in handy.”

“The Eye of Agamotto will rewind time until minutes before the attack. With the Hong Kong Sanctum still standing, Earth’s barrier will be restored. We need to defend the sanctum against Kaecilius.” Another pile of rubbles lifted from the streets. It revealed a man impaled by a steel rod. “Wong!” Stephen ran to his fellow sorcerer. Wong was long dead, but as the spell continued life returned to his eyes. Stephen waited until Wong was standing upright again to free him from the Eye’s influence. “Breaking the laws of nature. I know,” Stephen said as Wong looked at the glowing Eye of Agamotto.

“Well don’t stop now,” Wong said.

“Heads up,” Stephen cautioned. Kaecilius and the zealots’ emerged into view. They were no longer affected by the Eye. Their connection to the Dark Dimension must’ve weakened their attachment to reality.

The corner of Tony’s eyes twitched. “That’s it, I’m out of patience. Jarvis, analyse their fight patterns, terminate with extreme prejudice.” Mark Fifty charged towards the zealots in a flurry of red and gold. The zealots wielded their space shards with precision. Tony parried their blows with increasing accuracy until he was able to counter them all together. He blasted one of the zealots through the stomach and flung another into a collapsed building. The concrete chunks rematerialized
into a wall, trapping the zealot inside.

Stephen and Wong exchanged looks. “Where was he all this time?” Wong lowered his mace.

“Don’t ask,” Stephen checked on the Eye. Whatever this artefact was, it was the most powerful Stephen knew existed. He had a fleeting suspicion that if he’d been a more seasoned sorcerer, he could use it to affect a wider area. Perhaps even control the time-space continuum on a global scale.

As Tony fought the zealots, the Hong Kong Sanctum recovered its lost mystical properties. The Dark Dimension vortex shrunk to a quarter of its original size. “No!” Kaecilius yelled. He ran towards Stephen in a last-ditch attempt to disrupt the spell. A piece of metal caught Kaecilius’ ankles and he tumbled to the ground.

“Stay down,” Tony said as he retracted his helmet. He fired another restraint on each of Kaecilius’ wrists. The magnetic handcuffs snapped together and locked Kaecilius’ hands in place. Stephen and Wong joined Tony. The three of them watched the Hong Kong Sanctum restore brick by brick.

Stephen narrowed his eyes. Something didn’t feel right. This was too simple. If the Dark Dimension threat could be contained so easily then why didn’t The Ancient One tell him so? His mentor couldn’t see beyond her death, but Stephen didn’t think fate would be so kind.

Kaecilius laughed. The fanatical laughter tore Stephen’s attention from the sanctum. “You don’t get it, do you?” Kaecilius asked Stephen. His eyes were filled with madness. “You are heartless, doctor, a coward. I thought you’d understand but you are just as blind as the rest of them. You can’t fight the inevitable. I have failed him but there will be others, others enlightened to follow the same path, others destined to succeed.”

“Hey, zip it,” Tony warned.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” Kaecilius looked at the Dark Dimension longingly. “A place beyond time? So long as time still plagues this world others will join our crusade. And you, the fool who stood in our path…one day you will lose everything you’ve ever loved, and it will all be your fault.”

“I said, zip it.” Tony raised his repulsors.

“You think this is victory? Today, tomorrow, and each day after… You will never be ready. You will die in agony, knowing you had the chance to save them but you let it slip from your grasp!”

Tony lifted Kaecilius by the collar of his robes. He punched the greying man in the face and knocked him out. “Don’t listen to him,” Tony said to Stephen. He surveyed the streets. The Eye had dutifully reversed the destruction. “Let’s head back. The Legionnaires will be here soon. We should pick up Barnes on the way, hopefully he’s still kicking, then order some take out. I’m starving.” Tony flung Kaecilius’ body over his shoulder. He drew a circle in the air, gesturing for Stephen to take them back, but Stephen stood utterly still.

Kaecilius was right.

Today, tomorrow, and each day after, they’d never be safe. Of every planet capable of sustaining life, Dormammu hungered for Earth most of all. They might’ve stopped him this time, but at what cost? Earth had lost its Sorcerer Supreme. With Mordo gone, Daniel Drumm dead, Sol Rama critically injured, and Minoru missing, who was left to shield them from the darkness?

When Dormammu inevitably returned, could they defeat him again?

Stephen looked at Tony, and then turned to face the shrinking gateway to the Dark Dimension. He
compartmentalised his mind, a page he took out of Tony’s book, and considered the possibilities.

“Whatever it is you are thinking, it’s a terrible idea.” Tony dropped Kaecilius. He took a step forward and held a hand out to Stephen, but Stephen took off without a word. He’s finally figured out what he’s supposed to do. Stephen flew in a beeline for the cosmic vortex. “Stephen Strange! Stop!” Tony chased after him. The city shrunk behind them. Tony’s repulsors burned at peak strength. He caught up to Stephen and tried to grab onto the cloak. In his haste, Tony had forgotten to close his helmet. The look on his face was one of absolute panic.

Stephen avoided Tony. He lifted his ringed hand. An amber circle appeared. “Tony, I’m sorry.” With those words, Stephen pushed the portal towards Tony. Mark Fifty disappeared from the sky. Tony was transported back to street level. Tony barely stopped himself from crashing into a shopfront. He looked up and saw Stephen’s shrinking form. He blasted off again, but now he was too far away.

“Stephen, come back, let’s talk this over!”

“I’m sorry…I can’t risk it.” Stephen heard the desperation in Tony’s voice. He ignored the pain ripping his chest apart and kept going. He crossed the threshold. The Dark Dimension consumed him.

“Stephen—KKTTCHH…”

“We’ve lost signal, doc,” Friday said. The gateway closed behind him.

Stephen hovered in the emptiness and gave himself some time to adjust. “It’s just you and me now, dear girl.” Stephen looked at the bands of time on his forearm. He travelled through the Dark Dimension. The conquered worlds were strung together like beads on a necklace. They floated in disarray. Life had been drained from them. The once vibrant planets were now nothing but barren wastelands.

Stephen touched down on one of the smoother planets. His heart was beating so violently, it threatened to combust inside his ribcage. He knew what was coming. Something shifted behind him. Stephen turned and saw a rippling mass of raw energy. Stephen had tried to imagine what a cosmic entity would look like, but nothing could’ve prepared him for this. Dormammu’s eyes were two clusters of interstellar clouds. He narrowed them at the tiny mortal who dared to trespass on his territory.

Stephen took a deep breath. He thought of Tony.

“Dormammu… I’ve come to bargain!”

Chapter End Notes

Trivia #3:
Instead of dying on loop aimlessly, Stephen used his time in the Dark Dimension to practice the Mystic Arts. This explains his competence level during Thor: Ragnarok. Kudos to you, Stephen, for being the king of multitasking.
“Dormammu… I’ve come to bargain!”

“Distress signal queued on 6.59 p.m. Eastern Time.”

“You’ve come…to die! Your world is now my world…like all worlds.” Dormammu’s words pulsed in the amalgamation of realities. A beam of cosmic energy obliterated Stephen. His lungs withered under the heat. His corporeal form was turned to ash.

- 

“You’ve come…to die! Your world is now my… What is this…illusion?” The ruler of the Dark Dimension surveyed his realm.

Stephen smirked. “No. This is real.”

“Good,” Dormammu said. A space shard pierced Stephen’s heart.

- 

“You’ve…what is happening?” Dormammu gasped.

“Just as you gave Kaecilius power from your dimension, I brought a little power from mine.” Stephen raised his arm. The bands of continuity spun around his forearm. “This is time. Endless looped time.”

“You dare!” Dormammu bellowed. He raised his fist and brought it down on Stephen.

- 

“Dormammu… I’ve come to bargain!”
“Distress signal queued on 6.59 p.m. Eastern Time.”

“You cannot do this forever!” Dormammu hissed.

“Actually, I can.” Stephen met the gaze of the primordial entity. “This is how things are now. You and me, trapped in this moment, endlessly.”

“Then you will spend eternity dying!”

“Yes, but everyone on Earth will live.” Stephen narrowed his eyes. So many lives depended on him. He could not afford to retreat. Not even a single step.

“But you will suffer.”

“Pain’s an old friend.”

“Dormammu…”

“Dormammu…”

“I’ve come…”

“I’ve come…”

“I’ve come…”

“…to bargain!”

“…to bargain!”

“…to bargain!”

Stephen woke in a sea of fog. White mist blurred his vision. His head was spinning; repeatedly dying did that to a person. Stephen tried to gain his bearings, but all he could see was an endless span of nothingness.

*What…happened?* Stephen recalled the turn of events. Dormammu had accepted his terms to escape the hands of time. The ruler of the Dark Dimension ended his assault on Earth. How many tries did Stephen take to accomplish that? He’d stopped counting after a hundred. His head, his limbs, his
organs… Every last piece of him had been torn apart, ground together then reduced to dust. Yet at the same time, he was fine. He still existed. Stephen had gone toe to toe with the cosmic conqueror and won.

The lifetimes blended into a cascade of contorted colours. Stephen was going to be sick. He bent over and heaved onto the floor. It was when nothing came out that he realised he wasn’t in his physical body. He had no recollection of entering the astral plane, but he accepted the snippets of information as they were presented to him. Stephen stayed in foetal position and willed his detached stomach to behave.

These were trying times, but he had done it. Earth was safe. Dormammu had vowed to never return. He could go back to Tony now. The thought of Tony brought a smile to Stephen’s lips. Tony was going to be so mad. Well, madder now that Stephen had ignored Tony’s objections like a jumped-up superhero intern. He’d dived into an inter-dimensional gateway with no backup; then literally got himself killed hundreds of times. Stephen was going to return to Earth, sweep Tony into his arms, and beg for forgiveness. The smaller man would put on a good act. He’d make many cheeky demands, and Stephen would satisfy them all.

Fuelled by his goal, Stephen summoned the remainder of his strength and righted himself. He took in his peculiar surroundings. Now that the fog had parted, new features of the landscape were revealed to him. The ground was covered by an array of whirlpools. With no end in sight, these strange ponds of liquid dominated the plane of existence. Events from different worlds re-enacted inside them. The scenes didn’t last long; some were mundane events, whereas other showed epic battles of war and bloodshed. They told tales both old and new. Stephen lifted the Eye of Agamotto. It glowed brightly in the misty world.

Stephen was starting to understand now. He was witnessing time; endless, boundless time. Perhaps his misbehaviour with the Eye had caused more backlash than he anticipated. Wong had warned him against breaking the laws of nature. He knew there’d be a heavy price to pay, but he hadn’t endured hundreds of deaths to never see his loved ones again. He was going to find a way back home, technicalities be damned.

There was movement to his left. Stephen’s jaw dropped at the sight. It couldn’t be, standing thirty, maybe thirty-five feet away was a figure clad in yellow. She lowered her hood; the face it revealed smiled at Stephen with kind eyes. Stephen had last seen her less than a day ago, but without her guidance, those hours had seemed long and brimmed with uncertainty. Stephen reached out. He took a few fumbling steps. Once his mind processed what he witnessed he ran towards her. The Ancient One’s smile spoke of fondness and sorrow. She shook her head as Stephen neared then turned and walked away.

Stephen stood where his mentor had been and searched for her. Where had she gone? Did she not recognise him? The scene unfolding beneath him caught his attention. This whirlpool was large, its aura dark and foreboding. Stephen struggled to peer through the darkness, though the longer he stared, the less distorted the image became. He drew in a sharp breath. In the black, bubbling mess, was Tony.

Tony looked to be in some sort of bunker. There were two others present. Was that Steve Rogers and James Barnes? Stephen kneeled on top of the whirlpool. A force repelled him from it. Inside, Tony was fighting a losing battle against his fellow Avengers. Had there been a fallout since Stephen was away? Stephen’s face scrunched together. What was Tony doing? Why wasn’t he using any of his lasers? Mark Fifty looked different than Stephen recalled. Where were the suit’s protective runes?

Working as a team, the super soldiers overpowered Tony. Rogers slammed his shield onto Tony’s
helmet until it broke. He ripped the tattered metal from Tony’s face and brought his shield high into the air—he was going for the kill! “No!” Stephen reached down. The Eye of Agamotto touched the whirlpool and the force separating the two worlds disappeared. Stephen fell into the liquid. It was thick and muddy against his face. Stephen kept falling. He penetrated the gooey layer and landed in time to hear a sickening crunch.

What happened next happened too fast for Stephen to comprehend. Rogers abandoned his Shield. The super soldiers departed together. Tony was left alone in the bunker. Stephen rushed over. He tried to help Tony sit up, but his hands went through everything he touched. He was still in his astral form.

Tony tried to climb back onto his feet. Metal from the split arc reactor pierced into his chest. Tony coughed. Red splattered onto the concrete. After several failed attempts, Tony collapsed. In his disabled suit, Tony stared at the falling snow with an air of resignation. In a flurry of panic, Stephen searched the bunker for help, but they were on their own. Engines roared in the distance; Rogers and Barnes ascending in a Quinjet.

The weight of the situation finally sank in. The super soldiers had teamed up against Tony, disabled his suit, and then left him behind with life-threatening injuries. Stephen had never trusted either of them, but he had faith they’d do what was right. His faith was clearly misplaced. Tony was in desperate need of medical attention. He needed to get Tony out of here, but to do that, Stephen had to find his physical body first. He searched the facilities again. After combing through the bunker to no avail, Stephen hovered back to where he started. He froze a few steps before the man on the ground.

The temperature was sub-zero, but no vapour escaped Tony’s nostrils. A few flakes of snow coated his long lashes. He looked serene, as if he was enjoying peace at long last.

“No—no, no, no! Don’t do this to me!” Stephen rushed forward. “You survived Afghanistan; you survived fighting gods and aliens. You can survive this. Come on Tony—the world needs you. I need you.” Stephen tried to cradle Tony in his arms, but Tony’s stiff form slipped through his fingers.

“Don’t do this to me.” Stephen couldn’t help the quiver in his voice. When the Dark Dimension had swallowed him whole, when Dormammu had executed him again and again and again, during the endless suffering he had thought of Tony. The colour of Tony’s eyes under the sun. Tony’s playful banter and witty comebacks. The way Tony’s face lit up when he saw Stephen. The sound of Tony’s voice when he called Stephen his favourite person in the world… This couldn’t possibly be happening. Tony was the best of them. He was a survivor.

“Please.” Stephen’s lone voice echoed in the emptiness. “Please, answer me…”

----------

Stephen sat in the bunker and watched the colour drain from Tony’s cheeks. The ghostly imposter was a poor imitation of the man he loved. Snow fell from the sky. Day turned to night and night
turned to day. The engines of another Quinjet disturbed the peace.

A red being hovered into view. Whatever it was, it didn’t belong on Earth. Stephen hurled himself at the intruder. He so desperately wanted to protect what little he had left of Tony, but his fist touched nothing. The intruder checked Tony’s pulse. When it felt nothing, it documented the scene of the crime. The being lifted Tony from the frozen ground, something Stephen would’ve given anything to do. Stephen screamed obscenities as it carried Tony into the Quinjet. He only quieted when Friday’s voice rang through the coms.

They transported Tony back to New York, where a private funeral was held. A small crowd had been permitted to attend. Pepper, Rhodes, Happy, and Vision—the android, as Stephen learnt—each had a moment to say their goodbyes. The kid represented by a spider symbol in Tony’s archives had grown. He couldn’t finish his speech. He ran from the stand with a wet face, presumably to cry where no one could see him.

They laid Tony in a coffin of white roses. His face had been cleaned, the cuts and bruises covered by makeup. Rhodes had aged a decade since Stephen last saw him in Stark Tower. He was in a wheelchair. The Colonel closed the lid of the coffin. With the help of four other men, they marched Tony outside the chapel. They lowered Tony into the ground, and one shovel of dirt at a time, they buried him beside his parents.

Stephen stayed pin-drop silent during the ceremony. Nothing felt real. His heart screamed for him to reject what he’d seen, because if he accepted this as reality, then—

Stephen followed the crowd back into the chapel, where they comforted each other and bonded over their shared grief. But eventually, the sun sank below the horizon. The mourners departed, and Stephen was left alone with his thoughts. He hovered to the back of the chapel. No one took down the decorations. A black and white photo of Tony smiled at Stephen from behind the empty coffin stand.

“Tony?” Stephen called. His question was lost in the stifling silence.

Then it hit Stephen. He was never going to see Tony again.

Stephen doubled over on top of the stand. His sobs sounded more like muffled screams. He cried all the tears he had left to shed. Delirious from grief and fatigue, Stephen wondered if this was all a terrible dream. Perhaps this was one of Dormammu’s tricks. He was still stuck in the Dark Dimension, and Tony was still safe in Hong Kong. Stephen waited. Perhaps Tony would jump out from behind him, announce that Stephen had gotten what he deserved, and the two of them would dust each other off and kiss. They’d go home.

Stephen looked up. In the photo, Tony’s smile was as stunning as the one he’d committed to memory. That was all he had left of Tony now: memories. Stephen recalled the days he spent beating around the bush, wanting Tony to make the first move. He recalled the days he spent snapping at Tony after he first lost his hands. He recalled the days he spent being too prideful to admit he was in love. All that time lost.

Something had reached into his chest, ripped out his heart, and replaced the red beating organ with lead. Stephen stayed by Tony’s side until his picture was replaced. Numbness radiated from the spot he used to feel joy. This was it. Death: the grand finale.

Stephen couldn’t bear it anymore. He left the graveyard and never returned. He wished he’d never gone to the Dark Dimension, but regret was enlightenment that came too late. He could’ve stayed. He could’ve protected him. He could’ve done more. Why didn’t he do more?
Twenty-four hours after the funeral, what happened in Siberia was released to the rest of the world. *The Death of Iron Man. The Avengers Civil War. Sokovia Accords Reaffirmed.* The headlines were burned into Stephen’s mind. There was no escaping it, so Stephen learned all he could about the years he’d missed.

From that moment time sped up. Stephen wandered the streets of New York, hollow and purposeless. He drifted to his flat and found an identical copy of himself. Stephen knew there’d be consequences to manipulating time, and it seemed that as a result, his astral projection had travelled four years into the future. For unknown reasons, the Stephen Strange of present-day was still a neurosurgeon. He had never met Tony.

Stephen watched himself endure the loss of his hands again, but this time it was nowhere near as easy. With no one to ground him, his mind deteriorated with every failed experimental procedure. Christine loved him, but she didn’t get him. Despair consumed Stephen. He sold all his possessions and bought a ticket to Nepal.

On the other side of New York City, Stark Industries fell apart. Pepper did her best, but there was no salvaging the situation. Their guiding light was gone. There was no Iron Legion, and with the dissolution of the Avengers, the world struggled to fend off supernatural threats. The project that Tony had kept even from Stephen, the one that’d connect all the satellites he had fired into low-orbit never came to fruition. One day, another alien contraption appeared in the sky: the second invasion.

Stephen couldn’t muster the strength to fight. He watched the aliens conquer Earth, led by the warlord Tony had foreseen. What was left of the Avengers assembled. The Stephen Strange of present-day opened the Eye of Agamotto. He referred to it as the Time Stone. Stephen smiled bitterly. Time…how could have he missed it? The Infinity Stone he and Tony searched for had been there all along, right under his nose.

Stephen’s counterpart activated the Eye. He saw all the possibilities of the upcoming conflict. There was no way to succeed, not a single path led them to victory, but Stephen was not the type to give up in any timeline. He tried again, and this time, instead of travelling forward into the future, he travelled back to the past. Where did they go wrong? Was there anything they could’ve done differently to give them a chance? He spent hours inside the spell and found the answer at the crack of dawn.

He and Vision visited a place Stephen had avoided all these years: the private graveyard that Tony had been buried. Stephen watched them dig up the coffin with clenched fists. Every shovel was a cruel and vivid reminder of what had come to past. They cracked the lid open. Stephen closed his eyes at the sight of the bones inside. With the combined might of the Time Stone and the Mind Stone, they resurrected Tony and sent him back in time. Tony would keep all his memories of the future years, but he’d have no idea how or why.

Stephen’s counterpart collapsed after the deed was done. He’d depleted his life force to fuel the spell. Vision’s crimson skin faded to a pale pink. The children of Thanos arrived to find the Stone keepers killed or crippled. They retrieved the Time Stone from Stephen’s corpse and pried the Mind Stone from Vision’s head. The Mad Titan gathered the Infinity Stones. With a snap of his fingers, half the universe turned to ash.

Stephen’s astral form began to disintegrate. He felt no fear, only elation. He was tired. This world was doomed, but the world that Tony was sent back to, the world he came from, perhaps they’d have a chance.

Stephen… In the distance, a muffled voice called. He could recognise that voice anywhere; years, worlds, even lifetimes apart. Stephen closed his eyes. Around him people fled and cities crumbled. Earth was tinted red from the light of a dying sun. When he opened his eyes again, he was laying on
his back. The Hong Kong Sanctum stood undamaged in his peripheral vision. Groups of Chinese people were snapping photos.

Tony knelt over him, faceplate opened. A thin layer of sweat coated his features. Stephen reached up and Tony caught his hand in mid-air, a strange re-enactment of what Stephen had witnessed in Siberia, only the actors switched roles and Stephen was back in his body at long last.

Tony was saying something, but the ringing in Stephen’s ears drowned out all the words. Stephen didn’t know how long he had been away, but he couldn’t bring himself to care. His fingers finally touched the man he loved. Tony’s face was soft beneath his scarred fingers.

Tony was alive.

Tony had been returned to him.

Chapter End Notes

I couldn't resist the urge to make this chapter Infinity War compliant. It fitted so well!
Tony had been formulating a rescue plan when another gateway appeared. The tiny crack spat out a red and blue dot. Tony’s HUD picked up so many distress signals, even Jarvis lagged. Stephen fell out of the sky in a straight line. The cloak was too tattered to sustain flight. Tony caught Stephen before he could crash into the street. He lowered the man and checked for a pulse. To his relief, the pulse was strong, but Stephen wouldn’t respond to his name. When Stephen finally opened his eyes, it was as if another lifetime had passed.

Stephen fainted from fatigue seconds after he woke. The Dark Dimension gateway absorbed Kaecilius and his zealots then closed once and for all. On better days Tony would’ve questioned the outcome, but for the time being, he had only one priority on his mind. Wong opened a portal back to Stark Tower. Tony ran Stephen through every scan he could. It wasn’t until the results came back with no anomalies that exhaustion caught up with Tony. He changed Stephen into sleepwear, laid him down on their bed, and climbed onto the mattress too.

Tony fell into dreamless slumber. He woke the next day determined to take the rest of the year off. The bed was empty beside him and water was running in the en-suite. Tony could use a shower himself, so he stripped with the intention of joining Stephen, but the sight that greeted him froze him in his tracks.

Stephen stood under the running water fully dressed. His white shirt had turned translucent in the shower, exposing the black and purple bruise on his stomach. Stephen’s fists were clenched by his side. The water had soaked the dressing covering his wounds. They were minor cuts, but Tony would have to replace them later.

Tony hadn’t experienced total helplessness in years, but he’d been reacquainted with the feeling when Stephen flew into the Dark Dimension alone. Tony had been so, so mad at Stephen for his reckless antics, but as usual, once Tony realised that something was wrong, his seething fury gave way to worry.

Tony closed the distance between them and placed his hand under the shower. The water was freezing. He adjusted the temperature and stepped behind the shower screen. “Honey, you gotta talk to me. I can’t read minds.” Tony brushed away the damp strands of hair sticking to Stephen’s face. The other man wouldn’t look him in the eye. “What happened up there?” Stephen squeezed his eyes shut. He opened his mouth, but no words came out. “It’s alright.” Tony enveloped Stephen in a warm embrace. “I’m here. You’re back now.”

Stephen’s soaked pyjamas were cold against his skin. Tony threaded a hand through the grey streak on Stephen’s temple. Warm water returned some mobility to Stephen’s limbs. He slowly pushed Tony back until Tony was pressed between him and the wall. The tiles sent shivers up Tony’s spine, but he didn’t dare move. He lowered his hands until they rested on Stephen’s hips. They stayed
under the running shower. Stephen pressed his full weight onto Tony. He used his taller form to shield Tony from the outside world.

“You sure you don’t want to talk about it?” Tony asked after a pause.

“I…need time to process what happened,” Stephen said. Tony took that as a sign to file the conversation for later.

They ate breakfast in silence. Stephen barely touched his food. Tony tapped his feet anxiously under the bar counter. Stephen Strange was the definition of stoic rationalism. He was poised, competent, and collected. His training as a neurosurgeon strengthened his unflappable demeanour. Seeing Stephen so shaken frightened Tony. What’s worse, Tony had no idea how he could help. Time was relative. To Tony, it had been but a few seconds on Earth, but to Stephen… Whatever had happened up there, it was bad.

Bruce, Bucky, and Steve arrived at 10.00 a.m. sharp for debrief. They chatted among themselves while Tony made coffee for the group. The cloak hovered behind Stephen, who hadn’t joined the conversation. Stephen looked frail and detached from reality. He held a vacant stare in the super soldiers’ direction.

This is officially the longest week of my life. Tony thought as he sank into the soft cushions of his couch. His body was running low on battery, and though his enhanced physique could take much more of a beating, his psychological exhaustion slowed his brain to a standstill.

“You alright?” Tony gave Stephen’s hand a light squeeze. Stephen jumped at the touch, but otherwise didn’t reject Tony’s offer of comfort. Tony waited until Stephen settled, then gently massaged the hand in his own. He traced the scars down the length of Stephen’s fingers. Stephen’s stiff form loosened after a few strokes.

Laughter derailed Tony’s train of thought. Bruce, Bucky, and Steve were discussing their narrow escape. Tony rose from the couch. He was eager to get the debriefing over and done with. Stephen was in no shape to work, and Tony wanted to spend the day with him to ensure he recovered. “Jarvis gave me the rundown last night,” Tony said as he approached the others. “I’ll scan over the data when I get the chance.”

“I still don’t trust S.H.I.E.L.D., but it doesn’t make sense for them to play us now,” Bucky said as he eyed the nonverbal doctor. He opened his mouth again, but Tony shook his head and Bucky dropped the subject.

They discussed the specifics of the mission. Tony and Bucky did most of the talking while Bruce and Steve filled in the blanks. Once he had been let in on the reason behind their espionage train wreck, Steve had stayed shockingly cooperative. Tony regretted sending Bucky in alone, so he was thankful that Steve turned the tide last minute. Having Bruce Hulk out in S.H.I.E.L.D. headquarters would’ve been a disaster.

The debriefing progressed smoothly. For the first time since his resurrection, Tony and Steve sat down and had a civil conversation. It was almost pleasant. Tony would’ve liked the session to continue if it wasn’t for Stephen’s well-being nagging in the back of his mind. Satisfied that everyone was on the same page, Tony stood from his spot. “Excellent work, team. Solid effort all around. I owe you guys one.”

“Thanks for looking out for Bucky…Tony.” Steve stood too. “Can I call you Tony?”

A lopsided smirk appeared on Tony’s face. He neither confirmed nor denied the request. “I’ll see
you around, Cap.” Steve returned the smile. He extended his hand. Tony held out his own, but before Steve could shake it, he disappeared from Tony’s line of sight.

Stephen’s fist connected with Steve’s jaw. Steve crashed into the coffee table and shattered the glass top. Stephen stood over Steve with a look Tony had never seen on his face before. It was pure, unadulterated rage.

“Wow—same side!” Tony shouted. Stephen’s unprompted hostility blindsided him. The others reacted quickly. Bruce jumped from the couch to hold Stephen back. The cloak hovered around the pair in circles. It was reluctant to hurt Stephen’s friend. Stephen struggled against the restraint, but he was weak from fatigue and Bruce was stronger than he looked. Bucky helped a confused Steve sit up. The gears in his metal arm shifted. He was preparing for another attack. Tony’s brain to body filter had never been reliable. He leaped in front of Stephen and extended his watch gauntlet, the repulsor hot and ready to fire.

Amazing how conflict exposed one’s priorities. Tony snuck a glance at the pair behind him. Stephen’s hands trembled uncontrollably. The hand he had used to punch Steve couldn’t form a fist. Stephen’s hands were delicate after the many surgeries. The punch must’ve hurt him as much as it did Steve.

“Doctor, I know we don’t see eye to eye, but don’t do that again,” Steve wiped away the blood from his split lip. For Stephen to have wounded a super soldier, he must’ve given it everything he had. Stephen jerked against Bruce. He used the hand he could still move to conjure a whip.

“Cool it, Stephen!” Tony turned around. He placed himself between Stephen and the super soldiers. His watch gauntlet was locked on Steve, but he placed his bare hand on Stephen’s chest. That returned some logic to Stephen. His struggling eased then stopped altogether.

“Aren’t we gonna talk about this?” Bucky asked.

“That’s an excellent suggestion,” Tony said to Bucky. He turned to Stephen. “Come on…use your words.”

Stephen’s laboured breaths were the only sound audible in the room. The air was fraught with unasked questions. Tony swallowed dryly. When Stephen spoke, it was clipped and sudden.

“Unhand me, Bruce.”

“If I do that, will you promise not to freak out?” Bruce asked.

“Unhand me, now.”

Bruce let go. He backtracked a few steps with his hands raised. Stephen left without a word. “What the hell was that?” Bucky asked as he stared at the direction Stephen had gone. Tony retracted his watch gauntlet. He gave the others a curt nod then left just as quickly. He found Stephen on the landing strip.

During the initial months of his resurrection, be it due to sentiment or a lack of time, Tony hadn’t made any amendments to the Stark Tower blueprint. The tower had been constructed as an identical copy from his past life. The landing strip they occupied was not the helicopter pad three floors below, but the narrow one he’d used to remove the Iron Man suit. Since Tony had upgraded the suit to Mark Forty-eight, he hadn’t used the unsuiting mechanisms once. The once cutting-edge technology had become a relic of the past.

Perhaps he’d gone soft in his old age, but Tony didn’t demolish the redundant tech. It was a
testament to what he’d witnessed, so he installed balustrades on the open-air walkway. They now used the strip as a second balcony that lead to nowhere, an illogical design that Stephen had questioned, but ultimately gave up pursuing because Tony wouldn’t give him more than a shrug for an answer.

Tony came up beside Stephen. He gripped the steel railings and let out a shaky breath. He didn’t want to sound confrontational. During the time he took to mentally prepare himself, Stephen spoke. “What was it you wanted to tell me in the hospital?”

“The what?” Tony squinted.

“The night I was hospitalised. You wanted to tell me something. What was it?” Stephen turned to Tony.

“This really isn’t the best time. You are not okay—”

“Tony.” Stephen placed both of his hands on Tony’s shoulders. The tremble could be felt through Tony’s sweatshirt. A glassy sheen covered Stephen’s eyes. They were filled with so much pain. “Please…it’s very important to me. I need to know. What did you want to tell me?”

Tony would do anything to ease that pain. None of them were ready for the truth, but they rarely got what they bargained for. “I’m…from the future,” Tony said. It’s when Stephen didn’t look the least surprised that Tony found the root of the problem. Stephen knew, but how could he have possibly known? There was only one explanation. “What did you see up there?”


Tony couldn’t keep the truth bottled up any longer. The desperation in Stephen’s voice was too much to bear. “I died. There was an accident. I didn’t make it. I closed my eyes and woke up four years earlier.” Realisation dawned on Tony. “Is that why you punched Rogers? It’s all in the past now, I’m alright.”

Stephen received no comfort from those words. Learning the truth hadn’t shed any weight from his shoulders, it’d piled more on. He covered his eyes with his hands. “I tried to protect you.”

Tony wrapped Stephen in a tight embrace. “I know. You did a great job.”

“I tried. It wasn’t enough,” Stephen hid his face in the crook of Tony’s neck. Tony wanted to pull back and check if Stephen was alright, but the stubborn man wouldn’t let Tony see his face.

“It’s okay. I’m here. You’re alright.” Tony drew Stephen closer. A damp patch formed on his shoulder. Stephen remained silent, but as Tony muttered soft reassurances into his ear he let out a broken sob. The lump in Tony’s chest emanated a dull ache through his body. Moisture gathered in his own eyes too, but Tony needed to be strong for Stephen. He blinked away the wetness and concentrated on the blissful weight inside his arms.

It was a close call this time, and if they remained Avengers then they’d always be one close call away from losing each other forever. There was no way to solve it. Earth needed her defenders. They could only keep an eye on each other and grow stronger together, so when the next threat arrived, they’d be ready.

“I’m sorry,” Stephen said after he’d calmed.

“About what?” Tony leaned back with a bit of force. He rubbed the knot between Stephen’s brows
and tried to smooth it out.

“Everything. About how I was an asshole before I went to Kamar-Taj, how I kept my training from you, how I didn’t do more to—” Stephen was silenced by a finger on his lips.

“I’m going to stop you right there before you spill more nonsense. You’ve done more for me than I could’ve ever asked for. No one’s allowed to bad-mouth Stephen Strange, not even Stephen Strange.”

A small chuckle escaped Stephen. He bit his lips and nodded. “Alright.”

“Let’s go inside.” Tony tugged the front of Stephen’s shirt. Stephen wiped his eyes dry with his sleeve. His nose was stuffy. He snuffled loudly. Upon hearing the noise, Stephen looked disgusted with himself. “You need to rest,” Tony said.

“It’s hardly noon.” Stephen glanced at his wrist only to find it bare. Friday was still in the workshop. Tony made a mental note to fix her ASAP. The pair made their way back. Though they had parted from the hug, their hands remained linked in unspoken understanding.

“I don’t know about you, but I can lie in bed for the rest of the week,” Tony said.

Stephen considered Tony’s suggestion. “Have you a mind for lunch?”

“Food in bed’s good too. What are you thinking?”

“Pasta, maybe linguine in Amatriciana.”

“De-li-ci-ous.” Tony dragged out each syllable and made an ‘okay’ symbol with his free hand.

Stephen smiled. His eyes were red, but the air of hopelessness was gone. “It’s stupid… I lost track of time in the Dark Dimension. There was a moment where all I could think about was the meal I never made you.”

“Uh-huh, and who’s fault was that? ‘It won’t be long,’ he said. ‘I’ll be back before lunch,’ he said—which reminds me, Stephanie, I’m still mad at you. You’ve got nothing going for you in the past day, so I’ll just go ahead and name my terms. Kitchen duty, for a month. Meanwhile, you are grounded until I say so,” Tony babbled on until Stephen paused their journey to turn Tony around. He planted a kiss on Tony’s forehead.

“Anything you wish.” Stephen laughed at Tony’s stunned expression.

“Hey!” Tony’s cheeks burned with embarrassment. He covered the spot Stephen had kissed and dragged him inside. They made pasta from scratch, or more like Stephen made pasta from scratch and Tony hindered the progress by sneaking bites of food before it was ready. They used what was in the fridge. With the help of a food processor, Stephen could make pasta from anything. It was one of his many uncanny talents.

Tony ate three helpings plus dessert. By the time he finished, he had to lie down on the carpet belly up. Stephen suggested they go for a walk to help Tony digest. The pair visited Central Park. Learning from past mistakes, this time Stephen disguised them with a magical barrier. They talked. Tony spoke about his past life and Stephen about what he’d seen in the future, including how he’d seen it.

“We have to get rid of it.” Tony thought about the Eye he’d piled into a heap with the rest of Stephen’s robes.
“The Infinity Stones are tied to different aspects of the universe. They are forged from the remnants of six singularities that existed before creation itself. They are impossible to destroy,” Stephen said.

“I’m guessing hacking it apart with a chisel is out of the question.”

“Unfortunately.”

Tony considered the information. “Asgard has Mind and Space, Time is on Earth, Reality will arrive due to the Convergence. You said Xandar had Power, which leaves us with…”

“Soul.”

Tony shuddered at the notion of something as nonsensical and as unquantifiable as soul; a cluster of energy which dwells inside a being’s physical form, representing their true essence. “Any idea where it is?”

“None. Its location is not recorded in any text preserved on Earth. The best we can do is keep looking.”

“We should get your necklace off-world, as far away from Earth as possible.”

“When I became a Master of Kamar-Taj, I swore an oath to defend the natural law,” Stephen said hesitantly. “In a bizarre sense, I’ve broken that oath to stay true to it, but I cannot give up the Eye of Agamotto.”

Tony stopped walking. “That will put you at the heart of the attack. I know you want to do what’s right, but we need to look at this from a strategic point of view.”

“Which would be to keep the stone on Earth.” Stephen looked into Tony’s eyes with painful honesty. “My oath as a Master aside, we have no galactic allies other than Asgard. They’ve already got two Infinity Stones. Where would we send the Eye to? In the future I saw, Thanos arrived on Earth with four stones. He was only missing Time and Mind. To do that, he’d have gone through Xandar, a planet more technologically advanced than ours, and Asgard, a literal planet of gods.”

Tony broke away from the conversation. He came to a halt before the lake, with Stephen hot on his tail. “No planet, no civilisation, no crevice is secure. The way I see it, keeping the Time Stone on Earth will give us one critical advantage.”

“He’ll come to us,” Tony muttered.

“Exactly.” The pair took in the view before them. Towers from Fifth Avenue framed the lush woodland. A flock of ducks paddled across the distance. The lake rippled under a gentle breeze. It was mundane, but serene.

“How long do we have?”

“Six years.”

“At least that’s longer than anything I’ve had to work with,” Tony huffed. The pair exchanged looks, and at last, Tony nodded. However reluctantly, he agreed with Stephen. The advantage of home turf was too precious to throw away. If they had to face Thanos regardless, they might as well do it on their own terms.

Six years, 2190 days, 52,560 hours, counting down from now.

“By the way, did you find out how I came back?” Tony asked. “It’s been bugging me since the
beginning, but I can’t figure it out. It’s as if I blinked and my reality changed.”

“I…sent you back, along with Vision,” Stephen said.

“You and Vision?”

“With the combined might of the Time Stone and the Mind Stone. My counterpart saw millions of futures, you were their only chance. He gave his life to send you back.”

“But that’s—I don’t know what I’m doing, well, not anymore.”

“Maybe foresight isn’t the key.” Stephen turned to Tony. “It’s incentive, the driving force behind change and innovation, the courage to make the hard choices when no one else is willing or able. After you were gone the world stilled. The Avengers disbanded. No one did a thing to fend off the coming invasion. They ignored all the warning signs until it was too late. You are more important than you think.”

“I never wanted any of you to die for me.” Tony feared the sacrifice of his loved ones above all else. The possibility had plagued him since he first held the sceptre in his grasp. It was his single worst nightmare.

“I know, but sometimes, there is no other way.” Stephen lowered his gaze. “I can’t imagine the burden you’ve carried for all these years. To be the only one who knows, to fight alone—”

“But I’m not alone. I have you.”

“A fat lot of good that did you.”

“Hey, no bad-mouthing Stephen Strange.” Tony nudged his nose against Stephen’s in an Eskimo kiss. “You are one of the only people who’s got my back.”

“Considering your options, I’m not sure if that’s a compliment.”

“You are a ginormous wet blanket.” Tony rolled his eyes. “I suppose only one of us can be the fun one, which brings me to my next point.” Tony took a step back and cleared his throat ceremoniously. He preened a little and removed an invisible crown from his head. Tony placed the crown on Stephen then adjusted it a few times for good measure. “Congrats, doc. I’m passing on the mantle. You are officially the new king of foresight. Oh, mighty prophet, will you grace us with your all-knowing presence?”

Stephen snickered at Tony’s antics. “What’s your return policy?”

“No take backs, you gotta own it.” Tony beckoned for Stephen to resume their walk.

“Tony,” Stephen called as they returned to the asphalt path. The sun was bright, and the air was warm. Spring had chased away the chills of winter. It thawed the frozen earth and birthed new life.

“Yeah?” Tony replied. Stephen’s eyes were blue like the sky above him.

“I love you.”

The words were simple. Stephen had said variations of them before, buoyant and teasing, but this was different. This time it wasn’t a statement, it was a promise. Pedestrians passed them by, redirected by Stephen’s spell. They’d brushed past each other in their turbid old world but found each other here.
The swell in Tony’s chest was impossible to contain, so instead of suppressing it, Tony followed his heart. He leaned forward and pressed his lips against Stephen’s.

“I love you too.”

Chapter End Notes

Anew is coming to an end. There will be one more chapter and an epilogue to wrap things up. The sequel will be posted as a separate fic, but I'll make sure to link it together with this one. I'd like to say another huge thank you to all my readers. Looking back, Tony and Stephen have come such a long way.
The vote took place on a Monday evening. Despite the awkward timeslot, many still gathered outside the conference centre to support their favourite hero.

Tony issued two packages that morning. One was sent anonymously to agencies around the world. It documented Project Insight and featured a comprehensive list of those affiliated with the World Security Council. Tony would give the situation some time to brew. The second had been released on behalf of Stark Industries. It showed a compilation of Kilian’s crimes. Combined with Mark Forty-seven’s feed from the night of the incident, Tony had sufficient evidence to support that he had acted out of necessity.

The reveal hadn’t dented Iron Man’s popularity. Outside the floor-to-ceiling windows, a sea of red and gold overwhelmed the other colours. “You are popular with the kids,” Bucky said as he waved to a mini-Howling Commando. The girl on the other side of the glass had a Bucky bear under her arm. She squealed when her hero noticed her. Tony smiled and waved to a mini-Iron Man too. “What’s his problem?” Bucky snuck a peek at Stephen, who had been radiating an aura of thinly-veiled hostility. Stephen never took his eyes off Tony, even as he was interacting with his fans.

“You sure you’re up to this?” Tony asked Bucky. He had released the truth behind Stark Industries’ merge with A.I.M. So far, the majority had reacted positively, but it was only a matter of time before his enemies struck back with far-fetched conspiracy theories. Tony was ready for them. He had the moral high-ground, but in Bucky’s case, it was much more complicated.

The Winter Soldier had been in operation for nearly seventy years. His hit-list covered some of the most high-profiled assassinations of the twenty-first century. He was responsible for the deaths of President John F. Kennedy, Senator Harry Baxtor, and French Minister of Defence Jacques Dupuy,
just to name a few. Not to mention Howard and Maria Stark, whose deaths haunted Tony till this very day.

The public didn’t have a personal connection with Bucky, and mind control was a sketchy explanation on the best of days. To prove himself, Bucky would have to come clean with everything he’d done under Hydra’s influence, provide evidence when sometimes there was none, endure public ridicule, and undergo strenuous physical and psychological evaluations to prove he was no longer a menace to society. The process might take months, if not years to complete. In the meantime, Bucky would lose the freedom he’d fought so hard to win.

“I want to put the past behind me, once and for all.” Tony nodded at Bucky’s words. Sometimes there was no right and wrong. The best they could do was to make a decision and live by it.

The group took their respective seats at the table, with Thor and Loki in absentia. The vote was straightforward. A host recapitulated the differences between the consultant and the official member status. Steve and Bucky forfeited their right to vote by choosing to retain their consultant status. Natasha and Clint’s request to be made an official member was rejected by popular vote. When the time came to decide their leader, Stephen, Bruce, and Rhodey voted unanimously for Tony.

Tony saw the support rate of one hundred percent behind his name. His eyes watered. He pinched himself and the sharp pain cleared the mushy feeling from his chest. He was thankful for the sunglasses he wore. Iron Man didn’t cry; he was a symbol of authority.

Tony marched onto the podium. He took in the crowd before him and adjusted his microphone. He’d been planning towards this moment for so long, now that it had finally arrived, he wasn’t sure what to say anymore. Part of him hadn’t expected to come this far. Tony turned to his carefully curated team. One by one, they nodded at their newly minted leader. Stephen smiled proudly when he met Tony’s eyes. Tony winked at his second-in-command. He took out the cue cards from his pocket and cleared his throat.

“The Avengers is an organisation of extraordinary individuals. Some of us are enhanced supernaturally, others are just a man in a can, but all of us have one purpose in mind: to protect world stability from inner or extra-terrestrial threats. The Avengers is the first organisation of its kind anywhere in the world. Due to its unique nature, we will remain as an independent organisation, but that does not mean we will operate without oversight. A document named The Avengers Official Code of Conduct has been drafted and submitted to the United Nations for approval. We will obey the rules and guidelines established in this document. The AOCC will undergo as many future amendments as necessary to ensure that both parties are satisfied with the results.”

“The Avengers is an organisation that is accountable for their actions. We strive to keep collateral damage to a minimum. With the exclusion of time-sensitive threats or threats with catastrophic consequences, we will respect the sovereignty of nations and their borders. We will not intervene in conflicts unless we are called for, and we will not cross any borders unless we are permitted to.”

Tony paused. The cue cards his assistant gave him had moved on to thank the government officials, but there was one more thing he wanted to address. All eyes were on him. Tony recalled the first time he’d announced to the world that he was Iron Man. That had been a decade ago.

Tony smiled to himself. If he’d improvised that session, he could improvise this. He picked a camera and looked into the lens as if he was directly addressing the person on the other side.

“We are not alone in this universe. We never have been. Earth is safe, for now, but how long will it be until another alien army comes charging through a hole in space? Extraordinary circumstances call for extraordinary solutions. To all the super-powered individuals who have not yet revealed
themselves, I hereby extend an open invitation to all of you. We know you are out there. Come and join the Avengers. No one should have to fight alone. United, we are strong enough to overcome any difficulties the future can throw at us. We need to stand together, because when the time comes, Earth will need every last one of us.”

----------

Stephen waved to the screaming fans as he left the conference room. The double doors closed behind them and sealed away the ruckus. The Avengers stood in the hallway, unsure of where to go next. Tony joined them after he’d bid a small army of politicians farewell. “S.I. owns some land upstate. I’ve remodelled it into the new Avengers facility. It’ll mostly store equipment for now, but as we expand, so will the compound. You’re all welcome to crash there while you’re in town.” Tony broke the silence.

“What about your tower?” Bruce asked.

“Stephen will build a fancy portal to link the two. I’ll pop down to make upgrades and talk shop, but otherwise, the tower is home. I’ve learned to keep work and life separate,” Tony said. Stephen nodded in approval, which earned him another cheeky wink. “What are everyone’s plans? I know you’re staying for Extremis,” Tony hooked an arm around Bruce’s shoulder, “and Rhodey’s going back to the Air Force.”

“Steve and I will look into that lead you found,” Barnes said.

“Zola.” Tony nodded. “Won’t you be on house arrest?”

“I’m sure S.H.I.E.L.D. will be happy to have me as an asset where they can,” Barnes scoffed.

Tony looked at Barton and Romanov. “We will be returning to S.H.I.E.L.D.,” Barton said.

“Off to super-secret spy stuff. I guess this is it then.” Tony extended a hand, which the archer shook. He turned to Romanov and offered the same. “I’ll see you two around.”

“Call us if you need us,” Romanov said. If Stephen’s gaze had magical properties, the two spies would’ve simultaneously combusted. They left without looking back, followed by Rhodes, Barnes, and Rogers.

“Rogers, if I may have a word,” Stephen called. Tony snapped around at Stephen’s request. Rogers made his way back, closely followed by Barnes. Considering how their last meeting had ended, Rogers was on guard.

_He damn well should be._

“We’ve talked about this,” Tony said.

“I will do him no harm,” Stephen said.

“Promise?”
“I promise.” Stephen exchanged looks with Tony. Tony pursed his lips and lowered his gaze. He gave Stephen a small nod. On his way out, he tapped Barnes on the shoulder. Barnes looked at Rogers, who nodded in return. Barnes left with Tony and Bruce, leaving Stephen and Rogers alone in the hallway.

Stephen drew in a deep breath. He gestured for Rogers to follow him. They entered an empty meeting room, where they wouldn’t be disturbed. Stephen locked the door behind him. Rogers eyed Stephen warily. Stephen did not bother with empty reassurances. He turned on the TV. It happened to be the news channel.

“We are not alone in this universe. We never have been... I hereby extend an open invitation to all of you... Come and join the Avengers....” Tony’s speech was playing. Stephen turned up the volume. He needed some background noise for the next bit.

“Doctor, why are we here?” Rogers asked over the sound of Tony’s voice.

There were two types of anger: hot and cold. Hot anger was impulsive, passionate, emotions fuelled the individual. Cold anger was rational, dispassionate, and the individual fuelled their emotions. What differentiated them was control. Stephen had punched Rogers in a flurry of white, hot rage. It blinded him, and he’d chosen the most tactless form of attack. Now that control had returned to him, he found with satisfaction that he’d repeat his actions all over again, but this time, he wouldn’t leave it at a single punch. He’d open a portal beneath Rogers’ feet, drop him into the depth of Siberia, and leave him there. Perhaps the hypothermia would remind Rogers of the first time he went under ice, but this time, no one would find him. Maybe he’d survive, maybe he wouldn’t; Stephen didn’t care. He wanted Rogers to feel his body slowly shut down. He wanted Rogers to experience what it’s like to die on foreign land, completely, and utterly alone.

“Doctor?” Rogers repeated. His stance shifted. He dropped his centre of gravity and angled his hand towards his replica shield. Stephen approached him one step at a time. Rogers stood his ground.

“Human life is a puzzle,” Stephen began. Rogers frowned at the seemingly irrelevant topic. “Only there is no correct solution. We are given a pile of pieces, and we make of it what we will. With the discovery of new pieces, the meaning of the puzzle changes. So, consider this my gift to you.”

Stephen pushed Rogers back. Despite their proximity, the super soldier’s reflexes blocked Stephen’s hand, but it hadn’t been Stephen’s intention to strike. Rogers’ astral projection was displaced from his physical body. His pupils constricted to a pinpoint as his consciousness fell through the cracks of the multi-verse. Stephen showed him two events. Tony’s death in Siberia, and the destruction of half the universe.

Captain America’s eyes were described to be as blue as a cloudless sky, but up-close, Stephen could see there was a speck of green mixed in. Stephen pulled him back to reality. The residual force of travelling through the multi-verse slammed Rogers to the floor. “What was that?” Rogers picked himself up and held his bare hands before him. He opened and closed them. A second ago he had been clutching something.

Stephen wondered if this was what The Ancient One had seen in him. Foolishness, denial, certainty in that he was right when he was just a man stumbling through the world with his eyes closed. He hadn’t known anything then, and he knew so little now, “Fourteen million six hundred and five possibilities. You managed to ruin the one chance half the universe had at survival.”

“Was that something I’m about to do?” Rogers asked. “Does Tony know, is that why he’s been...”

“It must be wonderful, to feel so righteous, to have all the answers.” Was it better to know an incomplete truth or not having known at all? Stephen would’ve preferred the later.
“Why did you show me this?”

“Not for your benefit, obviously. I want you to know what happened, so you’ll keep your distance. I’ve instructed Jarvis to revoke your clearance to the tower.” On the TV, the news anchors were discussing the success rate of the Avengers’ open recruitment. They debated over the credibility of the AOCC and the necessity of the Avengers’ expansion. “I understand why you did it,” Stephen said after a long pause.

Rogers’ breathing had calmed. He looked up with disbelief. “If this is what you are worried about, doctor, I give you my word. I’d never hurt him. Tony and I may have our differences, but we—”

“I saw them bury him with my own eyes.” Stephen closed the distance between them again and lowered his voice to a whisper. “I don’t care what you promise. I understand why you did it because know this: if it came down to you, or Barnes, or Tony, I won’t hesitate.” Stephen stepped back. He slipped on his sling ring. “Time will tell if you are friend or foe, but until then…” He conjured a portal back to the penthouse.

“Stay out of our lives.”

Tony would be lying if he said he wasn’t worried about the outcome of the talk, but Stephen was a man of his word, therefore instead of loitering in the lobby, Tony bid Barnes farewell and drove back to Stark Tower with Bruce. He grabbed Stephen’s watch, greeted Maya, and left for the lab he had used to synthesize Starkium.

Call him spoiled, but unless it was for collaboration, Tony preferred having the lab all to himself. Irrelevant chatter distracted him. He also had a habit of jumping across projects when the mood suited him. When Tony was alone he didn’t have to filter his conversation with Jarvis. The workflow was smoother, and his brain got to enjoy a much-needed rest.

Tony parked in the lab’s underground garage. Jarvis had powered on the facility. The downside to having a secret lab was that no one maintained it. After months of disuse, a thick layer of dust had settled on the workbenches. Tony spent an hour airing out the facility and dusting it down. It was strangely therapeutic. As he had reduced the contents of his plate to a manageable amount, he could afford to spend time on mundane tasks like cleaning. Tony poured himself a cup of instant coffee. The beans in the grinder had gone stale, but instant coffee was better than nothing. He skimmed through his archive and updated the section on Infinity Stones. Satisfied that nothing was amiss, Tony laid Stephen’s watch out on the table.

The tempered glass face had been shattered, and the watch’s inner mechanisms were so impaired, it could no longer form a gauntlet. Friday was unresponsive. The signal transmitter was the only working component. Tony repaired bits where he could and replaced bits that were beyond salvageable. He contemplated giving Stephen a new watch, but Stephen was sentimental much like Tony himself. Stephen would’ve preferred to have his old watch back.

With a bit of tinkering, the watch was restored. Tony rebooted Friday. “Fri?” Tony asked when her
lively voice didn’t greet him like she used to.

“Good evening, boss. It’s good to see you again,” Friday said.

“Had me worried for a second there.” Tony gave her a pat on the straps. He swivelled to face the monitor and checked the statistics. “Something wrong with your transmitter? You spammed Jarvis a while back.”

“I’ve filed a distress signal for every hostile encounter, boss.”

“Every?” Tony turned back. “There must’ve been hundreds.”

“Nine-hundred and ninety-nine to be exact, Sir,” Jarvis added.

Tony’s heart sank. “Show me the footages.” Since their miscommunication in the Joint Dark Energy Mission Facility, they had authorised each other to overwrite their privacy settings during an emergency. For rescue purposes, Friday recorded all life-threatening situations. Tony scanned through the first dozen video clips featuring Kaecilius and the zealots. The next was taken in a dark setting. Tony’s eyes widened at the sight of the humanoid cluster of energy. He flinched when Stephen was impaled by a space shard.

Tony’s heart-rate picked up. He returned to the main directory. There were pages after pages of unopened folders. He scrolled through the records and played them at random. Each showed Stephen dying a different, but equally horrifying death. After the nine-hundred and ninety-ninth attempt, Dormammu caved. He vowed to never return to Earth and expelled Stephen from his domain.

Tony slammed his fist into the monitor. The screen sailed across the room and shattered against the far wall. Stephen had told him what happened, but he hadn’t grasped the severity of the situation until now. Tony threw his mug at the wall too. When that did nothing to calm his mind he trashed everything in sight.

Tony wasn’t sure what he was mad about. Was it Dormammu for daring to hurt Stephen? Was it Stephen for his ludicrous, half-baked plan? Or was it himself, for being powerless to protect his loved ones? He’d become Iron Man to defend the defenceless, but since he returned from Afghanistan, Happy had been hospitalised, Pepper nearly fell to her death, and Rhodey had lost the use of his legs. They were the ones that mattered the most to him. It had been his fault they were in danger, and yet, he protected none of them.

Tony dug out a Stark pad from under the wreckage. He brought up the idea he had been brewing since the media-coined Avengers Civil War. It would require him to re-insert the arc reactor, but instead of powering his heart, the reactor would contain an armour made of nanotechnology.

Tony would never be caught off guard again.
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

I apologise for spamming you guys this morning. I tried to make the sequel page work...
It's been temperamental.

Beta'ed by:
Missaness

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

On the sunny morning of July 15th, 2012, Bruce and Maya made a breakthrough.

Tony was pulled from his board meeting and Stephen from the New York Sanctum. They met Bruce and Maya in the Stark Tower labs. The four of them formed a circle around a potted fern. With unsuppressed glee, Maya snipped a stalk from the lush plant. The wound burned red. Tony watched in awe as a long and slender stem materialised from the embers. Thin flakes of ash fanned out to either side and formed the leaves. The dark substance changed in colour, mimicking the hues around it like a chameleon. Maya held the stalk she’d removed beside the regenerated one. The two were identical.

“This thing isn’t going to explode in my face like last time, is it?” Tony took a step back.

“This is the part we removed twelve hours ago.” Bruce retrieved a smaller piece of the plant. It had shrivelled overnight. “We tested the same formula on different species.” Bruce marched to a row of plants contained in separate glass domes. “None of them reacted violently. We had to dilute the formula to keep it safe. The regenerative effect will wear off after a few months, but guys…I think we’ve got it.”

Tempted with such unprecedented scientific breakthrough, the group worked late into the evening. With the formula established, translating it into serum form was a breeze. Maya squealed in delight as she held a sample of the completed serum in her hands. She shook it. The orange liquid sloshed in its container, glowing amber as it was disturbed, but dimmed after the surface had calmed. They named it the Extremis Super Serum. Maya proposed to run another round of tests. While Bruce and Maya made their way to the blast chamber, Stephen quietly slipped out of the lab.

Tony found him in the lounge. Stephen was sitting on the couch and had his head between his hands. He looked deep in thought. Tony walked over. He took one of Stephen’s hands and studied the scars. “Jarvis ran the formula through some calculations and found no flaws. With luck, the serum will be ready by the end of the month. We should sit on it, just to be safe. Yeah-yeah, I know that’s not what I did two years ago, but desperate times, desperate measures. We are not in a hurry now.”

Stephen remained oddly silent. Tony furrowed his brows. Before he could ask any questions, Stephen straightened and looked Tony in the eyes. “I’m not going to use the serum,” Stephen said.

Tony opened and closed his mouth. “I don’t understand,” Tony finally said. He held up the sample of the serum. “Look at this. It’s stable now. Are you seriously going to say no to getting your hands back?”
“When The Ancient One passed, she cleared up a lot of mysteries, including how the patient I rejected was able to walk again with a broken spine. My magic is strong enough to heal any wound. I can fix my hands, but at what cost? The use of magic has a price. The loss of my hands granted me mastery over another force. I must respect that balance to keep my power.”

Tony felt the tremor coming from the hand that was clutching his own. “But you can go back to being a surgeon. You can have your old life back.”

“The world needs Master Strange more than it needs Dr. Strange.” Stephen took in the sadness in Tony’s eyes and chided, “Oh, stop it. It’s not because of you. This is my decision to make. I chose to remain as a sorcerer even when I wasn’t an Avenger, in a universe where I hadn’t met you.”

“This is the reason you left for Nepal.” Tony sighed and slid down the couch. He rested his head on Stephen’s lap and propped his feet on the armrest.

“I know, but circumstances change; priorities change.” Stephen massaged Tony’s head, earning him a hum of approval, “Though I won’t say no to that super soldier formula. I’m over feeling drained after every battle.” Tony captured the hand that was tangled in his hair and kissed it.

“That baby’s ready whenever you are, Stephanie.”

----------

Stephen became Master of the New York Sanctum. Together with Wong, Sol Rama, and Minoru, the Masters of Kamar-Taj rebuilt the London Sanctum. Without a Sorcerer Supreme, Earth was vulnerable against threats from other dimensions. The Masters stood vigilant. They knew their hard-won peace would not last.

Tony took official command of the Avengers. The compound grew. Tony kept watch over the potential recruits but maintained his distance as he didn’t want to alter their course of flight.

Rhodey was having a great time in the Air Force. His work as the exclusive liaison between the Avengers and the United States Armed Forces earned him a much-deserved promotion. He slowly took control over the Iron Legion, much to General Ross’ chagrin.

Pepper flourished in her role as the CEO of Stark Industries. She took advantage of the publicity generated by the voting results and launched the new generation of Stark tech. She was well on her way to making Tony a trillionaire. Nowadays, Happy drove Pepper wherever she went. The two were getting closer. Tony was glad for them. He told Happy to go for it and that he deserved to be Happy. It earned him a ginormous eye roll.

In the wake of the World Security Council’s dissolution, S.H.I.E.L.D. went deep underground. Tony never heard from Clint or Natasha again. He still had the means to contact them, but he had no desires to.

Steve and Bucky busted Zola’s bunker. They provided Tony with a copy of the server in exchange for the lead. Bucky had no interest in joining S.H.I.E.L.D., but he could use an excuse to stay mobile.
and disable more Hydra facilities. He and Steve formed their own anti-Hydra co-op. They received regular updates from S.H.I.E.L.D. and left a trail of explosions in their wake.

Thor made regular visits to Earth. Sometimes, he’d bring Loki too. Thanks to his efforts against the Chitauri, Loki’s sentence had been shortened to a fraction of its original length. He could spend time outside of his cell under Thor’s supervision. Loki tried to hide it, but he was impressed by Stephen’s progress. The two would spar in the Mirror Dimension while Thor kept Tony company.

Thor told Tony the All-Father had taken his warning to heart. On the surface it appeared as if nothing had changed, but deep down, Asgard was preparing for the Dark Elves in secret. With the help of Tony, Stephen, Jane, Darcy, and Selvig, the Asgardians ended the Convergence and seized the Aether from Malekith. Thor took the Reality Stone back to Asgard with the promise of finding a safe hiding place.

Having received a handsome bonus for her work on Extremis, Maya started her own company. She was determined to take Extremis to the next level. With the formula stable, she could work towards a wider distribution. Maya patented the formula under many names. Herself, Bruce, Tony, and Stephen were the first that came to mind, but out of sentiment, she included Aldrich Killian too. She had a long and arduous road ahead of her. In ten or twenty years, the Extremis Super Serum could be made available to the public.

Bruce returned to travelling the world. He stayed under the radar but had given Tony his number so he could always be contacted. Last time Tony checked, he was somewhere in Thailand. Like all scientists who rarely saw the sun, Bruce had fallen victim to terrible tan lines. He tried to cover them up with an oversized Hawaiian shirt. He sent Tony a selfie of him lying on the beach and drinking from a coconut, which reminded Tony that he had a long over-due holiday with Stephen too. The pair left for Venice the following evening.

As Tony sipped wine with Stephen on a gondola ride, Justin Hammer rang out of the blue. Tony’s knee-jerk assumption had been that there was something wrong with the Iron Legion, but as it turned out, Hammer had rung to apologise. He confessed that he never meant to hurt anyone, and that he was thankful for Tony who had given him a second chance. He’d reflected on his actions. Hammer admitted that he never hated Tony. All the petty one-upmanship had been backward attempts to win Tony’s approval. He envied Tony’s effortless genius, but with all that had happened, he was at peace with himself now. Hammer introduced his boyfriend to Tony and Stephen. They met during community service. The four of them had a pleasant conversation. Hammer’s boyfriend even asked for Tony’s autograph, much to Hammer’s embarrassment.

Tony and Stephen spent a full week in Italy. They toured the country, binged on gelato, and collected ancient pasta recipes. The pair would’ve stayed longer, but they had both been twiddling their thumbs out of boredom. Stephen declared the impromptu end of their vacation after he caught Tony hiding in the bathroom, working on his Stark pad. They returned to New York refreshed and ready to rock ‘n’ roll.

Tony began his second chance at life alone and afraid. He calculated his every move. Behind every change he made to the timeline were weeks spent at the drawing board. Tony worried over if he could lead Earth down the right path, the best path, but there was no such thing as certainty in a universe full of mysteries; options were all they had. In time, Tony had learned to embrace uncertainty. Time travelling was a form of divergence. It was the manifestation of chance, and chance was what had given him the opportunity to begin anew.

Tony was no longer afraid. He had a team behind him, and they would catch him the next time he fell.
Whatever challenges the future could throw at them, he and the Avengers would face it together.

Anew.

-Fin-

Tony and Stephen will return.

Chapter End Notes

Anew is officially complete! It felt surreal when I typed that -Fin- at the end. Tony has come such a long way from leaning against that fireplace in Malibu, and Stephen from that gala where he met Tony for the first time. I am so proud of them both.

For the time being, their stories have come to an end, but there will be new challenges ahead of them. To be honest, I'm not ready to let this universe go yet. I've already drafted the outline for the sequel, and you can find that here: Renew.

With the arrival of Thanos, the stakes will be higher than ever before!

I'd like to thank my lovely betas for all their hard work:

Lavanyalabelle
HoodedIronLady
Missaness
Zinnv

Without them this fic would not be possible.

Finally, to all my readers both old and new: thank you for staying with me on this amazing journey. You guys are the true heroes of this fic. I am so lucky to have each and every single one of you. I hope you've had fun reading this fic, as writing it has brought me endless joy. ;D

Tumblr: ivivao3.tumblr.com
Works inspired by this one: Love is Strange for Iron Hearts by Kiera_Alloys

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!