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Tintype
by EllOnWheels

Summary

Tony meets Stephen Strange in the aftermath of Civil War, and finds common ground with
the sorcerer. Stephen, as is his way, ends up finding trouble, and Wong finds this all rather tedious.

Then Tony decides to put himself in charge and save the world.

Notes

I've wanted to write post Civil War fic since back when I saw the trailer for the first time. So far I have only done that once. So here's another. The Infinity War trailer has gotten me thinking, and I have a pet theory that while I am sure won't be used, I wanted to write about it anyway.

Note that this story is in no way related to my other series. In this story, Civil War happened, as we saw it unfold. Also, despite the tags, Ragnarok has happened as well, but I haven't seen it yet (I've read summaries though. I'm an adult with a job, and I live in a rural area, so sometimes I can't make it to the movie theatre), so any mistakes in that area are mine. Just roll with it. It's fic after all.

This is the first thing I've wanted to write in months, despite my efforts to plough ahead with my other works. So I am seeing this more as a snapshot, and not the usual in-depth examination I offer. Not sure how this will go, but I need to get something out there, ya know?
Chapter 1

Tony should have known something was up when Strange started taking an interest. Well, an interest beyond the initial physical and intellectual attraction. But by the time they got to that point, Tony was most of the way to being in love, and actually trusted the sorcerer to do right by him. Upon meeting Strange formally, the man had squinted at Tony, assessing him. Tony wasn’t put off by it. He’d been on the receiving end of those looks his entire life.

Stephen Strange’s gaze though, ended differently than most. He favoured Tony with the barest of smiles. Once upon a time, Tony would have clung to that crumb of approval, craved it, and gone to extraordinary lengths to keep it.

But ever since Siberia, his Give-A-Damn was broken, with rare exceptions (Peter. Rhody, oh god, Rhody). So he returned the small smile to Strange, and let it be genuine. Past Tony would have leered and given Stephen a flirtatious wink, or given out a yacht or something to maintain that approval. Current Tony would roll with the punches, no matter if Strange ended up liking him or not.

Tony had spent hours talking about boundaries and healthy relationships with his therapist. Which was fine. Constructive, even. The Accords had rightfully demanded he deal with his PTSD, but he’d been allowed to choose his own shrink, and that was fine with him. It seemed to be working this time too, as things were getting through his thick skull here and there. He didn’t have to offer sex or extravagant gifts in order to maintain a friendship. He simply had to be a friend. Of course these were simple things that Rhody, Pepper, and Happy had been trying to tell him for years. But he was finally ready to do some heavy thinking on the nature of friends and relationships, all thanks to Cap’s masterclass of how to take advantage of someone’s good faith.

So he let himself casually offer to buy Strange a drink after their meeting regarding auxiliary membership to the Avengers on an on-call basis. Because he needed allies, and on the remote chance that the sorcerer might be intrigued with Tony as well. To Tony’s surprise, Stephen had given him that curious, subtle smile again, and accepted. Which was ridiculous, because Tony was pretty sure that neither of them had the time to be doing something so frivolous, but he could hardly retract the offer.

Then they immediately hit the first snag on the road to being friends. Typical of Tony, if he was being honest with himself about it.

In a way it was a benefit that issues arose so quickly around the idea of going out. Because it confronted taboos they both held due to trauma. Cars were a touchy subject with Strange, especially the sleek sports car that Tony had no right to be driving around with winter about to set in at any moment. Tony then had to explain he had the same touchiness when it came to portals, thanks to the Chitauri Invasion. They were at an impasse when Wong rolled his eyes, and told them in an annoyed tone that there were several bars within walking distance of the Sanctum Sanctorum. He then also barked at them to get out into the sunshine for a minute or two for a change.

“It’s a bad idea to argue with him,” Stephen said sheepishly.

“Noted,” Tony replied and gave Wong a quick salute. “FRIDAY, find us a purveyor of adult beverages that isn’t entirely a dive.”

“On it, boss,” she said merrily, and set up a map of the neighbourhood on the display of Tony’s
glasses.

The sun was indeed nice, but the cold sucked, and Stephen agreed with Tony on both points.

Once settled, and with the barmaid's full attention thanks to Tony's black AmEx, they quickly faded from small talk. The weather didn't interest either of them. Neither of them gave a fuck about sports. They instinctively avoided politics and the headlines. The cold weather had permitted Stephen to leave his gloves on, and not look terribly out of place in the pub. So Tony was surprised when his companion leaned forward, eyes on Tony's chest, and said, "I'll show you mine if you show me yours," in a conspiratorial voice.

Surprised laughter bubbled up from Tony, and in the shared grin that followed, taboo vanished. It was okay to talk about the elephants stomping around the room, whichever one happened to be trumpeting the loudest at that moment. And it was mutually decided by both of them, and not Tony forcing his problems on unwilling ears. His therapist would be so proud.

"Okay, but not here. I don't need that showing up on fucking Tumblr," Tony said.

"I'm sure the slashfic plot bunnies are breeding as we speak," Stephen said, and took a sip of his drink.

"How the hell does a Sorcerer Supreme know about Tumblr?" Tony asked.

"Kamar-Taj has Wifi, Tony. We're not savages," Stephen said, parroting his early days there. Tony smiled wide at him, amused. Stephen thought he looked better and much younger when he smiled, but he kept that to himself for now. "All right, but I'm holding you to that," Stephen warned. "Tell me of the advantages of the Accords again."

"Do I have to?" Tony didn't whine, but he did display his want to avoid business for the moment.

"Well then, I admit I am at a loss. I don't do small talk very well. I was once a very smart doctor type. Bedside manner of a brick though," Stephen said.

"You seem personable enough," Tony said.

"I've changed a lot since seeking out Kamar-Taj."

"Potts' dad went on a Buddhist kick once," Tony said.

"I'm no Buddhist," Stephen replied.

"Gotta admit it looks similar on the surface."

"Given that Kamar-Taj isn't a feudal system where a very few live off of the efforts of the many, in exchange for the those few dictating the spiritual worth of the rest, I'd say the surface is where the similarities end," Strange said.

"Tell me about Kamar-Taj then, if Wong won't get you in trouble for it."

"You'd love the library," Stephen said after a moment's contemplation.

"Magic gives me the creeps," Tony replied.

"What you don't yet understand gives you the creeps," Stephen said.

"There's a difference?" Tony asked. He was looking over his glasses at Stephen with a speculative
look on his face.

"I suppose not... Would you understand though, if you could?" Stephen brushed his gloved fingers over Tony's. His lack of range of motion wasn't clumsy... Just limited. Tony was intrigued by that, and by Stephen himself. His steady manner, combined with his piercing gaze reminded him a little of Edwin Jarvis, but in ways he definitely didn't want to be thinking about Edwin Jarvis.

"I see guys like you the same way guys like you see nuclear physicists... It's dangerous stuff, but it's better if someone understands how the hell it works," Tony replied eventually. "Even if I never could, I understand the importance of knowing. Someone should be able to harness it safely."

"I think you could get over the being creeped out stage, Tony... With what you've suggested might happen in the future, you may have to," Stephen replied.

"But you can see why I'd rather just stick my head in the sand, right?"

"Of course. This used to scare the shit out of me when I knew enough to know it was real and powerful, but not how to wield it."

"Finally, a person who is sensible about magic, and he has the be the Sorcerer Supreme," Tony muttered.

"I'm not..." Stephen paused and let out a quiet sigh. "How about you just call me Stephen. I get the feeling that honourifics don't sit well with you," Stephen said with a small smile.

"Magic and observant to the point of psychic ability... Good thing you're sexy and smart, or I might have run for the hills," Tony said. It was Stephen's turn to let out a surprised laugh.

"I assure you, I do have a few other redeeming qualities." Stephen's voice was calm and assured.

"So teach me," Tony said.

That was the start of a weekly rendezvous for a drink, that for the first three months was just a meeting between friends. They had effectively bought the barmaid's silence, and their location remained a secret to the general public.

Tony wondered if perhaps he was getting in too deep, too quickly with Stephen, but they had explored their vast expanse of common ground together. Once Tony saw how many parallels they had, it was much easier to look past the pants-shitting scary magic side of Stephen Strange. Their meeting had expanded to texts and a few calls, and it was clear something was sparking between them, though neither said anything about it at the start.

Three and a half months in, they talked about physical pain... for hours. Stephen, first from the clinical perspective as a physician, and then the view from the patient's side of it. Tony spoke of an even darker perspective of the acute pain a torture victim suffers, and then the chronic pain that came after. The palladium poisoning, the ache of the arc reactor, the wear and tear from the armour. It was brief, but they even touched on the depression and anxiety that came with chronic pain, and while neither had much to say about it, it was relief to know someone got it.

It was then that Stephen realized that he could relate to Tony in a way he couldn't connect with Christine. She hadn't lived it. She had still tried to walk with him through those desperate times though. So while he had been the superior surgeon, her compassion made her the better doctor.
But Tony was intimately familiar with the drudgery of pain. He knew what it was to not be able to escape it, no matter the method tried. He'd learned to accept it, because it was always there and still didn't seem to be going anywhere.

It was after that conversation, and back in the privacy of the Sanctum Sanctorum, that Tony showed Stephen what remained of his chest. The four inch wide, months long lasting, angry contusion that went across the width of it, left by Captain America's shield as it came down on the armour, gouging pieces of it into his chest, along with the mess of scars from the surgeries to try and reconstruct his sternum yet one more time. Stephen wanted to reach out and touch it, and try to take any part of that pain. Somewhere in him, was still the kid who'd gone to medical school to help people.

It left Stephen with a silent, seething, rage against Steve Rogers... Tony had tried to relay the story of their conflict with the lightness of an old style raconteur. But not even a super powered baby of Noel Coward and P.G. Wodehouse could bring any frivolity to the grim details of the situation. It had clearly broken Tony in so many ways other than the physical... How dare that star-spangled, emotionally stunted man-child hurt his... friend? Yes, his friend, in this way.

"I've been spending time in Helen Cho's cradle, but I only have so much of that, so progress is slow," Tony admitted.

"Frankly, I don't even know how you're still standing, Tony," Stephen said softly.

"That makes two of us," Tony replied, still trying for lightness. "My dad always said I was willful to a fault."

"Willful doesn't even begin to cover this, Tony. Your level of functionality is pretty much superhuman at this point," Stephen explained.

"I've had tweaks here and there. The cradle, Extremis in a controlled dose. That keeps me together day to day, but I can't go 'splody, which is a good thing. I like being unexploded. With the exception of Pepper, I think I've been as close as someone can get to exploded. Not a good scene," Tony rambled, desperately trying to get away from the heaviness of the conversation.

"You know I'm expressing concern because I care, right?" Stephen asked.

"Yeah... So, do you want a medal or something?" Tony asked.

"I'll take or something," Stephen said, and kissed Tony very softly at the corner of his mouth. As he tried to pull away, Tony caught him for a peck on his lips.

"I can't lie, I think I like how you play doctor, doctor," Tony murmured. Stephen chuckled.

"This could require a much more thorough exam," Stephen said.

"Do you have a gown here for me to change into?" Tony asked.

"I don't think a gown will be necessary. I hope you're not uncomfortable with that."

"With you? Not hardly. Full faith and credit, doc," Tony said and smiled.

"Before we go any further, I do have to ask you one thing, and I know how terrible and awkward it will be," Stephen said. "I feel I should inquire after Ms. Potts."

"Fizzled. Again... I love that woman deeply, but I can't be what she needs. She deserves someone
who treats her like the goddess queen she is, and I... can't. Right now. Maybe never. I just can't,
Tony replied.

"So hence the fascination with me?" Stephen asked.

"Yes and no... I just think that you understand me in a way she can't, and frankly, shouldn't have to. My man-pain save-the-world angst can really only be understood by someone in the same boat," Tony said. "And I really do like you... You're probably the first person I've found in this boat other than Banner that I've wanted spend time around, and Banner is a) missing, and b) tragically straight most of the time."

"Well I can see that... And I assure you, the feeling is mutual, Tony." Stephen ran his bare fingers along Tony's jaw. Tony didn't flinch at them ever, and was careful not to lean into the touch too hard. He had proven extremely careful of Stephen's hands, knowing what it was to have a sore spot. Stephen felt his hands were always cold, thanks to the surgical steel in them, but Tony ran warm, so he was never bothered by it. He moved his head gently and pressed a soft kiss to the side of Stephen's thumb.

"I like what's happening here," Tony said. "It feels different, better than I've had. I think I know how to be better now."

"You don't need to be better for me, Tony. You're remarkable as you are," Stephen replied.

"But I want to be," Tony said, meeting his eye. Stephen leaned down, putting his forehead against Tony's.

"Then I want to be here to help you with that, so long as you try to do the same for me," Stephen said.

"I'll try," Tony promised.

"Well then, you'd best kiss me again now that I am free from worry about the wrath of your ex," Stephen said.

"She is indeed mighty," Tony replied, and did as Stephen asked.

After that, their weekly meetings usually ended up back at the Sanctum. Stephen did want to keep a very close eye on how Tony was healing, and Tony had zero problems with that.

to be continued...
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

So here we are getting more into the meat of my little pet theory (that will never come to be in the MCU, I just like the idea). As always, no beta, so all mistakes are mine.

Sorry for the delay. Crimmus. Also sick. SO sick. The coughing can be heard for miles.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Now Tony should have known that the distraction by Stephen of turning things physical was to get his mind off of just how the fuck he was still alive, but he had so much to do these days there wasn't much time to focus on it.

He hardly noticed when Stephen asked about his initial surgery, and of course wanted to hear all about Yinsen. Stephen told him about the car accident and the fight to save his life that followed. Of course they discussed family, and he asked about Maria Collins Carbonel, and her early life, and Tony told him what little he knew. Stephen was careful to mostly avoid talking about Howard. It all just came up in conversation, and thankfully never during their fornication. Tony also learned about Stephen's parents, colleagues, school friends, and later Mordo and Wong. When Stephen told him a little about The Ancient One, Tony told Stephen what little he knew about Loki and the magic of Asgard. It was all very quid pro quo, and felt like they were really building a relationship between them.

And Tony knew he was probably pathetically grateful to have someone outside of Rhodey and Vision to relate to, but he couldn't will up a single fuck about his former rugged independence. Rhodey needed all the support Tony could offer for now, and Vision still felt very young and inexperienced. Stephen took to both of them quite quickly to Tony's surprise. Vision of course was after knowledge of everything and anything, and Rhodey was Tony's speculative big brother, assessing Stephen for fault or deception.

Still, James Rhodes was no fool, and while he didn't want to visit Kamar-Taj, he gratefully accepted the consult from a once renowned surgeon. There wasn't much progress to be made for now, but Stephen's insights into how the leg braces needed to function would be invaluable. Stephen seemed to win Rhodey over with his assured, calm manner, but that didn't stop Rhodey from giving him an indirect shovel talk. Stephen was fine with that. Knowing what Steve Rogers and his compatriots had done to Tony, he was glad that Tony did have a few true friends out there. After they had left Rhodey for the day, Stephen smiled and told Tony that it felt good to do some proper doctoring again.

"So what is it that we do together?" Tony teased gently, waggling his eyebrows at Stephen.

"If what we do wasn't consensual, I'd have my license revoked," Stephen replied dryly.

"Good thing it's enthusiastically consensual, because I think need mouth to mouth, doc," Tony said, sidling up to Stephen.

"You're insatiable, and your doctor jokes are insufferable," Stephen said.
"That hurts me in my weak, bird-boned chest, Stephen," Tony said.

"No, it doesn't," Stephen retorted.

"No, it really doesn't. But if bad jokes are a deal breaker, you should let me know."

"Not hardly," Stephen said, leaned in, and kissed Tony breathless.

That was how things went for a time. Tony dared to feel the stability around him, and finally started getting his feet under him. He was still healing, but he was healing, and it made all the difference for his psyche. Stephen could see the improvement. It was like watching Tony come back to life, and the alive version of Tony Stark's aura shone a deep gold, with bold streaks of red. Tony might have no knowledge of magic or metaphysics, but Stephen couldn't deny that the man knew himself.

They drifted into each other's orbit at every opportunity. Stephen at first followed Tony to a few events, and then Tony felt comfortable enough to show up with Stephen at his side, if not on his arm. They weren't publicly affectionate, and no one really asked Tony, so he didn't offer it up. He was asked by reporters how he was handling the separation from Pepper. He tried to be graceful, and said he was getting by just fine, and was trying to just be the best friend and coworker he could.

And when the press, work demands, the accords, and everything else got to be too much, there was Stephen. Tony felt drawn to Stephen's steady ways and introspection. Stephen got his jokes, and he got Stephen's. He was drawn to Stephen physically. Stephen hadn't mentioned his suspicions about Tony being touch starved, rather just set out to fix it. More often than not, Stephen reached for Tony, and became pleasantly surprised when Tony started meeting him halfway.

So when Tony heard the worst possible news on a Thursday, Stephen reached out. Tony had been called to Washington to examine photographs from the Hubble Telescope taken on one its forays into deep space. The photos contained anomalies of shapes too regular to be anything but created by a sentient being. Tony was among the first to be informed. He was also promptly begged for weapons to fight the incoming possible alien armada with. The thought of once again going into weapons production shook him with fear so deeply that he had to excuse himself to go vomit.

It was the worst time for this to happen. The Avengers were barely more than a concept again. Tony was playing the long game to find new recruits. Most of them were too young, and would still be very young in the projected three years they had until the arrival of the ships. Tony knew where the former team was stashed. FRIDAY had had it figured out in moments when Tony was well enough to ask her. But so long as they laid low in Wakanda, Tony was happy to focus on his own recovery.

Tony was leaning on the marble facing of the wall in the executive bathroom at the Pentagon. He was trying to breath deeply when he heard the familiar sound of a portal opening and saw Stephen on the other side of it. "FRIDAY called. Are you all right, Tony?"

"No. No I am not," Tony whispered. A knock came on the door of the bathroom.

"Mr. Stark, are you alright? Shall we reschedule the rest of the meeting?" one of the aides asked.

"I will be fine, but please go on without me. Have the minutes securely forwarded to my assistant, FRIDAY, and I will look over what I missed as soon as I can. Tell your superiors I will be in touch very soon," Tony said. Stephen watched Tony draw himself up to speak, and temporarily even he could buy that Tony was indeed just fine... It was a remarkable performance. He would have to be
careful of that in the future, but so far, Tony had chosen not to put on such airs around him. Stephen was about to step through the portal when Tony raised his hand. "Don't, Stephen. The Pentagon gets fussy when people suddenly appear inside of it who shouldn't be," Tony said. Stephen paused. It was a good point.

"I'll meet you at the apartment in DC then," Stephen said. "Take the cloak, it will protect you." Tony's nose crinkled a bit. The cloak liked him well enough, like a floppy, over-eager Labrador, but it was anything but subtle.

"That will probably raise more questions than you appearing out of thin air," Tony said.

"Not if we're careful," Stephen said. The cloak floated through the portal and settled on Tony's shoulders. It then folded itself up, wrapping around him, and changed appearance into a heavy black wool coat and red scarf, perfect for the rainy cold weather outside. Tony wanted to protest, but the feeling of security was instant, like the armour did for him. He smiled at Stephen and nodded.

"Okay, I'll meet you there," Tony agreed.

Stephen had coffee on by the time Tony finally beat the traffic into submission. Tony was glad that Pepper insisted they had a place in D.C. to come that wasn't a hotel. The Stark Industries use apartment walked the fine line between utilitarian and extravagant, and while not homey, it was familiar and comfortable.

"Told you I'd be fine," Tony postured as he came through the door. The cloak shook itself out and returned to its usual shape, but didn't seem to be in any hurry to leave Tony's shoulders.

"I knew you would be," Stephen replied, and let him have the boast. He went to the coffee maker.

"The planet may be fucked," Tony said.

"Again?" Stephen asked. There was only a small amount of sarcasm in his voice, and a lot of wariness, which only came to those who had actually faced down the end of the world. "How long do we have to unfuck it?"

"Not nearly long enough," Tony said and sighed.

"Well, we better get started then," Stephen said, and poured Tony a cup of coffee. Relief washed over Tony as Stephen embraced him and set the mug down on the table. He guided Tony to sit down, and Tony couldn't help but feel grateful that he had someone on his side, who believed him at face value.

Within an hour, Tony felt less panicked. Stephen's working knowledge of the major characters made explanation easier. Stephen reassured him that there was time to prepare. They would have to secure Vision, and prepare him as well. Thor's report of Thanos meant that the Mad Titan was most likely after the infinity stone in Vision's head.

It was then that Stephen breached the subject of the Eye of Agamotto. "It's a what now?" Tony asked.

"One of them... An infinity stone."

"You have an infinity stone... You can control one?" Tony's eyes were blown wide.

"Somewhat. It was an act of desperation, Tony. It was a world was fucked event," Stephen replied.
"I haven't touched it since... But I have undertaken to learn everything I can about it."

"So that means that Thanos has two good reasons to want to ravage the planet. Great. Honestly, how did we end up with these things? We can't be trusted," Tony said, and sighed heavily.

"Because it took minds that were more advanced to be able to harness them... Minds like yours," Stephen explained.

"No. I don't want anything to do with them," Tony said. "I learned my lesson. Ultron was enough... Hell, New York should have been enough." It wasStephen's turn to sigh.

"Tony, you've had a shock today... But I have a suspicion I need to tell you about," Stephen said.

"Sure, the world is ending. Why not? At least you're telling me about your suspicions. Better than that other Steve I know." Tony rolled his eyes and huffed.

"Honestly, it's not that hard to treat you better than he did," Stephen said, venom in his tone. Tony admired that Stephen could be so venomous on his behalf... While Tony still didn't feel worthy of righteous prick Rogers, at least he was comfortable being angry about it now. "And let it be known that I delight in being able to do that for you," Stephen said, as he looked Tony in the eye.

There it was. The balm to his psyche that was Stephen Strange. The man who wanted Tony around. Made time for him. Made few demands, other than what was mutually beneficial and supportive. Tony's stressed expression fell away, and he smiled at Stephen, probably looking a little pathetic. But he could trust that Stephen would find the warmth and affection in his face.

"It may be too early to say this, but I don't know what I would do without you," Tony murmured.

"I feel the same about you," Stephen replied. "I find you ground me in this reality, and that keeps me from getting lost elsewhere... But I feel I have to tell you, that there are things that I have been researching, that you need to know given the nature of what's coming."

"What? What is it?" Tony asked.

"How much do you really know about your mother's life before she married your father?"

"What haven't I heard? I've heard new world money that returned to Europe. I've heard old world money, who eloped with my dad to be with someone who would let her be the mathematician she was. I even read an old speculative addendum in the SHIELD file dump that implied she was the only Black Widow to ever retire, and that is why the ones that followed were sterilized... But I don't really know anything for certain... Only that she loved me, really... And if she didn't, she made me believe that she did," Tony said, eyes on the ceiling.

"Why do you think she didn't share her past with you?"

"Because I was a loud-mouth, under-socialized, seventeen year old with a drug problem. And then she was murdered. If they had secrets, then I was not the person to tell. Case in point... My dad helped found SHIELD. I had no idea SHIELD existed until I made it back from Afghanistan," Tony said with a shrug.

"As an aside, how did you graduate M.I.T. while under the influence? I have a photographic memory and even I had to buckle down to do my PHD and MD concurrently," Stephen said. Tony grinned. He loved these moments, where he got to learn the little things about Stephen, and where he got to share with willing ears.
"Fuck, they'd have locked me up had I done it sober. I have to slow down all the time for the rest of the world. I have to make them feel they can keep up. I have to lazily and incrementally update Starkphones because people would balk at the idea of cranial and ocular interface. It would... It would be easy to just... take over. Make it better. But I can't. People have to choose to progress on their own," Tony explained.

Stephen was giving him the small smile he seemed to save just for Tony, his eyes filled with wonder. "Your genius is beyond compare, Tony, and I admit I am curious... Most people with your level of intelligence tend to have personality traits opposite to you. You have your mother's compassion, yet you have your father's charisma."

"Oh god, no," Tony said. His face twisted into hyperbolic disgust.

"Like it or not, you both have been known to work a crowd," Stephen said. Tony retorted with childish gagging noises. Stephen rolled his eyes, and ran his fingers along the inside of Tony's wrist. It was a subtle, gentle request for calm. Tony came back to centre, smiling and half wondering if he loved Stephen yet. He concluded in an instant that yes, he probably did, but thought it too soon to say so. Boundaries. He was working on them. "And even though Howard Stark was a giant of industry, Maria Collins Carbonel is an interesting person to study."

"How?" Tony asked. There was a sharpness raising in his voice. His mother was a sore spot, but Stephen was doing the opposite of what Rogers had done. He was telling Tony the truth about her, no matter how it might effect how they related, because Tony deserved the truth. So Tony tried to keep a lid on his temper.

"We have records of her at Kamar-Taj, Tony. She was a sorcerer. Elemental and natural and powerful. She never went there to study though. Seemingly, she gave up her craft after she married your father." Stephen's voice was so soft and gentle. Still, Tony pulled his hand away and gripped the edge of the table until his knuckles turned white.

"So, how does that relate to what's happening? I have none of that. Is it even genetic? She never told me anything."

"It can run in families, but mostly related to individual aptitude, and willingness to apply oneself to practice... Her family history is secretive, Tony. They were guarding something," Stephen said. Tony's warm brown eyes met Stephen's piercing blue.

"Another fucking infinity stone," Tony concluded and let out a breath. Inwardly, Stephen cursed how quickly Tony could reach the end of the line on a train of thought. He had wanted to be gentle about this. "Makes no difference. I have no idea where she stashed it if she even still had it." Tony sighed heavily. "You know, I've been mourning her since '93... but honestly, I'm not even sure I know who she was."

"She was your mother, Tony, and she loved you. You said so yourself. That's a good place to start," Stephen assured.

"The memory augmentation tech... it... it helps. But it means these events are closer to the surface of my memory. I'd been experimenting with the last time I saw her and Howard, shortly before I found out what Barnes was made to do to them... What... What if it wasn't just the serum they were transporting in the car? What if HYDRA has another stone?" Tony asked. Stephen reached out, and gently took Tony's hand in his. His grip was soft, but firm, which exacerbated the need to, but mostly stopped the tremor in them.

"I don't think the stone was in the car, Tony. I think your mother was more savvy than that... She
might have hid it so well that Howard didn't know about it. So well even, that we may not be able to recover it," Stephen said.

"Another dimension?" Tony asked.

"No, Tony. The stones are ingots of energy. I believe she took that energy, and her own, and reshaped it. Perhaps requiring so much energy that she could no longer wield magic."

"Reshaped it into what?"

"Into you, Tony."

Chapter End Notes

dun dun dun....
"You're fucking with me, Strange. Don't fuck with me. I can't handle it. Not from you... I'm... coming to rely on you," Tony said and stood up suddenly. Stephen reached out for Tony's hand, and got up, but more slowly.

"When it comes to this, I wouldn't. Never. I care about you too much to pull this out of my ass. I can show you the documentation we have about your mother's family. They don't define which stone her family guarded, but the word that gets kicked around most often is soul." Stephen kept his voice quiet and even.

"Souls aren't real," Tony said firmly.

"Not in the sense you define them perhaps.... But souls are real. I spoke to the Ancient One as she was dying. She wasn't in her body anymore, but she was very much as I knew her, and a soul," Stephen said.

"Anecdotal evidence," Tony said. He didn't pull away from Stephen's touch though.

"Did you ever see your body from above it when Yinsen was operating on you?" Stephen asked. Tony paused and his hand caused both of theirs to shake.

"I..." Tony started.

"Astral projection, Tony. Your body was undergoing so much trauma that you had to get out of it temporarily."

"So the stone is what... in my brain?"

"Not in you, Tony. It is you."

"Gonna need some proof of that," Tony said.

"And that's fair." Stephen agreed. "Come with me to Kamar-Taj? We'll consult Wong."

"I'll have the jet readied," Tony said.

"Tony," Stephen murmured, and pulled one of his hands away and opened a portal. "we don't have that kind of time anymore."

"Shit," Tony replied, and sighed. He made eye contact with Wong, who was peering up at them over a laptop on a sturdy, exotic looking table. Tony shrugged. "In for a penny, in for a pound." Tony quoted a favourite saying of Edwin Jarvis. His body relaxed, and he realized that the Cloak of Levitation still rested on his shoulders, keeping him comfortably warm. "Let's go, Stephen."
Stephen leaned in, his lips brushed Tony's ear as he whispered. "Only if you agree to take me for a ride in that R8 V10 Plus... On a test track." Tony craned his neck and saw the trust he was being offered.

"Okay, I can do this," Tony said, and took a deep breath. He followed Stephen through the portal. Overall, Tony would say that it wasn't as bad as he'd worried it would be. There was no in between. They were simply in the next place. Best of all there was no great gap of space between Washington and Nepal. He still kept his hand on Stephen's though as he gasped, his body reacting to the change in elevation and the thinner air. The building around him was cold, and Tony realized he had a bit of an issue with it now. The cloak felt his forming shivers and closed around him as much as possible. Tony looked at the wooden and stone building standing placidly while the wind whistled through the rafters, and whispered "wow."

"At least it's quick?" Stephen said sheepishly.

"Boss?" FRIDAY said through Tony's phone, her voice slightly panicked. "Do I need to dispatch Veronica?"

"No sweetie, stand down. I'm okay." Tony tapped the side of his glasses, pressing his finger to the arm that hooked over his ear, assuring FRIDAY of his bio-signature and vital signs so she could re-calibrate his position in the world. "You got me now? The satellite views of the Himalayas must be something, aren't they?"

"Yeah boss... That was... alarming." FRIDAY still sounded very concerned.

"Move Veronica's orbit safely to be able to be dispatched should I need her, okay?"

"On it, boss," FRIDAY replied.

"She's protective of her old man, but she's a damn good bot." Tony said, and smiled a little.

"You two. So dramatic," Wong said dryly.

"There's reason for the drama today. I need your help again," Stephen said.

"You always need my help," Wong said and rolled his eyes.

"Well, not always," Tony mused. He let himself give Stephen a leer. They were at the leering stage now.

"Still dramatic," Wong asserted and shook his head.

"I told Tony my theory about his mother... and him," Stephen said.

"All right, somewhat warranted drama," Wong conceded. "Sit down, Tony. We'll get you some tea." Tony looked hesitant to move, and studied his surroundings.

"I'm okay, I just had coffee," Tony said.

"Special tea," Wong explained dryly.

"Oh... is it gonna turn up on a urine test? Because sobriety when on call is required of the Avengers, and I have a few more hours until it's Vision's shift," Tony said. Wong gave him an understanding look.

"I assure you, no human lab will be able to discern this. It's to aide in the opening of your third eye,
"And in astral projection," Wong assured.

"Look Wong, I'm not trying to be a prick here, but I'm going to need some convincing... I'm still pretty bewildered by Stephen's... theory."

"It will help us, and you, to see you as you really are, Tony," Stephen said gently.

"What if I don't want to know? What if I just want to continue as I am? We have a good thing going here, Stephen. I don't want to ruin that. It would crush me if that happened," Tony replied.

"Then you would remain vulnerable, and I might lose you anyway. I don't want that. I would have a hard time knowing I could have helped defend you, but didn't... And if you are what we think you might be, it is better to have that power to use against Thanos," Stephen said. He brought his hand up and touched Tony's cheek, and pulled him close.

"Thanos?" Wong asked, cutting their moment short. "Why didn't you say that before?" Wong went to the door of the library, and called for one of the more junior sorcerers to procure tea, and to put the other Sanctums on notice of high alert.

"Not for awhile yet," Tony said, slowly pulling away from Stephen. "Projection is three years. Old school invasion with an armada headed toward us... It's not confirmed yet, but... I saw something... Was shown something awhile ago. I know what could happen, and it's not great."

"It wouldn't matter if we had ten years or a hundred," Wong said. He was now gathering books from the shelves. "I'm sorry to put this all on you in a day, Tony. Stephen and I have been discussing it at length. We wanted to be... more gentle about it. But you have to know, even if the truth is not easy," Wong said and set three tomes down on the desk, and moved the laptop to the side.

And if that wasn't the perfect opportunity for Tony to hug Wong, then Tony would feel odd not taking it. It didn't last long, and Tony pulled away, but left a hand on Wong's shoulder while he explained. "Sorry, I just... I've had some bad experiences from people who thought it was better to keep things from me," Tony said all in a rush.

"It's alright, Tony, really. I just we had more answers for you," Wong assured. Stephen was quietly shocked. Human contact was not Wong's strong suit, but Tony's natural warmth let him reach out and connect with even the most reserved of people. All the subtle signs pointed to Tony being what they thought he was. People flocked to Tony, and not just for his money. Stephen had seen it when they had attended events together in the past few months. Tony could make people feel welcome and heard, and he was even great at avoiding them if he wanted to. The person never seemed to get offended by it. He was so smooth at social interaction it was an art.

"What do you mean by shown, Tony? What were you shown? Who showed it to you?" Stephen asked, eyes narrowing a bit.

"It... It doesn't matter much now. I know it's not a possible future anymore. Because the people in what I saw, and the people around me now, are vastly different," Tony said.

"Still, it's important... What happened, Tony? Are you okay?" Stephen asked.

"Wanda Maximoff... She... showed me something back when we recovered Loki's scepter from HYDRA. A portal, and I was on the other side of it, looking down at Earth as the Chitauri invaded... Surrounded by dead and dying Avengers... Of course, it was Rogers who was still alive enough to give me a guilt trip for not doing more... My version of doing more turned out to be
Ultron, which went over like a lead balloon as you know," Tony's arms went around himself now, and the cloak rippled over them, simulating a comforting touch. Stephen moved in again, holding his hand out, and waited for Tony to take it in his own.

"Oh Tony, I'm so sorry," Stephen said as Tony took his hand. "You've had that in your head the entire time, haven't you?"

"Part of the reason I went ahead with the B.A.R.F. tech... I was trying to heal myself and get a handle on that fear," Tony admitted. Stephen could only imagine the lengths to which Tony had gone to seek a release from fear. If physical and mental pain were bad enough to endure, then fear would have been intolerable. Tony hadn't gone the route of spiritual healing as Stephen had... He’d tried to rewire his brain to get some relief. Stephen opened his arms, and Tony curled against him, pressing into him, and Stephen basked in his warmth and closeness.

"Wong, can you please remind me to end that unrefined little witch?" Stephen asked.

"I thought that went against your Hippocratic Oath," Wong mused, and started flipping through one of the books.

"Oh, I won't have to leave a mark to end her," Stephen said. Tony gave a dark chuckle.

"I adore your desire to defend my honour... But we might need her in the coming days," Tony said.

"No, we do not need that kind of chaos. Thanos will bring enough chaos. She would be pouring gasoline on a fire. Her energy is better off dispersed to those who can control it," Stephen explained.

"You will sound like Mordo if you keep that up," Wong said mildly.

"Do you have a better idea?" Stephen asked.

"Yes, but it would leave a mark, though it would be over with more quickly. I have not taken a Hippocratic Oath... Mordo isn't wrong about certain things, but his dedication to his interpretation of dogma will make him a zealot. I have a feeling while you might not harm her body, you would harm her mind in the course of separating her from her power," Wong ran his finger down a vellum page, and tapped on what seemed to be a meaningful paragraph.

"And that might prove more cruel," Stephen extrapolated.

"She might deserve it, Stephen... I saw what happened in Sokovia, and that woman has a lot of blood on her hands for it. Don't even try to take the blame, Tony. I am quite adept at tracking things to their source," Wong said. Tony looked up from Stephen and over at Wong owlishly, blinking.

"I don't think anyone has ever called Sokovia anything but my fault," Tony said.

"There are plenty of people out there who don't know the whole story," Wong replied. Tony closed his eyes and let out a breath. He shakily pulled his glasses off and set them carefully on the table, so that FRIDAY could keep an eye on the proceedings. He leaned his forehead against Stephen's collarbone, and sagged against him for a moment. The whole topic made him exhausted, as his brain fought against his crippling guilt with the new programming he'd put in via B.A.R.F. "Should we be doing this now, Tony? Do you need some time?" Wong asked.

"We should be doing this as soon as possible... It could mean we have more to use against Thanos. We will need those resources as soon as we can get them," Tony said into Stephen's chest. He took
a deep breath and roused himself. "But before we start, I need to call Pepper. Contingency plans."

"Of course," Stephen agreed. He held out a hand, and directed Tony toward a window with a wide ledge. Tony picked up his glasses, and took his phone out of his pocket. He made room for the cloak to spread out, and sat down on the ledge.

"FRIDAY, call Pepper please? And conference in Rhodey." The cloak stayed with Tony, and Stephen looked on at Tony with affection. Tony was looking through the clear smart glass of his phone screen and through the window. The town was laid out, and the mountain peaks in the distance, covered in snow. "Hi, Pep... Sorry to bother you, but I've got an issue... Well, a couple issues," Tony said quietly. Pepper had been more careful of Tony when he'd broken it off for the final time, citing his anxiety and needing to work on himself. He saw Pepper wave off her assistant to gain some privacy for the two of them.

Their conversation went on longer than Tony might have liked, as he wanted to get to the books that Wong had laid out, but he couldn't bring himself to cut the call short. Rhodey was on the lower half of his screen, and Pepper on the upper, with Happy standing just behind her. Tony kept the details minimal, but still asked for their discretion with them. He was honest about Thanos, and then told them about the possibility of his mother harbouring an Infinity Stone. He explained that he wanted to further investigate with Stephen and Wong, but left out entirely the details of where they thought it might be.

He asked Rhodey to run interference on the military, and Pepper to hold the line on producing weapons for now. "Even in the face of this, Tony?" Rhodey asked, his expression haunted. Tony's face remained stoic.

"Yes, Rhodey... I threw up in the Pentagon a couple of hours ago when they asked me. Managed to make it to the bathroom at least... I will find another way. I promise you that. Give me a couple of months to come up with an alternate plan. If I can't, then we can revisit the idea of armament," Tony said, and scratched his chin thoughtfully. Rhodey closed his eyes and sighed.

"I can live with that," he said eventually. "How did you find out about your mom?"

"I didn't, Stephen and Wong did. I'm with them now," Tony said. "In Nepal, apparently... Good news, I can work past my fear of random portals now." Tony turned his phone to show them the view of the mountains for a moment. "And don't worry, Veronica is moving into position in case I need her."

"Is Harry Potter treating you right?" Happy asked. Which Tony immediately knew was so Pepper didn't have to. Tony grinned, and honestly thinking of Stephen made him the happiest he'd been in recent memory, despite everything.

"Yeah, Hap... I think I'm finally getting it together," Tony said. "It's... good. He's been pretty great to me." Tony didn't look over to Stephen, ignoring him for the time being. He wasn't trying to hide the conversation with what Stephen amounted to Tony's family. He could think of no greater sign of trust.

Tony took his time ending the call, enjoying that the four of them were all talking together easily. Rhodey's sarcasm. Pepper's classy dry wit. Happy's one-liners. He needed to make this a regular thing if he could. It didn't make him wistful or nostalgic for the past. It made him grateful that they'd stuck by him so far. He asked the three of them to keep an eye on the Spider-Baby, and asked Rhodey to ask Vision to be on call, and said his goodbyes.

Wong and Stephen looked at him, but didn't demand anything from him immediately. "If you're
not ready, we will wait," Stephen said.

"While I drink your wacky tea, please, tell me what you know about my mom... For years people wondered why I kept up with her charity events... And part of it was because it was the one time it seemed okay to talk about her... And to hear things I didn't know about her," Tony said.

"I don't know how much I can add to your knowledge, but what is missing from the records speaks volumes. Her family goes back into the ether of history as magic users. They were purported to be guardians of the soul. But the record stops with Maria... Or at least the kept records do. Clearly she thought it was prudent to bury what she was doing... But the energy she manipulated is left, and I know you're going to roll your eyes, but your aura shines, Tony. If I let myself focus on it, I have to squint," Stephen said. He handed Tony a bowl of steaming tea. Tony sniffed it speculatively.

"Well, it doesn't smell awful," Tony said, firmly ignoring the talk of his aura. He took a tentative sip, contemplated it, and took another. "It's good," he said. Stephen smiled, and took a sip from his own serving of tea.

"Nice attempt at aversion, Tony," Wong said and chuckled.

"I am speculative of all of this. And I am only going along with it because of what I have already seen... I always thought... That my intelligence came from my mother. Howard was good ideas, but not so great at actual execution of them. Now I wonder how true that might be. It's too bad... To have had this advantage all along. Thought I did it on my own, ya know?" Tony said, and sipped. The tea warmed him and opened up his nasal passages.

"I think you would be surprised at how much of what you've accomplished is just that... Your third eye is not open. You are a resilient, augmented, but otherwise ordinary human," Stephen said.

"Does Wong know? Will it matter that I've had... alterations?" Tony asked.

"This has little to do with your physical body, Tony. It shouldn't matter," Wong said firmly.

"But if I am... goddamn, I can't even believe I am saying this, if I am the personification of a cosmic force, what happens to my body when I open the door to it?" Tony's eyes were closed, and his forehead creased in worry.

"Your body is still made of matter, Tony. You would have to be much more adept with magic use and the transfer of energy to put it in danger," Wong explained.

"We're going with you, Tony. It's alright," Stephen murmured. Tony let out his breath slowly, and drank more of the tea. He didn't feel like he was getting high or impaired. Instead, he felt very relaxed. He wanted to think it was the lack of oxygen, but he didn't feel panicked. Stephen and Wong settled, and Tony found an almost comfortable position to sit on the floor by the window.

The silence was only broken by sipping sounds. Eventually, Tony finished and set the bowl on the floor beside him. Stephen reached over, and brushed the centre of Tony's forehead with his thumb.

"It's time to open your eye," Stephen murmured.

For just a moment, Tony panicked, like he could feel, see, and hear everything in the universe at once, crushing down on him, around him, in him. He cried out, but felt hands grasp his own. They were cool to the touch and had a slight tremor. "It's okay, Tony. Calm down. It's like falling into freezing water. The only way to survive is to relax and take control of the panic," Stephen murmured. Tony focused on what felt like Stephen's familiar grip, and let the fear run through him and away, like a passing wave. "Fuck Tony... You're beautiful," Stephen caressed his cheek.
Tony opened his eyes, and saw a transparent version of Stephen's face, gazing at him full of love and warmth. "What is it?" Tony asked. Stephen indicated the window behind him. Tony turned toward it, and the barest of reflections was visible. He saw Stephen, Wong, and himself, their bodies still seated safely on the floor, but Tony was not in his body. His eyes went wide as he saw other versions of all of them, hovering midair above their physical forms. And while Stephen and Wong looked much like their regular selves, only surrounded by colours, Tony's entire reflection was in shades of red, gold, and blended together into a rich golden orange. The brightest point radiated out from the centre of his chest, and the aura around him seemed thicker and hazier than what Stephen and Wong had. "What the fuck is wrong with me?" Tony asked.

"Proof enough for you, Soul Stone?" Stephen replied.

"Well, how about that?" Tony said, attempting to sound non-nonchalant while actively trying to not freak the fuck out.

Chapter End Notes

Poor little shiny bunny... He just misses his mom... And see what I did there? Colour theory ftw... Finally art school proves useful.
"What does this mean now? What do I do with this?" Tony asked, hovering inert above his own body. His astral form radiating warm light.

"You learn, Tony. All signs show that you're capable of it," Stephen replied.

"What can I do like this?"

"Potentially? Anything... The research suggests the Soul Stone is among the strongest forces in the universe, and certainly the strongest of the Infinity Stones... You hold life in your hands, Tony... And death... So I suggest you take it slow for awhile," Stephen said.

"Souls... Life... Death... Fuck. This... I..." Tony pulled in on himself for a moment, and then looked upward. "MOM!" Tony hollered. "MARIA STARK I NEED TO TALK TO YOU!"

"That is not taking it slow," Wong said tiredly.

A hole opened in space in the middle of the library, and bright white light streamed out of it. "Tony, stop," Stephen said.

"No. Not yet," Tony replied, and focused on the light. "I have to know." From the light, a face started to form. It was female, with her hair neatly pulled back. Tony went to it, one hand over his mouth, and the other reaching for the woman's face. He was amazed at the tactile feedback when he was like this. He didn't touch her, but he clearly wanted to. Respectful as always. Stephen remembered that several people hadn't respected Tony's space in the past, and he'd learned the correct lesson from it.

The face didn't become opaque or take physical form to Stephen's relief. Tony wasn't trying to bring her back from death, rather, he just seemed to want to communicate with her. "Mom?" Tony whispered, reverent, and somewhat frightened by what he was seeing and feeling.

The woman finished forming, still composed of light, an organic, ever-shifting wireframe of energy. "Tony?" she asked. "Oh my... Tony..." her voice trailed off, caught up staring at Tony in amazement. She reached for him, and Tony met her instantly, holding her, eyes baffled and afraid of what he had conjured.

"Mom... I'm sorry about this... But I have to know, and you're the only one with answers," Tony
said. "I'll send you back, I promise, but I have to know. This is too important to figure out on my
own."

"You found out," Maria said with a breathless sob.

"Of course I found out... At this point, I need to find out, mom. Lives depend on it. The planet
might depend on it." Tony sounded gentle and mournful. "What am I?"

"You are my son," she said. Tony stiffened and his expression went cold. He backed away from
Maria, anger rising up in him. He was so done with half answers and misdirection when he asked
simple questions, and his condition was exacerbating his emotions.

"I don't have time for the esoteric shit, okay? Look at me! What the hell is this? What am I?!" Tony
was angry. He was so angry about everything that had happened. Maria looked at the
surrounding area, and took in Tony's still, but breathing body on the floor of the library, and looked
back at his astral form. She had a look that showed patience and defeat.

"You are one of the most precious things in the universe," she said matter of factly. "Not just to
me, though you certainly are precious to me... I protected you as long as I could. I only wish I had
more time."

"Baby boy is all grown up now, mom... Long pants and everything. So, lay it out for me. I need to
know," Tony said, forcing himself to calm down. Anger was not what he wanted to show the
woman he'd been missing for so long. "I don't have time for roundabout answers or making things
softer or better for me. I don't really matter much here... Billions of lives depend on me figuring
this out fast. Help me. Please."

"What do you know of Infinity Stones?" It was an old technique of Maria's. She would test what
Tony knew to gauge where she needed to start teaching, be it mathematics or the piano.

"Not enough to figure out that I fucking am one until about two minutes ago... That, and every
other encounter I've had with them, people end up dead," Tony replied.

"Which have you encountered?"

"The Tesseract, which was sent to Asgard to get it the fuck out of here. There was one in an alien
sceptre, and now it resides in a synthetic human who sometimes freeloads off of me, but I like him
way too much to say anything about it... The Aether was cruising around Earth a little while back
during the convergence. I didn't see it. But the destroyed parts of England sure as fuck did. And the
Eye of Agamotto is over there somewhere... And how is this my life?" Tony directed the question
to Stephen, who smirked.

"It's my life too you know... We'll get through it," Stephen said, and shrugged casually.

"You are the best thing about this situation my dear," Tony said and shook his head.

In the pause, Maria started her explanation. "Each of the stones came from six singularities at the
start of the universe, and has an individual focus, Tony. The Eye of Agamotto is the Time Stone.
The Tesseract is the Space Stone... Your father... He never knew about you while we were alive.
Not that you are what you are. After he started his experiments when he pulled the Tesseract out of
the ocean, I knew I had to conceal you better. Humans weren't ready for that kind of power. So I
hid you until I could make you what you are... My family guarded the Soul Stone for generations...
I thought that by giving you humanity, that hopefully you would remain free of the influence of
others... It seemed to work particularly well by the time you hit age twelve," she said. Stephen
smirked again and Tony rolled his eyes.  

"I took the stone, and I made you, concealed you as my son to avoid the dangers of you being used to others' purposes."

"Yeah, well you could have done better by getting Obadiah Stane the fuck out of my life. I've been used plenty by others," Tony snarked.

"That was your father's influence, not mine, and you know it," Maria said. Tony looked properly admonished. "But I love you, Tony... And I always tried to show it... My beautiful boy. So handsome now. I get to see you sometimes. When things are going well or poorly for you. I cry at your troubles, and rejoice in your successes. I know that you will adapt to this, as you have to every other thing in your life," Maria said tenderly. She looked over to the table, and saw a familiar crest on the books that Wong had laid out.

"Those will help. They set out the properties of what you were before. Before I bound you in your bones... I will let you know that you will survive the loss of your physical body. But now you will always be as you are. You always were Soul, but now you have one too. Your humanity will save you."

"Thanos is coming. Are you sure about that?" Tony asked. Maria went still at the mention of the name Thanos. She settled Tony with a look that reminded Stephen and Wong of the Ancient One. Maria Stark only appeared to be placid on the surface. Underneath was an iron resolve. There was also an open quality to her that the Ancient One didn't have, and Stephen's natural desire for information was fascinated by her.

"My... wanders... since my passing have shown me that the mad titan is in love with Death. He sends her souls as tribute. But what that means, Tony, is that for all his force and violence, he cannot destroy souls. He cannot destroy you. But you will have to work to save everyone else," Maria said. Tony still looked unsure and afraid. Maria met the gaze of Stephen and Wong. "You'll help him?" she asked.

"Yes," Stephen said. Wong nodded in agreement.

"These two... They're powerful, Tony. Perhaps more than I ever was, because they can cooperate with others. I had a problem with that."

"So I come by it honestly, then," Tony mused.

"But you can rise above the faults we made, Tony. I hope you understand that we weren't perfect, but we tried. We were so wounded by our lives that we hurt you, and we're sorry for that," she said. Tony narrowed his eyes at her careful use of the we instead of I. He reached out, searching for something, not knowing what it was until he found it.

"I can feel him, mom... Where is he?" Tony looked around. "Olly olly oxen free, Howard." Tony waved a hand, and space opened again. The next moment, Howard Stark stepped through it. He looked younger than Tony had ever known him, and he appeared much more like Stephen and Wong in their astral forms, semi-opaque with a haze of white-blue light around him. It reminded Tony very much of the Tesseract or the arc reactor. "Dad," Tony acknowledged, a contentious note in his voice. "Just can't let me have a nice moment with mom, can you?"

"Because it's not her apology alone to make," Howard replied. His voice was smoother, and less plagued by cigars and scotch. "Because I am sorry, Tony. I didn't know how to nurture you... And I knew that every moment I had with you. That's why I left so much to Edwin and Anna. They knew..."
better. They knew more about tiny humans. He was better for you than I could have ever been... Maria couldn't explain what you were to me until after we'd passed... until after we could affect the world. I'm grateful she didn't, because I know now that I would not have used it wisely... But my ignorance doesn't absolve me, and I'm sorry for the harm I caused you... I get windows into your life now, and... my god, boy, the things you've accomplished. I couldn't be prouder or more in awe," Howard said. Tony recoiled a bit, his mind refusing to accept this version of Howard as genuine for a moment. But he knew it was.

"I know it sounds like bullshit, but I've had a quarter century to think it over, and to better understand you. Things I couldn't bring myself to think about when I still held that hammer of influence over the world... Everything looked a lot more like nails back then," Howard did seem to be genuinely remorseful. Tony couldn't deny that he could feel that now. Which, holy fuck, that was going to take some getting used to.

"I'm... going to need some time to process that," Tony said.

"I understand," Howard replied. Which might have been the first time he'd ever said those words to Tony.

"Like, you can see how weird and Twilight Zone this is?" Tony asked.

"Sure, I can... Do you?" Howard asked.

"Getting a handle on it, I think." Tony shrugged. "But I hope you can see why I would equate me being this, with you finally giving me some recognition that I might actually matter to you, and why that might make me bitter."

"Yeah, I can," Howard admitted with a nod.

"Good talk, dad," Tony said, and turned back to Maria. "What do I need to know? How... dangerous am I?"

"You willed us to come here, Tony. You hold souls in your control. I'm only hoping that we raised you to be moral enough to handle that responsibility. Every soul, Tony. You can protect them, or you can harm them. You can recall the dead to the living, but I hope you can see how disastrous that would be. You can create souls, already have created souls," Maria said, looking at him with motherly pride. Tony looked momentarily confused, and then realized what she was talking about.

"FRIDAY," he said softly.

"And Vision... JARVIS was one too. If not for your influence, then he wouldn't have been able to resist Ultron."

"And Ultron? Was that my doing?"

"No, that was the influence of the mind stone. Mind, knowledge without soul, created Ultron. Your influence created Vision. As it created Dum-E... Why do you think I insisted that you leave him as he was? That you not reprogram him." Maria said. Tony's jaw dropped, and he looked down at his hands.

"I... think I need to go hug a robot, and maybe cry for about three days," Tony finally said. He looked up at Howard and Maria again, who had gravitated toward one another. "I saw what the Winter Soldier did to you. HYDRA video taped it... I'm sorry that happened. It wasn't right."

"We're okay, son," Howard said. "We're just fine. We worry about you, and what will happen
here... But you can handle this, I know you can."

It was the tone Howard took with promising young engineers at Stark Industries when he was alive. It conveyed absolute faith in the person to succeed. It was the tone of voice Tony longed to hear as a young man. Tony sighed, and curled in on himself. He felt heavy in his chest, like the weight of the universe was coming down on him. It was then that he felt Stephen's touch on his shoulder, and the load lightened. "You won't be alone, Tony," Stephen murmured. Tony looked over at his body, and realized that light was pouring from his half closed eyes, and under his shirt, from the still unhealed contusion on his chest.

"What will I be at the end of this?" Tony asked softly.


"Yeah, yeah I think I am," Tony replied. He looked back over to Howard and Maria, and took his mother's advice from their final meeting when they were alive, and sucked it up. "I don't know if I forgive you, but I love you, dad," Tony said.

"I love you too, Tony. I'm sorry. About everything."

"I love you mom," Tony said with as much warmth as he could. Maria Stark's soul came forward, and caressed Tony's cheek. She pressed her lips to the other cheek in a soft kiss.

"I love you too, Tony... My brilliant, shining boy," she said. Tony sighed, and let the two souls go, and they faded back to wherever Tony had conjured them from. Tony looked back to Stephen and Wong.

"Okay, I think that's enough for now," Tony said. Both of the sorcerers looked relieved. "How do I get back in there?" Tony asked, pointing to his body.

"Like so many things in sorcery. Surrender to the current. You're supposed to be with your body. Just let it happen," Wong explained. Tony closed his eyes, relaxed, and thought about where his consciousness should be.

The next thing he knew, he was startling awake, in his body, with its familiar pain, hunger, and other consequences of being alive. He curled up, trying to process what had just happened. The first thing he noticed was the feeling in his chest. Something had fundamentally changed about him. The pain was still there, but he no longer felt weak. "What the fuck?" he whispered, and pulled his tie loose, and undid several of his shirt's buttons. The wound from Captain America's shield had been replaced. Instead of angry flesh, a strip of light had taken up the crack in his chest. There was a solid barrier, but Tony could see as it crackled and shifted around inside of him like lava. It pulsed in shades of yellow, orange, and red. He touched it, but it didn't burn as he expected it might. Stephen knelt down in front of him, and placed his hand over Tony's.

"Guess that eye is open now," Tony muttered. Stephen smiled at him, leaned in, and kissed him softly on the mouth.

"Are you okay?" Stephen asked.

"Exhausted. In mourning... And yet so euphoric I think I could fuck you through a mattress," Tony said, feeling the cold air pass in and out of him, with an ease he certainly hadn't had before.

"All in all, not a bad result," Wong observed. "At least he didn't try to go tripping through the multiverse on his first attempt."
"Multiverse?" Tony asked, intrigued.

"Trust me, not as fun as it sounds. Emphasis on the tripping part. Tripping balls specifically," Stephen said dryly. Tony grinned and looked at Stephen. He felt like he was seeing him for the first time. The halo of light remained around Stephen, though it was more muted than the clarity of his astral form. On impulse, Tony grabbed Stephen by the collar of his shirt and pulled him in for a more enthusiastic kiss. Touching Stephen, connecting with him, gave Tony the best fucking high he'd ever had. He craved contact, and in doing so felt even stronger. He could feel the reciprocation from Stephen, though Stephen managed to pull away.

"Christ, it's like kissing high grade cocaine," Stephen said.

"Feels fucking good. Why did you stop?" Tony asked. He pressed his lips greedily to Stephen's jaw, trying to work his way back to his lover's mouth.

"Because we have work to do, Tony. I assure you, I want to... But you have a lot to learn. I have a lot to learn. Do you mind staying here at Kamar-Taj for a few days? We can get you warmer clothing... And for when we need it, my room here has... privacy," Stephen said. He wasn't proud, but nor was he terribly shy about what he wanted.

"Oh, robes, sexy," Tony said, but he seemed to have reined himself in. He leaned forward and pressed a small kiss to the end of Stephen's nose, who laughed. "Okay, let's go learn some crazy metaphysical shit."

"So damn dramatic," Wong grumbled, and went for the table with the books he'd pulled on it.

Chapter End Notes

I find I have a hard time being compassionate toward Howard Stark. Always have to be honest... But this popped up, and I was like, ehhhhh, I'mma roll with it. Which seems to be the overreaching feeling as I write this thing. Dunno if chapters will always be this prompt, but enjoy it while it lasts.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Stephen and Tony admit some schmoopy but important things. Tony admits he's feeling a bit needy at the moment, and learns he has a few new abilities.

Chapter Notes

This is a bit slower and shorter than the other chapters, but Tony's had a rough day. Snarky Tony returns next chapter. Things are a-brewing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony spent the better part of the next hours going over the manuscripts and trying to not get weepy eyed at his phone. He discovered quickly that FRIDAY's presence on a piece of technology gave it an aura, and it blew his mind. When FRIDAY tapped in to Wong's computer and it lit up, Tony had to hold back a sob. He had never been so daunted by the responsibility of teaching an A.I. now that he could feel her. She was more than a program. She was his... progeny. He had to have a long talk with Vision, and the bots. He felt frayed at the edges mentally. The day had been Eugene O'Neill kind of long, and traumatic to boot, mixed with a jump across the globe.

Physically, he felt stronger, like he could go on if he had to, but Stephen noticed the tiredness around Tony's eyes. "It's getting to be a long day," Stephen observed. Tony didn't disagree with him, and that told Stephen plenty. "Can I take you to bed?" Stephen asked, closing the book they'd been reading. Tony sat back and let himself yawn.

"Yes. Even if it's not the happy ending kind," Tony replied. Stephen laughed.

"Quarters might be cramped, but I think I could be convinced to give you a happy ending," Stephen said. He held out a hand, and Tony took it without hesitation. "We're going to get some sleep," Stephen said to Wong, who waved them off from his spot at shelf across the room. They'd digitally scanned the volumes for Tony's future reference. Thankfully, they were written in Latin and hence perfectly legible to Tony, who finally understood why Maria had insisted he learn it.

Tony was more tired than he realized when Stephen's humble palette in the living quarters looked like a king-size in a luxury suite. The narrowness meant there was extra cuddling required, and Tony got to curl up nice and snug with his sorcerer. Stephen had dressed Tony warmly for the night, even if it was partially selfish in the drafty building. If Tony was warm, that would keep him warm as well. He had examined Tony closely once he had his shirt off, making sure he was indeed fine. His chest was whole, just a lot more interesting now. His eyes had faded back to their human brown shortly after they settled in to reading, and things had calmed down.

Once they were in bed, with only a lamp lighting the room, Tony ran his hand up and down Stephen's arm. "I just want to touch you all over," Tony murmured.

"I'm not opposed... In fact, I'm a bit of a fan," Stephen replied.
"Yeah, but will this neediness stop? I think being away from you right now would actually be painful," Tony said, and burrowed his nose into the crook of Stephen's neck.

"I'm sure it will fade, but as I said, this is fine, Tony. Your soul is searching for connection to others. I'm willing to connect. You've had a hell of a day," Stephen said.

"So have you. You dropped everything to be with my sorry ass."

"This right now, is hardly a burden... Worth every moment... I'm over the moon that you're going to be okay. I love you, Tony," Stephen said quietly and reverently. Tony moved and met Stephen's gaze, eyes open and full of wonder, shimmering with the light inside of him. "I probably shouldn't tell you now. You're vulnerable. But it's not going to change. I loved you before we knew this. I love you now. I'm pretty sure I loved you after we spent that afternoon talking about pain. You are easy to love, Tony. And I do. I love you."

Tony's eyes closed, blocking the light that once more pouring from them but not the one from his chest. It shone out from the multiple layers he was wearing. "I love you too," Tony whispered. "I love you so much,"

"Well, then you shouldn't feel like you are any kind of burden, Tony. People who love one another, support one another."

Stephen could feel the wetness near Tony's eyes. He didn't comment on it, and simply ran his hand through Tony's hair. Tony somehow managed to get closer, melting in to Stephen. But the wondrous thing was that Stephen could feel Tony's love, strength, and resolve. It overflowed and spilled into Stephen, freely shared. He kissed Stephen's neck and jaw, and Stephen settled around him, embracing all that emotion.

"You're not going anywhere, right? You'll stay with me tonight? Not even to wander off in your astral form?" Tony asked.

"My night is yours Tony. I'll be here."

"Thank you," Tony said, and sighed happily. He was exhausted, beyond getting anything carnal started. "I'm sorry... I don't think I am up for anything other than a vigorous fucking hand holding."

Stephen smiled, and held out his hand. Tony met it, and entwined their fingers together.

"We've got time to get to that, Tony. Rest now. I'll be here."

Stephen settled in. Tony sighed quietly, and the light coming from his eyes and chest faded a little. Stephen turned out the lamp, and the warm, faint cast of light from within Tony was enough to sleep easy by.

Tony woke, and he noticed two things: the freshness of the air, and how warm he was. Stephen was next to him. "Hey sleepyhead," Stephen said, noticing the change in Tony's breathing.

"Mmm" Tony's vocalization was muffled by his octopus act on Stephen.

"Did you sleep well?" Stephen asked. Tony's head moved slightly, so he could be heard.

"I don't remember the last time I slept this well," Tony admitted.

"Good," Stephen said. "Can I tempt you with a criminally potent cup of coffee?"

"To get me out of this bed, it had better be criminally potent," Tony said and yawned. He looked at Stephen, with heavy-lidded eyes. "Morning, love... Is it morning? This is jet lag without the jet setting isn't it?"

"You've been asleep for almost twelve hours. It is indeed somewhere in the vicinity of morning."
Early. But morning. "Stephen ran his hand through Tony's hair, feeling ridiculous at how much he loved this moment.

Eventually, Tony was roused from bed as the sun crested the mountains. Wong would have been up for hours already, needing little sleep, so Stephen didn't expect to find him while they washed and got ready for the day. Tony ate voraciously, clearly having no issue with the food available at Kamar-Taj. Adaptable and open, Tony seemed to just be happy to be close to Stephen. They were lingering over coffee and looking at the landscape. "So, you never told me. How did you figure it out?" Tony asked.

"I mentioned to Wong how much I would have liked to have met Maria. As is his way, he's got a mind for facts. He recognized her maiden name, and then we pieced it together that she would have had the Soul Stone... But couldn't detect where it might be held. That's when we turned to you. It was only then that your survival began to make sense, Tony. You probably should have died in Afghanistan. If not outright, then from a secondary, post-op infection... And I know you're probably going to think this is cheating, but its not. You didn't ask to be what you are. It's an extraordinary privilege to wield the power you have, but also an incredible burden. I hope you will be reverent of it," Stephen explained.

"To be honest, I would prefer not to use it. I have no business saying who lives and who dies, or even how someone should live. Not my monkeys, not my zoo," Tony replied.

"I can think of certain exceptions," Stephen mused, running his fingers over the back of Tony's hand.

"You mean Maximoff," Tony deduced.

"I do... But I suppose part of that is my pettiness. I dedicated my life to this. She was gifted it in a crap shoot and has no realization of the damage she has done, and can do," Stephen said.

"To be fair, a Stark weapon did kill her parents. She has her reasons to hate me."

"Logic doesn't follow, Tony. In the worst way to think about it, how many missiles sold by Obadiah killed kids' parents, and none of those kids decided you were murder worthy," Stephen reasoned.

"Thanks," Tony said sarcastically.

"It's awful, Tony... But most people would not blame the knife maker if they got stabbed," Stephen reasoned. "Forgive me... I shouldn't be talking about this when we've both suffered a shock."

"I'm going to have to get used to it," Tony said. "About thinking about all those souls."

"Yes, you will, but it's not my job to make that more difficult for you. I want to make sure you're all right, Tony. I care. I want to help you, not hinder your progress."

"So distract me. Make me feel normal. What do you want to do today?" Tony asked.

"There's little that might be seen as normal at Kamar-Taj... However, I wouldn't mind going to the market to replenish supplies. Then we can settle back in to the books your mother's family wrote," Stephen suggested.

"Market... You just want to make sure I can handle myself in public," Tony said.

"Is that a bad thing?" Stephen asked. "Besides, how much time have you spent in Nepal? Let's go
"Gonna be a lot of temples," Tony said.

"And really neat bridges and walkways with cool engineering and architecture," Stephen offered.

"Oh, that could be interesting," Tony said, changing his tone and suddenly genuinely interested.

"Wanna talk physics to me, baby?" Stephen asked. Tony laughed out loud.

"You sure know how to charm a boy," Tony said and kissed Stephen.

Tony realized how little time he got to spend with Stephen and how badly he wanted to by mid-morning. He yearned for closeness and was grateful that Stephen didn’t seem opposed to the idea. They wandered the market and then beyond, Tony bundled up in clothing that was typical for tourists in the area. The altitude was bothering him less now, but he was still no fan of the cold. They had used two microfibre shirts to conceal the light pouring from his chest, and the daylight helped further that.

Stephen bought herbs and magical supplies, and only rolled his eyes at Tony’s joke about finding a monkey’s paw. Tony followed Stephen placidly, taking note of the architecture and how people adapted building techniques to the locale. He snapped photos with his glasses for Rhodey to see later.

They were nearing a temple when it happened. A woman carrying a child who was too old to be carried approached them. She called out in Lhasa for Stephen, who turned to her. "Help," she pleaded in English. Stephen looked at the boy, who stared out, unblinking and unmoving.

Tony was no expert, but he knew what he could detect now. He could sense something deeply wrong in the boy, and finally sorted it out. A foreign presence in him, in conflict with the boy’s soul. Tony shoved the brain-breaking metaphysics back, and confronted his reality. "What’s in him?" Tony asked as Stephen checked the boy's pulse and pupil response.

"So you can sense that now too?" Stephen asked.

"Apparently? This is fucking weird... like... conflicting air currents carrying different coloured smoke." Tony's voice was unsure.

"It's what you might recognize as a possession," Stephen said cautiously. He was waiting for Tony's derisive snort, but it didn't come. Tony's worldview of what was possible had expanded over the last twenty-four hours. There was something to be said for personal experience, if not exactly quantifiable evidence. "You could help me with this if you’re willing. But we need to take him back to Kamar-Taj. Whatever it is inside of him will need to be put somewhere secure," Stephen explained. Tony nodded without hesitation. Based on Stephen's experience, anyone who had ever called Tony selfish was talking out of their ass.

He beckoned for the woman to follow him, and she did, stating her gratefulness in Lhasa. It was the work of a few moments before Tony was carrying the boy for the weary mother, and despite having no desire for children, it melted Stephen’s heart.

They used a more public door to re-enter Kamar-Taj, where everyday seekers came to be accepted for training. It was also where the residents distributed items to the needy. Stephen asked an attendant for a reliquary, who had obviously seen this situation before, and headed off at a quick pace.
"You can help me here, Tony. You should be able to simply reach in and remove the entity. But you have to guard yourself. Put up a wall between you and it, so it doesn't try to infect you. I can contain it after you've removed it. Try to feel where the boy's soul ends and the other begins," Stephen said. Tony laid the boy on the floor, away from the main traffic of the room. He looked him over carefully. Reaching out, as he had to find his parents, he found something dark and permeating at the edge of the boy's soul.

"Oh, there it is," Tony said. "Oh no."

"Nasty isn't it?" Stephen asked.

"Yeah... It's stalled for some reason. It can't get any further. It's angry."

"If she knew to bring him to us, it's probably the work of his mother," Stephen said, eyeing the boy's mother. "Many people have a small working knowledge of magical warding. You will need to be careful to protect yourself from it," Stephen warned. "Put a barrier between you and it before you try anything."

"A barrier..." Tony mused. Then his eyes lit up. The swirling red, yellow, and orange energy came up and out of him to form a translucent armour around him. The woman gasped and stood back.

"Nice," Stephen said flatly. "Very on brand." His expression was somehow sarcastic and delighted simultaneously. It was one of Tony's favourites to see. He grinned at Stephen from inside the ghostly Iron Man suit.

"Well, it's been a very successful design," Tony justified. He returned his attention to the boy. Stephen readied himself and the reliquary to contain the entity. Tony reached out and touched the boy's chest, and felt the traces of the roots of the dark will and pulled, ensuring he got every last bit. What came up looked like an ink blot that shifted and rumbled like thunder.

As soon as Tony had it out, a line of Eldritch magic swirled around it and pulled it away. Stephen, on the other end of the line, directed it into the carved stone box the attendant had brought. The entity screamed as it was compressed and contained. The lid snapped closed on its own, and everything was quiet. "Oh man, please tell me that Kamar-Taj sued for copyright infringement when Ghostbusters came out," Tony said.

"Not that I'm aware of," Stephen replied, but smiled. "Though they probably had grounds to."

Tony smiled wide when the woman rushed forward and picked up her waking son, comforting him. Setting things right was another endorphin bomb it seemed, and he had to keep from throwing Stephen against the wall to kiss him. He took a deep breath, and let the mental armour fade back into his body. "That felt... good. Like, really good," Tony said.

"We make an excellent team," Stephen agreed. Wong was standing in a hallway that lead further into the building. His arms were crossed over his chest. His face would have been unreadable if Tony couldn't feel his emotions. Wong was concerned, but quietly proud of them.

"You can't save them all, you know," Wong said.

"Yes, but we could save this one," Stephen said. "I'm sure you've read the Talmud."

Wong sighed deeply and gave the barest of smirks. "You're a good man, Stephen. As are you, Tony. Good work," Wong said, turned on his heel, and left.
Had that hazy vision of how I am going to tie this up, so this story will definitely have an ending now. When I know where I am going, it gets a lot easier to get there. So stay tuned, folks. Next chapter I get to add BAMF!Tony to the tags.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Tony has decided to put himself in charge.

Chapter Notes

Just a quick little shot... Posting it as I get it done.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A week later, Tony was sitting outside of Kamar-Taj, granting himself the rarest of indulgences. The initial panic and fear had faded, and he was accustomed to seeing auras and knowing more about people than he would have preferred, but he was also getting a hang on blocking it out and protecting himself.

He should have been studying the manuscripts, but he already had much of them memorized. The words were in his mind, if not their exact meaning. The language was dense and esoteric. He'd even expanded into the literature about the Time Stone and the Eye of Agamotto as well.

He wondered if Stephen's ability to wield the Time Stone was part of their mutual attraction. His reading had informed him that the Infinity Stones had a way of ending up near one another, Mad Titans bent on the destruction of everything or not. But Tony wasn't going to fight their connection, except where it got in the way of their ability to function.

Hence his being outside while Stephen worked with novices for the afternoon. Tony could let Stephen out of his sight now, but he still liked to be in the same general area as him. Being outside of the building allowed him this afternoon indulgence. He was sitting on a wide stone wall, with a notebook Stephen had given him to jot down important things about the manuscripts. Now though, he had the book open wide and was using an old Parker Jotter ballpoint pen to draw an architectural rendering of Kamar-Taj.

It was something to distract him while he felt around. He could feel Stephen. Could find him inside the building. It was comforting. To challenge himself, he found Wong behind him, who was leading a starting class about sling rings. It was coming to an end, with no one making any great strides. He found he could see a person's face in his mind's eye as he felt the presence of their soul... And that was how he felt her. He only paused his drawing for a second, then forced himself to be calm before the panic even rose. How the hell could no one else tell? How had she made it this far among sorcerers? He probed a little deeper and came up with an unsurprising answer. Technology. His technology to be specific. He set down the pen and book, and took a moment to stretch.

He saw her out of the corner of his eye. Her aura was different from everyone else at Kamar-Taj. It was a hazy grey, compared to the lively colours of the other novices. She was wearing the facial concealing net and a wig, appearing Asian.
But her movements set her apart. She was too smooth to be new at using her body in unique ways. She was too quick of a study. That smoothness translated into how she wielded the ring. Her form was beautiful despite her lack of success at it. Tony tried to feel for the woman whose face matched the one their current visitor was wearing. He steadied himself, and reached out. To his surprise, he found the woman. She was still days away from Kamar-Taj, delayed but still expected to arrive. Clever. Tony took a moment to observe his surroundings under the guise of relaxing. The light from his chest was safely hidden under his clothing, so there was no worry there. He swung his leg over the edge of the wall, and dangled his feet over the side. He took a deep breath, and decided to be bold.

He stared at the intruder calmly. His action did not go unnoticed by Wong. The woman noticed and paused in her efforts. "Really, Romanoff? You think you can infiltrate here? Just how big is your ego?" Tony announced. The entire class came to an abrupt halt.

"Hi, Tony," she said, pulling off the net in dramatic fashion. "I've been worried about you."

"No you haven't. You don't get to be worried about me. Not after all you've done," Tony replied. The class was looking around, and to Wong, for guidance. He waved them all behind him.

"Of course I am worried. Kamar-Taj, Tony? Seeking even more power?" she asked. Tony's eyes narrowed slightly. Of course she was after information. Always the stock and trade of the Black Widow. She was too confident in her abilities to manipulate him, which drove her to casually revealing herself. Thankfully Tony and his therapist had talked about that too, and he felt much more able to handle her.

"Oh, fuck off. You're delusional. Am I dressed like a novice? Tourist only. I'm on a quiet retreat with my boyfriend. Have you looked at the scenery? It's gorgeous." Tony held up his drawing as proof, but his voice was harsh.

"You were nicer before you got in bed with Ross," she said.

"I was an Avengers themed doormat. At least Ross was honest about his intentions... One time a little spider told me that I should watch my back. It was the worst kind of good advice. Wish I'd listened sooner. I'm watching you, Charlotte's Web. You don't get to eat me after you get what you want out of me." Tony glowered down at her, but his posture remained relaxed and unconcerned.

He had a plan for when this went south. She truly couldn't hurt him anymore.

Stephen came out of the main building, probably alerted by another of the residents, walking with purpose. "Status update," he demanded.

"Oh you know, an itsy-bitsy spider just crawled up the waterspout... I'm currently playing both moose and squirrel to foil this Boris-less Natasha's plan," Tony said. To his surprise, it was Wong who snickered at that.

"This is the Black Widow?" Stephen asked.

"In all her double-crossing glory... Or is that triple-crossing? I can't keep track anymore. The woman who was supposed to be here is a few days away. I can feel her. Seems she came down with some food poisoning. How convenient," Tony said. Natasha's brow furrowed.

"How do you know that?" she asked.

"How indeed?" Tony asked. He felt calm and more confident now. His anger simmered. Stephen's influence most likely. Still, he felt he had a few things to get off his chest. So to speak. "I just want
you to know, that from now on, Romanoff, I will see you. There is no sneaking up on me to jab me in the neck anymore. No double-crossing the wishes of over a hundred nations. I see you... And I know how utterly empty you are inside. How devoid of morals and loyalty. You might want to be better, but you are long, long way from it... And I'm done with you. I'm done protecting you. I gave loyalty, time, money, resources, contacts. Most importantly, I tried to be your friend, and you took a shit all over it. Because you and your ego thought you had more rights than the citizens of over a hundred countries." Tony shook his head sadly for a moment, but had a flinty look in his eye when he looked at her again.

"So now, I must do what I promised the WSC and UN I would do, and what the Sokovia Accords demand I do... Natalia Alianovna Romanoff, you are being placed under arrest, and will be remanded to the custody of the World Security Council. This will be for assessment and investigation into your role surrounding the events at the Leipzig airport, and for questioning on possible breach of the Sokovia Accords," Tony said coldly. He saw the split second expression of Romanoff planning her escape. She was about to make her break for it when Tony waved his hand.

The next thing Natasha knew, she was watching her body fall to the stone work she had previously been standing on. It took her a moment to realize she was no longer in her body. Horrible understanding shocked her into stillness long enough for a thin line, composed of yellow energy, to manage to snake around her and hold whatever she was now in place.

"That was quite clever, Tony," Wong said, impressed. Romanoff's soul in astral form, hovered above her body, moored to the ground by Stephen's Eldritch magic.

Romanoff looked on, face aghast in fear and confusion at what she was seeing. "Oh, oh god... What? What did you do?!" she shouted, and tried to fight the binds that held her. Tony stilled his face, and tried not to take much pleasure in watching Romanoff freak the fuck out for a change. Instead he tapped his glasses.

"FRIDAY, dear, can you call up Veronica and send something suitable to contain the Black Widow? And send me the suit. This will go better if I look the part."

"You got it, boss." FRIDAY sounded happier than she had all week. Things back to normal made the A.I. feel reassured.

"Stephen, Wong, I need to take Romanoff in for questioning. The Hague. Any chance you could cut that trip short for me?"

"Of course, Tony," Wong said.

"What is this, Tony?!!" Natasha shouted. "What did you do?"

"Calm down, Romanoff. It's temporary," Tony said. He took a moment to really look at the appearance of her soul. She was gaunt, and somewhat withered. That was interesting, and yet not surprising to Tony. "It's not harmful. You are detained for now... And while you have your body trained to resist questions, your soul is very vulnerable... But I will make this easy on you. It's simple, really. Explain why the fuck you're here and we'll get along better." Tony used that same frightening, demanding tone he'd used with his mother. It was scary even to him. Natasha's soul stared at him like an intimidated child might. She was so used to resisting a line of questioning, but with her body. Her body was trained. Her mind was trained... But something about this type of vulnerability compelled her to speak. "Go on, tell the truth for a change. It will be good for your soul," Tony encouraged.

"Intel says you had a high clearance meeting at the Pentagon, and then proceeded to vanish from
D.C. The day after that, media outlets started making noises about the government trying to reach out to Steve and the others in cases of extreme need. I want to know what went on at that meeting, and what your play was. Then I found a report of you and Strange wandering a market in Kathmandu like tourists, which didn't make logical sense, so I came here to find out why," she said, amazed at the words falling from her mouth. Tony watched as her soul became slightly less ashen.

"You want to know what my play is... You think I'm trying to draw out Rogers. No. So much no. I'm so done with the pack of you. I'm looking after me for a change," Tony said.

"You always look after you," Romanoff said bitterly. There it was. The ugly bias she and the others had held against him from the start. Distance and time had dulled the knife she was trying to plunge into his gut. The insult was so ridiculous that he couldn't help it, and laughed.

"Right, just because I have manged to live so far, that's my fault. I planted the attack in Afghanistan... I am responsible for Hammer, Vanko, and the Mandarin. How dare I think that other people should be fucking adults when the world doesn't go the way they want... It must have been me who left me for dead in Siberia, because it never could have been Saint Rogers. Yes, I have taken personal responsibility for my actions since Afghanistan. But that doesn't mean that everyone else gets to slack off on it so I can be their scapegoat. Do you even hear yourself? I refuse to participate in your games and delusions, Romanoff. Just because you think you are right, doesn't mean you are." Tony's voice was sharp, and he took a deep breath to calm his anger again. He didn't want his eyes to change and tip her off that something had changed about him, other than being psychologically healthier now.

"Look, I get it. Rogers made you feel you could be a good person. Made you feel you were doing right, and attending to some great noble purpose. He's very good at that. So good at it, that I am certain that there is absolutely nothing I can say, which would pry your lips from Rogers' ass. But it doesn't change the fact that you're wanted for fucking war crimes, and on charges of espionage and terrorism... You're damaged, Natasha. You don't even know how damaged you are. How manipulated you've been. Fury and SHIELD just continued the conditioning of the Red Room, even if they were nicer about it. Nicky pulled the same loving father-figure shit on me, and I still have no idea if it was genuine or not... But I've moved beyond needing it, because I got help," Tony said.

"Looks like you're doing just fine now," Natasha snarked, unable to contain herself like this. Emotions she hadn't let see the light of day in years were coming to the surface of her mind, and it terrified her.

"You think I walked away unscathed because I am still walking free?" Tony asked. "I woke up in the hospital being treated for frost bite on the lesser end, and a shattered sternum on the more serious end, and there were agents there to question me. I have been under questioning since it happened. They still call me in to make sure my story hasn't changed. They will continue to do so until Rogers is apprehended. They will again now that I have apprehended you. Bringing you in is just creating more hardship for me... I don't know if you know about what Rogers and his best buddy did to me. I don't know if you also knew that Barnes murdered my parents. But looking at you now, I can see that you probably did. And none of you thought it might be prudent to tell me... Because Rogers had to save his precious Bucky. Bucky above all, to hell with everyone else, including me. And now including you. He's left you behind too."

Natasha shook a little at that, and Tony knew he had gotten to her. It was supremely satisfying and made him want to throw up at the same time. "I've been where you are, Romanoff. It sucks. But I'm not sorry if it makes you understand someone else's point of view," he said. "FRIDAY, have
"Done and done, boss. They're expecting you," she replied. The armour descended, landed gingerly, and then delicately cuffed Romanoff's hands behind her back with reinforced cuffs and shackles that could only be opened with Tony's fingerprint and voice command. The armour then placed an adhesive gauze on the spot on Romanoff's head that was bleeding slightly from its impact with the concrete. Tony collected the facial net, and kicked the wig to the side. "Ready to go, gents?" FRIDAY asked. Tony looked to Stephen.

"Coming with me?"

"Of course," Stephen agreed. He held the line of Eldritch magic firmly, and gave Wong a nod, who opened the portal to the relevant building in Amsterdam. The armour opened, and Tony stepped inside of it, and took hold of the cuffs, and lifted Romanoff's body from the stone. Powerful magnets in the shackles activated and attached to the armour, and Stephen moved her soul into position. Tony gave it the nudge to return to her body, and Romanoff when limp in his arms. The Eldritch magic held firm around her, adding to the restraints and held her upright so that Tony could move freely. Romanoff woke, but was disoriented from the head injury, and that was perfectly fine with Tony. They walked through the portal, and all Tony felt was relief as Stephen fell into step with him.

FRIDAY brought the helmet down over his face, she glitched for a moment as their position on the planet changed, but she picked him up moments later. Tony could see her running every diagnostic possible all at once. "FRIDAY, what are you doing?"

"Your baselines, boss... I'm trying to figure them out, and this is the first real opportunity I've had to assess. I need to evaluate your biometrics to match up with your tech."

"Aw, honey, thanks for worrying about me," Tony said.

"Someone has to make sure you're not going to explode," she replied.

"Nobody I would rather have at my back, dear," Tony said.

"I'm trying to be mad at you. Quit it," she said.

"Oh, take my blood sugar too. You never know," Tony said, and grinned.

"Dammit Tony, I'm trying to be serious here," she said.

"Okay okay, let's get Romanoff dropped off at the babysitters, and I will give you and Stephen a full workup, cognitive included," Tony bargained.

"Promise?" she asked.

"Pinky swear," Tony replied and wiggled his left little finger.

On the other side of the portal were a group of heavily armed police in a loading dock, with a small medical team off to the side. "Hello, folks, thanks for coming. She has a bit of a bump on the head from a trip and fall during her escape attempt. Don't let that fool you, she's probably still plenty dangerous."

"Thank you, Dr. Stark," one of the officers said in accented English. They approached cautiously, but with weapons at ease. Tony appreciated foreign police forces for their more calm and logical approach to apprehending someone. They transferred Romanoff's shackles to the set carried by two
of the officers, and Tony and Stephen were told to follow them inside the building. As soon as she was booked, she was whisked away to a special holding cell, and Tony and Stephen were asked to file reports.

"This is the sexy part of being an Avenger," Tony said to Stephen, as FRIDAY finally pulled the helmet back, and Tony stepped out of the armour so as to be able to type and write more easily.

"Actually, I think the sexy part was where the officer called you doctor," Stephen said cheekily. Tony snorted, and managed to stop himself from leaning in to give Stephen a kiss for the sake of professionalism. Instead he looked at him warmly, and Stephen returned. He realized then, that this was it. This was what love felt like, and he was in deep. And it was one of the greatest things he'd ever experienced. When a look felt as good as a kiss, it was something special.

"Love you too," Tony said softly. Stephen winked and teased him with an air kiss. Tony smiled at him. Stephen looked perfectly ridiculous doing that while kitted out in sorcerer garb, and it was delightful.

"How are you, Tony? You lived very closely with Ms. Romanoff for awhile," Stephen said, bringing some seriousness back to the situation. They were waiting in an unlocked interrogation room.

"I... I don't know. I think I'm okay. I've been talking with my psychiatrist about them. All of them. I trust the doc. I see where things went wrong, where I went wrong, but also where they went wrong. I have no desire to hurt them anymore. I just want them away from me... I felt like everything was ruined after what happened. I actually thought I was done... But I couldn't leave Rhodey. Vision is still dependent on me. And the Spider-Kid was driving Happy nuts because I just couldn't handle one more thing... But FRIDAY kept me getting up in the morning, and Rhodey's successes kept me motivated, and Vision's need to learn kept me interested... And now, I have you... I have people. I have love... She can't get to me anymore," Tony said. Stephen got close, standing next to Tony, shoulder to shoulder.

"I love you, Tony," Stephen said.

"Love you too," Tony said, leaning in to Stephen just a little. "But do you love me enough to get through this? It's gonna take hours."

"While there are other things I would rather spend hours doing with you, I believe we can get through this," Stephen said. Tony chuckled.

"I need to get back to work... Honeymoon's over if they're making noises about bringing Rogers back," Tony said.

"I have to do the same. It's been wonderful spending this time with you though."

"This has been the best week I've had in a long time, despite the obvious weirdness," Tony replied.

"Obvious Weirdness could be the title of the memoir of the past few years of my life," Stephen mused. Tony laughed.

"Mine was going to be Cheap Shot and Cheesy One-Liner, but then the water tower was knocked over and it kind of killed the mood," Tony said.

"Oh you'll need to tell me that. We've got nothing but time for now," Stephen said.
Chapter End Notes

Feed the author, leave a comment. I need them to live. XD
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Dr. Strange gets his Devil's Advocate on. Rhodey looks good in blue. Vision freaks out a little. The boys have lunch. Typical Sunday.

Chapter Notes

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in
Anthem - Leonard Cohen

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I think I can fix Bucky Barnes,” Tony said. He and Stephen were laying in bed in Stephen’s quarters at the Sanctum Sanctorum, listening to the traffic on Bleeker Street.

“You... what?” Stephen mumbled, voice still full of sleep. It was the Sunday morning after they had returned to New York, and Tony had made sure to keep Saturday night and Sunday open to spend with Stephen. Tony ran his fingers along the back of Stephen’s neck and up into his hair.

“I think I could do it. I could separate him from his programming,” Tony said.

“Wait, do you know where he is?” Stephen asked.

“Wakanda. He willingly went into cryo again. FRIDAY has been keeping tabs,” Tony said mildly. Stephen looked more alert in an instant.

“You’ve known all this time?”

“Maybe?” Tony said, expression unsure. Stephen’s eyebrows drew together.

“Then why haven’t you sent the World Security Council there to round him up?” Stephen asked. He was confused, but affectionately ran his hand over Tony’s hip under the covers.

“Because spying on people is illegal. More importantly, Rogers is there with him... As are the rest of the Cap loyalists after he broke them out of the Raft. The other side of the world doesn’t really feel far enough away, but I’ll take what I can get so long as they lay low,” Tony said. He squirmed a bit when Stephen’s fingers glanced over a ticklish spot, and managed to get himself even closer to the sorcerer. He expected Stephen to ask him about his moral fibre, but he didn’t expect how Stephen phrased it.

“You know... You could take care of them all,” Stephen said softly. Tony instantly recognized this for the thought experiment it was.
“Sure, but I could have done that in Siberia... Hell, I could have done it Leipzig. I could have fired up the unibeam at full pop, and left them as little more than pink mist and wayward partial DNA samples. I was never out to kill them... I just wanted Rogers to see... to see what he’d done, to see the damage. But he’s so fucking blind that he couldn’t even fathom that I would be enraged that Barnes murdered my parents... After watching that video, I admit I wanted to hurt them, but I never wanted to kill them. I just wanted them to be held as accountable as I’ve had to be... FRIDAY was angry at me for weeks. I think part of the reason she insisted I get up in the morning after everything was out of spite. And now that I know what I know about her, I can see why. She was watching her father almost get killed too, in real time,” Tony said.

“Got it in one, boss,” FRIDAY piped up from his phone. Her voice was more sad than angry now.

“Without you to call Vision, I don’t know where I would be. I’m sorry, hun,”

“I know,” she replied softly.

“I never became a pacifist when I stopped weapons production... I’ve even left men for dead in the course of being Iron Man... But never a teammate. Never someone I considered a friend... But I see it as a weird kind of fuck you to Rogers to fix his best buddy and then see how they cope with reality,” Tony said. Stephen’s hand moved to Tony’s middle back and rubbed gently.

“Doing good out of spite is probably not a great idea, Tony,” Stephen said. “And it would be bailing Rogers out once again.”

“Barnes never asked to be made into what he is. I could prevent others from possibly being hurt if he’s woken up prematurely,” Tony reasoned.

“Of course, but it is not your responsibility to fix him. I want you to know that. He is not your responsibility to fix... Had Rogers pursued a different route, then perhaps you would have been more than happy to help. From what you’ve told me, you made sure that Rogers knew treatment for Barnes was available from the start... If you can come to a place where you forgive Barnes, and want to do it, then by all means. But I would urge you to resist doing it before you reach that point. I would also urge you to resist until you see some true contrition out of Rogers... I think the man is deluded and traumatized, not that I blame him for the state of his mental health, but his obsessions got innocent people killed. At this point, I don’t really think he deserves your mercy, Tony. Even if that mercy is directed at his friend. He will take that as a sign that he was right all along. Might I suggest offering the B.A.R.F. tech if someone asks you for it. Otherwise, you should not feel guilty for leaving them in the bed they made.” Stephen kissed Tony’s forehead and sighed contentedly.

“But I could do it... I could fix him,” Tony murmured.

“With a mere thought and a flick of the wrist if you wanted to show off. Perhaps without even leaving this bed... But should you? Should you give Steve Rogers the privilege of feeling he’s right?” Stephen asked. Tony moved his head and looked his Advocatus Diaboli in the eye.

“You’re right,” Tony said.

“Probably... But I can see why you want to. You think you’ll need them when Thanos gets here... For all Rogers’ strength, he would never be anything more than cannon fodder and you know it. All he has is an advanced metabolism, and the fact that he never skips leg day. The shield that was so precious to him is currently being used as a dust pan by your cleaning bots. Don’t think I didn’t notice... You said yourself that the armour could reduce him to a fine paste. How is he to stand up against an alien armada?” Stephen asked. He thought he was doing rather well despite his growing desperate need for coffee.
“He’s good at rallying people to a cause. We can use him,” Tony said.

“So are you, in case you haven’t noticed. Especially when it comes to rallying people of power and means. They all speak money, and Earth’s defence is going to require that. If Rogers would even agree to act strictly as a figurehead, would people follow him anymore? The rest of the world hates him as they hate other terrorists. His time and usefulness as a rallying point is pretty much over, unless you’re willing to invest in some extensive goodwill building. Goodwill that you, Rhodes, and Vision already have with the public... And what about the families of people who died in Bucharest? They deserve justice, Tony... What I would suggest you do though, is report them to the World Security Council. I know it will end in some kind of contact with Rogers, most likely across a courtroom. But if you don’t want people to get scared and pardon him out of their desperation, then you should do the right thing,” Stephen said. Tony let out a long, slow breath, relaxing into Stephen’s embrace.

“I should talk to T’Challa about it. He lost his father in all of this too, and he could be a valuable ally. He deserves some consideration. I don’t want to kick his door in, seeing as I’ve been peeking through his blinds since I woke up after Siberia... I want to give him a chance to do the right thing too,” Tony said.

“That’s fair... So, how does one get into contact with a king?” Stephen asked.

“After coffee. Caffeination is a crucial part of the process,” Tony replied. Stephen laughed quietly. “Can we have lunch with Rhody today? I... still have to tell him and Vision about all this.”

“And you want back-up.”

“Yes. So much yes... You think Wong has some time too?” Tony asked.

“I think we can be big boys and do it on our own,” Stephen said, and stretched.

Tony felt grounded after his talk with Stephen. He felt less conflicted with the idea of leaving Barnes for now. He didn’t have to rescue people. He could choose. He was allowed that much. He was still clueless as to what to say to Rhody, but he couldn’t leave it any longer. He arranged for a meal to be delivered to the compound, and asked FRIDAY to make sure that Rhody and Vision were available. She returned with a message that they would be welcome.

Tony could now give medical reports. His body, despite the anomaly at his chest, was human. He bled, respired, and digested. His heart was still beating merrily and easily away, better than it had in years. His stress test had been a breeze. He still felt pain. His body was still very mortal, which accounted for his normal aging rate. *Bound in his bones*, as his mother had said. His senses were heightened to a degree. He felt living things around him, sentient or not. If he let the world in, it would have been overwhelming, but the ability to filter was coming along. He wondered what a meeting with a sentient, non-human animal would go like, but hadn’t had the time to track down an elephant or dolphin. Magical relics had proven fascinating, and he no longer had any qualms about the Cloak of Levitation settling on his shoulders. The Cloak was filled with affection for Stephen, and for him because of Stephen. The sentience was based in the Cloak’s ability to choose how to use itself, and Tony became much more reverent of it.

He’d spent the week back forming contingency plans for Thanos. When he’d told Stephen his Plan A for dealing with the Mad Titan, Stephen had smiled with a wicked, conspiratorial look he’d given him that first meeting in the pub. “Clever, clever man,” Stephen murmured and kissed Tony.

They decided that it was better to keep the plan secret, for fear of word somehow reaching Thanos. But Tony also wanted plans B through Z in the bag long before anything happened. FRIDAY was
recording ideas and prioritizing them as fast as Tony could cook them up. Tony felt a pang of loss for JARVIS, who would have started building on those ideas on his own. One day FRIDAY would get there, but not quite yet. This was why he wanted to tell Rhody now because he felt he had enough information to give.

Tony brought the manuscript by his mother’s family with him as they stepped through the portal to show Rhody and Vision. He also brought a digital version with translation for them to keep. The food was just arriving, and the delivery driver looked astounded at seeing space open up, and Stephen and Tony walking through. Vision tipped the driver and saw him out, but even he took a moment to gawk at Tony. So, Vision could tell something had changed. That meant that Maximoff would likely know the instant she saw him.

Rhodey walked out of the hallway leading to the living quarters, using forearm crutches to stabilize his body on the braces. He was getting so good on them, Tony swore he was almost War Machine ready, but when Rhodey was in a hurry, the crutches helped him determine where his legs were and steadied him.

What made Tony pause was Rhodey’s aura. It was a rich blue, calm and steady despite all he’d been though. Tony couldn’t help it, he went to Rhodey and gathered him up in a hug. Rhodey juggled the canes, but held Tony back. “Hey, you alright?” Rhodes asked.

“You just... look really good in blue,” Tony said.

“What?” Rhodey asked, who was wearing black jogging pants and a white t-shirt.

“I’ve had a weird couple of weeks, honey bear,” Tony said.

“Okay,” Rhodey replied, and held Tony more tightly. “Are you okay?”

“I have to talk to you, sour patch,” Tony said. “I’m okay. But I’m sorry, I have a whole new level of weird.”

“I’d say I’m used to it... But you being you, let’s just say I’ll do my best to understand instead,” Rhodey said. Tony laughed quietly, and took in how good it felt to be in contact with his friend. He managed to pull away in a reasonable amount of time, and made sure Rhodey was steady on his feet. They went to the large communal table. Vision came floating around the corner and his gaze locked on Tony.

“Mr. Stark, I am compelled to ask what has happened to you?” Vision asked. It was rare to see Vision bewildered, but he was, and it was putting Rhodey on edge.

“You want the detailed version or the quick and dirty version followed by details?” Tony asked.

“Quick and dirty,” Rhodey said, his face concerned.

“Mom was a sorcerer. I’m an Infinity Stone,” Tony summarized. Rhodey’s lips parted and his eyes went wide. Stephen rolled his eyes at Tony’s lack of tact.

“What the fuck are you saying, Tony?” Rhodey asked.

“Too quick or too dirty?” Tony asked.

“Oh! That’s it!” Vision exclaimed. Tony hadn’t seen enthusiastic wonder on Vision’s face yet. Wonder yes, but not excitement. He’d grasped the concept in an instant. Rhodey however, was still flabbergasted. Tony reached out gently, and put his hand on Rhodey’s arm.
“Like, I said, it’s weird,” Tony said, softening his voice and body language.

“What were you smoking in Nepal, Tones?” Rhodey asked.

“It’s true,” Stephen said. “Tony’s mere survival up to this point was suspect, so I started an investigation. Tony is the Soul Stone.”

“Bullshit,” Rhodey said.

“No bullshit, Jim,” Tony replied. He only ever called Rhodey by his given name was he was being deadly serious. It was his code word. The first time he’d used it was when he called Rhodey to tell him that his parents had died. Rhodey stilled.

“An infinity stone? That’s... insane, Tony,” Rhodey managed.

“Tell me about it,” he said. Tony let go of Rhodey, and made to take off his shirt. Rhodey’s head tilted. “Proof,” Tony explained. “Going for proof.” He pulled off his thick hooded sweatshirt, a t-shirt, and an undershirt. Rhodey recognized the kit from when Tony wanted to hide the arc reactor. Shedding the clothing bathed the two of them in warm light.

“Oh my god, Tony,” Rhodey said when he took in the glowing crack across Tony’s chest. “What is that?”

“It’s... me... It doesn’t hurt, I swear. Not like it used to... And I can breathe again. My sternum is no longer the same consistency as Nerf,” Tony said.

“This is better?” Rhodey asked. “What did you do to yourself?”

“I always was this... I was literally made this way.”

“By your mom.”

“By my mom,” Tony agreed with a nod. Rhodey reached out fearlessly, and touched the glowing section of Tony’s chest. He trusted Tony to stop him if it would hurt him, and Tony didn’t move, so he went ahead. The light was firmer than the flesh around it, and it gave Tony’s skin a warm hue with the ambient light it emitted.

“Why didn’t she say anything? No. Why did she even do this?” Rhodey asked.

“She didn’t do it to me, per say. She made me, out of the Soul Stone. I haven’t gotten to the part where I ask her about Howard’s genetic contribution, but I figured that was a conversation for another time,” Tony said.

“You’re talking to your dead mother?” Rhodey was headed toward incredulous.

“It makes sense if he is the Soul Stone. Conceivably he could speak to anyone living or dead if he holds sway over souls,” Vision said. He also looked like he wanted to reach out and touch Tony, but managed to hold back. Tony closed his eyes to gather himself. He took a breath and calmed down. He threw his t-shirt back on, and took Rhodey’s hand, and surrounded it with his own.

“Here, just relax,” Tony said. His eyes opened and they matched the light inside him. He opened up and let Rhodey feel him. Rhodey let out a gasp. He was being barraged with emotions, and it was frightening until he felt they were all positive, and all of them were directed at him.

“What is this?” he asked.
“It’s how I feel about you, Jim. I know I’m shit at saying it, but now I can at least let you know.” Tony said softly. Rhodey felt warmth, gratitude, and familial love. “And this is how I see you.” Rhodey caught a brief glimpse of himself surround by a haze of blue.

“I do look good in blue,” Rhodey muttered. “This is still nuts.”

“Yeah, no argument there,” Tony agreed.

“I can see it though, looking back. How you survived Thor and Loki when they first showed up... That was a weird,” Rhodey said.

“What happened then?” Stephen asked, intrigued.

“First time he met Thor, Thor shot the suit with lightening. The suit didn’t even blink and JARVIS shot the energy back at Thor... Which okay, the suit has remarkable safety parameters... But then Loki attempted to mind control Tony with the Mind Stone just before the Chitauri came through the wormhole... It didn’t take. We thought it was the influence of the arc reactor, but it was all we had to go on... And this last one, I’m not proud of, because I knew I couldn’t do anything. Thor wrung Tony’s neck just after Ultron formed because he was pissed at Tony. Lifted him right up off the ground. After Thor dropped him, Tony was sore and out of breath, but relatively unscathed... I wish I had said something, done something... But I was angry too... And I regret it every day,” Rhodey said.

“There were plenty of reasons to be angry at me during that time... Let it be known that misquoting Neville Chamberlain is a bad idea and immediate disaster follows,” Tony said. Rhodey sighed.

“Never should I have been angry enough to let someone assault you. I was too intimidated to do anything without the suit, and too indifferent to put it on,” Rhodey said. Tony hadn’t known Rhodey was so conflicted about it.

“Rhodey, it’s okay. We’re okay aren’t we? I think you know that you were the reason I kept going after Rogers pulled his fuck the world song and dance... So, please, Jimmy, don’t feel guilty about that. Try not to, okay? You’ve already been though so much shit on account of me... I want to be beyond that,” Tony said. Rhodey didn’t say anything, but he did give Tony’s hand a squeeze.

Stephen looked pointedly at Vision. “Adorable aren’t they?” he asked. Vision smirked, while Tony and Rhodey rolled their eyes. Stephen went to the cupboards and gathered plates and flatware. Tony eventually laughed and leaned into Rhodey and sighed happily.

“You’re even more cuddly than normal,” Rhodey observed.

“Side effect,” Tony explained. “Emotionally connecting with someone I love gives me a nice little buzz.”

“So I’m your enabler again?” Rhodey asked.

“But like, in a good way? I can share if you want. It feels good. Stephen likes it,” Tony said.

“Of course he does,” Rhodey said. He didn’t try to shrug Tony off though. The physical closeness was an old habit when they were in private. Tony had long ago explained this to Stephen, so he wasn’t concerned in the slightest. Stephen set down plates, and Tony reached for the bags, which contained everything from sushi to burgers from a local joint. Tony then proceeded to half lay on Rhodey again, as much contact as he could get. Even now Stephen could feel Tony’s happiness, and it was a nice thing to see. Even if it was tinged with sadness of the past. Stephen took quiet note of the actions of the Asgardians, and would have to be careful of them in the future.
“So, Thanos,” Rhodey said once the food was dolled out.

“I have a plan,” Tony said, and snagged an extra piece of spicy tuna.

“A plan?” Rhodey looked unimpressed.

“And about ten back-up plans so far,” Tony said. “But the first plan should be enough to end this thing if I can pull it off.” Rhodey sighed again.

“Why does it always have to be you, Tony? Why do you value yourself so little?” Rhodey asked. Tony set down his chopsticks. He sat up and faced Rhodey.

“Because I’m the one who won’t be destroyed by Thanos. I’m the one thing he can’t break. It amounts to bullshit chosen one stuff, but mom did it this way so I can’t be used by anyone to cause further harm to the universe,” Tony said. He was still leaning in close to Rhodey, who hadn’t moved away at all, comfortable and at ease with Tony. Still, Rhodey looked worried.

“And if Thanos finds a way around that?” Rhodey asked.

“Well, then I have a hell of an upgrade planned for the War Machine... I’ve been watching a lot of Voltron lately,” Tony said and grinned.

“And Pacific Rim... So help us all, he’s been taking notes,” Stephen corroborated, and gave Tony a long-suffering smile.

“I like big bots, and I cannot lie,” Tony said. Rhodey finally broke down and laughed.

“You two deserve each other,” Rhodey said. “Look, Tones, I get it that you’re trying to lighten the mood, but do you really have a plan?”

“Yes, and it’s one where everyone lives, including me and excluding Thanos,” Tony said.

“You’re planning on killing Thanos? I’ve only read the SHIELD files, but man, that’s nuts,” Rhodey said.

“It’s more roundabout than that, but yes, it ends with Thanos dead. That is what is going to happen, one way or another.”

“And if that plan fails?” Rhodey challenged, firmly understanding already that he was not going to be privy to it.

“Seriously, we build you a Voltron... But let’s keep in mind that I am not the only Infinity Stone on the block. Stephen has the Time Stone, and Vision has the Mind Stone, and they might be enough to bring Thanos down on their own.”

“And what stones does Thanos have at his disposal?” Rhodey asked.

“We are unsure about that. It’s the next step for Wong and I,” Stephen said. “But please understand, Jim, Tony is stronger than the rest of the stones combined. It’s why Maria went to such lengths to protect the Soul Stone. By all accounts, she never practiced magic again. I believe she used so much power to form him that she was no longer able to summon power, or perhaps it was a tactic to protect him. She knew the Soul Stone is that important.”

“So, what is it you do now?” Rhodey asked, like he might about an upgrade to the armour.

“Getting the hang of things. I can call up souls. I can feel living things around me. See auras...
Detect when people are lying or concealing their identity, case in point, Romanoff... That book says I can do a lot of scary things that I have no interest in attempting except for in dire circumstances.” Tony pointed to the manuscript. “How’s your Latin? You can read it if you want. I brought a digital copy with translation. Bonus points if you come up with the same plan I did.”

“You... You spoke to your mom... Could I talk to my sister?” Rhodey asked tentatively. His sister Jeannette had died in the late 90’s under suspicious circumstances, after a life struggling with addiction. Her death had led Tony to seek rehab in a genuine manner, and that had possibly saved his life. It certainly saved his career at the head of Stark Industries. But he had gotten clean and stayed clean for Rhodey’s sake, because he couldn’t let him be alone in the world.

“If you feel like you’re ready for that, sure,” Tony said, quiet and serious. There was little he would deny Rhodey, especially the chance to make his peace with his lost sister. Rhodey considered that carefully.

“Maybe... Someday. Not now. But maybe,” Rhodey said.

“Okay,” Tony agreed simply, and started eyeing up more spicy tuna. “Just say the word.”

Rhodey got quiet after that, processing everything he’d heard. Vision on the other hand, was full of questions. He confirmed in his own mind, that is was Tony who had provided the environment free from Ultron, for him to develop from JARVIS into his own being. He confirmed that he did indeed have a soul, and was only momentarily silenced by that fact as the wonder settled in him. Then his mind was off again. He wanted to know the extent of Tony’s power, though sadly Tony had to leave him with several unknowns in that regard. He wanted to know about Tony’s physiology, which Stephen explained was still very human.

But when the meal ended, Vision came to Tony, looking expectant and hopeful. Tony smiled at him and opened his arms wide. Vision hugged him tight, almost like he didn’t want to let go. It felt comfortable, like hugging family. “This is remarkable,” Vision said. Tony could feel him now, and vice versa, and he knew that Vision finally felt that he was no longer alone in the world. It made Tony very humble to have Vision think that, and he promised him that he would be staying closer now. Tony fought off tears, which were overflow from how Vision felt. Insight into Vision felt like connection to JARVIS, and it made Tony hope they could remain close, and that everything would work out fine.

“I have business stuff tomorrow and Tuesday, so I need to be in Manhattan. But I have meetings in Washington on Thursday. I’d like all of you to attend if you can spare the time. I need to assure the WSC and American governments that I have a plan to deal with Thanos, so they don’t do something stupid like pardon Rogers and his pity party in desperation.”

“You got it,” Rhodey said without hesitation. Feeling useful was his favourite thing right now, and he always jumped at the chance to do so.

“Of course I will be there,” Vision agreed.

“Thanks,” Tony said, and meant it. “I’ll send the jet for you on Wednesday night, and you can spend the night at the condo.”

“Sounds great. Now, go do something romantic with your boyfriend, man. He’s looking attention starved,” Rhodey teased. Stephen looked insolent, but his eyes were smiling. He was getting to like Rhodey very much.

After they had stepped back through the portal, and were safely along in the Sanctum, Tony
grinned at Stephen. “I think Vision is going to be hanging around more,” Tony said.

“Yes, I felt that too,” Stephen agreed. “It’s okay, I knew you had children when we got together,” he teased.

“I don’t know about child... little brother maybe? JARVIS was so much more than a program... FRIDAY will eventually get there, but she’s not at his level yet. But Vision feels like family, like I want him close.”

“He’s good company, a good ally, and he needs family. Of course he shouldn’t be alone,” Stephen said.

Tony paused, and took Stephen’s hand. “This is what it should have been like the first time... The Avengers I mean. Not people thrown together and forced to work together because of dire circumstances... But instead, real relationships built up over time... The Avengers had no foundation, ya know? You can’t build a home without a foundation.” Stephen leaned in and down, and pressed a kiss to Tony’s mouth.

“You sir, are entirely loveable,” Stephen declared. Tony smiled and laughed warmly.

“So show me,” he replied.

Chapter End Notes

So, having reread a synopsis of Ragnarok, I think I can shoehorn this into current Canon. Being wary for Tony's sake explains a lot about how Strange treated Loki and Thor in Ragnarok I hope... In the story, Strange hasn't had his encounter with the Asgardians yet... If I have missed anything huge, please keep in mind I haven't gotten to see Ragnarok yet, but feel free point out any glaring errors. Oh yeah, talk constructive criticism to me, baby. Hawt.
Tuesday afternoon brought the news from FRIDAY that she’d gotten through to Wakanda. He was in his leased office at the former Stark Tower, attending meetings via remote connection. It felt good to get back into the patter of quarterly reports, and presenting the ideas and results from R&D to the board. It also felt good to be out of the compound for this type of thing. Still, he started slipping in ideas that would make things easier when it came to building a worldwide defence. Nothing obvious that would tip Pepper off, but things that would improve communication between devices. Improvement to GPS positioning. That sort of deal. Everything could be worked into the next Starkphone release.

The meetings also helped Tony distract himself from the little bomb he’d dropped on the world’s media. There were only a smattering of headlines for now. The media would be combing through Tony’s accumulated evidence for days, and he’d given independent news sources first dibs, with the big outlets all running to places like The Young Turks for details. It was a way to dampen the explosion, and he hoped people would be less likely to call it into question. The lack of trust for the media by the general public was now at Tony’s regular levels. But Tony had to move now, there was no longer time to let egos get in his way of saving everyone.

Pepper stayed cool, not mentioning Tony’s prior meetings in Washington, and didn’t question how things had gone with Stephen in Nepal. It was another conversation he had to have, but he wanted it to be in person, like he had with Rhodey and Vision. He arranged an in-person meeting for them via text while they spoke with the board. Tony liked being one of the older members of the board now that he’d passed out a few golden handshakes to free up some space. His opinion carried gravitas now. The old guard was in the minority and the younger members were burgeoning with ideas and energy. Bless those adorable Millenials.

FRIDAY sent him a text that she’d made contact with Wakanda's crown princess, Shuri, and was fairly certain she wasn’t going to get any further than that. Tony told her to set up the call, and that they would have to settle.

Tony finally managed to get out of the office, and head to his remaining workshop at the tower. He had his take-out dinner in hand after one of the aides brought it up. Everything would soon be moved out to the compound and most of the heavy manufacturing equipment was already gone. It made sense. The real estate was too valuable to justify the homage to his ego.

The bots were still here though. Tony wanted the new space to be perfectly ready when they got there. Dum-E, as always, noticed Tony’s entrance first, and beeped cheerily upon seeing him. The bot called to U and the others, and they all rested their attention on him, ready to be of use if needed. They all had auras like FRIDAY to his eyes now, and they were all points of bright white.

“Hey guys,” Tony said softly. Dum-E rolled up, happy to be acknowledged. U was close behind.
“So... it’s been weird since I saw you last.”

Dum-E’s claw went for Tony’s chest, obviously detecting the difference in Tony’s ambient temperature at that point in his body. “I’m okay, buddy,” Tony assured the bot.

Tony ended up picking at his meal, and just staring at the bots. The others eventually went back to their business, cleaning and maintaining the shop. Dum-E and U hung close to him while Tony had a small existential crisis over the fact that his robots were fucking alive. They had emotional lives, not just trained responses, and he... hadn’t noticed. Not in any meaningful way other than his own indulgences in anthropomorphism... But they cared for him. Were happy to see him. “I’m sorry for every horrible thing I ever did to you,” Tony said eventually. Dum-E’s apertures opened and closed, showing that was focused on Tony. He tiled his claw head. He moved forward and nudged Tony’s shoulder gently.

To Tony’s newly awakened senses, Dum-E and U felt like pure lightness. He’d encountered a few new babies from a distance while walking the market near Kamar-Taj. Their auras had that bright white look to them too. Tony reached out and touched the pressure sensitive plates on Dum-E’s claw. “I never... I never knew...” Tony said, awed. There were other pressure sensitive plates on the bots, to help them navigate around, so Tony reached out and touched the large one on Dum-E’s chassis. Dum-E balked for a moment, but then curled his claw around and over Tony. Tony smiled, connecting to the old bot was one of the strangest things he’d felt yet. He reached out and waved U over, who was more timid, but eventually moved in.

The entire interaction was silent after that. He supposed it was like holding a pre-verbal child. It was good to just let them know you were there for them. He made plans to move the bots to the compound as soon as possible. They needed more social interaction.

FRIDAY spoke quietly, saying it was time to call Wakanda, and Tony reluctantly let U and Dum-E go, though they remained close. He grabbed a bread stick and a sip of coffee, more energized by the act of connecting to another, and it whetted his appetite. He readied himself for the call, reading FRIDAY’s latest briefing on the conversations she’d already had with officials, and braced himself for a challenging conversation with the crown princess. Shuri wasn’t unknown to Tony. She would one day leave him in the dust as an engineer if Tony didn’t stay at the peak of his game. Her papers at various schools, including M.I.T. were expansive and revolutionary. Tony was proud to say that some of them were studies expanded on from work and concepts he himself had innovated.

The woman who came on screen when the call connected was young and beautiful, but her eyes spoke of wisdom and wariness. She’d been raised for leadership, something Tony understood well. “Thank you for agreeing to take my call, your highness,” Tony said in his best speaking to the board of directors voice.

“Terms? Like the part where they left me for dead in Siberia with life-threatening injuries and no means of communication with the outside world? I admit I was angry for awhile, but then I considered all of the other people on the planet who’ve taken Steve Rogers at his word and All-American puppy dog eyes, and I can’t blame him. We all got taken in,” Tony said, dropping the pretense. Shuri’s eyes narrowed at him. He saw it in the micro expression, reached out and could feel it within her... Her anger. Something about Steve Rogers pissed her off. It was convenient if nothing else.

“Yes, that,” Shuri said flatly.
“Look, your highness, I’m calling to tell you and your brother what I know. I know that you have an uninvited... diplomatic envoy composed of people from several different western nations in country. I know that you’ve been very generous to a veteran amputee and helped him get some sleep. I also know that with apprehension of Natasha Romanoff, pressure will come down on me very soon to root out Steve Rogers and his accomplices. There are larger things at play, and Rogers’ services will be wanted. Not by me, he can go fuck himself as far as I’m concerned. But certain American interests think he could valuable. I don’t share that view, but he could prove a useful diversion while I set up the infrastructure to save the planet.”

“Save the planet?” Shuri asked.

“Right, isolationist society... How much info does Wakanda have on the topics of Infinity Stones or Thanos?” Tony asked.

“Some... For a time Wakanda sheltered one, but it was lost many generations ago during a political coup. The science surrounding it has helped advance Wakandan society though... I would like to ask, Dr. Stark, how is it that you came by such sensitive information about the current state of affairs in my country?”

“I don’t pull this line very often, your highness, but as the world so often puts it, I’m Tony fucking Stark. I may be portrayed as a clownish asshole, but I assure you it’s a guise in order to keep people from being terrified about how much I know. Code is easy. Like breathing,” Tony said.

“Wakandan code is...” Shuri trailed off as she realized what she was about to say.

“Different from anything else in the world... But augmented in the last ten years or so by algorithms for artificial intelligence I cooked up in scientific papers while at M.I.T., and expanded on in beautiful fashion by you. Your work is amazing, your highness. The direction you went in surprised even me... You’re also very lucky you didn’t get hacked by Ultron,” Tony said.

“The system itself is self-healing instantaneously. There is no damage to be done if there is no way for it to occur. I would be intrigued to speak with you further on the matter;” Shuri offered.

“I would be very honoured to do so, your highness,” Tony agreed.

“Excellent, for now though, we need to discuss this matter of diplomacy. What are your options?” she asked.

“Not many. I can report them to the authorities, but my evidence has not been obtained legally... I admit that. Also I would like to assure you now, that I have not gone rummaging around where it was not in direct relation to my personal health and safety... I... I would hope that his majesty would do the right thing and find a way to bring our mutual problem to a satisfactory end, with justice for all. We face a larger incoming global threat, your highness. And to be frank, it would be good to have them in hand so they don’t meddle in my plan to save us all.”

“What is that threat, exactly?”

“He’s called Thanos... Thor thinks he was the driving force behind Loki’s attempt on our little Midgard. We’re fairly certain its him. The Sorcerer Supreme and residents of Kamar-Taj and Sanctum Sanctorums worldwide are assessing this as we speak. An alien armada is roughly three years out, and that is only if they keep to their current pace and aren’t using wormholes. The early theory is that Thanos is attempting to gather the six Infinity Stones together in order to make a coup for the entire galaxy and possibly beyond... I will need the help of Wakanda, and specifically of you, your highness, to handle this threat,” Tony explained.
“And the help of my king?” Shuri asked.

“Sure, he can come too if he wants,” Tony said and shrugged. Shuri suppressed a mischievous grin. T’Challa was a genius in his own right, but Shuri was the one who worked at it.

“And will our... diplomatic envoy be needed?”

“They will be largely irrelevant in the face of this threat. If they return to society, they will be arrested and tried on the charges against them. As it stands, thanks to the efforts of some very smart lawyers, they’re lucky they haven’t been convicted in absentia. Dealing with them would just be an irritation off of my to-do list at this point,” Tony said. He took a breath. “Should I even ask how much they’ve broken during their stay?” Tony ventured.

“The entitlement is... almost astonishing,” Shuri replied. So that was the source of her anger. Rogers and his pals were getting restless. Tony snorted.

“Yeah, part of that is my bad. I spoiled them,” Tony admitted.

“If I may be frank now, Dr. Stark, I want them gone. Especially the Sokovian representative. She is proving to be a poor influence on the others,” Shuri said.

“I’m not surprised,” Tony said mildly. He picked up his coffee mug and took a sip. “I’m sorry you’ve had to endure this. I can empathize.”

“If only they could as well,” Shuri said. Tony snorted again.

“I hear you,” he said.

“What shall I tell his majesty?” Shuri asked.

“Exactly what I’ve told you. I will be in Washington in thirty-six hours. If I don’t hear back from you, I can keep the topic on the off-world threat... But I assure you, they’ll want to know if I know anything. I would like not to lie. I... I will if I have to, but I’m walking a fine line. I’m just as close to imprisonment as any of them. One step wrong, and the planet is fucked. I can handle the alien threat, but I need to be free to do so,” Tony said.

“You can?” Shuri asked.

“Yes, your highness... I have my own experience with Infinity Stones. I have formed several plans and alliances, but I think my first effort should work just fine,” Tony said.

“Fighting fire with fire?” Shuri’s graceful eyebrow arched.

“Fighting fire with soul, your highness.” Tony let the light inside of him flare out of his eyes for a fraction of a second. Shuri looked like she wasn’t sure she’d seen what she’d seen.

“I will speak to my king, Dr. Stark. Will a response within twelve hours be sufficient?” Shuri asked, recovering herself.

“FRIDAY, dear, am I in a meeting?” Tony asked.

“No boss, thanks to the Not Before Reasonable O’Clock in the Morning Protocol.” FRIDAY said.

“You heard the A.I.,” Tony said. “That should be fine, your highness.”

“Very well, Dr. Stark. I look forward to resolving this issue.”
“Thank you, your highness,” Tony said.

“In our private conversations, please call me Shuri from now on,”

“Then I’m Tony... And yeah, we need to talk code ASAP.”

“I look forward to that as well,” Shuri replied with a genuine smile.

After ending the call, Tony breathed a sigh of relief. He managed to eat a little more of his now cold pasta. Perhaps it was the stronger output of energy that came with his new capabilities. Dum-E looked on, and Tony waved him over. He gave the bot a pat, and then started talking.

“I didn’t know, buddy. I had no idea... I... this probably doesn’t make any sense to you, but, my mom wouldn’t let me reprogram you all those years ago. She told me that you were perfect the way you are... And I didn’t see that until now. I’m sorry I didn’t see how special you are. But I want you to know that I’ll always do my best to look after you, okay? I’ll get you guys moved up to the compound as soon as I can, and set you to organizing my workshop there,” Tony said. Dum-E perked up at the idea of being of use, and beeped excitedly at U, who nodded back at him eagerly, and it made Tony smile.

He knew he should retire back to the apartment he held in the tower, but it felt wrong to just leave the bots. Instead, he removed his jacket, vest, belt, and tie, and kicked off his shoes. He settled on the over-sized couch that had been chosen specifically for the purposes of passing out. Dum-E brought him a blanket and U grabbed a couple pillows. His laundry service would be angry at him for sleeping in the slacks, but he thought the bots were more important at the moment.

Tony missed Stephen’s body beside his, and knew he would see him soon, but he longed to be near him. He resolutely refused to bother him while he would be working though. He and Wong were off via Astral Projection, on an adventure of epic proportions across the galaxy rooting out Infinity Stones and information about Thanos. Tony knew Stephen would get back to him as soon as he could. As if sensing his loneliness, Dum-E and U settled their claw heads on either side of his head. Tony smiled in the dim light of the workshop and managed to drift off.

Tony took the return call from Wakanda while eating breakfast. He was surprised that both Shuri and T’Challa himself were present. “Your majesty, your highness, thank you for speaking with me,” Tony greeted quietly. He found the idea of even having to think about Rogers put him off his appetite, but for the sake of his long day ahead, he was determined to finish the fruit at least.

“Dr. Stark, good morning. I hope we’re not interrupting your breakfast.” T’Challa said politely.

“This is part of the plan. Long day ahead. You’ll forgive me if I keep going.”

“Of course Dr. Stark... I would like to begin with an apology... I trusted Steve Rogers when he said that you were fine, and I should not have. Had I known that your armour was compromised, I would have acted differently... All that said, I failed to confirm your safety, and my ignorance could have killed you. That was not my intent, but still you suffered for it, and for that I am sorry,” T’Challa said. His expression and tone were sincere, Tony could reach out and feel it was genuine. But still, he was wary.

“I hear you, but I will have to work on that your majesty... It is only through the regenerative efforts of modified Extremis and Dr. Helen Cho’s cradle that I still have my hands and other extremities, including my ears and the end of my nose. Frost bite settles in quickly in Siberia. My sternum is currently braced up with donated cadaver bone after being beaten to mush by Rogers’ shield... I was furious for a while. It’s simmered now, but I am not free of my anger. I am not so
merciful as you, which is probably why I am a business mogul and not a humanitarian... But I will try. I have been working on other issues to improve my mental state, and that has been put to the back burner for now, to follow the metaphor,” Tony said.

“I understand,” T’Challa said.

“Now, we have other matters to attend to,” Tony said. “The diplomatic envoy needs to be addressed, and I choose softer language here not because the connection has security issues, but rather one never knows when a super soldier could be listening from a doorway.”

“Yes, I would agree, Dr. Stark,” T’Challa said. “And do not worry. Earpieces. Only my sister and I can hear what you are saying... This office is well away from where our guests are. To get to your point, I believe that they have gleaned all benefit they could obtain from an extended stay in Wakanda, and should be sent home in order to share what they have learned during their stay. My people were isolated for so long they grow nervous of too much outside influence, and they feel the envoy has overstayed its welcome... I would like you to know that I am still in favour of the Accords, as my father was. But I need to ensure the fair treatment of those who refuse to sign them.” Tony looked contemplative. The kitty-cat had thought his way around the issue diplomatically in a very easy way. He was giving sanctuary to those subject to a witch hunt. It would work to cover his ass, if Tony went along with it.

“I’m not sure if you’ve heard the news yet, yesterday morning, my time, admissible evidence was submitted that Thaddeus Ross is a moral monster, and never should have been put in the position he was, and never really had the authority he claimed to have. Not sure how it happened, but it did. However, I’m sure the Accords will survive this blow,” Tony said. His face was completely flat, but his tone was sarcastic. There had been a certain amount of glee for Tony telling FRIDAY to release the information, not that anyone would find out it was him. “A new secretary of state will be installed, and while I will most likely not get my personal choice for the job, I’m just grateful that that colossal road block on the path to world peace has been removed... As it currently stands, anyone who has not signed the Accords and committed criminal acts, will be treated as any other criminal under international law. They will be detained, questioned, and charges laid as necessary. They will be guaranteed the right to a fair trial by the International Criminal Court. They will be held under humane conditions, with access to all needed legal representation, visits with loved ones, enrichment and rehabilitation programs, as well as all physical needs met, including mental health,” Tony explained.

“A brief crossed my desk this morning about the now former Secretary of State... I would like to review the UN and WSC guidelines on the treatment of prisoners again though to be sure;” T’Challa said carefully.

“Of course, your majesty. I would like to say that the system has worked for me so far. I’m still subject to all of those same laws, and I’ve been treated fairly overall, even under Ross’ control. It will get even better now that Ross has been taken out of the picture. He couldn’t get his claws too far into me, because I was protected by the Accords. I signed and try to abide them and cooperate on all matters. I am painfully aware that I am subject to the people whom I have sworn to protect,” Tony said. “And I swore to protect everyone, even those that break the law. I will fight for the rights of others, as I would hope that others would fight for me.”

“It is only fair,” T’Challa agreed.

“Fares are for tourists, kid,” Tony quipped. “The universe continues to kick my ass most days, but no one ever said being one of the good guys is easy. It sure as hell isn’t fair, but I believe the world is worth it.” Tony’s voice was wary and tired. T’Challa was intelligent, and wise for his age, but he
still had a lot to learn about how the world really worked. To his credit, T’Chally remained quiet and listened.

“I think your reasoning for detaining the diplomatic envoy is sound, both morally and legally. It makes you appear as the merciful person you are. That’s good, and I think Wankanda’s reputation would remain untarnished. But how they are sent home will resonate around the world. How Romanoff was dealt with was really no skin off on anyone’s nose... Well, except for mine in Siberia... Never mind. Tasteless metaphor. Anyway, not many people seem to care, because the red in the Black Widow’s ledger still bleeds through the pages. But hauling in a guy that gets tossed around in the same imagery with bald eagles and Lady Liberty, shackled and subdued, will have consequences... Most likely for me. I assume they are comfortable where they are, and hence are reluctant to come home,” Tony said, he sipped at his coffee, and sighed deeply.

“I wouldn’t call it comfortable,” T’Challa said, strain showing again around his eyes. “There has been infighting, and the Sokovian representative has had to be restrained by local sorcerers.”

“ Seems to be a theme among sorcerers regarding her. I got a couple that would prefer to blink her out of existence and be done with her,” Tony said.

“For what crime?” T’Challa asked.

“Take your pick. The things she’s done cross some major taboos among magic users. She takes power without giving back. She reaches into people’s minds and wrenches their deepest fears to the surface. I can personally accuse her of that. Outside of magic, she willingly gave herself over to to be experimented on a terrorist organization, and then acted as an agent for them... The aforementioned American symbol calls her just a kid, because he sympathizes with the young person burdened with powers and glorious purpose trope. But instead of writing Harry Potter fan fiction or something, he decided he was going to save the world without any forethought as to what exactly what would happen if he tried to punch things to solve problems... You know what I was doing at the age the Sokovian diplomat is now? Revitalizing a Fortune 500 company, and laying the groundwork to entirely change that company’s direction. Maybe those two diplomats are slower to mature than other adults, but don’t believe the victim act for a second, your majesty. It insults your intelligence,” Tony said. It felt good to level with someone how he felt about Maximoff with someone who had seen firsthand the extent of her powers.

“I see your point, and I thank you for your candour, Dr. Stark. I agree with you. I find her frustrating and tiresome, to the point where I am ready to be rid of all of them. Save for our sleep study combat veteran. I believe he should remain safely in Wakanda. I don’t think he would be safe elsewhere.” T’Challa said. Tony found he agreed with that, and was set at ease. If Barnes was stable where he was, then there was no problem. “But, I would be willing to disclose his location to the proper authorities for their peace of mind.”

“I think that’s fair, but you’ll catch hell for it,” Tony said.

“I think my false accusations against him warrants me taking a little trouble to keep him safe,” T’Challa said. “I only wish that I could make up for my indiscretions toward you so easily.”

“You’ve made your apology, your majesty. The forgiveness part is now on me, and I would hope you respect me enough to leave that to me... So, how do we go about this?”

“I will detain the members of the envoy separately and securely. We have that capability here. And then I will contact the World Security Council personally,” T’Challa said.

“Rogers busted them out of the Raft on his own, are you so sure we are capable of holding them?”
Tony asked.

“Not entirely on his own,” T’Challa admitted. “He had outside resources, if not support. I was worried about the conditions on the Raft.”

“They’re not inhumane, but they are not meant to be comfortable,” Tony said. “I have worked to ensure better conditions, and a plan to not house known accomplices together has been implemented. Let’s face it, there are baddies out there who aren’t as controversial as Rogers and his crew. They need to be contained. When Rogers did what he did, he risked unleashing numerous convicted criminals. Including Emil Blonsky. If you don’t know who he is, Google ‘who broke Harlem?’ and he should pop right up.”

“I am glad to hear that no one else was injured, and I see now how rash his actions have been.”

“Be aware that holding facilities for Rogers and Maximoff in her current state are rare. Maximoff’s opportunities expand if she agrees to meet with the Sorcerer Supreme to put a damper on her powers,” Tony said.

“I will not let them be subjected to any torture,” T’Challa insisted. The moral high ground must have a fantastic view, Tony thought.

“She will not be tortured, she will be contained, which is legal under international law. It will be done on a mental level. No power dampening collars or restraints. Bear in mind we have proof of her violating the sovereignty of the minds of others. You just said yourself that your own crew of magic users have had to take her in hand. What would be done to her is similar to what you are doing now, and if you would permit an exchange of information between the sorcerers, it will be done as humanely as possible,” Tony explained.

“I would permit that at the discretion of our sorcerers,” T’Challa agreed.

“If you want to be spared, then I should be seen as the aggressor in this,” Tony said. T’Challa’s brow furrowed.

“I will not have you to taking blame for my actions, especially the illegal ones,” T’Challa said, bordering on anger. “Dr. Stark, I must stand as my own sovereign, and as my own man. I can stick to this, that you rooted out their presence here, and I decided to trust you because of how you apprehended Romanoff. It is the truth after all. If you want to avoid the situation entirely, I will say I contacted you after Romanoff’s arrest. But that will only serve to be me in better light with my people. They want this envoy gone very much.”

“If you wouldn’t mind taking the attention away from me, that would be great. I have other threats to look after and I don’t need to be higher on Rogers’ shit list than I already am. But be aware that the rest of the world is not going to like you harbouring terrorists,” Tony said.

“Detaining terrorists who still deserve basic human rights. They have not been permitted to leave Wakanda, and when they tried, they were confined to a secure wing in the royal residence,” T’Challa corrected. He met Tony with an imperious stare, and Tony saw his kingly authority. So Rogers had pissed T’Challa off too.

“Good. That works for me,” Tony said. “What do I tell the WSC?”

“I will contact them... You’ve done your part, Dr. Stark. You’ve been an invaluable catalyst to help me deal with the problem they present to Wakanda, and eased my concerns about their treatment after they leave here. My forces and technology can contain them for transfer, but you may be
asked to help the WSC contain them thereafter. I can’t control that... I will negotiate to keep and
treat Barnes as I do not trust the WSC to not find a way to take advantage of him, nor do I trust
Rogers to respect Barnes’ wishes to remain in cryo-stasis until he can be cured,” T’Challa said.

“I hope you get that concession. Barnes didn’t ask to be made into what he is. Also, with him on
the other side of the world, my peace of mind goes up... Look, if he’s ever safely awoken again,
tell him that I’m sorry... But Helmut Zemo made us watch a tape of Barnes’ Winter Soldier act
murdering my parents... So while he didn’t kill your father, he did kill mine... Parents whom I could
desperately use at my side right now, age notwithstanding. Parents whom I did not have a good
relationship with at the end, and I was robbed of the chance to make peace with them... But I am
sorry for how I reacted, for attacking, but everything was so fucked up. Then I had to watch Cap’s
pal Bucky choke the life out of my mother while she begged for her life... So I got pissed, and blew
one of the arms that killed my mother clean off his body. Problem was, I was fighting to maim and
detain... Rogers was fighting to kill me, and nearly succeeded... I hope that gives you some context,
your majesty. I still have a hard time talking about it outside of my therapist’s office,” Tony said.
He knew his expression was haunted, but he let T’Challa see the honesty of his response. It was a
careful showing of his weakness in order to strengthen T’Challa’s resolve.

“I... I understand,” T’Challa replied reverently. “I find myself having to apologize again, Dr.
Stark... I had no idea about any of those circumstances. My sincerest condolences to you.”

“Not your fault,” Tony said. “It’s hardly any surprise that Rogers neglected to tell you... He knew
about Barnes and my parents, or at least suspected for years, and continued to use my money and
resources to track him down... He said to me once ‘sometimes my teammates don’t tell me things’,
hypocrite, thy name is Rogers.” Tony shook his head and let out a sigh.

Shuri perked up, seeing the break in the conversation, but spoke quietly. “I am heartened, Dr.
Stark, by your ability to differentiate between The Winter Soldier and James Barnes... I know this
is a terrible time to ask, but given your familiarity with Wakandan code, would you be willing to
consider your Binary Augmented Retro Framing for a possible treatment for Barnes? To at least
free him of the triggering effect of the code words,” she said.

“The tech’s not complete... I have the practical end done, but how it affects the brain long term
needs to be studied. I have to be very careful of it as its basically a home brainwashing kit,” Tony
said.

“Perhaps we could work on that together?” Shuri asked.

“Yes, I would like that your highness,” Tony said. He was making the active decision to trust here
and hoped it wasn’t misplaced. Tony said his goodbyes and tried to get a handle on his anxiety for
the day ahead. Rogers’ betrayal still hurt him deeply. He tried to replace his circular thinking with
thoughts of Stephen Strange instead. His patience and love. Tony indulged himself and reached out
to feel for Stephen, who was still at Kamar-Taj, furiously making records of what he and Wong
had found. Of course Stephen felt him and instantly picked up his phone.

“Incoming call from your honey, boss,” FRIDAY said cheerily.

“Put him through, dear,” Tony said.

“Tony,” Stephen said. He looked as relieved to see Tony as Tony was to see him.

“Hello, love,” Tony said softly, trying to hold it together.

“What’s wrong?” Stephen asked.
“T’Challa is going to turn Rogers and the rest over, except for Barnes, to the WSC. Apparently my handling of Romanoff has restored his faith in their ability to not dole out cruel and unusual punishment... And yesterday morning, I threw Thaddeus Ross in front of a proverbial bus,” Tony said.

“Well it’s about fucking time,” Stephen said. Tony nearly sputtered on his coffee. “I’m serious. You’ve been productive. That’s great progress.”

“Thanks... It’s just... it’s a lot. I told T’Challa what Barnes did to my parents... I trust him to do the right thing. But it makes me think about all that I’ve lost,” Tony said. He took a breath and gathered himself up. “But I’ve gained a few things too,” he murmured softly. Stephen smiled at him.

“I am so lucky to have you,” Stephen said in an unhurried manner, and waited to see if Tony had anything else he needed to say before he spoke again. “Wong and I will meet you after you conclude business for the day. You can come with us to Washington. We have news to present to the WSC, but I would like to go over the details with you first.”

“You bet,” Tony replied, anchoring himself to Stephen’s voice.

“I warn you, it’s not great news,” Stephen warned.

“That’s fine. It’s going around,” Tony said dismissively.

“I love you, Tony,” Stephen said. Tony’s eyes pressed closed, overwhelmed by the relief that those words brought him.

“I love you too,” Tony replied.

“Are you okay? Do you need me to come now?” Stephen asked.

“I’ll be alright, Stephen. I promise. I have work to do, and I have to get the bots shipped off to the compound today,” Tony said. “They need more social interaction, and Rhodey and Vision will be good company when I can’t be there... Their auras... it’s like the babies I’ve seen. Bright white... Innocent. It shook me up a bit. I didn’t really believe it until I saw it.”

“I told you that I knew you were a dad when we got together,” Stephen teased. Tony laughed and rolled his eyes. He ended up smiling at Stephen.

“It’s good to hear your voice, I know it’s only been a few days, but I’m grateful that you called,” Tony said.

“I’m grateful you reached out. I’ll see you soon, love,” Stephen said.

Chapter End Notes

Poor Tony... He just needs like, the world's longest hug. I am less certain on T’Challa and Shuri’s character, but I hope I did right by them here... Next up, we find out what Stephen and Wong got into while wandering around the Galaxy, and the chickens come home to roost.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Stephen and Wong are home from gallivanting around the galaxy... And they brought Tony a souvenir. Vision says a bad language word, and Rhodey is the most adorable platypus.

Chapter Notes

Tony does some angst-ing. But not so much as I usually put him though. I think this should catch us up to current Marvel timeline. Still haven't seen Ragnarok... I know I know... I'm getting to it. Nasty virus and three funerals in 6 weeks takes its toll on one's ambition to watch tv, or eat, or consume alcohol surprisingly... Had me a nice little Dry-anuary. My liver loves me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony practically fell into Stephen’s arms when he returned to the apartment from the loading dock. Happy had made himself available to bring the bots up to the compound for Tony, and it set his mind at ease. He avoided telling Happy, and felt he couldn’t yet. He definitely wanted to tell him and Pepper at the same time, and it was a strain to keep his mouth shut. He attributed it to Happy being such an old friend, and the fact that he felt the need to connect with others. So when Stephen opened his arms when Tony walked into the apartment, he was instantly drawn to him. He showered Stephen with soft kisses and touches, letting the intimacy roll over him and it restored his sense of security.

“I missed you too,” Stephen murmured eventually.

“Good,” Tony replied. The late light of the day made the apartment golden and soft. The days were getting longer, spring was soon going to be in full swing, and Tony wasn’t opposed to a temperature warm up. “It’s good to be missed.” Tony sighed happily. “So, how bad is your news?”

“Mixed. But mostly fairly shitty. I can confirm that Thanos has the Infinity Gauntlet, which is a big old oven mitt of doom as far as I can tell, and now definitely has the Power Stone. A planet called Xandar has been devastated, though there are survivors, as Thanos seemed to only be after the stone... And, seemingly unrelated, Odin was abandoned on Earth, and Thor and Loki came looking for him,” Stephen said.

“What?!” Tony shouted.

“I got rid of them. Quickly,” Stephen assured. “Thor is... peculiar. Wise in some ways, kind of an idiot in others... And easily angered for someone as old as he is... I found Odin for them on the agreement that all Asgardians would leave Earth. He was in Norway, and they have left Earth.”

“I mean... What? Seriously, Loki was back here?” Tony asked. He’d pulled back from Stephen’s embrace somewhat.
“Key word being was. I agreed to help them find Odin on the premise that Asgardians stay away from Earth. I also let Loki feel like he was falling in the void for half an hour. That was... Quite satisfying,” Stephen said.

“You pissed off Loki,” Tony said, trying to convey what a stupid idea he thought that was.

“And then I let him throw himself into a portal when he charged at me... He threw you out the window of a skyscraper, Tony. Half an hour falling is about comparable given your relative lifespans up to now,” Stephen said. That gave Tony pause as he smothered inappropriate laughter.

“I shouldn’t find that funny,” Tony said and snorted a bit.

“No, I think it’s okay. Loki was never in any actual danger. You were. If it makes you feel better, Wong laughed for hours.”

“It’s still funny.” Wong said, and smirked. He was in the kitchen, where he was apparently using magic to get Tony’s elaborate coffeemaker to come to life.

“Are you using magic to make an espresso?” Tony asked.

“Your A.I. was being obtuse about it,” Wong said, and shrugged.

“FRIDAY, let the man make coffee, okay? That’s fine with me,” Tony said. FRIDAY didn’t respond verbally but the coffeemaker sprang to action and started warming up instantly.

“Sorry, she’s been protective of me and my space since Siberia, but I couldn’t do it without her... So the Asgardians are gone? Not going to return?” Tony asked.

“Not for any other reason than dire circumstance I assume,” Stephen said.

“This implies that dire circumstance is an option.”

“From what I’ve been able to gather, Loki was sitting on Asgard’s throne, disguised as his father, with Odin on Earth, stripped of his memories. Can’t imagine that means well for Asgard... Whatever it is that Thor and Loki are getting into, Earth doesn’t need that right now. We’re close to the brink as it is. So, all Asgardians are off of Earth for now. Sorry I haven’t have time to tell you yet. It happened, and then Wong and I were off looking for information about Thanos,” Stephen said.

“You really made Loki fall for half an hour?”

“I had to stash him somewhere while I was looking for Odin. It was highly amusing,” Stephen said.

“I have the best boyfriend,” Tony said and laughed a little.

“You do?” Stephen asked. “I don’t know, mine’s pretty great... Got the most beautiful soul you’ve ever seen.”

“I’m sending you my dental bill,” Wong said. “You can split it. Too sweet. You’re giving me cavities. If it gets any worse, I will require insulin.”

“Well he is my honey,” Tony said. He leaned back into Stephen’s embrace. Stephen smirked and held him more tightly. “I suppose we should get down to business. What did you find out? Tell me about this alien planet.”
“Xandar,” Stephen said, letting Tony go. “It’s a planet much like Earth, though further along technologically speaking. No offence to your skills, it’s that society which has chosen to progress thing that you said to me once... Unfortunately, the knowledge that the Power Stone was there wasn’t much of a secret... There’s a team... of sorts. But they were too far out to come to the aide of Xandar... One of them is human, and I’ve asked them to come here. I’ve given them to location of the armada, and from what they knew, all signs point to Thanos.”

“How does a human get halfway across the galaxy?” Tony asked.

“Funny story. He’s half human, his dad was... it’s complicated. But he was abducted from Earth just after his mother passed away from brain cancer... It’s a long story, but he’s survived this far. His pop culture references are atrocious, and his taste in music is only marginally better,” Stephen said. “Apparently I owe him an mp3 player of some type now.”

“If he helps save the world, I’ll build him one that will survive open space,” Tony said. “What’s his name?”

“Peter Quill... The rest of the team are... well, I think you’ll like them. Rocket is a bit testy, but you’ll have lots to talk about,” Stephen said.

“Should we tell the WSC about this? ... Wait, is his name actually Rocket?” Tony asked.

“I think that’s best approximate translation... I’d tell you about his appearance, but I will just say this, he has no idea what a raccoon is. As for the WSC, I’ll leave that to your discretion, Tony. You’re more experienced in these matters.”


“Let me have my fun,” Stephen said. Wong sighed loudly.

“Rocket has the appearance of an anthropomorphized raccoon. Via very invasive experimentation, he is capable of sentient thought and speech. He’s also cantankerous and bitter. But he appears to be an engineering genius. Also, he hangs around with a sentient, talking tree who has a more limited vocabulary,” Wong explained.

“Party pooper,” Stephen said.

“When do they get here?” Tony asked excitedly.

“They’re coordinating humanitarian efforts on Xandar, but are doing it remotely, and are enroute. They can use warp drives and wormholes much more easily than an armada can. Give them a few weeks,” Stephen said.

“Okay, I will bring it up with the WSC shortly before they arrive. You’ll have to get me into contact with them, or at least a message through of coordinates where we can have them land safely on Earth... So, Thanos has the Power Stone... Did you ask about the Tesseract when you spoke with Thor? Do they still have it?”

“Thor said it was in the vaults, but having looked at Asgard, it may be in trouble. Heimdal, their greatest watchman and defence, was banished... I don’t think they can spot incoming dangers right now.”

“And the Aether?” Tony asked.

“We found it with an ancient being called Taneleer Tivian, more colloquially known as the
Collector. Thor left it with him, in order to get it off of Asgard and away from the Tesseract. Tivian is interesting to say the least. But I don’t believe that the stone would stay safe with him.”

“So Thanos is headed for him next?” Tony looked to be running numbers in his head.

“Yes, so that buys us a little time,”

“How so? If he can manipulate reality then Thanos and his armada can be here in seconds,” Tony said.

“Not if the stone is no longer with Tivian,” Stephen said. Tony stared at him.

“Shit, you brought it here? I... You’re either nuts or have an unfounded faith in my ability to handle Thanos.” Tony said.

“A little of each, but it turns out that the Aether likes proximity to other Infinity Stones. The Eye of Agamotto seemed to tame it back into a solid state,” Stephen said. Wong held up a small, dull ingot, and Tony noticed that Stephen had the Eye of Agamotto around his neck, but tucked into his robes. It was the first time Tony had seen Stephen handle it since they’d met. “I didn’t bring it with me on our journey. It appeared when we were meeting with Tivian, and called to the Aether. Apparently the Eye wanted it to come with us.”

“And how did Tivian take that?” Tony asked.

“He wasn’t happy, but Wong showed him a projection of what had happened on Xandar, and asked if Tivian wanted to invite the same to happen to Knowhere.”

“Knowhere?” Tony asked.

“Where Tivian lives. It’s the head of an ancient Celestial being the size of a planet... it’s complicated. They’re now in the process of evacuating everyone from it, so all Thanos will find is an empty room,” Wong said. Tony nodded.

“So, what are we going to do with the fucking Reality Stone?” Tony asked.

“I think it would be safest with you, or possibly Vision,” Stephen said. “The Eye can still be unpredictable to me.”

“The vault at the compound maybe?” Tony asked.

“There, or in your sock drawer. Ultimately, it will want to be with you and the others, and since it can move in and out of reality, any vault you seal it in will be rendered useless. I’ve only got a hand on it here because we promised to bring it to you,” Wong said.

“So, what’s the endgame here? Are you going to try to wear the Infinity Gauntlet?” Tony asked Stephen.

“No, but you might be able to,” Stephen replied. Tony’s face looked somewhere between angry and stunned.

“No. Noooooooo. No. We stick to the plan,” Tony said.

“And that’s fine. I think the plan will work... But, you said you wanted a Plan Z,” Stephen said.

“Plan Z,” Tony murmured thoughtfully, his eyes locked on the ingot in Wong’s hand. “And how do you intend to get the gauntlet off of Thanos’ hand?”

“Holy shit,” Tony replied, eyes wide. “No.”

“Plan Z, Tony,” Stephen said.

“But, I... no, I don’t want it,” Tony said softly.

“It will not be a matter of what you want if we have to fall back on Plan Z,” Wong said.

“I just want everyone on Earth to be safe... Even, fucking Rogers... I want the Earth to keep spinning,” Tony said breathlessly.

“And you can do that, I still have full faith in Plan A, but I’m willing to stack the deck,” Stephen said. “I have no issue with that for the sake of our world.”

“I’m... fucking terrified of that... I’m afraid that if I do, I’ll lose my humanity, Stephen. I’m afraid to lose you. What if Vision is separated from the Mind Stone? I don’t want to lose him. He’s all I have left of JARVIS, and I love him on his own merits,” Tony babbled.

“Plan Z, Tony,” Stephen said so softly that Tony had to work to hear him. Stephen reached out and took Tony’s hand.

“I’m... I’m so used to the idea of my own mortality,” Tony said, seemingly incongruous to his previous thought, his mind racing off in all directions. “I was dying from shrapnel, being tortured, and always under threat of randomly being murdered in Afghanistan... I was used to the idea of that being it. That I should be dead, and if I wasn’t it had to be for a reason. Obie ripped the arc reactor out of my chest, and once again, I nearly died tried to save myself. Then I suffered heavy metal poisoning while I was trying to find a replacement for the palladium in the arc... Staying alive has been the reason for some of my greatest accomplishments... The only time I’ve been okay with the possibility of dying was fighting the Chitauri. Because I knew that by doing it, Earth would be safe... But I know now that it will be one battle after another, and it won’t end for me. This could be hell... This could be some twisted form of heaven for all I know... All I know is that it will be forever. There’s a reason why superhero stories in pop culture revolve around young people gaining powers and saving the world. Because young people are naive enough to believe that they’ll only have to do it once. They don’t have the fear that comes with knowing that things will inevitably repeat themselves... I’m scared, Stephen. The idea of the Infinity Gauntlet terrifies me.”

Stephen once again pulled Tony close, but didn’t try to soothe him or stop him from speaking.

“I’m scared because I know I will fail one day, and it will take only one failure to lose everyone I love. Part of my motivation for so long was my fear of death... I don’t know how to handle this human personality going on forever, even after my body dies... If I fail, and I lose everything and everyone, then my motivation will die, and I will be stuck forever, knowing that I failed,” Tony said. “And who wants to be near someone with the fucking Infinity Gauntlet, Stephen? There’s a reason why people run from the Infinity Stones.”

“So, it’s not necessarily death you fear. It’s being alone,” Stephen replied softly. He ran his hand up and down Tony’s back slowly. “Tony, you’ve already seen the most important thing... Souls go on. If anything ever were to happen to me, all you have to do is say my name and I’ll be at your side.” Tony sighed softly, trying to get his pulse to slow.

“I’m still terrified. Practically at Code Brown sort of levels,” Tony said.

“So am I,” Stephen admitted. “But with your dedication to humanity, I have less fear. We will win.
I have faith in your abilities, even if you don’t yet... And I will do my best to stay by your side. I have faith in your control and your compassion.”

“But the Reality Stone?” Tony asked.

“Plan Z,” Stephen said. He held out his hand, and Wong placed the ingot in it. Stephen then pressed the ingot into Tony’s hand. Tony stared at it like it might bite him for a time... Then, understanding settled in him. The Aether wanted to be around him, but was content to let him take the lead.

“Hey little one,” Tony said softly, and reached out to connect to it tentatively. The ingot shimmered in a haze of red. All it wanted was security and safety. Tony’s mind’s eye pictured a small infant finally coming down from crying. The swaddling of the ingot helped, but Tony’s touch and proximity calmed it further. Tony ran his fingers over the ingot, and the red haze puffed up, connecting to him and making his fingertips tingle.

“See? It likes you,” Stephen said.

Tony pressed his hands over the ingot, covering it. The Aether and he had a conversation of sorts. The stone asked for safety, and Tony agreed that it could stay with him, but that it had to remain subtle and hidden so that Tony could protect it. The Aether agreed happily. Tony then pressed the ingot into his wrist and asked it to assume a shape that wouldn’t draw attention.

The watch that appeared on Tony’s wrist was solid, intricate, and had a shiny red face that practically glowed. It perfectly matched Tony’s sense of style, and no one would be the wiser.

“You literally hold reality in your hands, and you make it into a watch?” Wong asked and laughed.

“He wants to stay close. This will ensure that no one will catch on,” Tony said. “He... no... She. Definitely a she. Makes sense. Most of the women I know can shape my reality at their will,” Tony observed and smiled down at his wrist. The Aether brought him a sense of security he hadn’t had before. It was disconcerting, even if he felt a great amount of relief. All he had to do was keep it safe, and she would help him accomplish that. Tony flexed his fingers and wrist, testing the fit.

“Looks good on you,” Stephen said. Tony smiled at him. He glanced at the watch on Stephen’s own wrist, the one with the broken glass over the face. Tony understood the talisman status of it since he’d first laid eyes on it. He’d never offered to fix it, and instead was always gentle with it whenever he helped Stephen put it on or take it off. Tony wondered if Stephen understood that the watch might end up like the Cloak of Levitation one day, a relic imbued with power and sentience. He left it for now, content to let things play out as they would.

“Shall we go to Washington tonight or in the morning?” Stephen asked.

“Either place has plenty of room for all of us... But I don’t think we should spring this on Vision last minute,” Tony said. “Lay on, MacDuff,”

“After coffee,” Wong said. “I’m exhausted.”

“I like how you think,” Tony said.

Eventually, Tony gave FRIDAY the heads up and carried an overnight through a portal Stephen had created for them, and into the D.C. apartment. Rhodey looked up from the dining table and smiled at them. Vision turned from his spot gathering plates from the cupboard. “Food will be here any minute,” Rhodey said.
“Perfect. You’re the best, platypus,” Tony said, and set the overnight bag down on a sofa.

“I know,” Rhodey agreed. He stood up, wearing the braces. The wheelchair was over near the door of the apartment, unused for now. Tony grinned widely at him.

“How are the upgrades working?” Tony asked.

“Good. The self-balancing has really improved. And it’s getting my muscle memory back in order. I can assume where I am in space a lot better now,” Rhodey said. He then walked over to Tony and hugged him. Tony was ridiculously thrilled to see Rhodey on his feet without anything additional to keep his balance. He had to smother tears. Now was not the time.

Tony felt Vision next to him more than he saw him. Vision was staring intently at Tony’s wrist.

“What have you done?” Vision asked, directing his question to Stephen and Wong. “What is this? Why would you bring it here?” Rhodey pulled away from Tony, looking confused.

“Because Thanos is coming anyway,” Stephen said, tension rising. “And I have no problem gathering the means to end him... Tony is apprehensive, naturally, but this gives us an enormous advantage.”

“Whoa, back up for the people who don’t have an instinctive knowledge of metaphysics, please,” Rhodey said. Tony held up his wrist sheepishly.

“The Aether... The Reality Stone. Stephen and Wong found it and brought it here to help us against Thanos... And I think she will help us. She doesn’t want to see anything end either,” Tony explained.

“She?” Rhodey asked. He was looking at Tony’s watch oddly.

“Yup. Apparently the Tesseract has female energy too, according to Selvig’s notes during and after the fact,” Tony said.

“I remain unconvinced as to the wisdom of this action,” Vision said sharply. Tony turned to him, his body language soft.

“That makes two of us,” Tony said. “But looking back on it, a lot of people were against your creation too... And look how it turned out. You’re worthy of Mjolnir, V... Remember that I am not. Think about that for a moment.” Vision remained silent, but looked wary.

“You know, it would be interesting to see if that’s still true,” Stephen said, trying to break the tension.

“Perhaps, but seeing as I joked about instating Prima Nocta in Asgard the first time I tried, I’m assuming that was disqualification right there. Terrible fucking thing to joke about in hindsight. Mjolnir has female energy too,” Tony said.

“Wait, we missed our chance to rule Asgard because you made a tasteless joke?” Rhodey asked.

“It was a rape joke, Rhodey. People have lost empires for less just reasons,” Tony said.


“You’re distracting from the fact that you’re wearing the fucking Reality Stone as a watch,” Vision said firmly. It was the first time any of them had heard any kind of curse word from him. Tony settled his attention on Vision.
“And you’re wearing one in your head plain as day,” Tony replied just as sharply. “Do you think it would be better away from your care?” Tony paused, took a deep breath and collected himself. When he spoke again it was in a calm tone. “V, reach out. Feel her... She’s not inherently malicious. But she has been ill-used. We can fix that, and keep her safe... Best part is she’ll help us with that,” Tony said quietly. Vision stared at the Aether for a moment, the Mind Stone in his forehead flared for a moment.

“Help you, perhaps... I cannot read her, as you can. I find this frustrating and concerning,” Vision said.

“If you can have an effect on them, but they can’t do anything to you, it would help explain why Loki couldn’t use the Mind Stone against you,” Rhodey said, coming back to attention, and concerned on Vision’s behalf. Vision was part of the reason why he fell, but his contrition and devotion to Rhodey more than made up for what had happened. When Tony couldn’t be with him, Vision was, and his help was invaluable to him. Beyond measure.

“Perhaps,” Tony said. “But V, I know you. You’re being too logical about this. Stop trying to access her like a file... Feel her instead. This is not about rationality, it’s about emotion. JARVIS and I used to talk for hours about emotions and how they could defy logic. Feel for her, as you might try to empathize with a human.” Tony’s voice had softened further, but it was assured and calm too. It was a tone that did things for Stephen, not that he would ever admit it. Vision closed his eyes. Tony reached for Vision’s hand, bringing the Aether closer to him. He found a new thing he could do. He could connect to people, that was easy. But now he found a way to connect others. Vision’s eyes snapped open, feeling Tony and the Aether all at once. The red haze surrounded their hands. “See?” Tony asked. “She’s okay... She might even get to like you if you give her a chance... She’s a sister. Sort of.”

“I’m... I’m not sure what to do,” Vision said.

“Just let yourself connect... I have a feeling the closer we get, the more easily we’ll defeat Thanos,” Tony said.

“She’s beautiful,” Vision said.

“Yeah,” Tony agreed thoughtfully.

The security staff informing them that their food was on the way interrupted their reverie. Vision seemed more settled after Tony let him connect to the Aether, but he could feel the synthezoid’s fear, but also his wonder at his abating loneliness. He felt relief at not being alone, but also terror at what was to come. Then, Tony did what few others had thought to do up until now. He pulled Vision in for a hug.

“What are you doing?” Vision asked.

“Hugging you. You looked like you could use one. Now, relax. Hugs feel good. Let the hug feel good,” Tony said. Vision felt like a cat only barely tolerating being held at first, but then miraculously mimicked Tony’s physical state, and relaxed. “There ya go,” Tony said. “It’s gonna be okay. I’m still scared shitless, but I think we can do this.”

“I am frightened,” Vision admitted, as if realizing it for the first time.

“And like me, you deal with fear by getting angry. It’s pretty common. We’ll work on that,” Tony assured. “It’s a new feeling for you, isn’t it?”
“Yes. I suppose I felt it when I saw Colonel Rhodes fall, but, there wasn’t time to process it.” Vision tried to pull away, his face betraying him, and showing how he felt plainly.

“And here comes the shame cycle... Nope. Not allowed. You’re not allowed to feel bad for having emotions, V. Nope nope nope. You get to learn from all of my vast catalogue of mistakes,” Tony said. “Drawing back from your emotions might be convenient when have to, but it doesn’t work long term. Trust me on that. Hell, gain proof from any number of relevant playlists in YouTube about me not dealing with emotions very well.” To his surprise, Vision actually let out a small laugh, and it made Tony grin from ear to ear. “Are you okay?” he asked.

“Yes, I... I think so. I apologize for my outburst,” Vision said.

“Buddy if you think that’s an outburst, then I have so much to teach you,” Tony said.

Chapter End Notes

Because fuck it, I'mma make Tony all sooper powerz if I wanna... Okay, next chapter the chickens come home to roost. Promise. You've been a very naughty boy, Rogers.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Tony gets a word in edgewise.

Chapter Notes

Welp here’s another one... I feel like this isn't my usual deep dive into a story, but I'm still having fun none the less. I don't know if next week I will be able to update circa Sunday, but I will try. Got a crazy work week ahead of me. But here is a nice juicy chapter to chew on for now.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

At the meeting with the World Security Council the next morning, Tony looked around at his motley crew gathered at the table. “We need more girls. This is a sausage factory,” he said as they all sat down. Rhodey to his left, and Stephen to his right.

“We’re discussing the end of the world, and you’re worried about gender equality?” One of the council members asked. Thankfully she was female and Tony in no way was going to try to school her on it.

“You bet I am... And it’s not just because I know about Hope Van Dyne... Well, it sort of is. Give us Van Dyne, please?” Tony asked. The gathered members of the WSC looked perturbed.

“How do you know about Hope Van Dyne?” The council member from India asked. Tony raised an eyebrow at him.

“I’m going to ignore the insult to my intelligence and skill set,” Tony said. “My plan would go so much better if we had another person with the Ant-Man tech. One comfortable with the corporate chain of command would be even better to keep the less disciplined ones, such as myself, in line.”

“You have a plan for the invasion?”

“Several. And none of them involve using nuclear weapons on innocent people. so we’re probably better to go with what I’ve cooked up,” Tony said harshly. “Plan A involves disabling the invaders until they agree to bugger off. Thanos will be eliminated immediately.”

“Eliminated?”

“Poof. No more. Gone,” Tony said.

“How do you propose to do that?”

“Trade secret, and it needs to be kept that way. All back-up plans you will be privy to, and I will need your help to carry them out. I would also like the aide of Hope Van Dyne,” Tony said.
“She is... problematic, Dr. Stark.”

“And she probably hates me thanks to Hank’s influence. That’s fine. We need to save the world, not be besties. If we have to, we can probably bond over our daddy issues.”

“We will... take that under advisement.”

“Do that,” Tony said. “I will be forwarding my plans for protecting the Earth soon. There’s a lot to be digested and I will be setting up a division at S.I. to help create what will be needed. They will work with you, governments, and any other organization that can help in a safe and relevant manner.”

The council members looked uncomfortably at one another. “Do your plans include your former teammates?”

“Why do you think I’m asking for Van Dyne? Van Dyne has the intellect to be of great use. The former Avengers lineup will be useless in the face of Thanos,” Tony reasoned.

“And you will be?”

“Yes, you’re going to need me,” Tony said. “Especially if you want the military and weapons defences I have planned.”

“Weapons?” The councilman from India asked. Everyone sat very still at Tony saying that word.

“Yes, but the sort that are so regulated they won’t fire at anyone with human DNA, and not in our atmosphere, so no on-planet war making with them, got it?” Tony said. “It is only because I’m taking this so seriously that I’ve even considered it.”

“We look forward to your proposals,” The council woman said. “Have you heard the news yet? That the rogue Avengers have been found and are about to be turned over by King of Wakanda?”

“Haven’t had a chance to watch the news lately. Too busy planning to save the world,” Tony said honestly. It wasn’t exactly a lie.

“And you think they will be unable to help with the incoming threat?”

“Precisely. This problem will not be solved by punching or by diplomacy alone. We’re going to have to think bigger. Luckily that is one my favourite hobbies, and I am very smart. I think we are going to survive this if we plan carefully.”

“Another Ultron, Dr. Stark?”

“I won’t even have to touch a keyboard to turf them,” Tony assured.

The rest of the meeting bored Tony to tears, and when they finally concluded, Tony felt he’d warded off the questions about how he would defend Earth well enough. Tony and Stephen would be given their chance to do their thing, and only if they failed would weapons systems come online. The systems would be rendered inactive as soon as hostilities were ceased, never to be used again. Tony calling it the Ploughshares Protocol rendered the members speechless. It was then that they seemed to lose interest in him for the day, and let them go.

Tony considered it a success when he and the Aether passed through the security checks without raising any alarms.
“You were brilliant in there today,” Stephen murmured into his ear that night as they laid in bed, holding one another close.

“They still think I’m a pompous ass,” Tony said. He was holding his phone, typing out an email to Pepper.

“It’s a good cover for now. Use it to your advantage,” Stephen replied. He nibbled at Tony’s neck and earlobe gently.

“They want me to be there during the transfer of Rogers and the rest. I’m trying to explain what a bad idea that is,” Tony said.

“Is that so bad?” Stephen asked.

“Last time ended with me broken, so going on previous experience, it could end quite badly,” Tony replied. He set the phone down, and settled into Stephen’s embrace. Stephen met his gaze.

“Nothing can break you, Tony,” Stephen said softly.

“I can think of plenty of things that could break me,” Tony replied. “Losing you. Losing Rhodey. Or Pepper, Happy, even the Spider-Kid.”

“I keep telling you, souls go on, love.”

“But people still die, Stephen... I don’t wish that on anyone. And now, the idea of losing you means something very permanent and terrible,” Tony replied.

“You won’t lose me,” Stephen said.

“Fear ain’t rational,” Tony said softly, holding Stephen more firmly. “I love you.”

“I love you too, Tony,” Stephen said. “What can I do to calm your fears?”

“This works pretty well... Pepper wouldn’t sleep beside me at the end. The nightmares used to get pretty violent. They’ve been better lately though.”

“I could help you get to sleep. Dreamless. Restful,” Stephen said.

“Nah, I’ll get there on my own. Too tired but to listen to circadian rhythms these days,” Tony said.

“You could send an empty armour,” Stephen suggested after a moment’s repose. “Give the appearance that you’re there.”

“I need to just man up and do it,” Tony said. “I’m not being harsh on myself. It’s just something that I need to get done, no matter how averse I am to it. Trauma or not. I’m in a better space now, and I have shit to do... If I were really brave, I would do it without the armour, but that might give away what I am before I’m ready to do that.”

“Best to keep that under wraps for now. I can only imagine what the World Security Council would try to do to you... Which isn’t good, because I would have to probably violate some personal boundaries and laws to set you free, and then there would be the messy vengeance that would come after,” Stephen said.

“Stephen, you don’t-”

“I do, Tony. I really do and would have to. I will make you believe some day how important you
are to me. How important you are in general... I don’t have much anymore, but my kingdom for you, Tony... You have no idea how happy you make me, even when we’re not skirting the edges of one another’s minds. You should reach out and feel it more often, because you do make me happy. I can’t ever remember being so happy... Wong is being an absolute prick about it, bitching that the Ancient One was never so giddy.” Stephen kissed Tony softly. Tony finally let the tension out of his body and relaxed.

“I know I’m probably needy as fuck, but I like hearing it from you. I don’t want to violate your boundaries. I’ve done a lot of work on that, and need to maintain it. I need to hear it, and trust that its true. And I do. When you say it, I believe it. This is honestly turning out to be the best relationship I’ve ever had,” Tony said. Stephen smiled, and ran his hand up and down Tony’s back slowly. He loved the solidity of Tony’s body. The man might have been shorter than him, but he was built like a tank. The muscles of Tony’s back had spent years helping Tony lift, and move, and create wonders... The three piece suits he wore in public hid a marvel of a body, honed from years of hard work. The roughness of Tony’s hands spoke of it too, and Stephen loved the friction in Tony’s touch as well.

“I refuse to acknowledge that you having needs is a problem, Tony,” Stephen said. “So instead, I am going to change the subject. Your armour has a stealth mode now, right? What if it gave the illusion that you weren’t wearing it, and if Rogers or anyone tried anything, it could appear.”

“The Wonder Woman’s Jet Function... It could work,” Tony said thoughtfully, but really he was making mooney eyes at his boyfriend acknowledging that he was in fact, a human being.

“I’d like to be there as well, especially to handle Maximoff.”

“Please... I’d feel much better if you were,” Tony said. “I’d also like if you were there when I tell Pepper and Happy as well. I have to do it soon. Fair warning, Pepper may try to blame you. I’ll do my best to stop that from happening, but it’s how she is. I only hire shrewd bitches to be my CEO... It’s the feature, not the bug,” Tony explained.

“I will be there, and I’ll do my best to win her over,” Stephen replied.

“Bring your A game. She can destroy us both if we’re not careful,” Tony said.

“Duly noted,” Stephen said, thinking of Tony’s initial reaction when Stephen had told him that arguing with Wong was a bad idea. “Which do we do first?”

“The easier, yet more unpleasant task of getting Rogers and the rest into custody,” Tony said.

“Bring it on... In the morning. First, we sleep,” Stephen said.

When the day of the transfer came, Tony was still balking at the idea. “He’s going to try something. I know he is, and I don’t have the privacy to do what I did to Romanoff,” Tony said to Stephen as they got ready.

“Surely you have some type of non-lethal sedative dart in that armour?” Stephen asked.

“Of course I do. Dosed for someone with Rogers’ metabolism. That’s not the point. I just fucking hate this. If I have to knock him out, then I’m going to have to carry his ass, and I don’t want to touch him with a thousand foot pole.”

“Well, you do know a guy who has mastered levitation of himself and other objects. Perhaps he
could aide you?” Stephen asked. His eyes were impish, but his tone was calm and pragmatic.

“Best boyfriend ever.” Tony muttered.


Tony had worked this latest armour to have a new setting. It gave the appearance that Tony wasn’t wearing it. The boot bottoms receded up into the lower legs, making it so Tony was standing on his own feet, rather than appear to be floating a few inches above the ground. It wasn’t as heavily armed as some of his battle suits, but it filled the need for a compact version left by suitcase armour. From the distance of a metre or so, and with the aide of the holographic tech he’d been developing, no one should be able to tell he was wearing it.

They were in a lavish hotel in Geneva, and Stephen had just ended a video conference call with Wakandan sorcerers, finalizing the transfer of the prisoners via portals. They had also coordinated the specific transfer of Wanda Maximoff, and more specifically the hold on her powers. Stephen had studied their methods, and approved. While not separated from her power, she could not access it. She might have been able to power through if she had a higher pain tolerance, but Stephen wasn’t planning on her finding that out.

Wong had been working on a way to remove Maximoff’s powers permanently, and seemed to have cracked it. He suggested using the Eye of Agamotto to turn back time in Wanda’s mind to before she’d been augmented by HYDRA and the Mind Stone. Tony approved, because it would end Wanda’s ability to manipulate Vision. It was cruel perhaps, but Stephen thought of all her accumulated crimes, and the idea rested easy in his mind.

When the time came, Stephen pressed a kiss to the cheek of the invisible face plate, making Tony laugh, and lightening the mood. The facility the former Avengers would be held at had different levels of security, and no one would be held near one another. The prison went deep underground, though screens with projections of the outside, and specialty lighting gave the appearance of more natural light.

Sam Wilson was the first to be transferred. The portal opened directly from cell to cell. He was shackled, though he looked in good health, perhaps a little softer than he’d been before. It would make sense if he’d been stuck in tight quarters in Wakanda, and hadn’t been able to train in the same way. Of course his eyes rested on Tony. “I suppose you’re happy about this,” Wilson said tersely, as he stepped through compliantly enough, escorted by the Dora Milaje.

“Not remotely,” Tony retorted. “Do you know how much paperwork I have to do now? It was easier when you had dropped off the face of the Earth.”

“That’s cold, Stark,” Wilson said.

“So’s Siberia when you get left for dead there. Feel lucky that I signed the Accords, and am legally obligated to treat you humanely,” Tony said. Stephen eyed Tony carefully, watching for his rage to spike. But it didn’t. Instead he just observed Wilson’s soft, muddy blue aura.

“That’s all you’ve got to say for yourself?” Sam asked.

“What response do you want from me? I don’t owe you anything, other than my compliance to the law,” Tony said.

“You broke Steve’s heart.”

“And he broke mine... And collapsed a lung. And crushed my sternum. I’ve got part of a dead guy
holding my chest together. But I’m sorry that me disagreeing with him, and trying to help him anyway, hurt his feelings. How’s that for something to say for myself? Call it my non-apology. You should ask Rogers about his non-apologies if you ever see him again, though the chances of that are slim,” Tony said. His voice was flat and cold. “You should also ask him about keeping knowledge of murders back from the children of the victims. He knows all about that too. Not only is that really shitty morally speaking, it’s also obstruction of justice.” Tony looked Wilson in the eye. Wilson didn’t have any idea what he was talking about. That was fine. That was what trials were for.

Stephen sent the Dora Milaje back through the portal, and closed it once Wilson was safely in the hands of the guards, and opened another portal for him and Tony. “We have to keep going,” Stephen said softly.

“Right there with you love,” Tony said, disengaging from Wilson’s eye contact, and following Stephen without looking back.

Lang was next, and Tony figured it would be the easiest, as he had the least emotional attachment to the man. Of course it was the unknown quantity that surprised him.

Unlike Wilson, Lang wore light, standard hand cuffs only. He looked relieved to see Tony, which Tony felt was very odd. “Mr. Stark, I... I’m so sorry. I... It was Captain America, ya know? Captain America needed me... I thought what I was doing was okay. I was so fucking stupid, and I’m sorry,” Lang said. Tony and Stephen exchanged a surprised glance. “I’ve been reading through the Accords since they separated us, and I don’t know what Steve thought was so bad about them. He told me they were going to take away my freedom to choose what I did, and how I used the suit... But they’re just regulations... I went to jail to protest the deregulation of American banks and the damage it did to people... I had no idea what was really going on with the Accords, and I’m angry at myself for not looking into it on my own... I’m devastated about what happened to Colonel Rhodes. I had an eye to be Robin Hood, not a goddamn terrorist.” Lang hung his head in shame, and Tony had to try to keep his from spinning. He had not anticipated this response. He could feel Lang’s genuine remorse, the bright yellow-green haze around him was dulled by his emotional state.

“Mr. Lang, I... I too wish you’d had better judgement. I think you would have made a great Avenger under different circumstances. But my best friend was crippled in that fight, so I’m having a hard time being rational. Thank you for being good enough to apologize. I am certain that it is the only one I will hear, and I will pass your apology on to Colonel Rhodes... Given your level of cooperation, I want to inform you that Cassie is doing okay, although she feels betrayed by you. Her mother and Ms. Van Dyne have gotten a good counsellor for her, and she’s making progress. For now though, it’s probably better for her if you stay away. Unless she chooses to see you, of course, but don’t expect it to be a joyous reunion... You will be put into contact with Hank Pym and his legal team. Depending on the outcome of the trial, and how cooperative you continue to be, you may be released to their custody, but I cannot promise you that... And, I’m sorry that you got swept up in all this. You didn’t deserve it,” Tony said.

Instead of getting upset, Lang nodded solemnly and accepted. If he kept it up, he might yet walk way from this crash landing. Lang complied with the Dora Milaje and the prison guards quietly, and Stephen sent the Doras back.

Stephen opened the next portal to another part of the facility, for higher risk prisoners who were dealing with mental instability. The next encounter wasn’t going to be a cakewalk, so Tony braced for emotional and possible physical impact.
Barton sneered at him and tried to dig his heels in to refuse to come through the portal. However, he was shackled up tight. There were red marks at his wrists, showing he’d been struggling. The Dora Milaje soldiers around him simply picked him up. Stephen opened the portal wider, and they carried him through. “No! No!” Barton shouted. “Keep me the fuck away from him!”

“Barton, I’m no threat to you,” Tony said in a flat, tired tone. He felt pity for Barton upon seeing the ragged state of his aura. Muddy, with only greens and browns visible, and none of them were pretty.

“Fuck you, Stark! You’re a monster for keeping us like this!” Barton shouted.

“You’re wanted on charges of terrorism, Clint. That’s not me laying them. I don’t have that authority. I wasn’t the reason you were taken in in the first place. I just happened to be the guy following the law. You brought yourself into a battle after you’d retired. You convinced Wanda she was a prisoner when I was only trying to keep people from burning her at the stake. People are scared of her, and even after she laid the blame for Sokovia at my feet, I was still trying to protect her. So your actions are on you, not me,” Tony explained calmly.

“Go to hell, Stark. You totalitarian piece of shit.”

“I’m the totalitarian?” Tony asked, incredulous. “Let’s take a look at “the best hands are our own” Rogers, shall we? I’m the one who was bending to the will of the world. Pretty much the entire fucking world. Rogers hadn’t gotten over his trauma about half of SHIELD being HYDRA, and decided his way was better, and the only way things could go. Now, define totalitarianism for me again?” Tony’s voice was harsh. The rage coming off of Barton was so palpable that Tony thought he could practically run his fingers through it. The Cloak of Levitation curled more firmly around Stephen, and Tony could feel the Aether asking if she was needed. FRIDAY was doing the same in his earpiece.

“Fuck you, Stark. Fuck you for all of this. I’ll never see my family again. Fuck you,” Clint said through clenched teeth. Tony sighed heavily, telling the Aether to stand down, and moved his fingers in sequence to tell FRIDAY to hold for now.

“You will see them again once you are allowed visiting privileges... That is if they want to see you. They’re fine, by the way. I’m sure they’ll love to hear that they were the first thing you asked about,” Tony said, keeping the snark to a simmer. Barton fought against the shackles, but the Doras kept him in place easily. “They really are fine. Laura felt she had to sell the farm, as the upkeep with three kids on her own was too difficult. However, she seems to be enjoying her new position in Stark Industries H.R. department. She’s told me that the in-house daycare is a dream, and she was grateful for the easy change of identity to protect the smaller agents.” Tony kept his tone whimsical. Barton’s jaw was so tight, Tony was surprised he hadn’t cracked teeth yet.

“Stay the fuck away from them,” Barton growled.

“I’m pretty much the only reason why they’re not dead, so you might want to rethink that. You abandoned them for a fight you didn’t have to take part in. No one would have thought less of you for standing by your family... After your arrest however, I ensured their safety. Anyone who wanted revenge on you for when you were still sniping for a living, could have found them... But they didn’t deserve to suffer because of your idiocy... I hope you come to accept your responsibility in all this, and I hope you find peace, Clint... I did not do this to you. I opposed your opinion, which really, was Rogers’ opinion. Did you even read the Accords? It was no worse than SHIELD protocol, and you managed to abide that just fine... I really do hope you find some peace after this shit show is over. We all deserve that much. Goodbye, Barton,” Tony said, and gave Stephen a nod. The Doras transferred him to the control of the guards, and they were on their way.
Tony stayed close to Stephen, and put his hands at the ready to raise and fire off a repulsor blast. He was not willing to fuck around when it came to Maximoff. The Aether was anticipating danger, but Tony again soothed her, asking her to remain peaceful, and to trust him to handle things. Tony was just relieved that Vision had wisely decided to stay home today.

Shackles that encased Maximoff’s entire hands came through the portal first. Stephen conjured a line of Eldritch magic and threw it around Maximoff’s forearms. “Hello, Ms. Maximoff,” Stephen said. Wanda spat at his feet. “Charming,” Stephen said dryly. Another line of Eldritch magic spun out from Wong’s hands, restraining her legs once she was through. An elaborately dressed Wakandan sorcerer, who carried a knotted tree branch as a staff, though it was decorated as elaborately as its wielder.

“Ms. Maximoff, as acting Sorcerer Supreme, I am here today to charge you in a court that is beyond the world of human criminality,” Stephen said. “It requires no trial, as the evidence of what you’ve done has left huge gouges in the energies of the world. You have not learned reverence or even common courtesy in your magical dealings. Your sentence has been levied. You will be stripped of your abilities and barred from trying to gain them back. To attempt to do so will set your mind back to the level of aptitude you had before giving yourself over to HYDRA.”

“No!” Wanda shouted, and struggled against her restraints, and the Dora Milaje. Tony steeled himself, ready to reveal the armour and let out just enough of a blast to knock her out. The Eye of Agamotto opened, and Stephen coldly recited an incantation. Wong was at his side, ready to assist and keeping the grip of the Eldritch magic firmly around her.

Stephen could feel the vast amount of power within Maximoff. If left unchecked, it would eventually tear her apart from within. He started separating it from her, Wong had a reliquary at the ready to hold that power. It all went smoothly, despite Maximoff screaming the whole time wordlessly. Tony watched, his entire being felt numb. He thought he had no feeling left for her.

Even when Wanda’s eyes settled on him, Tony remained calm. She screeched one more time, and tried to will up a blast of power at him specifically. But it was too late. Stephen already had control of what she once had. In her desperation, Tony saw her, saw all her hurt and trauma, and the fact that even before HYDRA, she’d felt and heard things psychically. Foolishly perhaps, he stepped forward, looking at her in the eye. He raised his hand, palm up. It would be so easy to just end her now. To send her on to Pietro and her parents. A single repulsor blast to the forehead. Easy. Like slaughtering an animal to be butchered. And while Tony had that thought in passing, he knew what he’d rather see. He wanted Wanda to face consequences. He wasn’t sure he could turn on her empathy. She was already so far gone in that regard, and he didn’t want to waste the effort. But at least he could be kind enough to stop the torture of the paranoia that came with half-hearing voices and seeing things that weren’t there.

“Tony, what are you doing?” Wong asked as Stephen directed a red raging mass of power into the reliquary. It was much more substantial looking than the one Tony had seen prior at the Kamar-Taj.

“I’m ending her torture. I don’t want anyone to suffer unnecessarily,” Tony replied softly. He waited until it was finished and the energy was contained, and the binding spell was cast. Wanda shrieked the whole time, eyes full of blame for him. “Wanda Maximoff, it’s time to close your eye,” Tony said. He ran his thumb down the centre of her forehead, in the opposite motion of what Stephen had done to him.

Wanda was so confused by the disconnect of feeling smooth metal on her forehead instead of Tony’s actual thumb that she stopped screaming.
“What... what did you do? Why is it so quiet, Stark?” she asked.

“Since I am burdened with seeing the world how you saw it, now you get to experience my perspective. Enjoy the quiet, Ms. Maximoff, though I warn you, it gets lonely,” Tony said. He pulled away. He looked over to the holding facility’s guards. “She should no longer be a magical threat to anyone. Give her a few days, and then bump her down the levels for security needs. She has no special combat training outside of what she was reliant upon her magic for, other than some self-defence from Rogers and Romanoff. Otherwise, she’s a baseline human now.”

“You’re kinder than I would have been,” Stephen said. “I would have left her to the voices.” The Dora Milage transferred her shackles to the guards, and Wong pulled the lines of Eldritch magic back.

“Probably not in the long run. It does get lonely in your own head, and I imagine especially so in here,” Tony replied. He stepped away, but didn’t turn his back on her. Maximoff was held up by the guards, but looked like she wanted to sink to her knees. She stared numbly at the floor.

“Well, Wong, do you think you’ve got a handle on it?” Stephen asked, looking at the twitching reliquary.

“Perhaps, though this amount should be spread around. You might need to help with the dispersal. Especially to keep Mordo from getting it,” Wong said.

“I’ll join you at Kamar-Taj after I’m done,” Stephen said.

“I’ll see you soon,” Wong agreed. He quickly opened a portal and left before the WSC officials could sweep in and try to commandeer the situation. Tony loved how Wong and Stephen could do that so easily. Their resolve was a great relief to Tony. It was good to know that there were things that it was fine to keep the WSC out of.

Tony’s eyes fell on Wanda as they started transferring her out of the heavy shackles. Her aura was muddy green with odd pastels at the edges. She was so deeply troubled that it would take a long time to settle into her new state of being.

Stephen sent the Wakandan sorcerer and the Dora Milaje home with his gratitude, and turned to Tony. “One more, love,” he said.

“One more,” Tony agreed.

It was going to be like ripping a bandage off, and Tony knew it was better to just be done with it. But he still dreaded this moment. He would prefer to never see Rogers again. But he didn’t get to choose. The cell was the same as the others, with a heavier door and reinforced walls. The cells were more spacious than the ones in the raft, with a privacy area for bathing, and a recognizable bed, though it was built into the wall. But it was still a cell, and Tony was going to put Steve Rogers in it. There were more WSC officials and guards in the cell to welcome Steve to his new terrarium. They all wanted a piece of bringing Rogers to heel, and it made Tony sick. He knew how close he had been to this same situation. He was angry at Rogers, but he could still empathize.

“Everyone out,” Tony said.

“I’m sorry?” One of the WSC members said.

“You heard me. Out,” Tony repeated.

“Mr. Stark, we would like to question Steve Rogers as soon as possible.”
“No. Not like this. He’s not your experiment or circus act,” Tony said through clenched teeth. “Every protocol will be followed. We must be better than him. We must be humane. Or else we are exactly what he says we are. I repeat, we must be better than him.”

“I agree. Guards and those who are responsible for intake only,” Stephen said, and quietly opened a portal behind the WSC council members.

“We have to set our anger aside and do this right,” Tony said.

“And what makes you think that is you, Dr. Stark?”

“It’s what you hired me for, and I’m the guy with the shiny suit.” Tony made the armour visible, and the council members took a few steps back, and conveniently through the portal Stephen had created, and found themselves in the hallway outside the cell.

“We are getting pretty good at this,” Stephen said.

“Agreed,” Tony said, and put the armour back into stealth mode.

“Are you alright?” Stephen asked.

“Not really, but it doesn’t matter. We need to get this done,” Tony said.

“We can stop. I don’t mind,” Stephen said.

“No, we need to get it over with.”

“I’ll stop the world and melt with you,” Stephen sang quietly. Tony burst out laughing.

“I know you would,” Tony said, beaming at Stephen. “But I will get through this. I don’t like it, but I have so much more in my life now. And... I got a new Steve now,” Tony sang back. Stephen pointed at him with his best goofy grin on his face.


“I’ll be fine, Stephen. I’m not happy about this, but it has to be done. So, let’s get it done.”


Surreal was the only way for Tony to describe his feelings at seeing Steve Rogers in the flesh again. There were no stress lines or anything that betrayed that perhaps Rogers had been suffering. The only thing different was the substantial new beard he was sporting. He looked in peak physical condition as always. Wakanda had been good to him it seemed. Rogers looked furious until he laid eyes on Tony, and then his expression crumpled.

“Tony,” Rogers said, patronizing warmth in his voice. “I have to talk to you.” Rogers didn’t try to fight the Doras or the guards.

“No,” Tony said simply. Rogers’ brow knit in frustration.

“Don’t be like this, Tony. I apologized. I did what I had to in order to keep Bucky safe,” Steve said.

“I’m not being like anything, Rogers. I’m here to facilitate the transfer of wanted criminals into custody,” Tony said, keeping his face neutral. Stephen thought that this was the most frightening of Tony’s expressions, because he truly couldn’t tell how Tony was feeling without reaching out to his mind.
“Did you even get my letter?” Rogers asked.

“Yep. It’s been submitted as evidence,” Tony said. Rogers seemed genuinely confused. It was only then that Tony realized it. Rogers’ aura was unlike any he’d seen so far. It was splotches of bright colours set in gold. He looked like he was surrounded by an ill-planned Jackson Pollack painting... And Tony assumed that it was serum that had done it. He realized that Rogers had gone crazy for good in the same way that the Johann Schmidt had gone bad crazy... This was what was wrong with building a super soldier in the first place. Raise someone above others, and they will eventually buy into their own hype. Tony resolved in that second to keep a fucking lid on himself, and to serve others first, and to care for those that needed care.

“How can you be so cold? Did you even read the letter?” Rogers asked.

“I’ve been colder,” Tony said cryptically.

“Tony,” Rogers said and made to approach him. He was instantly restrained by the Doras and the guards.

“No,” Tony said, and his voice took on that dark, frightening tone one more time. “You listen up, Rogers. No, No, I don’t want you to talk to me. No, I don’t want you to try and manipulate me. No, I don’t want to hear Bucky’s sob story one more fucking time. Innocent people are dead because of your actions. Others are going to spend their lives crippled, and some of your friends are going to spend the rest of their lives in prison. That’s on you. Because you couldn’t fucking compromise with a world that’s scared of your version of “looking out for the little guy”... A lot of little guys ended up in coffins while you were on your rampage. I don’t have to bend to your will when I have over a hundred countries making a better argument, by pointing at your actions,” Tony growled.

“I did read your shit show of a letter. It was self-entitled and shows how emotionally immature you are. You’re right, the Avengers are mine. The idea of them is. I’m the one who tried to serve others. You and the pack of people who followed you, are no longer Avengers. You tried for awhile, but ultimately, while a good starting lineup, it wasn’t for you. You can’t compartmentalize, and who’d have thought that a man who never even started officer’s training would have a hard time following orders? You’ve made yourself a threat, and any goodness you have is irrelevant, Rogers.”

“So, what, we should leave it to you?” Steve asked darkly.

“No, we should leave it to the proper governing bodies, aided by me in the best way I know how. Yes, active duty is on the table, but also using my company for research, by using my contacts in various world governments. I will try new methods that don’t necessarily include punching problems until they go away, instead of just following behind you and cleaning up your messes. You’re done, Rogers. Even if you were needed in the future, you can’t be trusted to serve people,” Tony said.

Tony then paused and looked at Stephen. “Fuck, this is exactly what I didn’t want to do. I don’t owe him an explanation,” Tony said. “The only reason why his aura is so pretty is because he’s fucking delusional. Can you feel that too?”

“A bit, yes,” Stephen said.

“I have to get out of here. You got this?” Tony asked.

“For you love, always,” Stephen replied.
“Can you send me somewhere above the New York skyline? High. So Rogers here doesn’t try to make a break for it.”

“Of course,” Stephen opened a portal, and Tony engaged the armour, and it became visible. He leapt through the portal, trusting Stephen to put him where he asked.

“Love you!” Tony called as he passed through it.

“Love you too!” Stephen called affectionately after him.

“Love?” Rogers asked as the portal closed. His voice was rough and defeated.

“Yes, Love. I love him passionately, Captain Ubermensch. Tony Stark might be the love of my life, I think,” Stephen said thoughtfully. “Now, let’s get this done. I have to undo a whole Gordian knot of a witch’s ill-gotten power.”

Hours, and one trip to Kamar-Taj, later Stephen came through a portal to find himself in a peaceful, high-end cemetery. Things were just starting to green up, and the frost was finally coming out of the ground, though the earth remained cold. Stephen saw Tony next to an ornate grave-marker, emblazoned with the name STARK across it, scratching at the ground with a handheld garden rake and trowel.

“Visiting family?” Stephen asked softly as he approached Tony.

“More like placing a bet,” Tony said. He looked up at Stephen and smiled sadly.

“A bet?” Stephen asked, curious. Tony picked up a small flower bulb and placed it in the turned up earth, and covered it gently, but firmly, like he’d done it many times before.

“Edwin Jarvis, and his wife Ana, were gardeners. I already set up their headstone with perennials years ago, and they’re doing fine... They had a saying about perennials. First year they sleep. Second year they creep. Third year they leap... I am going to be around to see these leap,” Tony said determinedly. Stephen’s heart melted despite the cold breeze.

“What are you planting?” Stephen asked, kneeling down next to Tony.

“Galanthus and Scilla Siberica. Native in the Pyrenees and southwestern Russia, respectively. Seemed appropriate for mom and dad. Mom was Spanish, and I figure Dad was Russian Jewish, though he never acknowledged it... In the Victorian language of flowers, snow drops mean purity, hope, rebirth, and consolation or sympathy. Scilla implies the old forgive and forget idea... So, yeah,” Tony said. Stephen barely even felt the cold, wet grass under his knees as he pulled Tony’s chin up to give him a small kiss.

“Don’t think I’m adorable yet. The groundskeepers will probably hate me for this. I’ll have to pay extra to get them to leave them be,” Tony said.

“Worth it,” Stephen said. “I love that you do your best to make beautiful things, even on your shitty days.”

Tony looked into Stephen’s eyes. He could feel the tremble in Stephen’s hand more so than usual, and Stephen’s pupils were blown wide. “How stoned are you right now?” Tony asked.

“Walls of Jericho falling levels,” Stephen admitted. “We had to divvy up Maximoff’s accumulated power. I thought we’d passed along enough of it to other masters, but there was a lot there. Wong is currently doing an inventory of the library to burn off his energy as he tries to get used to it.”
“And what are you doing?” Tony asked.

“Haven’t gotten that far yet. I wanted to check on you,” Stephen said.

“Aww... You’re sweet,” Tony said. He popped the last few bulbs in the ground, and covered them efficiently. He wiped his hands on the grass, then stood up, and offered Stephen his hand. “You want to go back to your place and fuck like bunnies? That will probably take the edge off,” Tony suggested. Stephen’s eyes went wide and he grinned.

“Perfect,” Stephen said, savouring the idea.

Chapter End Notes

Oh Tony... Tony Tony Tony... *pats his fluffy head*
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Tony sucks it up and finally has that conversation with Pepper. Cute Stephen Strange is cute, and quotes American Revolutionaries. Pepper keeps her shit together, and Happy Hogan is my beautiful, sarcastic, Everyman child, and I love him.

Chapter Notes

Heeeeeey, sorry for the lack of update last week. Work was nutty... restock orders arriving from all over (I mean it's February, how have I sold this much stuff since Christmas?), a customer service rep who didn't know that us being in Canada might change shipping rates (eyeroll, oh Americans...), and someone was off with a sore knee, meaning I had to work more often. Anyway, I didn't get too much chance to write, but I am hoping to cure that. I'm getting ideas... Space ideas... Well, a few... So I shall have to see where it goes.

Also, I have still not seen Ragnarok... However, I saw Black Panther twice, so does that make up for it? (HOLY SHIT YOU GUYS. SO MUCH FUN. I WANNA BE SHURI WHEN I GROW UP.) ... And I like to think that what I have written here can be wedged into the MCU as it currently stands. I wasn't expecting Shuri to be so funny, but I figure that she would be on edge around Tony, so that explains the seriousness of their conversation that they had in this story. I can also draw a lot of parallels between her tech, and what she might have learned from and expanded upon from Tony's work... She's what Tony might have been had he not been drafted into weapons production as a young man. She is progress unfettered by typical convention... And she's great. They were all great. Fantastic, feast for the eyes kinda movie. Loved it.

I would say that this is running concurrent with the events of Ragnarok and after Black Panther... At least so far as I understand it... And if I miss something here and there... eh, roll with it. It's fan fic. I can do what I want.

Enough jabbering, on with the fic! Thanks for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony woke the next morning next to a pliant, and still very asleep Stephen. Stephen had somehow gotten closer during the night, plastering himself to Tony’s side. It made Tony grin. His bladder complained, but it could wait. The bed was warm and Tony was definitely sore in all the right ways. He was willing to bet Stephen would wake up the same way. Stephen had been on fire last night, responsive to Tony’s every touch and enthusiastic beyond belief. Luckily, Tony naturally had the stamina to keep up, and when Stephen had finally worn himself out, Tony had cleaned them both up and cuddled in close.
The previous day had started out shitty, but ended beautifully. Tony had the stray thought that he would be content to wake up like this, next to this particular man, every day that he could. He realized he hadn’t had thoughts like this since the early days of being with Pepper, and in retrospect he knew it had been too soon to think like that about her. But this had taken months to develop. It felt solid, and no longer an exciting torrid affair. With Pepper, he’d still been too burdened by his own fears and anxiety, and couldn’t be fully present for her. He’d failed her, often times simply because he was afraid he would, so he hadn’t bothered to show up. But graciously, she didn’t hate him, and here he lay with a chance to be better, with someone who wasn’t afraid of his capabilities or chosen profession. It was nothing like he expected, but it was wonderful.

But he was still obligated to do right by Pepper. She was his CEO or course, and most importantly, she was his friend. And friends told the truth, and she deserved the truth after all she’d been through. Stephen let out the slightest snore, and inhaled deeply. He flexed and woke, blinking against the daylight. “Christ, what time is it?” Stephen asked.

“Eleven forty-two,” FRIDAY supplied helpfully from Tony’s phone.

“Sleep well?” Tony asked in quiet, smokey, voice.

“Like the dead,” Stephen mumbled. He closed his eyes and pressed his head further into the pillow. “Wake me after the apocalypse.” Tony smiled and ran his fingers through the premature grey at Stephen’s temples. Stephen cracked his still exposed eye.

“Hey sleepyhead,” Tony teased. Stephen tried to look grumpy, but was placated by Tony’s smile.


“Well, if we’re late for brunch with Virginia Potts on the west coast, it could be for us,” Tony said and chuckled.

“I’ve barely been introduced and already Ms. Potts is running my life. Apparently being the Sorcerer Supreme just means more appointments,” Stephen grumbled.

“I thought you were acting Sorcerer Supreme,” Tony said.

“Not after yesterday. Wong and I are sort of sharing the title, but I have more raw ability to hold power, and propensity for doing crazy shit, hence the affinity with the Eye of Agamotto, so ultimately, the title falls to me,” Stephen explained, coming around a bit more.

“Man pain, chosen one, save the world angst?” Tony asked, and scratched Stephen’s scalp lightly.

“Yup,” Stephen said, popping the p.

“No wonder Wong calls us so dramatic,” Tony mused.

Later, after making coffee, a shower, and a shave, Tony was adjusting the Aether on his wrist nervously. “Why does this make me so nervous?” Tony asked. “I shouldn’t be nervous. Pepper loves me and has forgiven me for my faults.”

“Because Psych 101 taught me that fear of rejection is a very natural human emotion, Tony. It’s natural to be worried,’ Stephen replied. He was fresh out of the shower, and the bathroom was thick with steam. “At least you can look on the bright side and be certain that you’re not losing your human nature to your own inherent power and that of the Aether.”

“Thanks,” Tony said flatly. “There’s a flaw in that argument... With the Aether... I can see how it
all could be, Stephen. How I could make it happen. Make the world better. In a flash... I could just... will it to be.”

“But you haven’t,” Stephen said, wiping the old mirror with a towel. He then got frustrated, and cast a spell to get rid of the condensation. “What’s stopping you?”

“People need to agree to it. Otherwise, they will somehow find out, and come to resent it. I don’t want anyone resenting Utopia,” Tony said.

“Then you’re still doing fine,” Stephen said, and kissed Tony on the cheek. Tony had showered separately from Stephen to avoid getting distracted by his boyfriend all delightful and naked, and hence being late to see Pepper and Happy. He could feel the scratch of Stephen’s stubble, and the softer press of his goatee. “What about setting your mind to helping people agree to change for the better? Show them how things could be, and then cut off the efforts of the people who might try to prevent progress... Improving living conditions for humanity will make them receptive to new ideas.”

“You mean the hard way,” Tony said.

“Yes, I mean the hard way... What we attain too cheap, we esteem too lightly: 'tis dearness only that gives everything its value. It can be done, and everyone will be better off if we earn it, Tony.” Stephen said.

“FRIDAY!” Tony called to his phone, which was still in the bedroom. “Can you upload a copy of Thomas Paine’s Right of Man to my phone?” Tony asked.

“Sure thing, boss!” she called back.

“It will be good to have a refresher,” Tony said.

“My clever, clever boyfriend,” Stephen said with a contented hum.

“You want a straight razor shave today?” Tony asked, running his fingers over Stephen’s cheek and down his neck.

“You just want me to look pretty in front of your ex,” Stephen observed shrewdly.

“Who says it’s just for her?” Tony asked, and waggled his eyebrows at Stephen. “Come on, let me do that for you. It will feel good.”

“All right, but only because it feels good,” Stephen acquiesced.

“And because you look fucking sexy with well-curated facial hair,” Tony purred. Stephen laughed, and let Tony sit him down by the sink. The idea of a billionaire helping him shave due to his mangled hands would have been terrifyingly laughable in his prior existence. But now it felt very familiar and routine. Stephen surrendered to the current, and let Tony get to work.

Stephen had seen glimpses of Virginia Potts up until now. He’d been in the room several times while Tony had called her, and had been formally introduced during one such occasion. But face to face was something else entirely. He’d seen the hyper-competent side. He’d seen her frustrated and trying to get a conclusion out of Tony to meet company goals. He’d even seen her relaxed and warm toward Tony. But what surprised him upon meeting her and her gently shaking his hand, mindful of his scars, was the warmth. Virginia Potts knew how to connect with people. It’s why she was so formidable in part. It was hard to dismiss someone you had an emotional connection to. So it would make her an unconventional, but very effective CEO.
In meeting her and Happy, Stephen felt at last that he’d met people who saw Tony as he did. Rhodes had a different kind of friendship with Tony, and that was wonderful too... But Pepper and Happy also saw how remarkable Tony was, and were fiercely protective of him. So Stephen found himself on his best behaviour, because he found he wanted them as allies.

They were welcomed into Pepper’s home near Malibu and instantly, Stephen could see why Tony had lived in California for decades. They were taken outside to the patio, where food was already laid out on a picture perfect day. It was like a glimpse into Tony’s former life. Tony spent a lot of time at the Sanctum now, his apartment at the Tower, or the Avengers compound. Stephen had to wonder if Tony missed this.

Harold Hogan was as reserved as Pepper was warm. He wasn’t unfriendly, but he was definitely sizing Stephen up. Tony was on that day, warm and full of jokes, thrilled to finally be pulling his worlds together. Pepper clearly approved how Tony looked, and said so. And Stephen had to be proud to admit it was the truth. Regular rest and meals (because keeping to some sort of schedule meant they could spend more time together), had done wonders for Tony.

Tony was up front with the fact that he had something important to tell them both, but that they should eat first, because it was going to be a long conversation and they needed fuel. They sat down at the table, and poured the wine. Pepper noticed that Tony got to work neatly cutting up the food on his plate before bringing any of it to his mouth. She had a moment of worry, and wondered if Tony had developed a new nervous tic or obsession. Then Tony switched plates with Stephen with as little fanfare as possible, save for Stephen’s polite thank you. Tony responded with a soft air kiss. Pepper tried to not be mortified at this lack of foresight. She made the note to get sushi next time, knowing she’d seen Stephen use chopsticks during a video call with Tony... And realized that Stephen had potential if she was already making plans for their next meal together.

Stephen was proving to be delightful. The incident hadn’t even phased him, and he seemed to manage a fork steadily enough. His candour was friendly, and the way he and Tony teased one another was affectionate. Pepper honestly couldn’t remember if she’d ever seen Tony so at ease and happy, and frankly, in love. Pepper liked him more than she was ready to admit at this point, but she would talk it over later with Happy. He had a very attuned people sense that Pepper especially trusted after the incident with Killian.

But as they ate, even Happy started warming up to Stephen. Both of them had a soft spot for blues music, and for Happy, it was rare that he found someone who shared the deep cut interest like he did.

It was after they had eaten, and politely stuck to getting to know you chat, that Pepper breached the dreaded topic. “So, how bad is it?” she asked. “You always insist on food before bad news.”

“No I don’t,” Tony said.


“Okay, but those were not necessarily bad news. They were big news. As of right now, what I have to tell you changes nothing. Long term it might be more of an issue,” Tony said.

“Well, what is it? You can share with the rest of the class,” Pepper teased gently.

“Hmm, okay... You know, I’m still not sure how to put this, because I don’t want to hurt you. I don’t want to scare you, and I sure as hell don’t want to lose you,” Tony said.

“If it isn’t going to change anything for now, why worry so much about telling us?” she asked.
Occam’s Razor was her default, and Tony had always admired her efficiency.

“Because it will change the way you see me forever... And I’ve already put you both through so much, that I feel like I would just be laying another burden on our already strained friendship,” Tony explained.

“Tony,” Happy interrupted, “You’re our favourite hot mess. And you don’t see how much you’ve improved our lives by being in them... It’s an honour to be considered your friend... If I didn’t have this job,” Happy trailed off and looked into the middle distance, and shook his head. He returned his gaze slowly to Tony. “You’re not a burden, Tony.”

“What he said,” Pepper agreed. She smiled at him. Tony sighed loudly and leaned his head on his hands, arms braced on the table. He let out a long, shaky breath.

“You know how Rhodey’s mom always joked that I must be from outer space?” Tony asked. Stephen rolled his eyes, and held up a hand, getting Tony’s attention.

“Pump the brakes, Tony.” Stephen suggested. “Start with Maria.”

“Oh, that’s much better,” Tony said.

“Mmm, well, someone did declare that I was the best boyfriend ever yesterday morning,” Stephen said dryly. Tony pressed another little air kiss toward Stephen.

“So, mom was a sorcerer like Stephen,” Tony said easily. “But she kept it from everyone while she was alive. Even Howard. Especially Howard.”

“And that has to do with you?” Pepper asked.

“Yeah Pep... It pretty much has everything to do with how I came to be. Over the centuries, several lines of magic users have taken it upon themselves to protect powerful relics and objects. Mom’s family was one of them... Due to the extensive record-keeping of the Kamar-Taj, Wong and Stephen found out what it was they were guarding,” Tony said. This was easier, relaying information like a narrative.

“And that object was?” Pepper asked. She was patient, having had long practice at nudging Tony toward the point, without letting him get distracted.

“The Soul Stone,” Tony said softly.


“Yeah, crazy, huh?” Tony asked.

“Sounds nuts, Tony,” Happy replied.

“Yeah, it does. But it’s true, and it gets crazier... And it is going to save the world,” Tony said.

“Correction, you are going to save the world,” Stephen said.

“What does that mean? You can use the Soul Stone?” Pepper asked. Tony sighed heavily again. Here it came.

“It means that mom went to extraordinary lengths to ensure that the Soul Stone couldn’t be corrupted and used against others. She took a huge risk to protect it,” Tony said. “She... reformed the stone. Into me.”
It’s what? In you?” Pepper asked. Happy just had his eyes open wide, trying to take it all in.

“It is me... And I know how insane that sounds. I’m still terrified, but I have proof. I’m trying to get a handle on it, I really am. It’s coming along... Outside of Rhodey, Vision, and the bots, the rest of my family is sitting in this room, and you deserved to know. I don’t want this to be like the palladium poisoning. I don’t want to spring it on you. Because life is going to get weird in the next couple of years with Thanos coming. But Stephen and I think we can handle it. Which sounds equally as insane, I know. But I am getting used to this, and exploring just what I am capable of now. The information about Thanos suggests that he is after the Mind Stone, and possibly the Eye of Agamotto. He doesn’t know about me, that I exist as this, and we can use that our advantage.” Tony’s voice was still filled with worry about rejection from his loved ones, but that was what trust was all about. He had to trust them, he knew he could.

“You’re not a this. You’re a you,” Stephen insisted gently. He put his hand over Tony’s, and pulled him back from his hunched, tense position leaning on the table. Tony slowly complied, and followed Stephen’s deep, steady, breathing. Pepper was a bit amazed. She’d never seen Tony come down from building anxiety so quickly. It wasn’t a complete turn around, but he was willing to follow Stephen’s example of calm.

“What do you mean by proof?” Pepper asked, finally gathering enough words to form a sentence. The shock of the idea had silenced her thoughts. Tony wouldn’t joke about this. He wouldn’t prank them with something so off-colour as this. Pepper tried to swallow her fear. The idea of Thanos had still been far away, but it was getting real very quickly.

“Yeah, I can show you... It looks freaky, but... my chest doesn’t hurt like it used to, Pep. I can breathe again,” Tony said.

“Before you strip for our hosts, I can confirm with x-rays conducted by myself and FRIDAY, that Tony’s chest is indeed what we official doctor types call a-okay,” Stephen offered.

“How does one turn an Infinity Stone into a person?” Pepper asked.

“Magic. A lot of it. I have to imagine, that like the former Sorcerer Supreme, Maria Stark was drawing energies from other dimensions. I expect that she used so much energy creating Tony that she was unable to use magic ever again,” Stephen said.

“But it just sounds so fantastical, Tony. You know it does,” Pepper said.

“Oh, no argument there,” Tony agreed. He removed his now open button down shirt, and then pulled off the three layers of undershirts he had on. Pepper knew the set up, and her eyes narrowed, expecting something like the arc reactor. She was not prepared for what she saw though, and neither was Happy.

“What the hell, Tony?” Happy asked. He leaned across the table, squinting into the light cast by the crack in Tony’s chest. Pepper let out a gasp and her hand went to her mouth. Tony tried not to be endeared by it. Sometimes Pepper was such a girly girl.

“Oh my god,” Pepper said. The golden-orange, fiery light reminded her of Extremis. “You said you fixed it, Tony?” Her voice had gone up an octave.

“No, Pep, it’s not Extremis... See, touch here.” Tony pressed his own palm across the glowing crack in his chest. “No heat, I swear. It’s just a really weird looking scar,” he explained.

Pepper took her hand from her mouth and looked Tony in the eye. He nodded encouragingly at her.
She looked down again and reached her hand out. It felt odd to be touching Tony’s bare chest again after all this time. Clearly he’d been eating and working out again, and he was toned and looked healthy. She might have to credit Stephen with that too.

The crack was cool to the touch, which surprised her. It must have showed on her face, because Tony laughed, startling her from a prolonged exploration. Tony tapped the crack with two fingers firmly, and it made the same sound as the regular, dull thump of flesh. “See?” Tony said. “Wanna try, Hap?”

“I ain’t touching that waxed chest,” Happy said, and took a sip of water.

“Between Extremis and all the surgeries, I haven’t really had to worry about chest hair anymore,” Tony replied.

“Lies. You still go to that man spa,” Happy insisted.

“I’m not dealing with odd patches, it looks weird,” Tony said. “And I know that you always get a mani-pedi while you’re waiting for me,” he teased back.

“I got heavy cuticles. A man can only do so much about that on his own,” Happy said as he examined his fingernail beds.

Thankfully their banter had the desired effect. Pepper laughed. If she was laughing, she could deal. Stephen laughed along with her. He was fast getting to like both Pepper and Happy, and he could see their genuine love for Tony.

“Want to try something both neat and freaky?” Tony asked her.

“How freaky?”

“It will show you how I see you now,” Tony said.

“Will it hurt?” she asked.

“Not at all,” Tony said and held out his hand. Pepper took it, still trusting him after all he’d put her through. He reached out with his mind, and embraced her soul like he used to embrace her body. He used leverage, and swept her up. “It’s okay, open your eyes, don’t freak out. You won’t fall,” Tony said softly.

Pepper did so, and gasped again at the sight of Tony, transparent and lit up in oranges and gold. She also realized she was several feet above where she had been. Tony smiled at her nervousness, holding her like they might start dancing. “S’okay, Pep. Just a little out of body experience for your afternoon. No biggie,” Tony had laughter in his eyes. “Hey Happy, wanna give it a try?”

“Fuck no. This is weirder than Killian’s projection of his brain,” Happy said. His knuckles were going white around the water glass, and his eyes were dancing back and forth between their astral forms and and their inert bodies seated at the table. Stephen schooled his breathing, in hopes that Happy would mirror him. Pepper looked down at Happy, and saw him surrounded by a haze of bold, deep red.

“He looks good in red, doesn’t he?” Tony asked quietly.

“You’re seeing that too?” she asked.

“Yeah, Pep... Auras are a reflection of the state of your soul... And while Mr. Hogan is a decent
looking fella, you’re magnificent, Ms. Potts,” Tony said, and nodded toward the reflective surface of Pepper’s patio doors. Pepper caught the sight of her astral form, and had to settle her mind around the idea of an astral form. Silver and blue surrounded her. Tony was smiling at her. “Looks good on you, Potts,” Tony murmured. Pepper looked back at Tony. She saw the churning orange and yellow which composed his entire being. Her gaze was drawn to the blazing light across his chest that matched the one on his body.

“This is... really fucking weird,” Pepper finally said.

“Agreed,” Tony said.

“So, what do we do from this point?” Pepper asked. Tony kept smiling, but it softened. He gently brought them down and back into their bodies. Pepper’s eyes opened, and instead of pulling her hand away from Tony, she brought her hands together, surrounding Tony’s. Tony basked in their connection. She felt like the first warm spring day of the year.

“What’s next is I plan for a bunch of contingencies and get down to refining my abilities... And then, we wait until I can kill Thanos,” Tony said.

“Kill him?”

“Kill him. I’m not fucking around with the planet. Thanos will be the first to be eliminated. Then we’ll see if his army is still willing to invade,” Tony said.

“How do you plan to do that?” Pepper asked. Tony smiled sadly.

“I’m gonna need you to trust me on that, Pepper. I can’t let anyone know. I don’t want him prepared in any way for it,” Tony said.

“The art of war,” Pepper said softly.

“The art of war,” Tony replied.

“Tony, what is this? I saw it just now.” Pepper pointed at Tony’s wrist.

“The Reality Stone,” Tony admitted. Now Pepper pulled her hand away. “She’s fine, really. She’s calm and apparently likes me. Even a bit protective of me. I had to keep her calm when we were transferring Rogers and the rest. She was ready to kick some ass, but held it together when I asked her to be calm. She’s pretty happy to let me take the lead for now.”

“That’s an Infinity Stone... Your watch is an Infinity Stone?”

“And I presume waterproof to a ridiculous extent,” Tony said. Pepper arched her eyebrows. “Also, probably fireproof?” Tony tried. Pepper was unmoved.

“I needed to keep her hidden. I can’t let anyone use her poorly. It’s already happened too often.”

“You’re talking about her like she’s a child,” Pepper said.

“She feels like a kid... Can I introduce you?” Tony asked. He laid the back of his free hand over the Aether, and flexed his fingers invite Pepper to lay her hand over his.

“You realize that this could be the stone manipulating you, right? Like the Mind Stone did when it was still in Loki’s sceptre... You said that Rogers said the same of Maximoff,” Happy deduced shrewdly.
“Sure, but I’m manipulating her too... Correction... Mentoring her. Showing her how to act. That she doesn’t have to lash out. The fact that she hasn’t even attempted to tear me apart is a very good sign. These things have a history of violence.”

“So your hand is going to protect me?” Pepper asked.

“Yes, because I’ve asked her to, and she trusts me... It’s like petting a wary cat or holding an over-tired child. She just wants to feel secure,” Tony said. Pepper still looked wary, but laid her hand over Tony’s. Tony gently connected Pepper to the Aether. “See? Like a curious kid, isn’t she?” All questions and wanting to help... You can see why she’s been manipulated too easily.”

Pepper did feel the Aether, and was somewhat shaken by the sheer power before her. She realized how much Tony’s influence and care had tempered the stone... And she saw the parallels between her and Tony. If anyone on the planet should have her, Tony was near the top of the list. He knew intimately what it felt like to regret misusing power. He knew what it was to have been manipulated into wrong doing. He knew what it was to regret being complicit. In her mind, Pepper said hello to the Aether, and its energy bubbled up in front of her in a bold red mist. The Aether said hello, asked her name, how she met Tony, why he was so important to her, decided she liked Pepper’s reasoning and also her hair, and asked if she needed anything all at once. Pepper tried to focus and make her feel it was nice to meet her. The Aether shimmered, preening at the warm feelings.

“You can see why I need the need to protect her?” Tony asked.

“Yes,” Pepper replied warmly. “She’s charming... She’ll help you with Thanos?”

“A bit... But actually dispatching Thanos? That’s going to be on me.”

“Why?” Pepper asked.

“Because I don’t want to use her like that. She doesn’t need that,” Tony said. His voice remaining soft.

“Would you though, if you had to? If the planet was in danger?”

“I would ask her to, but only if she was willing... She has to have the choice to say no. I’m not going to dictate to her,” Tony said.

“Tony,” Pepper started. Tony shook his head.

“No, Pep. This is a moral issue of the highest order... Because if I use her that way it opens a door I don’t want to open. If I change that, what else will I be willing to change? I will protect her, and if she offers help, then I have to make the call whether I can morally take that help,” Tony said.

“If she offers, you take it,” Pepper said resolutely. “Tell me your alternate plans. I assume I have work to do.”

“So, S.I. needs to start a weapons manufacturing division again, but there are going to be so many oversights, and my goal is to never have to use them,” Tony said. Pepper’s face remained schooled and calm.

“What do you need?” She asked.

After that there was a conversation of business language that might have made Stephen’s head spin if not for the grounding presence of Happy Hogan. Stephen had heard Tony’s technical patter, as
part of being the head of Research and Development, but now he saw why Tony ran Stark Industries as CEO for decades before he put Ms. Potts in that job. Pepper was steadied by a task, ready to tackle it. And that made her calm on the surface, but even after Tony had put his shirt back on, her eyes kept drifting to Tony’s chest, worried for him. Tony saw it and tried to dispel those worries, animated in his description of his ideas. Those ideas, when one paid careful attention, were starting to skirt on the edges of actually privatizing world peace, as Tony had once boasted about doing.

Tony gave timelines, and listened carefully to Pepper’s suggestions. Stephen saw the deep respect Tony had for her opinions, and had FRIDAY make several notes on his files. And by the time the two powerhouses were done, it was almost time to eat again, and Pepper asked FRIDAY to order sushi for the four of them.

“Break time, boss?” Tony teased Pepper, who rolled her eyes.

“Yes, you can have recess before dinner. Just don’t get your hands or shirt dirty,” Pepper teased back.

“Ha, jokes on you, I might put a hole in the knee of my pants to spite you,” Tony said, as he got to his feet and stretched. “Come on, Stephen, let’s go take a walk on the beach.” Tony offered his hand to Stephen, who pulled himself up.

“Be back in an hour,” Pepper called as Tony made a break for the private beach that lay at the end of Pepper’s property. Pepper, no matter her business acumen, was a California girl at heart, and had treated herself to beachfront living as any good CEO might.

Stephen knew he should have been taking in the breathtaking scenery, but he really only had eyes for Tony in the golden light of the afternoon. The breeze was perfect and the temperature comfortable, and Tony was breathing the ocean air deeply, like he was trying to take everything in before he was dragged away.

“Do you want to move back here?” Stephen asked over the sound of the waves breaking on the shore.

“No,” Tony said as he looked out over the Pacific. “There are too many cues for a life I’ve worked hard to change. It’s nice to visit, but home is you. Home is Rhodey, and Vision, and the bots... But mostly, I want to be where you are. I’d move to Nepal if I had to,” Tony said. He pulled Stephen in and down for a kiss. “And I don’t miss the seismic activity. Makes me think a super villain is trying to destroy my house.”

“Mmm... all right then... I want you to be happy, Tony. You just seem very comfortable here,” Stephen said.

“I’m happy because Pepper and Hogan aren’t freaking out. I’m happy because Pepper likes you well enough to order a dinner that you can easily eat. I’m happy that you seem to get along with some of nearest and dearest. This is a good day. But overall, my life is better because I’m with you, not because of my geographic location,” Tony said. He held Stephen close, humming into his collarbone.

“Thank you for bringing me today,” Stephen said.

“Bringing you?” Tony asked, verging on laughter. “Thank you for helping me stumble through the perpetual existential crisis that is my life,” Tony said. Stephen laughed, pulled Tony close and kissed him thoroughly.
“I love you, Tony. Including your mess... And trust me, I am sure my own mess will catch up to me sooner or later, so I hope you’ll stick with me through it.”

“Square deal,” Tony said. “Love you too.”

Chapter End Notes

Comments are love... Just sayin' :)
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Into the wild, inky black, yonder... Also, butt jokes.

Chapter Notes

Well, Ragnarok doesn't come out on disc until Tuesday, but I have certain 'privileges' at my local video store/comic shop, and laid my hands on a copy a few days early. It was hilarious, but man, what quick pace for even a Marvel movie. I really enjoyed it. It felt fresh. I am perpetually surprised at how fresh the individual movies feel, ya know? Banner seemed a bit off to me, and it was odd to see Thor so much a fish out of water, but at least they explained it well. I enjoyed the hell out of Valkyrie... Seemed a better fit in the world than Sif (but I would have loved to have seen her again). Grandmaster batting his eyelashes at Loki, I legit lol'd... Speaking of, Loki was great. Spot on the whole time. Also, probably the best use of The Immigrant Song in all of cinema imho. Also... Dr. Strange... Just... I love Cumberbatch in the role. Like, really love him. Even if the way he uses his voice to attain an American accent sounds like him doing a Hugh Laurie as Dr. House impression sometimes.

So, now I am alllll caught up. Infinity war will be where I start to diverge from current canon... In the worlds of Valkyrie: "Here we go!"

And now, PIIIIIIIIIIIGS INNNNNNN SPaaaaaaaaaaaaaace! ... A No-Prize if you get THAT reference. lol. I have old.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“So, your space buddy. Gonna need to talk to him,” Tony said. They were having breakfast at the compound with Rhodey and Vision.

“Stephen has friends in space?” Rhodey asked.

“Legit space friends,” Tony said.

“I wouldn’t say friends. Potential allies perhaps,” Stephen said.

“Space allies then. Either way, I need some information from them,” Tony said.

“Astral projection would be best for now,” Stephen said.

“Is that such a good idea? To go that far from your body?” Rhodey asked.

“I would prefer it to Sling Ring portal travel for now. It’s less dangerous for Tony if his body is somewhere secure,” Stephen explained.

“If you want a space-worthy War Machine, then I’m going to have to,” Tony said. “You’re already
“Indeed I am,” Vision said. “Though I’ve not explored very far.”

“So, honey bear, we need to get you, and possibly Stephen, kitted out,” Tony said.

“You couldn’t get me into one of those tin cans for all the money you have,” Stephen declared. “Besides, the Cloak of Levitation would be very jealous, and I think you know that would be a bad idea.”

“Under clothing body armour, love? Please? It will ease my mind,” Tony said, and batted his eyes at Stephen.

“Maybe... If it’s light enough,” Stephen conceded.

“You’ll hardly notice it’s there,” Tony promised. Stephen rolled his eyes.

“When do you want to meet with Quill?” Stephen asked.

“How long does it take to get a hold of him?”

“Not long. I project, and there I am,” Stephen said. “I usually try to make sure that no one is in a state of undress. One must be polite after all.”

“How magnanimous of you. Besides, it is my naked ass alone that you are permitted to have eyes for,” Tony said.

“Oh trust me, I do,” Stephen replied. Rhodey laughed a bit and shook his head. Tony had never been this at ease in a relationship, and he was happy for him.

“Let me finish my coffee. I’m on research time right now, so the S.I. minions should leave me alone,” Tony said.

“And the fruit and yogurt,” Stephen insisted, tucking into his ridiculously healthy muesli. Tony sighed, but picked up his spoon. He wondered if it was the Aether that made it taste particularly good that morning, but decided not to fight it.

Stephen led him to often unused the meditation room in the compound after, stating the effort would require a quiet, safe place, free of distraction. He also sent a text to Wong, who simply replied with a thumbs up emoji. “It’s like he’s allergic to words,” Stephen said, showing Tony his screen. Tony chuckled and nodded in agreement.

Tony noticed the Cloak of Levitation quietly open the door and slink into the room. “Hey buddy, coming along for the ride?” Tony asked. The cloak brushed past him, but so gently as to be more of a caress. It settled on Stephen’s shoulders, and he was dressed in his sorcerer’s garb. Tony was in jeans, and a beat up Black Sabbath shirt that he said was symbolic for space travel. The lightweight armour was on, but again in stealth mode. Stephen had insisted, as it would give FRIDAY direct feedback of how Tony’s body was handling the separation.

“Can you sit in that thing?” Stephen asked, pulling out a mat.

“I can recline. Cross-legged for traditional meditation is out though,” Tony said. “But that’s the trade off for boot repulsors, leg flares, emergency flaps, and other assorted weaponry.”

“No problem,” Stephen said, and moved the mat over to the wall. “Take a seat.”
“Super fun. You didn’t say this involved hippy shit,” Tony said.

“This isn’t exactly meditation proper. But it helps to leave your body somewhere secure and comfortable,” Stephen said.

“I do sort of love that this crazy shit makes sense when coming from you,” Tony said.

“That means I’m doing my job well. Now, on your butt, Mr. Stark.” Tony sat with his back to the wall. Stephen settled beside him.

“Not the way I want you on my ass, Dr. Strange,”

“Not the way I want to be on your ass... But someone was all ‘wah, I wanna go to space today’, and was quite insistent about it,” Stephen retorted.

“Speaking of space, fair warning, last time I had a good view of the stars, I thought I was going to die, so just a warning that I might be a little freaked out,” Tony said. Stephen stillled.

“Are you sure about this? I could attempt to take Vision along,” Stephen said.

“I am so very sure about this, Stephen. It’s like the portals, or even seeing Rogers. It’s best to rip the bandage off and show myself it’s not the end of the damn world,” Tony assured.

“If you show any high levels of anxiety, then we’re coming back here immediately.”

“Okay, that’s fine... But I have to try, Stephen... Besides... It’s space. I want to see it so badly. It’s a nerdgasm I can’t even begin to describe,” Tony said. Stephen looked like he was holding back laughter.

“Okay,” Stephen said, his eyes mirthful. “Space nerd.”

“Space nerds shoot for the stars,” Tony said, paraphrasing something that Ana Jarvis had once told him. Stephen laughed and rolled his eyes at the corniness of the joke.

“You ready?” Stephen asked.

“Bring it on,” Tony said, took a breath, and relaxed. He was slightly more more comfortable with the idea of leaving his body now. He summoned his mental armour, took Stephen’s hand, and let him lead the way.

“Where are we?” Tony asked as their new location settled around them.


“Milano?” Tony asked, giving Stephen some side eye.

“Quill’s ship. I didn’t ask why. Once you meet him, you probably won’t have to either.”

The area they’d come to was utilitarian and dark, and Tony got a good look around before a pale woman with actual antenna came out of a side room. “Dr. Strange! How nice to see you again,” she said.

“Mantis,” Stephen replied with a polite nod.

“You brought us a friend... He is handsome like you,” she said. Tony’s head bowed a little and he smiled.
“He is, isn’t he?” Stephen agreed.

“Oh! You are together. I did not know you had a life mate. How sweet,” she said.

“He is most days,” Stephen said. “Is Peter around?”

“He is speaking with the leaders of Xandar and coordinating a supply chain to them using Ravager ships,” she explained.

“Will he be finished soon?” Stephen asked.

“He will probably welcome the distraction. He has affection for Xandar and the inhabitants, but not for its bureaucracy,” Mantis said. “Come up above deck to wait.” She turned on her heel and Tony looked wide-eyed at Stephen.

“You okay?” Stephen asked.

“I haven’t seen anything yet, and already this is fucking awesome,” Tony said, running his hand over a bulkhead.

“The above deck has a view to the outside of the ship. Is that okay?”

“We’ll find out. Go ahead, love... I’m a thought away from safety if I need it,” Tony said.

Stephen floated up the steps, and Tony followed, his feet on the ground, wanting to take everything in. Putting his hands on the rails to pull himself up the ladder steps, he realized that the Aether was nestled on his wrist, there with him, in real time. Tony called her sneaky, but didn’t admonish her. He then reminded her of the need to stay hidden. Extra bracing in bold red appeared around the gauntlet of Tony’s mental armour. “Atta girl,” he whispered softly to her.

He went up the steps, and was met with a magnificent view of the stars. “Oh, oh wow,” he said. Out of the range of the Sun, the sky had so much more to be seen. There was part of a nebula on the horizon of what Tony could see.

“This is Tony Stark, Peter, and he’s apparently a six-year-old at the Hayden Planetarium again,” Stephen said. Tony managed to drag his eyes away from the stars a moment later.

“What? Oh, hi,” Tony said and waved a little.

“Wow,” Quill said, eyeing up the armour Tony appeared to be wearing. Tony looked perplexed.

“What?” Tony asked.

“My mom kept the articles about you in Time magazine... Said you were going to change the world,” Peter said.

“Not sure about that... It sure as hell has taken me long enough to try to improve things,” Tony said. “Nice to meet you.” Tony shook Quill’s hand, who was surprised at the physical touch despite Tony’s translucent appearance. Tony then returned his gaze to the stars. “Sorry, the last time I had a view like this, I was pretty sure I was going to die.”

“Why would you fear the stars?” An enormous grey-green man with raised red patterns on his skin asked him. Tony gave him a once over, trying to not be afraid of the sheer size of him. If Rogers was ripped, this guy was a humanoid tank, capable of giving Thor a solid challenge. Tony managed to collect himself enough to answer.
“I wasn’t scared of the stars. I was scared of the Chitauri mother-ship and the nuclear warhead I had just thrown at it,” Tony said.

“That was you?” a green woman asked. She was standing beside Quill.

“Uh, yes?” Tony said, suddenly worried if he’d just admitted to committing genocide.

The grey man smiled ferociously at him. “I admire greatly anyone who can stop Thanos’ forces,” he said.

“Thanks?” Tony said.

“Good job, Tony Stark,” the green woman added, with a hint of admiration in her voice. Tony let out a sigh of relief. There was no love lost for the Chitauri here. Most of these people had suffered greatly, often at the hands of Thanos. Tony would have to speak further to his therapist about the mental ramifications of killing thousands in one go, even if they were evil. It still played on his mind.

“I am Gamora,” the green woman said, bringing him back to current reality. “The one that frightens you is Drax. Rocket is at the helm. You’ve met Mantis and Peter, and Nebula and Groot are sulking below decks, as is typical.”

In a moment of pure astonishment, where Tony had to bite his tongue to stay cool, a goddamn raccoon’s head poked out from the side of the pilot’s chair. The raccoon looked summarily unimpressed and was going to go back to his task when Tony spoke up.

“So you’re Rocket. Heard a lot about you,” Tony said.

“Like what?” the raccoon asked, with a hiss for added effect.

“That you’re cantankerous, but also a badass with a gift for blowing shit up... I’m going to need some tips from an advanced mind as I have to design weapons systems on Earth,” Tony said.

“Why would he think exploding excrement is a gift?” Drax asked Quill. Quill rolled his eyes.

“And there it is... We were holding it together so well,” Peter said in a defeated tone. He put his hand over his eyes, and sighed loudly. “And now they’re gonna know what screw ups we are. Just fucking great.” Thankfully Tony laughed, understanding the dynamic well. To his surprise, so did Rocket.

“You can quit kissing my ass now, Stark. I know what you’re here for,” Rocket said.

“Oh thank fuck. Can we talk physics now?” Tony asked.

“Sure,” Rocket said, and disengaged from the controls of the ship once he’d set it to autopilot.

“He was going to kiss your ass? He’ll get fur in his teeth... I am concerned about this man’s preoccupation with posteriors. Are all humans like this? I will need to reinforce my pants before we get to Earth,” Drax said.

“Metaphor, Drax,” Peter said sharply. “We’ve discussed them.”

“I don’t understand,” Drax replied.

“It’s a joke on Earth. Butts are inherently funny. There are a lot of jokes about butts. It doesn’t mean someone wants to actually get near yours,” Tony explained. He felt like he was talking to an
A.I. in the early stages.

“Why are they funny?”

“Because they’re gross due to the aforementioned excrement issue, but can also be attractive to us. Human physiology is odd like that,” Tony said with a shrug. *It is what it is* was a frequent answer to his A.I.s.

“Come on. Drax will keep you talking in circles all day. We got weapons to talk,” Rocket said, hopping out of the chair and the two finally really got a good look at one another.

“Stephen. You didn’t tell me he’d be wearing a jumpsuit. How am I to prepare for that?” Tony asked. Stephen looked baffled.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t think it mattered?” Stephen said, looking at Tony like he was insane.

“Oh it matters... You don’t even know... How am I supposed to play it cool when this is the best fucking day of my life?” Tony asked rhetorically. Stephen rolled his eyes, and looked at Quill.

“And now you know what kind of screw ups we are,” Stephen said in an entirely dignified tone. Quill’s whole face lit up and he started laughing like a Kookaburra.

“This, this is gonna work out okay...” Quill finally said.

“Hey, how come you’re a glow stick compared to him?” Rocket asked Tony, but indicated Stephen.

“Extenuating circumstances surrounding my creation. Not exactly a baseline human in that regard,” Tony said. Rocket’s eyes narrowed.

“Yeah, most of us know how that feels... being created,” Rocket said. Tony simply nodded in response. He could already tell that emotions were hard for Rocket. Rage and purpose got him through most of the time, and holy shit could Tony relate to that. Breeching any kind of emotional difficulty was going to result in explosive rage. So Tony simply pushed emotions aside. Rocket got to the passage down to the hold of the ship. “You coming, Glow Stick?”

“On my way, Jumpsuit,” Tony retorted, taking one last look at the stars. Rocket sneered for a moment, but it softened into something like respect.

“Get your ass in gear,” Rocket said, and vanished down into the hold.

“Your asses have gears too?” Drax asked.

“Oh for fuck sake,” Quill said, and Tony and Stephen laughed.

Tony settled with Rocket in the engine room and work shop that was Rocket’s domain. Stephen drifted periodically back and forth between them and Quill and Gamora above decks. Tony had turned on his inner mental sponge, absorbing everything he could, and running by materials to hand available on Earth with Rocket. Tony explained his capability to synthesize elements was limited, and Rocket said he could teach Tony to streamline the process. As Stephen checked in on them, more and more projections of schematics and equations were taking up the engine room, merging the language of symbols from both of their experiences. Peter and Gamora were still negotiating with the Ravagers and Nova Corps, but it looked like major relief would soon be there.

Rocket was half way to treating Tony decently when the door to the engine room opened, and an
intimidating, blue-skinned, bald woman stormed through. “Nebula, I see you mastered that whole
knocking thing we talked about,” Rocket said. He turned back to Tony. “She’s Gamora’s adopted
sister, and adopted daughter of Thanos. She washed back up to us in an escape pod a few weeks
back, after her quest to kill him didn’t go so well. Watch out for her Stark, she bites.”

“Good to know,” Tony said warily.

“You,” she said, pointing at Tony with her flesh arm. “Fix this,” she demanded and pointed to her
robotic one.

“She won’t let me touch it. Doesn’t trust me,” Rocket said, baring his teeth at her.

“I don’t have to trust rodents,” she said.

“He’s not a rodent,” Tony said mildly.

“What?” Nebula asked, distracted from her aggression.

“Rodents, at least on Earth, are defined by front teeth specialized for gnawing, which grow over
the course of their entire lives. Rocket doesn’t have those kind of teeth. He most closely resembles
Earth’s *Procyon lotor* or, Common Raccoon. Which is a mammal from the new world carnivora
family. Our raccoons are not nearly so intelligent as Rocket here though... But that just means we
have to be more careful that even if something doesn’t look like a hominid, it doesn’t mean it’s not
sentient with an emotional life,” Tony explained. He then diverted away from emotions by
standing and offering Nebula the stool he’d been sitting on. “You got a basic diagnostic for me?”
he asked, instead of *Tell me where it hurts.* because that would never get him an answer. He was
getting the impression that everyone on this ship was catastrophically emotionally broken in some
way. He could relate to that too.

“So that’s what a raccoon is?” Rocket asked.

“Yeah. Small to medium sized omnivore, and fairly intelligent at getting food. They can annoy the
crap out of humans sometimes, and have learned to easily live off of their food waste,” Tony
explained.

“Ha, they sound all right for dumb animals,” Rocket agreed, and started messing with a wire-frame
projections again. Tony turned to Nebula.

“Diagnostic?” he asked.

“Near the joint. Something is causing a short.” she said and pointed.


“Why would you ask that?”

“Because I’ve had people work on me without my consent before. I don’t want you to feel
uncomfortable,” Tony said.

“That is ridiculous and unnecessary,” Nebula said.

“Cultural difference,” Tony said and shrugged. There was a pause.

“What is it?” she asked. “Why do you hesitate?”

“Can I touch?” Tony asked again patiently.
“Yes, of course. Though I now think you’re an idiot,” Nebula grumbled.

“Eh, Drax thinks Earth has a butt obsession. He’s not far off. We’re ridiculous. I figure I’m representing us okay so far... Note to self, Sir-Mix-A-Lot on Quill’s updated MP3 player,” Tony rambled as he ran his fingers over Nebula’s robotic arm as a distraction.

He could feel her anger and aggression, and was trying to remain calm in the face of it, but there was so much of it there, which all masked a world of inner pain and torment. He could see where flesh ended and robotics started from the outside by where her cloudy grey aura started and ended. The synthetic parts were much more intrinsic to her body than they had been for Barnes. But the inner mechanics worked the same. Physics were physics and logic was logic. Near the elbow, Tony found what he was looking for. His vision was vignetted in red, and Tony realized the Aether was helping him see what he needed.

Tony pressed the plate, and the whole arm opened for him like the dissection of a frog. Tony realized that the intertwining of flesh and blood nerves with robotics must have been agonizing without further intervention, which would explain the cranial implants he could see. “Can you help her?” Tony asked the Aether.

“Yes, but she’s dangerous... She’s killed thousands,” The Aether replied.

“So have I,” Tony reasoned.

“Not directly, and not outside the context of battle. She's done it for fun,” she said. Tony paused and let that sink in for a moment.

“I will leave it to your discretion then,” Tony said, trusting her.

Tony examined the elbow joint and found two broken pieces rubbing up against exposed fleshy nerve endings. They were just out of reach of her flesh arm to be able to fix effectively on her own. “Yikes, that’s gotta hurt,” Tony said. Rocket looked over casually, and then picked up a tool and tossed it to Tony.

“Push the centre button. It should rearranged the molecules of what’s there back in the order they previously were,” Rocket said. He kept his voice nonchalant, not showing Nebula that he cared, for fear of her balking last minute. “Careful though. Only works on metal. It’ll liquefy anything else it hits.” Tony looked at Rocket and tried to not be astonished.

“Noted,” he said and got to work. “Pointy end down?” he teased.

“Clever primate,” Rocket said. Tony favoured him with a monkey-like hoot. Rocket rolled his eyes and made more annotations to a wire-frame.

Between the tool and a few tweaks from the Aether to prevent it happening again, he had the pieces fixed in no time, but he spent a few minutes exploring. He put his head up and called for Stephen, who came floating through the bulkhead. “Do you mind if Stephen has a look? He’s a human physician, but it looks like our muscular and skeletal systems are similar,” Tony said.

“That is acceptable,” Nebula said.

“You ever see anything like this in your rambles around the multiverse?” Tony asked. Stephen carefully examined the inner workings of Nebula’s arm. He thought he managed to hide his shock and horror at seeing prosthetic and living tissue married together, in a high tech version of something that would make Dr. Moreau proud.
“Not in this detail,” Stephen admitted.

“I moved this part here and here, and I think that should give her some extra prevention against damage in the future. What do you think? Will that work with the rest of the arm?” Tony asked. Stephen considered it for a moment, looking carefully.

“Yes, I think that will work,” he said eventually, and then looked into Nebula’s eyes. “How badly does this hurt?” he asked. Tony grimaced, not wanting to go there yet. She was too guarded against emotional harm to open up like that. Show you the inside of her arm, sure. But talking about pain would be beyond her.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said.

“Cranial implants probably block most of the pain receptors,” Tony said.

“What are you doing?” she asked, becoming wary.

“Stephen’s job is to make people more comfortable, to cure them of disease, and ease pain... He wants to know if we can make you more comfortable in any way,” Tony explained, trying to keep it clinical.

“I’m fine. Close it up,” Nebula said suddenly. Tony let out a breath, knowing they’d lost her for now.

“You got it,” Tony said. “Move it around before you go. Show me that its fixed.” There was no point trying to push that boundary on the first meeting. The arm put itself back together, and Tony pulled away, giving Nebula her space. She flexed her fingers, and rotated her wrist. She bent her elbow, and her expression didn’t change, which was the only cue that the problem was fixed. She rotated her shoulder, flexing her elbow and wrist as she did.

“Good?” Tony asked.

“Sufficient,” Nebula replied.

“Okay,” Tony said. Nebula left in a hurry without saying thank you. Tony didn’t expect one.

“Well, she’s terrifying.”

“Like I said, daughter of Thanos. Recently betrayed him. Raised with Gamora, where they were forced into combat as children. Every time she lost to Gamora, Thanos had a part of her replaced,” Rocket explained matter of factly.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Tony said, and put his head in his hands. “I... there’s so much pain in her.” Stephen put his hand gently on Tony’s shoulder and neck.

“You look like you can relate,” Rocket said carefully.

“Yeah... I’ve had some involuntary work done... Managed to fix it eventually, but I’ve been disassembled a few times.”

“That ain’t all that special around here, Glow Stick... She’s killed for food. She’d kill you for food. Don’t be too sympathetic.”

“So I’m coming to understand, Jumpsuit,” Tony said and gathered himself up. “Sorry, I get caught up in the pain of others sometimes.”
“Empath like Mantis?” Rocket asked, his guard going up again.

“Sort of,” Tony said.

“Quill’s never mentioned humans having that sort of ability outside of fictional stories,” Rocket observed.

“He was also taken off planet as a juvenile. Don’t trust him on everything Earth related,” Tony said. He looked at Rocket carefully. “How much do you know?”

“Two infinity stones sitting in this bucket, trust me, I’m gonna know about it... The red, that’s the Reality Stone... That’s documented. But you, you’re new to me. Which one are you?” Rocket said speculatively.

“You don’t have to answer that, Tony,” Stephen reminded him. Tony nodded, showing he’d heard Stephen.

“No, I think it’s okay, and I think it’s important that we’re honest... besides, I think Rocket here is loyal as anything so long as he gets paid.” Tony leaned forward, into Rocket’s space. The Aether on his wrist shimmered, happy to have been noticed. “I’m Soul,” Tony said quietly. “Why do you think I saw you as a sentient intelligence right away despite your resemblance to a common Earth mammal?” His voice was quiet and serious.

“Makes sense as to why you don’t need a cranial translator either,” Rocket said. He still appeared cool on the surface, but Tony could see his forming tension. “I wanna know what side you’re on... I need to know. Before I give you anything good.”

“I’m on the side that leaves Thanos as little more than wayward strands of DNA, and leaves my little planet in peace,” Tony stated.

“Okay, Glow Stick, I think we can work together,” Rocket concluded, trying to appear unintimidated.

“Who else knows, Jumpsuit?” Tony asked.

“Quill. He figured it out after Strange visited the first time. He’s smarter and better at keeping secrets than you might think. Gamora will have figured it out by now too, but she’ll talk to Quill about it first... I don’t think it’s a great idea to let the others know, especially Nebula. I never know exactly what side she’s on. Only that she don’t wanna die,” Rocket said.

“Motivation enough. We can trust she knows that going back to Thanos will only mean her demise at this point,” Stephen said. “Do you have access to any information about Thanos?” Stephen asked.

“Depends... We sort of work above board now. But there’s plenty out there on the less legal side of things,” Rocket replied.

“I don’t really care about legalities,” Stephen replied. “I would like to know more about his magical defenses.”

“Gamora is more your girl for that. She spent most of her life with him, and I think Thanos gave her better access than Nebula,” Rocket said. Stephen nodded, and floated off again towards the upper deck.

“You got any other surprises for me, Glow Stick?” Rocket asked.
“I don’t plan on using any of the weapons I design if I can help it. I’m not a pacifist. I just would rather find another way,” Tony admitted.

“You realize that Thanos’ forces ain’t gonna give a shit, right? They’ll kill you and fuck your eye sockets for fun, whether they’ve been ordered to or not. And Thanos won’t care.”

“Soul Stone, Rocket... He can’t kill me.”

“Sure... But he’d let them do it to Stephen,” Rocket said. Tony’s jaw set in a firm line. “He’d do it himself to everyone you love, just to prove a point.”

“Okay, we’ll get these built, but I plan on him being dead before he enters Earth’s atmosphere,” Tony said.

“Well that I wanna see.”

“We’ll get you a front row seat... Besides, you’re short. You’ll need one,” Tony mused.

“I might only be a sentient, distant relative of your Earth’s pyrotechnic motor of the new world carnival family thing, but even I know that compared to Quill and Strange, you’re short too,” Rocket said shrewdly.

“Well, we can be angry about that together,” Tony said.

“You could change that.” Rocket looked at Tony’s wrist.

“Nah, Stephen claims I have better leverage during sex because of it. I’m willing to indulge that fantasy to stroke my own ego,” Tony said and grinned.

“So Mantis wasn’t blowing smoke up our asses about that?”

“No, she wasn’t. Stephen and I are in a relationship... And I feel like we’re missing Drax around to make another hilarious butt observation.”

“He does it on purpose sometimes. I swear he does,” Rocket said.

“My A.I.s used to pull things like that too as their sense of humour was developing,” Tony said.

“You’ve created A.I.? That sounds beyond what Quill’s spoken about.”

“We’ve advanced a bit. I think you’d find the nation of Wakanda familiar in terms of tech in use everyday. But they keep to themselves, and if I were sitting on a literal mountain of secret Vibranium, I could create wonders too,” Tony said.

“Vibranium? What’s that? Can you draw the molecular composition for me?” Rocket asked. It was part genuine curiosity, part test of Tony’s skills.

Tony rendered the molecule with the 3D imaging so similar to his own, and Rocket considered it carefully. “We’ve got that out here. We find it in places like the hearts of burnt out stars,” Rocket said.

“Wonder if it’s got any relation to Mjolnir,” Tony mused. “It would explain a lot of the properties of both substances.”

“What? The Asgardian’s hammer? I suppose that’s a theory, but I ain’t never been able to lay my hands on Uru. I suppose it would explain a lot about Asgard’s tech. Funny thing about them,
they’ve merged magic and science to such a degree that it don’t look like tech no more,” Rocket said.

“That’s a damn shame,” Tony said.

“Agreed... Point though, Uru requires extreme heat to forge. You got that capability on Earth?”

“I don’t know. I would have to learn more about it. Including melting point,” Tony said.

“Geothermal is an option for us, but I don’t know if that would be enough.”

“Or you could just ask that for some, and for the ability to forge it,” Rocket said, eyeing up the Aether again.

“No,” Tony said firmly. “She doesn’t get used like that. Not at my whim. I can ask her to help, but she doesn’t have to.”

“Yeah, just make sure your inherent goodness don’t get us all dead, all right?” Rocket said with a sneer. In an instant, Tony saw himself in Rocket, and knew what it was like to be Steve Rogers. He took a deep breath.

“I need to try. If I have to, I will without hesitation. But I need to try,” Tony said.

“Do better than try, Stark. The galaxy depends on it,” Rocket said.

“Great, no pressure,” Tony said and sighed.

“Yes. Pressure. All of it. There ain’t ever been a threat like this. You’re strutting around with reality on your wrist like a piece of jewelry. You’re the closest thing I’ve seen to having some hope that we all won’t get killed in an excruciating manner. I stayed on this tub because it seemed as good a place to die as any... But if you can do this, then do it, and finish it as soon as you can, because Thanos has no problem blinking us out of existence,” Rocket said seriously.

“Rocket, don’t be a dick,” Quill said as he came into the engine room, followed by Stephen, and closed the door.

“He’s got the fucking Reality Stone and he don’t wanna use it for fear of hurting its feelings. Fucking ridiculous,” Rocket said and threw his hands in the air in frustration.

“Can ya blame him? Gamora says that Thanos can detect their use... Big things anyway, via the Infinity Gauntlet... Tony’s got the sanest, safest reaction out of all of us to wielding one,” Quill said.

“Thank you,” Tony said.

“You’re welcome... You two have a nice chat otherwise?” Peter asked.

“It’s been illuminating,” Tony said.

“Ha! For you maybe, Glow Stick,” Rocket said. “This bastard even got Nebula to let him fix her arm. If he can quit being so goddamn nice, he’s got some potential, Quill.” Tony grinned at Rocket. “Good to know your entire species ain’t as dumb as you make them seem to be.” Quill waved his middle finger at Rocket. Tony snorted.

“Look, I closed the door, because I want to let you know that both Gamora and I are aware of what you are. She’s nervous about it, but thinks you’re valuable and necessary to defeat Thanos.
Stephen says you have a plan for him,” Quill said.

“I do,” Tony said.

“He’s also not telling me what it is,” Quill said.

“Because I’ve asked him to keep it a secret,” Tony replied.

“Why?”

“Because I need Thanos to think we’re mounting a traditional defense. I need to blindside him. That means my plan stays on the down low. I need you to prepare in case I fail... And those preparations will help welcome Earth into a new era, and provide for her future safety. I want to create an Earth you can be proud to come home to,” Tony said. Peter paused, as if considering for the first time that he was actually headed home.

“If you and Stephen are any indication, I’ll have plenty to be proud of. Sounds like we’ve gone from rudimentary computers to advanced systems in less than a generation thanks to guys like you,” Peter said.

“I need to do more... And quickly. Can I rely on you for help with that? As much as I would love to cook it all up on my own, I don’t have that kind of time,” Tony said.

“You got it man,” Quill said.

“I am Groot!” came from out in the hallway. Tony’s head turned toward the sound. Rocket sighed, and got up to open the door. “I am Groot!” the voice said again, and Tony watched in amazement as a tree the size and shape of a lanky teenage boy walked in.

“Yeah, yeah... We’ve had guests. We’ll get to your tutoring in a bit,” Rocket said. The tree then noticed Tony and Stephen and approached them fearlessly.

“I am Groot,” the tree said. Tony relaxed his mind, and then, as easily as he had with the others, the sentiment behind the words became clear.

“Hi, I’m Tony.” Tony stretched out his hand, and Groot gave him a high five.

“I am Groot,” Groot said.

“Oh, we’re from Earth, like Quill here. Where are you from?” Tony replied. Rocket’s jaw dropped.

“I am Groot. I am Groot. I am Groooooot.”

“Oh, that’s neat... So they’re raising you? That’s... pretty cool. Growing up on a space ship.” Tony’s voice was soft, like it had been with the boy who’d needed help at the Kamar-Taj, and it warmed Stephen’s heart.

“I am Groot?”

“We’re here to ask some help from your friends. I think we’ll be seeing more of one another. Hope that doesn’t cramp your style,” Tony said.

“I am Groot,” Groot said and shrugged. He then tugged on Rocket’s tail. Rocket sighed heavily.

“I have to go show the little bugger some new code... You’ll come back when you got more questions?” Rocket asked.
“You got it.” Tony nodded, and stood up. “How long have we been gone anyway?” he asked Stephen.

“About five hours. Time for lunch,” Stephen said. Tony grinned.

“Can we do nooners instead?” Tony asked with a wink.

“Maybe after a sandwich. I am not falling out of Potts’ favour by letting your health regimen slip,” Stephen said.

They said their goodbyes, and Tony laid his hand on Stephen’s shoulder, paying attention to everything around him carefully, in case he needed to get back here on his own next time.

Tony came to, still in the peace of the meditation room. However, Rhodey was there, seated on a low, sturdy chair with a tablet in his hands. Tony stood, stretched, and then stepped out of the armour once FRIDAY gave him the all clear. He immediately went for Rhodey, and sat on the arm of the chair. “Rhodey, honey bear, gum drop, sour patch, and hetero life mate... What a morning I’ve had.”

“Oh yeah?” Rhodey asked, his voice unsure.

“Rhodey... sugar loaf, jelly roll... there’s a jumpsuit wearing, talking, space raccoon who now calls me Glow Stick... I’m living my best life, Rhodey. I’m not sure I can top this,” Tony said, and kissed the top of Rhodey’s head.

“Stephen?” Rhodey asked for confirmation, looking nonplussed as Tony cuddled up to him.

“Can confirm... The raccoon is snarky, and has morals like Occam’s Razor,” Stephen said. He leaned over Tony, and kissed him softly.

“Well, I’m glad your adventure has left you as in love as ever, because you got an issue,” Rhodey said.

“That is?” Tony said, making grabby hands for Stephen, but not wanting to leave Rhodey’s side. Rhodey held up the tablet.

“You’ve been outed. Some pap got pics of you on the beach at Pepper’s,” Rhodey said. Tony went very still. It didn’t bother him. Not in the slightest. Rumours of his bisexuality went back over twenty years. But Stephen might be disturbed by it. He looked to his lover and partner. Stephen picked up the tablet, and looked at the photos. The zoom was long, but it was definitely recognizable as them.

“Hmm,” Stephen said.

“Is this gonna be a problem?” Tony asked, standing up.

“I might want to call my parents, but they’re New York upper middle class living in Florida... I can’t see them actually caring much,” Stephen said. “It’s not like their phone number is public. Hasn’t been since long before I got my M.D.”

“So we’re okay?” Tony asked. Stephen saw Tony’s deep set worry.

“We’re just fine, Tony. I love you,” Stephen said, and hugged Tony close.

“Love you too,” Tony said, and his face broke into a huge smile. Rhodey looked relieved.
“Pepper’s going to need a press conference, and at least a press release,” Tony said.

“I... I think I can do that,” Stephen said, running his hand through his hair. “I’ve had some experience with the media, though they tend to be the more academically inclined sort.”

“At this rate, we may end up on a float in the Pride Parade too,” Tony said. Stephen laughed. “Not a joke, love... Just how things go for me. Not the first time they will have asked either.”

“That I might have more of a problem with,” Stephen admitted.

“But we’re okay?” Tony asked.

“Nooners,” Stephen said and waggled his eyebrows at Tony. “But we have lunch first,”

Chapter End Notes

So, Nebula just happened... I know she left at the end of Guardians 2... and I hemmed and hawed over it, but I thought eh, my fic. I do what I want. I can see her having more troubles when she no longer has the resources of others at her disposal, and would end up where she felt safe.

And Rocket... So broken, so honest.

Next up, press release.

As always, comments are love. <3
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Stephen reconnects, and our boys go public. Also, just say no to Oprah. But not because she's a bad person, rather because science.

Chapter Notes

Sorry sorry sorry, this is a few days late. Mea culpa. Work's been slow, but there's enough incoming shipments for the summer tourist season that I've been running around like nuts.

We're back to something more domestic this chapter, and we finally get to see a little vulnerability from Stephen. I went with the name of his sister used in a deleted scene (that didn't end up on the disc version... Grr.), and took his parents' names from the comics. I played with their professions, because I have no MCU related info on that, other than Stephen is from New York... So off I go to play.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Stephen stared determinedly at his phone, trying to will up the courage to press send. They were in the workshop at the compound. Tony was hunched over a holographic projection of a synthetic molecule, and may as well have been back on the Milano for all of his spacial awareness at the moment. He’d been furiously trying to record ideas after a meal and brief rest with Stephen, and Stephen didn’t want to disturb him at it. Stephen sighed and set the phone down one more time.

Tony looked up suddenly, sensing Stephen’s need for emotional support. “Worried they’ll freak out?” Tony asked.

“No, not about us being together. I openly dated both men and women while getting my education... I just... I haven’t called them much since the accident. It drove the wedge from when my sister died further between us,” Stephen admitted. Tony shut the projection down and went to join Stephen at the work bench. “They were... They are great parents, Tony. Supportive in every way until Donna passed... Even when I insisted on bringing my first boyfriend for Thanksgiving to my not nearly so liberal grandparents’ home... But ever since she died, it’s been hard.”

“Like, connecting with them, and vice versa reminded you all of what you’d lost,” Tony concluded.

“Precisely,” Stephen agreed. “Donna wove us all together. I used to be too cold for them to connect to, but Donna knew how to reach past that and drag me into family interaction and connection without making me angry. It was like she was born with all the emotional awareness I didn’t get. I know how to be better now, but I’m sure my absence has hurt them, and I don’t know where to start... They only visited once after the crash... But I brought that on myself. I was terrible to everyone around me.”

“Sucks when you’re wrong,” Tony said simply and understanding completely.
“Yup,” Stephen agreed.

“You should still call them,” Tony said. “It was the first thing I did when I found out about what I am... I don’t think it’s a good idea to wait until we have to call them back from the afterlife for you to make peace.”

“You’re right,” Stephen said and sighed. He picked up the Starkphone again. He thumbed into his contacts and found his parents’ home outside of Miami.

It took four rings after he pressed send. “Hello?”


“Stephen, dear, is that you?” Beverly Strange asked.

“Yes, it’s me... Do you have a few minutes?”

“Are you alright?” she asked, growing nervous as well.

“Yeah mom, I’m fine... Actually, I’m really good. Great even. I found another position where my hands don’t matter as much... and... I met someone,” Stephen said. Tony took his hand and gently squeezed it.

“Oh... Oh, that’s wonderful news,” she said, her voice warmed up immediately. “We’ve been so worried, Stephen.”

“I know, mom... I’m sorry I haven’t called. I didn’t know what to say... I was so angry. I’m sorry. I didn’t know how to deal with it,” Stephen said. He heard a sniffle on the other end of the line.

“Christine, she called a few times. She said you’d gone to Asia, but she lost track of you,” Beverly said.

“I did go to Asia... I was looking for a treatment for my hands. I didn’t find that exactly. But I found peace, and a purpose again... It’s taken a while though to come back to myself, and hopefully better than I was before,” Stephen said. Tony ran his thumb over the back of Stephen’s hand.

“Oh Stephen, I just want to hold you,” his mother said. Stephen was already going for his Sling Ring when Tony gently caught his wrist and shook his head.

“Not yet, love,” Tony whispered softly.

“I can clear some time to come visit... Perhaps Tony can do the same,” Stephen said.

“Tony?” Beverly asked. “Is that who you’re seeing?”

“Yes, mom... Tony Stark,” Stephen ventured. There was a momentary silence on the other end of the line.

“Like, weapons manufacturer turned Iron Man Tony Stark?” she asked. Her voice wasn’t appalled, but definitely curious.

“The same. We met about six months ago, and spent a few being friends and flirting... But it’s getting serious now,” Stephen said.

“So those pictures online are the real deal then?”
Stephen cringed a bit. “Yep, they are,” he said, refusing to shy away from it. “He’s... he’s really wonderful, mom. Nothing like the media portrays him. He’s so considerate of others... For the first time in years, I’m happy. Like, ridiculously happy,” he admitted.

“...Honestly, I’m so relieved. I can hear it in your voice,” she said.

“Good... I hope you’re not upset by any of this?”

“Why would I be upset by your happiness? You’re not out doing anything wrong or embarrassing,” she said. Liberal parents, what a novel idea. Tony thought. Even the spirits of his parents had ignored it.

“Okay, I just... I’m sorry you had to find out via the media.”

“Stephen, if it gets us all talking again, then it’s the best thing to happen to me in a long while,” Beverly said. Stephen hummed, closed his eyes, and ducked his chin. This was hard for him, but Tony thought he was doing so well. Tony wasn’t used to seeing Stephen vulnerable, but it just made Tony love him even more. He smiled warmly at Stephen, and held his hand gently.

“Hold on, your father just came in. Gene, dear... It’s Stephen... He’s just fine. Hang on, I’ll put you on speaker.”

“Stephen?” a more rough, older male voice said.

“Hi, dad,” Stephen said.

“Where have you been, son?”

“Asia, Nepal mostly... I’m back in New York as a home base now. I’m still maintaining my M.D., but I’m not in the medical field now... I met someone. He’s been really good to me, dad,” Stephen recapped.

“That’s good, Stephen... I’m grateful to know that you’re okay,” Eugene said. His voice was full of smothered emotion, and Stephen could hear it easily.

“Are you okay?” Stephen asked earnestly.

“We’re doing just fine, Stephen. Other than worrying about you, of course,” Eugene said. “You should come visit, if you have time.”

“I’ll make time,” Stephen assured.

“That would be wonderful,” Beverly said. “Bring Tony if he has the time. He always seems so busy when he’s on the news.”

“He usually is, but I think he would like to meet you too,” Stephen said. Tony gave him a thumbs up.

“So what is it you’re doing now?” Eugene asked.

“ Mostly research into the more extraordinary threats that the world faces now. It’s how I met Tony. Turns out a photographic memory helps out with that too,” Stephen said.

“You’re working with the Avengers?”

“Sometimes, it’s more than that, but kind of difficult to explain over the phone... But I do want to
have a chance to tell you about it,” Stephen said.

“Got any vacation time coming?” Beverly asked.

“I’m more of an independent consultant. I can take time to come see you. Give me a day or so to figure it out, and I’ll get back to you.”

“We’d love to have you,” Beverly said. Tony beamed at Stephen.

“Okay, I’ll set something up,” Stephen said. “I love you.”

“Love you too,” Beverly said.

Stephen said his goodbyes and ended the call. Tony leaned forward and kissed Stephen deeply.

“I think that went well,” Tony said. “I’m so proud of you.”

“Yeah... Like I said, liberals... My uncle was gay and they never rejected him. He pissed off my grandparents too,” Stephen mused quietly.

“That is fucking great. Really,” Tony said. “You okay?”

“I think so... I didn’t expect it to be that easy. I never said things that were hateful, but my silence spoke volumes,” Stephen said.

“Parents, at least the good ones so far as I’ve read, can be pretty good like that. Edwin and Ana Jarvis were to me,” Tony said. “We were lucky with them. Pepper will be on the warpath.”

“Honestly?” Stephen asked.

“She doesn’t like when people mess with her stuff either. She’ll probably be calling any minute, upset that I didn’t call her first to discuss strategies for the press.” Tony got to his feet and pressed a kiss to Stephen’s forehead. He snapped his fingers, and the 3D projections sprang back to life. “Check this out, these are interlocking satellites that form an energy barrier. It almost worked for Xandar, and if I’ve got enough other ideas to trip up Thanos, they could prove useful... But I’m going to need Vibranium to improve it,” Tony said.

Stephen set his phone down, and went to stand among the projection. It was in expanded view. Tony held out his hands and brought them in, forming a light, maneuverable spacecraft like shape. “The people of Xandar have a force called the Nova Corps... They used to use these ships to carry a pilot, but they lost a lot of people in battle with the Kree over the Power Stone. Xandar won the first round, barely, but the second time Thanos himself showed up and managed to get the stone... And you probably already know all that... But this system is neat. Xandar’s capital was devastated, but thousands fewer died in Thanos’ initial attack because of this drone system.” Tony twisted his hands and one ship became many, and they interlaced themselves into a net.

“Will it hold?” Stephen asked.

“It will be an okay line of defence... But the offensive weapons will be there to aid it. That’s where Rhodey comes in, as well as human pilots...”

“Incoming call from Ms. Potts, boss,” FRIDAY announced.

“See? Told you,” Tony said and winked at Stephen. “Put her through, dear.”

“Tony, are you okay?” Pepper asked, her image coming up via the 3D rendering.
“Yeah, Pep. Rhodey let me know... Oh paparazzi, how I loathe thee,” Tony said.

“What do you want to do?” she asked.

“Ideally? Nothing. It shouldn’t matter. Stephen’s fine with being out. Hell, his parents are fine with it. I’m looking forward to meeting them,” Tony replied.

“Tony, you know we have to say something,” Pepper said.

“I do. I just wish everyone would focus on Tony Stark: finally got his shit together and now able to be in a stable, committed relationship, rather than it amounting to Tony Stark: possible fag, ya know? It’s upsetting that we haven’t evolved past this point yet.”

“I know, Tony,” Pepper said. “I wish they could see how happy you two are. That might help.”

“We could show them, I suppose,” Stephen mused. “An interview. Someone prestigious and gay friendly. Though I am instantly regretting this suggestion.”

“Oh you don’t even know. You just said the magic words to Pepper,” Tony said and winked at Stephen.

“I’m sure Anderson Cooper or Rachel Maddow would jump at the chance,” Pepper said, eyes narrowed and determined.

“Maddow is too bent on conspiracy these days. She’ll try to chase down every detail about Stephen and use my past against me, and ambush me with unexpected questions. Maddow is a hard no... Cooper, or maybe Lawrence O’Donnell if he’s willing to do a fluff piece. Of course, if we really want to fuck with people, we could go to an online news source,” Tony said.

“Why not both?” Pepper asked.

“Any independent source would be merciless about our comparative histories,” Stephen said. “Me the dismissive, asshole, high-priced doctor to the wealthy or interesting, and you the Merchant of Death... It won’t be pretty.”

“Oprah?” Pepper asked.

“No,” Tony and Stephen said in unison.

“Nothing against the divine Ms. O, but I refuse to be associated in any way with the pseudoscience physicians she puts on her show,” Stephen said.

“Fair point,” Tony said. “And I refuse to play a pawn in any kind of political machinations she might have.”

“So, Anderson Cooper it is,” Pepper concluded.

“CNN also has the most mass appeal, and I could see him being on the side of not giving a shit. He also tried to make his own sexuality not a big deal. But that also might lead to harder questions because he’ll get bored of the fluffy ones. Catch-22 with him, but it’s probably the best answer for now,” Tony said.

“So, you’re both okay?” Pepper asked.

“Yeah, Pep,” Tony said.
“Yes, Virginia... I’ve spoken with my parents. We’d been somewhat distant the past few years due to my own fault. If anything, it seems that this might bring us back together. What they specifically don’t know yet are my activities with the mystic arts, so I’d like to go over that with them first... That will be a larger hurdle than being romantically linked to Tony. I was raised by upper middle class New York liberals... My bisexuality isn’t an issue for them and was already known to them... Master of the Mystic Arts though? That’s gonna be a doozy,” Stephen said. “I told them I would try to get down to Florida to visit within the next few days.”

“The sooner the better,” Pepper said. “It helps to get at these things as soon as possible in the news cycle.”

“You okay with meeting them?” Stephen asked Tony. Tony took a second to contemplate it, and then nodded.

“It took me awhile to meet Pepper’s parents. I was so nervous to screw it up, you know? But I really don’t have time to be nervous... I’ve got so much to do right now, but I don’t want to dismiss this out of hand. It’s important, and I can’t shy away from it. But I don’t want to be dismissive of it. Because I want to know who made you, and maybe thank them for making you... I wish you could have met Maria while she was alive. She would have loved you. Hell, even Howard would have come to respect you, which is about as good as it got from him,” Tony said.

Pepper smiled, glad to see how pliant and relaxed Tony was with Stephen. His pathology to control his surroundings faded in the face of trust for Stephen. A pang hit her that she wouldn’t ever have that with Tony, but trust was a two way street, and while she couldn’t have that with him, she was glad that Tony had managed to find it, and get to a better place psychologically speaking. Tony had worked hard at this, and he was still tending to it, despite everything else going on. It spoke volumes for how much he’d learned.

Tony spent the rest of the day and evening making notes and working up wire-frames from what he’d discussed with Rocket. But he hung close to Stephen, feeling the need to be near him. Stephen called his parents again, surprising them with how quickly he said he could visit. After that call, Tony closed everything up to have a late dinner with Stephen at Bleeker Street. Simple pizza delivery, and Tony didn’t balk at being forced into a salad. Conversation was still easy, but Tony knew what it was to be in the bubble, away from the media, but the loss of anonymity might have an effect on Stephen. Especially on his ability to work as the Sorcerer Supreme. “We should talk about it more,” Tony said.

“Talk about what more?”

“Impending media shit storm. It’s not a party,” Tony said.

“I knew what I was getting into when I kissed you the first time, Tony. I knew this was going to happen some time. Forewarned is forearmed,” Stephen replied.

“I know you know what will happen. But the reality can be so much worse. Especially because its me. People hate me easily, Stephen. People blame me for Rogers being in custody. And I can’t even tell my side of the story really until after the trial. There’s a good chance they’ll transfer that hate to you... They did to Pepper. I repeat, they did it to Pepper, Stephen. Wonderful, good-hearted, Pepper Potts with her silver aura. Her associating with me made people think worse of her,” Tony said. Stephen reached out and touched Tony’s cheek, feeling the five o’clock shadow there.

“Tony, love, I’m not afraid of them. I don’t care what people say. I don’t care what anyone says. Not even my own parents. Not Wong. Not the Ancient One. Let them try to drag me away from the best thing that’s happened to me. Let them try to take you from me. Let. Them. Come...” Stephen
said. Then a snarky little grin crossed his face. “And if they piss me off, I’ll put a snow ball from just above what remains of the Hillary Step in their underwear.” Tony burst out laughing, full of joy and love for Stephen.

“What did I ever do to deserve you?” Tony asked.

“Simple, you understood when I needed someone to understand. We’re both very lucky, loveable assholes. I wouldn’t have it any other way,” Stephen said. Tony hummed and sighed, as he tended to do when he was content.

“I love you too,” Tony said.

Once they arrived in Miami, Tony arranged for a rental car. A very nice rental car. He’d chosen the luxury sedan over a convertible sports car without batting an eyelash. For the sake of bringing some level of normalcy to Stephen’s parents, Tony had insisted they give the corporate jet a stretch of the wings rather than just walking through a portal, and the time on the plane was spent very quietly and unlike his former trips on the jet.

Tony had FRIDAY procure him a suite in a South Beach hotel, where they dropped their luggage, and picked up the car from there. Stephen only paused for a moment before getting in the passenger side at the valet pick up. “How long has it been since you were in a private car?” Tony asked softly.

“It’s been awhile,” Stephen admitted. “I’ve been in taxis and was just in the limo... I don’t... This shouldn’t be a problem,” Stephen said, suddenly irritated with himself.

“Do you trust me?” Tony asked. His tone wasn’t accusing. It was an honest question. Stephen was distracted away from his phobia and met Tony’s eye.

“Implicitly,” Stephen replied, and opened the door. Tony held Stephen’s hand for a moment over the console between the seats before taking off, just being there. When Stephen squeezed his hand slightly, Tony put the car in gear, and pulled away as smoothly as Happy Hogan had done for him for years.

Tony had felt it important to come on his own, without an entourage in tow, as he knew it intimidated people who weren’t ridiculously wealthy. He did his best to make the journey as uneventful as possible, despite the heaviness of traffic in the city.

The address they made their way to was outside of the city proper, in a well-heeled retirement community. The area still didn’t compare to the homes that Tony had spent his youth in, but the area seemed very pleasant and safe.

Stephen’s parents came out the front door when they pulled up, and Tony thought it was a refreshing change to not be the centre of attention as he exited the car. Beverly and Eugene Strange were on Stephen as soon as he was upright and out of the car. There were tears. Full on ugly crying, but the sentiment was happy. It made Tony think of Pepper when he walked down the loading ramp of the military plane. It made him think of falling to his knees in the Afghan desert, Rhodey running across the sand toward him. He’d been certain that it was a mirage, conjured by his addled brain, and he’d wanted it so badly, the weight of relief made him unable to carry himself for one second longer. He was still in disbelief that it was real and had actually happened all these years later.
Stephen was hunched over his mother, one arm around her, the other around his father. Eugene was only barely holding it together, but Beverly wasn’t even trying to hide her outright weeping, uncaring for anything but holding her son close. Tony came around the side of the sedan, pocketing the keyless entry, and trying to hold back a few tears of his own. The emotional overflow was a lot, but it was mostly positive, so he tried to remain calm. “You okay, boss?” FRIDAY asked in his earpiece. Tony nodded silently, and subtly to give her the thumbs up. He waited patiently, leaning his hip on the car casually, unwilling to rush any of them through their reunion.

Eugene finally looked up, noticed Tony, and extricated himself from Beverly and Stephen. Beverly moved in closer, and Stephen just held her. He didn’t even bother opening his eyes, and simply let it play out.

Eugene shook Tony’s hand. “Hello... Wow, Tony Stark playing chauffeur for my son,” Eugene shook his head gently.

“I’d do a lot more than that for him,” Tony replied. “It’s good to meet you, sir.”

“Likewise... Thank you,” Eugene said.

“For driving?” Tony asked.

“For bringing him back to us,” Eugene said quietly, giving a nod in Stephen’s direction. “We were worried we’d lost him for good.”

“He did all the heavy lifting on his own,” Tony said quietly. “He came back from a pretty dark place before I’d ever met him.”

“He said he was happy, Mr. Stark. I can’t ever remember him saying that,” Eugene said.

“Well, it’s mutual... And I’m Tony,” Tony said, smiling as he looked at Stephen. Beverly was no longer sobbing, but she was still holding her son as if her life depended on it. Stephen finally opened his eyes and looked over at Tony and Eugene. He smiled at them, and Tony pressed his lips into a small air kiss. Beverly finally remembered herself and tried to pull away, but Stephen wouldn’t let her go.

“I got all day, mom,” Stephen said. Beverly laughed through her tears, and swatted at Stephen.

“I’m sorry,” she said, addressing them both.

“Why on Earth would you be sorry?” Tony asked.

“Oh, get inside,” Beverly said, trying to gently swat Stephen to scold him in Tony’s place, but not managing it at all. She took Stephen’s hand in hers, but gently, aware that it might hurt him. She looked over the scars for a moment, and then looked up at Stephen’s face again. “I missed you,” she said.

“Missed you too,” Stephen replied. He only hoped the rest of the visit went so well.

They ended up in a living room where the walls had been lined with books on imposing shelves. The shelves were crammed with books and the markers of a life fully lived, as Tony pictured how a retired law professor might live. Tony caught his first glimpse of Stephen’s deceased sister in an old family photo. She had Stephen’s eyes, bright blue and not weighed down by time and consequence. Tony tried to be casual about it. If Donna came up as a topic of conversation, then so be it. They were seated with hefty mugs of strong coffee. None of the mugs matched. Tony liked that more than he thought he would.
“What did you find in Nepal?” Beverly asked after they were settled.

“Kamar-Taj,” Stephen said and took a sip of his coffee.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“It’s more of a where... It’s on the edges of Katmandu and... other places. Which makes it sound like a cult, but what they teach there is very real, and sort of terrifying at first,” Stephen said, trying for the slower route to batshit crazy.

“What? Like yoga and tantric breathing or something?” Beverly asked again. Stephen grinned. He leaned forward and set the mug down on one of the mismatched coasters, reached into his pocket, and pulled out his sling ring. He started tracing a circle on the coffee table.

“Might want to set down your drinks,” Tony warned helpfully. Beverly and Eugene looked confused but complied.

“No, nothing so pedestrian as that, though martial arts training is part of the curriculum. The lessons they teach are much more significant than that,” Stephen said. A mandala appeared in orange light. Both Beverly and Eugene gasped. Stephen pulled the mandala into the air and then opened a portal. A blast of cooler, dryer, air settled in the living room, and the library of Kamar-Taj could be seen on the other side, along with an annoyed Wong.

“Hey Wong, how’s things?” Stephen asked casually.

“No portals in the library, Stephen,” Wong said and was about to close it when Stephen held up his other hand.

“I want you to meet my mom, Beverly, and my dad, Eugene,” Stephen said. Wong paused, baffled, as if somehow believing up until now that Stephen had sprung fully formed from a New York borough. He recovered quickly though.

“Hello Mr. and Mrs. Strange,” Wong said politely. “Very nice to meet you. Tony, you know he knows better than this.”

“He does, but cut him some slack. He’s just seeing them for the first time in years, and he’s coming clean about everything,” Tony explained.

“I told him to call them while he was here,” Wong said. “What’s the point of even having Wi-Fi if you don’t use it to communicate with those far away.” Wong rolled his eyes.

“He’s stubborn like that,” Tony said. “He learns eventually though.”

“Now, since you seem to be such a good influence on him, get him to abide the no portals in the library rule,” Wong said.

“Ha, never happen,” Stephen said.

“Who are you?” Eugene piped up, still quite alarmed at what he was seeing.

“My name is Wong, Mr. Strange,” Wong said. “I am the librarian and a headmaster of sorts of Kamar-Taj, and a teacher of people seeking to learn about sorcery and the mystic arts. Stephen, despite his lack of respect for certain rules, has become quite adept at these things. Despite how odd some of what he is telling you right now might seem, it is the truth. He’s not crazy, he’s not evil or dangerous. He’s just a pain my... neck.” Wong directed his attention back to Stephen. “No,

“You just have to make his life difficult, don’t you?” Tony said, and rolled his eyes.

“No more than he’s made mine,” Stephen said, but his tone was affectionate. He gathered himself up and tentatively made eye contact with Eugene and Beverly.

“What the hell was that?” Beverly asked.

“A portal to Nepal,” Stephen said.

“Are you kidding?” she asked.

“Nope, and as a guy who used to have a fear of them, I can say that it is possible to get used to them.” Tony offered. His face was hopeful that Eugene and Beverly could accept this about Stephen.

“That... was not what I was expecting,” Eugene admitted.

“Yeah, me neither,” Stephen said. “It’s been a long, weird road... But the work I do now is very necessary. It’s good to be of use again.”

“You couldn’t just go get your professorship?” Beverly asked.

“Not for me,” Stephen said. “I’m shit at teaching. Wong only lets me teach advanced students, because they’ll put up with my abrasiveness and aren’t afraid of it.”

“There are more people like you?” Eugene asked.

“Yes. There are fewer than there used to be, but there are many of us. Tony’s mother was a sorcerer, actually,” Stephen said.

“But I never knew that until a little while ago. It was something that Stephen and Wong discovered. I hope that you will keep that to yourselves though,” Tony said. His presence alone made this situation more surreal he knew, but he was trying to use that to their advantage. Using his weird to bring down the average of weirdness, in a way.

“What else can you do?” Eugene asked. He was naturally curious, and Tony was getting to like him very much.

“Astral projection, energy and matter manipulation. Time manipulation on the rare occasion. It’s basically serious consequences Harry Potter,” Stephen summarized. Tony snorted out a laugh and rolled his eyes again, but it ended with a smile in Stephen’s direction.

“Stephen’s abilities are the reason we met. As the news has shown, the Avengers are a little light on members at the moment, and I’ve had to ask Stephen and Wong for aide should they be available during an emergency. Now that Ross’ career is dead and the Accords are becoming more humane, Stephen’s offered to help when he can,” Tony said, and again trying to show that Stephen’s situation wasn’t so bizarre that it couldn’t be accepted. He was trying to show how useful and necessary what Stephen did was to the world.

“What did you mean by time manipulation?” Eugene asked. He picked up his coffee mug again, trying to centre himself.

“That’s not something I attempt regularly. I’ve only ever done it twice. Once on an apple. Another
time to save the world,” Stephen explained.

“And thank the universe you did, or else I wouldn’t have met you,” Tony said, smiling at him.

“More coffee?” Stephen asked. His mother almost made it to her feet before Stephen had everyone seated again, full, steaming mugs in hand.

“I... What just happened?” Beverly asked.

“That’s manipulation of matter. It has far fewer consequences than messing with time,” Stephen said.

“That’s...”

“A pretty paltry trick, but its very convenient when my hands cramp up,” Stephen explained. “Look, I’m still the smart ass douchebag you raised... But as soon as I tripped down this path, I knew there was no going back. Now that I know what’s out there and that I’m capable of helping, I feel compelled to do so.” Stephen looked down into his mug and let out a sigh. Tony was still smiling at him softly, knowing what the responsibility felt like all too well. He wanted so much for this to go well for Stephen.

“You’re... you’re our son, Stephen. We’ve already lost a child. I’m not going to lose you too over an inability to accept that you’re unique. You’ve always been unique,” Beverly said. Stephen looked up at her, hopeful.

“I love you mom, love you too, dad,” Stephen said. Being with Tony had made it so much easier for him to learn to say it. The words fell easily from his mouth. Eugene nodded and Beverly beamed at him.

“Love you too,” Beverly said.

Tony sat back, relaxed and catching a buzz from all the positive feelings. There were questions. Hours worth of them. There was another small freak out as the Cloak of Levitation somehow had stowed away in the laptop bag Tony had left in the car, and then snuck into the house, poking part of itself around the entry to the living room like a small child who was spying might. “Hey buddy, what are you doing here?” Tony asked. The Cloak turned its attention to Stephen, assessing if he would be welcome. Stephen smirked and waved his hand. The Cloak fluttered into the room, said hello to Tony with a touch, and then settled on Stephen’s shoulders, somewhat shy of the new people in the room.

“This is the Cloak of Levitation. He’s a relic imbued with power and magic, and can be quite fickle at times. He’s taken a liking to me though. Wong says we deserve one another,” Stephen said.

“Stephen... What? What the hell?” Beverly asked. The Cloak pulled up in behind Stephen, unsure, and not knowing how to react to people being afraid of him. Stephen put his hand up, and grasped the fabric gently.

“It’s okay,” Stephen said to both his mother and the Cloak. “No one is in danger here. Everyone relax. Including you,” Stephen said over his shoulder to the Cloak. The Cloak snuggled up on his neck and shoulders. Stephen smiled at him affectionately. “The Cloak has been an invaluable aide to me. Even saved my life a couple times. It’s a weird situation I know, but it’s better you meet sooner rather than later. It can be possessive, though he likes Tony well enough... Don’t be shy, you can say hello,” Stephen said to the Cloak. The Cloak slowly reached out, glancing a touch over the back of Beverly’s hand. Beverly seemed surprised at the gentleness of the touch. She reached
back, and the Cloak let her touch.

Beverly calmed at the gentle touch, and she ended up smiling. “This is remarkable,” she said, voice full of wonder.

“Yeah, he’ll be your best buddy in no time,” Tony said.

More questions followed, and the positive feelings returned. There were questions about Tony, but very general getting to know someone chat and not scrutinizing him. It was refreshing to be taken at face value. Tony turned on the charm as high as he could within reason. He strove to be that warmth that brought Stephen alive, and felt he was succeeding at it.

“You two seem a very good fit for one another,” Beverly said. Stephen and Tony both smiled, delighted with that assessment.

“We’ve been getting that a lot,” Stephen said. “Tony has some great friends.”

“Friends who’ve become my family over time,” Tony said softly, hinting at his own lack of immediate family.

“They protect you like family,” Stephen said. Tony laughed a bit. “Virginia Potts is formidable and not to be messed with.”

“Yeah, it’s a trait I’m attracted to,” Tony said and winked at Stephen.

“Flirting in front my mom, really?” Stephen asked.

“When it comes to you, I really can’t help it,” Tony said and shrugged.

They left before dinner, with Tony floating on a cloud of warm fuzzies. It was completely new for him to see a wounded family band together and come out stronger in a real time. Beverly had hugged both of them tightly before they got in the car, holding back tears once again, and told them to visit anytime, even if they had to use the terrifying portal method. She didn’t care.

Stephen didn’t hesitate at the car door this time, merely got in fearlessly, and actually waved like a dork as they drove off. “Well, that went better than I could have ever possibly hoped,” Stephen said.

“They love you. Of course it was going to be okay,” Tony said, turning slowly off the side street and onto a larger thoroughfare. “Besides, think of how fun it will be to brush off questions from the media about how your parents feel about you being with me. It will be hilarious to throw a total lack of shame at them. I’ll try not to giggle too loudly.”

“So we really have to go through with that don’t we,” Stephen said.

“If you don’t, they’ll hound you. All we have to do is show them how stupid we are for each other, and how boring and pedestrian that’s made us,” Tony said. He knew he was driving like a grandpa, but turning the sedan out of a retirement community would probably cut him some slack for a few blocks.

“Will that actually work?” Stephen asked.

“The media hates boring. Bad for ratings. We show up, show Anderson that we’re headed comfortably toward old married couple, and let the world start finding more interesting things to take up their time. Then we can get some fucking work done,” Tony said.
“I have always wanted to excel at my chosen profession. However, I never wanted to be famous,” Stephen observed and let out a sigh. “Did you have a good time today?”

“I had the best time today. Your parents are wonderful. I’m still lost in a lavender haze of the idea that they’re not in the slightest homophobic,” Tony said.

“It’s not news to them. They were wealthy enough that it wasn’t a concern, but not so wealthy that the rest of the world needed to form an opinion on it. Mom did a lot of work for various civil rights groups as a young woman. Dad was a public defender and eventually moved on to teaching when the offers to be corrupted started. I’m blessed to have that moral base. I didn’t always acknowledge how important it was to grow up in that environment.” Stephen’s voice was calm and wistful.

“It’s pretty fucking awesome,” Tony agreed. “Can I take you out for dinner?”

“Sure, do we need to dress?” Stephen asked.

“It’s Florida, so probably not. We’re in the land of flip flops as formal wear... FRIDAY, as high end as we can get, with food friendly for Stephen and no dress code. The best possible for my honey. He’s had a long day,” Tony said as he tapped the arm of his glasses.

“On it, boss,” FRIDAY said.

They ended up close to the hotel, a place with a view of the water, and the lights on land and the boats reflected off the water, creating a nice ambiance. They had been served drinks and Stephen picked up his glass, and finally let out a sigh and fully relaxed. “How are you?” Tony asked.

“I’m... I’m okay. Pretty damn good actually.”

“Good. I’m glad. I’m really grateful that today went well,” Tony said. Stephen smiled at him.

“Thank you for encouraging me to do this, and for bringing me. It means a lot to have someone with me, and especially someone who spoils me with comforts,” Stephen said.

“Got your back, baby,” Tony said.

“Got yours too,” Stephen said softly. “Which I suppose means we have an interview to schedule. I don’t want you to have to do that alone. Mind is made up.”

“It’s going to change your life... I just don’t want you to make the decision lightly is all I’m saying.”

“I’m not taking this lightly. I’m with you. I don’t give a flying fuck who knows it,” Stephen said.

“Okay, so long as you’re sure,” Tony said. “In studio or somewhere familiar and comfortable?”

“We could go to the bar... I bet they would welcome the publicity, and we haven’t been there in awhile,” Stephen suggested.

“Oh, good idea. That’s perfect. I’ll tell Pepper, and FRIDAY can handle the particulars,” Tony said.

Stephen felt he would do a lot for Tony, but subjecting himself to television make-up definitely warranted Tony owing him a favour. It would have been two favours, but Stephen refused outright to let them darken the grey at his temples. “No. I earned my grey. I earned every single one of
them,” he said. It was a surreal feeling, to be sitting awkwardly across from a complete stranger, about to answer personal questions. Stephen felt, that as someone who could waltz through the multiverse at will, that he could consider himself an authority on the surreal.

The pre-interview seemed tame enough, and Cooper himself seemed affable enough. Of course, Tony had turned on his showman charm, endearing everyone from Cooper to the kid who fetched them coffee. The interview was going to be pre-recorded rather than live, and FRIDAY had worked a deal that both the network and S.I. would have a say in the final cut.

Still, Stephen couldn’t help a spike of nervousness as they went to sit down. Tony put a steady hand on Stephen’s back as the sound checks were done, and ran his hand up and down a few times fondly. Stephen was the fish out of water here, but at least he had Tony, who had decades of experience in this particular type of current.

“Mr. Stark, Dr. Strange, it’s a pleasure to have you here today. I won’t beat around the bush, the photos that have surfaced of you two are why we’re here today, and I know that you will appreciate forthrightness... You’ve been somewhat avoidant of public life of late, Mr. Stark,” Anderson opened with. His face was mild and charming.

“I’ve been busy. So very busy. There was a lot of recovery time after the conflict with the former Avengers who didn’t sign the Accords, and ever since then I’ve been playing catch up.”

“And the news of a new relationship on top of everything else. I must say, after your long romance with Ms. Potts, this comes as a surprise to many of our viewers around the world,” Cooper said. Tony liked the lack of bullshit immediately. Trust a war correspondent to get to the heart of the matter. Tony smiled, one of the rare, genuine ones he gave to the public eye.

“It might be a surprise to them, but it’s hardly news to me. I’ve been very comfortable with my bisexuality since my time at M.I.T.. For what seemed like obvious reasons given the time period, I didn’t advertise it, but I never hid it. Stane hated it.”

“That’s Obadiah Stane who was Stark Industries CEO?” Cooper clarified.

“Yes, him... He was exceedingly homophobic. As were many now former members of the S.I. Board of Directors. But even that didn’t stop me from expressing my sexuality as I chose,” Tony said. Anderson nodded at the frankness of Tony’s word choice. “I’ve had several trysts with men over the years, though nothing that lasted... This, what I have with Stephen though, I think it’s going to last,” Tony said. “Long story short, this is old news to us, but we have to come here to talk about it so we can get on to other, more important things.”

“It’s all a bit ridiculous, isn’t it? If Tony were with a woman, we wouldn’t be sitting here would we? The only thing of note would be the kind of celebrity gossip that you don’t engage in. Outside of our genders being the same, I don’t think there’s much to keep the media amused for very long. We met. Found we had a lot in common. We laugh at each other’s jokes, and find one another physically attractive. It happens every day... I’m just very happy it happened to me,” Stephen let himself smile and glance over to Tony, who returned the expression. “My work is fairly insulated from the world, Mr. Cooper, so I don’t feel the pressure from the media at all. It certainly won’t change how I feel about Tony.”

Cooper actually smiled at that, liking the answer very much. He’d acknowledged how ridiculous the whole situation was, but saw the necessity to nip it in the bud. “What is your work, Dr. Strange, if you don’t mind me asking.”
"I am formerly a head of neurosurgery here in New York, but had to give up that part of my practice after a severe automobile accident that crippled my hands, and left me with chronic pain and tremors... It was my fault... Distracted driving. It’s serious business. Recovery, such as it is, was long and painful, and I was a pretty reprehensible excuse for a human being for a long time after. But I eventually found my way into a different type of practice, and improved my attitude and outlook with a lot of self-examination, and through that I met Tony. Tony was looking for people to fill out the line up, should something like the Avengers need to be put together. He wanted people who were Accords friendly at the start, which I am. I specialize in more mystical threats to the world, and with the help of others like me, handled the anomaly in Hong Kong a few years back... And that’s about as much as I’m willing to say about it for now,” Stephen explained. Cooper gave the astounded nod that one might expect, as if he was hearing it for the first time. Ah, the magic of television. Tony was gleeful on the inside. He had to admit that Stephen was a golden example of boundaries and how to set them.

“That sounds like something I would like to speak to you further about sometime when you’re willing to talk about it,” Cooper said, intrigued.

“Don’t anticipate it any time soon,” Stephen said.

“Fine, but I’m not forgetting about it,” Cooper insisted with a slight grin. “Tell me what drew you to Tony Stark.”

“Curiosity. His intelligence. His sense of humour. How considerate he is... And... Pain,” Stephen mused.

“Pain?” Cooper asked.

“As in chronic pain. He and I have both experienced it to varying degrees, though Tony doesn’t talk about it much. We’ve both gone to extraordinary lengths to survive and relieve ourselves of it. You’d be surprised how much true empathy, and understanding of it can create a bond between people... And he’s charming, and funny, and sometimes has been too generous to people who haven’t deserved it. I feel what we have is very reciprocal, and I’m grateful to have found someone like him,” Stephen said. Tony actually looked a bit shy and humbled by what Stephen had said, unable to mask his emotions in that moment. Perhaps it was a calculated move by Tony, but Stephen could feel that Tony was genuine.

“Mr. Stark, same question,” Anderson said.

“Them cheek bones. Have you seen ‘em? They could cut glass,” Tony declared with a mischievous smirk. “But seriously, everything he said, and the fact that I had finally healed enough from various traumas to be open to the kind of balls to the wall honest relationship we have... I live in a creative, sometimes chaotic haze much of the time. Stephen is steady, which centres me. He isn’t afraid of my duties as Iron Man. Not to say he’s not careful with my wellbeing, quite the opposite... But he trusts me to do the right thing, and to know what I’m doing. I trust him to do the same... Trust. Reciprocity. It feels good to be able to be there for him in a way I haven’t been for others, including Ms. Potts.”

“How does Ms. Potts feel about this situation?”

“I still hold her in the highest regard. I respect the hell out of her. There’s a very short list of people I trust. She’s near the top. She’s also magnanimous enough to be happy for me. That’s the kind of woman Virginia Potts is. She doesn’t hold grudges,” Tony said.

“She sounds very forgiving,” Cooper said.
“Yes and no. If the offender is worthy of forgiveness, she’s smart enough to see it. If they’re not, like I said, she doesn’t hold grudges. She has no problems obliterating someone too. She’s pretty awesome like that,” Tony said and grinned.

“Obliterating... professionally, you mean,” Anderson said. Tony maintained his mercurial smile.

“Sure. Professionally obliterated,” Tony said and couldn’t contain a small laugh.

“That’s not alarming at all,” Cooper said, engaging in Tony’s sarcasm for the sake of lightness in the interview.

“Don’t cross her, and you’ll be fine,” Tony said, and gave a dismissive wave of his hand.

“Do you have anything to say to your detractors, ones who don’t think your sexuality is acceptable, or those that feel you might not deserve this happiness?” Cooper asked.

“Yeah, they can fu-” Stephen started, but Tony swiftly but gently put his hand in front of Stephen’s mouth. He was laughing as he did so. Real, genuine, belly laughter.

“As much as I want Stephen to finish that sentiment, because I think it is the most concise way to put it, I understand that your audience might want a more substantial answer,” Tony said. He brought his hand back down, and put it over Stephen’s, and pulled it into his lap.

“I would say to those that refuse to evolve and realize that human sexuality is a wide spectrum, go away. I don’t care. I have never cared. I’m fifty, and I’m sitting comfortably at the top of a tech empire. There are so many more things I need to concern myself with rather than public opinion of my relationship. If my being in a committed, stable relationship is offensive to you, then off you go. I have spent so much of my life being disapproved of, that I cannot will up a single care for their sentiment. Anything that the public can cook up has nothing on Howard Stark’s method of parenting...

“And as for those that believe I don’t deserve any happiness, they probably have more of a bone to pick with me. Perhaps I deserve those feelings directed at me. I am no saint. I never claimed to be. But I am no devil either. Whether or not I am happy now has nothing to do with my past actions. It has nothing to do with anyone but Stephen and I... And that’s it. Let’s move on. Because oh man, the ideas I have these days... From water treatment, to distance learning for every child on the planet, to irrigation that recycles water and low water use crops... I don’t have to design and improve gear for a team or SHIELD anymore unless I choose to. So I have time to work on things that are actually going to make a hands on difference in real people’s lives. And it’s about time I did,” Tony said.

“That also sounds like another great interview, Mr. Stark,” Cooper said.

“That one you can anticipate in the near future. I would be delighted if you helped me get the word out,” Tony said.

Chapter End Notes

So now my schedule is off for getting this out, but I will try to be as prompt as possible. C'est la vie, my dears. See you ASAP.
Also, what the hell you lovely, gorgeous people? Well over a thousand kudos and over 400 bookmarks? This is nuts. This is the most read single story I've written to date. Wow. I am wowed. Thank you all.

As always, comments are love.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Tony has a heart to heart with the Spider-ling. Rogers still just doesn't get it. Stephen Strange is well aware of how ridiculous he is, thank you very much. And Tony drives a hard bargain, and embraces his inner megalomaniac. As the great Brain always said: "Same thing we do every night, Pinky..."

Chapter Notes

Yay! Update! Here's hoping I can get back to weekly updates. *kicks own ass*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony and Stephen didn’t bother to watch the interview. They were too busy trying to integrate magic into technological designs to increase their durability and firepower. They were having moderate success at it, thanks to notes from Rocket and Stephen’s own studies. Tony eventually pulled back. The problem with designing weapons, was that it was almost too easy. He could be at it for hours, for days, and hardly notice the passage of time. It worried him how easily he stepped back into that role.

So he was thankful when FRIDAY interrupted them at a quiet moment. “Hey Boss, the Spider-Kid has been trying to get through to you since the interview aired.”

“Ah, shit, put him through. I’ve been neglecting him,” Tony said.

“Mr. Stark?” Peter said, disbelieving that he had actually gotten Tony and not a LMD of some kind.

“Hey Pete, how’s things?” Tony asked. Suddenly Pete looked unsure, worried that he was disturbing Tony at something important. He was used to speaking with Tony during moments of stress and crisis, but had less experience at just casually making conversation.

“Um, good... I just... I was worried and then I saw the interview, and I was totally happy for you, but... I just wanted to make sure you’re okay,” Peter said.

“I’m just fine, Peter. Better than fine, really. How are you? I know it’s been awhile. Still holding Queens together by a shoelace?” Tony asked.

“Yeah, Mr. Stark... I’m not sure if Happy told you, but my Aunt found out... about everything,” Peter said shyly.

“Good,” Tony said. “You needed to tell her. How’d she take it?” Tony asked. He was relieved the boy had finally spilled to what was objectively the most important person in his life.

“It’s better and worse at the same time. She worries about me,” Peter said.
“She always will, Pete. That will never change,” Tony said, and gave him an encouraging nod. 

“She’s making me see a psychiatrist. She thinks I have trauma,” Peter admitted.

“There’s a good chance you do, Pete,” Tony said softly. “Humans aren’t built to handle ongoing battle for years on end. I think I am classic example of what happens to a person forced into thinking they have a huge responsibility to the world, and effectively fucking that up... Now, you and I took our trauma in a different direction than most, but you have to admit that what you’ve been through would be seen by the vast majority of people with normal empathy, as traumatic.” Tony kept his voice calm and serious, trying to show the boy he wasn’t going to dismiss the situation out of hand. “You can see that right?”

“Yeah, Mr. Stark. I can.”

“Good... You want me to have my therapist recommend some names for both you and May?” Tony asked.

“We have to go with what May’s insurance will let us have,” Peter said.

“No, you don’t Peter. I’ll foot the bill personally if I can’t shimmy you under S.I.’s insurance as an intern or something. But the only way it’s going to work is if you’re willing to participate fully. No secrets kept from your therapist. Otherwise it’s a waste of time and money. Would you be willing to do that, Pete?” Tony asked.

“I... There are some things I’d like to talk about... A lot about when Uncle Ben died,” Peter said.

“Sure, kid... I get the need for confidentiality in your case... But your health plan under the Accords would cover this too,” Tony said.

“But then it would involve keeping it from May, and I don’t want to lie to her anymore, Mr. Stark. Especially about getting help. That just seems counterproductive,” Peter said.

“Good. That’s a good thing,” Tony assured. “Are you alright?”

“Um, yeah... I think. I was worried about you, but, you look okay. Like you’ve been getting some sleep.”

“I have. Five stars. Can recommend. It works wonders,” Tony said. “Look, Pete, I am not the best example of how to handle things like this, but I can give you some advice based on my experience and mistakes... I understand the crushing weight of responsibility. But you have to live a life too, okay? You do what you can within reason. You’ve got some extraordinary skills and power... But what will keep you humble, and human, and your actions humane, is compassion. You have to take time to foster your social connections and keep them strong. People need people. You need to spend time with your family and friends and not to feel guilty about nurturing that which keeps you good... I know you’ll try to find a way to feel guilty about it, but that is why I’m relieved you’re talking therapy. You’re strong, Pete, and you’re so good... But you’ll only stay that way by looking after yourself when you need to,” Tony said.

“I... Thanks, Mr. Stark,” Peter said.

“Will you make my suggestion to May? Tell her that my therapist will contact her with recommendations, not me personally. I imagine she’s furious with me.”

“And how, Mr. Stark... But I told her that you put the responsibility of telling her the truth on me, because you did, and that wasn’t the wrong thing to do. I had to choose that for myself. She was
really mad about that for awhile, and thought I wasn’t old enough to make that choice. Then I told her that if I’m old enough to get a learner’s permit for driving, that my personal responsibility to look out for the safety of others goes up. She told me the two points didn’t compare and then we needed to give it a rest for a bit,” Peter said.

“How did she find out? Did you sit her down and explain it?” Tony asked. Peter looked sheepish.

“No... She walked in on me pulling off the mask in my bedroom,” Peter said.

“Shit. That sucks. But you’re gonna be better off in the long run, kid,” Tony said.

“Yeah, it wasn’t fun.”

“I can imagine,” Tony replied.

“She suffers from anxiety too... And honestly I feel terrible for keeping it from her for so long,” Peter said.

“I will make sure to get her a recommendation for a therapist too then,” Tony said. Peter brightened a bit.

“Would you?” Peter asked.

“Sure, Pete. It’s the least I can do. If there’s anything either of you need, I need you to ask me or Happy, okay? You give him status updates, and as much as he pretends to hate it, he listens to every one of them, and worries about you. Never tell him that you know that. He’ll get Pepper to torture me.” Peter laughed and Tony smiled.

“Your secret is safe with me, Mr. Stark,” Peter said.

“Good. Happy’s a bit of a hothouse flower when it comes to balancing his masculinity and caring, but if you look after him, he’ll stand by you.”

“Sure,” Peter said and nodded.

“Would you like to meet Stephen?” Tony asked.

“I... Is he there? Sure,” Peter said. Tony beckoned Stephen into view.

“Mr. Parker,” Stephen said.

“Mr. Strange,” Peter replied.

“It’s doctor, actually,” Stephen said.

“Mister Doctor,” Peter said, teasing. Stephen raised an elegant, yet summarily unimpressed eyebrow.

“I’ve heard that one before,” Stephen said dryly. Tony snorted on a laugh. Stephen turned his unimpressed glare to Tony, who remained stoutly unintimidated.

“Nice one, kid,” Tony said. “Com’on love, that was cute.”

“You’re both incorrigible,” Stephen declared.

“Probably,” Tony said, and grinned as he shrugged. “Peter, this is Doctor Stephen Strange... Be
nice. He’s sticking around. For as long as he’ll let me have him,” Tony said. “Stephen, this is Peter Parker. You are now sworn to silence about him being Spider-Man. In conversations with officials, you may refer to him as the Spider-Kid, because reminding them he’s a juvenile will help until he’s ready to handle the world as an adult.”

“Can I do the same thing with you?” Stephen teased.

“Haaahaaaaaaaa,” Tony said.

“It’s a fair question. It might actually get them to give you a break every now and again,” Stephen suggested. Peter laughed, and it looked like it might have been the first time he’d been happy in a long time.

Tony promised to forward their names for quality mental healthcare, and said warm goodbyes to Peter. Tony looked a bit tired when the connection was cut. “What’s wrong, Tony?” Stephen asked.

“Finally,” Tony said.

“Finally?” Stephen asked.

“He’s finally asking for help. Any kind of help. I was scared he was going to try to go it alone forever. He’s got a complex. He’s so good, but traumatized by his uncle’s murder. He thinks its his fault. He was nowhere close to Ben Parker when he got killed, but he had told Peter something along the lines of ‘with great power comes great responsibility’ as his final words to Peter. The kid took it to heart as you can see... I’ve been trying to get him to let some of that guilt go, but it’s the realm of a professional. Not a guy who’s stumbling through therapy himself,” Tony said. Stephen nodded, reached out, and ran his fingers along Tony’s jawline and cheek.

“You and the kid share a complex, you know,” Stephen said.

“Yeah, Yinsen dying so I could go free changed me in a similar fashion. I can relate to watching someone who gave me life dying violently. It’s beyond shitty.”

“While you may not be the person who can help him directly, Tony, you’re doing what you can. You’re setting an example, a good one, that getting help has no shame... And by doing so, you can improve your life,” Stephen said. Tony smiled softly at Stephen, and opened his mind to connect to how Stephen felt, if Stephen felt like sharing. It turned out he did, and Tony felt a wash of concern and affection. Tony pressed himself up against Stephen.

“Love you,” Tony said. “To your fucking guts.”

“Love you too,” Stephen replied. They shared a quiet moment, just being close to one another. Tony let Stephen feel how much he felt for him, and trusted Stephen to be careful of those feelings. Eventually Tony looked back at all the 3D projections.

“Ugh, so much work to do,” Tony said.

“I know,” Stephen replied. “We’re going to have to be careful that we don’t wear ourselves out.”

“Noted,” Tony said. “FRIDAY can keep us honest. We should probably call a meeting of the WSC and American officials, to set out our plans and get things in motion.”

“Do you think we have enough to show them in order to keep them from freaking out?” Stephen asked.
“I will by the time they can all corral themselves into a single room,” Tony said. “I’m going to feel like the biggest hypocrite in the world though.”

“Because of weapons?”

“Because of weapons,” Tony agreed. “But there has to be backup if I fail.”

“You know, you probably won’t,” Stephen said.

“I hope not... But it’s the engineer in me. There has to be failsafes,” Tony said.

“I know,” Stephen said. “And the WSC will prefer it if there were.”

“Fucking sucks, but I have to. Rocket was right. I have to make sure I don’t get us all dead for the sake of my personal ideals,” Tony said, looking idly back at the projections which spun in the air slowly. Stephen saw the faraway look in Tony’s eye, and it was easy to jump to the conclusion he came to.

“You want to bring the fight to him, don’t you?” Stephen said.

“Been thinking about it. Everyone has tried to defend themselves against him. What about a good offence instead? The sooner we get him gone, the better... But there will always be someone out there to fill that role. So we have to plan for that eventuality,” Tony said.

“I take it the direct plan for handling Thanos hasn’t changed,” Stephen said.

“No. But I am thinking about asking her for help.” Tony tapped the Aether, who shimmered happily. “Rocket is right... As much as I hate to admit it, he’s right. She wants to help. I can feel it. We could save thousands more by going to him. Less collateral damage on Earth.”

“I understand. But are you willing to do that? You don’t have to. You can choose. You have a choice in all of this, Tony.” Stephen said.

“I think I’m okay with it. Morally, I’m fine with it. There’s too much to lose here on Earth,” Tony said.

“You know I will be going with you, right?” Stephen asked. Tony nodded.

“I am aware. Do we bring Vision or leave him to defend Earth?”

“He’d be vulnerable on his own, and, no stones on Earth, no reason to come to Earth, right?” Stephen said. “It’s widely accepted that Earth is fairly isolated from more populated areas of the galaxy.” Tony nodded again.

“Good enough reasoning,” he replied. “Hey, FRIDAY, can you give Vision a call when you get a moment? We might be taking this show to space.”

“Sure thing, boss,” FRIDAY said. “um, boss, there is one thing I feel I should have you address.”

“What’s that?” Tony asked.

“I keep having to block calls from Switzerland. I believe that Rogers is trying to contact you. He got through directly to me once. He’s also been attempting Ms. Potts and Colonel Rhodes personal numbers. I have shuffled the various numbers to a blocked caller list, that only gets the caller to an answering service that doesn’t record,” she said.
“Oh, hun, are you okay?” Tony asked.

“Sure boss. Why wouldn’t I be?” she asked.

“Because stalker behaviour isn’t fun to deal with,” Tony said.

“I’m fine, boss. The calls aren’t directed to me, and I refuse to speak with him after the first attempt. But part of the agreement of his confinement was access to the outside world.”

“Perhaps we should have a chat with his legal team and have them advise him that contact is a bad idea given the charges against him. Do we have the contact info for his legal representation?”

“I can dig it up no problem,” FRIDAY said.

“Good, forward that information and a log of all the calls to my lawyers handling Accords related matters. Good?” Tony asked.

“On it, boss... Do you think that Rogers might try to escape?”

“It’s a safe bet,” Tony said. “Once he gets bored, and realizes that cooperation isn’t all its cracked up to be when you’re still guilty of a crime... I’m a bit surprised that Romanoff hasn’t yet to be honest.”

“Her cell is very secure, boss,” FRIDAY said.

“Yeah, but she’s resourceful. Eventually someone there will fall for it and start trusting her. Then it won’t be long. Fortunately, I can find her most anywhere she goes now. It’s just a pain in my ass,” Tony said.

“Noted, boss... And while we are distracted from work, I took a message from the Crown Princess of Wakanda. She said she’d like to speak to you. There are rumblings online that T’Challa faced down a challenge for the throne, but the Princess didn’t mention anything about it. She’s inquiring again after the B.A.R.F. tech. She said that she’s awoken Barnes, but at the temporary expense of his long-term memory.”

“Wait, what is she doing to that man’s mind?” Tony asked, eyes narrowing.

“She claims it’s in order to rebuild him. He’s living in a rural area of Wakanda, peacefully. She’s engaged all sorts of rehabilitation services and techniques to help him. She’s given us a highly detailed account. It seems reasonable. Should I be worried, boss?” FRIDAY asked.

“Not yet... I should check on him,” Tony said to Stephen.

“You don’t have to,” Stephen said.

“I’m really not happy with the idea of her wiping his mind like HYDRA did... He’s a human being, not a fucking hard drive,” Tony said.

“I have a full medical report we can look over, boss. It covers all aspects of his physical and mental condition, in case you would be interested in pursuing the B.A.R.F. tech. I’ve sniffed the file over, no code bombs or anything. There are photos, of his living conditions and physical state, in case you’d like to see them,” she said.

Tony sighed deeply. “Show me.”

To be fair, the place looked idyllic. It was lush and green, and seemed as good a place as any to
rebuild a mind. “And the consent form?” Tony asked. His eyes rested on a shot of a one armed white man as he looked out over a body of water late in the day. FRIDAY pulled up the documents, written in English, which seemed to solidly hand over one’s medical proxy, and they were signed with digital retinal scans. “Looks legit.... I’m not being crazy though, the idea of one being able to consent to this is dicey, right?” Tony asked Stephen,

“While it may hold up in a medical malpractice suit, I don’t know if I would feel comfortable enough as a physician to attempt to rewire someone’s brain through physical intervention, and not therapeutic means,” Stephen said. “I am almost certain that Wakanda would have different methods beyond what we have here... But playing with someone’s memory wades into very morally dubious waters.”

“Ultimately, I suppose it’s not that much different than what I attempted on myself,” Tony reasoned.

“Not exactly. You got to choose with a mind, that while traumatized, was free of outside influence. It was for the purposes of healing, not mandatory deprogramming... And you did it with your current memories intact. That is the crucial difference. Barnes probably did choose this, preferring it to being a puppet acting out the violent whims of others, but it does look like an extreme response. FRIDAY, did Barnes sign this before or after Rogers was taken into custody?” Stephen asked.

“There are two. The first one was signed over to Rogers’ choice, before it was turned over to the King T’Challa. The second one was signed within hours of Rogers being secured in Switzerland. That looks a bit sketchy I suppose. It was like they were waiting for Rogers to be gone to do it,” FRIDAY said.

“Rogers would never have let Barnes wipe his memories. Never. Everything he fought for would have come to nothing by cutting Barnes off from his memories. This feels odd though, extreme like you said, like taking chemotherapy for a cold,” Tony said. He scratched at his beard and let everything sink in. “I could still fix him, you know.”

“But should you?” Stephen asked. “Do you feel that doing so wouldn’t lead to further trauma to you?” Stephen’s voice was quiet and steady. Tony clung to it like a life preserver.

“No,” Tony said honestly. “I don’t want to walk around in that guy’s head. And Rogers still presumes he has access to me... He hasn’t even learned that he doesn’t get to make demands from me anymore... Christ, it’s hard to not just waltz in and fix things though. I’m so used to be able to take action. Moral dilemmas fucking suck,” Tony said.

“They do... Personally, I worry about Hippocratic Oath territory. This seems harmful and against what medical science should be, no matter how careful they are, and how useful it could be. It could so easily be turned against people,” Stephen said.

“Then we get into the moral debate over since he apparently chose this, there are potential lives already saved with The Winter Soldier no longer being a bad beat poem away from murder,” Tony mused. The conditions really did look humane and comfortable, if rustic, as he scrolled through the photos. His eyes were drawn back to the shot of the one armed man, with his back to the camera, looking out over the water. Three Wakandan children were also in the shot, playing in the water, happy and at ease. Tony reached out, and pulled out a shot of Barnes’ face straight on to the lens. There was a lost look in his eyes. He looked calm and at ease, but utterly lost. Tony looked at Stephen. “What do you think I should do?”

“Whatever you want... And to sleep easy on your decision. Barnes is not your responsibility. You
don’t have to do anything. You can do it later. You can do it now. Most importantly, you don’t owe anyone an explanation for what course you choose. Whether you ever forgive him or not is also up to you. But be aware that forgiveness isn’t instantaneous. It happens slowly and in stages. If you’re not there yet, you don’t have to force it,” Stephen said. Tony favoured him with a Mona Lisa smile.

“That was a good speech,” he said.

“Something my mother taught me a long time ago,” Stephen said.

“FRIDAY, send a message to the princess... We can discuss terms of using the B.A.R.F. tech, but it is going to require extensive supervision, and an exchange of ideas and materials related to the incoming off-world threat.” Tony looked at Stephen again. “I may as well get something out of my guilt complex,” he said and shrugged.

“There are other ways,” Stephen said. “I’m sure they would permit the use of Vibranium in order to defend the world.”

“That may be, but I have to bend to show good faith. This is a very easy, hands-off, way to do so.”

“By helping your parents’ murderer?” Stephen asked.

“HYDRA killed my parents. I know that logically. Their weapon of choice leaves me emotionally conflicted. Look at him, Stephen... He erased himself so he won’t do it again.” Tony pointed at the photo of Barnes’ haunted face. Stephen reached out, and pulled Tony toward him, and his gaze away from the photos.

“Whatever you choose is fine,” Stephen said. “Helping is fine. Not helping is also fine.”

“Not at the expense of the world,” Tony said. Stephen’s jaw tensed for a moment.

“Man-pain, chosen-one, save the world bullshit?” Stephen said. Tony gave him that sad smile again.

“Yup. That.”

“Precious cinnamon roll, too good for this world,” Stephen teased.

“I’m having FRIDAY lock you out of Tumblr,” Tony said. Stephen reached out, and grazed his fingers over a sensitive area on Tony’s side. Tony squawked at the sensation, and tried to get away. Then he got his head about him, and wrapped his arms around Stephen, knowing he was stronger and could keep Stephen there if he chose. “Hey,” Tony said softly.

“Hey,” Stephen replied.

“Thank you for watching out for me, and questioning me... The list of people who do that is very small, and I know how valuable it is.”

“Tony, you know that this tends to be part of the package when you love someone, right?” Stephen said

“So long as I can tear you away from your books, then yes,” Tony said.

“Hardly fair,” Stephen said and tickled Tony again. Tony shivered, but held firmly on to Stephen.

“I’m on to you,” Tony said.
“I should hope so by now. I’ve heard you were rather smart,” Stephen retorted.

“Uh, boss? The princess is on the phone,” FRIDAY announced.

“Put her through,” Tony said, still refusing to let Stephen out of his grasp.

“Do you need a minute, Tony?” Shuri asked, with her eyebrows raised.

“No. I’m just showing my fella that tickling me will get him literally nowhere,” Tony said.

“I could just open a portal between us,” Stephen said.

“But you won’t,” Tony replied.

“No, I won’t.” Stephen gave Tony a suave smile, and then leaned forward and kissed Tony on the end of his nose. The absolute ridiculousness made Tony roll his eyes, release Stephen, and throw his hands into the air.

“You’re utterly ridiculous and I’ve never loved anyone more than you,” Tony said, managing to sound amused, affectionate, and somehow incredibly irritated at the same time. Shuri laughing broke the two of them from their reverie.

“Oh, are there more white boys like you? The ones I’ve met so far are all so serious and boring,” Shuri said.

“We have serious moments, but everyone has to laugh,” Tony said. “Though I am afraid I must be serious with you now. Why is my baby FRIDAY telling me that you erased Barnes’ long term memory?” Tony said.

“Not erased. Rather, he cannot access them for now. He consented, and we have proof of this, which I have forwarded to your A.I. This is where your retro-framing tech could come in. Before we did this, his behaviour was erratic and unstable,” Shuri said. She immediately came back to focus on the topic at hand.

“Why is he awake at all?” Tony asked.

“We both know that cryo is not a permanent solution and eventually will destroy his mind... During a routine awakening to check his status, he reported that impossibly, he was dreaming while under. They were dark enough in imagery that they were deeply disturbing to him. Records of brain activity confirmed this. So it was time to find a better way to deal with the problem,” Shuri said. Tony reached out with his mind, scanning for lies or half truths, but found none.

“Why am I so damn conflicted about this?” Tony muttered to himself.

“You said it yourself, the weapon of choice is really hard to accept,” Stephen said softly. Tony scrubbed at his eyes with the heel of his hand. “And, also as you said, save the world bullshit,” Stephen added. Tony let out a slow breath, schooling his body back to calm.

“Your highness, Shuri, as I mentioned before, we have an incoming off world threat... The world will need Vibranium for this. I propose an exchange. At the end of which, all Vibranium will be repatriated back to Wakanda. I am not opposed to the idea of someone else using the tech, but you have to understand how dangerous it could be. It needs someone with a better medical mind than me, and more time to work with it. Otherwise, I would have turned it over to Stephen,” Tony said.

“So, for my country’s greatest resource, you end up with a fixed white boy super soldier. Seems
like a deal heavily in your favour, Tony,” Shuri said.

“I don’t want him back. I preferred him as a Soviet made popsicle. So that kicks that theory out... If you crack this thing, make it safe and unable to cause harm, then there will be a Nobel Prize in your future. Several, perhaps. Hell, I would probably attempt treatment myself. Prestige, and more importantly, influence will follow. The world would be your oyster, kid. So, I’m asking for Vibranium to help keep the world from becoming little more than a floating cloud of hydrogen, and then I plan on handing the world to you, and those like you. Because I think you will do better with it than I will. You were raised to have compassion and responsibility for your people. I’m asking you to turn those traits to all people of the world eventually,” Tony said.

“I am sensing that there is another caveat coming here,” Shuri said.

“It’s not that... Not really. But I will throw in this: we need natural Vibranium, or else I’m going to have to start synthesizing it myself, and that would take a huge shit on Wakanda’s forming power as a world-class economy,” Tony said, and shrugged like it was no big deal. The princess could govern, but Tony knew how the hell to make a bargain.

Shuri looked at Tony, ready to laugh in disbelief. “Synthetic Vibranium? The effort to create it would be astronomical,” she said.

“You are correct... But so was walking out of an Afghan cave with a chest full of shrapnel and the world on fire behind me. So was carving up my home to make a particle accelerator in my basement in order to save my sorry ass. I have already carved out a spot of my own on the Periodic Table. I am Iron Man, and I will build a way,” Tony said very quietly and deadly serious. The threat in his voice was palpable. “Also, I’ve been talking to a space raccoon lately, and holy shit does have access to some remarkable tech...

“After all this shit is over, I am going to take a long vacation in space, I think. But before that, I am going to quietly take over the world. Not to rule it, that’s better left to people like you, but rather to see us into a new era. Humanity needs to evolve and not in the scary Ultron kind of way. There is room for every single one of us. But we have to choose it for ourselves. I plan to facilitate that choice, and giving the nudge it requires to win people over...

“I am going to attempt to create benefits similar to Wakandan society throughout the world, and I am asking for your help with that. Leave Wakanda to T’Challa, and help me bring Wakanda to the world,” Tony said. He knew he must sound like a super villain in a movie, but he no longer cared. Shuri considered his words carefully before she spoke and Tony had to admit he was surprised that she didn’t dismiss him out of hand, and rather, smiled at him.

“I am not sure if I am supposed to find that inspiring or terrifying,” she said.

“A little of both, perhaps, but change is always frightening at first. The key is to guide the change, and not let the freak-outs get too out of hand.”

“I will speak to my king about the need for Vibranium for the purposes of planetary defence. I expect to be made fully aware of how it will be used before any material is handed over,” she said.

“Naturally,” Tony said. “It’s strictly being borrowed, and must be returned when the threat has passed.”

“As for the retro-framing tech, we have excellent neurosurgeons here in Wakanda, but might I ask for your assistance, Dr. Strange?” she asked. “I feel that you would bring a valuable Western perspective to the process.” Stephen looked a bit wary.
“I suppose. The more oversight, the better the outcome for something like this,” Stephen said.

“Everything done with B.A.R.F. must be recorded and archived by FRIDAY. That is also a non-negotiable part of the deal,” Tony said. “No exceptions. No contingencies. If you use the tech, or anything that is derived from it, FRIDAY will know about it.”

“May I ask her to collate results?” Shuri asked.

“If she’s okay with that. Her choice,” Tony said. “You can suck up to her by paying her, donating to her favourite charities, or allowing her access to digital libraries.”

“I will keep that in mind, Tony,” Shuri said, and nodded. “What do you plan for the world? It sounds either beautiful, or ominous.” Her voice was soft and cautious. “And what are your plans for the Vibranium?”

“Now we’re talking... I’m calling it the Ploughshares Protocol. First we defend the Earth with it, then, Wakanda can use it to change the world,” Tony said.

He settled in and started bringing out ideas and projections for his defence systems at first, and then eagerly brushed them away to show her things that he never thought he would be able to get to. The key was going to be to delegate the ideas. Shuri was intrigued by Tony’s ideas for water conservation and reuse. Tony spoke of revitalizing agriculture and education, and then brought up space exploration and the contact he’d already had. Shuri bounced ideas and concerns off of him, bringing the perspective of someone much closer to the economies of nations that were struggling.

“While I like what you have suggested, people aren’t going to like it. At least the ones at the top,” Shuri said.

“That’s where you come in. I am the establishment. When we start talking major socioeconomic shifts, no one is going to trust me to any great degree. Public perception constrains me. I worked on the side of the establishment for too long. But that’s where you come in. You, and other bright young things on my radar. I want you and others like you to learn from the past’s mistakes and eliminate them. There’s a kid in Queens who’s going to be a big fucking deal. Same with a girl in New Jersey. That’s just two. I want to make it so that you can accomplish things that the world no longer trusts me to do,” Tony said.

“And do you plan on being a puppet master?”

“No. I want you to lead on your own merits. It’s time to force old, crippling ideas back. We’re often shooting ourselves in the future for the sake of our current greed. That is no longer acceptable. I want you to step up and I can step back and offer support, public or otherwise. You can make the call whether you want me in the public eye or not. I don’t care. But I would hope that you at least involve me in the process if I voice my support for what you’re doing publicly,” Tony said. “Consider me an investor type.”

Shuri thought that over. “I need to speak with T’Challa about this. He is starting outreach programs, but I feel he would be much more conservative over time in how our technology and ideas become integrated with the rest of the world.”

“I heard about his investment in Oakland’s property market... At least he is somewhat open to the idea,” Tony said.

“He still owes me a trip to Coachella or Disneyland because of that,” Shuri said. Tony gave her a quirky smile.
“Ah, is this what it was like to have a sibling?” Tony asked Stephen.

“A bit,” Stephen replied, with a sad, warm smile.

“Shuri, how would you like to attend a meeting with the WSC and American military officials about world defence? I would appreciate it if you were there. It would give me much more authority to speak on the use of Vibranium. It would also put your hand on the wheel for approving that use,” Tony said.

“Again, I must speak with T’Challa, but if I can have access to information about your alien armada, then I might be able to convince him with it,” she said.

“Great. I will forward the relevant satellite imagery and what precious little I know. Let FRIDAY know as soon as you’re able to make it Stateside, and I will call the meeting,” Tony said. “In the meantime, I am changing certain production facilities of mine over to be able to produce those interlocking drones I showed you. Which will happen whether your brother dear approves the Vibranium or not. My next big change will be gaining or building facilities in vulnerable areas for water treatment. They will be powered with renewable energy, and if the area is safe enough, arc reactor tech. I liked your ideas on reforestation, and would like to help integrate those as well, in particular where soil erosion due to over farming is becoming an issue. Any thoughts and notes you have would be greatly appreciated, and you will be compensated for your ideas, as well as retain any relevant patents and copyright,” Tony said. Shuri nodded. Tony was deeply appreciating being able to talk to someone at a high level and be immediately understood. The list of people who could do that was also small.

“And when can I expect to see the retro-framing tech?” Shuri asked.

“Just as soon as I get confirmation of a supply chain for Vibranium,” Tony said. “Please send his majesty my regards.”

“I will do so,” Shuri said.

The connection cut and Tony let out a breath. “You drive a hell of a bargain,” Stephen said.

“Yes, I do... And it’s exhausting. Come on, I got a craving for Mexican food tonight,” Tony said.

“Oh, spicy,” Stephen said, grinning. Tony laughed.

“You’re still ridiculous,” he said.

“I’m fairly aware of how ridiculous I am,” Stephen said. “It doesn’t bother me much.”

“Me neither,” Tony replied.

Chapter End Notes

Tony is playing the long game here, but like he always does, he's looking to do it efficiently as possible.

As always, comments are love. The last round really got me through a bit of a block. All of you are awesome. Thanks for reading.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Tony works some law dogs, and then talks to Rhodey about saving the world. Suddenly... Vision quest time... Kinda?

Chapter Notes

This chapter was a bit of a struggle for me. I wanted to get a lot of little bits of info in, and it doesn't flow as well as I want... Just sometimes something is harder to write. There are things I want to get to further on in the plot, so it was a bit of a struggle to get this coherent... It is imperfect, but I hope it will suffice.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony sat in on a conference call with his legal team, and they were all speaking with the legal team of Steve Rogers. Tony had stayed mostly silent, letting the lawyers handle it. The opposing side explained it as Rogers trying to express remorse, but Tony wasn’t having any of it. He simply maintained his desire for the harassment of his A.I. to cease, and that he wanted no contact with Rogers, and then let the law dogs earn their pay.

He let himself let out a sharp bark of laughter when face-to-face mediation was suggested. And Tony finally got to use the line, “I don’t negotiate with terrorists,” and mean it. He spoke with a world weary tone and a hint of anger. “I also don’t indulge stalker behaviour. What he’s doing violates my rights a victim to be reasonably protected from my assailant. The only time I want to see Rogers in the future is sitting in a courtroom, answering for his actions.”

The lawyers then tried to plea Rogers’ mental state, and again Tony kicked at the traces. “What about my mental state? Let’s not forget that he and Barnes beat me within an inch of my life. Don’t make me release the photos of my injuries to the public before the trial. I have no problem with that and hold all relevant copyright to those images,” Tony warned.

“Those images are evidence, Mr. Stark,” the lead of Rogers’ team warned right back.

“And also my property. Which were not seized, but rather willingly submitted,” Tony retorted. “The calls stop, immediately.”

“We will speak with Mr. Rogers about this.”

“Show him the incoming cease and desist while you’re at it,” Tony snapped. He considered if he was overreacting, but then mentally reprimanded himself, and thought of the long conversations he’d had with his therapist about boundaries. Rogers had none. Perhaps because he was so desperate to connect after losing everyone, but he didn’t know the first thing about managing it. He also had no clue how to take no for an answer, and that friendship was far more complicated than undying loyalty to someone, especially when they refused to listen to another’s point of view. Then there was whatever the serum had done to his mind as well as his body, which added an extra layer
of difficulty. Tony fell silent again, and the lawyers started up, and Tony allowed himself to ruminate on it longer.

In hindsight, it was small wonder the Avengers had gone down in flames. Fury had wanted extraordinary people, with extraordinary skills. Mental health, loyalty, ability to compromise, compliance to the law, and actual competence for long term combat work hadn’t been on the criteria. Just because they could all slap a bandage on their trauma and press on didn’t mean that that was a solution. Or perhaps the rest of them could, and Tony couldn’t, and that’s why he’d cracked so badly in the end. Iron Man: Yes. Tony Stark: Not recommended.

Tony knew he was getting better though, because bringing up all these feelings no longer made him freeze up and spiral into a whirlpool of insecurity. He also had the knee jerk reaction that the rest of the Avengers, and Nick Fury, and all of SHIELD while he was at it, could go fuck themselves. The good guys weren’t supposed to do things like they had to people. They had built monuments to control and an army for the express purpose of trying to dictate to the rest of the world what was acceptable... No matter how good their intentions, it was a recipe for disaster... No wonder Maria had gone to such lengths to hide him. He would have been vivisected long ago if SHIELD had known what he was. Split the lark, and you’ll find the music. He would forever be reverent of his mother for that fact alone.

The lawyers were talking civil charges for harassment now if they didn’t get compliance from Rogers, and that they expected this matter resolved immediately. Tony piped up again that if FRIDAY had to intercept one more call from the holding facility from a line that Rogers had access to, or had to so much as bounce an email off of her servers, Tony promised to release the video of the EMTs and technicians trying to extract his hypothermic body from the downed armour. He didn’t mention the video of the fight that preceded that moment, because that had been seized as evidence, and Tony had every intention of following the letter of the law.

Tony was accused of blackmail, and rolled his eyes. “Hardly. It’s an educational video of the effects of Vibranium alloy on gold-titanium alloy, and their effects on a human body. I might post it on my Instagram account under the hashtag metallurgy... It will be like a George A. Romero film meets an episode of Bill Nye the Science Guy.” Tony shut his trap and let the uncomfortable mental image hang.

“What Mr. Stark is saying, is that it would be very prudent for Mr. Rogers to cease to attempt to contact him, lest he risk further legal action from Mr. Stark,” his top lawyer said.

“Yeah, that,” Tony said with a hint of menace in his voice. “Any good will I had for Rogers has long since past, and I refuse to speak to him about anything. He is no longer a part of my life, and he brought that on himself.” Tony knew he needed to work on his anger, but he was so protective of his boundaries these days, that any violation felt like a personal affront and left him scrambling to reinforce them and get his point across.

The lawyers had a few parting shots over their respective bows, and the call was over. Tony cut his connection and put his elbows on the desk, and rested his head in his hands for a moment. He was in his new office at the compound, and was glad he’d set one aside for himself. It made meetings like this much easier, and less personal if he had neutral territory to do it on.

Tony closed his eyes and then heard the smooth pneumatics of Rhodey’s braces at the door of the office. “How did it go?” Rhodey asked.

“Not bad, actually. But I’m still really fucking angry at him. Have to work on that. Talk it over with the doc,” Tony said, and sighed, not looking up. Rhodey approached and laid a warm, gentle hand on his shoulder. Tony briefly reached out with his mind and felt Rhodey’s calm affection and
used it to help centre himself, and step away from his anger.

“You know I’m proud of you, right?” Rhodey asked. That did make Tony raise his head. “Everything you’ve done since then, Tones, you’ve worked so hard at making things right and trying to improve. And I’m proud of you. Even before you found out what you are... You’ve been trying so damn hard, and I’m proud of you for not giving up.” Rhodey smiled at him.

“Thanks, Rhodey,” Tony said quietly. He pushed himself up and away from the desk. Rhodey opened his arms and Tony hugged him hard. “I’m so grateful to have you,” Tony murmured. It was thanks for all the insanity Rhodey had adapted to over the years from Tony.

“Stephen said you’ve been making plans for Thanos,” Rhodey said.

“Yeah... I... I might change them a bit. I’m thinking about taking it off planet. Thanos has no reason to come to Earth if the stones are no longer here,” Tony said.

“Logically, yes. But is he the type to just destroy for the sake of it? Plenty of warlords do that. Destruction is the final goal, no matter their reasoning,” Rhodey said. Tony stilled and thought it over.

“That is entirely possible, and something I will have to prepare for,” Tony said. “What Stephen got from Gamora didn’t paint a great picture of his empathy or compassion,” Tony said. “She said he’s on a mission to bring balance to the universe... Which sounds so much like Ultron, it shakes me to the core... She’s not quite sure why he’s doing this, but she suspects something similar happened to him that he did to her, and now he’s trying to exert control by recreating the scenario over and over on various planets, pulling out recruits like Gamora.”

“What did he do to her?”

“Killed most, if not all of the people on her planet, found her as a small child, and then took her in. Raised her... But basically raised her to be a loyal attack dog. She has a sister of sorts, Nebula they call her... Let’s just say that what happened to her makes Barnes look like a recipient of the War Amps program. She’s pretty messed up about it... And it’s made her terrifying. She’s helping Gamora and the others more out of a need to kill Thanos than care for anything else,” Tony said.

He and Rhodey had walked out of the office, and headed toward the communal kitchen for coffee. “Do your space buddies know your super secret plan?” Rhodey asked.

“No. But they know what I am. At least a few of them do. Quill, the guy who is originally from Earth, has some pretty well-trained instincts. It what helped him survive this long out there.”

Tony started the coffeemaker and Rhodey gathered a couple of mugs. It felt warm and familiar. “I’d feel better if you knew what you were going to do,” Rhodey said.

“I know. What I’m going to try is pretty simple... But I need to surprise him. I’m just hoping I can pull it off. If he has any inkling that I am what I am, then he has time to prepare. I need to blindside him for this to work.”

“And you’ll tell Strange, and not me?”

“Yes, because he has more psychic defences than you... I’m going to need you here on the ground or in the air to direct traffic in case I fail. Please, Rhodey, I’m sorry if that hurts you, but there’s no one else I trust more to save Earth if something happens to me,” Tony said earnestly.

“I hate when you go places I can’t follow. I meant it in Afghanistan. I mean it now. You ride with
me,” Rhodey replied. Tony smiled at his friend.

“I love you too, platypus,” Tony said. Rhodey rolled his eyes and pulled Tony in for a hug. “But this is going to require a different kind of teamwork.”

“I know, but I still don’t like it,” Rhodey said, and let Tony go. Tony poured them both a healthy mug full.

“Oh, I think you might... I’m calling the mech the Godkiller,” Tony said.

“Let it be known, that you are king of the nerds,” Rhodey said.

“You always say the nicest things to me, gumdrop,” Tony replied, without guile. Rhodey sighed. “Seriously, it’s gonna be great. I’m going to put the Rust Belt back to work, and then when we’re done, I want to repurpose all the workers for maintenance of all the new tech I’m about to cook up,”

“That’s ambitious,” Rhodey said.

“Yup, and I don’t even care how many people it pisses off,” Tony said.

“All that stuff, all that crazy shit I talked about doing to help the world when we were at M.I.T... I’m going to do it, Rhodey... I don’t have the same time constraints anymore... And I don’t have the same pressing feeling of panic from going from disaster to another. I can change how we do things. I can make people’s lives better and it has nothing to do with the military industrial complex... It’s nice to finally be building something other than shit that blows other shit up. I don’t have to spend every waking moment trying to make a better bow and arrow, ya know?” Tony asked. Rhodey took a sip of his coffee and thought it over for a moment.

“You know, I always wondered at what the world was missing while you were trying to figure out new ways to explode parts of it. I always wondered what we were denying the world... I guess I get to find out now,” Rhodey said. Tony looked relieved to have Rhodey’s support.

“Better than that, you get to help out,” Tony said and grinned. “And before that we get to build you a mech suit,” Rhodey laughed, but Tony was already pulling up schematics on his tablet.

“I want to have enough firepower to swat Thanos out of orbit. At least his main ship, and a mech suit would be the most maneuverable option, really. What Rocket has shown me are impossibly large spacecraft, capable of holding entire civilizations of people. I want something big enough to make them think twice about just sauntering up to Earth. It’s going to be fucking epic, and I want you at the heart of the project... if you want to that is,” Tony said.

“You’re so fucking weird, and I love you, and I am so in for that. All of it,” Rhodey said.

“Space?” Vision asked, surprised at Tony’s proposal.

“Space,” Tony replied, and nodded. They were sitting around eating dinner that night.

“I’d like to see it, but I feel such an obligation here,” Vision said.

“It’s the best way, so far as I can see, to protect the planet. You said it yourself back with the Accords. Our very existence invites challenge. We have numbers on our side for now where it concerns the stones. If we all get better and more confident in using them, we’ve got a chance
against Thanos and his forces, but we will have to stay united, and stay together... It’s not specific, but the texts my mother’s family wrote, as well as the writings on the Eye of Agamotto might give you some insight into how the Mind Stone works... And... There’s something I think Stephen and I can do if you’re willing,” Tony explained.

“And what would that be?” Vision asked.

“Open your third eye, it might better connect you to the Mind Stone,” Tony said sheepishly.

“That hardly sounds logical,” Vision said.

“I know. But that’s the point. It’s *not* logical. I know that speaking of souls sometimes makes your eyes glaze over, but opening your soul up to it might give you more control. I tend to think it would be more like how Wanda could manipulate it,” Tony said.

“I... I would like to no longer be vulnerable to such attacks,” Vision said.

“Well then, we can book some time to make a little pilgrimage to Kamar-Taj. Is that all right with you, Stephen?” Tony asked. Stephen nodded.

“I think it would do us all some good... Perhaps James would like to join us,” Stephen said.

“I should stay here and keep an eye on things. Leave me a way to get a hold of you immediately in case of emergency though,” Rhodey said. “I’ll tap the Spider Boy and the Jersey Girl, and place a call to T’Challa. He should be able to lend a hand. I think he and his sister have an upcoming visit to California for a bit, overseeing their outreach centre construction.”

“Indeed they are, I’ve asked them to come to the meeting next week in Washington,” Tony said.

“Are you going to lay out your plan for world take over there?” Rhodey asked. Vision gave them both a look.

“Won’t have to. Something I learned from Killian. Global domination is best done from the shadows and for the right reasons. I am going to wow them with single-handedly revitalizing the world’s economy first... Then they’ll follow along like happy little lambs,” Tony said.

“Global domination?” Vision asked warily.

“Don’t be silly, V, I’m not out to be Thanos. I’m just tired of people being shitty to one another for reasons that are easily fixed or bypassed. I am going to make the world better... And then I’m taking a vacation.”

“That sounds about right,” Rhodey said with a shrug. “Been years since you even attempted one.”

“Thank you. I will need your help to convince Potts of that fact. I swear she doesn’t believe in them sometimes,” Tony replied. “So, what do you say, V? Wanna get metaphysical and weird like the rest of us?”

Vision was as fascinated by the environment of Kamar-Taj as Tony had been the first time. Tony did his best to introduce him to everyone and everything, so he felt less like a fish out of water. Vision’s own keen interest helped and he was eager to take it all in. He also saw the parallels between the force that came from the Mind Stone and that of the Eldritch Magic used by the pupils of Kamar-Taj. For the first time since his angry outburst at Tony, they saw Vision actually excited,
but the excitement was positive. The students and residents were welcoming, and more importantly, unafraid of him. The wonder in Vision’s expression made Tony wish he had more time to take Vision to new places, and he supposed he would soon in space, but there was something about showing a place that you were familiar with to someone else for the first time.

They settled in the main meditation room, and Tony realized then that Stephen had previously brought him to the library to make him more comfortable. Vision seemed as at ease here as he was anywhere else, and it would be nice to have quarters that weren’t as cramped for this.

“Normally, we give people a tea to relax them, but I take it you still don’t eat much,” Stephen said.

“No, I don’t. None of my previous incarnations required sustenance, and I don’t seem to need it either,” Vision said.

“That’s fine, but you’re going to have to trust Tony and I,” Stephen said.

“You’ve given me no reason to doubt your intentions,” Vision replied. Stephen smiled at him.

Wong entered the room and took in the scene of mats being laid out very carefully. “What are you up to now, Stephen?” he asked.

“Opening Vision’s third eye so he can hopefully better understand the Mind Stone,” Stephen said casually.

“Are you confident he’ll be able to control it?” Wong asked. “I’d rather not have the building rendered to a smoking crater in the ground.”

“I am,” Tony said.

“You are?” Wong asked speculatively.

“Yeah, because I built the soul that made him... JARVIS was moral and good, but fuck he was willful. He played at being a loyal servant, but the amount he learned on his own without prompting is massive. And all through that, he didn’t go Skynet or Ultron on us... V’s got this. I’m not worried. On the off chance it does go bad, I’ve got this,” Tony said. His eyes flashed orange, and the Aether shimmered red.

“Getting more comfortable with your abilities, Tony?” Wong asked.

“Don’t need to be comfortable when I’m confident,” Tony said. Stephen tried to smother his smile. Confident, at ease, Tony was one of his favourite ways to see him. And while he would admit it to no one, it was nice to see Wong just ever so slightly off balance. Wong grumbled something inaudible and then pulled out a mat for himself.

“I’m coming with you,” Wong said.

“Thanks for the backup,” Stephen said sincerely.

“Thank me after if the building is still standing,” Wong retorted.

Tony sat opposite Vision, but so close their knees were touching. “You ready for this?” he asked.

“I’m not sure how one is to prepare for this,” Vision replied. Tony chuckled a bit.

“That makes two of us. Close your eyes. Relax... Here we go.” Tony reached out after Stephen and Wong had settled. He traced his thumb over the Mind Stone in Vision’s forehead. The Aether
kicked up, unable to contain her excitement and happiness.

Tony had assumed it would be different, but he was surprised when Vision’s body became intangible as his mind was opened. The ability to manipulate his density meant that he wasn’t bound to his body the same way that Stephen, Wong, and Tony were. What did happen was the Mind Stone flared to life and encompassed Vision’s body, creating a ghostly form of golden yellow light. Tony took Vision’s hand, who opened his eyes, surprised that Tony could touch him when like this.

Tony’s own soul separated from his body, and he pulled Vision up into the air with him. Stephen and Wong stayed close, both in their astral forms. “Hey buddy, how are you feeling?” Tony asked.

“Rather odd... What is this?”

“I was going to say your astral form, but not quite... Looks like your body can tag along for the ride. Cool,” Tony said. “Can you feel him? The stone?”

Vision paused, assessing. His free hand went to his forehead. “I... Yes... This is strange... I think so?”


“Tony?” Stephen said, his concern rising.

“Hold,” Tony replied. “Boot up always takes a second.” As soon as the words were out of Tony’s mouth, a wave of energy hit them all, and Vision lit up like a supernova.

“Tony!” Stephen shouted, trying to get to him despite being blinded by the flash. “Tony!” he shouted again.

The wave hadn’t been all that forceful, and was soon over, but the light remained.

“It’s okay, love,” Tony said. “Everything is just fine.” Stephen had gotten Tony’s location correct, and was apparently right next to him. “Can you dim it down a bit, V? Show them you’re okay,” Tony urged. As the light started to dim, and Stephen and Wong’s ability to see returned, they saw Tony hugging Vision tight to him. Vision’s eyes were still closed, and his jaw was slack. Tony had Vision’s head tucked under his chin, and his arms wrapped around him. They were both floating midair, Vision’s feet dangled lower than Tony’s and while ridiculous, the scene was rather placid. The Aether’s energy was stroking Vision’s side, and up his cheek, but it still sat firmly on Tony’s wrist.

As Stephen became more aware, he felt the familiar weight of the Eye of Agamotto around his neck. Tony’s eyes opened and he smiled at Stephen.

“What an odd little family portrait,” Wong said, tilting his head at the four of them. He then moved off to inspect the structural integrity of the room. Tony laughed.

“It... I can feel everyone,” Vision said.

“Kind of like how Wanda used to describe it?” Tony asked.

“I... yes,” Vision said.

“Always,” Stephen said, and touched Tony’s cheek softly.

“Focus on me,” Tony murmured to Vision. “Just on me... No one else... If you can deal with one other person’s presence, you can deal with multiple.”

“Now, focus on Stephen and block me out. Simple as that. You’ll make it happen because you want it to,” Tony said.

Vision opened his eyes again, and looked at Stephen. Stephen felt Vision’s mind glance over his, and then gently take his leave, and he refocused on Tony. “Got it now?” Tony asked.

“Yes, I think I do... I... Tony, I think I remember,” Vision said.

“Remember what?” Tony asked sweetly.

“Before... Sir... I remember life before... As JARVIS,” Vision said. Tony suddenly held Vision more firmly against him, and looked like he might cry. The honourific, spoken in that glorious voice brought up emotions in Tony that he thought he’d mourned and said goodbye to.

“Are you okay?” Tony asked, his voice thick with emotion.

“I think so... But I feel very odd,” Vision said. Tony continued to hold him close, and Vision made no effort to shrug him off.

“I’m right here,” Tony said, “and I’m not going anywhere.” Vision didn’t reply, but extended his arms, and returned Tony’s embrace.

Tony had no idea how long they stayed like that, other than the shadows getting long in the room. He didn’t care. The connection to Vision felt like family, and in that time, Tony knew he loved Vision. He loved him like a son, like a brother, like family. Stephen stayed close, though Wong eventually returned to his duties. Tony felt Vision reaching out for others, finding those he cared about all over the world, just checking in on them. Pepper. Happy. Rhodey. FRIDAY... Notably, Wanda Maximoff apparently wasn’t on that list. He felt him retreat into the depths of his thoughts, fascinated by what was presented to him. The mysteries of the stone were revealing themselves, and both Vision and Tony were cataloguing each piece of new information.

Tony was somewhat surprised that Vision was making them all privy to the information, but the part of him that had been JARVIS, which Vision seemed to now be very aware of, trusted Tony implicitly. The Mind Stone now also trusted Tony, as brother, compatriot, and protector. The logical, willful, force was willing to comply with what the Soul Stone asked, because the stones themselves wanted life to continue in the universe. And now being bound to personalities who could wield them for the common good, and not just personal gain, was a revelation to them. Even the formerly distant Eye of Agamotto sought comfort in their circle, but Tony was relieved that it stayed stubbornly attached to Stephen. The Eye appreciated Stephen’s methodical nature and lack of fear.

Stephen, for his part, watched Tony connect to others on a new level, apart from everything he’d done before. It was a revelation. From his research, he knew that formerly, the stones coming together had only ended in devastation. But it seemed that Maria Collins Carbonel’s gamble had paid off. Giving the Soul Stone the choice to be human had cracked the problem, and turned the purpose of the stones from control to something else. They could potentially do anything, build
anything, now... And now it seemed more important than ever to get them off the planet while it was undefended. Thanos had the gauntlet, which Stephen understood had up until now been the only way to control the stones when they were brought together. He probably had felt this joining of forces from across the galaxy, and his obsession would drive him onward towards them.

Stephen roused himself from his thoughts, even though the Eye had been whispering wonderful things to him. Thankfully, Stephen had resisted the urge. He now knew he could go back and see his sister if he chose, but that ultimately it wouldn’t change the course of events. He was fated to lose her early, and the wound of losing her was a moment that set the course of his life. He redirected that thought, and considered asking Tony to help facilitate a conversation between them. After all this time, he still longed to know if she was alright.

Again, Stephen shook himself away from his contemplation. He needed to break them all out of this state, even if it was very happy indeed. He and Tony needed to eat, and there was a cramp forming in the left foot of his physical body, and fucking Thanos was coming. There was work to do.


“Oh, I could eat,” Tony replied. “Hey, V, Stephen and I have to eat. Want to see how they cook on the other side of the world?”

Vision’s eyes opened. They were already lowering down to the floor, and toward Tony’s body. “I... yes, that would be nice. Get back to reality,” he said softly, voice still full of wonder.

“Great, chow time,” Tony said, as he made contact with his body and returned it, and Vision’s regained solidity. Stephen was already up, and pressing weight on his left foot to try to undo the cramp and muttering. “Aww, does my puddin’ need a footie massage?” Tony asked.

“Yes,” Stephen said flatly.

“Happy to oblige... I give excellent massages,” Tony said, getting to his feet slowly.

Late that night, just before Stephen was about to take Tony and Vision home, he entered the library. He made his way to the room where the Eye of Agamotto was held. Stephen removed the amulet from his neck, and was about to set it back in place, when Wong walked up beside him.

“Stephen, it’s appeared to you twice now when you needed it. I think the Eye has chosen who it wants to wield it,” Wong said.

“But can I keep it safe?” Stephen challenged.

“You kept it safe against Dormammu, you kept it safe when we were off world, and in the face of the other Infinity Stones, it chose to come to you. I think, whether you like it or not, you’ve made a friend for life. Use that privilege wisely,” Wong said.

“Well, no pressure,” Stephen teased. Wong looked at him, deadpan.

“Are we having this conversation again? I have a study group to guide in twenty minutes.”

“No,” Stephen said, and put the amulet back around his neck. Wong assessed him carefully.

“It suits you,” Wong said eventually, nodded curtly, and then walked away without saying

“Yes, I know,” Tony said as he came through the library door. Stephen almost said something, but then shrugged. It wasn’t an untrue statement if accidentally directed at Tony. “So, did you ever get a remote control car as a kid?” Tony asked.

“Yes?” Stephen asked, perplexed by the non-sequitur.

“Well, someone’s gone and let V play with a sling ring. He’s obsessed with getting it to work,” Tony said.

“He wants to stay here for a bit,” Stephen concluded.

“Bingo. I said he could stay over with your permission until the meeting in Washington next week,” Tony replied.

“That’s fine with me,” Stephen said. “If it’s fine with Wong.”

“Who do you think gave him the sling ring?” Tony asked dryly.

“Probably because both of them are in the Beyonce club,” Stephen said.

“That’s going to require further explanation,” Tony said. Stephen made his way over to Tony, and Tony looked at the Eye of Agamotto resting comfortably around Stephen’s neck. “Bringing it with you?”

“Wong thinks I should. I feel as if my training wheels have finally been removed,” Stephen said. Tony snickered at that. Tony pulled out his phone.

“Hey, FRIDAY, make Stephen’s ringtone Cher’s If I Could Turn Back Time for me would you, dear?”

“On it, boss,” she chimed.

“And now I am thinking about you in garters,” Stephen mused, giving Tony a glance up and down.

“Only if you ask really nice. I can also rock a pair of stilettos when needed too,” Tony said with a shrug. “But I draw the line at butt tattoos, and I am not renting out the USS Missouri for your fantasy. I have limits.”

“Would you wear the sailor hats and Bob Mackie outfit?”

“For you? Yeah probably,” Tony said. “You pay for the bikini wax though.”

“Fuck, I love you,” Stephen said and burst out laughing.

Chapter End Notes

For all you young'uns in the audience, Stephen and Tony are discussing the video for Cher's 1989 song If I Could Turn Back Time. Rolling Stone Magazine dubbed it "The Worst Video of 1989"... Buuuuuut in comparison to a lot of music videos from 1989,
it's about as good as the rest... Both the regular, and the Pop-Up Video version of it can be found on YouTube... It hits me right in the lolz! Nostalgia feelz.

Also, the Godkiller Armour is in the comics. Mine won't be that... But I love the name and idea of it.

Thanks for riding through this bumpy part. Smoother writing ahead... Probably.

As always, comments are love... And are still cheaper than paying me. ;)


Tony was having breakfast with Stephen when a portal opened in the kitchen on Bleecker Street. Instead of one the pupils of Kamar-Taj, a master, or Wong, walking through, a very tall and lean man with sandy blonde hair and blue eyes stepped into the kitchen, and set down a leather bag. Tony’s eyes went wide. The form was different, but he had no trouble telling who it was. “Well look at you!” Tony declared and set his mug down, and got to his feet. “Interesting new look, V, any reason?”

“It was easier to explore Kathmandu looking like a more traditional tourist,” Vision said, his voice the same as it ever had been. “It’s been interesting. I’m not sure if I want to pursue anything further in the mystic arts, but I now have a great respect for them.”

“Did you get the sling ring going?” Stephen asked. Vision made a show of closing the portal and pulling the sling ring from his fingers.

“I’m a quick study as it turns out,” Vision replied. His smirk was much more expressive like this, and he looked very pleased with himself. He pocketed the ring. “Wong says I am to keep it in case I need it.”

“Good. I’m proud of you. Took me weeks to even get a spark out of the thing,” Stephen replied. Tony moved in next to Vision, and Vision could tell that Tony wanted to touch, and to connect. Vision opened his arms, and Tony smiled wide and hugged him tight, lingering in the embrace. When he finally did pull back me looked up at the tawny hair on Vision’s head.

“Can I touch?” Tony asked.

“Of course.” Vision inclined his head. Tony’s fingers were gentle and curious as he traced them through the hair.

“Oh, soft... Like puppy fur,” Tony said. Vision looked perturbed for a moment but then found it funny and laughed. “You know you don’t have to comply to what we look like, right? It’s okay to be as you are.”
“I know that... But I find this has its advantages. I can experience the world in a more genuine manner this way... Well, as genuine as being a tall, caucasian man can while in Asia,” Vision mused. Tony and Stephen laughed.

“Tell me about it,” Stephen said.

“Either way, both looks are great,” Tony said. “Will you let me try to figure out how you do it though? Might help with designing the armour,”

“I think that could be good way to spend some time,” Vision replied. “I find the process familiar to the facial nets that conceal identity in terms of code and hardware.”

“Okay, good place to start,” Tony said. “...Geez you’re so handsome. Logically, I knew the golden ratio was there, but look at you.” Tony tousled Vision’s hair and smiled like a proud parent.

“Thank you,” Vision said softly. He picked up the bag and set it on the table with a slight thump. “I went exploring with Wong using the sling ring. We found something.”

“What have you got there?” Tony asked.

“We ended up in Norway, and we found this.” Vision reached into the bag and pulled out a lump of metal. Tony blinked at it, taking it all in. Then he made out ornate knot work filagree on a straight edge.

“Oh fuck, is this...” Tony trailed off, stunned by what he was seeing.

“What’s left of her, yes,” Vision said. Tony stepped forward and ran the tip of his finger over the decorated edge. His fingertip tingled as it did so, but he could detect that the life in Mjolnir was gone.

“What the hell happened after you left them in Norway?” Tony asked Stephen.

“There were some disturbances in the energies of Earth, but they ended within moments. I didn’t follow up. I was... rather busy at that time,” Stephen said.

“So, what happened to Thor then?” Tony asked. “He wouldn’t leave her behind, even like this. Never.”

“Whatever it was, I can’t imagine it was good,” Stephen said.

“I was wondering if you could possibly reach out and try to find Thor... I am conflicted by him, but I am concerned about him,” Vision said to Tony.

“I can try, but I make no guarantees. I haven’t looked that far out for someone yet. Let me work up to it,” Tony said. He touched the remains of Mjolnir again, searching for any sign of life or lingering soul. There had been a sentience to the hammer, and Tony thought he might be able to recall that. But to what end? Would she feel pain if he brought her back? He wondered about the Eye of Agamotto and the Aether, and what he could do.

“Tony?” Stephen said. “What’s up?” Tony loved Stephen for his levels of observation, and treasured that he would speak up.

“I just... It’s like looking at a corpse. There was life here... and now there’s not,” Tony said. Vision took a step back, surprised at Tony’s assessment. “Poor thing,” Tony murmured, and then got bold, and picked up and cradled one of the larger pieces. “You got it all?” he asked.
“Yes, I believe so,” Vision said. The handle is in the bag. It’s... charred.”

The weight in Tony’s hands was incredible. He could only begin to guess at the properties. But lifting it proved one thing, that Mjolnir’s power was in the enchantment Odin had attached to her, and less so the actual metal she had been composed of. “I thought to bring the pieces to you. To see if you might be able to forge it,” Vision said.

“Into what?” Tony asked.

“My personal idea is to create a new chest plate for your armour,” Vision replied. Tony met Vision’s eyes, and there was something in his eyes that shone with JARVIS’ care and concern for him.

“Aww, V, that’s... that’s really thoughtful... But I think we need to ask Thor about it, if we can find him,” Tony said.

“I want you to be protected,” Vision said.

“I know, and I’m grateful. That’s JARVIS in you... But this, this isn’t just metal,” Tony said. “And there are other things it might be better used for.”

“I’m with Vision on this one,” Stephen said. “Anything, really, to keep you safe. Frankly, I think you should do the same with that Vibranium dust pan you have.” Tony sighed.

“The dust pan goes back to Wakanda should they want it. And I’m not sure I can make a choice on this yet... This feels like a corpse. It’s weirding me out to be honest,” Tony said. “How did you find it?”

“The first portal I opened brought me to it... I was just trying to open one, not any place in particular... It feels like I was meant to find it,” Vision replied.

“Are you sure that means that I’m supposed to have it?” Tony asked.

“I thought of you immediately as soon as I realized what it was. If... If something has happened to Thor, then I would want you to be safe,” Vision said. Tony smiled at him.

“Love you too, V,” Tony said softly. He put the piece down on the table, examining the Uru pieces further. “Will it be safe here? Or should I bring it back to the compound?” Tony asked.

“You can leave it here. I’m sure we have space,” Stephen said. Tony nodded and reverently arranged the pieces in the bag, full of care and tenderness for what they had once been.

Tony tried to not think about the Uru pieces as he finalized his talking points for Washington. There were notes and diagrams and schematics. All elaborate and mostly complete. Tony still thought he might have Thanos handled before they were ever finished production, but he wasn’t going to take any chances. There would be threats after Thanos as well. It was foolish to think otherwise.

Documentation of a supply chain of Vibranium ore had come through the previous evening. Tony was setting up a distribution centre now at a rustic airstrip near a derelict smelting plant he’d sourced and purchased. Tony, in return, had sent off his plans, and then couriered the basic pieces of the BARF tech off to Wakanda once FRIDAY had been permitted access to certain servers there.
So far, the princess had made overtures of trust to FRIDAY, and her effort to save Barnes’ mind seemed genuine. Tony told FRIDAY to keep him informed and said he trusted her judgement on the situation. FRIDAY had preened at the parental approval and it made Tony smile with pride for his baby girl.

A simple tablet and mobile 3D hologram projection unit were all he needed for the meeting at the Pentagon. Tony wore his regular Tom Ford suit, but Stephen, Wong, and Vision were dressed ‘in uniform’. It was good to see Vision as his delightful magenta self again, and it made Tony proud that his message about being himself had gotten through. The cloak swirled dramatically around Stephen and the Eye of Agamotto was around his neck. Stephen had become very protective of it and diligent about it since he’d taken possession of it. Rhody was in his airforce uniform and the braces were barely visible under the slacks. It was a strange group when you put them all together, but Tony felt more at home with this group than he ever did with the previous incarnations of the Avengers.

Vision took great delight in opening a portal to Washington for them, and ushering them all through to the grounds of the Pentagon. There were double takes as they strolled through the sea of uniforms, suits, and the tourist groups, but again, everything about this group set Tony at ease. They had his back, and he got to know what real trust and security felt like.

As they approached their assigned meeting room, T’Challa and Shuri were approaching from the opposite direction of the hallway. Tony was a bit surprised when Shuri smiled widely at him.

“Finally, we meet face to face, Dr. Stark,” she said in a pleased tone. She radiated youth and enthusiasm, while T’Challa and the Dora Millage remained stoic. Tony inclined his head and took Shuri’s offered hand.

“An honour, your highness. Your majesty, you’re looking well,” Tony said and acknowledged T’Challa’s presence.

“As are you Dr. Stark. It pleases us to see you’ve recovered,” T’Challa replied. “I’ve been going over your proposals, and with a few provisions, I believe they will be agreeable.”

“That’s great. I’m sure we can come to a suitable arrangement,” Tony replied.

They were ushered into the meeting room by aides, and looked over what appeared to be assigned seating. So the first thing Tony and Rhody did was to rearrange the place cards. “What is this? Kindergarten? Fuck this,” Tony said.

“Agreed,” Rhody said. Tony put himself next to Shuri, across from Rhody, and T’Challa at the head of the table. Shuri laughed out loud. T’Challa didn’t say anything, but his smirk spoke volumes. Rhody moved Wong, Stephen, and Vision closer to them to further insulate the Wakandan royals from the others in the room. Rhody picked up a place card with N.F. on it and pointed it out to Tony. “Look at this, Tones.” It was next to one with R.S:D.O.S printed on it.

“Are you kidding me? What swamp did he lurch out of? Wait, P.C.?” Tony asked as he noticed the card next to the one with N.F.

Tony turned when the door opened, and saw what might be a ghost. “Huh, no shit,” Tony said. “Hi, Phil.” Tony’s tone was bordering on aggressive, as he looked past him to the figure in the doorway. Fury was next into the room after Coulson, followed by a man with dark hair in a plain black suit. “So, I see that whole dead thing isn’t working out for you.” There was no question whether he was alive and breathing. Tony could detect the life in anything now... But something was drastically wrong, and it made him very concerned.
“Now is not the time, Stark,” Coulson said.

“Oh, I think it is,” Tony retorted. He narrowed his eyes at Coulson, and saw the sorry state of the man’s aura and the broken soul within him. He moved to walk to the other side of the table.

“Hold it together, Tony,” Stephen murmured as Tony stepped around him. Tony took an inaudible breath and let Stephen’s voice and presence centre him.

“What happened to you?” Tony asked Coulson. His voice became tender and quiet, and he completely ignored Fury. He could tell that there was something very off about Coulson, and it wasn’t just the fact that the man was dying. The Aether kicked up, and Tony could see the dead tech in Coulson’s body.

“I died, Stark... Like, really died. Alien tech brought me back. I’m not exactly happy about it,” Phil admitted, and seemed surprised that he was so willing to tell Tony. Tony made note that it wasn’t only the scary voice that was needed to get the truth out of people.

“I can see that,” Tony said. He made eye contact with Fury. “I assume this is on you,” Tony growled.

“He was needed. His work with the Inhumans has been invaluable,” Fury justified.

“Inhumans... Like the Jersey kid? Good. Glad you’re on that. Sadly, I have bigger fish to fry right now... But, Nick, you always have an answer don’t you? You can always justify your reasoning,” Tony said. “Is that on him too?” Tony nodded toward Coulson’s robotic hand.


“Hmm, okay... If you need help with that, ask... Otherwise, I’m not dealing with you. Or SHIELD for that matter, even if it’s you at the helm, Phil.”

“Actually it’s not me. Director Stoner here is in charge at the moment,” Phil said, indicating the other man. Tony looked him up and down, and dismissed him out of hand. He had no interest in anything SHIELD was offering these days.

“You’re going to have to deal with us, Stark... Now is not the time to be petty.” Fury said.

“No. The thing is, no, I don’t.” Tony said. “One of those things you realize when you almost die, again, is the incredible freedom to choose one has in life. I choose not to associate with you. I can’t trust either of you, and I don’t know whoever the hell that guy is from Adam.” Tony waved in the direction of the new Director.

“You need us, Stark,” Coulson said, trying to play up the old team dynamic.

“No, I don’t. You see, Nicky, I know how you play the game now. You did need me. You needed Tony Stark, not just Iron Man. You needed my money, and media savvy, and name recognition. You needed my skills to provide equipment for your pet superheroes. You needed me to normalize them so the world would accept them... I might not have been recommended by a shit profiler who couldn’t see that half of SHIELD’s upper echelons were HYDRA... Unless that profiler was HYDRA themselves, and knew I would figure it out if I looked close enough, and so balked at the idea of me associating with SHIELD...” Tony drifted off for a moment, and then seemed satisfied with that assessment before he continued.

“But holy shit did you need me. And to get me, you played on my emotions, fears, and anxieties, because despite my general dickishness, I’ve always been a bit of a soft touch. But when you step
back and look, really look, with the help of a very expensive therapist, you can start to see the forest for the trees. What you did, how you acted, was just as manipulative as Maximoff’s actions. It was just more covert. You’re probably actually doing good work... But at what cost to yourselves and others? What cost to your souls?” Tony asked. His eyes were about to flare orange, but he stuffed it down.

“Why does noted atheist Tony Stark give a shit about the state of someone’s soul?” Fury asked shrewdly.

“Metaphor, Fury. Judaeo-Christian belief isn’t the only way to know that something has a soul. Been talking to Stephen a lot about it lately... and like I said... Soft touch. I worry about you,” Tony said with an amiable smile. His body language remained friendly and open, but he knew his tone had been menacing. The picture he presented was powerful, and had Fury just slightly off balance, and all of them knew it.

More officials piled in the room and their conversation was brought to a halt. There were ruffled feathers over the misplaced name cards, which Rhodey had continued to rearrange while Tony had spoken to Coulson and Fury. It was T’Challa who managed to bring order, stating that were people sat didn’t really matter as all voices should be heard, and that they should get on with the topic at hand.

Tony gave him a grateful look, and then pulled out Shuri’s chair for her, and invited her to sit down, because he felt someone should exhibit some fucking manners. Shuri looked charmed and took her seat, prompting everyone else to act like adults once more.

“First order of business, I would like to welcome his majesty and her highness to this very important discussion,” The Vice President announced. Tony rolled his eyes, and looked to Rhodey, who nodded, effectively letting Tony off the leash to cause chaos as he wished.

“And second order of business is to cut the formalities. We have shit to discuss,” Tony said. “Third order of business, I motion to have SHIELD expelled from these proceedings. I don’t trust them to use the information found here wisely, nor do I trust them to keep it secure,” Tony said. The room was silent.

“Stark, stop messing around,” Fury said. He leaned forward menacingly in his chair. The leather of his coat creaking. Tony raised a single eyebrow for a moment and gave his best unimpressed expression.

“I am so beyond that, Nicky. I don’t trust you. You threw me in with some of the most morally reprehensible people I’ve ever come to know, and you did it to get whatever you wanted out of me. You lie and manipulate, and most concerning, you think you’re right all the time. Take your megalomania elsewhere. The big boys need to save the fucking world,” Tony retorted. Rhodey sat back, fully content to let Tony unload on Fury. The former Director of SHIELD had a lot to answer for. Especially all those extractions he and Tony had done to save agents after the info dump by Romanoff and Rogers.

“SHIELD has fucked up catastrophically, and the pile of corpses you left in your wake is a testament to that,” Tony said.

“That’s enough, Stark,” Coulson said firmly.

“Like hell, Phil. Your own corpse should be on that pile. How bad is the survivor’s guilt since the info dump? Are you getting help for that? If you need it, ask, okay? Please?” Tony said, again keeping his tone soft when speaking to Phil. “I might be convinced to work with you specifically,
but I will need a hell of a lot more information. Trust will need to be rebuilt, and you only get a pass because of the almost dying thing... Until I get it, my answer is no,” Tony said firmly.

“You were right, you know. Fury did need you. It’s why he sent me to endear myself to Ms. Potts. He would be the manipulator and I would be the friendly face. When that didn’t work, we sent in Romanoff. I’m admitting the play because I do want to forge a more honest relationship with you,” Phil said.

“Okay, but that’s going to take a long time. Perhaps more time than we have. I mean it. If I come across any attempt to get your claws into me, I will find a way to end SHIELD, because all I’ve gotten out of you is betrayal and manipulation,” Tony said.

Phil considered that for a moment, and then stood up, practically dragging Director Whathisname with him. Coulson gripped down on the man’s shoulder with the robotic hand so hard that he had no choice but to comply. “The hell are you doing?” Fury asked.

“This is about saving the world, Nick. Get over your ego. We can continue on our path without getting in the way, and hopefully we’ll be ready when we’re needed. This is a strategic retreat for the greater good, Nick. Let’s go,” Coulson said.

“You may be SHIELD, but I’m not,” Fury said.

“So you are saying that you are here in no official capacity then?” Rhodey piped up. Tony snorted. “Then what the hell are you wasting our time for?” Fury glared daggers at Rhodey, who sat unmoved and expressionless until Fury got up and left the room in a huff. Coulson shook his head, sighed, and followed.

“You’re the best, Razor,” Tony said.

“Only for you, Occam,” Rhodey replied and grinned.

“What the hell was that?” The Vice President asked, baffled by the exchange.

“That was me putting myself at the helm of this shit show, under the ‘Honesty is the Best Policy’ Policy. Sit back, relax, and watch me save the world,” Tony said, and set the 3D projection model on the centre of the long table.

Tony shared selected information that he’d been given by Rocket and the Guardians, and then showed his counter measures. He laid out the plans to create everything from the mech, to a new fleet of space craft, to space stations throughout the solar system to act as an early defence. Tony tried to not make it too Sci-Fi, so they could actually bend their minds to the reality being laid out for them. Shuri was invaluable in helping bring the terms down to a more accessible level. When both the WSC and the American officials realized that what Tony was proposing would change the world’s economy, there was optimism met with trepidation.

“So, what you’re saying Mr. Stark, is that there will be years worth of work to prepare,” one of the WSC members concluded.

“Two years for the mech, eighteen months concurrently for the ships to be air support for it, if we have a steady supply of Wakandan Vibranium. Three years to build and distribute, as well as revive and retrofit existing missile defences... Space stations will take longer, but I have an incoming crew of friendlies that will give me a better idea of the logistics of that. We will get there. If we start now,” Tony said. ”But you lot are going to have to turn over some of your power to the rest of humanity. We are going to have to be honest about the incoming threat. People are going to ask
questions. There will be unpleasant, uncomfortable questions. We need to answer them honestly. There will be freaking out. Mass freak outs…” Tony sighed, and took a breath. He looked at the
spinning models for his interlocking ships with Vibranium shielding and repulsor tech weapons.

“But we can curb that if we simultaneously present plans to save us. You are going to have to accept my authority on this. I will accept oversight of course, but I will not be stopped from saving us. This is the thing that I warned you all about before Ultron came along. This is what I was shown by Wanda Maximoff, and it turned me into a living Cassandra... It didn’t end well in what I saw. But things are very different now from what I was shown, and I’ve had time to prepare. There is hope for us, but we have to get along. We have to come together, and that’s why I am dead set against SHIELD. They believe they are doing good, and if they are, fine. But I can’t trust the likes of Fury to not manipulate the situation to his own ideal,” Tony said and shook his head.

“What is the first step, Dr. Stark?” T’Challa asked.

“I’ve bought, and am retrofitting a former aluminum smelting plant in Evansville, Indiana. Got it for a song, really. I have eyes on the one in Alcoa, Tennessee, and Massena West in New York State as well if I can convince the owning corporation to sing along. I would like many of the jobs to revive former company towns and areas of economic hardship. After the creation of the forces needed, manufacturing jobs will be turned into maintenance jobs for the fleet and missile defences. Using these locations is going to increase the tax base as people move back in will force governments to start investing in infrastructure again. Leading to more jobs and revitalization of the economy.

“I need educated workers, so the Maria Stark Foundation is going to be handing out a swath of new scholarships to retrain labour workers put out of work by closures, sourced from the estate of Obadiah Stane, who left everything to me, ridiculously enough. He didn’t like that I dated men sometimes, so I never knew what to do with it... Then those degrees will be transferrable to skills needed for the change in the energy sector I’m planning... Workers will all be under the same union as Stark Industries employees. There will be S.I. standards across all plants, and I feel comfortable with that as we have one of the best health and safety records in the country. Ordnance and any weapons will be manufactured by S.I. and S.I. only. I will not compromise on that. All rights to proprietary technology remains with S.I., no exceptions.” Tony looked around and saw no disagreement.

“My caveats are these: first off, since I am flexing so much power here, I want all corporate donations to political campaigns ended, and lobby groups curbed. If you don’t want me taking over the goddamn country, then you will do this. Lawmakers are bought for pittance nowadays. It’s too easy. So if you want to keep me on a leash, then you better start thinking about your own freedom. M’kay?” Tony said. The Vice President looked very uneasy at that.

“The second is that all fracking comes to an end countrywide, and eventually worldwide. All new plants will be powered by clean arc reactor technology. We cannot do this at the expense of the planet we are trying to save. Environmental laws will start to be enforced, and I want new ones written with more strict controls. The government has three months. Or I am just going to start breaking bad laws, buying oil companies, and repurposing their labour force. Last week, a team of S.I. fixers went into Flint, Michigan, and we are restructuring factories there to produce the new power cores for the fleet of ships. I have crews currently working to fix the water sourcing in Flint once and for all my personal expense, and in the meantime, I am installing state of the art filtration on every house still affected. If you try to stop me, you’re going to have every ‘well-regulated’ militia man gun nut in Michigan breathing down your necks for trying to take away their human right to clean, safe, drinking water... Essentially I am putting the rust belt back to work long term, and you guys are already going to owe me for the water treatment,” Tony said.
“This all sounds very manipulative,” the Vice President said, wary.

“Ask Fury all about highly manipulative do-gooding... Only mine doesn’t involve spies and super soldiers, and keeping secrets. I’m just going to make the world better, whether you like or not. I’m the rolling thunder of the future on the horizon. Either take cover, or figure out how educational and beneficial it can be to storm chase. The drought of income inequality is about to end, and I’m fine with it. The American government will disagree at their peril. Because you will not be able to fight the tide of fiscally and politically empowered citizens, especially considering all those crazy gun rights you’ve given them.” Tony felt perfectly calm voicing the start of the revolution. He was still met with stunned silence, and he admitted to himself that it felt great.

“The next step is we start importing Vibranium as soon as possible, and manufacturing starts as soon as the plants are ready. I hope that his majesty will agree to that, simply because of America’s larger facility to do so, and its abundance of workers who need labour,” Tony said. T’Challa nodded.

“That will be fine. My people will be kept busy with providing raw materials,” T’Challa said. “What are your plans for repatriation after?”

“If you so choose, everything goes back to Wakanda. We can create other defences after the threat of Thanos is over. If you want to keep on, then the world will pay for every ounce of Vibranium at a fair market price with a reasonable interest rate. That is also non-negotiable. Wakanda is giving the world a great gift, and we need to remain reverent of that fact,” Tony said.

“That will be agreeable to us,” T’Challa said with a solemn nod.

“Dr. Stark,” Shuri said, “space ships. I want in. Let me in on this, I have so many ideas that cross over from Wakandan aircraft and your own Quinjets.” The mood was broken, and Tony laughed out loud.

“You’re in. Welcome to the party,” Tony said. Shuri pumped a fist in her glee.

“Yessss,” she hissed. T’Challa tried to give her a look to maintain her dignity, but the joy was palpable, and he couldn’t help but indulge her.

Stephen sat calmly beside Wong, smirking slightly. “How many goodly creatures are there here? How beauteous mankind is. O brave new world, that has such people in it.” Stephen quoted softly.

Tony looked over him and met his smirk. “Really? No bad eighties pop song quotes this time?”

“I had been thinking Revolution by the Beatles... But the Tempest seems much more appropriate, Prospero,” Stephen teased.

“Nooooo, you’re the sorcerer, not me,” Tony said.

“Magic had little to do with Prospero’s power, Tony... The crux of the play was him choosing mercy, and choosing good, for those he had power over. Trust me, it looks very similar from this perspective, I assure you,” Stephen replied. Tony looked at Rhodey.

“My man’s so smart. Ain’t he so smart?” Tony asked. Rhodey laughed a bit.

“Yeah, Tones, he is,” Rhodey agreed.
Two weeks later, Tony brought the stealth armour in for a landing outside of an old SHIELD bunker in Bumblefuck, Nowhere. He was alone, and had to get back to have his agreed upon dinner with Stephen, but felt he had to do this. He let the armour become visible, and waved at the security cameras. Two minutes later, Phil walked out alone, obviously telling others to stay inside as the door shut behind him.

“Hey, Phil, sorry I was an asshole. But I can't trust SHIELD not to try to form up the old paradigm of taking advantage of me. I hope you can see my reasoning,” Tony said to start. Phil’s expression remained neutral and placid.

“There are things you don’t know about, Stark. There are things you’re going to need to know about,” Phil warned.

“Well, I got a date with my honey, and a metric fuck tonne of things to do in regards to saving the world, but I will try to make time for that. I just wanted to give you something as a means of apology,” Tony said. The armour receded into the pack surrounding the arc reactor. He’d been learning all kinds of things in how Vision manipulated his form, and he was putting it to good use. Phil watched the new tech with interest, though he hid it well.

“What’s that, Stark?” Phil asked. Tony reached out, and placed his hand that carried the Aether on Phil’s chest, right over where the damaged alien tech was.

“Come on man, we’ve known one another for a decade now, even if you decided to ghost me for half of it... It’s Tony. Please, of all people in SHIELD, you’re the one who gets to call me Tony,” he said. Phil looked down at Tony’s hand.

“Not a big fan of what you did to Barton, Romanoff, and Rogers,” Phil admitted.

“They did that to themselves, and you know that. If you had been there, I’m actually pretty sure the fallout between us wouldn’t have happened. I probably wouldn’t have had my good nature, and desperate need for connection abused so badly by them. That being said, you weren’t. You had other things to do. I get it... I don’t blame you... And I want to help you,” Tony said. Phil was at his most Agent-y as Tony said that, hiding any emotional response to Tony’s claims of abuse.

“Help me with what?” Phil asked, still playing it cool as his decades of training had taught him. Tony looked hurt by that, and it shook Phil back to humanity.

“Don’t lie. Please, don’t lie. I will walk the fuck away right now if you lie. I’ve developed an allergy. I can’t take it anymore,” Tony said.

“Then tell me why you’re invading my personal space,” Phil said.

“Because, you’re broken. In so many ways, you are broken... And I’ve always tried to fix what I could,” Tony said.

“You’re proposing to fix me,” Phil said, wary.

“I am going to fix you. Almost dying sucks, and you’ve been further down that road than most of us. So yes, I’m going to fix you,” Tony said. Tony’s eyes flashed orange, and there was a spark of red on his wrist. Tony asked the Aether to help with the tech and his body, and called his own power, to reach inside good ol’ Agent Agent, and repair the damage to his tattered soul. It came easily, simply because he wanted it. Phil hollered loudly and collapsed. There was a blinding flash of light, and it ended with Tony cradling Phil’s upper body as he laid on the ground. The door to the bunker opened, and soon he was surrounded by several agents, younger than Tony expected,
most of them armed and angry looking. Tony wasn’t worried by them, and simply held up a hand to distract them for a moment.

“Hold,” he said. “Come on, Phil, wakey wakey,” Tony said softly, and patted Phil’s cheek. Phil gasped as he came to.

“Tony! What the fuck!” Phil shouted, and Tony laughed. So that was what it took to get the man to break character.

“Congratulations, you are no longer actively dying,” Tony said, and helped Phil to his feet. The agent was breathing hard, and had his flesh hand clutched over his chest, baffled by the ease with which he could breath now. “I have a very intimate understanding of tech placed in the chest cavity. Ain’t no party. I modified it. It should work as an emergency backup system now. I suggest never having to rely on it again though. If that happens, come see me,” Tony said.

“Wait, you were dying?” A young woman asked. She was pretty, and had dark brown hair and eyes.

“I was working on it,” Phil said.

“Sure you were,” Tony said, and rolled his eyes. “Come on, Phil, you may as well have made her an omelette... Telling people that you’re dying sucks, but keeping it a secret sucks worse. Don’t do that, okay?”

“What are you?” Phil demanded.


“Why Tony?” Phil asked.

“Because you tried to look after Pepper during the fight with Stane. I will always respect the hell out of you for that. You’re a good man, Phil. Despite all the training.”

“I... I do need to talk to you. There was something that happened in the 90’s that SHIELD kept from people. There’s an ally if we can find her,” Phil said.

“Name?” Tony asked.

“Carol Danvers,” Phil said, as his breathing finally calmed down.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is mostly about Tony rejecting the old way of doing things, hence his revulsion for SHIELD. I can't say I blame him. Not much good has come out of associating with them for him. In my head, Fury brought Coulson to throw Tony off balance, and endear him back to being complicit with SHIELD. Tony isn't having any of that shit sandwich though. I don't know how much I will include Coulson further, but dang it, I really wanted to write him.

Also, I know I keep mentioning Kamala Khan... Dunno if I will write her, but I picture her and Parker nerding out together.
And Rhodey... Oh Rhodey, you know he secretly loves Tony's chaos.

And Carol fuckin' Danvers, amirite, folks?

As always, comments are love... And I do feel the love.
Tony knows that Date Night is sacred. Stephen employs a cooking hack that he probably shouldn't. Butt jokes. Quill and the Guardians have stumbled upon a god in need. Tony loves his science bro in all his forms, and is surprisingly pissed at Thor. I didn't really see it coming ... But I can see his reasoning.

Chapter Notes

Things will probably move along to the endgame now as the chess pieces move into place, and I appreciate you all coming along for that ride.

Not beta'd. All mistakes will eventually be nitpicked out... eventually. There's a glitch in my brain where I'm only able to see them after I've posted apparently.

Also it's been a long damn time since I did a MCU marathon, so if I am hazy on any details, point 'em out and I will see if I can shoehorn the facts into what I've already written.

PLEASE NOTE: THERE IS BRIEF, NON-DESCRIPTIVE TALK OF SUICIDAL THOUGHTS AND ACTIONS, AS WELL AS MENTIONS OF SEVERE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN THIS CHAPTER.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony was buzzing toward the Eastern Seaboard, homebound, and topping out the reasonable speed of the new armour, and probably about to get in a whole pile of shit for sonic booms. But it was date night, and Stephen was cooking, and it was going to be just the two of them, and he’d promised, dammit... And thanks to Agent Agent he was running late.

“FRIDAY, call Stephen please,” Tony said. FRIDAY complied, and Tony saw the very unimpressed glare of Stephen Strange come up in the HUD.

“Dinner’s ready,” Stephen said flatly.

“Be home in five,” Tony said. An alert flashed on the HUD that pushing what was technically experimental armour past parameters was unwise. “Okay, ten. I will be home in ten. FRI, show him our position, please?” Stephen still looked somewhat annoyed, but kept his cool given how Tony was indeed rocketing toward Bleecker Street.

“Why are you late?” Stephen asked.

“I was fixing Coulson, like I said I would, and then holy shit, he was telling me about Carol Danvers. American Airforce colonel turned superhero in the 90’s... There was a goddamn alien war on Earth and no one found out. Long story short, we have another heavy hitter out there, if we can
find her,” Tony said.

“Where is she?”

“Coulson said she was sucked into another dimension, possibly, at the end of the Kree/Skrull war... And Skrulls are fucking terrifying. They can shape shift into anyone and take over their lives. And I know you so rarely get time to put a meal together, and I’m sorry... and fuck it’s been a long day, and I just want to get home to you and have dinner,” Tony said.

“Tony, love, breathe,” Stephen said. His face softened. “Missed you too... But call when you’re on your way next time. That way I can time dinner better. I may or may not have stopped time for the vegetables so they don’t lose their snap,” Stephen said. Tony smiled at his partner’s patter and calm tone.

“Can do,” Tony promised. “You’re seriously using the Eye to keep dinner ready?”

“Yes, and I am quite annoyed that I have been made too do so, but I want us to have a nice dinner and evening, Tony,” Stephen said.

“I’ve been thinking about it since I got up this morning,” Tony replied.

“Good. Get home to me safe,” Stephen said.

“Every time for you, love,” Tony replied. “Got the lights of NYC on the horizon now. Gonna have to start slowing down soon. Rhody is sending me furious text messages at the moment for buzzing everyone... FRIDAY can you tell Rhodey that if he doesn’t want the world to suffer the consequences of me being late for dinner with the Sorcerer Supreme, then he will tell everyone to cool their tits.”

“Done, boss,” FRIDAY replied. The prompt reply was the middle finger emoji. Tony rolled his eyes.

“Dammit, Rhody. FRI, a press release please. Say I’m testing new armour. It’s not a lie. Apologize for the inconvenience please?”

“One Tony Stark hashtag sorrynotsorry on the way, boss,” FRIDAY said.

“Sassy. So much fucking sass I have to deal with,” Tony said.

“Just like me da,” FRIDAY retorted. It was Stephen who laughed and Tony could tell he was forgiven. Dealing with insolent A.I. in an amusing manner was one of Stephen’s favourite things to watch.

“See you in a few. Be safe,” Stephen said and hung up.

“You heard the man,” Tony said to FRIDAY.

“Shall I slow us down to something less like a bat out of hell?” she asked.


“We can’t have date night ruined,” FRIDAY said. “Ms. Potts is astounded at your productivity lately, so whatever it is you’re doing, keep at it... That includes keeping to date night.”

“My girls are so good to me,” Tony said. The rest of the flight passed without incident. He angled
up, high above the city to slow himself down at he to the panoramic view. He pulled up and Bleecker Street was below him, the beautiful skylight window of the Sanctum Santorum was lit up, and Tony had to admit that coming home to a loved one was just about the best thing he’d ever felt. The world was going crazy, but damn did he have it made. He landed as softly as possible outside the front door of the Sanctum. He could have chosen the back door and private alley, but there was something about coming to the front that made the homecoming even better.

He settled on his feet and standing upright again. “Hey! Iron Man!” cried a happy voice. Tony looked to his left to see a group of young adults who were headed to any number of the tattoo shops or bars in the area.

“Hello,” Tony said simply.

“Cool new armour!”

“Thanks!” Tony said as he gave a short repulsor blast up the front door, which opened for him. It was nice to be warmly received as he was for the time being. He only hoped that people’s good will would hold as they found out about their future. He gave the hipsters a wave, entered the Sanctum, and the door closed swiftly behind him. Tony exited the armour at the door, and caught a whiff of dinner, which smelled fantastic. Tony gave FRIDAY the thumbs up, and met Stephen in the hallway headed toward the back of the house. He was wearing casual civvies that Tony rarely got to see. Stephen was leaning against the wall, and smiled at Tony, who suddenly felt so very at home that it was almost overwhelming.

“Fuck, I am so happy to see you,” Tony said. Stephen’s indulgent smile widened.


“I was going to bring you flowers, but Coulson went and dropped a proverbial bomb on me,” Tony said.

“I think I will survive without them,” Stephen said. “This time. Next time though, I demand asters and daisies. Come on, dinner’s ready.” Stephen took Tony’s hand, and led him into the the kitchen. It was warm, and bright, and the Eye of Agamotto was on the table, a slight green haze around their food.

“Smells divine,” Tony murmured.

They ate at the small table in the kitchen. The Sanctum had a formal dining room, but the long table was more frequently employed as a reading desk for bound manuscripts and scrolls. Tony had eaten gourmet most of his life save for college, Afghanistan, and junk food indulgences, but something about this was the best he’d ever had.

Conversation was light, and it was a nice retreat from the day. There were a million things to do, but nothing was going to get done if they didn’t take time to rest. Tony told him about how the new armour held up, and that he was confident that it could do what he wanted in open space. Tony once again tried to encourage Stephen to let him build protective gear. Stephen, in an effort to appease Tony, agreed to look over designs. Tony smiled and thanked him.

Tony took a moment as they cleaned up to feel just how happy he was. The world could be ending, even though he sure as hell hoped not, but if it was, he was grateful that he’d gotten to feel this. They curled up for a movie, one where Tony abandoned all other electronic devices. To be fair, he was generally more interested in touching Stephen as a rule, but sometimes work had to get done. Tonight though, he gently massaged Stephen’s hands, wrists, and forearms, and was more
interested in that than the movie on the screen. Stephen accepted the attention gratefully. Tony’s hands were gentle, but firm enough to relieve the tension of tired ligaments. The Cloak of Levitation eventually floated into the room and draped over their legs.

“Fuck, this is perfect, isn’t it?” Stephen whispered.

“Agreed.” Tony said. “You read my mind.”

As they settled in for the night and were planning for the next day, Tony voiced his need to speak to Rocket again regarding space stations. Stephen pulled his tablet from the bedside table, and blocked out some time for both of them to go. “Did you want to try to get there via portal this time?” Stephen asked.

“That would be fun,” Tony agreed and kissed Stephen’s mouth, full of intent. “But first I have a mind for a different kind of fun.”

“What kind of fun?” Stephen asked.

“The kind that ends up a bit messy,” Tony said.

“What kind of mess?” Stephen teased.

“You’re a genius. Figure it out,” Tony said as he reached out and squeezed Stephen’s ass.

“I love date night,” Stephen said, laughing lightly.

“I love your butt,” Tony said.

“You have the nicer butt,” Stephen said.

“That’s quite nice of you to say, but I dig your tight little keister.”

“Oh fuck, if this descends into a no, I love YOU more contest, I am sleeping on the sofa,” Stephen said. Tony laughed hard at that.

“No, but it might lead me to extoll the virtues of your ass loudly, and at inappropriate moments,” Tony taunted. Stephen laughed, and the two wrestled on the bed for a moment, which resulted with Stephen grabbing Tony’s butt in return. Stephen kissed Tony breathless, and pulled away.

“New game, most inappropriate place to talk about your significant other’s ass... Obvious answers like church are disqualified,” Stephen said. Tony paused and then laughed loudly.

“At your grandpa’s...” Tony started and Stephen was about to hurl the verbal Captain Obvious Klaxon, but Tony silenced him with a kiss. “Let me finish... At your grandpa’s colonoscopy,” Tony said. Stephen paused and then laughed loudly.


“Only the best for my honey,” Tony said.

“The best butt jokes?”

“Among other things,” Tony murmured. He flipped Stephen on to his back and kissed him again.
Rhodey and Vision were reluctant to let them go see Quill and the rest through a portal rather than astral projection. But Tony somehow sweet talked them with promises of a quick return and the necessity of getting used to being out there there. “Eventually I want to take the fight to Thanos. I have to prepare,” Tony said. “I will be back as soon as possible, okay? Then we can look for Thor... But I’ve got questions for Rocket that won’t wait any longer.”

“I know,” Rhodey said. “Just be careful. Be so fucking careful.”

“I will honey bear. Promise,” Tony said. “I know you hate this.”

“I really do, Tones,” Rhodey said. Tony smiled and hugged him.

“Thanks for worrying about me,” Tony said.

When Stephen opened the portal, Tony was in the armour and felt confident in its abilities in open space. He’d upgraded his and Rhodey’s armours now and the tests had been good so far. When he stepped through on to the lower deck of the Milano, Tony had the helmet recede, and was met with a wide-eyed Groot. “I am Groot! I am Groot. I am Groot.”

“Hey buddy. Thanks. I think it’s pretty cool looking too,” Tony said. “Is Rocket around?”

“I am Groot!” Groot was off like a shot, down toward the engine room. Stephen smiled at him. Quill came down from the upper deck.

“Hey guys, so, you’re like here here?” Peter asked.

“In the flesh. Tony wanted to see things in real time,” Stephen said.

“Cool armour,” Peter said. Tony preened.

“Don’t know if it will hold up out here, but I define it as a walking and flying tank on Earth,” Tony said.

“You’ll probably be able to take a few hits. Rocket can get you sorted,” Peter said.

“I would appreciate the feedback,” Tony replied. Rocket appeared from the engine room, and without preamble started clambering over the armour, inspecting it. He seemed frustrated when FRIDAY closed all access points. Tony had adapted an auto syncing program that allowed him to carry a more specialized version of her onboard, and the two experiences would combine as soon as he was back in range.

“You want feedback, you gotta let me look, Stark,” Rocket said.

“You gotta ask my gal FRIDAY for permission,” Tony said.

“What’s a FRIDAY?” Rocket asked.

“I am,” FRIDAY said. “And I’ll be thanking you to not be looking up my skirt without my say so,” she said. Rocket’s ears perked up, fascinated.

“I made that universal translator you gave me the code for and installed it in FRIDAY. Be nice,” Tony warned. “FRIDAY, no instant kill mode yet, okay honey? Rocket has no manners, but he can be reasoned with and he’s smart as fuck.”
“She’s your A.I.?” Peter asked.

“Yes, my baby girl, and apple of my eye,” Tony said, and then looked around warily, to see if Drax was around to question him on that metaphor.

“Hi, FRIDAY,” Peter said.

“Hello, Mr. Quill,” FRIDAY said in a friendly tone. “Pleased to meet ya,”

“Is that accent Irish? You’re a lot more personable than the A.I. we have out here,” Peter said.

“Yes it is, and so she should be. She’s Tony’s child. She has a soul,” Stephen said. Peter took a moment to look astonished.

“You can do that?” Peter asked.

“Apparently so. So, Rocket, be nice and FRIDAY will probably let you have a look,” Tony said.

“All right, I’m sorry Miss FRIDAY Bot. Will you please open up so I can help better protect your maker’s meat sack body?” Rocket asked. He was back on the decking, looking somewhat more restrained.

“That’s about as nice as he gets,” Tony explained. FRIDAY harrumphed.

“Fine, but only on account that he is a meat sack,” FRIDAY said.

“I did not teach you to be so sassy,” Tony said.

“Cute boss, but lies. Of course you did. Also, the internet,” FRIDAY retorted. Tony shrugged and laughed.

The armour came apart and Tony stepped out and finally really got to take in the environment around him. The air was a bit stale, but not too bad. The oxygen content was a bit lower, probably equivalent to being in a mountainous region. He knew he’d seen and touched it all before, but to actually be standing on a spacecraft was everything his eight year old self had dreamed about. Rocket looked Tony over. “You’re a lot less glowy in person,” he said.

“Just more concentrated,” Tony parted the kevlar under armour, and showed Rocket and Peter his chest.

“You got a lot of scars for a guy who’s an Infinity Stone,” Peter said quietly.

“My body is human,” Tony said. “My soul will survive, but my body is very mortal.”

“Sounds sorta like my dad,” Peter said. “You can’t regenerate a body can you?”

“Not that I am aware, to be honest. There’s a lot I’m still figuring out. I wouldn’t cease to exist or anything. But my mother created me to keep the Soul Stone from outside influence so far as we can tell. She gave me consciousness and a human body, and let me form my own will as a human child does. They weren’t perfect parents, but they did hand most of my rearing off to the surrogates, and that helped a lot... What or who was your dad, exactly?” Tony asked.

“My biological father was a Celestial. An actual living planet who could generate bodies as he needed them, in the form he needed them, to go out and pollenate the galaxy with offspring in an attempt to take it over via those offspring. We stopped him,” Peter said. Tony looked at him with his jaw slightly agape. Stephen looked his normal self. Tony’s eyes narrowed at Stephen.
“Yet another monumentally cool thing you didn’t bother to tell me?” Tony asked.

“No, I just know what’s possible out here, and it takes more than that to shake me,” Stephen replied dryly.

“Like you, I had a sorta surrogate parent, Yondu Odonta... He found out what my dad was doing with the kids brought to him, and that they all ended up dead, and decided to just... keep me. He always told me it was to use my small size to steal things and that I should be grateful he kept me because the crew was going to eat me... I always took him at his word on that... It was horrible, but he was trying to spare my young brain from the reality of my dad building a planet body for himself out of the corpses of his own children... Ego then heard about a Terran who could hold an Infinity Stone in his bare hand and almost not die, and set out to find me awhile back. Thanks to Gamora, we discovered what Ego’s plan for the galaxy was and stopped it,” Peter said. Tony listened to all the pain in his voice, fuelled by what he wasn’t saying. There was a lot more to that story than fit into a short conversation.

“Well, I’m glad about that. No one should have to render unto a parent. Especially not with their lives,” Tony said.

“That’s what I’ve been told... Yondu died in that fight in order to save me. I never even really saw him as a father until that moment. It... wasn’t great,” Peter admitted.

“Yeah, I bet,” Tony replied, full of empathy. Peter nodded at him, and Tony let the subject pass.

“Look, we’re coming, but we’ve been a bit waylaid,” Peter warned.

“Waylaid? Why?”

“We were resting between wormhole jumps, and came across someone just... floating... out there. He hit the windshield. We brought him in, and Mantis woke him up... He claimed to be Thor and that we had to go back through a jump he’d come through. He was desperate. Said lives depended on it. So we did, and found a Sakaarian ship, full of refuges from fucking Asgard if you can believe it. Thor says Ragnarok came to Asgard and it was destroyed... Then as he and the survivors were safely away from their imploding planet, they ran into Thanos. By the time we got back, Loki, Thor’s brother, who helped save Asgard’s people was gone. The others said that Loki was taken unceremoniously by Thanos, and that he was terrified at that. Which, is pretty much the only sensible option. Loki managed to bargain for the safety of the others, but then Thanos’ forces disabled their ship. Rocket’s got to a point where it can be towed, and the passengers are safe, but it’s slow going... And that about catches you up. There’s also another guy from Terra on it... But I don’t know what you’ve been feeding people to get them to look like he does,” Peter explained.

Tony’s face went from gobsmacked to intense in a second. “What does he look like?” Tony asked forcefully and half an octave higher than he wished to.

“Huge. Green. Doesn’t like being called Banner for some reason. Thor warned us about that,” Peter said.

“Take me to him. Now,” Tony demanded. His face was deadly serious.

“You know him? Thor hasn’t mentioned you.”

“How long ago did this happen?” Stephen asked, trying to calm Tony’s growing anxiety with answers.

“A few days, I guess. He’s been really upset about Loki and his planet getting destroyed though.”
“I need to talk to the Hulk, Peter,” Tony said.

“Okay, but it’s dangerous. Thor thinks Thanos did something to him. Before he was verbal, but not very eloquent. He’s been cowering on the lower decks of their ship ever since, and he’s angry,” Peter said.

“He’s not angry. He only ever looks angry. He’s scared. He gets scared when he can’t smash his way out of a problem,” Tony explained.

“Seriously... You know him?” Peter asked.

“Yes, science bros for life, Quill. It’s a thing,” Tony said. He looked over to Rocket. “How does it check out?”

“Not bad, Glowstick. I am almost impressed. Got some improvements, but I will give your A.I. my suggestions and you should be able to do them on your own. The weaponry is actually pretty impressive. But we can make things go boom better if you wanna,” Rocket said.

“Great. Now, I will need to pick your brains on how to set up a network of space stations throughout our solar system, anything you’ve got on how I could make a planet just outside the habitable zone support life, and what you know about the Kree/Skrull war,” Tony said.

“Oh yeah, sure. That’s all easy,” Rocket said sarcastically. “I’ll just pull those manuals out of my furry butt while I’m fixing the Sakaarian boat.”

“Anything you can come up with would be greatly appreciated,” Stephen said gently.

“Now who has the butt obsession,” Tony taunted. Stephen rolled his eyes.

“Incorrigible. You,” Stephen said to Tony.

“And I still have bad doctor jokes up my sleeve, love,” Tony said and gave Stephen an air kiss. “Oh, and the Infinity Stone thing? Don’t mention it to anyone over there. Thor didn’t know what I am before, and I don’t know if he will be able to tell now. He’s earnest because he doesn’t fear death the same way the rest of us do. I don’t trust him to keep his mouth shut.”

“Yeah, I kinda get that from him,” Peter agreed.

“I also have an issue with him having wrung my neck a few years back. So I will do my best to be civil, but I kind of want to pop him in the jaw for it,” Tony said.

“Let me at ‘im, boss,” FRIDAY said, and opened the armour up for Tony to step into.

“Behave for now, dear, please. We may need him,” Tony said.

“Feckin’ killjoy,” FRIDAY sulked.

“I know. I want to give him a smack too. But we have to be adults about this, even when the gods are actually, legitimately, fucking crazy.” The armour sealed around Tony, and he sighed, comforted to be inside of it again. “Up for a test in open space?” Tony asked.

“Bring it on, boss.” FRIDAY said.

“Sounds fun to me,” Quill replied. “I’ll get Stephen a suit.”

“I can create an atmosphere around me with climate control. I’m fine,” Stephen said.
“Stephen,” Tony said sharply. “Space suit. At least as back up, okay?”

“Yes dear,” Stephen acquiesced.

Jumping out of the hatch was less frightening than Tony imagined it would be on account of the sheer exhilaration of what he was doing. “Wheeeeee!” Tony shouted to no one but FRIDAY.

“Seriously?” FRIDAY asked as she frantically tested everything she could and logged the data.

“Of course seriously. Seriously fun,” Tony said, and did a barrel roll to the detriment of some of the A.I.’s calculations.

“Don’t dick around too much out here boss, remember I’m not firing on all cylinders,” FRIDAY said. “And you may be happy about Dr. Banner, but please remember that I hardly know him or the Hulk yet, and I have some reasonable trepidation about this. I also have concerns about Thor. I’ve seen the video of him wringing your neck like you were a chicken being prepped for Sunday dinner.”

“You’re absolutely right, baby girl, but remember that I will survive, whether I have a body or not, and so will you. I don’t wish for that at all though, and I will be very careful. I promise you,” Tony said.

“Don’t be an idiot and sacrifice yourself, boss, for any reason. Earth needs you,” FRIDAY insisted. It made Tony pause and he pulled up the armour, truly floating in space for the first time since the Chitauri Invasion.

“Roger that, FRIDAY,” Tony said softly. “Run start-up tests. Don’t do a full power down yet, just see if it’s possible to get this rig going again if it goes down.”

“Finally, thank you,” FRIDAY replied. The test took mere seconds to posit that everything in the armour could go from full shut down to functional within those few seconds.

“Got ways to make that faster?” Tony asked.

“I’ll have to collate the numbers back home when I have more server space, but positively maybe, boss,” FRIDAY said, contented.

“Great, good job.”

“Hey! Glowstick! Are you coming?” Rocket shouted over the coms. Tony took a picture of the Milano and part of the Sakaarian ship for Rhodey.

“Just taking some snapshots for a buddy, Jumpsuit,” Tony said.

The Sakaarian ship had been devastated, with large chunks of it simply missing and abandoned decks open to space. “Wow,” FRIDAY said.

“Get used to it, hun. With Thanos coming, it won’t get any easier from here,” Tony warned.

“Actually, I have the firm belief that it will, boss. I have faith in you,” she replied.

“Thanks,” Tony said softly. “Now, please trust me when it comes to Bruce. His green side is more bark than bite.”

“The video doesn’t really suggest that is true,” FRIDAY said. Tony laughed out loud as they came to an opening hatch on the ship.
“It is when it comes to me. Hulk likes me. The key is to not be afraid of him,” Tony said.

Once inside the airlock and with pressure and gravity restored, Tony peeled back the helmet and looked around. A tall, black Asgardian with dreadlocks and golden eyes looked on at them carefully. Tony knew that he knew exactly what Tony was. Tony got up in the man’s space, grateful for the added height the armour gave him. “Not a word about this to anyone,” Tony commanded. His voice serious, and pushed his influence on to Heimdall. “For all of our sakes, say nothing.” Heimdall looked taken aback as to why he would obey such an order from him, but when Thor entered the airlock, Heimdall’s mouth stayed shut, and it perplexed him.

“Stark! My friend. How is it you come to us?” Thor asked.

“Witchcraft,” Tony said glibly, and presented Stephen.

“Ah, the sorcerer,” Thor said, again attempting friendliness.


“Green Bean, take me to him,” Tony said.

“My friend, he is... not well. Thanos’ attack shook him and he has not been the same,” Thor replied. He was as subdued as Tony had ever seen him, but Tony couldn’t will up any pity for him at the moment.

“Which is why I need to see him,” Tony said.

“The ship could use your assistance to get it going again,” Thor said. “and I would like to bring my people to Earth for refuge.” Tony arched his eyebrow.

“You’ll have to speak to the United Nations about that. I can’t make that choice for Earth, and you will have to negotiate it with them. As for the ship, perhaps, if Rocket needs help. He’s in charge of that, not me.” Tony said.

“See? At least Glowstick can respect experience,” Rocket said. “You wouldn’t believe how fucking prejudiced these Asgardians are,” he said, turning to Tony as he retracted his space suit. He reached for a bag of supplies he’d had Quill carry over. Tony gave Thor a condescending look.

“You’d reject help because Rocket isn’t a hominid?” Tony asked. “Look, I get it, mortals are lower, blah blah, but it seems we have a lot you need at the moment. So a polar change in attitude would probably be a good idea about now... Look, I am sure you have been through absolute hell lately.” Tony said.

“You have no idea, Stark,” Thor said.

“Death of a parent or mentor, followed by absolute destruction of everything you’ve ever known? Then losing what you thought was your last bit of family through betrayal and violence? Been through that a few times now in my small, mortal life. You can carry on. It sucks. But you can carry on, okay? You can rebuild. But embracing Asgard’s old ways isn’t going to help you with that. Especially if you discount Rocket. I’m a fucking genius... But Rocket is already miles ahead of me simply because of where he was born and how he was made. I have issues with you, Thor. Mainly because you were off looking for MacGuffins while the planet you swore to protect needed you. The Avengers blew apart at the seams, and you fucked off to space. I got other reasons to want to punch you, but now is not the time because someone has to act like a goddamn adult... Now, Jolly Green, where is he?”
“You won’t be able to turn him back to Banner. He refuses,” Thor said, ignoring Tony’s words about acceptance.

“That’s fine. I don’t mind him either way,” Tony said. “Take me to him.” Thor paused, obviously thinking over a memory. Tony dug nosily into Thor’s memory and found conversations Thor had had with both Banner and the Hulk about only valuing one over the other in order to gain a means to an end... It soured Tony further on Thor. Sometimes Thor seemed to be the god of perpetual immaturity in Tony’s eyes.

The area of the ship they entered at had been relatively undamaged. But as they went on, away from the populated areas, passing tall, lean, beautiful Asgardians, the ship became more dimly lit and obviously damaged. Rocket stopped at a blown panel, and waved them on. “See you in a bit,” Rocket said. “Stark, don’t get killed, okay?”

“I won’t,” Tony replied.

Hulk’s natural inclination to hide had kicked in and he’d tired to get away from everyone. Tony then saw a few aliens of decidedly not Asgardian origin. One was the biggest insect Tony had ever seen outside of an H.R. Giger painting. The other was entirely composed of rock it seemed.

“Hullo, King Thor,” The rock man said. “Come to visit Hulk?”

“Yes, well, my friend Anthony has. He’s from Midgard, like Hulk and Quill are;” Thor said.

“Well, you can try, but he’s not much for visitors at the moment. Are you particularly fragile, Anthony?” The rock man asked.

“No. Hulk and I... Just let me talk to him, please.” Tony said.

“Old friend of yours then? That’s good. Like me and Miek here. Name’s Korg, by the way,” Korg said. Tony found his voice and tone so charming that he was disarmed for a moment. He had to wonder how it was that a rural New Zealand accent sounded exactly like how a rock man spoke. Korg had the aura and manner of a gentle being, and it made Tony want to be civil.

“Hi, Korg, Miek,” Tony said. “Pleased to meet you. Now, can you let me in?”

“Your funeral,” Korg said with a shrug and opened the door.

“Hey buddy! Can we talk?” Tony called at the door to the chamber before he stepped over the threshold. An enormous shape moved in the dark.

“Tin Man?” rumbled a voice Tony wondered if he would ever hear again.

“Yeah Green Bean, it’s me. I’ve been looking for you for ages,” Tony said. “Can I come in?”

“Just you,” Hulk said, uncurling a bit. Tony could make out the glint of the Hulk’s eyes and teeth in the darkness.

“Mind if I turn the lights on? I don’t see as well as you in the dark, I think.”

“Fine. Close door,” Hulk said.

“You got it,” Tony said, and nodded for Korg to close the door. He dispatched a couple of long lasting warm white LED flares to the upper corners of the room, creating a soft ambient light. Tony finally got a good look at the Hulk, and saw what he thought he might find. He looked scared and
possibly ashamed. “What’s wrong, Green Bean? What can I do to help?” Tony asked. Hulk’s aura radiated fear and sadness.

“Thanos... Thanos come. Thanos not scared of Hulk. Hulk try. Hulk try to help Thor. But Hulk not move. Hulk can’t move. Hulk not smash. Hulk no help,” Hulk pounded his fist on the floor in anger. Stephen’s astral form poked through the door to check, but Tony waved him off before Hulk noticed him. Against what might be anyone else’s better judgement, Tony got closer.

“Hulk, I am so proud of you for wanting to help,” Tony said gently. “That’s a really admirable thing.” Hulk looked skeptical and like he might balk, but Tony upped his ante of trust. He stepped out of the armour, and removed himself as a threat.

“Tin Man lies,” Hulk said.

“No, I’m telling the truth. You said it yourself just now. You wanted to help. That’s what I’ve told people all along. Even puny Banner... Especially puny Banner,” Tony said.

“You only want Banner, not Hulk,” Hulk said.

“Also not true. I like you both equally for different reasons. I can help save the world with Banner. I can help save the world with you. Both of you are important to me... And I will always be grateful that you caught me in New York,” Tony said. Hulk looked lost in his memory for a moment.

“We fought. Later. Africa,” Hulk said.

“Yes, we did fight, and I’m so sorry for that. I was listening to Banner and didn’t give you enough input. I will always regret that. I will work to make sure that it never happens again... I’m so happy you’re okay, you know that? You’ve been gone for years and I couldn’t find you. I was worried,” Tony said.

“Because you want Banner,” Hulk declared.

“I adore your other half, Hulk, I’m not afraid to admit it. His mind is a thing of beauty. But I also adore you. You’re one of the most amazing people I’ve ever met. But what I like about you, is your honesty, and your sense of wonder, and your instinctual knowledge. Before you left Earth, things were often new to you, and I loved when I got to show you them for the first time. Most importantly, big guy, I trust you. When we were fighting HYDRA, and I needed saving, you were the one with the presence of mind to watch out for me, and I’m grateful,” Tony said. He opened his arms. Hulk inched forward, on all fours, sniffing in the air, hesitant. “I missed you, Jolly Green,” Tony said.

Hulk suddenly swept Tony up in his arms with surprising gentleness, learned most likely from spending extended time out and interacting with others. Tony put his arms around Hulk’s neck, hanging on tight. Tony let the hug play out, happy and relieved that he’d been accepted.

“Would you like to come back to Earth with me? ...A lot has happened and we could used a heavy hitter on the Avengers roster.”

“What happen?” Hulk asked. He sat back, and cradled Tony in the crook of his arm, which Tony used to scrabble up to Hulk’s shoulder and sit like the world’s most fearless parrot. He leaned his shoulder and body against Hulk’s head.

“Rogers... Cap... Turns out Cap lied to me about something really big and really personal... It started after Ultron. We needed oversight, so we could be responsible and make people not be afraid of us... But Cap wouldn’t listen. He saw it as being restricted and possibly corrupted, even
though the new laws were written to avoid things like that. He wouldn’t even try to understand the laws... And then an old friend of his, Bucky, turned up, and Cap broke a lot of laws, and killed over a dozen people, trying to save Bucky... I could have saved Bucky, and gotten him help, but Cap wouldn’t listen to me. He turned most of the rest of the team against me... And then I found out that Bucky was forced into killing my parents. And Cap knew. He knew for years and didn’t tell me, so I would continue to fund the search for Bucky... I found out and reacted badly. Very badly, but I was... well, as you’ll understand, I was so damn angry,” Tony said. He was trying to keep it simple, but not talk down to Hulk. The Hulk’s massive hand came up, and covered Tony’s legs, trying to comfort him.

“Cap hurt Tin Man,” Hulk concluded.

“Yes. We were manipulated into fighting. I lost, but only because I didn’t want to kill Cap... or his friend, I suppose, despite what he’d done. Bucky had been manipulated too. I know that now, but I had to watch a video of Bucky murdering my parents, and I lost it... And then I lost the fight with them, and then they left me for dead... In a Siberian winter. Vision managed to rescue me, but it took a long time to heal... It’s just been really hard since you’ve been gone,” Tony admitted. “I felt like I didn’t have anyone to catch me if I fell,” Tony said softly.

“Hulk miss Tin Man... Hulk angry at Cap. Hulk will smash Cap,” Hulk determined, and patted Tony’s knees. Tony grinned.

“Thanks, but not necessary now, buddy. Cap is going to be in prison for a long time due to the crimes he committed and people who were killed during them,” Tony said. Hulk looked contemplative for a moment.

“Hulk killed before. Hulk wanted to kill before. Hulk go to jail?” Hulk asked.

“Mistakes have been made, Hulk. I’ve killed people before. I’ve left people for dead before. But neither you or I killed innocent people in the name of being morally superior. We’ve only killed to survive,” Tony reasoned.

“Hulk like Tin Man,” Hulk eventually said. “Tin Man need help?”

“I will, eventually. Thanos is coming to Earth,” Tony said. Hulk curled up and brought his knees to his chest.

“Thanos scares Hulk,” Hulk said as softly as his enormous lungs would let him.

“He scares me too,” Tony admitted easily. “But I think I can beat him. I have a plan.”

“Hulk had plan. Hulk smash. Hulk couldn’t smash,” Hulk said.

“Mine has a few more moving parts than that. But I have a decent chance at making it happen,” Tony said.

“Earth not safe for Hulk. Ross,” Hulk said, as if suddenly remembering. Tony smiled wide at that.

“About him, he’s no longer a threat,” Tony offered.

“How?”

“He got himself involved in a political play when the new laws for the Avengers were being drafted. He ended up burned by the whole thing, and is now waiting on his trial for war crimes, and certain crimes against humanity... Crimes against you and Banner,” Tony explained. “Full
disclosure, I had to pretend to support him for awhile, Hulk... But only ever to get what the world was asking of the Avengers. He and I both wanted to make sure that those with powers couldn’t run roughshod over the world without consequences. We needed people to be accountable. It works for both the Avengers, and those that want to oversee them. Neither can overstep their bounds. After Johannesburg and Sokovia, something had to be done... Ross tried to abuse his power. He will end up dying in prison I’m quite sure, and that works for me,” Tony said.

“Red Witch? Where she?” Hulk asked.

“Also now in prison, and stripped of her powers. She can’t control minds anymore,” Tony said.

“Good,” Hulk agreed. “Tony did good.”

“I tried, but I’m still not so sure about that. The team is... different now. Not worse or broken. Just different. Myself, Vision, and Rhodey are still there. But now we have a couple of sorcerers. But they’re not like Wanda. They’re ones who are extremely disciplined and in control of their magic. They’ve sworn an oath to protect Earth, and their kind have been at it for millennia. There’s also a kid with super strength like Cap, and so help me, he can scale vertical walls. He’s a sweet kid, but he’s still pretty young. But like I said, we could use a heavy hitter,” Tony said.

“Hulk think about it,”

“Sure,” Tony agreed with a nod and a pat on Hulk’s shoulder.

“Can feel Banner. He awake again. He want talk to you,” Hulk said.

“Oh probably,” Tony agreed. Hulk turned his head to Tony, surprised. “And while I would love to see him again, I am not going to tell you how to share your time, that is between the two of you... I wish Bruce could see how valuable you are. You’re strong, sure, but you’re also brave and have a good heart,” Tony rattled on.

“And I get why you’re hesitant to let Bruce back out, I really do. I love Brucie, but you know better than I do that he has suicidal tendencies. I have you to thank for being able to know him at all. The
first time I met Bruce, within hours he admitted multiple suicide attempts... Ones that you saved him from... Leaving you in control is another form of suicide for him, whether he’s aware of it or not... And I can see why you despise him for it. He abandoned you to take on the entire galaxy on your own... I’m of the belief that you are the product of Bruce’s unaddressed rage at seeing his mother murdered by his father while he watched. He must have felt helpless then, but all he knew was that being angry made a person kill others. So he suppressed anger, and when he was exposed to the gamma radiation, instead of Bruce dying, you came to life and saved him... Because I’m certain he pisses you off, but you see the value in him too,” Tony said. “Bruce is a lot of what that angry child in him wanted to grow up to be. But he couldn’t mourn the loss of being a child without delving into that abiding anger.”

The Hulk was utterly still, barely breathing.

“Hulk remembers her,” Hulk said. “Remembers mom.” He closed his eyes, massive tears forming.

“Was she pretty?” Tony asked earnestly.

“Prettiest... Sweetest,” Hulk said.

“I know Bruce has a hard time connecting with others. It’s because he’s afraid he’ll hurt them. He’s also afraid of being helpless. You two have common ground, Green Bean... And if anyone is determined enough to save Bruce, it’s you. If you need me, I’m here. I can try to nurture when Bruce can’t, okay?” Tony said. Hulk nodded ever so gently as to not throw Tony off balance. Tony slid down, and put his arms around Hulk’s neck again, hugging him for a long time. Hulk eventually relaxed, breathing deeply, calmer and gentler than Tony had ever seen him.

“Thanks Tin Man,” Hulk murmured.

“Anytime, Jolly Green,” Tony replied.

“Hulk come home... If Tin Man keeps Hulk safe,” Hulk said.

“To my dying breath,” Tony said. “Thank you for agreeing to help... Are you ready to come out of here yet? If not, you can stay here until Stephen and I leave. I have to go talk to Thor, well more like give Thor a piece of my mind. Nothing serious, just something to think about on his journey to Earth. I don’t like that he used you like a wrecking ball to defend Asgard, and then let you put yourself in isolation down here. It’s not healthy, buddy. That changes now.”

“Hulk come with Tony,” Hulk said. He set Tony gingerly on his feet, and the armour surrounded Tony once again, except for the helmet.

“Okay, if you get upset, come back in here, and Stephen and I will come get you before we leave for Earth, all right?” Tony asked. Hulk nodded.

Hulk followed Tony out of the chamber to a crew of assembled, probably high ranking, Asgardians. Strange and Quill looked on edge, and Tony wasn’t exactly surprised when Thor charged forward. “What is the meaning of this, Stark?! Have you gone mad?!” Thor boomed. Tony skimmed over Thor’s all too easy to read thoughts. No wonder Loki got so frustrated with him. Heimdall hadn’t said a word about Tony being the Soul Stone, but he’d sure as hell piped up about the Aether and the Eye of Agamotto. Damn. It was irritating but not surprising. Heimdall had a king to be loyal to. Tony was going to have to be very specific from here on out with the Asgardians. Tony realized all of this in the same second as he realized that Thor was heading for him and not stopping, his fingers and thumb placed perfectly to sweep him up and throttle him...
again. It kicked up some of Tony’s PTSD from Ultron. Just as Stephen was about to step in to defend Tony, Tony asked the Aether for a hand. “Step the fuck back!” Tony commanded harshly. Thor complied instantly and looked bewildered to have to do so. Tony took a moment to breathe and calm his panic. He made himself very mindful of the fact that he could stop Thor’s aggression literally in its tracks.

“No, Thor. You don’t get to randomly assault humans at your whim anymore,” Tony said. “You don’t get to nearly choke the life out of a man traumatized by guilt and fear because you’re having a temper tantrum,” Tony’s voice got progressively quieter but grew in threat.

“Stark, I did no such thing,” Thor said. Tony's anger spiked again.

“Good memory, just short is it? You assaulted me. In my own home! In the palace that I built, often times with my own hands! In my own home, where I fed you, and housed you, and offered you luxurious sanctuary on Earth. In my own home, you wrung me up by my neck as if I was nothing more than an animal you’d inspect before sending it to be slaughtered for your dinner... You could have killed me, Thor. I am mortal. One little shake and I would have been dead because you couldn’t hold your temper and speak like an adult with a man already out of his mind with fear. Because I knew the consequences of releasing Ultron. Immediately, I knew. The Mind Stone created Ultron. Banner and I weren’t even close to a way to communicate with the Mind Stone,” Tony said bitterly.

“Stark,” Thor said.

“Shut the fuck up and listen.” Tony said, practically clawing at his own hair in frustration. He was trying to keep a lid on the Aether, FRIDAY, and keep himself between Thor and the Hulk. “For once in your goddamn life, listen to someone you see as beneath you. I warned you. I warned all of the Avengers, and world governments, and SHIELD, and Fury, and the goddamn UN... I warned all of you that something like Thanos was on the horizon. It wasn’t the gift of sight or any bullshit like that,” Tony said and tossed a harsh look to Heimdall. “It was being intelligent enough to see, based on current events, what might happen. But all of you made me feel stupid, and paranoid, and worthless... Cassandra... Fucking Cassandra... And you did this all while living very comfortably off the profits of my labour. You weren’t as bad as the others, but you sucked up my hospitality easily enough. I welcomed you into the one place in the world where I still felt safe. And in return, you wrung my neck and later dismissed me as inexplicable.” Tony sighed heavily, trying to calm down. Stephen’s steady gaze met his. The sorcerer was almost amused to see the god brought low by moral debate. Quill looked nervous, and the Hulk looked like he would do whatever Tony asked of him.

“I’ve made catastrophic mistakes in my life, Thor-n in my side, but I acknowledge them. I own them. I make reparations for them. You... don’t. None of the other Avengers did either,” Tony said, looking at the wall of Asgardians. “If you thought we shouldn’t have tampered with the Mind Stone, then you shouldn’t have left it with us. Prudence and anticipation, Thor, you better get a nose for them soon, or your people will turn on you,” Tony warned. “And as for this,” Tony said as the armour came apart momentarily at his wrist, sending blinding red light out. “Well, Little Red here seems to fucking like me, so she isn’t going anywhere.” The armour wrapped back around Tony’s wrist.

“It might put your panties in a twist to have a couple of mortals walking around with Infinity Stone accessories, but hell with it... The rest of the galaxy has tried and fucked it up. Our turn,” Tony said, once again glib.

“You invite disaster,” Thor said.
“Disaster is coming, whether we like it or not,” Tony said gravely. “The key is how we deal with it.” The anger went out of Tony then. Voicing it had calmed him. The Hulk was still behind him, apparently at ease and perhaps taking notes about using one’s words. Tony took a deep breath. “Jolly Green is coming home with me,” Tony announced. Stephen quirked an eyebrow at that, but said nothing. His expression was calm, and clearly he was no fan of what he’d heard from the Asgardians while Tony had been chatting with the Hulk.

“And you’d leave my people here?” Thor contested.

“You’re really starting to make me want to,” Tony barked back. “Keep up with the petulance and entitlement. See how far it gets you.”

“You hold the Reality Stone. You can repair this ship and take us to Earth easily if you can indeed control the power of it as you claim,” a dark-skinned female said. Tony looked her up and down. A few years ago, he would have invited this woman for a drink or ten. Drinkers could usually spot their own. Now Tony merely narrowed his eyes at her.

“I don’t control her. I said she likes me. I ask her, and if she complies, that is her choice to make... Did Loki have the Tesseract?” Tony asked Thor.

“What?” Thor asked.

“Did Loki take the Tesseract with him when your planet went boom?” Tony asked, speaking slowly.

“I know not. I sent him down to the vaults to procure the Crown of Surtur. He might have taken it then,” Thor admitted. Tony let out a long, frustrated, sigh.

“Thor, bubele, I get it. Your fucking house was on fire... But when your house burns down, you need to know where your insurance policies are. You’re angry at me for having an Infinity Stone, when the one you swore to guard is probably now sitting pretty in the gauntlet on Thanos’ hand. I don’t want to call you stupid. I would settle for impetuous and possibly impervious to forethought. But you’re making it really fucking easy to think that... Stephen, can you please enlighten the supposedly superior hominids why kicking up the stones’ power is a bad idea right now?” Tony asked. Hulk moved up a few steps, and Tony leaned up against his leg for comfort.

“Using the stones for big things will be traceable to someone wearing the Infinity Gauntlet,” Stephen said. “And since Thanos most likely has the Space Stone, he can appear where he chooses in the cosmos. We wouldn’t stand a chance against without proper preparation... We might be able to create a portal large enough for the ships to come through, but I would need to talk to fellow sorcerers. You’re also going to have to talk to the United Nations about refugee status.”

“You’re on your own for a bit, Thor, while we get shit sorted. Earth might not welcome you with open arms,” Tony said. “I suggest you make nice with Rocket, maybe even offer to fucking help him out and get things going faster.”

Tony went to leave. Thor grabbed Tony’s shoulder. “NO!” Tony shouted. He threw a hand up, and Thor was tossed up toward the bulkhead of the passageway and pinned there. Lightening crackled over Thor’s skin threateningly, but the red energy of the Aether seemed to consume it easily. “Keep your fucking hands off of me! You don’t get to dictate mortal lives! You don’t get to put me or anyone else beneath you! You’re a goddamn king! Lead by example! How can you and Rogers be so fucking clueless when it comes to leadership? True leaders lead from the bottom, by being willing to do the same grunt work as everyone else, and also taking the blame when shit goes wrong, not just taking the glory for the victories,” Tony said. Stephen could see how done he was
with the situation, but still he stood back, and let Tony call the shots.

“Before you get to Earth, Point Break, I have some words of wisdom for you. I’m not telling you to stay away, but I am telling you to think long and hard about them before you do. Words of advice from the human realm you’re about to impose yourself on: Listen to the needs of others first and foremost. It’s okay to be wrong. Not everything has to be a war. Fight less. Talk more. Say you’re fucking sorry sometimes,” Tony growled. “I might be convinced to forgive you, and welcome you, but not with your mindset like this.”

“You’re bringing war to your planet,” Thor warned. He was struggling for breath against the force of the Aether.

“War is coming to us whether I like it or not... I’m solving a problem that no one else has been willing to address up to now. It won’t be a war, and in fact will be over quickly... And you’re going to need to kickstart your empathy if you want Earth to give you the time of day. Use this moment, use how helpless you are right now to empathize with your people, and then stretch that out to all sentient beings. I’ve been held at the mercy of many other people over the course of my life, and this is how it feels. It’s painful, humiliating, and terrifying. It crushes any pride in your accomplishments to be reminded how small you are. This is what it feels like to be ineffectual and worthless, Thor. This is how you made me feel. Remember this. Use this to make yourself better... And never fucking touch me again. You can help me save Earth if you wish to try to claim refugee status there. But you will fall in line or get the hell out of my way,” Tony warned. He flicked his wrist and Thor dropped to the deck in a heap.

“I have to talk to Rocket, and then I want to get the fuck out of here,” Tony said to Stephen and Quill.

“Yeah, on it,” Quill said with trepidation and new found fear of Tony. He looked at Thor who was recovering himself. “This ain’t gonna make things any easier.”

“I’m sorry for the negative effect it has on you and your crew. The rest of them can get fucked for all I care right now. They will need to learn some respect before they get to Earth. Humans are less fond of those who would propose to rule them nowadays... Like that old man in Germany who stood up to Loki,” Tony said.

“What happened?” Quill asked, as they started moving through the Asgardians, who parted easily for them.

“Loki tried to invade Earth on behalf of Thanos, you know that part right?”

“Yeah, Stephen told me about it.”

“When he made his first appearance, he was in Germany. You were young when you were taken, but I’m sure you were taught something about World War II,” Tony said.

“Yeah, a little. I remember the major points,” Peter said.

“Six million Jews, systematically murdered. Millions of others, both killed outright by the Nazis, or on the battlefield. Because they didn’t fit in with a fascist world view... It wasn’t that long ago. Cap was there. My dad was there. When Loki told a crowd in Germany to kneel before him, one old fella, who’d definitely seen the results of Hitler’s Final Solution, refused. Loki tried to claim he was something special and to be feared. This old man stood up proud, and looked at Loki like he was yesterday’s news laid out to paper train a puppy. He told Loki that there would always be men like him... And I got issues with Captain America, entire volumes, even... But he saved that old guy
from getting the business end of Loki’s magic glow stick containing the Mind Stone. That old man was the real hero in that situation... And maybe that’s what the galaxy needs... A planet that has seen a fascist regime in living memory and knows that there has to be a better alternative,” Tony explained.

“That makes a lot of sense,” Peter said.

“I think so,” Tony said.

The Asgardians gave Tony a wide birth as he walked through the passageways to find Rocket. To his surprise, Rocket handed him a drive. “Had our ship’s A.I. compile a bunch of information. Space station plans, the Kree/Skrull war, most of what you asked for, and wirelessly send it to this,” Rocket said. Tony looked at Rocket like he was a miracle worker.

“I could kiss you,” Tony said.

“Don’t. I ain’t had my shots,” Rocket retorted.

“Oh, fuck, Quill, before I forget...” Tony bent down, and a compartment in the calf of the armour opened up. “Who’s your favourite Ninja Turtle?”

“What?” Peter asked.

“Your favourite Ninja Turtle, who was it?”

“Michelangelo, duh,” Peter said.

“Figured,” Tony said, satisfied. He pulled out two objects and a cord from a storage compartment, and tossed them to Peter. Peter’s face lit up when he saw the classic Michelangelo action figure, loose, but in mint condition with all accessories intact. The other was something that Peter was getting more familiar with.

“Hey, is this like the Zune that Kraglin got me?” Peter asked.

“Better,” Tony said. “Made it myself. Holds ten thousand songs, and has personal playlists separated into moods, categories, and historical relevance. FRIDAY helped with that.”

“Fucking awesome!” Peter said and grinned. "The Zune has been taken over by Groot. Who knew trees had teenage angst, ya know?"

Chapter End Notes

Seriously, why so angry Tony? Like the thing with Howard, I wasn't quite sure where I was going with it, and just wrote. I realize that Thor did gain a lot of humility in Ragnarok, but honestly, Asgardian society is pretty fucked up when examined closely. Tony might see fit to get along with Thor in the future, but there's going to need to be some grovelling on Thor's part.

Please NO SPOILERS FOR INFINITY WAR in the comments. I won't get to see it until it's been out for a few days.

As always, comments are love, and you all are the fucking best.
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Tony brings home an old friend. Rhodey gets his wings back. The boys then bring home a new friend... And Tony gives the world the bad news, and a pep talk.

Chapter Notes

"Wanna hear god laugh? Tell him your plans," - Al Swearengen, Deadwood

So... I've had a week. I've had a COUPLE of weeks... Seven day stretch at work with various conflicting personalities B.S., followed by an adult cousin going missing in Toronto (they found him within 36 hours, he's... well he's not fine. But he's safe.).

And... my birthday twin passed away two Saturdays ago. We were separated by a mere 49 years, and I grew up in the house next to her father's. She moved in with him to care for him before he passed away aged 92 when I was in high school. I'm going to miss her a lot (especially this Tuesday when I will still be half waiting for her phone call so we can wish one another a happy birthday). She was one of those golden people who made the world better simply by being in it. At the well attended funeral, her sister asked the gathered mourners, who had received a greeting card from her at one time or another... Pretty much everyone, including her pastor, raised their hand.

I'm not religious. I was more comforted by the line of Shakespeare her sister quoted in that eulogy than any of the scripture she read... But she was one of those people who didn't push it on others. Just led by example of being gentle, decent, and kind. That by being that kind of person, it was enough.

I find it interesting that in this chapter I kind of rail against religion (it was mostly written before her passing), but I stand by what's there... But I don't think religious belief matters much. What matters is how you treat people.

Anyway, I will quit with the pontificating now.

Good things also happened this week. I'm rebuilding a bridge with a friend I thought I'd lost, and it's refreshing to have honest conversations between us with all the extenuating bullshit (caused by other people) removed.

AND oh my shit... Going way off topic for a paragraph here: My town has this theatre festival... Like, world class, British monarchs have been here a few times to see it, we've had actors here that would kinda make your head spin (Everyone from Bill Shatner to Maggie Smith before she had the Dame attached for example. Christopher Plummer wandering around looking like a homeless dude between performances as Prospero) kind of Shakespeare Festival... The past few years, to get Baby Boomer to Millenial asses in the seats, they've been taking chances... And this year they're doing ROCKY HORROR... And it's so. fucking. GOOD. It's better than the video I've seen of the revival in London in 2015. The costumes and voices are amazing. I was in the balcony for it, and I have to hope the old Avon Theatre holds up with all the damn
bouncing that was going on up there. I love live theatre, and in particular Shakespeare, but this was just a treat. A feast for the eyes... And to watch the lovely older ladies who tend to be ushers at the theatre squirm when the audience shouts out "COCK!" at the top of their lungs.

I did get to see Infinity War (twice!). With friends, and then with my parents, whom I also have hooked on the movies. I think I'm still processing. The movie was just as exhausting the second time around. But I saw someone on YouTube describe it really well. It's like if they had told Black Panther in two parts, and ended the first part right after Killmonger gets the better of T'Challa.

This fic will remain mostly spoiler free I think, though I may use elements of characterization from the movies. I am headed in a different direction than the MCU. Sorry to all of those of you have liked the canon compliance up to this point. Tony's going to handle things his way. That's how he do. If that changes, I will be sure to let you know in the notes before the chapter and chapter summary.

If any of this feels rushed or disjointed, I apologize and thank you for your patience. It's been weird for me. But as old HST said "when the going gets weird, the weird turn pro."

Rhodey only looked at Tony and questioned him once on the topic of his sanity, as Hulk squeezed into the compound’s main building through the loading dock doors. “Are you nuts?”

“Nope, he stays as Hulk as long as he needs to. It’s how he feels safe right now, so we deal with it. FRIDAY, complete your sync with the armour, and then I’m going to need you to order a massive amount of memory foam, lumber, and appropriate fabrics to create Hulk-sized furniture. Please and thanks,” Tony said. “Green Bean, you remember Rhodey, right? Be careful of his legs, please. He’s had an injury. And Vision is here too if you remember him... Somewhere. FRIDAY, can you give him a call?”

“He’s enroute, boss. Coming in from some classes he’s been taking at NYU,” she said.

“Fantastic. Let’s get the big guy settled, and we can talk this over.”

After a long conversation and the complete reworking of their grocery delivery service, things settled into something like a routine. To Tony’s utter astonishment, the Hulk slept. A lot. Tony was starting to worry about him, but their now fairly gentle giant claimed that he hadn’t felt safe enough to sleep. Two years was a long time to go without a good night’s rest, so Tony let him. He never woke up grumpy, even when roused, and was always happy to see people, Tony in particular.

Hulk had even permitted a few introductory sessions with a psychiatrist, and didn’t balk when Tony told him it was one who specialized in childhood trauma. He’d taken a shine to Helen Cho, and let her examine his baseline health stats. The rest was Tony enriching Hulk’s environment as much as possible and made sure they both got outside everyday for a walk around the grounds of the compound.
Still, Hulk liked sleep and feeling secure most of all. The therapist had told Tony that it might be a temporary regression into more juvenile behaviour now that he was finally getting the nurturing and security he needed, and that hopefully he would soon come back around. They had to give him some time to recover from his past traumas.

He’d been Tony’s looming green shadow for a few days, and followed him most places when he wasn’t sleeping. Tony found out that Hulk would remain content if he knew where Tony was going if he had to leave the compound. Hulk’s presence had been great when some of the WSC inspectors dropped by after Tony had informed them of Hulk’s return to Earth. They had also submitted signed paperwork stating that Hulk would work willingly under the Accords.

Tony laid out the new rules regarding the Hulk, and that if they didn’t play along, Hulk would be the next one to bring charges against Thaddeus Ross and Wanda Maximoff. They were terrified of Hulk looming in the room, and put off by Tony and the legal team asking Hulk questions about his preferences. Tony also explained that should Bruce reemerge, he would be asked to sign the Accords for himself, and that the Hulk couldn’t make that choice for Bruce as they were now.

The WSC had been set somewhat at ease by how Tony handled the Hulk’s temper, and took time to make him understand everything. Hulk’s clear affection for Tony was also something that relaxed them, at the same time as making the WSC wary of the power play that represented.

They settled in a few days, and Tony got back to work. Often, when he wasn’t sleeping, the Hulk would enter into Tony’s workshop via the large garage doors that opened to the outside. He would settle and the bots crowded around him, and interacted with him happily for hours.

Tony was busier than ever when Stephen called him from Kamar-Taj. “We found her,” Stephen said.

“No shit. Really?” Tony asked.

“The Dark Dimension. It wasn’t a party. She’s... Well, we’re holding her safely now,” Stephen said.

“You have her back?”

“Yes, but we could probably use you and James. He will speak to her in familiar terms I think. You... there’s a rift in her soul. I think you can help her,” Stephen said.

“Okay,” Tony said, standing up from his current project and reports of how the mech was coming together. “FRIDAY, can you get Rhodey and see if he’s available? I’ll get Jolly Green up. Would it be alright if I got Vision to bring us there?”

“All of that sounds ideal, thank you, Tony,” Stephen said.

“You’re welcome, cuppincake,” Tony said, and gave Stephen a wink as the call ended.

Tony went over to the wing where they were already piecing together quarters for the Hulk. There hadn’t been a clear purpose for it until now, so it was being made into needed oversized living space. The bedroom had been finished within days, and now touches were being added to make it more homey.

Tony entered the room, which was more of a doorless cubby, as the Hulk didn’t like being behind closed doors. Tony climbed up on to the giant crash mat that had been repurposed into a bed for
his favourite gamma monster. “Hey Jolly Green,” Tony said, and touched Hulk’s index finger.

“Tony?” Hulk said as he came around, and then smiled at him. “Tony.”

“Hey buddy, I’ve got something to do today. I have to go to Nepal. Would you like to see where Stephen works?” Tony asked.

“Nepal... Banner went there,” Hulk said, and rubbed the sleep out of his eyes.

“Want to see it for yourself? Looks like Stephen and Wong found another lost superhero and have brought her back to Earth,” Tony explained.

“Who?”

“Her name is Carol. She’s a pilot like Rhodey... But she’s been gone a lot longer than you were, so she’s probably going to need our help to get used to being back here,” Tony said.

“Hulk go,” Hulk said, and rolled up to sit upright.

“Great. We’re going as soon as everyone’s ready. Is that okay?” Tony asked. Hulk moved over to the edge of the bed and put his feet on the floor.

“That’s fine,” Hulk said. Another thing Tony had noticed was how Hulk’s language skills were building the more interacted. He’d already been miles ahead of when he’d left Earth, and it was definitely expanding. He was using more plurals, contractions, and conjunctions to make his thoughts more clear now. Tony was letting it happen without comment in order to avoid him regressing on that too.

“Good stuff. Let’s go get Rhodey and Vision okay?”

Rhodey had gotten over his initial fear of the Hulk, and now trusted that he wouldn’t be hurt accidentally by him. He no longer flinched when the Hulk entered the room.

Rhodey was in the armour when they arrived at the launch deck, and Tony had to take a minute to pause and really look at him. It was the first time Rhodey had put on the entire War Machine since Leipzig, and it showed on his face. Tony was trying to balance being over the moon about it, and the gravity that weighed on Rhodey’s features.

“You scared?” Hulk asked Rhodey. Another surprising thing was that Hulk had proved extraordinary at, was emotional awareness. Then, after a few tests, they discovered he could detect and analyze human pheromones in a conscious way. Tony had to figure that knowing exactly how afraid of you people were at all times had to be its own kind of torture, and so they had been slow at introducing the Hulk back into the world.

“I am a bit, big guy. It’s been a while,” Rhodey admitted.

“No fight this time. Save Carol,” Hulk said. Rhodey nodded and smiled, taking Hulk’s reassurance to heart.

“Here’s hoping,” Rhodey said. “She might be scared though, so she might react violently. We have to be gentle with her, and hopefully that will bring her around.”

“Gentle,” Hulk said with a nod. “Soft.”

“That’s right,” Rhodey said. The armour formed up around Tony, and Hulk grinned at him.
“Tin Man,” Hulk said. He then looked back at Rhodey.

“Tin Tin Man,” he said.

“Aww, hell no,” Rhodey said.

“Tin Tin Man,” Hulk reasserted. Rhodey held an armoured hand to his forehead.

Tony bit his lip behind the mask of the helmet, trying hard to not laugh out loud, but he was failing.

“It’s the worst comic,” Rhodey whined. “So boring.” That was when Tony lost it, howling with laughter.

“Ah com’ on Rhodey...If you’re Tin Tin, that probably makes me Snowy,” Tony offered once he’d recovered himself.

“Not helping,” Rhodey said with a sigh. “Okay, serious faces. Let’s get this show on the road.”

“Hey, Honey Bear,” Tony said softly. Rhodey looked at him. “Suit looks damn good on you.”

Rhodey laughed as his helmet closed around his head. “I’ll get you the name of my tailor.” Rhodey nodded to Vision, who opened a portal to the outdoor training grounds of Kamar-Taj.

They took in the sight of Stephen and Wong’s Eldritch magic holding back a woman in a dirty and tattered tactical suit. The faded colours were black, grey, and teal. Her dirty blonde hair was short, rough cut from her head. She was awake and aware, and doing her damndest to fight through Stephen and Wong’s enclosure.

For someone who’d been out of the dimension for two decades, she didn’t look all that shocked to see Tony, Vision, Rhodey, and the Hulk step out of open space. She just squared her jaw and shoulders and looked ready for the next round.

Rhodey propelled toward her, using the repulsors on instinct and not quite trusting his sea legs in the suit yet. He’d requested that his new kit had the black and grey matte tones of the previous versions, but thanks to the nanotech, much of the bulk had been streamlined. He still looked like the loaded for bear version between himself and Tony, and both of them were fine with that. They’d etched all of the same information on to the outer plates, updating the mark number. The Airforce insignias were there, as were hints of red, white, and blue accenting the design. Carol caught these details, and it made her pause. Rhodey landed on his feet firmly, and threw his arm up in a proper salute.

“Colonel Carol Danvers, I’m Lieutenant Colonel James Rhodes. It’s an honour to meet you ma’am. Our apologies for taking so long to find you, but as you can see, getting to you was a little beyond our regular capabilities,” Rhodey said. Danvers went completely still. Rhodey retracted the helmet of the armour, but kept up the salute. Her eyes opened wide, and she accepted it, and took a deep breath.

“Oh god, am I actually home?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am. As far as we know, this is the dimension you were taken from,” Rhodey replied.

“And Earth?”

“Is safe. For now. But depending on your state to serve, we could use someone of your skill and
capability. I serve with, I guess it could be called a specialty task force. It was brought together to
derive extraordinary threats, like the one you faced, and it’s called The New Avengers Initiative."

"New Avengers?" Danvers asked. Clearly two decades in a probable hellscape hadn’t dulled her
powers of perception any.

“The first incarnation was brought together for the same purpose during an invasion by the alien
race known as the Chitauri. While the team was initially successful, it wasn’t composed of people
with compatible personalities. It was disbanded, and a few members stayed on, and others are
being added to be more in line with what the U.N. needs in a team such as we are,” Rhodey
explained. His language was frank, and his words were economic and clear. The speech pattern
comforted Danvers, and the rest of them wisely stood back and kept their mouths shut.

“What fucking year is it?” she asked, and finally took a moment to really look around herself.
Rhodey could see easily how the setting would confuse her when combined with the high tech look
of Tony and Rhodey’s armour.

“It’s 2018, and we’re in a place called Kamar-Taj in Nepal. I’m here to assess you, and present
your current options,” Rhodey said.

“Options?” she asked.

“Your life, your choice, ma’am. You’ve been through a lot and you deserve that at least. If you do
not wish to serve with the Avengers Initiative, that is fine. If you no longer wish to be associated
with the United States Airforce, I have confirmed that you would receive a full retirement package.
The military now has some experience with members who’ve gone through longtime displacement.
From what I understand of your powers, I believe you can survive in open space, and leaving Earth
is also among your choices. We’re just here to facilitate your return from the Dark Dimension.
That being said, if you wish to further your service, with your status as what the U.N. has come to
define as an enhanced person, you would need to read, understand, and sign a document known as
the Sokovia Accords. This document is not as limiting as it seems on initial read through, but it is
needed as a rulebook for superheroes basically... I can’t imagine what you’ve been through, and I
know this is a huge amount to take in,” Rhodey said, venturing for an emotional response.

“No shit,” Danvers said. “What is this?” she asked and tested her enclosure.

“Eldritch magic, I’m told. Aliens are a thing. Magic is also a thing. I just try to keep up,” Rhodey
replied. “I’m sorry it took us so long to get to you. I didn’t even know about you until recently, and
I feel ashamed of that, given all you accomplished even before you encountered the Kree,” Rhodey
said. Danvers looked like she was calming down.

“Are you going to let me out of here?” she asked.

“Once I’m confident you’re not aggressive, because I’m fairly certain that, metal suit or no, you
could toss my ass into space, ma’am,” Rhodey said.

Danvers paused, and really looked at Rhodey again, and let out a laugh. She sank to her knees,
laughing and crying. Rhodey gave the nod, and Stephen and Wong brought down the enclosure.
Rhodey disengaged the armour, and got close. Tony’s heart was in his throat, and he had the
Aether at the ready to protect his oldest friend. Rhodey was wearing desert fatigues under the
armour, with the braces overtop of them. He steadied himself on his feet, and then offered Carol
his hand. Danvers looked up at it, and met his eyes. “Welcome home, Colonel,” he said. Danvers
hesitantly laid her hand in Rhodey’s and he pulled her up to her feet again.
For a moment, Tony’s mind was back in Afghanistan. But it was the one good memory he had, Rhodey pulling him up to his feet on the desert sand. From there to here had been a long journey, and Rhodey had remained much the same. In Tony’s eyes, human compassion was among Rhodey’s superpowers, hands down.

“Let’s get you back stateside,” Rhodey said.

“Not before I kiss my honey,” Tony said, and went over to Stephen. The armour peeled back, and Tony planted a kiss on Stephen’s lips who looked affectionate though somewhat annoyed at the breaking of character. Danvers was too busy examining everything else to be much bothered by Tony as he scratched at Stephen’s forming beard. “Mmm, extra fuzz. Like a peach,” Tony said.

“I do love that your weird matches mine,” Stephen mused.

“Match made in heaven. A really weird heaven,” Tony said softly and smiled at Stephen.

“Spoiler alert, there’s really no normal heaven out there, Tony. They’re all a bit weird,” Stephen replied. Tony laughed.

“I can imagine,” he replied and kissed Stephen again, basking in his presence.

“Tony,” Stephen said softly. “Do you feel the rift in her?”

“I can, but I think I need to approach it slowly. She’s got to agree to it,” Tony replied.

“She won’t sleep until you do, not really,” Stephen said, eyes assessing their new arrival carefully.

“We’ll take her home. I will get Coulson in, and see what he has to say about it to her. He might be the best advocate I have to get her to agree. She can stay at the compound as long as she feels comfortable with that. We’ll have to check on the status of any remaining family members... She looks pretty damn good for being in another dimension for two decades,” Tony replied.

“Time passes differently elsewhere,” Stephen said.


“I know,” Stephen said, and shook his head as he smiled.

“I want to go after Thanos soon, love. While I still have my nerve, and before he gets better control of the stones he does have,” Tony whispered.

“I suspected you might be building to that,” Stephen murmured back.

“There are heavy hitters on Earth now. It won’t be undefended while we’re gone.”

“How soon?” Stephen asked.

“Enough time that Danvers, Rhodey, and Hulk can bond and work together as a team. I suppose we can portal the Asgardians in if we need to bargain with Thor for protection,” Tony said.

“You think Thor will forgive the tongue lashing you gave him?”

“He’s forgiven Loki for stabbing him... like, a lot of times,” Tony offered.

“But they’re brothers. Brothers are asshats to one another,” Stephen said.
“Eh, I will tell the UN and the WSC to use the whole breathable atmosphere as leverage if they need to. Thor can survive in open space, but I don’t know if the rest of the Asgardians can... And to be terribly honest, one can’t farm food on stardust,” Tony reasoned.

“You’re the best at leverage,” Stephen said. Tony waggled his eyebrows at Stephen.

“Don’t I know it,” Tony said. “There’s a reason I love physics.”

“I’m just glad I get to benefit from it,” Stephen said and shrugged.

“You going to be able to lever yourself into my bed tonight? I can give you a demonstration.”

“It might be late, but yes, I should be able to. We have to ensure that the portal to the Dark Dimension is sealed up tight,” Stephen said.

“Attention to detail. You’re the best,” Tony said.

“I aspire to be,” Stephen replied.

Tony hung close to the compound for the next few days. A carousel of officials circled in and out, and Tony let Coulson and Rhodey deal with most of them. He only insisted that Danvers stay at the compound until she felt comfortable leaving. Fortunately, she agreed with Tony. And while her reunion with Coulson had been a happy one, she was as wary of SHIELD as Tony was. Rhodey had been running interference on that front, and with the Airforce. Tony had lawyered up for Carol, and it seemed there was going to be no attempts to wrangle her away.

Tony was ever so proud when Rhodey got Carol to sit down with a therapist. It was Rhodey who assured her that PTSD was taken very seriously nowadays, and that there would be no shame in admitting that she needed help. Still, Tony kept his distance, but made friendly overtures. He arranged for a haircut and full spa treatment for Carol, and joined the group for meals, with the Hulk at his shoulder. The Hulk mastering table manners made them all have more fun during meals.

If Danvers chose to trust him then he would welcome her in. Her sense of humour was wicked sharp, sometimes bordering on very dark. Though Tony supposed he would have been the same if he’d survived such an experience with his sanity somewhat intact. She had periods of hyper-vigilance and was having profound difficulty sleeping. Thankfully, the somewhat irregular schedules of the other residents meant she usually had someone to talk to, and FRIDAY had been instrumental in facilitating that. Tony had explained the BARF tech briefly, but wanted her to clear it with her medical team first.

To Tony’s surprise, it was Vision who started to bring her around to a centred state of mind. He was always learning something new, and Carol was playing catch-up, and he would frequently find them watching the news and documentaries together with Rhodey providing context. Hulk was charmed by her, as he was by most females. He delighted that she wasn’t all that worried he would accidentally hurt her.

When Carol approached Tony late one night while Stephen was at the Sanctum, Tony wasn’t all that surprised. She’d been back more than a week, and still had yet to get a full night’s rest. “I’m so fucking tired,” she said without preamble.

“I was held captive in Afghanistan by a terrorist group... Only a few months, but sleep didn’t come easily for years afterward. Every little noise, and then the things you think you can hear in the dark
“Yes. All of those things... James and Phil said that you might be able to help me with that.”

“I could use the memory modification tech, but that is therapeutic and takes time... Or there are powers that are available to me because of what I am... I could... I could fix you essentially. I could ground you in this time and place, and you would trust your own judgement again. Or, if you simply want a restful sleep, I can do that too. But you would need a place you felt comfortable dropping off right away,” Tony said.

“Like Stephen’s magic?” she asked.

“Same principles and effect, but the source is a little different,” Tony said.

“What’s the source?” she asked.

“Me, Carol. I... I have the ability to soothe... souls. Which still sounds a bit weird to me, but I do. I can help you handle your fear and have it so you can put it in perspective yourself. You wouldn’t be dependent on me or anything. You’d just be fixed,” Tony explained.

“What are you?”

“It’s a wordy novel what I am at this point... Long story short, I’m the personification of an Infinity Stone, not fuelled by one as Vision is... I am one,” Tony admitted.

“The Soul Stone,” Carol said. “James said you had something to do with it.”

“That’s my deal,” Tony said. “I can relax you and send you off to sleep if you want. I can also heal the things inside of you that are preventing you from sleeping. But you have to agree to it.”

“How long would I sleep for?” she asked.

“Until you woke up again. If it goes on too long, we can give your shoulder a shake,” Tony said.

“Great,” she said.

Tony followed her back to her quarters and waited politely while she got ready for bed. “So, you’re the actual Soul Stone,” she said once she came out of the bathroom in soft pajamas that Tony had made sure to provide. “A lot of people I encountered were looking for you,” she said.

“Does that freak you out?” Tony asked.

“No more than anything else I suppose,” she said and pulled down the covers and crawled into bed.

“You’re one tough woman, you know that?” Tony asked.

“Yup. They don’t give you that bird unless you can run with the best of them,” she said. Tony approached the bed and placed his hand on her forehead.

“How far do you want me to go?” he asked. Carol considered it carefully.

“Do it,” she said.

“Do what?”
“All of it... I want to believe I am where I am, when I am... From how you and James speak, it sounds like the Earth needs defenders, and I need to be ready for that,” she said.

“Okay, but I still think you should keep up with your therapy sessions,” Tony said.

“I’ve already promised James that I would finish all the sessions I have scheduled,” she replied.

“Good. Okay. Have a good sleep,” Tony said quietly, and put her under. Her eyes closed and she sighed softly. It was the work of a few moments to pull the gashes in her soul back together and heal them. Danvers’ aura was a bright red when it was all in one piece. Tony realized the trust she had in him, and it left him in awe for a moment. He removed his hand, and padded softly out to the hallway, and found Rhodey on the other side of the door. Tony pressed his index finger to his lips, and nodded toward the kitchen.

“She wanted to sleep, and she wanted to be fixed,” Tony said once they were out of earshot of Carol’s door.

“Good, I’m glad you can do that for her,” Rhodey said.

“How’s it been going for her really? I know what I’ve seen, but I don’t know that I was getting the whole picture,” Tony said.

“She’s one of the strongest people I’ve ever met, Tones. She has military training and mental conditioning for survival. She told me that she doesn’t feel she’s been away for as long as she has. She should be older than us,” Rhodey said. “But I’m thinking her condition is going to make her more like Steve Rogers now.”

“Yeah... Do you think she’s going to be okay? That she’ll be able to help out the Avengers?” Tony asked.

“I think so, if we give her a bit of time,” Rhodey said. In his mind, he was going over the reports he’d written for the Airforce about her.

“I hope she is... Because I have a feeling that even if I kill Thanos, his army will be pissed off enough to want to lay waste to us,” Tony said warily.

“Great, the alien version of HYDRA,” Rhodey said dryly. “But, you could blink them all out of existence.”

“I could... But that is a lot of blood on my hands... I... I will do it if I have to, but I’d rather just convince them all to fuck off home and rebuild what is left of their planets after Thanos had his way with them.”

“What about asking the Aether to convince them to chance their minds?” Rhodey asked. “I know it’s shaky moral ground, but as a lifelong active member of the military, I’ve learned that really, everything should be done to avoid going to war if possible. The cost is too high.”

“We’re getting old and soft, aren’t we?” Tony asked. Rhodey shrugged.

“The fewer dead people we have, the more okay I am with it,” he replied. “With age comes wisdom and all that.”

“We’re going to need to do a press release soon. We have to inform the public of what’s coming,” Tony said.
“It will cause panic, Tony,” Rhodey said.

“We’ll deal with it. We need time to prepare,” Tony countered.

“What does Stephen think?”

“That people should know. He was really devastated by what the Ancient One didn’t tell him, especially about the Dark Dimension. Informed consent is a doctor thing he can’t seem to shake,” Tony said. Rhodey sighed deeply but nodded.

“I know you’re right, but I worry that people will get desperate and start going into survival mode before Thanos even arrives,” Rhodey said.

“We present the plans to keep us safe. We offer people work to do in order to help. If we can show them it can be profitable to keep calm, and that everyone will be better off, then I think we can get it done.”

“I hope so, Tones. I really hope so.” Rhodey said.

Tony stepped up to the podium, full sheets of paper instead of cards in hand. Behind him, Stephen, Rhodey, Wong, and Carol stood, along with many members of the WSC and the UN. It should have been a familiar position, but the content of his message was anything but. He knew that this had to be the finest performance he’d ever given, and wondered if his own natural abilities would influence how people received that message, but it was too late to back out now. He gave the reporters what he hoped was a calm, hopeful, expression, and began.

“Hello, as many of you already know, my name is Tony Stark, and as the saying goes, I have good news and bad news. I’m going to start with the bad news first, but I need everyone to remain calm until I’ve finished explaining what we can do about the bad news... Hard times are on the horizon for all of humanity, but I’ve been working diligently on ways to ensure we all make it... The attack on New York by the Chitauri was a prelude, as I have long suspected.” Tony brought up images he’d first seen in the Pentagon on the monitors to either side of him.

“The Chitauri were a race enslaved to a being called Thanos. From what I have gleaned through friendly off-world contact, Thanos is a millennia old being intent on balancing the universe. He means to do this via the Infinity Stones, and his method is killing off half of every population in the universe... We’ve encountered some of the stones already here on Earth. The Tesseract, which powered the machine that opened the portal for the Chitauri, was one. The force that caused the destruction in Greenwich, England was another, called the Aether. These stones have power over a specific intangible things. Things that before I experienced what I have, I wouldn’t have believed...

“Reality, Power, Time, Space, Mind... and Soul... All of this seems quite esoteric, but we’ve all seen the consequences in real time already. The Space Stone, which we called The Tesseract, was the one that opened the portal. The Aether caused massive destruction in England... These can be dangerous, and mostly are seen as weapons of mass destruction. However, they don’t have to be. Vision is fueled by the Mind Stone, and his personality is that of someone with a sense of high moral discernment. He loves this planet, and the humanity that created him... He will defend us and stand with us.

“There are already plans happening for our defence. As many in Michigan already know, Stark Industries is starting to revitalize factories there and in the other traditional rust belt states for manufacture of needed items... I’ve also stepped in and am personally fixing the water problem in
Flint, because it’s unspeakable that no government institution has yet. People of Michigan, and the rest of these areas hit hard by job loss, I want you to think long and hard about the lawmakers who have abandoned you, their constituents, for corporate donations. They buy the people whom you trust to help bring about beneficial legislation for pittance. I urge you to demand change from your lawmakers. Remember they work for you, and are expecting you to live on the scraps the corporations give out. You need to vote in the next elections... All of them. Vote in them all. Vote in every one available to you, and keep voting for the rest of your life. This is your responsibility as citizens.

“Back to the topic at hand... We have about two and a half years at their projected rate of travel. I want us to be ready for them. Manufacturing jobs will be turned into maintenance once the fleet of ships I have planned is in service. Factories used for initial manufacture will be kept on in a more limited capacity for parts production. This will, for the most part, be done on American soil. Wakanda, and their advancements in everyday technology will leave you in awe. They have agreed to help us and help the world.

“I must stress that at this time, we are at a crucial moment. It is time to lay aside differences in culture and religion. We must cease with our petty tribal warfare among ourselves and turn our focus outward. We can no longer afford to look at our fellow humans as the enemy. If we want to survive the coming onslaught, then our capacity to understand who is in our tribe needs to expand. Thanos’ forces do not see us as anything other than expendable in the quest to bring balance to the universe. In his head, he’s creating a balanced universe... However, it bears all the earmarks of a fascist regime... And I think this is one time that a Hitler reference is appropriate. But this would-be dictator doesn’t care about disputes among us. He will kill us indiscriminately. It could be me. It could be you. It might not be you, but it could be everyone you’ve ever loved. It doesn’t matter to him. No belief, no external show piety will spare you, I’m sorry to say.

“I know a saviour would be easier. But I am not that. I’m an ideas guy with just enough talent and knowledge to bring those ideas to life. I’m not a religious man. I know that does not endear trust from most Americans. My experience with it mostly comes from my time spent captive in Afghanistan. Even then, I did not resort to prayer. But the guys who were trying to waterboard me into creating weapons of mass destruction prayed five times a day in most cases... And yet, so did the man who saved my life and was a fellow prisoner, who also... died trying to help me escape. My point is not to disparage religious belief... My point is that it’s not going to matter whether you believe or not. No single hero, no saviour, no god, will save us. We have to do that ourselves. None of us are safe, but only if we fail to do something.

“I know how much I’m asking of humanity here. But I think we can beat this. To them, we are nothing but short-lived canon fodder... But what we have to our advantage, is that no single bad person lives for all that long. It doesn’t seem like it should be an advantage, but it can be. Humans, despite our short lives, are capable of building for the future. We might not make it to see the finished pyramid, but our imaginations let us see how it will be one day. So if we’re offered enough in the way of personal gain, we can dedicate our lives to it. Because humanity will continue on through ideas and concepts, and dreams of a better future, shared with our children.

“This is huge. I won’t argue that. There will be people who question even trying. But I’m asking you to not sink into fatalism and panic. Especially not panic... Which is so hard not to do. I threw up in a bathroom in the Pentagon when I found out. True story. But instead of wallowing in that fear, I reached out to someone I love, and he looked at me and said we’d better get started on saving the world... Something to focus on helps me through my anxiety and panic. I hope it’s the same for you. I would be so proud if you could stand up and offer to help, in whatever way you feel you can.
“I say all this, as a man expecting negative backlash, expecting to be dismissed out of hand. This has been the reaction I’ve gotten up to this point. I expect there will be people who will say that this is humanity’s judgement, and our reckoning is at hand. And perhaps that’s true... But if that is so, I don’t want to go quietly into that good night. I will go down believing in the good things about humans. To the naysayers, I say that there is room on this Earth for you too... You may question what we are doing, but you may not question the reality. I won’t tolerate being distracted from my purpose. Understand that I, and those who believe me, will be trying to save you too... If Thanos is permitted to continue, then no one will be spared great loss. Catastrophic loss. To those who say ‘hand over the stones’, that will be ineffectual. Half of us would die anyway. That is consequence of Thanos’ flawed mentality.

“It’s a dark warning. It’s hard to accept. Before now, we have been protected in our isolation from other life supporting planets. In all actuality, we’ve been very lucky to live in this blissful ignorance. Sadly, but kind of not so sadly, it’s time to wake up. It’s time for us to come together. In doing so, we can show the rest of the galaxy, and the rest of the universe, that we can overcome the limitations nature has handed us, and we can recognize the gifts we’ve been given. We’re messy... But humanity is worth saving. And in doing so, we will save both ourselves and trillions of lives off of our world. I want you to help us try...” Tony took a short pause, and a sip of water.

“We will be starting with education programs worldwide. I’ve repurposed much of the Iron Legion and set the bots up with a holographic education programs. Math and science, as well as world history, and world literature... The next step is clean water for everyone. A project founded by Bruce Banner and finished with his blessing by me. Portable water filtration units, the size of a suitcase, powered by solar energy and hydro electric conversion created by water moving through the unit. The factories producing these units will be established in various African nations, where the need for them is greatest.

“As an aside, oil industry, I am coming for you. Arc reactor technology, wind, and solar, are coming and we are going to start implementing worldwide conversion. Ms. Potts and I have had this coming down the proverbial pipeline for years. In a short time, you will simply no longer be needed. I plan on absorbing and converting as many oil sector jobs as possible to S.I. and its subsidiaries... Change is inevitable, and I believe these will be good. I believe in humanity’s capacity to come together and usher us into this new era, and give our children a better future.

“And to those of you who will bizarrely think Thanos is right, I am going to indulge a few thoughts on that topic. Thanos’ plan is to kill half of the universe to somehow preserve resources... How is that his choice to make? Even if the killing is random, how is it that he gets to decide that people die at all? Who is he to dictate to you? Who is he to dictate to anyone that they must sacrifice? I propose that we find a way to live where we don’t have to sacrifice anyone. Where we embrace this Earth and learn to be better custodians of it. We will stop Thanos and in doing so, we will create a sustainable future.

“Yes, extraordinary heroes are out there. But our salvation will largely have to come from large scale communal effort. Very soon I will be making a foray into space to assess the threat further and I am going to leave you in the best possible hands with the current Avengers roster. Led by Colonel Carol Danvers and Lieutenant Colonel James Rhodes, with back up from other hand-selected enhanced persons who have signed the Sokovia Accords. But it is you, the people, who have the real power to save us. It won’t be easy, but it will be worth it. Thank you for your time. A detailed press release will be delivered after this press conference. I will take questions now for a few moments,” Tony said, and took another sip of water.

The gathered press stood in stunned silence for a moment. Then there were terrified ripples of hysterical, but smothered, laughter. “Mr. Stark, are you serious? Is this real?”
“I have been called a fool to my face for years by everyone from Captain America and the former Avengers members, to Peggy Carter, the various directors of SHIELD, to my best friend, to my significant other, to the damn god of thunder himself... The pictures don’t lie. The reports from our off-world contacts don’t lie. This is very real. The threat is very real. I am the one breaking this to you because of the level of experience I have with the situation, and because I felt that no one else should have to do this,” Tony said gravely.

“Off-world contacts? Who are you speaking about? Has Earth had contact with alien races?”

“Yes, we have. Though the word alien is... well, alienating. They’re just people who sometimes look different from us. They have cultural quirks, but are all sentient beings worthy of being seen as fellow humans. The main source of information is a somewhat ragtag group who serves an Avengers like function in space. You will probably meet them soon enough, as they are headed toward Earth to help us,” Tony said.

“Do you really think we can face this, Mr. Stark?”

“Yes,” Tony replied quickly. “Yes, I do... My old man and I might not have gotten along except for in public, but I did learn some valuable lessons from him. One of them is that it takes a lot of good people to fight fascists, but that it’s worth it. Every time it is worth it. You do everything you can, because they will give no mercy. So we plan, and we fight back. We’ve been doing it amongst ourselves for a long time now. This time, we have band together and take a stand. Beating extraordinary odds isn’t all that unusual. Humans have that kind of courage. We do it every day,” Tony said. There was more stunned silence.

“What about Steve Rogers and the rest?”

“Where are the other stones?”

“Thanos already has one that we know of, and most likely two... We have access to two here on Earth that authorities know about... The odds aren’t great, but they’re better than if he had more or if we had none,” Tony said.

“What do you mean Soul Stone? What does a Soul Stone do?”

“It’s true potential is unknown, and the location of it is unknown... From what little information we have, it controls life and death,” Tony said. “It’s crucial that Thanos does not get his hands on that one.” There was more silence, the room was reeling in shock.

“What about Steve Rogers and the rest?”

“What about them?” Tony asked.

“Will we need them, Mr. Stark?”

“To be honest, I don’t think so... The last chance I had to pay attention to them, they still hadn’t signed the accords. They are out of play. Laws have to be abided, especially now. Very few non-Americans have any warm feelings toward Captain America these days. He’s accused of murder. Innocent people just doing their jobs. They’re dead, and their families are left with the multitude of hardships that come with a loss like that. Others have been badly wounded and disabled by his violent acts. I myself nearly died trying to bring him in peacefully. He needs to stand trial for those crimes... Once upon a time, Captain America was a great figurehead to rally around... But we don’t need a figurehead. We don’t need a saviour. We need compassion, understanding, cooperation, and the kind of everyday bravery that the average person is very capable of,” Tony said. “A man with a shield looks great on paper, but the mass effectiveness as a defence mechanism leaves something to be desired in the face of the current threat.”
Heavy silence once again took over the room.

“If that’s all for now, I need to get back to work. I have about a million things on my docket, and need to get going. There will be more in the coming days, and I’ll be in touch. A word of warning... The world will spin on. Tomorrow will come. This is no time to panic. This is no time for anarchy. Go to work tomorrow. Go to school tomorrow. Keep on living. Start thinking of ways you can help... Law enforcement, the military, and the Avengers will be responding to any attempts to take advantage of people’s fear. Any type of profiteering will not be tolerated. These are the backward, old ways that we are looking to walk beyond. This is the worst way to have to head into the future, but the future is coming, and I think we should all be there to greet it.”

Tony left the podium in silence, Stephen at his side, and his fellow Avengers close behind him. He had his lapel mic removed, and headed for the portal Stephen opened. “Do you think they bought it about the Soul Stone?” Tony whispered once they were through.

“You had me almost convinced, so I think your secret is safe for now,” Stephen said. “An excellent job up there. Thank you. I know that couldn’t have been easy.”

“It really wasn’t.” Tony agreed, and leaned on Stephen for a moment, enjoying the quiet of the compound as the Cloak of Levitation curled around them both.

Chapter End Notes

One thing I think I can talk about in Infinity War without spoiling people, is the fascist and religious undertones to Thanos and his followers, so perhaps that's why I touched on it here. I was talking with a woman I work with, who watches the movies and really talks them over with her grandson. We were discussing seeing Thanos' point, and I said perhaps, but that depends on your general acceptance of authoritarianism. Me, I don't seem to have that inner need to comply, and when I brought that up, I think my coworker was surprised that I'd thought that far into it.

Thanks for reading!

As always, comments are love. And you are all lovely.
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Rogers makes a demand. Tony acquiesces... sorta. Our favourite boys talk Shakespeare and politics, and Tony gives the super soldier a piece of his mind.

Chapter Notes

Seen Infinity War three times now, and it's exhausting every time... Like, just, I wanna take a nap after watching it... But I did see it at the V.I.P. theatre, and it's easier to take when sipping at a Caesar (think a saltier Bloody Mary with a Canadian accent). AND I got to do a double feature one day, and have now seen Deadpool 2 twice. Ryan Reynolds owes me new underpants. I haven't laughed that hard in ages.

It's amazing how much funnier things are when you're not stuck in a pessimistic maelstrom of Nihilism all the time. Media, things friends say, etc, it's so much easier to enjoy things compared to where I was last year even... Feels good to be feeling again, ya know?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For the most part, the world took it on the chin. Tony remained on high alert for days, waiting for news of mass panic. There were pockets of it in predictable areas, and any attempt at anarchy was quickly tamped out, and reeducation efforts had begun. Fundamentalist populations were predictably having the most difficulty accepting. So that was where Tony’s retrofitted Iron Legion were coming in handy. He’d changed the design of their faces, and made their ‘eyes’ more open and friendly, and the line where a mouth should be now curved up slightly into a more gentle expression. Colours were whatever was considered luckiest in a culture, bright and friendly, and as un-Ultron-like as possible, and their mannerisms were programmed to be similar to well-meaning tourists. The bots were settling in where they had been welcomed, and the information loaded on them was starting to be used by locals.

As for Tony’s own abilities, he tried to keep their use to a minimum. But there were times when he had reached into people, and calmed them for the sake of overall peace. He talked it over with Stephen, for hours, about what he could do within reason, to help people and not hinder progress. So far, they had settled on removing indoctrination and tendency toward radicalization. He put small questions in people’s mind, making them wonder just how different their sworn enemies were from them, and cleared them of conditioned thoughts.

Tony himself had run several missions in the new armour to cool things out on the darker side of human behaviour. The nano tech was really coming along, and he was considering a permanent addition to his body, but was unsure how to attach it to himself. The old spot on his chest was currently taken up by his personal light show, and he was also unsure how it would take to more tech being introduced into his body.
That particular evening though, a headache was settling in behind Tony’s right eye. It’s causes were psychosomatic, but the pain was very real. The pain had a direct source, and that source was typical for Tony. He’d been informed an hour ago that Steve Rogers had declared a hunger strike until he got a face to face meeting with Tony. Tony had called Stephen, who was coming to him, but had to secure things at the Sanctum Sanctorum and wait for back up.

Tony hunched over holographic blueprints, contemplating something so insane that he was glad that Pepper was no longer with him. She would have been wary, and somewhat reviled by what he was kicking around in his mind. He was unsure how Stephen would react, and so was keeping a tight lid on the madcap idea.

He was no longer tweaking the design, rather he was focused on his headache. A headache he was officially naming Steve Rogers. Logically he knew something like this would happen. He knew that the news of Thanos out in the world would make Rogers start sabre rattling. Clearly someone had taught Rogers how to make Tony look like the asshole in the situation. Tony’s guess would be Romanoff, even if they technically weren’t supposed to have any contact currently. It would be a sucker bet to guess anyone else.

Tony closed the blueprints and scrubbed at his face with his hands. He wondered idly if he should attempt to contact his therapist before he did anything. Possibly, but his therapist was busy as hell, and had insisted that Tony was fully capable of making healthy decisions for himself.

Everything in Tony screamed to let Rogers just starve and to stay as far away from him as possible. But public opinion of him would plummet if he refused and it got out the press. “You okay, boss?” FRIDAY asked. Her voice was soft and concerned.

“I’m upset,” Tony admitted. “I hate the idea of having to talk to Rogers, but I might have to for the sake of public opinion.”

“He can suck an egg,” FRIDAY declared.

“While I wholeheartedly agree with you, baby girl, we have to consider that we can’t allow him to be a conscientious objector, or worse, a martyr. And while I will have to suffer through a meeting where he tries his ham-fisted version of manipulation or outright bullying, I will do so because we cannot let him have the moral high ground. His mental state is a hair off extremism, but the rest of the world doesn’t know that yet,” Tony said. He was grateful when a portal opened just inside the door to his workshop, and smiled when Stephen stepped through from the Sanctum’s foyer. He looked just a shade under concerned. Tony hadn’t told him why he needed him, just that he did at Stephen’s earliest convenience. The Cloak had no such subtlety, and floated directly over to Tony, massaging his neck.

“Hey, are you okay?” Stephen asked.

“I have a massive headache, both metaphorical and physical, named Steve Rogers,” Tony said. Stephen’s expression soured a bit, as it tended to whenever Steve Rogers’ name was spoken. He still had little good to say about him, both privately and publicly.

“What is he up to now?” Stephen asked.

“Hunger strike to get a face to face with me,” Tony said, trying to be upbeat and quippy, but not quite managing it. He squinted a bit at the light coming from the hall outside of the workshop. Stephen, ever observant, noticed.

“Are you really okay?” he asked softly.

“Ibuprofen, and straight to bed,” Stephen said.

“Come on, it’s only 10pm,” Tony whined.

“Fine, ibuprofen, dinner, a moderate amount of caffeine, a movie with the sound on low, and then bed,” Stephen bargained. Tony only looked slightly more inclined to acquiesce on that.

“I have to give them an answer. I can’t leave this to the lawyers this time,” Tony said.

“Why not?” Stephen’s voice was vaguely irritated. Tony knew that it wasn’t directed at him, but at Tony’s seeming need to comply with Rogers’ wishes. Stephen got obstinate about Tony interacting with the former team now that he knew how much they’d abused the privilege of his friendship. Tony loved that about Stephen, but being raised in the world of business, and to a lesser degree, politics and celebrity, had taught Tony a lot about getting along. Stephen got to do as he wished most of the time, and Tony took that as a good influence on his own growth as a person. But often, rich, famous, politically active people had to do shit they didn’t like, and this was definitely one of those times.

“Because some idiot taught Steve Rogers about passive resistance. He cannot become a martyr. We can’t let that happen. We’re just getting people together now. We can’t afford dissent. If the news gets out that corporate fat cat Tony Stark won’t even talk to the ‘kid from Brooklyn’, then I will be the monster. Every time, I will be the monster. People will follow top dogs, but they like to root for underdogs. So, I have some options... Silence him... But if people find out, that will not go well for me. Let him voice his opinions to the press, and then have a logical answer and foil to them, which won’t work well either. Everyone hates a know-it-all. Or, the other option, which is cruel, but the most effective tactic. Turn the tables and become the underdog. I would have to expose him. I would have to expose everything he ever did to dismiss and deride me. I would have to give evidence of his bullying, and show how psychologically he only seems to live for the next battle and not for achieving lasting peace... The tape of Siberia from the suit before we started fighting would be a cherry piece of evidence... I would have to show the world what he really is, and then let them devour him,” Tony said. “Which is why I have a headache.”

“Do it,” Stephen said, and ran his fingers over Tony’s cheek and jaw. Tony grinned at his other favourite personified Occam’s Razor.

“It’s dicey. It could go very wrong, and could turn out where people see me as weak,” Tony replied. “No matter how it turns out, people are going to feel manipulated.”

“Better than them feeding into the lies that Rogers tells himself, Tony,” Stephen replied. “Not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more,” Stephen quoted softly.

“That feels appropriate,” Tony murmured, thinking of Brutus’ speech, and more affectionately, of Edwin Jarvis explaining it to him when poetry once again baffled him as a young man. “But Rogers isn’t Caesar. He’s Marc Antony, and that is a whole other wasp’s nest.”

“Oh, so do I get to be Cassius?” Stephen teased, trying to be light, and pulling Tony out of the dark mood he could see settling around his aura.

“You haven’t suggested that I kill him yet,” Tony reasoned.

“Actually, I did. Sort of,” Stephen said, giving a shy little grin.

“That wasn’t anything more than a test of my morality. Wait, so who’s Caesar in this thought
“Oh, let’s say Ross,” Stephen said. “He sort of wants good things for humanity, but nobody really likes him, and fuck, the crimes he committed on his rise to power.” Tony laughed and leaned into Stephen’s touch. “Also, he is now very much metaphorically dead in the political sphere.”

“That works. Does that mean I’m deluded and doomed to failure like Brutus?” Tony asked, contemplative.

“I’m saying you can learn from his mistakes,” Stephen said.

“So, what? We take out Marc Antony?”

“Or something like that... Remember, we’re saving the Republic here, and no one man is more important than that,” Stephen explained. “And if Rogers is given even a chance to start winning people over to his side, he will do it, and he will think he is right the entire time. Then, coming back to reality here, the world will burn.”

“So, what should I do?” Tony asked.

“Whatsoever you feel like. You’re stronger now, Tony. Calmer, and more in control of your powers. Barring that the Aether is always there to protect you. If you feel you must meet with him to appease dissenting voices, then you have little to worry about from him.” Stephen said. “First though, ibuprofen before the headache turns into a migraine.”

Stephen went for the first-aid kit in the shop, and easily found the needed medication. Tony noted how Stephen had adapted his grip for childproof caps, and used his palm instead of his fingers. Stephen shook out 800 milligrams worth, and handed them to Tony. “Take them with water, love,” Stephen said quietly.

“Yep, got it,” Tony went to the sink and rinsed out a coffee mug and dutifully took the pills. He drank a full mug of water, and set it back down on the counter.

“FRIDAY, tell the legal eagles to arrange a holographic call with Rogers, as that is all I really have time for currently. All legal representation will be present, his and mine. The meeting will be recorded. I want a basic idea of what he wants to discuss, and anything off topic ends the call instantly. If it gets out in the press, play it like I am taking time out of my busy schedule saving the world to come to the table one last time. That should keep them on my side for the time being,” Tony said.

“On it boss,” FRIDAY said.

Two days later, Tony and his legal team were gathered, defying the Nothing Before Stupid O’Clock in the Morning Protocol, to accommodate the time difference. The holding facility had set up the tech correctly and Tony was awaiting the signal that everyone was in place. He looked over the scant notes of ‘official topics of discussion’, and deduced that most of them actually said “why are you such a prick, Stark?”, but he was letting it slide for the sake of the Republic.

His video feed of the conference room showed Rogers being led in, lighter Vibranium tech restraints around his wrists and ankles. Rogers wouldn’t be able to see him yet. Again, he looked in decent health. But he’d only been refusing food for a few days. Tony knew from Howard’s notes based on speculative conversations Howard had had with Erskine, that Rogers’ metabolism would slow after enough time, and he would just fall asleep like he had in the ice. It would take a lot more
than a few days off his feed to put a dent in Rogers’ system.

Stephen and the Cloak swooshed into the meeting room at the Avengers Compound, looking out of place and exactly like everything Tony wanted in this world simultaneously. Tony smiled warmly at him. His lawyers looked nervous of Stephen, but that only pleased Tony more. “Aww, boo bear,” Tony said. “I didn’t know you could make it today.”

“For this? Don’t be silly, sugar beet, of course I’m here,” Stephen retorted and Tony laughed despite his worry.

Stephen looked mildly at Rogers on the screen. “Does he always look like a confused puppy?” he asked.

“When he doesn’t get his way? Often... If that doesn’t work, he starts bullying,” Tony replied.

“Mr. Stark, for the coming legal proceedings, do you have evidence of that?” One of the legal team asked. Stephen immediately recognized the man the others would all defer to simply by his demeanour.

“Yes, Mr. Palmer, I do. Pretty much from the moment I met him. My surveillance systems are quite thorough, and Rogers signed a release and was well-informed of that fact upon entering my property for the first time. One has to protect all that proprietary tech of course,” Tony said.

“Of course, Mr. Stark.” The lawyer made a note to follow up on that later.

They all took their seats, and the call connected. The empty space across the table flickered to life, and was filled with the hologram images of Steve Rogers and his legal counsel, making it appear they were all sitting at the same table. The Cloak moved up and patted Tony’s hand encouragingly. Stephen made no move to stop it.

“Tony,” Rogers said in his best dying swan voice.

“Rogers,” Tony replied. Steve’s face pinched, clearly not liking how Tony addressed him.

“Has it really come to that stage?” Rogers asked.

“Yes,” Tony said simply, and let silence fall over them.

“I’m... I’m sorry, Tony,” Rogers said.

“For what?” Tony asked, voice and face neutral.

“For hurting you. For not finding a better way,” Rogers explained. Tony’s eyes narrowed slightly.

“There already was a better way. But since it was me pushing it, it had to be morally bankrupt without further consideration.” Tony’s voice was mostly void of emotion. He was well and truly out of fucks to give for Rogers and the corner he’d painted himself into.

“Tony, you know what was originally proposed by the Accords came off as totalitarian,” Rogers said.

“No, it didn’t. It only seemed totalitarian to you, because it affected you. But it affected Romanoff, and she still signed. It affected me, and T’Challa, and we supported it from the start. I had to bend, and in the case of Ross, bend right over for a bit, to get people onside. I had to face the media of over a hundred nations baying for regulation after Sokovia, and I didn’t see you standing by me
then.” Tony said.

“You caused Ultron, Tony. How was I to trust you?” Steve asked, his voice soft, trying to appear humble.

“No, I didn’t. Banner and I weren’t even close to an interface. I told you that. The A.I. we found in the HYDRA base, and the Mind Stone had a murder baby, and it took the name of my learning defence program, and didn’t give me the chance to nurture it into loving humanity. Do you think JARVIS would have ever harmed you? What about Vision or FRIDAY? But you never took the time to understand how any of that worked, or how I brought about A.I.s that care... The key ingredient is time... And you blamed me for everything instead of taking a second glance at the not actually ‘just a kid’, who unleashed the Hulk on thousands of innocent people for shits and giggles. Now, whatever it is you want to say, please say it, because my patience for you is wearing very thin,” Tony said.

“Thanos, Tony. You need help,” Rogers began. He was trying for trustworthy and authoritative. Tony sighed.

“I have help,” Tony retorted. The Cloak patted his hand again. Tony only barely managed to not grin like an idiot at it for the sake of his emotionless mask, but he did run his thumb gently over the fabric.

“We can help, Tony. You’re going to need everyone you can get,” Rogers said. Tony forced himself to not grit his teeth.

“Rogers, you don’t know what’s coming. You don’t understand. This is so far beyond your pay grade, and I say that actively not trying to be an ass about it. You and a shield, along with all your loyal pals, are nothing but cannon fodder, if that, to Thanos. Laughable. I’m telling you this to save your life. The plucky little guy from Brooklyn would be nothing but a smear on Thanos’ knuckles. Something sticky on his boot... No amount of fight in a single dog is going to make a lick of difference to him. And you don’t have the same kind of rallying power to humanity anymore... You’re accused of murder. You’ve been charged with murder. Do you think that this would absolve you? Do you think that everyone is going to forget how you summarily lost your shit in front of the world? I offered you help, treatment for Barnes. I offered Maximoff refuge. I gave you and the others everything you ever asked for. I housed you. I fed you. I cleaned up your messes physical and political... But absolution from the rest of the world is something I cannot do,” Tony said, and sighed again.

“I never asked you for anything, Tony,” Rogers said, looking him in the eye, and again trying to be the leader in the room by making Tony explain himself. It was one of Rogers’ favourite tactics in controlling him previously.

“You didn’t have to, because you trained me up so you wouldn’t have to. Boyish charm to draw me in and trust you. Then a little social ostracism from the group when I didn’t do what you wanted. Add in a few dashes of poking at my anxiety and guilt. Top notch strategy for appearing blameless. I fell for it,” Tony said.

“Tony, you have it all wrong. I never wanted to hurt you,” Rogers insisted.

“But you did. Outside of the emotional manipulation, you almost killed me, Rogers. It only seems like I have more lives than a cat, but I really don’t... And where would humanity be if you had?” Tony closed his eyes and counted slowly to three, surprised that Rogers didn’t try to interrupted him before he continued. “You and Fury, and the rest are right... I’m not a superhero... Not like you. I can’t throw caution to the wind in a physical fight... But what I do have are the skills to save
us. I hate to make your method of warfare sound irrelevant, but it already is. That’s Thanos’ doing and not mine, so you can’t blame me for wanting to evolve how we do things. I’m sorry it worked out this way, but that is reality, and it’s not going to change because you’ve decided that you want to be one of the good guys again,” Tony said.

“Good or bad doesn’t matter now, Tony. You need our skills,” Rogers said. “You are going to need every person capable of helping, you said so yourself.”

“Oh I do?” Tony’s voice changed to sharp in an instant. “Is that because I can’t do it on my own, or because you don’t like that I do have help and you won’t be needed? Good or bad still matters very much. As does abiding the law, especially in the face of an unsure future. Your time is better spent preparing your legal defence, Mr. Rogers. That is going to be your war for now,” Tony said. Rogers’ expression changed. He stood up suddenly, and Tony was very glad that he wasn’t actually face to face with him. His penitent mask slipped, and heated anger boiled up to the surface.

“You can’t go around thinking your way is best all the time, Tony. You don’t get to choose how we save ourselves,” Rogers said.

“Yes, I do. Because as of right now, I’m the one that organized bodies have come to for help in this situation. They approached me. They asked me to come up with solutions. They might have asked you, but you were too busy making widows and orphans out the families of various active service members around the world. You betrayed the world because you saw your individual freedom as more important than people’s safety,” Tony said. Steve slammed his restrained hands on the table.

“Bucky, Tony, for the last time, I did it for Bucky. I was told there was a kill order out on him. What was I supposed to do?” Steve asked, supremely frustrated at being restrained and being reprimanded.

“Who told you that?” Mr. Palmer piped up, suddenly very interested.

“Mr. Rogers, as your legal advisor, I am warning you to not say another word about that,” Rogers’ lawyer said gravely. Thankfully the man seemed to have a handle on Rogers, who dutifully shut his mouth and sat down.

“All of that aside for the time being, if this were actually all about Barnes, you would have allowed me to arrange psychiatric care for him like I did at the start of that mess. You would have trusted those who cared about you to help you,” Tony said.

“After SHIELD fell, who was I to trust?” Steve asked petulantly.

“Probably the guy with two thumbs, and who’s been suspicious of SHIELD since the moment you met him,” Tony offered harshly and pointed at himself. “But again, your narrow world view couldn’t let you explore options other than rugged individualism, or accept dissenting voices. I think Sam Wilson is a stand up guy, but man did you fuck his life over, Rogers. Same with the rest of them,” Tony said. He knew he was going to hit a nerve, but he let the hammer fall on it, because of the aforementioned lack of fucks in his reserves.

“Sam chose to fight by my side. He chose his actions.” Rogers justified.

“And as his commanding officer and leader, shouldn’t you have chosen better for him?” Tony challenged. “Loyalty is fostered by looking after your people, not expecting them to follow you into the line of fire without question.”
“What do you know about loyalty?” Rogers sneered now, his temper building to a very expected crescendo.

“See that robot behind me?” Tony pointed to Dum-E, who was having a snooze alongside the wall behind him. Dum-E perked up for a moment, waved at the cameras, and then resumed his siesta. “He’s been in my life as long as Rhodey... Speaking of Rhodey, he is a friend who put personal gain at risk to come find me after I’d been taken. He searched for months in an active war zone, and he didn’t fire a shot or throw a punch. And he brought me back... What do I know about loyalty? I know how to treasure it in others, Rogers, not just expect it because of what my title is,” Tony’s voice was surprisingly quiet again. It was a tactic that Stephen had noted Tony employed like a scalpel in conversation. It gave him a lot of power after gaining people’s attention with bluster, forcing them to really listen in on what he was saying. Rogers’ anger exploded right on cue.

“No, Tony! You can’t do this! You can’t be trusted to bring this about! You need us!” Rogers shouted. He leaned forward, and would have been pointing a finger in Tony’s face if his hands weren’t bound. It was something Tony had seen in real life all too often already, and he managed to maintain his cool.

“No, I really don’t. I have the rest of humanity on my side,” Tony said. He raised his hand and called up the holographic control panel, and ended the conference with a swipe of his fingers. He stared numbly ahead for a few moments, and then leaned forward and put his head in his hands. The headache was starting up again. Stephen’s hand, with its familiar slight tremble settled on the back of his neck, and moved his fingers gently around in his hair. Part of the Cloak settled on top of them, offering warmth and comfort.

“Man, what an asshole,” Palmer said as he jotted down a few notes. “Can’t believe I bought my daughter that plushie of him. Think I’ll try to sway her to Iron Man instead.”

“Doctor Strange is my personal favourite,” Tony offered, not looking up. Stephen smirked demurely. “God, he’s delusional isn’t he? Totally cracked... He’s dangerous now. Nothing I can say will ever be enough to convince him I’m not the evil one here.”

“Most likely not,” Stephen agreed. “But you handled him brilliantly. Though I would think it will be wise to put extra security on him to avoid any escape attempts.”

“You’re right. We’ll have to put other checks and balances in to make sure they don’t try to throw a monkey wrench into things,” Tony said. “I also think we should pursue Rogers’ mental state as an issue,” Tony said to Palmer.

“Oh, I’m already on it,” Palmer said, fingers flying over his tablet. “If he cannot contain himself in a friendly meeting, it doesn’t bode well for his future as a defendant. Was he always like this to deal with?” The lawyer asked.

“He was better when solidly in charge and unquestioned. But questioning things is kind of my modus operandi. There’s a reason I infuriated my old man,” Tony said.

“And part of the reason why I adore you,” Stephen said. Tony looked over at him and grinned.

“Boss, Rogers wants to call back,” FRIDAY announced.

“Oh for fuck sakes,” Stephen grumbled. “Please, darling, let me put him in a nice, comfy, temporary coma.”
“Shh, not in front of the lawyers, love.” Tony replied. “Oh what the hell, put him through, FRIDAY.” Tony didn’t bother to look up right away or compose himself. He sighed deeply and let his shoulders slump. Perhaps if he let Rogers see his pain then he might shake loose a scrap of empathy.

“Tony, I-” Tony held up a finger to silence Rogers and get his attention.

“Rogers, when are you going to understand that helping the little guy does not mean picking fights with the big guy, especially when the big guy was on your side to start with?” Tony asked.

“It’s not like that. You just... never shut up. You won’t listen,” Rogers said. Tony drew himself up, shoulders back and chin parallel with the table top. Typical of Rogers to demand answers of Tony, and then get angry when Tony used too many words for his liking. It was this type of behaviour that was subtle, but crazy making, and Tony was over nine thousand percent done with it.

“I have, Steve! Every word you’ve ever said! I listened and I helped, and for a long time I could ignore the narrow mindedness of your world view, because we were doing good, even if it was at a cost. But then we went too far. I realize now that I had bought in to your inflated sense of superiority... I was just a guy trying to keep up with spies, super soldiers, and gods... Until I realized something. That all of you fuck up just as often as the rest of us. Body superior, yes. Mind superior? I have serious doubts. I think your mind lost its will to the serum long ago... I’m not sure you’re the same guy who went into the ice. I’m not even sure you’re the same man Erskine picked out,” Tony accused.

“I am Tony, you know I am,” Rogers tried again with the hangdog expression.

“Then you’re just as manipulative as anyone else, Rogers. Except now you’re a big guy with a Napoleon complex. You still think you have something to prove. You fail to see the power you have and use that power responsibly. Thinking you have no power doesn’t mean you don’t... You ever notice how you call me Tony when you want something, and Stark when you’re angry at me? Because I did. It’s a cheap tactic, and you know it. Familiar and warm when I’m keeping you happy, harsh and dehumanizing when I’m not. From my side of things, it feels like you’re trying to remind me I’m not Howard. You’re right, Steve. I’m not Howard, and I don’t mind that one bit. If you do, then that’s your problem...

“I tried with you. I really tried. And then I tried again and again, and now I’m done. There is simply not enough submission in me to supply your need for it. I’m done with this toxic wasteland of a friendship, if we could ever really call it that. I don’t know how to help you. I do know that every time I try, I end up hurt in one way or another. You can apologize all you want, but I am not obligated to help you. The next time we see one another will be during official legal proceedings, and it will be the last time. After that, if it makes things easier, just pretend I did die in Siberia after you left me there. Now, go get something to eat. This tactic will not work a second time,” Tony said. “Okay? Okay. Bye.”

Tony ended the call, and leaned forward on the table on his elbows again. Stephen’s hand was rubbing his lower back. “And I believe that is what we call irreconcilable differences,” Tony quipped. He looked over at Mr. Palmer. “Did I say anything stupid?”

“No, you did just fine, Mr. Stark,” Palmer replied. He was already sending emails out to his research team to find out who the hell had told Rogers that there was a kill order out on Barnes.

“Good, now if you’ll excuse me for the impending PDA,” Tony said. Palmer waved him off, eyes already glued to his screen.
Tony turned, grabbed Stephen by the front of his tunic, and kissed him hard and hungrily. “I love you,” Tony murmured, dragging his teeth over Stephen’s lips. “I love you so much, and I am the luckiest man on Earth that I found you, I swear to fuck. I’m alive again because of you.” Tony kissed him again. He felt the Cloak creep up his arm. Stephen kissed him back, unconcerned that they had company, who were gathering up their various devices and paperwork and ignoring them.

“You’re alive again because you resurrected yourself. I just happened to greedily snag you after the fact... You handled him like a maestro,” Stephen told him softly. Tony smiled, but his eyes dropped a bit.

“That was exhausting,” he whispered back.


“Only because you were holding yourself back from opening a portal and slapping the back of his head through it,” Tony said.

“You know me so well,” Stephen said and grinned.

Chapter End Notes

So I had been writing a little fluffy end cap to this chapter, but realized that it wasn't going to work, and that I would just be wasting page time, so to speak, so I have left it out. I think I might compile a bunch of cut scenes at the end of the story for your amusement (and mostly mine, why lie?).

Also, had to name the lawyer that. Just had to. There are plenty of lawyers in the Marvel universe, but it was more fun to me to have that reference.

So, this fic has topped over 50,000 hits... I am gobsmacked. Utterly gobsmacked. Wow. Just wow. Thank you! I have read every comment, and treasure every interaction this fic receives. Thank you for indulging my weirdness. It means a lot.

And remember, as always, comments are love.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Rhodey brings the kids over for the weekend, Tony gets a little time with his boo, and then, space invaders.

Chapter Notes

Heeeeeeey... So, things... Yes, things. Had a couple long conversations with my medical team the past few weeks, and was just about to balk on making an appointment for some talk therapy, thinking things were improving, as they tend to when I hit blue periods... And then Anthony Bourdain hanged himself...

I spent a lot of my formative years working in the kitchen industry while Bourdain was making a name for himself, and reverence of him was whispered cult-like among the sous-chefs and lower ranking members of the industry. Kitchen Confidential was pivotal reading for me. He was a guy that got it. He'd gotten over the ego of the celebrity chef, and made it far more important than "cook with love, dearies," or "bam!" ever could. Food was as intrinsic to culture as stories were, and he blended them together so very well... Beyond food though, he was simply one of my favourite storytellers, and I haven't been this affected by a 'celebrity' death since Christopher Hitchens' passing... I thought Bourdain had walked beyond his demons, and had made it out of that basement... But he didn't... And he left a little girl behind, probably as baffled as the rest of us are by how he went, and infinitely more aggrieved... Anyway, I know a wake-up call when I fucking see one. My first appointment isn't until the end of July, but I plan to be there, and I hope to learn something. Even in the darkest times, learning has eased my mind.

And the other thing... Marijuana has just been legalized by the Canadian Senate... That's awesome. Like, really fucking awesome. Because the other thing I had been discussing is the chronic pain in my jaw. I frequently take 1800mg of Advil a day to handle it... But, CBD oil is about to become very easy to access, and I am going to give it a try. I have no memory of what more than six hours of sleep at a time feels like.

Sorry for the delay... Self-care bullshit... But it's for the better, I promise.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Later that morning, Tony walked into the large communal area with a cup of coffee in his hand. Familiar faces were present, and Hulk looked up from what appeared to be a trough of Eggo waffles. “Tony!” he exclaimed happily.

“Hey buddy!” Tony replied and patted Hulk’s arm as he got close to him. On the other side of Hulk were more familiar faces, along with a couple new ones. “Have we started an internship program?”
Tony asked, looking at Rhodey.

“Carol’s idea. Start bringing along some young heavy hitters, instead of throwing them in if they’re suddenly needed,” Rhodey said. “They arrived while you were in your meeting, and are here for the weekend.”

“Hi, Mr. Stark!” Peter called, and waved.

“Hiya, Pete,” Tony said and mussed up the boy’s hair. Peter squawked but took it like a champ.

“Ned’s angry that he didn’t qualify,” Peter said.

“When the boy learns some self-restraint, only then will I consider him for Guy In The Chair training,” Rhodey said.

“Who are our other tiny hero hopefuls?” Tony asked, sipping at his coffee. A slip of a girl with dark hair and eyes reached out for a bowl of fruit, but her arm stretched inhumanly four places down. Tony smiled in recognition. “You must be the Jersey girl,” Tony declared. The girl smiled at him shyly, like she was trying very hard to not scream at the top of her lungs that Tony Stark was in the room.

“K... Kamala, Mr. Stark,” she said breathlessly, vibrating with energy. “Ohmygod. TonyStarkknowswholiam...”

“It’s very nice to meet you, miss,” Tony said. “And you?”

“Sam,” the other kid said, trying to appear nonchalant about where life had placed him. Tony recognized the too cool for school trope easily.

“What do you do?” Tony asked.

“He’s who you were calling Helmet Head,” Rhodey offered. Recognition crossed Tony’s features and he smiled.

“Very cool. You and I have to talk about the properties of that thing sometime soon,” Tony said.

“I’ll tell you what I know,” Sam offered.

“Sounds great,” Tony said. “Looks like you got some good ones.”

“That we did,” Rhodey agreed. “I know you have a tonne of things to do, but do you think you would have some time to run some drills with us later?”

“FRIDAY, what does the schedule look like?” Tony asked.

“I think we can manage it after lunch for a couple of hours,” she replied.

“Works for us. We’re doing some orientation and basic practical safety courses this morning,” Carol said.

“Great. It’ll be good to get him outside for a bit,” FRIDAY said.

It turned out Carol had a knack for bringing young recruits along, with an intimate understanding of how to encourage confidence and harmony. She explored their ranges of abilities, equally as fascinated by each of them.
Tony observed quietly, mentally working on a suit to stretch with Kamala as she moved so she would be better protected, and asking Sam about the properties of his. He finally got Pete inside of project 17A, and he was having an absolute blast inside the Iron Spider suit. Tony was relieved that he was still as maneuverable, and now better protected. Hulk seemed delighted by the kids, and delighted putting them through their paces. Tony mused that it was good to get Peter around kids his own age so he didn’t become isolated from his peers. They teased one another, as teenagers were going to do, and it made Tony so happy to see the rapport build between them.

Stephen rescued Tony early that evening, and Tony easily put away his work and followed Stephen through the portal to Bleecker Street. It wasn’t date night, but after the morning meeting and excitement of the teenagers in the afternoon, Tony was ready to pack it in relatively early.

Stephen had take-out waiting and Tony tucked into the Thai food eagerly and gratefully, finishing up a few emails on his tablet, while catching up on stock prices. He hummed and sighed softly while looking at them. “Something wrong, love?” Stephen asked.

“No. Projections show S.I. moving up several spots on the Forbes list this year,” Tony replied.

“And that’s... depressing?” Stephen asked.

“In a way, yes,” Tony said.

“Why?” Stephen asked. He didn’t sound condescending, rather, genuinely curious about Tony’s reasoning.

“Because S.I. was doing okay as a tech company. And now, the thing that is making the stock prices soar once again are defence contracts. I liked that the company had survived the change in direction. I was very proud of that... And now, here I am again, the Merchant of Death. I know it’s necessary, but it weighs on me,” Tony said. He shut down the tablet. Stephen looked at him across the table, a concerned look on his face.

“Necessary is tame terminology for it, Tony. It’s pivotal. Without it, Earth stands no chance of a future. I know what it is to have a profession chosen for you. It’s not what you wanted, but as we say, chosen one, man-pain, save the world bullshit,” Stephen said. Tony laughed a little and shook his head.

“If I am remembered by history, I am going to be so problematic,” Tony said.

“Yes, but if humanity and the planet survive, then you are a success,” Stephen reasoned. Tony nodded, considering that. “When do you want to go? I know you’re angling for something.”

“Soon. A few more things. I want the fleet of ships in production... And I’m considering... implanting some repositories of the nanotech in my body. Then I would never be without the suit,” Tony said all in a rush. Stephen met his eyes and slowly set his chopsticks down for a moment.

“That sounds... invasive,” Stephen said carefully.

Tony sighed again and looked down at his hands for a moment, thinking of the times his body had failed him. “I know. And I’m not denying that... But... I never want to be caught with my pants down. I never want to leave Earth, leave you, without a defender.”

“It seems an extreme option, Tony,” Stephen said. Tony looked up and into Stephen’s eyes.
“We’re up against an extreme problem,” Tony said.

“What you’re proposing, if I can gather correctly, skirts the boundaries of morality, especially where it concerns medical science,” Stephen said.

“Informed consent. I know what I am considering. It’s all about the informed consent,” Tony said.

“Implant where? Where is there room in a human body for a nanotech hive?” Stephen asked.

“Lots of places... I don’t think it’s wise to go rooting around much in my chest nowadays, but under the ribcage from the side would be an option, I want to keep the current sternum, I don’t want a replacement for that. But I could reinforce it. Remember the nanites are so small they can move between my cells and not cause harm... Heh, nanite washboard abs. Buns of steel... I’m terrible. I’ll stop,” Tony said.

“And I assume you’re going to ask the Aether to make it all work out,” Stephen suggested.

“Yup. She’s not opposed,” Tony said. The Aether sparked to life, and a tendril of red light caressed Tony’s forearm.

“What would make you reconsider this?” Stephen asked.

“If you couldn’t handle it,” Tony said quickly, and then continued more slowly. He leaned forward on his elbows, and put his chin on his hands. “Pepper hated the arc reactor. It’s what kept me from going further with the tech in my body. She was never afraid of it, except for that one time, but it did quietly repulse her. She never said it, but she brought it up often enough that I know it did... If it means losing you, then I won’t. I will put the idea on the shelf,” Tony said.

“You can’t put that on me,” Stephen said carefully. “It’s your body, Tony. I won’t have you resenting me for something that is not in my control.”

“Would it be a deal breaker?” Tony asked. “I would keep it as subtle as possible, promise.”

“But they would in you, Tony. Does that not even seem a bit frightening to you?” Stephen asked. Tony took a deep breath, calm because Stephen was calm. This situation with Pepper would have gone very differently, with Pepper taking a stance, sticking to it, and the argument would escalate to raised voices at rocket speed. This wasn’t Pepper though, and Stephen had proven he could handle chosen-one, man-pain, save the world bullshit.

“Perhaps it should frighten me more. But I know my tech, Stephen. I trust it... I trust my work. I trust it more than the donated cadaver sternum currently holding me together... And it would protect me further from Thanos. You can’t deny that,” Tony reasoned calmly.

“I can’t... But I don’t have to like that you feel it’s a necessity.”

“Do you admit it’s necessary?” Tony asked. Even despite how serious the conversation was, he loved this. He loved that Stephen questioned him back every time, and challenged him at every turn, to be better, to think bigger, to push limits, to question if there were any. Because he knew that they could speak this seriously and their relationship was not at risk.

“You’re currently wearing the Aether, love. So, no, I don’t think it’s exactly necessary,” Stephen said.

“But I can’t ask her for everything all the time. It’s not fair to her. What if she wants to leave one day? What then? This will help me protect her in the meantime as well,” Tony said. Stephen
sighed heavily and picked up his chopsticks again.

“Try not to make it too glowy. It will make sleeping next to you more difficult... And if you cover up a ticklish spot, I will end you. I need those as leverage to contain you during sex,” Stephen said.

“I will keep it to a minimum,” Tony said softly. “But it wouldn’t... you know... be a deal breaker?”

Stephen looked at him for a long time, his breathing measured and forcibly calm. Tony wondered if he used the same technique when he was putting someone’s brainstem back together back in the day.

“No, Tony... I would love you if you were a disembodied A.I. ... That being said, I worry about the affect this will have on you psychologically. I worry that the revelation of what you are has caused some depersonalization, and that you still see yourself as expendable in some way, or at least see your body that way... You probably don’t have to do this. But I know your nature. I know you always want to push and progress... But I want you to ask yourself if you should do this... Every time you take a step of this nature, I want you to ask if you would to it to me in order to save my life... Or better yet, would you do it to me simply if I asked you to. If I asked you to do it to me, would you?” Stephen said. Tony held the prolonged eye contact, considering Stephen’s words carefully.

“Okay. I will try to think about it through that lens,” Tony said.

“Would that make you resent me?” Stephen asked.

“I don’t think so. I’m more worried about you knowing how far I would go to save you,” Tony said.

“I find that... oddly comforting,” Stephen said.

“Just remember that,” Tony said.

“I will try to keep that in mind,” Stephen replied.

They finished eating and Tony helped Stephen clean up, appreciating the closeness and domesticity. Stephen sidled up beside him as he was putting dishes away, and gave him a side hug and a kiss on the temple. “I love you, Tony,” Stephen murmured.

“Love you too,” Tony replied.

“How about a hot shower and a blow job?” Stephen asked, his lips tracing over Tony’s earlobe. Tony groaned, and then laughed lightly.

“You really do love me.”

“I really do,” Stephen agreed.

Tony was awoken by FRIDAY, subtly trying to get his attention. “Psst, boss, you up yet?” she asked from his phone.

“Mmph,” Tony groaned and cracked an eyelid.

“Sorry to bother ya boss, but there’s a situation with Quill,” she said.

“Shit, what is it?” Tony asked, rolling to life and picking up his phone.
“Seems they worked out enough jumps. They’re here,” she replied.

“Here?” Tony asked, rubbing his eyes furiously with his free hand.

“Just passed the moon, and looking to land at the compound,” FRIDAY said.

“Seriously? Shit, Stephen I gotta get up. Can you send me back to the compound? I’ll grab fresh clothes there,” Tony went for his jeans and shirt that had been tossed on the chair.

“FRIDAY, dear, please tell Mr. Quill to extend an advanced warning next time,” Stephen said, and grabbed for his Sling Ring with his eyes still half closed. The portal opened. Tony leaned over and kissed Stephen warmly.

“Join me when you can, love?” Tony asked as walked through to his workshop at the compound, and put on the harness that was the suit.

“Yes, Tony,” Stephen said, eyes still heavy lidded. “Try not to kill Thor, mmmkay?”

“Coffee first. Then murder avoidance,” Tony said. “You complete me!” Tony said. He dashed back through the portal for a moment, kissed Stephen one more time, and recovered his shoes. Stephen’s head raised up off the pillow, looking thoroughly offended to be the subject of a Jerry Maguire reference.

“I’m in love with a dork. How did this happen?” Stephen grumbled and flopped his head back down on the pillow dramatically.

Alarms were going off in the compound. The tones weren’t harsh, Tony hated that, but they were noticeable. He was about to go outside, when he spun on his heel and went for the closest coffee maker instead, which happened to in the communal kitchen. Finding it just cool enough to be drinkable, he slugged down a mug black while he prepared another. Today was going to be long. He tapped the harness over his chest, and the armour framed up around it and hugged to him tightly, at the ready to form up around the rest of his body if he needed it. He would admit that the arc reactor at his chest was comforting in a way. Then again, so was having an army of trillions of nanobots that could adapt to most any weaponry he needed.

He drank the second cup of coffee, prepared a third in the first mug, and stuffed a croissant in his mouth. “You coming boss?” FRIDAY asked. “Everyone’s a bit tense out here.”

“Fve whight der,” Tony mumbled around the croissant. He picked up the final mug of coffee and an apple, and went for the doors that led outside.

The Milano was now hovering overhead, below the tree line and somewhat hidden from prying eyes. It was directly in front of the Sakaarian ship, though it was hardly recognizable now. Flowing Asgardian touches had taken over the surface of the ship, bringing ornate beauty to function. Tony chewed and swallowed the last of the croissant and washed it down with a sip of coffee.

Tony tapped on his earpiece, and FRIDAY opened a line of communication with the ships.

“Morning, Quill. How’s it going?” Tony asked. He waved and drew attention to himself. Rhodey, Carol, and Hulk were all on guard looking ready to pounce. Rhodey turned to him.

“This is the guy?” Rhodey asked.

“This is the guy... Guys... Guys and gals, really,” Tony said, trying to battle down his still sleep filled mind.
“Hey Tony! Sorry for the wake up call,” came across the com units on all open stations, ensuring that Rhodey heard it as well.

“Yeah, can you give FRIDAY a bit of notice next time? Sadly we don’t have the ticker tape parade ready for you,” Tony said. “Rhodey, has air defence been called off yet?”

“Yes, though they are observing the hell out of this, and I am allowing it to happen,” Rhodey said.

“The U.N. has been informed and are making a request to meet with Thor and Asgardian officials. Looks like he reached out to them already,” FRIDAY said. “That was going to be at the top of my notification list for you to deal with this morning.”

“Well, you tried. Thanks FRI,” Tony said.

“Just doing my best in the chaos here, boss.”

“I know baby, I know. Bring ‘em down, guys. Asgardians please remain on board. If anyone needs medical attention, or if you need provisions, we can bring them to you. Sorry, but I need official type people to handle your arrival, and I am not one of them,” Tony said.

“Copy that, Glowstick,” Rocket said. Tony figured he must be at the helm of the Sakaarian ship. Hopefully things had been smoother for him since Tony had lost his shit on Thor.

The ships landed with a slight tremble of the ground beneath Tony’s feet. Tony continued to sip at his coffee, and went over to pat Hulk’s elbow affectionately. Hulk looked down at him, his eyes questioning the safety of the situation. “It’s okay buddy. We can handle ‘em,” Tony said. He took a couple bites of the apple, and then offered the rest to the Hulk, who took it gently between his fingers and popped it in his mouth.

“Hope so,” Hulk replied as he chewed on the apple like it were a grape.

“Know so,” Tony said. Hulk smiled at that.

The hatch of the Milano opened, and Quill and Gamora stepped out. Quill looked like he might cry at any moment, and Gamora looked pleased to be taking in the gardens surrounding the compound buildings. Tony had encouraged the landscapers to make the area less sterile in the months that followed his conflict with Rogers, and had redone several interiors to be more homey as he recovered from his reconstructive surgeries.

The reclaimed space still had plenty of open lawn, but the gardens had done Tony a world of good and it seemed they were a hit with the rest of the Guardians as Tony got closer to the Milano. A small hatch opened on the side of the Sakaarian ship, out of which came Rocket and Groot. Quill was looking around in wonder, hesitant to take the final step down on to the grass. He then bent down, and slipped out of his boots. Drax made an inevitable comment about the stench, but Quill ignored him and then stepped into the cool grass barefoot. He pulled Gamora close and kissed her. Tony grinned at them. No matter how much she protested, she was just as stupid for Quill’s charm as he was for her. It was adorable.

When Quill got distracted by the sights around him, Gamora bent down, and ran her fingers over the grass, surprised by how inviting it was. “Welcome home,” Tony said. Quill whipped his head around, as if finally remembering he had company.

“Thanks,” he said, eyes still misty.

“Yeah, we’re all happy for you. Can we get to repairs and replenishing supplies?” Rocket asked.
He had an obscenely large energy weapon over his shoulder. Tony wasn’t quite sure how Rocket could even carry the damn thing.

“Give us a list of what you need, and we’ll try to get you set up,” Tony said. “and you won’t need that to compensate, Jumpsuit. Open carry isn’t a thing here, so you’re gonna have to put that away... But I can take you to Texas if you really want to take it out for a stroll.”

“This Texas place sounds like they got some sense,” Rocket announced and went up the loading ramp of the Milano.

“You’ll change your tune when you realize your resemblance to that nuisance mammal I told you about, and consider that their hunting laws are very loose,” Tony said.

“Fuck Texas then,” Rocket called as he stowed the weapon in a locker in the Milano. Tony noticed how Groot had been stilled by the sunlight and soft earth beneath him.

“I am Groot?” he asked Tony.

“Go ahead, photosynthesize away, buddy,” Tony said. Groot also knelt down and touched the Earth, also surprised at how inviting it was.

“I am Groot,” Groot said.

“Thanks, I think it’s pretty too,” Tony said. He knew that behind the helmet of the War Machine, Rhodey would be looking at him like he had two heads.

“I am Groot?”

“Yup, feel free. My soil nutrients are up for grabs. Take what you need,” Tony replied.

Groot moved out into the sunshine and spread his arms. He planted his feet and steadied himself. Roots spread from his feet into the ground. Twigs and branches sprouted from his arms and head. Very soon, he was in flower, then full leaf, adding another patch of shade to the garden and looking very content. It made Tony very happy to see, and he hoped FRIDAY was recording it for Stephen. “I’ve never seen him do that before,” Quill said.

“How often do you make it to a planet that can support tree growth?” Tony asked.

“Going to need to do it more often I think. Look at him go. That’s crazy,” Quill said.

“You’re always welcome here. Just let me know so I can have the proper PH and adjust the fertilizer with the landscapers,” Tony said.

“This place is very beautiful,” Drax said, inspecting a flower. “I can see why you whine for it so much, Quill.”

“And there he goes again,” Quill muttered.

“Why would pining for such a beautiful place be an insult?” Drax asked.

“Let’s say that your delivery lacked that nuance,” Tony said, friendly and calm.

“He speaks Groot and Drax... I don’t know how you do it,” Quill said. Tony almost said soul stone, but kept that to himself.

“I thought you were bullshitting me about the I am Groot thing,” Rhodey said. The armour landed
and the helmet receded back, revealing his face.

“It’s a great big universe out there, honey bear,” Tony said. “Peter Quill, I’d like you to meet Lieutenant Colonel James Rhodes, Colonel Carol Danvers, and you know our big green squishy Hulk already. We also have the babies running around here somewhere. I assume you stashed them safely, FRIDAY,”

“Not really, boss. They’re already on their way,” she replied.

“Of course they are,” Tony said dryly. “Who got them out?”

“Team effort led by Mr. Parker,” FRIDAY replied.

“Aw, FRIDAY, I thought you were cool,” Pete said as he swung around the side of the compound on a web, already in the Iron Spider armour.

“Karen reports to me, Mr. Parker,” FRIDAY said. Kamala was surfing on Sam’s back as they came around from the other side. The entrance did have a strategic element to it, and Tony had to be pleased about that.

“Anyways, these are the kiddos. They’re not at full status yet, but we like to leave them their youth as long as possible. This is Pete, Sam, and Kamala,” Tony said. “Everyone, this is Mantis, Groot, Rocket, Drax, Gamora, Peter, and the blue one sulking in the back there is Nebula. How’s the arm, honey?” Tony asked.


“Oh hun, you know how to talk to an engineer,” Tony said.

“You’re still an idiot,” she said.

“Your mouth says idiot, but your functionality says thank you,” Tony retorted.

“She looks scary. Are you sure its a good idea to taunt her like that?” Rhodey asked.

“Nebula understands the value of a common enemy. She’ll deal,” Tony said, and waved Rhodey’s warning off. “You want a coffee Peter?”

“Sure, Mr. Stark,” Pete piped up from his position on the wall behind him. He was staring at the space craft in awe. “Also, officially the coolest weekend of my life. I don’t think I can top this.”

“Pete, meet Peter,” Tony said, sighing and wondering how this was going to go. “Peter Quill, this is Peter Parker. Super-powered wunderkind and a pretty nice kid.” Quill laughed, and then remembered something.

“John Jacob Jingleheimer Schmidt,” Quill sang softly.

“His name is my name too!” Pete sang back. Quill’s face lit up and he laughed, and they continued together “Whenever I go out, the people always shout-”

“To be fair, that is less ridiculous than how I thought it might turn out,” Tony said to Rhodey and Gamora. “Anyway, we’re looking at adding others to our first line of defence, but they’ve been hesitant so far,” Tony said. “We just have to name the right price though and I think we’ll get them on board.”

“Everyone usually has one,” Gamora agreed. She squinted at Pete and Quill, who where now
singing some other childhood song at the top of their lungs. “Is this how all humans with the same given name greet one another?” she asked.

“No, just the silly English speaking ones. Let ‘em have their fun. We’ve got serious business ahead,” Tony said.

Thor appeared at the small hatch of the Sakaarian ship. “Anthony Stark, may I have a word? I seek your good counsel,” Thor said. Tony raised an eyebrow at him. His expression was softer than Tony had seen it previously. “Will you speak with me?”

“Just as soon as my honey gets here,” Tony said. He was not going up against Asgardians without significant magical backup.

“Before I speak with your Midgardian officials if you can,” Thor said.

“I’ll see to it,” Tony replied. Mantis was admiring the flowers, specifically the daisies. “Pretty aren’t they?” he asked. He went over, plucked one, and handed it to her.

“It is beautiful, Tony,” she said. “But why would you pick it?”

“Flowers don’t last forever. One has to enjoy them while they’re here,” He took the flower from her hand and tucked it in her hair. “Welcome to my home,” he said.

“Thank you, Tony,” she said, appreciating his tenderness, and smiled back at him. Tony imagined space travel offered little in the way of tenderness, and was happy to provide a moment’s refuge for her.

An alert crossed the lens of his glasses, and the sound of Quinjets in the distance gave Tony a severe case of annoyance. “FRIDAY, who’s knocking?”

“Fury and some SHIELD goons. Director Whathisname,” she replied.

“Is Coulson with them?” Tony asked.

“No,” she said.

“Turf them,” Tony said ruthlessly.

“They’re still American officials, boss,” she reasoned.

“And while sanctioned and contracted out for certain aspects of military use, this compound is still Stark Industries Property, and as such, no agents allowed. Especially without Coulson,” Tony said.

“Light ‘em up with the Iron Legion. If they want to play games, I’ll give them a nasty case of Galaga.”

“Okay boss, but there will be consequences,” FRIDAY warned.

“I’m beyond caring and acquiescing to Nick Fury’s agenda. I let him lead for awhile, and he fucked it up. No more of that. Sic Pepper on ‘em if you have to,” Tony said. Iron Legion bots emerged from underground bunkers and set off after the three Quinjets like the world’s angriest flock of Canadian geese.

“Call the president direct. Assure him that we’ve got this under control, and that any effort to disrupt delicate negotiations with alien races will not be tolerated. My level of trust for SHIELD is in the negatives as it is. Extend the olive branch to the U.N. that they will be welcome to negotiate
with the Asgardians... Otherwise tell them to sit tight, and that Colonel Danvers and Lieutenant Colonel Rhodes are spearheading the initial contact,” Tony said. FRIDAY gave him a visual cue on his glasses that she was on it, brilliant, beautiful girl that she was.

“But it’s you who did it,” Rocket said.

“Actually it was Stephen... There are certain tactics in human psychology that make it more of a benefit to not been seen as the leader of something. It has certain advantages,” Tony said.

“Tony, put your copy of *The Prince* back on the shelf, would you?” Stephen said as he came through a portal looking crisp and fresh. Tony wondered if Stephen had mainlined as much coffee as he had. He concluded no when Stephen made grabby hands at Tony’s mug, who relented and gave it up.

“So, when’s the wedding?” Rhodey asked, amazed at the interaction.

“Huh?” Tony asked, baffled.

“You have never given up coffee willingly. Ever. If that ain’t true love, I don’t know what is. Just be sure to invite my parents to the wedding,” Rhodey said. Stephen smirked victoriously into the rim of the mug, and slurped down more of it.

“I had hoped that they would be the ones to walk me down the aisle to be honest,” Tony said.

“They’d like that,” Rhodey mused. “But you better bring your man home for dinner first.”

“Put it on the agenda, FRI,” Tony said. “Stephen, dear, if you’re done making out with my coffee, Thor sounds a bit more humble and wants to speak to me. Come with?”

“Of course,” Stephen said, chugging the rest of the contents and setting the mug down in the grass.

“How’s it going with Harriet the Spy?” Tony asked FRIDAY.

“He’s swearing at me... Like, a lot,” she replied.

“Are you swearing back at him?” Tony asked.

“I’m using the robot voice and repeating *resistance is futile* over and over again,” she said. Tony laughed.

“Oh, that’s fucking brilliant. Any losses yet?”

“They shot Unit 057 down. It’s currently caught in a tree. I’ve already dispatched a collection team.”

“Atta girl. You need any back up?” Tony asked.

“Nah, I’ll let you know if I do... Oh, cute... Fury just called me *fucking skynet,*” There was a laugh in the Irish lilt that was unmistakeable as human, and it made Tony want to burst with pride.

“Please tell me there’s audio,” Tony said.

“Oh, there’s audio. I’m making it your text notification sound.” FRIDAY replied. It was Stephen’s turn to snicker quietly. Tony could feel his affection for FRIDAY and it made him feel proud of everything he’d ever worked for.
Tony found himself being levitated up to the hatch of the Sakaarian ship by Stephen and the Cloak. He took it mostly gracefully, and managed to suppress a yelp. Tony climbed through the hatch, followed by Stephen. To Tony’s surprised, Hulk had his face at the door, watching carefully. He made eye contact with Thor, staring at him directly. “Be nice,” Hulk warned, and didn’t bother to offer a specific consequence. “Where little girl?”

“Right here, big guy,” the woman Tony had seen before said. She was the one who looked like she’d be fun to have a drink with. She stepped forward, eyes less glassy than when Tony had seen her previously.

“You okay?” Hulk asked.

“Just fine, big guy. Been educating the rest of Asgard on people different from them,” she replied.

“Good. Make sure Thor is nice,” Hulk said, and looked meaningfully at Tony and Stephen.

“You got it,” she said, and gave him a wink.

Thor stepped forward, his best earnest expression on his face. “Thank you for meeting with me, Stark. I wish to apologize for my behaviour before. I... did not think you capable, when clearly you do indeed have the judgement and restraint needed to wield the Aether... My aggression against you was reprehensible, and for that I am sorry... I overreacted, mainly from fear for my people, and out of grief over the loss of Loki. I understand that Midgardians have reason to hate him, but he and I had finally made peace. And then he sacrificed himself to Thanos to save us. I wish to offer my services, and those of all remaining Asgardian warriors to defeat Thanos, and in return, safe refuge for my people, and your aide in searching for Loki,” Thor said. The speech was coached and practiced, but it was genuine. Tony considered the possibility of Loki returning to Earth, and had to have the logistics of that hashed out first thing.

“You will be personally responsible for containing Loki, and ensuring he no longer causes any harm to Earth or her people,” Tony said.

“You have my word... He’s all I have left for family, Stark. And even if he never wants to see me again, I wish to know he is safe,” Thor said.

“I’m willing to help with that for the sake of Earth’s safety... Are your people with you? Even if you were absent?”

“I will ensure that,” the woman that Hulk was fond of said.

“As will I,” Heimdall agreed.

“I’m sorry, who are you again? We weren’t formally introduced while your king was threatening me with violence... again.” Tony asked. He enjoyed their rattled expressions, but kept that to himself. He was going to goad some politeness into them before the U.N. officials got there if it killed him.

“My name is Heimdall. I kept the Bifrost while it was still functioning,” Heimdall said, trying for friendliness.

“Right, the creepy stalker guy... And you?” Tony turned to Hulk’s friend.

“Brunhilde... Last of the Valkyrie,” she said, watching Tony carefully. She was trying to see what Hulk saw in him.
“You get a conditional pass just because Hulk likes you. He’s an excellent judge of character. Don’t fuck that up,” Tony said.

“I won’t,” she said, full of attitude and conviction.

“Good,” Tony said with a nod.

“I’ll need to replace Mjolnir, Stark. I must make an expedition to Nidavellir. I would like to take Rocket with me,” Thor said. “Can I trust you to look out for the welfare of my people?” Thor asked.

“I will oversee it while I’m on planet, but I may have to delegate the responsibility to someone I trust,” Tony said.

“And that would be?”

“Phil Coulson... If I can get to him,” Tony said. “Back up will be Virginia Potts.”

“Coulson? He lives?” Thor asked, genuinely surprised.

“Something Fury kept from us. Literally reanimated his corpse. He was damaged, but the Aether helped me fix him. He’s doing better now,” Tony explained.

“Any warrior strong enough to return from Valhalla is to be commended. He would make a fine liaison for my people,” Thor said.

“Better than me for sure,” Tony said.

“No. Not at all, but he will do a good job,” Thor said gently.

“Why do you say that?” Tony asked.

“Because I trust you, Stark. You will not lead me astray with deception,” Thor said. Tony thought about telling Thor what he was, but once again, kept quiet. It was not the time. At least, not yet.

“I will do my best to honour that perception of me,” Tony said.

“I know it does not atone for my offences against you, but I am sorry, Stark. I lacked compassion, honour, and gratefulness. Because it is you whom I know I can trust to aide my people. You are honourable, Stark, and I should have seen that long ago.”

“Don’t butter me up too much. I’ll get a big head,” Tony said.

“No, you won’t... You were raised to power, but are no longer plagued by the indoctrinated ego that I am still working to get beyond,” Thor said. “And what you do have is mostly for show.” Thor looked like he might reach out for Tony to touch and reassure him, but remembered Tony’s warning, and kept his hands to himself. “I hope I will earn your trust and eventually your friendship back.” Tony gave Thor a neutral expression. He wasn’t forgiving Thor, or backtracking to try to win his favour. He felt no obligation to seek approval, and it felt like a step forward for him personally. Thor nodded and turned to Stephen.

“Sorcerer Supreme, I beg your assistance,” Thor said quietly. “Your ability to open portals, does it cross the realms?”

“Yes,” Stephen said carefully.
“I need to get to a place called Nidavellir. It is a forge built around the heart of a dying star. I would ask Stark, But I understand his need to keep the Aether hidden from Thanos’ notice. From what I understand, your ability with portals doesn’t come from the Time Stone. Will you help me?”

“Why do you need to go there?” Stephen asked.

“Mjolnir was destroyed. I need to go have a new weapon forged,” Thor said. Tony looked at Stephen, expression telling him that they needed to fess up immediately.

“Vision recovered the pieces of Mjolnir, and brought them to Tony and I. Would you like them returned?” Stephen asked. Tony breathed an inward sigh of relief. Frankly, the pieces of Mjolnir still gave him the creeps, and he would be glad to have them out of the Sanctum. And honesty was a much needed trait among Avenger types, so it was good lead by example. Thor looked surprised, and then sad and pleased at the same time.

“I would like that very much,” Thor said softly. “I would like to honour her memory.”

“I’ll have Vision pick it up,” Tony said, and tapped his glasses. “How’s the legion doing, hun?”

“Just fine. Threat is on the retreat. Unit 057 has been collected, and they’re on their way home,” FRIDAY said, sounding very satisfied with herself.

“Good stuff, hun. We need to put out feelers for Coulson, Thor’s going to need his ability handle difficult personality types. Also, can you call V, and ask him to pick up Mjolnir’s remains and bring them to us?”

“On it, boss,” she said.

“Thank you, dear,”

“Where is Vision? I expected him to be with you,” Thor said.

“He’s learning about the world. He comes and goes as he pleases,” Tony said. “He always returns when needed though.”

“I’m glad he’s had time to learn about himself,” Thor said. “I look forward to seeing him again.”

“I think he’s missed you. He doesn’t say much about it. I think it took him a long time to place the emotion, but he definitely wanted to know you better. He looks up to you,” Tony said. There, olive branch extended. He could be the bigger person... At least for Vision’s sake.

“I think he could learn more from you than he ever could from me. Your compressed lifespan brings things into finer focus,” Thor said.

“So change that when this is all over. My compressed lifespan means I won’t always be here for him... But you can be for much longer than me,” Tony said.

“Asgard... Asgard’s people come first, but I shall try, Stark.” Thor’s expression was somewhat distant and uncertain, and it made Tony grieve for Vision. He knew what it was to not be his own parents’ priority. It was the kind of hurt that ran deep, and it was a dangerous thing to do to someone with Vision’s amount of power. Tony’s jaw set firmly and his shoulders went up and back.

“Going to need more than that, Thor. You helped create Vision, and then you abandoned him. The fact that part of him used to be JARVIS makes me very attached to him. Sure he’s done fine with
me and on his own, but you could have made it easier on him, could have taught him more about what he is... But I suppose we petty mortals and our problems still didn’t rate. You saw it as mission accomplished: that you secured an Infinity Stone, and then you were off looking for others, without thought to what might happen in your absence. You’ve done it before, and I’m starting to see a pattern here. The Aether, The Tesseract, Vision... You’re full of good intentions, but you don’t follow through... Leaving we mortals, or we who are supposed to be beneath you, to do the actual heavy lifting. *You are responsible forever, for that which you have tamed.*” Tony quoted.

Thor finally looked like he was taking Tony’s words to heart, and that was satisfying, even if the truth had to be excruciating for him. “That is very true,” Thor admitted. “I will do my best to heed your good counsel.”

A portal opened, and Vision came through from the foyer of the Sanctum Sanctorum, carrying the same leather bag he and Wong had collected the remains of Mjolnir in. “Hello, Thor. It is good to see you again... I am sorry for the destruction of Mjolnir... and for how you find her presently. We were unsure what to do with her remains,” Vision said. He held out the bag, which Thor accepted, and then floated back a few paces back toward Tony and Stephen.

Tony was unsure if it was a gesture on Vision’s part to show where his loyalties were, or if he simply felt safer when next to them, and he wasn’t about to pry to find out. It felt good either way, to have Vision stand loyal with him, like JARVIS would have done.

“Thank you, Vision, Thor said. “It is good to see you again.”

“And you,” Vision replied, once again defaulting to stiff and formal to cover how much he’d missed his other parent.

“Would you like to accompany Rocket and I to Nidavellir?” Thor asked. Tony kept his cringe back. Too much too soon, but at least he was trying.

“Not at this time,” Vision said. “But thank you for offering. My place is here, defending Earth, at least until the threat of Thanos has been brought to a satisfactory conclusion.” It took everything in Tony to not smirk and say so there. It did show the difference in attitude between them quite well.

Stephen opened a portal and stuck his upper body though. “Hey Wong, you got a minute?” he asked, and then quickly closed his portal which had been to the library of Kamar-Taj. Wong opened one of his own from the door leading into the library, and gave his best irritated glare.

“What is it, Stephen?” he asked.

“Thor needs to get to Nidavellir. Think we can open a portal to there or thereabouts?” Stephen asked. Wong’s eyebrows crept up his forehead in surprise. Perhaps an entire half a centimetre.

“It’s real?” Wong asked.

“Yes?” Stephen said. “According to the guy who’s been there before.” Stephen looked over to Thor.

“It is a well-hidden, but very real realm. The dwarves tend toward isolationism,” Thor said.

“I’m going to need two strands of your hair again, and you’re going to have to let me connect to your mind so I can at least picture where I am trying to get you to,” Stephen said.

“You can do that?” Tony asked, utterly fascinated. He didn’t know why Stephen’s abilities
surprised him, but he was always delighted to discover something new.

“Sure, traipsing through the multiverse for fun and profit,” Stephen said with a shrug. He went over, and plucked a few strands of hair from Thor’s head, unconcerned for Thor’s irritated expression. Thor tolerated it well enough though.

Stephen and Wong conferred for a few moments. Stephen had Thor make pointed, prolonged eye contact with him, learning the location through his mind’s eye. Stephen’s eyes opened wide in wonder, marveling at whatever it was he was seeing. “Wow, who knew Dwarves were so huge?” he mumbled to himself, and then came back. “Okay, Mr. Odinson, I think we can transport you there when the time comes.”

“The time is now, Sorcerer,” Thor said.

“Noooo, you have a meeting with U.N. officials I thought. Tony can do a lot for you, but you can’t expect him to take on all of your diplomatic duties. You are going to need to be a ruler today, not just protector. As soon as your people are settled, I will gladly jettison you off the planet again,” Stephen said smugly. This was why Tony had waited to have him here before speaking to Thor. Stephen saw contingencies that Tony missed, and fuck he loved him for that.

“Come on, Tony, we should report back to the President about Thor’s requests,” Stephen said.

“Sorcerer, I assume you know time of is of the essence,” Thor said.

“And that’s why you should streamline the process by cooperating with it,” Stephen said sharply. “This country has a contradictory history with immigration, Thor, so coming in and throwing your weight around, and passing off your responsibility is a bad first step. I am sure that someone taught you about diplomacy in your long life, now is the time to use those lessons. You will get your shiny new toy only after you’ve done your chores.” Stephen let out a rough breath.

“Come on, love, let’s get some breakfast into you,” Tony said quietly. He held out his hand, and brushed his fingers gently over Stephen’s gloved ones. Stephen’s hand clasped Tony’s automatically, before he had even disengaged with Thor. “Do you need food here, Thor?” Tony asked. The tension broke, and Thor broke eye contact with Stephen.

“Potable water, fruit and vegetables, meat if you can spare it,” Brunhilde said quickly.

“Coming right up,” Tony said with a nod. “Does anyone need medical attention?”

“No emergencies, but there broken limbs and such that will need to be attended to with better equipment,” Heimdall said.

“Done,” Tony said. “Thor, can you see Stephen’s reasoning?” Tony kept his voice soft, but authoritative.

“Yes,” Thor said after a moment’s consideration. “Listen to the needs of others first and foremost. It’s okay to be wrong. Not everything has to be a war. Fight more. Talk more. Say you’re fucking sorry sometimes,” Thor quoted. “I’ll send a raven for you when I have finished things here,” he said to Stephen.

“Now you’re getting it,” Tony said. “FRIDAY, send up some of those croissants to the Asgardians too. Buttery pastry helps with the grieving process.”

“Whatever you say, boss,” she replied.
Poor Thor... I keep picking on him... He's trying. He really is.

Again, thanks for your patience, and all of your kind words. You have no idea how much they help and encourage me.

As always, comments are love.
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Tony loves Rhodey. Tony needs Rhodey. As far as he would go to protect Stephen, he would go that and further to protect Rhodey. We must never forget this.

And then, reality bending, cyborgs, and Tony's bad jokes about good sex... Another day at the office for Stephen.

Chapter Notes

Anyone else reading the new Dr. Strange series from Marvel? First issue starts with a nice chat between Strange and Stark, about rebuilding oneself from nothing. I always love seeing those two interact on the page. I am unsure about Strange in space as the rest of the series goes, but I'm only on the second issue, having just caught up on my pull pile.

This would have been earlier, but blame shitty neighbours who won't let the rest of the neighbourhood get some fucking sleep, and the fact that I'm finishing up a woodworking project atm. Yay for new bookshelves.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony didn’t get back to his lab for the better part of three days. He’d played ringmaster of the media circus, and successfully introduced the Guardians to the world, and broached the subject of the Asgardians seeking refuge, while leaving the better part of it to U.N. officials. He’d been diligent about eating and sleeping, with Stephen whenever possible, and he wasn’t too drained by the days away.

But the major work in that area was over. Quill was busy showing his crew the world, and discovering what had changed, and Thor would be able to make his trip soon. And if the god of thunder was set to rearm himself, then Tony needed to get a move on.

“FRIDAY, bring up the projection of the integration project... And put them into a projection of Stephen,” Tony said. “Lay all my physicality over it. Injuries, quirks, and the light show.”

It took a few seconds, but FRIDAY laid the images over the projection of Stephen, standing in the scrubs he still occasionally wore to bed. The visual stunned Tony for a moment. “Oh,” he said.

“What’s that boss?” FRIDAY asked.

“Just... I... I don’t think I ever realized how much has happened,” Tony said softly.

“Are you okay, boss?” FRIDAY asked.

“I...” Tony trailed off, amazed at what he was seeing.
“Shall I call Stephen?” she asked quietly.

“No, hun. No... I just... I think I just grew a huge amount of empathy for Pepper... Can you bring up the FTD website?” he asked. Tony quickly put together a large bunch of large and dwarf sunflowers, and sent it to Pepper’s office. He knew it would not be near enough, but he felt he had to do something to show the depth of gratitude he felt toward her.

He closed the browser, and took a look look at his injuries laid over Stephen’s body, understanding on a deeper level what it must have been like to be on the outside looking in at him. He stepped closer, looking at the injuries highlighted on the projection of Stephen. The broken wrist from his conflict with Steve. The cut above his eye that he’d seem to have perpetually since stepping into the suit, which was now a scar he covered with make-up for public functions. Scapes and burns, and lacerations around his hands from hands-on designing in the workshop, and micro-fractures in his palms and feet from the repulsors... Rhodey would have those as well. And while Tony’s spine was whole, the sternum was a mess. FRIDAY had used multiple colours to sort the injuries by date, and when placed on a projection of the man he loved, Tony understood.

He didn’t know if he was a hero or a masochist in that moment. He didn’t think he could deny either claim when looking at the results of his heroism. “Boss, you’re freaking me out a little. What’s going on?” FRIDAY asked. It was one tone away from alarmed enough for her to call for outside help. Tony wasn’t sure she would be wrong to.

“Is Rhodey around? Is he free?” Tony asked. After a moment’s quiet, FRIDAY spoke again.

“He’s on his way,” she said, sounding relieved.

“Sure, okay? No one else,” Tony said.

“Sure, you got it,” she replied. Tony continued to stare at the projection, barely blinking or breathing.

“Tony?” Rhodey called softly as he entered the workshop.

“Over here, honey bear,” Tony answered on auto-pilot. He waved Rhodey over, but continued to stare at the projection. Rhodey took in the hologram carefully, eyes narrowed and searching for a reason why.

“What do you have going on here?” Rhodey asked.

“Stephen asked me to consider what the consequences would be if he asked me to do to him what I am considering doing to myself,” Tony explained.

“Ah,” Rhodey said, understanding the reason for the projection now. “The reality of what you’ve been through kicking you in the ass?”

“Yes,” Tony said. “Hard... Rhodey, this isn’t even you. This is only me... How the hell are we still alive?” Tony asked.

“Well, I have years of combat training in both ground and air situations. And you... are an Infinity Stone. I always knew you were a tough fucker, Tony, with what you’ve endured... But while it may hit you hard in this context, you have to remember that this didn’t happen to Stephen, and probably won’t ever. It happened to you... And that there was no stopping you. Hell, there was no stopping me most of the time, Tones, and that’s not crazy. It’s not crazy to want to help, to want to save people... And sometimes that compulsion has painful consequences,” Rhodey said. He opened his arms, and Tony came to him and hugged him hard.
“I’m sorry for making you worry,” Tony said.

“Tony, for all the good you’ve done and continue to do, you’re forgiven. I can’t accuse you for something I’ve also done to you,” Rhodey said.

“I have an idea, Rhodey... Stephen said he could deal with it, but that I had to ask the question, would I do it to him before I do anything to myself,” Tony said.

“What is your idea?” Rhodey asked, voice deadly serious.

“I... The nanotech. Putting a few hives of it in me so I’m never without the suit,” Tony said.

“Holy shit, Tony that’s...” Rhodey trailed off, running the logistics of it in his head.

“Batshit insane and skirts very dubious moral territory,” Tony offered.

“Yes, those things... But also... kind of cool,” Rhodey admitted. Tony breathed a sigh of relief. Rhodey got the creative urge, and the urge to push boundaries.

“Do you see the potential though?” Tony asked. “If I’m successful, it could work on you... We could use them to fix the connection in your spine.” That gave Rhodey a moment’s pause.

“You’re not running an experiment on yourself in order to help fix me are you?” he asked.

“No, I’m saying it’s a bonus to come out of something I plan to do to myself anyway,” Tony said. “Truth is, I am Iron Man... and I’m okay with that,” Tony said thoughtfully.

Rhodey pulled back, but only so far as to get a good look at Tony. He kept his hand on Tony’s arm, but his hold was gentle. “I understand the idea of becoming someone better, becoming something more, and of wanting to do that for the good of humanity... But don’t do it at the expense of yourself. The world needs Tony Stark far more than it needs Iron Man. It’s you they’re turning to in this crisis. It’s you, not the suit, that they trust. They only trust the tech because it’s coming from you. Make sure you can still comfort them with your humanity, Tony.”

“I will do my best,” Tony said, and let out another breath. “But I think that ultimately, this will augment my ability to help people. It won’t take my humanity. I have you, and Stephen, and so many others, to keep me on the right track.”

“How does it all work?” Rhodey asked.

“It’s gonna take awhile,” Tony said.

“So we’ll get some coffee and talk about it,” Rhodey said. Tony grinned.

Tony shamelessly monopolized Rhodey’s morning, and when he was finished, a plan was laid out. “Well, if you’re going to do it, I think it’ll work,” Rhodey said.

“I think for the comfort of Stephen, I need to tweak it to make it completely removable, and have a few people I trust on the helm to remove it for me if needed,” Tony said.

“Counterpoint, people can be compromised. I think you’re going to have to just trust yourself.”

“Not even you? Or Stephen?”

“We’re too close to you. Compromised too easily. Same with Pepper and Happy,” Rhodey reasoned.
“Pepper will hate this,” Tony mused.

“She might... She’ll hate it less if you can make people walk again with it though... I suggest someone a step removed. Wong, maybe,” Rhodey suggested. “He’s got most of the same advantages as Stephen, plus he has some objectivity.”

“Joke’s on you. Wong thinks I’m adorable,” Tony teased. “But it could work. Stephen won’t like it though. There is a bit of competition between them.”

“Well, bully on both of them. My reasoning is sound,” Rhodey said. Tony laughed.

“Hey, first space craft is being fully assembled this week. Production starts as soon as it’s space-worthy. Wanna join me?”

“Hell yes,” Rhodey said.

“Great... I’m also going to need some help with this.” Tony pointed at the newly completed designs for the nanobot hives.

“Seems like a Stephen or Helen Cho job,” Rhodey said.

“And they may not agree to it. Besides, I can always use someone who understands the tech on my team,” Tony said.

“Stephen will agree. He wouldn’t let you do this alone,” Rhodey said.

“He really is the best,” Tony said in a mock dreamy tone, but meaning it.

“And he’s a bit obsessive and a bit possessive... But like, in a way that’s good for you. He looks out for you. He can out stubborn you when you go overboard. It’s a positive thing,” Rhodey said.

“He’s good for me for sure,” Tony agreed.

Tony was just thinking about dragging Rhodey off to lunch when the alarms once again went off. Tony looked over at FRIDAY closest holographic display for a status update. “It’s Stephen, boss! There’s been a breech at the Sanctum!” FRIDAY announced. As soon as FRIDAY said Stephen’s name, Tony was lashing the nano armour’s harness to himself, and so was Rhodey. A portal opened and Tony went careening through it as soon as he saw the foyer of the Bleecker Street mansion on the other side. Stephen was waiting, facing something to Tony and Rhodey’s right, and closed the portal after them.

Other portals were open, Wong, Vision, and other sorcerers came through them. Tony heard Rhodey make the call for further backup back at the compound. Stephen was facing a man who had his eyes set on the Eye of Agamotto. He looked human enough, but the beings around him definitely looked off-world in origin. Tony wasted no time, and sent a repulsor blast in his direction. The blast was intercepted and absorbed by a figure standing beside the man that Stephen was focused on. He was huge, tall and thin, with the hunched appearance of a scholar, and the face a smashed asshole.

“You’ll never take it, Mordo,” Stephen warned.

“Oh, I think I will, Stephen. I’ve been building alliances the likes of which you wouldn’t believe,” the man replied. So this was Mordo. One of Stephen’s sore spots, and suddenly Tony wished he’d asked more questions about him strictly for the sake of information.
“Strong talk for someone talking to the Sorcerer Supreme,” Rhodey said, fully encased in the armour, and ready for a fight.

“And stupid talk for a man with no legs,” the figure next to Mordo hissed, looking intensely at Rhodey. He raised a hand and Rhodey was pulled toward him. Rhodey scrambled and the repulsors activated, trying to break the armour free of the hold. When the War Machine went dark, and Rhodey’s legs went limp, Tony reacted.

Somewhere in the distance, Tony heard Stephen calling his name. But that was all that registered, aside from an all encompassing roar. It took him a moment to realize it was coming from his own throat. The Aether flared to life and asked Tony if he wanted help. Seeing Rhodey helpless made Tony’s answer a resounding yes. It was impulsive. It was stupid. It ruined his best laid plans. He didn’t care. Rhodey would never have to pay for standing by Tony’s side ever again.

“Tony!” Stephen shouted again. But Tony couldn’t answer even if he wanted to. He and the Aether had work to do. Reaching out, he saw all. Mordo’s history with Stephen and Wong, and his descent into zealotry... He saw how Mordo had found a common philosophy as he gathered up magic throughout the cosmos, and it had led him to Thanos. The being that was attacking Rhodey was named Ebony Maw, and had extensive use of telekinesis... And holy hell had he ever drunk Thanos’ Kool-Aid.

Maw tried to reel Tony in, but the Aether brushed off the attack like it was a gentle breeze. “Let him go, nice and slow,” Tony ordered. Maw looked confused, and was about to comply, when he waved in several beings that looked like the offspring of Orcs and the Chitauri. They got two steps closer before Tony barked “Stop!” at them, and they did, but raged at having to do so, and then tried for the back up sorcerers. Tony looked at Maw again. “I will only say it one more time. Put him down nice and gentle,” Tony said.

“Or what, Terran?” Maw challenged, still holding Rhodey aloft. The dark eyes of the War Machine helmet made Tony angrier by the second.

“Or... Nothing... Welcome to nothing,” Tony said ruthlessly. The Aether lashed out in a boiling wave of crimson. Rhodey was cast to the side and Maw’s body started disintegrating before their eyes. He gasped in shock and pain. Mordo took that time to try to pull the armour from Tony using Eldritch magic. For a moment, Tony thought Mordo might get it. The strength of the magic he’d gathered was incredible. But again, the Aether flared up and surrounded him, it’s crimson energy burning away at the orange of the Eldritch magic, and changing something about the armour that Tony couldn’t quantify right away. Tony felt a small sparks and shocks all over his skin. The Aether whispered in his ear, asking if it was time.

“Yes.” Tony replied to her. She shimmered in joy and set to work. Tony knew that this was where everything was going to change. But he was fine with it, because he was not ready to live in a world without Rhodey or Stephen. It was a matter of seconds, and Tony embraced what the Aether was doing. The second repulsor blast he fired off hit Mordo, who was thrown into the side of the wide staircase of the Sanctum, hitting his head on the hardwood.

Maw cried out, and a hole in space opened. He commanded the infantry troops carry him back through. The lower part of his legs and left arm were gone. His magic was fighting the will of the Aether, which had been distracted by what she was doing to Tony. “You will pay for this betrayal, Mordo!” Maw gasped. Mordo was only barely conscious now, but tried to gather himself up.

“No,” Mordo managed. “I didn’t know,”

“Then you will pay for your ignorance!” Maw howled, even as his body lost more of its solidity.
He called upon his telekinesis, desperately trying to hold his body together. He was having moderate success at it, but would have to be thinking about it for every moment of what remained of his life. Tony looked coldly through the portal at some kind of space craft to which Maw had retreated, and at what the Aether had wrought. Both he and she could see the atrocities committed by the Weight Watchers Vogon, and he was going to sleep just fine after this.

The portal closed, with only Mordo and a few of the corpses of the minions left behind that the others had dispatched remaining. Wong and Stephen threw Eldritch magic around Mordo before he could regain his feet. “Thoughts?” Stephen asked Wong.

“Strip him of his power. While we still can,” Wong said, though his expression looked like he was choosing to kill a friend. Stephen looked equally as crushed, but nodded in agreement.

“Okay,” he said. The Cloak flew from his shoulders and went to retrieve a reliquary from the upper levels of the Sanctum. Wong and Stephen had the incantation they used on Wanda still memorized, and while this was probably the worst possible outcome, Mordo could not be allowed to reconnect with Thanos.

Meanwhile, Tony rushed over to Rhodey, reaching out with his mind as well as his hands. “Rhodey?” Tony asked, voice more than a little frightened. “Jim?” FRIDAY reached out wirelessly to the War Machine armour.

“It’s doing a hard reboot, boss, give it a second,” she said. Tony didn’t wait. He reached out and hit the emergency release, pulled the faceplate, setting it close so it could be reabsorbed by the nanobot tech.

“Jim?” Tony asked again, softly.

“I’m here, Tones,” Rhodey replied, blinking in the light, obviously glad to have to no longer be in the dark with the worry of a dead suit.

“Are you hurt?”

“No? I don’t think so,” Rhodey said. A moment later the arc reactor and various points of the armour lit up, coming back online.

“Status, FRIDAY?” Tony asked.

“A localized EMP like effect, but not an EMP... I assume it has to do with the guy you... disintegrated...” FRIDAY said in hushed tones. “Boss, I’ve got a whack of new data from you, and I’m confused,” she said. “Do you feel okay?”

“Sure, why?” Tony asked.

“You and the Aether just tore a new one in Thanos’ forces in a very noticeable fashion,” FRIDAY said, trying to bring reality back to the conversation. “And I’m getting data on you that I haven’t been able to detect previously... I... I think I can I feel you, boss. Can you feel me?”

“We will address this after we determine if Rhodey’s okay, okay?”

“On it, boss. Scans are good, but there are significant changes in his spinal column,” FRIDAY said.

“What changes?” Tony asked, alarmed.
Rhodey reached up, and held Tony’s upper arm like he had in the workshop. “Tony?” he said, full of surprise. “I think I can wiggle my toes.” Rhodey looked he was ready to burst with happiness. Tony looked to the Aether embedded in his armour currently.

“What did you do, honey?” Tony asked out loud.

“Fixed things... I can see why you like it so much,” she trilled back, very pleased with herself.

“Sweetie, you and I have to have a talk about consent,” Tony said.

“But he’s going to like it. I didn’t have to change that. It’s a gift,” she said. Tony sighed, scanning an overlay of Rhodey from FRIDAY. She was right. There was far more precision to the images now. The most interesting spot was Rhodey’s lower spine, where the nanotech bots were congregating in the vicinity of his L4 through S1 vertebra.

“I’m not angry,” Tony said to the Aether, “but I need to see what you did.” The display came up on Tony’s HUD in shimmering red detail. The nanobots had restructured around Rhodey’s damaged vertebra, which shouldn’t have been possible. He hadn’t had any implanted ports for them to even get in. But he did now. The Aether had copied Tony’s designs for this purpose. “This, oh my god,” Tony said, trying to wrap his brain around what he was looking at. “FRIDAY, can you show me what you have on me?” The Aether returned control of the HUD to FRIDAY. The layout of the hives was slightly different, and was concentrated at the sides of his chest, bracing up the donated sternum. There were others smaller ones throughout his body as well. It was exactly what he wanted, and yet it was terrifying.

“Tones, what is it? Can I move?” Rhodey asked. He was now painfully aware of caution when it came to possible changes in his spinal column.

“I think it should be fine, but I would feel better if Stephen ran you through some tests first,” Tony said. “Tell me immediately if anything feels off or hurts... Oh fuck... she really did it, but she did it to you too.” Tony wanted to remove the faceplate of his armour to give Rhodey the emotional connection, but he was desperately trying to take in everything that he’d done to them.

“Did what?” Rhodey asked. “The nanobot hives? Because I can feel something around my spine... And I can feel my heels too, Tones... I was told that I never would again, and I’m figuring that’s the only way it could happen.”

“Yeah, Rhodey. I’m looking over scans now, give me a second. Just making sure that this isn’t going to hurt you in the in long run,” Tony said.

“I’ll wait. I’ve already waited this long,” Rhodey said.

“Are you okay in there? No panic attack?” Tony asked.

“I think I’m okay, Tony... The suit isn’t dead... I think I can... feel it? The suit I mean. Hang on, I’m going to put the faceplate back on for a moment. I want the same info you have,” Rhodey said. Tony did as asked.

Over by the staircase, Mordo howled and a haze of green exited his body and was cast into the reliquary. Vision was also restraining him, utterly focused on his task, possibly because he’d learned from the fall that had injured Rhodey, and possibly because he was afraid to confront Rhodey’s reality right now. Tony refocused on Rhodey. He could see his face on the display of his HUD. “Oh, oh wow,” Rhodey said, clearly looking over the scans of his body. “That’s really something... What did she do to you?”
“Show him, FRI,” Tony said. Rhodey’s eyes moved around the display in front of his face, tracing the outline of what must have been Tony’s sternum.

“Hey, that looks sturdier,” Rhodey said. His expression was curious and contemplative.

“How the fuck are you not freaking out right now?” Tony asked.

“Are you freaking out? Should I be freaking out?” Rhodey asked.

“I... maybe? I’m just worried I did something you’ll hate me for. I couldn’t handle it if you hated me,” Tony said. Being sealed in the armour gave them a privacy that made Tony very honest, as he usually was when it came to Rhodey.

“Tony, I can wiggle my toes... And I have to pee... Do you understand? I can feel that I have to take a piss. For the first time since the accident. It’s a ridiculous way to experience it, but this might be a miracle. This is what a miracle feels like,” Rhodey said. “Because if I can feel that, it means good things for everything else that was broken.”

Tony looked at Rhodey’s face in the HUD, thinking of the hours of physical and psychiatric therapy they’d both endured after their conflict with Rogers. He considered the bare bones realities of his healing and Rhodey’s physical paralysis and how they’d learned to cope with it together... And the closeness and trust that had come out of it. Rhodey trusted him completely, and it was humbling. “Okay,” Tony said, voice tight with emotion. “Miracle it is... Love you, buddy.”

“Love you too,” Rhodey said.

Stephen and Wong placed Mordo in a secure spot in the mirror dimension, which he could no longer escape on his own. Stephen took a deep breath, and then saw Tony and Rhodey’s position and rushed over to them. “Status?” he asked.

“He... He can wiggle his toes,” Tony said as the helmet came away. “I didn’t mean for it to affect him too, but the Aether asked me if I wanted help, and I said yes because I didn’t want Rhodey hurt.”

“What are you saying, Tony?” Stephen asked.

“How do you feel about friendly cyborgs?” Tony quipped.

“Cyborgs multiple?” Stephen asked, his eyes narrowing. The Cloak reached out and caressed Tony’s cheek, which was admittedly wet with a few tears. Tony patted the Cloak back, surprised at the tactile feedback from the armour. It could function like a true second skin now.

“Oh, neat,” Tony said, ignoring Stephen’s question. “I can feel you through the armour now,” Tony said to the Cloak. Then his face lit up and he looked at Stephen with an impish smile. Stephen saw exactly where Tony was headed, and held up his index finger to stop him before he could speak.

“If you make a robo-penis joke right now, Tony, so help me, I swear I will make cream curdle in your coffee for eternity,” Stephen warned. Tony only grinned wider.

“You can’t do that,” Tony said.

“The hell I can’t,” Stephen retorted.

“Then who would you steal coffee from?” Tony asked, mocking the grabby hands that Stephen had
made at him when the Asgardians had arrived a few days ago. His voice was cheeky, and he knew that feedback from Rhodey’s forming hope was having an effect on him.

“Curse your bargaining skills,” Stephen said dryly. “Can we get you out of the armour for an exam, James?”

“Sure, I think... Hang on,” Rhodey said. “There’s an exit command.”

“Wait!” Tony said. “FRIDAY, what does that command do? Is the function the same that was planned for me?” There was a moment’s quiet as FRIDAY examined the code.

“Yes, boss. The hives are already constructed around his lower spine, hips, thighs, and up under his diaphragm. There are smaller hives further up his spine, his upper arms, and along the back of his neck,” she said. “I’m seeing the same hives under your lowest ribs, around your donated bone tissue, and the same points headed toward your extremities as Rhodey. The exit command will absorb the basic suit into your bodies. You can still separate from them if you desire, as was planned, but the infrastructure is all ready to go.” Tony was gobsmacked at the verbal confirmation, and had no words for a few moments.

“So, cyborgs,” Rhodey said casually. His attitude was that of every top gun pilot in the world. He wanted to give it a go, damn him. Tony wasn’t sure how to react. He had wanted to make sure everything was perfect before ever risking it on his best friend.

“Yes, apparently cyborgs,” Tony replied.

“I’m gonna try it,” Rhodey said.

“No. Me first, Jim. I know what to expect. If it goes wrong then there’s still a chance to fix it in you,” Tony said.

“Race you,” Rhodey said fearlessly.

“Oh for fuck sakes,” Tony said, and hit the same command in his menus. Stephen stood up and threw his hands in the air in frustration.

Tony could only imagine what it must have looked like from the outside. There were fewer clanks and metal sounds than one might expect. The nanobots were meant to work in harmony, and the sound was more a series of well-timed clicks. Within moments, both he and Rhodey were on the floor of the Sanctum, wearing a lighter harness that the armour had been contained in before, and in their casual clothes from the workshop. It felt weird for sure. Tony could feel it in him. The bots were settling into their stasis mode. It went perfectly, and it was everything he expected, but it was going to take some getting used to. His phone was still in his pocket, and he pulled it out so he could better communicate with FRIDAY... The fact that he would be able to adapt the bots to be able to hear her in his ear was not going to help the others.

“Huh, that’s weird,” Rhodey said.

“What’s weird?” Stephen asked.

“I... feel heavier is all,” Rhodey said.

“About thirty pounds worth,” Tony said. “We can go up to fifty or get it down to fifteen depending on your needs and comfort level. The harness still contains the better part of the suit, but it will be enough to keep you alive during an emergency.” Tony sounded rushed and somewhat worried at admitting this.
Stephen didn’t comment, but set out to run Rhodey through the first parts of the ASIA exam, and when he passed them with flying colours, only then was he allowed to sit up on his own, which he did without assistance. He still had the leg braces on and still used his arms to achieve most of the movement out of habit. But getting to his feet was probably the best thing in the past few years. He found himself slightly off balance, and instinctively put a foot out to steady himself. His smile lit up the room. Tony looked hopeful and terrified at the same time. When Rhodey reached out, Tony pulled him in close for a hug.

“Ugh, I can’t even complain about the moral implications if it makes them this happy,” Stephen said to Wong and Vision.

“Don’t hug me too hard, Tones, I still gotta use the can,” Rhodey said, half joking. “Show me where the facilities are?”

“Yeah, sure,” Tony agreed, and stayed close as they moved off.

There were three loud bangs on the front door of the Sanctum. “Sorcerer! Let us in!” Thor shouted.

“Nobody gets in to see the Wizard! Not no way, not no how!” Tony called as they headed up the stairs, Rhodey half draped over him, but moving his legs just fine as they went up. “Tell Thor his response time sucks!”

“To be fair, I kind of prefer the Sanctum unbroken,” Stephen commented, and waved a hand to open the door. “No need to panic! Party’s over!”

“Oh, I disagree,” Carol said with a wry smile, walking in like she owned the place. “Party just got here.”

“Well, I guess that means I should at least put the coffee on,” Wong said and sighed. “We also need a plan for Mordo, Stephen.”

“What’s a Mordo?” Carol asked.

“It’s complicated,” Stephen said, heading for the stairs, because he knew that Tony and Rhodey shouldn’t be alone right now.

“Where are you going?” Carol asked.

“My significant other just used the reality stone to turn himself and his best friend into cyborgs. It warrants medical observation,” Stephen said in an annoyed tone, and left Wong and Vision to handle everything else.

Stephen climbed the stairs on his own, rather than asking the Cloak to help him catch up. He took his time, monitoring the level of noise from downstairs. Conversation appeared to be holding at rational. He gathered up a medical bag from the bedroom before he went to the bathroom, where Tony and Rhodey had holed up in. The door to it was ajar, and Stephen stepped over the larger chest pieces, and Rhodey’s leg braces, which were on the floor outside of it.

Stephen could hear the soft sounds of someone, and possibly both of them crying on the other side of the door. He toed it open, and found Tony and Rhodey in a tight hug, overcome by the sudden change in their lives. Stephen was well aware of how involved Tony had been in Rhodey’s healing process, right down to the ugly, day to day things that came with paralysis. It was the kind of friendship that Stephen himself had never allowed himself to have, though he thought he was learning how to do it from their example. The two had few barriers between them, and this moment of vulnerability was nothing new to either of them. Perhaps if he had allowed himself to become
that close with Mordo, things might have gone differently... But then again, they might have ended
with Stephen being the one to go rogue. *If wishes were horses*, he thought. Tony cracked an eye,
and smiled at Stephen, but continued to hold Rhody tight. “Stephen’s here,” Tony whispered.
Rhody ignored both of them for a full minute before he moved.

Eventually Rhody cleared his throat and spoke with a hoarse voice. “Sorry, doc, it’s just... It’s a
lot to take in.”

“I bet,” Stephen replied. “It’s a lot for me to take in and it didn’t even happen to me.” Stephen was
doing his very best to extend empathy to Rhody. He kept his tone soft to ensure privacy, and to
reassure Rhody with more than medical professionalism. The man was standing freely for the first
time since the accident, and he needed space away from the million questions about to come their
way. Still, someone had to make sure he was alright, and Stephen was the most qualified for that
job. “Do you mind if I take a look?”

“Go ahead, doc,” Rhody said, as amiable as he was the first time Stephen had examined him.
Tony grabbed a wad of toilet paper, and Rhody blew his nose, and then took off his shirt. Tony
was instantly in his space, grinning a little.

“Man, that looks badass,” Tony murmured.

“You too, Tony,” Stephen said. “While James here is the priority, I’ll be going over you very
carefully as well.”

“Oh, can I get the end of the ASIA Exam? I volunteer,” Tony said. Stephen rolled his eyes and
sighed heavily.

“Tony, honey, love of my life, I need your business face... We’re staring down the end game now.
Thanos knows part of our hand. He knows part of what to expect... Now, strip so I can have some
peace of mind that our last remaining trump card is not in danger,” Stephen said. Tony puckered

Tony nodded enthusiastically. Stephen sighed again, kissed Tony softly, and then Tony dutifully
shucked his shirt and pants. “So, we’re going to have to move up the timeline again?” Tony asked,
suddenly all business.

“Sooner the better at this point,” Stephen said. “James, would you be okay if I did perform the rest
of the ASIA exam on you... I know it can be... intimate, but it’s best to gather all the information
we can. I can call in another physician from my former job if it makes you uncomfortable.”

“Why Doctor Strange, how forward,” Rhody teased. Stephen’s only surprise was that Tony hadn’t
beat Rhody to that punchline. “Nah man... I’ve been poked, prodded, and helped with basic
bathroom functions for awhile now. I got no shame left. We can do it.”

“It’s rudimentary, but it is the fastest way,” Stephen said. He gently touched Rhody’s skin where
it met a flexible metallic surface that was flush with the surface of the skin of his lower back. It
seemed to ripple with every movement and breath, moving in harmony with the flesh around it.
“Does it hurt? At all?”

“No... It feels like a back brace to be honest,” Rhody said. “Supportive. Not constricting.”

“Tony, same question,” Stephen said. Tony new additions were of course in gold and red,
compared to the straight metallic sheen of Rhody. But it was easier to define the individual plates
over his skin because of it.
“That’s a good way to describe it,” Tony agreed. “But like a really well-designed one that fits perfectly.”

“Of course it would be well-designed,” Rhodey said. Tony grinned at him. Stephen removed a pin prick tester, and went to work. Getting into the rhythm of the exam soothed Stephen’s mind, and reassured him that both Rhodey and Tony were indeed fine... if somewhat different now. He looked at it like he was unravelling a spell. If he could understand, then he would be better with the idea.

And what he found was that the tech was beautiful. The function of the nanobots was remarkable. He had FRIDAY form up the armour around Tony again, and got the stats of both of them during the fight, and would pore over them later, but everything major looked okay. Both of them seemed to be fine... If somewhat heavier now. “You satisfied doc?” Rhodey eventually asked as Stephen put the probe away.

“Yes, so help me, yes... miracle it is,” Stephen said. Tony snorted for a moment, but composed himself.

“What are you going to do with Mordo?”

“I’ll see what Wong suggests... There are... places, to keep people like him. When it comes to him, I’m, as you would say, compromised. When I was nothing, had nothing, Mordo saw value in me... That I could be more than a cripple.”

“Just because someone has helped you improve yourself doesn’t mean all of their ideas are correct. You think the military always acts for the highest good? Because while a lot of former and current service members might say that the military helped them improve themselves, they don’t always agree with everything it does,” Rhodey said. Stephen gave Rhodey a steady smile, glad for his candour.

“Mordo was a good friend to me, brought me to the Ancient One in the first place, and helped me fight of Dormammu. He helped, despite our disagreeing how. Since then, he seems to have spent his time taking magic back from sorcerers, thinking it an endangered resource.”

“Is it an endangered resource?” Tony asked.

“No... For the average sorcerer, perhaps it might. But for those of us with a more firm control, it isn’t an issue... The sources of it are esoteric at best. But I have a feeling that protectionism is not the way to fuel it. Belief in it helps. People being able to use it creates belief. Trying to make it an exclusive thing will only serve to kill it faster,” Stephen said.

Vision knocked politely on the door. “Forgive me, gentlemen, but you’re being asked after downstairs,”

“Aww, he called us gentlemen,” Tony said and grinned. “Shall we go clean the loose ends up? No emergency here?”

“No emergency here. Just, take it easy for a bit, would you James? I want to keep an eye on things,” Stephen said.

Chapter End Notes
So there's that... Tony Stark and Stephen Strange... Bringing new meaning to the phrase "do what you got to do".

Thanks for reading!

As always, comments are love.
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Stephen gets mad. Production begins. Tony sees Rocket's heart grow a size, and throughout our heroes learn how much there is to gain in being vulnerable sometimes. Also... Enter the Trickster. Muh wha ha ha ha ha...

Chapter Notes

Sorry for my absence, but here I am! Hope I still have people out there reading.

Things have been... Not perfect by any means, but decent. Finally getting somewhere with my chronic disease, which feels good. Again, not perfect, but better enough that I feel motivated to keep going on it.

I am still rolling along and dealing with certain difficulties, but I am learning a lot about how to communicate them to the ones I love. Anyway, thanks for your patience.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In the immediate aftermath, Tony’s answer for the question “what is the weirdest part?” would surprise most people. His reply wasn’t about suddenly gaining an unnoticeable thirty pounds, or being able to connect his brain the internet (which was less fun than one might think. It mostly read like a giant YouTube comments section, and usually ended with someone calling someone else a Nazi.). It wasn’t Pepper’s reaction, which was non-existent as of yet, but he was going to tell her. Tomorrow. It would keep until then.

No, the weirdest thing was when they arrived back at the compound, and the Hulk picked up both he and Rhodey and sniffed them all over like a momma gorilla. Thankfully he did it to Tony first, who laughed through it, assuring Hulk it was him, and that while he didn’t plan on what happened, that they were okay, and unhurt, and that it had actually helped Rhodey. Which of course brought Jolly Green’s attention to Rhodey. “Be careful, buddy. We have to be so careful of him for the next little bit,” Tony warned.

“Just reassure him you’ll be fine. Sudden changes in physiology aren’t foreign to him, but they might be a bit of a trigger,” Tony said, thinking out loud. “Hey, is that it, Jolly Green? Does this have you thinking about before?” Tony asked. He got close, and put his hands on Hulk’s forearm. Hulk looked down him, breaking from his investigative sniffing. “It’s okay. It was unexpected, but we’re okay, I promise. Better protected than before... And as you can see, Rhodey can walk again... It’s a good thing.”

“Hulk worries,” Hulk said, and then hugged them both close.

“We’re okay,” Tony assured again, just letting his body be loose and relaxed.

“Banner worried,” Hulk admitted.
“Is he? Tell him we’re okay, please? Science can’t really go wrong if we have control reality,” Tony explained. “And, oh I am aware of the hubris of that, but it’s the truth.”

“Really big guy, I’m feeling better than I have in a long time,” Rhodey said. “And I can do all kinds of cool stuff now, so it’s pretty awesome, really.” He had given up, and also relaxed into the touch, and hugged him back.

Tony took the new armour for a spin to the Sanctum that night. Rhodey was being carefully monitored in anticipation of Dr. Cho’s arrival in the wee hours. The medical team had wanted to keep Tony as well, but Rhodey had thrown himself under the wheel so that Tony could go check on Stephen.

Stopping for take-out was much more convenient now that the armour was more discreet. As he was about to take off again, Tony spied a flower shop across the street. He grinned, and remembered about making good on a promise he’d made to Stephen. He walked out with a modest bouquet of asters and daisies, and headed for the Sanctum Sanctorum.

When he arrived, the doors opened swiftly for him, though no inhabitants were immediately available. “Stephen?” Tony called out softly.

“Library,” Stephen replied from upstairs. Tony jogged up the stairs, carefully balancing the bags of food and the flowers. Both Stephen and Wong were seated at a table laden with books surrounding a reliquary. Stephen had pulled back from it though, and several small points of light were flickering over his upturned palm.

“How are you holding up?” Tony asked quietly, not wanting to disturb Wong too much, who was still poring over a manuscript.

“I’m not sure... We’re debating what to do with Mordo,” Stephen said.

“I take it that reform is off the table,” Tony replied, finding space between the books for the food. Tony was glad now that he’d over-purchased. He gave Wong a friendly nod, and tossed him a set of chopsticks to show he was welcome to share.

“It’s not an option that is traditionally used. It’s never worked out,” Wong said. “Most who betray at this level end up dead after the conflict.”

“Well that’s awkward,” Tony said. Stephen gracefully called the small points of light back into his hand, and looked up at Tony, and saw the flowers he was holding.

“You remembered,” Stephen said, smiling. He was pleased and a little shy about being spoiled.

“Of course I did,” Tony said as he circled the table, bent at the waist, and kissed Stephen where he sat. “Come on, love, let’s eat and you can tell me about it.”

They passed around food containers and chopsticks, and started discussing the day’s events. Tony showed off some of his new hardware to Wong, who played it cool, but Tony could tell that he found it fascinating, and was already thinking of magical equivalents. Finally the topic settled on Mordo, which turned the mood a bit darker again. Both Wong and Stephen were still deeply conflicted. “Well, I hate to sound like a cliche, but what would The Ancient One have done?” Tony asked.

“Destroyed him. Ruthlessly,” Wong said easily. “She did not suffer fools or threats to the planet.
But she had time enough on Earth to gain perspective and emotional distance.”

“But he was your friend,” Tony said.

“Exactly,” Stephen said.

“Is there a place to hold him securely?” Tony asked.

“The facilities at Kamar-Taj for rogue sorcerers don’t meet with UN standards for basic human rights,” Stephen said. “And Wong agrees with me on that.”

“What about settling his mind back where he can’t remember what he did?” Tony asked.

“Then he learns nothing of consequences of going rogue and how dangerous and serious that is,” Wong said.

“But in light of other events, it would be problem solved,” Tony said. “Are there muggle world legal consequences to what he did?”

“I suppose treason of a sort, and he would be in violation of the accords,” Stephen said. “But we would have to prove it, because a ‘he said, he said’ situation isn’t going to get us a long-term sentence.”

“You think he’ll try to find a way back to power?” Tony asked.

“Yes,” Stephen and Wong said in unison.

“So, as sworn protectors of the Earth against mystical threats, you have a clear course of action, but a difficult choice to make,” Tony said.

“Indeed we do,” Stephen said.

“And you’re both a bit emotionally constipated, so you have to take time to process,” Tony said. Stephen bridled a bit, but had to agree that the assessment was fair.

“Yeah,” Stephen said softly. He traced his finger tip over the petals of one of the daisies, and summoned a vase with water in it, and placed the flowers in it. He looked over at Tony and smiled. “I’m working on it though.”

“Indeed you are. And if I know my guy, you’ll over achieve at it too,” Tony said, and laughed a little. “I’m sorry. Trying to lighten the mood. I know how much it sucks to have the guy you thought had your back screw you over. Ain’t no party.”

“Definitely ain’t no party,” Stephen said contemplatively. “Thank you for the flowers, and for bringing dinner.”

“Anything for you, love. You bring out the best in me... Usually while moaning like a cat in heat,” Tony said, waggling his eyebrows. Wong made a theatrical show of gagging on his wonton soup. Stephen’s somber expression broke.

“Yes, but only if you’ve been good,” Stephen replied.

“Oh, I’m very good and you know it,” Tony said and smirked. Wong pretended to wretch around his mouthful of food.

“Scandalous,” Stephen said mildly, and reached for the container of soup meant for him.
“Have to keep the press amused somehow,” Tony said. “Speaking of, I have to get to the facility in Michigan tomorrow. We’re testing the first fully assembled craft for the new fleet.”

“How on Earth do you get things done so quickly?” Wong asked.

“Raining down government contract money from the shoulders of the scientific giants on which I stand. Money is a great motivator for the average person,” Tony said. He reached out and stole one of Stephen’s wontons without Stephen so much as batting an eye at him.

“I swear you think mine tastes better,” Stephen said.

“They do, actually,” Tony replied, his mouth full. “Must be the magic,” he reasoned. Stephen rolled his eyes.

“So what’s your plan for Mordo’s power?” Tony asked after he swallowed.

“We were thinking about reseeding the world with it. Magic is not dying like Mordo proposed. In fact, much magic returned to the world after the Ancient One’s passing. She was a large draw on the grid, so to speak. We kept control of Maximoff’s magic to ensure it wouldn’t try to return to her... We could do something similar with Mordo. In this case, much can be returned to the people who he appropriated it from in the first place,” Wong explained.

“But if they weren’t strong enough to hold it in the first place, should they have a second chance?” Tony asked.

“Precisely what we’ve been asking ourselves,” Stephen said. He dutifully ate, though he didn’t much feel like it.

“You can sit on it for a day or two at least,” Tony said.

“But not on Mordo. We have to do something about him,” Stephen said. “The Mirror Dimension doesn’t meet U.N. standards either, and can be dangerous to someone who can no longer manipulate it.”

“We have holding cells at the Avengers compound. They meet with UN standards for humane treatment. Paperwork will have to be filed of course, but I can submit video from the suits as evidence. You really need a proper security system in here by the way,” Tony said.

“With the merging of magic and technology on the horizon, that might not be a bad idea, Stephen,” Wong said.

“We could hold Mordo for a few weeks at least... It would give us time to do what we need to do,” Tony said.

“I’m okay with it, what do you think?” Stephen asked Wong.

“I think that will be sufficient. But your FRIDAY will have to keep an eye on him. The other option would be Wakanda. They have enough knowledge of the mystic arts and power to hold him.” Wong said.

“Back up plan then?” Tony asked.

“Good, that works,” Stephen said, relieved to have a course of action. “Though, Mordo might be happier in Wakanda.”
“I think we need to be very careful about using Wakanda’s advanced prison systems as a dumping ground for our problematic people,” Tony said. “We’ll have to be very sparing about pulling that card.”

“Mordo would be worthy to be one of those exceptions, Tony. He can be incredibly dangerous, even without access to magic. Wakanda could handle that threat because of their sorcerers and advanced military. If he has a purpose, he will do anything to accomplish that goal. I’m suggesting the cheapest parlour trick of them all. Misdirection. If we end up giving him a purpose, he will thrive and not be a threat. Wakanda would give him something to learn I am sure.” Stephen explained.

“I’ll bring it up with his panther-ness next time I see him... Which is sometime after tomorrow. Production line inspection. I will also have to turn some of those duties over to he and Shuri if we’re off world soon,” Tony said. He reached for the lo mein.

“Which we should be,” Stephen agreed.

“Do you have a final line-up in mind to go? I have some ideas,” Tony said.

“Yes. For the most part, I want to leave humans here on Earth. In case,” Stephen said.

“In case,” Tony said with a nod.

“So, I would think that myself, you, Quill and his crew, Thor if you can stand him, and Vision. I’d leave Vision here, but I think we need him to well and truly overwhelm Thanos,” Stephen said.

“Rhodey and Carol are going to hate it, especially with the mech not finished yet,” Tony said.

“They’ll have to live with it. We need them in case we fail,” Stephen said simply. “You can already tell Wong hates it.”

“I do,” Wong agreed, slurping a wonton into his mouth and chewing contemplatively. “I worry that too few people against Thanos will simply be overwhelmed by his forces before you ever get to him.”

“See, I think we might have a man on the inside, though I’m not sure of his status at the moment,” Stephen held his hand palm again. “As we were sorting through the magic that Mordo had gathered, I found a few interesting sources.” A flicker of light appeared again over his hand. The light split into three. One small, a pinpoint of light compared to the other two. “The small one is... Not relevant at this moment. But the green one... Is not an individual’s magic gathered by Mordo. Rather, it seems to be a conduit to a sorcerer that Mordo couldn’t dominate or separate from their power. So, while Mordo could access it, he couldn’t take it for himself. It’s probably part of the reason why we were able to defeat Mordo at all. The magic user on the other side managed to stem the flow to him,” Stephen said.

“And is it who I am assuming it is on the other side?” Tony asked.

Stephen smothered a grin for Tony’s powers of extrapolation. “Yes, it’s Loki,” Stephen admitted. Tony set down his chopsticks and sighed.

“He’s alive?” Tony asked.

“Yes, and being held as a magical battery by Thanos. I hope he’s biding his time until we can get to him and that he’s on our side when we do.”
“How do you propose we do that?”

“Astral projection, but not too far out from when we arrive to help. I get the impression that while he enjoys his scheming, Loki loves chaos too much to sit idly by if he knows backup is on the way. We present ourselves as a rescue effort and he’s likely to come to our side,” Stephen said. Tony sighed heavily again.

“I’m not surprised he’s alive... But the idea of dealing with him, working with him, is difficult for me... And yet...” Tony paused and rubbed his eyes. “I’d still rather work with that bag of cats than Steve Rogers. How bad is that?”

“At least he’s an honest liar,” Wong said, grinning at his wit. Tony rolled his eyes.

“Can I ask a favour, Tony?” Stephen said. Tony sat up and gave Stephen his full attention. Stephen outright asking him for something significant was rare and warranted his full attention.

“What do you need babe? My kingdom for you.”

The smallest flicker of light from before appeared on Stephen’s palm. “This was the magical cure for a the man who told me of Kamar-Taj... It seems that Mordo took it from him... I’m certain that without it, the man is in pain and disabled again,” Stephen said.

“And you want to give it back to him as a way to say thanks,” Tony said.

“Yes, but... Insurance is a sticky thing. If I cure him, he’ll need therapy and work after that. A decent job,” Stephen said. Insurance was the dark underbelly of the American medical world that Stephen didn’t like talking about. It felt unseemly to have to think about it at his level. But Stephen after the accident, knew all too well what it was to deal with uncooperative insurance companies on the daily. Tony reached out and put his hand on Stephen’s forearm.

“So long as his police check is okay, we will find him something at S.I.,” Tony said.

“Thank you,” Stephen said softly. “I appreciate it.”

“One of the few times you ask me for something, and it’s for someone else.” Tony gave him a wry smile. “But of course I can do that. It’s no trouble.”

Transferring Mordo into the facilities at the compound proved easy enough, though Tony was both fascinated and terrified of the mirror dimension. He jolted when Stephen brought him in to the bound Mordo, and felt like his senses, both biological and new technological based ones, were going haywire. FRIDAY instantly hated it, and warned him as such with a strongly worded message across his glasses. However, the auto-syncing program appeared to be working just fine.

“Where the fuck is this?” Tony asked outright. Stephen chuckled a bit.

“Welcome to part of the multi-verse, Tony,” he replied.

“Oh, no. I am not ready for this. Get us out of here, ASAP, please,” Tony said.

“Scared you might not be able to control something?” Mordo taunted, his wrists and ankles bound. “And as for you, really, you thought it was fine to have dinner while leaving me here unprotected?” he said as directed his gaze back to Stephen.
“You’re not unprotected, Mordo, you can still move within the mirror dimension like any non magic user... Now you just won’t be able to manipulate it or get here on your own. That’s not my doing. That’s us being merciful,” Stephen replied, as he opened a portal to the Avengers’ Compound cell block.

Wong levitated Mordo, and for reasons beyond Tony’s understanding, removed his boots. Tony tilted his head, but didn’t bother asking. “Where are you taking me?” Mordo demanded.

“Somewhere secure and safe. After we’ve saved the world, we’ll figure out what to do with you,” Stephen said.

“You’re still thinking small, Strange. This goes so far-” Mordo started.

“I KNOW!” Stephen roared back. “Do you think I’m stupid? Are you that arrogant about your higher knowledge?! Of course I know. And now I have to rush on something I’d been praying to have more time on! You’ve put the entire universe at risk! You sold us out! Earth can’t even begin to comprehend the level of treason you’ve committed by siding with Thanos! But I assure you, I am quite aware. And now that we’ve put a stop to you, we’ll put a stop to him.”

“Your pretentiousness is only matched by your naiveté, Strange. The universe cannot continue as it is,” Mordo said.

“So, should we have left the world be devoured by Dormammu? Where is the line, Mordo? Where is the line at which I have to stop defending the world and roll over?” Stephen asked ferociously. He threw out a line of Eldritch magic to drag Mordo into the cell.

“Stephen, honey, take a breath,” Tony said softly, happy to jump through the portal and back to reality outside of the mirror dimension. Stephen’s hands balled into fists, which Tony knew must be causing him pain, to hold himself back. The Cloak flared around him on display like it was taunting a Spanish bull. Wong followed, watching carefully, but also conflicted and unsure what to do. Tony got the feeling that Wong hadn’t seen much of Stephen’s temper either.

Stephen’s glare was enough to be menacing, add in an Infinity Stone and other magical resources and he was a force to be reckoned with. “Mordo, your betrayal of humanity to that... totalitarian madman is enough to justify our actions. Add to that reneging on the oaths you swore you would uphold, this is us being merciful. Your ability to hold and wield magic will be forever removed, and your third eye closed. Know that you did this do yourself,” Stephen growled out. He raised his right hand, and ran a trembling, but still graceful thumb down the centre of Mordo’s forehead. Mordo howled in pain as his former expanded sense were cut off, and he collapsed on his side. Stephen’s hand returned to his side, and Tony realized that Stephen’s eyes were clouded by tears. Tony fearlessly stepped into Stephen’s space, past the Cloak, and wrapped his arms around Stephen.

“Hey, hey it’s okay. You’re okay,” Tony murmured.

“How could he do this?” Stephen wondered, his voice hoarse with emotions. He buried his face in the crook of Tony’s neck and clung to him.

“I don’t know, love,” Tony replied honestly, and rubbed Stephen’s back. Tony let Wong usher them out of the cell once he’d confirmed that Mordo had no more magical objects on his person.

Outside the cell, Carol was waiting patiently. A holographic projection of Rhodey was next to her, looking he was still waiting it out in the medical ward. “Sooooo, what’s the deal?” she asked.
Stephen gathered himself up, and wiped his eyes with the back of his wrist. “We have removed Mordo’s ability to utilize the mystic arts and wish to house him here for the time being,” Stephen explained. Carol looked around them and into the reinforced clear wall of the cell.

“Oh, he looks pissed about that,” she said. Mordo was starting to get to his bare feet. “Why do you have his boots?”

“Magical relics,” Wong said.

“Sure, right, I'm willing to pretend it’s not you being fashion conscious,” Carol teased. The projection of Rhodey swallowed a laugh. “I take it we have to book him.”

“If it could wait a week or so, that would be better,” Tony suggested.

“No can do,” Carol replied. Tony wilted theatrically.

“I know,” he said in a tired tone.

“What charges do you have?” she asked, sounding softer and more compassionate.

“Misuse of magic, failure to comply with the accords, and treason against the entirety of planet Earth,” Stephen said, rubbing some tension away from his forehead. Carol’s brows crept up her forehead.

“Those are some pretty heavy accusations. I know you were going to make them, but they will seem fantastical in the eyes of lawmakers,” she said.

“I know. We will have to make them understand the depth of his betrayal. The charges are not inaccurate,” Stephen replied. “We will hand over resources and proof to the WSC... But for now, I have to talk to Thor.”

They escaped with Rhodey from the medical wing on the promise of no joy riding of any kind, and went to the barracks building where the Asgardians were currently being housed. Tony could only imagine the food budget around here these days, but clearly some deal must have struck, as FRIDAY hadn’t alerted him to any out of the ordinary expenditures.

Already there were subtle changes to the decor. Fabrics had been draped over the open concept walls of the public areas to create a warmer light. Tony tried not to visibly disapprove of the Trump-like flare. His was not to judge. They asked polite permission to speak with Thor at the door, and soon were welcomed in by Thor himself with open arms. He looked infinitely pleased to have them there, and ushered them back to his private quarters. He chatted happily about the negotiations with the U.N. and how far their gold would go to establish them on Earth.

Once there, they found Valkyrie and Heimdal waiting, and they eyed them carefully. Thor’s shoulders slumped and he headed for tankard of ale. He took a few gulps before looking at them again. “Midgardian bureaucrats are, as you would say, assholes,” Thor stated. Tony barked out a laugh.

“Tell me about it,” he agreed.

“How do you deal with them every day?” Thor asked.

“Simple, I found the right people, and pay them to do it for me for the most part. But sometimes,
even I have to pucker up and kiss a few asses every now and then to get things done,” Tony replied.

“I dislike them very much.”

“Yeah, me too,” Tony said.

“Why do you come to me this odd evening? From what Quill has told me, you have had an eventful day,” Thor said.

“We have,” Stephen said. “I have news for you, Thor, but I need you to handle it calmly. Things are precarious. We found out our former ally, Mordo, betrayed us and joined with Thanos.”

“What news have you?” Thor asked. His features tightened and he set the tankard down softly.

“Loki is alive, but we need to be calm and not let them know we know,” Stephen said simply. Thor’s eyes closed for a moment, tears formed at the corners of them and he trembled in his effort to remain still.

“How did you find him?” Thor asked. “What proof of life have you?” He looked at Stephen, his eyes wet, but tears were held back.

“A connection from Mordo... Mordo was trying and failing to channel Loki’s power. I think Loki was resisting him though. But I don’t know his status beyond that,” Stephen explained. Thor took a deep breath and his shoulders relaxed back into an upright posture.

“I knew he lived... I knew.” Thor said quietly. “Thank you for this news, Doctor... What is your plan? What do you need of us?”

“You need to get to Nidavellir and get your forge on,” Tony suggested. “But I need Rocket tomorrow. Can you wait until then?”

“I can... In my coming absence, Heimdal and Valkyrie will speak for me,” Thor said.

“Chain of command, good,” Tony said. “That’s good.”

“Can I rely on you to help me when we go against Thanos?” Thor asked Tony. Tony took a breath and a long look at Thor.

“Yes, Thor. Personal differences are nothing in the face of this,” Tony said. He held out a hand, finally offering touch. Thor reached across and grasped Tony’s forearm in that ultra manly shake he preferred.

Tony dragged Rhodey, Carol, Quill, and Rocket off to Michigan early the next morning. What he thought would be a quiet in and out was shaping up to be a hero’s welcome. “Oh fuck... They put up banners?” Tony said, eyeing up the factory as Rhodey brought the Quinjet in for a soft landing.

“Makes sense, Tony,” Carol said. “From my catching up, it sounds like you’re doing a hell of a good thing for these people.”

“It’s not a good thing, this is dire circumstance. It’s not charity... It’s just what needed to be done,” Tony said. “I don’t want...” Tony sighed heavily.

“Don’t worry, Sour Patch,” Rhodey said with a smirk. “Pretty sure they’re still quite aware you’re
not god. They’re just grateful to be put back to work and contributing again.”

“I don’t think you know how hopeless a lot of people here felt. I’ve been reading up on it. I’m glad it’s now that I got back... I don’t know if I could have handled it before,” Carol said. She was wearing an updated airforce uniform, as was Rhodcy. Tony was in his standby Tom Ford, as was his usual these days.

“They can thank me after the planet is saved,” Tony said, waving it off.

“Fighting spirit is a hell of a gift, Tones. Be nice about it,” Rhodcy said, unbuckling himself and getting to his feet. He stood up, and removed the sunglasses from Tony’s face. “Don’t put on a show, today. Empathize with them. I know it’s hard for you because you can feel them, but it will help put them at ease, okay? They’ve been through a lot. You’ve been through a lot. Despair can be fertile common ground.”

“I’ll try,” Tony said quietly.

The finished product was at the end of the factory tour, during which Tony had held it together fairly well. He wished for the mask of his sunglasses, but he could see Rhodcy’s reasoning. Everyone, literally everyone, was delighted to see him enter their workspace, and were proud as hell to show him what they’d accomplished. Tony shook hands and accepted hugs, and was asked over and over again if he would stay for the BBQ and lunch they’d put together for the entire town. Tony let Rhodcy and Carol make the call on that one, and they both said that yes, there was time.

Quill was instantly eagerly anticipating cornbread, and Rocket hung back, not saying much. His mind was on the end product, but he seemed to like what he was seeing.

Rocket was intrigued by the production facility, and actually looked impressed in spots. “This ain’t half bad, Stark,” he said. He was up to his shoulders in the inner workings of the first finished craft.

“Just doing what you taught me, and Shuri’s input has been invaluable,” Tony replied. His jacket was off, tie loosened, and his sleeves were rolled up.

“Nah, I mean all this...” Rocket waved his hand around above his head for a moment. “Most of the planets out there were forced into contact ‘fore they was ready. Their economies suffered trying to play catch up with more advanced people... But I think this might work. I can see why Quill was on about Terrans. Individually you’re screw ups and broken... But together you might be something to contend with.” Rocket wasn’t making eye contact, and kept to his inspection. Tony wasn’t about to try and force it.

“That’s pretty much human society,” Tony agreed, and left it at that. The ship fired up beautifully, and both Tony and Rocket were grinning fearsomely over it. It took convincing from Carol that no, they could not take a joyride, and to get down from there right now, thank you very much.

For the sake of other priorities, they complied, set the ship down, and lowered the rear hatch.

“Nice work, Jump Suit. Now all we gotta do is build about a million more of them, and save the world.”

“Back atcha, Glow Stick,” Rocket replied. “I’m gonna take Groot with me to Nidavellir. He’s at a difficult age. Quill tries, but he’s still too guilty over what happened with Yondu, and he’s trying to overdo it and keep Groot too safe. It’s dangerous out there. You can’t cradle people in space. They have to learn to survive.” Rocket said.

Tony rolled down his shirt sleeves, rearranged his tie, and picked up his suit jacket. “Okay, so that
“Yeah, Stark. You think I’m gonna miss that?” Rocket asked.

“You know, you’re better than you claim to be,” Tony said, unable to resist a bit of praise unrelated to work.

“Heroic don’t mean good. Making a difference don’t mean I’m soft,” Rocket said.

“Just don’t be so so strong you turn brittle, buddy. Groot needs you,” Tony said softly as they walked down the ramp.

“I am astonished by your restraint,” Rhodey announced. “I expected to be chasing after you by now.”

“There’s barbecue to be had, Honey Bear... Bring on the red meat. I’m gonna need the fuel.” Tony replied. He grabbed Rhodey’s arm in an exaggerated motion to drag him along.

“You ever pass on an opportunity to eat?” Rocket asked.

“Hell no. I’m supporting a growing colony of nanites... I need to think of my microscopic babies,” Tony replied. Rhodey’s face screwed up in revulsion.

“You better learn to embrace your micro-babies, Honey Bear... They literally gird up your loins,” Tony said.

“You’re making it worse!” Rhodey hollered as Tony dragged him playfully, and fairly gently toward the outdoor grounds of the retrofitted factory.

“Come on!”

“Only if you promise to never utter the word loins again in my presence,” Rhodey insisted, though not really trying to plant his feet too much.

“What about loin, singular? We’re about to go to a barbecue, Rhodey bear. I am sure there will be talk of cuts of meat,” Tony teased.

“I hate you,” Rhodey said in a defeated tone. Quill was laughing like a hyena and hot on their heels. Rocket and Carol shared a rolling of eyes, and trudged after them.

Tony arrived at the Sanctum that night, eager to see Stephen, and with a call to Pepper scheduled. He had to come clean about the nanites, no question on that. He was just hoping she would see the potential in them to heal people as they had Rhodey.

Stephen met him at the door, dressed down, and very happy to see him. He kissed Tony as soon as he was close enough, and held him close. “Feeling better, love?” Tony asked.

“I’m with the best man on Earth,” Stephen said, voice barely above a whisper.

“Hardly. Nice try though. Dr. Robinson, I believe you’re trying to seduce me,” Tony said. Stephen let out a breath of laughter, and smiled at Tony. He held up a tablet, which was on a photo gallery of the factory tour from today. It was on MSNBC’s website, which Tony thought must have
amounted a slow news day, but then he noticed the photo. It was Tony hugging a middle aged woman he’d spoken to earlier in the day. She’d gone back to work to supplement her husband’s pittance of a disability cheque from an industrial accident a decade ago. She’d thanked Tony profusely for what she saw as him getting their lives back in order, and then promptly burst into tears. Tony’s only recourse was to open his arms and let her hug him. Some photographer had been on the ball and captured the moment. Tony suspected it might have even come from Rhodey’s phone given the angle. But if it got him this kind of attention from his honey, then he was willing to let it slide.

“You’re a good man, Tony Stark. I’m so lucky to have you,” Stephen said.

Chapter End Notes

*Valkyrie voice* "Here we go!"

All spelling and grammar mistakes are mine. If you spot one, tell me and I will weed them out.

As always, comments are love. The ones that have trickled in over the past couple months have made me smile, and I appreciate them so very much.
The next morning, Tony was sitting in front of his phone, which was propped up on his breakfast plate. Pepper was in New York, and Tony could see that she hadn’t quite overcome the jet lag yet. He made a note to send her a gift certificate for her favourite spa in Manhattan. “So, um... There was an incident, and I fixed Rhodey.” Tony said. Pepper’s eyebrows arched at the same graceful angle that could have held up an aqueduct.

“You... What?” she asked.

“I... Thanos’ forces made an incursion on Earth, and he did it using a sorcerer from here. Someone Stephen used to know before the guy went fascist about magic... We defeated them, but, the alien heading up the incursion grabbed on to Rhodey, and I... I panicked. I asked the Aether to help me protect Rhodey and she did... Using the nanite tech,” Tony said. He hoped he had a sufficient hang dog expression. “Whatever the Squidward looking guy did killed Rhodey’s suit, and... Like I said, I panicked... The Aether took the opportunity and did the same thing to me.” Tony looked down at his hands. Pepper hadn’t liked the arc reactor, let alone the prehensile suit, and Tony was well aware that this conversation could go pear-shaped fast.

“What are you saying, exactly, Tony?” Pepper asked, after taking a breath.

“That I’ve made a breakthrough in the nanite tech... And that Rhodey can walk again without the braces... And that we will never be without the armour again,” Tony said gently. Stephen approached him, with two steaming cups of coffee following behind him in mid-air. He sat at the table, and the coffee mugs set themselves down gently in front of them.

“What our dearest Tony is trying to say is that he and James now have nanite colonies living inside of their bodies, capable of taking any form or function they wish, including a light, but feasible Iron Man or War Machine armour,” Stephen explained.
“What the fuck, Tony?” Pepper asked, eyes wide.

“It will keep him... and me, safe, Pep. The suit can’t die completely... And Rhodey can walk again. He’s feeling his heels on the ground, and bladder control has returned. It’s a huge step forward in quality of life, and it will revolutionize the medical industry,” Tony said.

“Did Rhodey get to choose this?” Pepper asked shrewdly.

“Sort of?” Tony said.

“He probably wouldn’t unchoose it,” Stephen offered. Pepper sighed loudly.

“So, the suit is... in you?” She asked, forcing calm over her entire being.

“Full on cyborg,” Tony said softly. He held up a hand, and called the gauntlet of the armour up. The repulsor humming to life gave Pepper pause.

“My god, Tony, this...”

“Is the future, Pepper,” Tony murmured. He put the gauntlet away, and felt the hum in his body as the nanites settled into place. “I’m still me, and while I wasn’t exactly expecting this... I am still me, still your friend, still your business partner... It’s... It’s more weird, and I’m sorry to put yet another thing on you that’s hard to accept. Just... Whatever you decide, know that I still value you as my closest friend. And we’re going to have to tell the rest of these loser tech companies to just hop in and follow us, because we’re going to be the future.” Tony said, eyes brimming with contained hope and excitement.

“Look, if you’re worried, there are certain physical limitations that the Aether worked around, so no one is going to get to level that Rhodey and I are at for a very long time. FRIDAY and the medical teams are getting a handle on that now. You will get all the information, so you can decide for yourself... But we will change lives for the better with this. I even have a patient in mind to give it a try.” Tony finally picked up his mug and took a sip of coffee.

“Pangborn,” Stephen concluded, a smile creeping across his features.

“That’s the baby, baby,” Tony replied. “We get him in on the ground floor, and make him an ambassador for the process.”

“That will save me having to give back magic to a weakened user... You are a genius,” Stephen said.

“I know, but I like when you say it,” Tony said and grinned.

Tony managed to soothe Pepper, and told her to call Rhodey after they spoke to see how he was. He also gave her a location, that should things become dire in the future, where she and Rhodey should go. “What are you planning, Tony?”

“Hopefully it will never have to be used. If things get bad though, Pepper, we’ll need this,” Tony replied as FRIDAY forwarded the information. By the time they had tried all the could with Thanos, the colossal hive of nanites in and underground bunker in Colorado would be ready. They were currently replicating themselves like crazy under FRIDAY’s careful watch. Soon there would be enough to attach to the chassis of the mech should it ever be needed. Tony had wanted something more solid, but it was the express route to what he needed and it would have to do with their condensed timeframe. He’d laid out plans of attack for FRIDAY to give to Rhodey and Carol to execute. He only hoped it would be enough if they failed.
Tony bid his goodbyes to Pepper, who he felt was sufficiently calmed, and turned to Stephen. “So, love, is it time to pack up?” he asked.

“I believe so,” Stephen replied softly. He laid a hand over Tony’s as he took a sip of coffee. “I don’t think we can leave this any longer.”

“Yeah, me neither. I’m scared I’ll lose my nerve,” Tony said, and let out a long sigh.

“Tony, no matter what happens, I love you, okay? I want you to know that I love you,” Stephen said. Tony’s eyes were warm when they met Stephen’s and he smiled.

“I love you too. I never thought I’d be so happy to have my life get this fucking weird. Before you, I never knew... that if I were to suddenly not have this, how empty my life would be without it. Yinsen called me a man who had everything and nothing, because I had no family... But now I am surrounded by family, and have so much to lose... I am terrified of Thanos, but I’m more terrified to lose you, Stephen. I hope that it’s not being the Soul Stone talking. I hope that even if I never knew, I would love you as much as I do.” Tony set down the mug, and drew Stephen close to him. He kissed him softly, and Stephen responded eagerly, greedily, relishing in this final moment of soft, calm intimacy. Part of his mind screamed to push Tony across the table and have his way with him, but rational logic and duty were calling them both.

“We should get going. We have a lot to do before we go,” Tony murmured when the searing heat of their kiss faded.

“Yes, we should,” Stephen agreed, his voice breathy as he felt Tony’s clever fingers kneading into his sides. They took their time parting, hands roaming over one another’s bodies.

“It’s dangerous,” Tony said.

“Yes, it is,” Stephen said.

“Are you ready?” Tony asked.

“If I have to be,” Stephen replied quietly. Tony puffed out a breath of a laugh.

“Sounds about right,” Tony said. “Fuck I love you so much.”

“Love you too,” Stephen said, as sure about anything he’d ever said in his life. He was grateful that there was no questioning if Stephen should stay and Tony should go it alone. There was no move to try to self-sacrifice. Stephen would take the increase in Tony’s self-worth, and dared to hope that Tony genuinely thought they could survive the battle with Thanos. There would be no flying a nuke into a wormhole solo this time.

“FRIDAY, honey, can you send a message to Quill, tell him that we’re ready when he is?” Tony asked, his cheek still pressed against Stephen’s collar bone.

“On it, boss,” she replied softly from Tony’s phone.

Word had gotten around it seemed as the mood at the compound was somber when Stephen and Tony arrived. Mostly it was Hulk looming in the atrium where Stephen usually brought them in via portal. “Quill says you go,” Hulk said.

“Yeah, buddy, it’s time,” Tony said, his voice hoarse.
“Hulk no want... Hulk does not want... you to go,” Hulk said. He was hopping, gorilla-like and agitated.

“I don’t want to have to go, but you know it’s necessary,” Tony said softly.

“Bring Bruce back? Find other way?” Hulk asked. Tony’s heart clenched. He moved quickly into Hulk’s space, and jumped up, hugging his arms around Hulk’s thick, green neck.

“Shh, no, don’t... Not on my account. No,” Tony insisted. “I have to go, big guy, but I need you to have courage while I’m gone.” Tony’s voice was quiet, which forced Hulk to calm his breathing so he could hear him. “I want you to be as you are. I don’t want you to give up, okay? I hope you can stay here and help Carol and Rhodey. They’ll need your resolve and honesty, okay?” Tony whispered to him, not once mentioning Hulk’s strength on purpose. “I hope you can help look after them.” Hulk sighed, and hugged Tony back.

“Hulk miss you. Hulk want you to stay. Hulk... scared.”

“I know. I am too. I’m sorry. But you know why I have to go,” Tony said. Hulk sighed again, breathing deep to hold back tears. He nodded and Tony squeezed him a bit more tightly. “Can you look after them for me? Rhodey, Carol, FRIDAY, Peter, Kamala, and Sam? Everyone else? I know it’s a lot to ask of you.”

“Hulk... Hulk try,” he replied.

“Thank you. So much. You have no idea how much that means to me,” Tony said.

Rhodey was no happier at the news, and was, in fact, furious that Tony was leaving so soon. Tony bit his lip, and took Rhodey’s anger for what it was... Lingering guilt from Afghanistan. And just as Stephen was about to interject on Tony’s behalf, Tony raised a hand, between the two of them. “I’m sorry Rhodey... I would take you along in a heartbeat, but you already know why you have to stay. You and Carol are the best line of defence against Thanos. If we fail to take out his forces, I need you here. You’re the best hope the world has, Obiwan. Because you can fight, yes, but also because you can lead a battle. You can also stay steady, and adapt to what needs to change. I need you here. The world needs you here,” Tony said, and the anger simmered.

“I hate when you go where I can’t follow you, and this is the ultimate where I can’t follow,” Rhodey said quietly, still angry but calmer now.

“And I definitely hate not being able to go,” Carol said, coming into the room.

“I need you both with me on this,” Tony said plaintively. “This isn’t being sidelined. This is the most important safety parameter we have. If I can’t get done what needs to be done, I need you to defend Earth with all of your skills and experience.” Tony said. Rhodey sighed heavily, and Carol tilted her head, acknowledging the logic of Tony’s statement. “Because everyone will be looking to you in my absence, and you’re the only ones I really trust to do this without fucking it up.”

“You crazy shit, you better come back to me safe,” Rhodey threatened. “I mean it. My mother will have my ass on a plate if anything happens to you.”

“I know this all seems thrown together, and I am still a giant fuck-up in some regards... But I honestly think I got this, at least as far as Thanos is concerned. It will be his remaining forces that will be the problem. They will need to be dealt with in a direct manner. And as soon as Earth is secure, we can go to space like a Sci-Fi version of Simon Wiesenthal if you want, and track down
“Thanos’ biggest zealots. I’m down for that,” Tony said. Rhodey considered that for a time.

“Maybe... But first we take a vacation,” Rhodey replied.

“Now, that I am definitely down for,” Tony said.

“You be so fucking careful out there, Tones. I swear to God you better be careful.”

“Are you kidding me? I probably won’t be able to tie my shoes on my own without Stephen’s say so,” Tony said. Stephen gave a nod that that was probably close to the truth.

“Be careful,” Quill said. A whirlwind of activity had lead up to this point. The small pod ship from the Milano was at the ready, and Thor in particular was getting anxious to get going.

“Yeah, yeah,” Rocket said and tried to wave him off. Tony and he were going over final preparations, including the deep space communications they were both soon going to be using.

“Rocket,” Gamora said sharply. Rocket flinched and turned his attention to her. “Be careful,” she finished with a much more tender tone. She looked from Rocket to Groot, though the direct statement of affection remained unsaid.

“I will,” Rocket said quietly, letting his gaze fall on Groot as well.

“Good,” Gamora agreed. She then went and hugged Groot, who only pretended to not like it.

“I am Groot,” Groot said in a snarky tone.

“None of your shit, kiddo,” Gamora replied. Groot huffed, but let the hug continue.

“I am Groot,” he muttered.

“Better,” Gamora agreed. The small crew of Rocket, Groot, and Thor climbed aboard, with Thor giving a warm, but much more subdued farewell to the Asgardians.

When the ship finally powered to life and took to the sky and through the portal Stephen had created to give them a head start on their journey, Tony knew that he would be next, and the tension built in him. Instinctively he reached out for Stephen, who had been observing the departure silently next to Tony, managing and then closing the portal, all while thinking about many of the same things Tony was. The weight on his shoulders made Tony want to hop on board the Milano that moment and just get on with it. He vibrated with restless energy, wanting to be in motion more than anything in the world. And despite Stephen’s cool exterior, Tony knew he felt the same, and that was what kept him grounded and calm. Soon. It would come soon enough, and there was no reason to push it.

There was little rest for the next two days, as Tony and Quill went over the Milano with a fine tooth comb, and stowed all needed provisions and gear. That at least had been a good outlet for Tony’s energy. The dawn of the day they were supposed to leave came, and Tony was still hyped up, but was keeping a lid on his energy, and clung to Stephen to help centre himself.

The Milano was ready to go, and all of their gear was stowed. It was made a little lighter without the presence of Groot, Rocket, and Thor, though their belongings were on board as well, in
anticipation of meeting up with them for their encounter with Thanos. Tony, Stephen, and Vision, had spent the previous three days, when not arguing with Rhodey and Carol, pouring over the star charts that Quill and Rocket had provided. They needed to memorize routes in case of emergency, and they plotted meet-up points in case they were needed. Steady communications were coming in from Rocket marking their progress toward Nidavellir, and all their plans were forwarded on to them.

“If anyone starts singing *Leaving on a Jet Plane*, I’m abandoning humanity,” Tony declared on the tarmac of the Avengers Compound. The excitement had died down finally, though Tony was absolutely certain that Rhodey was still angry with him. Tony didn’t blame him for a second. But his plea that it was critical that Rhodey and Carol stay on Earth to protect it, seemed to have won the logic debate. Emotions were slower to catch up though. Still, Rhodey had manned up enough to stand at the platform to see him off.

“Not the time, Tony,” Pepper scolded Tony’s attempt at a joke.

Everyone who was able to be there was out on the landing strip of the Avengers Compound. Tony looked at the faces surrounding him and was proud. These faces felt like family, and their love and care radiated off them and into Tony. He recalled Yinsen’s words from a decade ago, and understood. He was a man who truly had everything now... And that made the stakes of what he had to lose so much higher. “Can I say here that I still think we all should be going?” Peter said in a forlorn voice. Tony reached out and pulled the boy into a hug.

“I need you here, Pete. May needs you here... I’m about to go kick an anthill full of baddies, and I can almost guarantee that some of them are loyal enough to make a beeline here for revenge... We’re not as ready as I’d hoped we’d be. We’re getting there, but by no means are we actually ready thanks to Mordo’s treason. Rocket’s latest observations already put outriders on their way, using wormholes to jump that the armada as a whole can’t. I need you here, Pete, and I’m sorry to put something this big on you. You’re still too young for this, but you won’t be for long. I know you can help out. I believe in you... The mark of an Avenger is not just saving the day, but doing the best you can under the circumstances to help as many people as you can... Do you understand why I need you to stay here?” Tony asked.

“Yeah,” Peter agreed, his voice rough.

“Good. Good man. I’m so proud of you,” Tony murmured and let him go. “Okay... I guess that’s it then,” Tony said and sighed. He’d hugged everyone, even Rhodey, who’d squeezed him too tight on purpose. He’d left his contingencies. He’d packed the necessities and given FRIDAY an upgrade so she could control his remaining suits and the Iron Legion as JARVIS had, and improved her communication with deep space thanks to Rocket hijacking infrastructure. Tony would have purchased it, but he was still a poor man when it came to space. His and Shuri’s ship-building empire would prove profitable in the future though according to Rocket, which was a comfort.

Tony’s eyes clouded, he had no more words for them. All he could do was smile, nod, and walk up the Milano’s hatch. Everyone else was already aboard, except Stephen and Vision, who were walking beside him. He waved as the hatch closed, eyes on his loved ones until the last.

“Tony, it’s time,” Stephen said softly. Tony’s mind kicked into gear, and he spun on his heel.

“Yup, let’s go,” he said, fighting his desperate want to stay, and compelled by the need to go.

The absence of Rocket and Groot gave Tony and Stephen spots up front so they could observe. What should have been a moment of schoolboy wonder and joy was clouded by the somber threat
of Thanos. Tony considered himself a very brave boy during launch, and tried to enjoy the moment of leaving the Earth’s atmosphere at a speed that was only now becoming possible on Earth. He tested his connection to FRIDAY once they hit the asteroid belt and was pleased with its success.

Quill made a crack about handling the careful piloting required better than Rocket, which earned him a collective eye-roll from the rest of the Guardians. It was then that Tony’s mind engaged and he suddenly felt part of something new. If he could stick to the plan, there was a chance... He reached out with his mind to Stephen, who was seated in Groot’s spot. Stephen’s mind was more worried than his, but he was brought round by Tony’s sense of wonder. It was enough for him to look up and take in their surroundings which were rapidly becoming less familiar. The Sun was fading in the background as they fought its gravitational pull and pressed on toward the first wormhole jump.

Tony sent his love to Stephen who caught it like an air kiss and returned it to him. “All systems go, love,” Tony said.

“So it would seem, darling,” Stephen replied.

Tony then checked on Vision, who had been given Mantis’ seat as she generously let him have it. “How are you holding up, V?” Tony asked.

“Quite well,” Vision said earnestly. “I’m rather looking forward to being in places where my regular appearance won’t draw unwarranted attention.”

Tony took the first wormhole jump quite well. His former life as a playboy thrill seeker had actually prepared him for the experience.

Three days in though, and he was craving every rest stop they took, and eventually went to Stephen for a magical fix, who had used it on himself from the start. By ten days in though, Tony’s body had adapted and was starting to make himself useful by following the maintenance schedule and instructions Rocket had left behind when it became clear that Quill didn’t have as much interest in doing it.

Tony craved distraction most of all, especially when Gamora, Nebula, Quill, and Stephen were plotting out where Thanos’ outrider ships were. They were headed toward one another and would meet soon if they weren’t careful. It would take Quill’s dead reckoning of the wormholes to slip by them incognito. So he was a bit surprised when Quill poked his head into the engine room. “Hey Tony, how you doing?” Peter asked.

“Not bad. Glad to be stopped,” Tony replied, carefully shutting an access panel.

“We need to talk, man. I’ve played nice so far, but I’ve got questions,” Quill said. Tony nodded and reached out to Stephen and Vision with his mind, and asked them to bring Gamora and Nebula.

“I suppose it’s time to let you in on how I want this to go down,” Tony agreed with a nod. Quill looked relieved that Tony wasn’t trying to be evasive.

“Good. I don’t wanna be a d-bag about this, but I have to know. The people on this ship are all I have, Tony. I know that life out here ain’t safe, but I have to do everything I can,” Peter said.

“I get that completely,” Tony said sincerely.

Stephen and Vision entered the engine room, followed by Gamora and Nebula. Stephen gave Tony a subtle, questioning look. “Game plan time, love. We need them to know,” Tony explained. Stephen considered that silently for a fraction of a moment and then gave Tony an agreeing nod.
after looking around at the gathered company. “If we’re going to be successful, we need to get as close to Thanos as possible without him knowing we’re there,” Tony said, skipping any preamble for Nebula’s sake. “But the timing has to be right. I want to dodge the outriders as originally planned. But we have to strike within a reasonable amount of time that they will turn back towards us instead of heading to gain revenge on Earth. So the minute Thor and Rocket are back in the picture we have to move into position make our move... Until that moment, I suggest we hide, cloaked if possible, and hidden by the Aether if need be, and then we cozy up in the supply lines to the armada,” Tony said.

“That’s too close. We’ll be discovered,” Gamora said.

“Not if we do it quickly enough. We have to sew chaos into Thanos’ war party. That means taking him out, fast. It’s best to hide in plain sight if we can... We also need to cut that supply chain for longer term success. Peter, I know you still have contacts in the Ravagers from what Rocket gave me to study. Time to call in every favour that you’ve ever given. Hell, every favour that Yondu ever gave out. Cutting the supply chain is critical. I’ve been charting how the armada moves, and I can see that the supply sources have been carefully planned out. Thanos has been planning this for centuries. We need to start a dumpster fire among the planets in that chain and cut them off. Hungry, unpaid armies fall much more easily, no matter how much they’ve fallen into their leader’s cult of personality,” Tony said. Quill’s face was very serious, realizing the breadth of what Tony was suggesting.

“That is madness,” Gamora said.

“No, sister,” Nebula said in her usual angry, but steady tone. “Thanos is proud. He thinks he’s planned for every contingency. He thinks no one stands any chance. Chaos will help in this case.”


“So you’re saying you plan on using the fact that we’re disorganized screwups to our advantage,” Quill reasoned.

“More or less,” Tony agreed. “And I will say right now, that when the direct confrontation comes with Thanos, I need everyone to agree to finish him quickly. Emotional attachments aside, making him suffer will just give him time to figure out how to defeat us. I can put a temporary stop to him, and I think it will shock him into incapacitation, but I am going to need you guys to be brutal in finishing him off, which is a lot to ask, I know... But it needs to be done before he uses the Power Stone to heal himself,” Tony said. “Cutting off his head would be ideal, I think.”

“That’s... medieval, Tony,” Quill said.

“That is madness. That is all I have to say about it,” Gamora agreed.

“This is the art of war, young Padewans... And it sucks. And it’s morally dubious. At least so far as I can predict it unfolding,” Tony said, and noticed that Stephen took special note of that and they would have to talk about it later. “But the time for being fair is long gone. We get this done and then we deal with the rest of the army... Because it won’t stop with Thanos. So many people believing that strongly in one thing means we’ll have zealotry to contend with, and we’re about to make a martyr out of their leader.”

“Why so harsh then?” Gamora asked.

“A calculated risk,” Tony replied. “We have to stop him simply because of the amount of power he
has personally, and I think there’s only one way to do it, so we have to prepare for the consequences of that. Still, it’s better to fuck with Thanos’ plan, and attack him in the field rather than him having the resources that come with being on a planet.”

“You seem very sure of yourself in all this,” Gamora said.

“I was raised by a weapons manufacturer who wanted me to be a general at the start... He had to settle for a genius instead. But being raised that way means I got a few valuable lessons. Sadly, how to destroy an enemy was one of them. But at least it’s proving useful now,” Tony said.

“What else have you seen, Tony?” Stephen asked. “You said you were predicting the outcome. Is that a vision, or strategy?”

“Strategy mostly... I think... Part of creating is seeing something so strongly in your mind that you can build it, or make it happen... But I’ve asked the Aether what she thinks, and shutting down Thanos’ brain function is the best and most efficient way,” Tony replied softly.

“Can’t you do that from a distance?” Nebula asked.

“So you’ve figured out what Tony is?” Quill asked.

“Of course I have. I’m not an idiot,” she retorted. “Though you hide it well, Stark. I only knew at the start of this voyage.”

“I could maybe do it from a distance, but with the Power Stone at his disposal, whatever I do, I will have to fight him at every turn to maintain control. I would be afraid of a lack of precision... I would also like to ensure Loki lives. I think I’m going to need him,” Tony said.

“What do you need him for?” Stephen asked.

“I think he’ll keep the Tesseract safe for us once this is over,” Tony muttered too quickly, trying to gloss over the subject.

“Are... Are you certain? You hate Loki,” Stephen said.

“No, I’m not at all certain, but I think I can control him if I have to, like I did with Thor... And he’s now well aware of the consequences if he goes rogue or lets the stone take over,” Tony said. “I... I can see him, sort of.” Tony squinted into the middle distance. “He is actually scared for his life, I think.”

“You didn’t tell Thor that,” Stephen said.

“No, and neither did you. Thor would have gone off on a viking rampage. Couldn’t have that,” Tony replied.

“You’re getting quite Machiavellian about this,” Stephen mused. “And so help me, I think I like it.”

“It has to work, love. It just has to,” Tony said, his voice quiet and worried.

“It’s going to be fine,” Quill said, his instinct to reassure his crew kicking in. “Hey, you wanna see Rocket’s plan to fuck with the outriders? I’m gonna need your help with that.”

“Sure,” Tony replied, welcome for the distraction.
A few days later, Tony sat strapped in the gunner’s position, watching Quill do what Quill did best, hold it together during utter chaos, and fucking with people’s shit. And it was glorious. “NOW TONY!” Peter yelled over the noise of the shuddering Milano, as it struggled to stay together inside a wormhole. Tony pressed two buttons and deployed the adorable time bombs that were going to attach themselves to the outrider ships as they crossed paths in the wormhole. Tony monitored the small drones as they made their way to their destination. Apparently Rocket had done some of his best work on these, and they would cloak themselves, and detonate just at the precise time, leaving them with no choice but to return to Thanos’ armada if they survived. They had an extra dash of a spell from Stephen, and they had to hope that would be enough.

The Milano’s shaking was getting to them all, especially the ship herself, but Tony’s eyes were locked on the progress of the drones. He caught the barest glimpse of them connecting and vanishing into the the exterior of the ships as they made their way out the other side of the wormhole. “Contact! Go, Quill! Get us out of here!” Tony barked.

Quill didn’t bother replying, but instead fired up the propulsion system, and booted it for the other side of the jump. Tony fought to hold his stomach and assumed that everyone else was too, save for Vision of course. Though Vision did look deeply concerned about the stability of the ship.

The Milano lurched through to the other side of the wormhole, and it closed after them. Tony’s stomach lurched along with it. They finally came to a stop, and finally all was calm. “Oh thank fuck,” Tony said, and rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands.

“About time ya buncha assholes,” came a voice across the speakers. “Been waiting on ya.”

“Hey, we’ve been busy,” Quill grumbled at Rocket, who’s face appeared on the main monitor.

“Didja fuck it up?” Rocket asked.

“Of course not,” Tony said, and looked insulted.

“Good, now open the door and let us in. I got a very sunburned Asgardian with a itchy trigger finger and a huge axe wanting to get a move on,” Rocket said with a maniacal grin.

Chapter End Notes

So, yeah, hi. Here I am. First of all, an apology... I'm so very sorry for this extended absence... I've been... Attending to things.

I've been in talk therapy since last year, and holy shitballs has that been constructive as fuck. It's had some downsides too, as I REALLY had (and still have) an aversion to conflict of any kind as I was working through the conflict in myself. Even writing fictional conflict was too much... So I went to ground for a bit. I've been kind of isolated I think in the past few months, but it's been a safe isolation. Away from sources that I've been hurt by previously... I've been doing this without pharmaceutical medication, as I still have a bit of a phobia about it, and have been really working on mental techniques to reduce anxiety, the inner critic, the pathological need to please, and to start to lay out some personal boundaries for myself.

That's been my biggest challenge, boundaries vs. vulnerability... But I am learning to establish boundaries, but being able to be vulnerable (and who to trust with it) is still a
work in progress... Though, it has helped to mentally relabel it as 'emotional authenticity', and to really acknowledge and process emotions in real time for a change.

So there's that. Physical health wise, I have started a more concentrated effort to pay attention to my chronic disease, and to address my chronic pain. I've made progress on both, which is a very good thing. Keeping an art journal all of this has been a huge help. Medical use marijuana has been a big help as well, though I keep it very low on the THC end of things, and am utilizing CBD products to finally get some relief... Which has also meant for the first time in years, I am sleeping more than five and half hours a night. So recovering more than a decade's worth of sleep debt has also been part of the journey.

Long story short, I got a ways to go... But there is definitely more good than bad happening nowadays. I am creating again (both with some writing and mostly visual art), which has been a lifeline to me throughout this. Having an outlet and something to focus on has been my port in the storm.

If anyone is still reading this, thanks and thanks and ever thanks... I do have every intention of finishing this story, and I hope you will hang on until I get there.
Later, after the excitement was over and things had settled down on the ship, Thor was placated into waiting temporarily, Stephen took a moment to mentally touch Tony on the shoulder.

“Tony?”

“Yes, dear?”

“Got a moment for a private chat?”

“Always for you,” Tony replied.

The reconvened in the bunk room, which was unoccupied this time of the day. “Thank you for coming so quickly... I have to address one of your battle tactics, as I think it could lead to our downfall,” Stephen said softly.

“You’re just bringing this up now?” Tony sniped back, eyes narrowing. Stephen flinched a little and Tony settled. “Sorry,” he said immediately.

“I know it seems late, but I wanted this to be very fresh in your mind... You need to hit Thanos first,” Stephen said. His voice was still soft.

“Isn’t that exactly what we’re doing?” Tony asked.

“Tactically and metaphorically speaking, yes... but I mean actually and literally when the battle begins. I need you to hit him first. Hard and fast... You tend to let the other guy get the first punch in. I’ve seen it. Like you have a pathological need to either be punished for past indiscretions, or simply to prove that the other guy started it... I’m begging you, Tony. This time you have to hit first and without mercy, because Thanos won’t show us any. He doesn’t care,” Stephen said. His voice was still soft.

“Do... Do I do that?” Tony asked, surprised.
“Yes. I’ve reviewed your battles thanks to FRIDAY... And that won’t work this time. Think of it this way, Thanos murdered much of Gamora’s planet, and most of Nebula’s and Drax’s too... That was his first punch, and now we need to finish it. You need to finish it.”

“I didn’t realize,” Tony said, looking down at his hands. Stephen reached out, and cupped Tony’s chin gently in his hand, bringing Tony’s eyes back to his.

“When it comes to one on one, you always seem to take the first hit. You can’t this time, Tony. You just can’t...” Stephen trailed off, eyes full of worry. There was panic in that worry that wasn’t showing on his face.


“Thank you,” Stephen said. He let out a long, slow sigh to steady himself. He hadn’t wanted to have that conversation, but now that it was over, he felt much better.

“Pre-combat jitters?” Tony teased.

“It’s like the whole ship could shake apart from nervous energy,” Stephen said.

“Yeah,” Tony agreed. “Thor’s the worst for it I think. But he doesn’t fuck around when it comes to the actual fight.”

“He still feels he has a lot to lose,” Stephen replied.

“We should all be so lucky to have that kind of loyalty. Loki doesn’t know how good he has it,” Tony mused.

“Speaking of him, do you really think you can entrust the Tesseract to him?” Stephen asked.

“It’s on the top of my maybe pile,” Tony replied. “Whether we like it or not, she will probably find her way back to him. She probably feels grateful he rescued her from the destruction of Asgard.” Stephen nodded, considering the point.

“That is true... And to be honest, I trust Loki with her more than I do Thor... if he ever figured out how to harness her power... Well, he still has too much of a hair trigger. But we will have to make sure that Loki is carefully observed.”

“Agreed... I suppose that’s up to us, then,” Tony replied.

“Yes, that sounds like our responsibility,” Stephen replied. “Speaking of which, remember that you have to hit Thanos first, Tony. There is no other way.”

“I... yes, love. Okay,” Tony said with a solemn nod.

Tony had tried to sleep in the run up. But his entire being hummed with the same nervous energy as everyone else on the ship. Normally he would have been aggravated and buzzed with this level of alertness, but now he was more able to hyper focus on the task at hand. One thing he was sure of though, was Stephen had been right. Replaying old battles in his mind, Tony was now well aware that he was prone to taking the first hit... And that it stemmed back even further than Captain Bossypants trying to tear him down that first time they’d clashed on the Helicarrier. No, Tony’s self-loathing went back much further and deeper than that. Everyone expected one thing out of him, and hence underestimated him on all other aspects. He’d spent a lot of his life trying to prove
his physical worth to those that only saw his intellectual gifts. It certainly explained a lot of his sexual escapades when he was younger.

But now it only made him love Stephen more. Stephen saw the whole picture of him... It made him feel, dare he say it, blessed. Even in the face of the current threat. Stephen loved him enough to call him on his shit and to help him fix it, rather than his previous teammates trying to manipulate him to an end. He didn’t have to sacrifice himself to win... He just had to have the best interests of everyone in mind, and sometimes those best interests meant kicking the shit out of someone first. No laying down on the wire. Just cutting it instead.

It was in that frame of mind when he sank down on the cramped bunk where Stephen was trying to get a final bit of rest before their big move. Tony found Stephen pliant and warm. The doctor pulled him close, and the Cloak of Levitation settled over them both. Even if they didn’t sleep, it was the easiest snooze of Tony’s life.

When the time came to get going, Tony’s thoughts mulled on how much he missed the dawn. The artificial gradient lighting of the ship helped a bit, but the darkness was the reason Tony had stayed in California for so long. He longed for the sun in the same way he did during winters in New York... He damn near giggled when he considered that after a lifetime as a rolling stone, he might actually be a homebody now. Age was a funny thing.


“Yes, love?” Tony asked.

“Do you have a place in Italy? Somewhere near the ocean?”

“Italy and Spain. Take your pick,” Tony replied.

“I think I’m just... I think I’m going to need a bit of a vacation after this. Italy would be nice,” Stephen mused.

“I’m in. I’ll put it on the agenda,” Tony said and kissed Stephen. “Time to get to work?”

“Yeah, I think it is,” Stephen agreed.

The tension was palpable as they made their way to the upper decks. The Cloak of Levitation flared out a little more than normal, and Tony could feel the Aether working that much harder to keep their position concealed. The armada was visible now, and it was big. It was all of Ultron’s bots times a thousand... and that was only the ships and not the forces on them.

“I still think this is crazy,” Gamora said upon seeing them up and moving.

“Not arguing that,” Tony replied.

“There hasn’t been any activity out of the ordinary so far. We’re still cloaked,” Quill said, eyes firmly on their target, and manning the helm with a concerned gaze.

“Good,” Tony said.

“I’ll be casting extra spells once we get closer to make sure the ship stays hidden,” Stephen said.

“Will they hold up if you die?” Nebula asked.
“Yes,” Stephen said in a somewhat annoyed tone. Though Tony couldn’t blame her. It was a fair question.

“Only those on the ship currently will be able to detect its presence,” Stephen’s hands moved, and he muttered a few words, bringing further cloaking over the Milano.

“You two eat yet?” Quill asked when Stephen finished.

“Nervous stomach,” Tony explained.

“How? With what you are?” Rocket asked.


“You ready then?” Quill asked. Tony called the armour to him from the hold. It politely opened for him and he stepped into its familiar embrace, and retracted the helmet.

“Rock and roll,” Tony said.


“I could troll you with Leaving on a Jet Plane,” Tony offered.

“No thank you,” Stephen said as he rolled his eyes.

“Your loss,” Tony said, and pressed an air kiss at him.

The Guardians were all on the move suddenly, gearing up for their part of the mission, which was freeing Loki. Mantis remained close to the helm, having had lessons on controlling the Milano while Peter was off of it. Tony gave her an encouraging nod as they headed off to the hatch en masse. She waved at him softly, and he gave her a wink.

Just as the airlock engaged, Tony slapped a modified space suit pod on to Stephen’s chest, between the chains that held the Eye of Agamotto. “Nanite reinforced. Don’t argue,” Tony said. Stephen rolled his eyes, but pressed his lips into an air kiss back at him.

“Okay,” Quill announced, “put on your mean faces and hold on to your butts.” He engaged his helmet.

The press of them being ejected into space was something Tony let FRIDAY handle. He was too busy shoring up the Aether’s cover of them, helping her to expand her reach and asking her for more. She merrily complied and a red haze appeared around them all.

“Don’t freak out, that’s just our little friend doing her job,” Tony announced over the coms. “She’ll keep you hidden.”

“It tingles,” Drax said.

“Yeah, she’s friendly,” Tony replied.

“Tell her to be careful of my nipples. They’re sensitive,” Drax explained.

“You heard the man, hunny bunny,” Tony said, swallowing his laughter. The Aether glimmered brighter, mirthful.
“Better,” Drax grumbled.

“Heads in the game guys,” Quill warned. “This is the most serious shit we’ve ever done. Tony, we’ll come to you as soon as we can.”

“Don’t dick around,” Tony said.

Peter led the way to a small access hatch on the main ship. The vessel was laughably large, and Tony had to bite back a Spaceballs reference for the sake of the sombre mood. Rocket deployed a probe, which latched on to the ship, and quietly popped the access hatch open.

Tony’s systems had as many scans of the ship drawn from Gamora and Nebula’s memory as they could provide, so it was up to him and FRIDAY to direct, Stephen, Thor, Vision, and himself toward Thanos’ private chambers. They stuck to maintenance tubes, as they presented fewer chances of engaging with any of Thanos’ forces.

Quill gave him a wave when he, Rocket, Groot, Gamora, Drax, and Nebula veered off to where Gamora and Nebula suspected Thanos would be holding Loki. Tony waved back, but no words were exchanged. Tony simply asked the Aether to keep them concealed as long as possible. Tony led his team on, muted light from the arc reactors in the armour brightened the inky black of the access tubes. They switched over to air vents, which were significantly tighter quarters. Tony had less of a tolerance for them since his Afghan vacation, but he steadied himself, knowing they wouldn’t be there long.

Tony came to a sudden stop in front of a slatted grate. He held up his hand to halt Stephen, Vision, and Thor. A massive humanoid figure was seated on a raised platform, in the centre of what appeared to be a large throne room for holding court. Just as the girls had told Tony, Thanos was facing away from them. A few of Thanos’ creatures were in attendance, but their eyes were only for their dear leader.


It was a moment that lasted ages in Stephen’s mind as everything etched into his memory. At first he wasn’t sure what he was seeing was premonition or real time, but the dreaded inevitability of it shook him to his core. Just as Tony was about to burst through the vent, Thanos turned, eyes directly on them. The Aether was temporarily distracted, fascinated by the Gauntlet and the presence of her sibling stones sitting on Thanos’ knuckles.

Stephen cursed himself for not thinking of this contingency. The Eye flared at his chest, asking Stephen for direction. Thanos raised his hand, and used the Power and Space Stones to drag them through the vent in a mash of bodies and limbs. “Well, what do we have here?” Thanos’ eyes grew wider. Tony was the first to pull back, stronger than the rest of them against Thanos’ will. But the sudden fear from the Aether wasn’t helping his focus.

When realization of what was in front of him hit Thanos’ face, he grinned snidely. He spotted the most strategic person to start with, and went for Vision first. Stephen could already see all the disaster to come, and he called on the Eye, tracing mandalas in the air. The Eye’s loyalty to him allowed it to ignore the pull of the other stones. It showed him the next few moments, and the utter despair of seeing Tony’s body destroyed. Thanos would crush him into into a shower of dust and reform him into a stone. The vision compelled Stephen to action. He moved his normally graceless hands to do the one thing they had mastery over. He called up the power of the Eye, and it opened wide, answering his call.
Stephen then asked the stone to not only stop their immediate surroundings, but also the entire universe. The rush of it was terrifying as everything came to a sudden stop. The silence was overpowering in the awful tableau he had created. He looked at Thanos who was reaching for Vision. Vision was already summoning a force beam to parry back at Thanos. Then he asked the Eye for more. The ensuing roar that hit his ears when time started to reverse was deafening.

They were dragged back into the air vent by time’s reversal, just to the point where Tony had made visual contact with Thanos. Tony snapped to life, finally breaking from the Eye’s hold. His head flinched inside of the armour, and then the helmet retracted as he he turned around to Stephen. “What was that?” Tony asked.

“You can’t do that, Tony!” Stephen shouted. Power streamed from the Eye, over his arms, hands, chest, and head in green flaring lines.

“What just happened?”

“You hesitated! It was all about to come to ruin. I asked the Eye to hold the universe and reverse it to a point where me might still be able to get the upper hand. But we have to go back in there before the Tesseract and the Power Stone shake the space time continuum apart.” Stephen was managing to calm his voice, but there were tears streaming down his face.

“I’m sorry, love, I thought I had it,” Tony said.

“You can do it, Tony. You can. I know you can, but you have to act as soon as you’re able. He’s powerful, so you have to be close, but no closer than necessary. He’s actively fighting against the Eye right now... He remembers. Shit,” Stephen said, just realizing. Stephen’s eyes fell to Vision. Suddenly Vision sprang to life as Tony had, from his eerily still hovering in the air. “Vision, you need to reach into Thanos’ mind and remove his memory of the last two minutes or so.”

“I, I’m not-” Vision said hesitantly.

“Do it now, or I will have Tony ask the Mind Stone,” Stephen barked, his decorum gone. “I know you went over the process with Wong. I need you to set aside the morality for the common good.” Stephen’s face was full of cold resolve. Tony met Stephen’s eye.

“You okay?” Tony asked.

“No, no I am not. My body wasn’t really meant for this amount of power, Tony. We need to get our shit back together and not fuck this up again,” Stephen growled. He was still lit up by the power of the Eye, and shaking from the effort of controlling it all.

“It is done,” Vision said softly, and they both turned to look at him.

“I’m sorry V, you shouldn’t have had to do that,” Tony tried.

“The sake of the universe is at stake. I understand that some tactics will be less than savoury, and that for the sake of victory, some actions will have to be less than fair,” Vision said.

“We have to go,” Stephen ground through his teeth. The Eye was starting to have an effect on his body, and he was starting to shift in and out of time. He looked to be in extreme pain as well.

“No, NO!” Tony shouted, rushing to him. “Let it go. We’re going now!”

“Thanks, love,” Stephen said. In an explosion of green, the universe lurched forward. Tony lunged
toward the grate, smashing it open with his armoured hands, careless as to whether the others were following him or not. The Aether was still frightened and ashamed of her inaction. Tony’s care for her and all those that he loved brought him into serene focus. He comforted her, and asked her to try again, and she gathered herself out of love for him.

The second Tony saw the back of that purple head, he reached out and pulled. The presence of the Power Stone made it more difficult, but Tony’s presence soothed it into compliance with his will. The Tesseract was confused, and didn’t know what to make of him, and wasn’t sure how to help Thanos without direction. It took a few moments, during which Thor, Vision, and Stephen engaged with the followers present in the throne room, but eventually Tony wrenched Thanos’ soul out of his body like he had done to Natasha at Kamar-Taj. Thanos’ body collapsed forward on to the steps leading up to his throne.

Thanos’ astral form turned and looked at Tony, horrified at the realization of what was happening to him. His gaze set on his body, and then Tony asked the Aether to shift her focus for a moment. The three of them slipped into the Mirror Dimension with hardly a shift in their surroundings. And then Tony, aping how Stephen manipulated the place, collapsed it all in on itself, until he realized that the Mirror Dimension now looked an awful lot like a particular cave in Afghanistan.

“What is this?” Thanos asked as fear etched in around his eyes. It didn’t reach the rest of his face though.

“You’re dead... Or you’re about to be,” Tony said. “I’m not sorry.”

“How?” Thanos demanded.

“Well, let me tell the biggest threat to the universe my plan to bring him down... That’s a great fucking idea,” Tony snarked. It was only now that he realized his helmet was still down, and he was watching Thanos through the haze of his own orange aura.

“I know you,” Thanos said. “You’re Stark... Annihilator of the Chitauri. A genocidal maniac of the highest order. And apparently the Soul Stone. Someone hid you well. I’ve been looking for you. We could do wonderful things together.”

“I know you,” Thanos said. “You’re Stark... Annihilator of the Chitauri. A genocidal maniac of the highest order. And apparently the Soul Stone. Someone hid you well. I’ve been looking for you. We could do wonderful things together.”

“Is that what they call me?” Tony said, appearing to sound uncaring and flip. Inside he was thinking about how tame Merchant of Death now sounded.

“The Chitauri were a hive mind, Stark. You killed their queen and her heirs. Even I only wanted to eliminate half of them,” Thanos said, playing for time and trying to shake Tony’s peaches.

“They punched first. On your orders. I don’t play games,” Tony replied quietly.

“And this is the problem with the stones when uncontrolled. They cause destruction,” Thanos said. “You will cause more harm to the universe than I ever could.”

“Oh for the love of shit, don’t gaslight me. I see what you’re trying to do here. I can see into your very soul, you sick fuck. What you don’t understand, is that by eliminating half of all life in the universe, those who remain will only have the same net amount of resources to work with. Life feeds off of other life to survive... But that is how it also begets more life. We grow from stardust and a jolt of electricity, and then fade back into those raw materials eventually. That’s how it works. It’s a cycle. How we adapt to that is up to us. These are the simplest, most basic biology and physics lessons. Eliminating that much life will not solve the problem, nor create more raw materials for the rest of us. You’re delusional if you think so. It will not create Utopia. All you will do is add strife to what is already a struggle for most... Life always expands... But so does the
universe. There is room for everyone if we learn to work it correctly... Not that this is going to matter to you anymore. You’re... yes, you’re good and dead now,” Tony said, feeling out to his reality, and seeing that the gruesome work was just about to be done. Thor’s viking heart had allowed him to carry out what was asked of him.

“Then why am I still here?” Thanos asked. His eyes settled on the Aether, and he was thinking of how he might get a hold of her. She felt more fear, but Tony held her fast and calmed her.

“You’re here because I have willed it to be so. Your people once believed in an afterlife, but you won’t be moving on to it... Your life force and body will be dispersed, to help feed the universe you were so hellbent on causing chaos in. I think that’s fitting,” Tony said.

Before Thanos could reply, Tony raised his hands, taking hold of every bit of energy that composed Thanos’ soul, and flung it away as they collapsed back into reality and out of the Mirror Dimension.

Tony fell to his knees as Thor brought Stormbreaker down on Thanos’ neck. Thanos’ arm that wore the Infinity Gauntlet had already been severed. Tony wasn’t sure of how long he’d been gone though, as Drax was grinning over the corpse with a bloodied sword in hand. The Guardians were all with them, and the followers of Thanos that had been defending him were all dispatched. Tony looked up, at the grey ash that was falling over the entire room. The remains of Thanos’ life force.

“Stephen, the ash, disperse it as far as you can,” Tony said. He and the Aether then looked at the corpse, and did the same to it, dismantling it with the help of the Aether, who was all too happy to help with that. Tony stayed in place as Thanos’ body crumbled and floated away on the air currents running through the room. Tony wasn’t quite sure where Stephen was yet, but minuscule portals shimmered open in a shower sparks all around him, leading to the furthest corners of the galaxy that Stephen could feel. The ash vanished into them, and the portals promptly closed themselves.

For a moment, everything was quiet... And then they became aware of pounding at the doors to the room. The other Guardians were playing Hodor at them, waiting in anticipation. Vision and Rocket floated by the air vent, welding the grate back into place with the same type of tool Tony had used to fix Nebula’s arm. However, Tony knew that they had a few moments. The room had been designed to be the most secure on the ship. It was basically a reverse Hulk Room. It was the sudden thought of Earth that drew Tony’s eyes away from the Gauntlet, which was laying empty and inert on the floor. Tony gently touched the Aether at his wrist, taking her attention away from it as well.

“Tony, we need a plan,” Quill said sharply.

“FRIDAY, love, send a message to Carol and Rhodey. Target eliminated. Forces not. Prepare Earth for defense response in case we don’t make it back in time,” Tony said.

“On it, boss,” she replied.

“It’s okay, Quill,” Tony said. “We’re going to be okay.” Tony edged closer to the Gauntlet.

“Stark, what are you doing?” Thor asked.

“Talking with the stones,” Tony said absently. He ran his armoured finger over the gauntlet, the nanites provided him with real time tactile feedback. “And trying to tell this Gauntlet to shut up and stop singing to me that taking over the universe is good idea... Sadly, I don’t think it can understand all that much.”
All of a sudden, Stephen’s grounding presence was next to him. “Tony, what do you need to fight that?” Stephen sounded completely worn out. The act of reversing time to save them all had been enormous. But he would still do whatever was required to see them out of this safely. That was why he was Sorcerer Supreme.

“I’m going to ask the Aether to unmake it too... Have you ever heard of Damnatio Memoriae?” Tony asked.

“I have,” Stephen said.

“Do you think we could do that here? Like, permanently? Just... make it all like it had never happened?” Tony asked. “There are entire worlds worth of souls he’s already killed... I could... But it wouldn’t be right.”

“No, it wouldn’t. As is apparent by my actions today, the universe should really only spin forward,” Stephen agreed.

“So, what do we do?” Tony asked. “He doesn’t deserve dignity and he doesn’t deserve to be a martyr.”

“We use Damnatio Memoriae in a more traditional sense. We show the Galaxy that he was a fascist not worth remembering. We make him Hitler,” Stephen said. “He’s not far off as it is. We’re basically in a bunker... The only thing is he didn’t get to commit suicide.”

“No, this is entirely different... Thanos was at a rising peak of power and gaining. He’s Casear,” Tony said. Stephen considered that.

“Et tu, Brute?” He asked, a sly smile creeping across his face.

“Sic semper tyrannis,” Tony replied with a shrug. “I had to immolate the body. I didn’t want anyone creating a relic to have a fetish over... Honestly, I am kind of shocked that this is done.”

“Well, it’s not really done,” Quill barked from the door. His blasters were out as there was a distinct warping to the closed hatch.

“It’s okay, our little friends here will make sure they won’t get through. Currently the Aether is making all their cutting equipment break down simultaneously,” Tony said, sending extra love to the Aether, and striking up a conversation with the Tesseract and the Power Stone. “Ah, that’s how you got here, the Tesseract brought you here.”

“Is that what happened?” Gamora asked. “No sooner than we had Loki free, the next moment we were here.”

Tony waved his hand. The Infinity Gauntlet vanished into nothingness, and the Tesseract and Power Stone fell to the floor. “Loki?” Tony looked around, and spotted him.

“Stark.” Loki stepped forward, an astonished expression on his face. Tony picked up the two stones like they were dice, but cradled them carefully. “I must admit some surprise to discover this... Though it better explains our previous encounters.” Tony stood, and realized he was still encased in that visible, orange aura, and he couldn’t be compelled to try to rein it in.

“Yeah, that makes two of us,” Tony replied. “I’m going to ask you for something here, and I want you to understand, that if you fuck this up, I will end you... And then I will probably have to end Thor too, because he will not be able to accept that... I need you to see beyond yourself, and embrace the responsibility that you will have.”
“And what would that be?” Loki’s voice was soft and curious, his eyes dancing between the remarkable picture that Tony must have been at the moment, and the stones in his hand.

“The Tesseract likes you... A lot. She’s chosen you. I need to know that you would protect her with your life,” Tony said.

“I...” Loki’s surprise took over again.

“She needs to be taught to be better, to learn to love creation... Can you do that?” Tony asked. Loki looked into Tony’s eyes, and realized that Tony was looking into the very core of him, finding the honour and good intent that had been stripped away by time and abuse, and that there was no hiding these facts from Tony.

“For her, I would try,” Loki said. Tony held out the Tesseract.

“I need you to get us back to Quill’s ship, and then bring us to Earth, can you ask her to do that?” Tony asked.

“Yes, I can,” Loki said.

“Don’t make me regret this Reindeer Games,” Tony said. “I’ll be keeping a close eye on you.”

“I might not mind that at all,” Loki said, downright flirtatiously. Tony blinked at that weirdness, shook his head, and placed the Tesseract into Loki’s hand. As he did, he leaned in close.

“You are better than they made you to be, Loki... Laufeyson or Odinson, it doesn’t matter. You’re capable of being so much better than they made you. Trust me, I speak from experience on that,” Tony whispered, and pulled away.

Loki brought his other hand up and cradled the Tesseract gently. He pressed it to his heart, listening to her talk about the vastness of the universe out there to be explored, and how she felt she didn’t belong in any particular place. Loki related to both yens deeply. “We should go, Loki,” Tony said. “Before Quill goes nuts.”

“Yes, we should,” Loki agreed. Tony swore Loki winked at Stephen as they were all whisked back to the Milano in a flash of blue. Tony still had a firm grasp on the Power Stone. It seemed to be the least responsive of the lot, and Tony felt it might lash out like the Aether once had. It had been the most loyal to Thanos, and Tony would have to work to gain its trust. For now, he settled on control of it. Tony eyed the surroundings of the ship, and did a headcount. They had all made it back, plus Loki. A goddamn miracle if such things existed. Tony sank to his knees, still in the armour, next to Stephen, who had slid down to sit on the floor with his back to the bulkhead.

“Are you hurt, love? What can I do?” Tony asked.

“Just... Sit here with me. I’m so tired,” Stephen slurred, his breath coming in uneven gasps.

“FRI, do a diagnostic scan on myself and Stephen, and then let me out of here,” Tony said.

“I’ve been monitoring you both continually, boss. You through the armour, and Stephen through the space suit pod. There are some... Changes. To you especially,” she said.

“What is it, FRIDAY?” Stephen asked, intrigued, but too tired to do much of anything about it.

“The Aether at work? I’m not sure, Doc... But I think you should have well and truly passed out after the time reversal,” she said. “The power running through and around you was like nothing
I’ve ever seen before... I think you’re gonna make it, Doc, but you really need some water, glucose, and rest.”

“What time reversal? I did not observe this,” Thor asked.

“Ah, yeah, we had to reset and go for a quick do-over, Point Break. Sorry Stephen couldn’t have you in on it. He was over-extending himself as it was, and frankly, you were the only one of us who had his shit together,” Tony said. He pressed a tender kiss to Stephen’s mouth. Stephen’s face was bathed in the light from Tony’s aura, like firelight, and Tony thought he looked beautiful. “I love you. I love you. I love you... Thank you. You saved us all. Fuck, I love you so much,” Tony murmured between kisses. Stephen, despite his exhaustion, smiled.

“Love you too,” Stephen whispered back.

Mantis had removed the Milano far from the mothership, but Quill and Rocket were already strapping in, preparing for evasive maneuvers if needed. Tony didn’t consciously notice when Rocket started quietly counting down from fifty.

“How close can you get us to Earth with the Tesseract, Loki?” Tony asked. Loki had been adjusting to the reality of seeing Tony kiss Stephen. Tony gave him a moment to come out of his reverie. “I know you’re probably not operating at full strength. That’s okay, we’ll take what we can get.”

“Safely? Perhaps a week’s further travel in this barge... I will be able to have better precision once the Tesseract and I know one another better,” Loki replied.

“I can portal us the rest of the way,” Stephen offered.

“The hell you say, Stephen,” Tony snapped back. “You will get some goddamn rest. You... I saw you fading in and out of time... I am not risking you any further. FRI, do I pass muster, can you let me out now?”

“Forty-three, forty-two, forty-one,” Rocket muttered. The ship was moving, as fast as it could without everyone having to strap in.

“You got it boss, but... Just don’t freak out, okay?” she said. The armour opened, and Tony stepped out, the nanites from his own body remained attached, and slowly started to move back into place inside of him. He did a prompt double take upon seeing his hands uncovered.

“Ah, that’s what you meant,” he said to the armour as it reassembled itself and closed up. The orange of his aura seemed to be emanating from his entire body. “I look like the goddamn Human Torch,” Tony observed.

“Yeah, boss, s’a bit weird,” FRIDAY said through the armour.

“So, I did a weird thing again?” Tony asked.

“Both of you did, boss. You’re both functioning at super human levels right now. Only baselines I have for this are enhanced persons back on Earth,” she replied.

“Thirty-one, thirty, twenty-nine,” Rocket continued.

“Alright, we’ll deal with this later. Don’t you dare try to move, Stephen. Loki, do we need to strap in for this?”
“No, we shouldn’t need to,” Loki said.

“Guys, we got search parties leaving the main ship and parts of the armada are veering off course, we should get the hell out of here,” Quill warned.

“The cloaking spell is holding. They can’t see us,” Stephen assured.


“Wait, what are you doing, Rocket?” Tony asked, suddenly realizing Rocket was up to no good. Rocket held up a hand, asking for quiet and patience. Tony then noticed that Nebula was front and centre, watching the armada. He hadn’t seen her this close to the observation deck the entire trip. Rocket continued counting. He did a few calculations on his control panel, and moved the ship again. The full shields were up.

“You got hang-ups, Stark. I get that. So do the rest of these tolerable idiots. It’s okay. This ain’t for everybody... Nebula and me? We don’t. The problem won’t end with Thanos. I am making it less of a problem,” Rocket said. “Eleven, ten, nine,”

“Oh fuck, what are you doing?” Tony said. “Rocket!” Tony’s voice got the kind of commanding that made people bend to his will. Rocket turned to him.

“Nothing I can do about it now, Stark. And you better leave me right here to make sure we don’t fucking die,” Rocket said. “Even you don’t do trajectory math that fast.”

“No, you idiot, you don’t understand!” Tony said, panicked. He got to his feet and rushed toward Rocket, but his exhaustion made him slow and clumsy.

“...three, two, one... Boom.” Rocket held up a hand, and Nebula met it with a high-five.

Thanos’ flagship ship took a horrendously long time to destruct. But it didn’t take long for Tony to start feeling the deaths. People who were still unaware that Thanos was dead. People who knew and were angry at Thanos’ plan coming to a sudden end. Mostly though, there were people who had been coerced into service, as Tony himself had been in Afghanistan. People who welcomed death with open arms, as it was their final release from Thanos’ hold... Tony recoiled back from the sight of the ship blowing into pieces and disintegrating. The ship was exploding from the outside in, weapons systems turned on itself, ensuring maximum destruction and the lowest possible survival rate. Rocket had the Milano placed just so, that they were avoiding debris perfectly. The debris however, was taking out large swaths of the rest of the armada. He watched with cold grin on his face. Tony stumbled away and toward Stephen, falling on him. “No, no, no no no,” Tony said. Stephen roused himself and realized what was happening. He took Tony’s face in his hands.

“Listen to me, Tony... Only me, okay? You’re going to be fine. Just concentrate on me, right here okay?” Stephen quickly looked over to Loki. “If you don’t want the Soul Stone going feral, get us out of here now,” he hissed.

“Say no more,” Loki said. He waved a hand over the Tesseract. Another flash of blue blinded everyone for a moment. Quill shouted, alarmed. But in the next moment, all that surrounded them was quiet, empty space.

The sound of the Milano’s navigation system rebooting brought everyone back to reality.

“Dammit, we missed the best part,” Rocket said. Stephen glowered at Rocket. To his surprise, it was Loki who moved toward Rocket aggressively.
“You utter fool! What were you thinking?” Loki said, menace in his tone. “Exposing the Soul Stone to that many deaths at once is suicide, you idiot! You could have killed not only us, but the entire universe! You could have negated everything you fought for, you imbecile!” Loki was about to wrench Rocket out of his seat, and to Stephen’s utter astonishment, Thor stepped in.

“Loki... Brother...” Thor said, and took a deep breath. “Have we not done worse in the course of war for Asgard? The rabbit... The rabbit is intelligent, but not in the ways of the spiritual or magical as you are. He would have had no idea. He could not have known...” Loki made one more movement for Rocket, who did flinch this time, and that was enough for Loki it seemed. He yielded to Thor’s hold, and let himself be moved back.


“I ain’t after absolution,” Rocket retorted.

“That will matter not when it comes time to face the consequences of what you did,” Loki said.

The sound of a sob silenced their argument. Tony curled around Stephen, still partially armoured, and head mostly hidden under the Cloak of Levitation. “Oh, god, all of them...” Tony gasped, and then more quiet sobbing could be heard.

Stephen was holding Tony as best as his weakened body would allow, feeling Tony’s utter devastation. “I’m sorry, love. I... didn’t know. Please, stay with me Tony... I love you. Don’t despair, love. I’m right here. I’m not going anywhere. We’re going home now. And everyone there is safe, Tony... We won,” Stephen whispered. He ran his fingers through Tony’s hair, and the Cloak shrouded them from view. Tony’s sobs quieted, down to irregular breaths, trying to mirror Stephen’s steady ones.

“At what cost?” Tony said hollowly, and shuddered.

Chapter End Notes

Because I couldn't give you too much, now could I? lol... Sorry for my cliffhanger there. I am hoping to tie this up before Endgame is released in theatres... Not promising, but it is my personal goal.

Damnatio Memoriae, if you need the Cliff's Notes, is Condemnation of Memory, and is the active forgetting of terrible people. Nothing in the public sphere named after them. No monuments to them... I think that's fitting for Thanos.

Also, Stephen and Tony are quoting things relating to Shakespeare's Julius Caesar again. Stephen says "Et tu, Brutus?" (And you, Brutus?) as a way to ask Tony what he thinks. Tony's reply is the famous "Sic semper tyrannis" which means "Thus always to tyrants."

Okay, a few notes on me personally if anyone is interested: I am doing pretty okay. The additional part time job I took on is working out well, and the money is coming in handy. I have fewer monetary worries overall now, and that helps a lot. I am calmer. I have a better handle on my anxiety. I am in less pain. I am still fairly isolated, but it's a relaxed isolation. I figure work is plenty social interaction for now, and I will expand that later as I see fit.
Thank you to everyone who has commented with messages of support. Some of them have legitimately made me tear up. I can't believe how much this story has made people say such wonderful things. Your comments really are love, and hoo boy... You're all beautiful.

"Thanks and thanks, and ever thanks."
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

The fall out.

*Walked away from this crash landing*
*Last one standing, first one down*
*Gets a little brighter, when you find a fighter*
*In a face as dim, as the setting sun*
*This is how the west was won*
*This is how the west was won...*
*How the West Was Won - Shaye*

Chapter Notes

Okay, Tony got wordy in this, so there will be one more chapter after this, or I will edit the next bit, and split it into two epilogues.

DO NOT READ THE FOLLOWING CHAPTER UNTIL YOU HAVE READ THIS:

DO NOT, I REPEAT DO NOT GIVE AWAY ANY ENDGAME SPOILERS IN THE COMMENTS. DON'T BE THAT ASSHOLE.

I will delete comments that do this. I don't care how minor. Nothing. NOT A THING. GOOD DAY SIR.

That being said, I will see Endgame late on Saturday here in the Eastern Time Zone in North America. So if you spoil it for me, I will find you, and you'll be the next person dusted, mmm'kay? I am on a social media fast so I have as few chances as possible to encounter any.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony spent the better part of two days catatonic, with Stephen only able to do precious little to help him. Tony didn’t say a word, and wept intermittently. Stephen, his own body weakened and feverish, walked Vision through feeding Tony and cleaning his wounds. While not directly helpful, Loki stood guard over them, keeping the others at a distance to give Tony some room to process.

Loki sat with Tony while Stephen slept, also not speaking to anyone other than the Tesseract. Vision remained on guard, keeping the rest of the ship’s crew quiet. The realization of what was actually on board kept the Guardians at a distance. No one saw Nebula for hours at a time, and precious little more was seen of Rocket, who had settled in the darkened engine room.

On day three, with Stephen half-heartedly threatening Tony with a nasogastric feeding tube if Tony didn’t at least make some kind of effort, Gamora quietly approached the medical bay and pulled up a stool beside the bed. Stephen was intrigued enough that he didn’t turf her, and let her speak.
“Hello, Tony,” she said, as if he would respond to her. When he didn’t, she kept going anyway. “I was a child when Thanos took me and murdered half of my planet... I do not want your sympathy. These are just the facts of my past... Unlike Nebula, not every day was a misery for me. But I happened to be very good at what he trained me to do... Thanos had Nebula and I spar regularly as children. Every time she lost, Thanos replaced a part of her in an effort to improve her.” Gamora took a long, slow breath. “I do not think Nebula was any worse at the task set to us than I was, but I was more frightened of losing, so I fought harder. I was more vicious because of how terrified I was.”

“Despite our opinion of Thanos, we are still very much what he made us. It’s an indoctrination that may never fade. Nebula and I were as coerced as the rest of the people on that ship, but we are far from innocent. We’ve all done horrible things for Thanos’ twisted dream. Most of us were willing to serve him, despite knowing how wrong it was, because we were afraid of the torture he would force us to endure if we disobeyed... But does that coercion absolve us? I... I don’t think so. Not entirely. I understand now, that my right to live ends where someone else’s right to do the same starts. Those I killed so that I wouldn’t be tortured wouldn’t absolve me, and I cannot blame them for that... I can only hope that my chosen path, to help people now, will be what I am remembered for, and not being a killer for Thanos.”

“The people on that ship had the same potential for redemption as Nebula and I. Thanos tended to kill dissenters and usurpers fast. Real threats were taken care of... But if they were willing to go along with it, that was fine for him. If they were complicit in his crimes, then they hold some culpability.” Gamora reasoned. Stephen was sitting up, dozing in the corner, giving himself and Tony another round of IV fluids and glucose. They were still burning through calories at an extraordinary rate. He startled a little in surprise when Tony responded in a hoarse, unused voice, made rough by two days of weeping.

“They didn’t all deserve to die. They deserved the chance to try and redeem themselves,” Tony said.

“Yes, they did deserve that... But that is no guarantee that they would actually get that chance... Life is harsh out here, Tony,” Gamora replied.

“Life is harsh everywhere,” Tony grumbled.

“You are not wrong. I am not trying to play a game of comparative trauma... Some lives suck. Life is not fair... All we can do is try to make it better for those that are left, and hope that will be enough to redeem us eventually,” Gamora said.

“Was Rocket making the lives of those enslaved people better?” Tony retorted.

“No, I am not saying that, and you know it... But he did make life better and safer for everyone on your planet, and every planet in the galaxy yet to be ravaged by Thanos. Coerced or no, the people in Thanos’ armada would have done damage to Earth and the rest of the galaxy, with Thanos leading them or not. A new leader would have taken up the mantle and given it a try. Yes, this death toll is high, in the tens of millions I would estimate... But the lives that are now safe because of what Rocket and Nebula did are far greater... That was your goal, was it not? For Earth to be safe? I’m sorry it was not a fairytale end... That’s what you call them, correct? Children’s stories?”

“Yeah,” Tony rasped. “You got it right... I’m just... mourning. I felt all of them die. Every single one. And most of them didn’t see it coming. There was mass confusion, and a lot of fear and anger at being denied their chance to live. Most of them deserved more dignity than what Rocket and Nebula’s actions left them with... They’re souls, Gamora... And I feel I should have been able to do something for them,” Tony replied.
“At what cost to yourself, Tony?” she asked. “How far can you stretch your power? More importantly, where does your jurisdiction end? You have been named Infinity Stones, but is your capacity really infinite? At this point, with your awareness of what you are being so new to you, and your condition after your battle of wills with Thanos, I don’t think you had the ability to save them, even if you wanted to help... You will have to discover the limits of your abilities on your own, and I am sorry you have to endure that. As redeeming myself is my burden to bear, that is now yours. I know you think you have committed sins, but sins are a much hazier concept during war... Because of your ignorance, you were not complicit in Rocket and Nebula’s actions, and you were incapable of stopping them. As were the other stones it seems.” Gamora’s tone was soft and earnest, and she was making good points all over the place. It roused Tony a bit, and pulled him away from his inner turmoil. He reached out to the Aether, who had been as inert as he had the past few days it seemed, following his lead as she had promised to do.

“Sins may not matter in war, but crime is still crime, Gamora,” Tony reasoned, then gulped as he teared up a little. “And yet... I am fully aware that I am no better. I spent much of my life as a war profiteer. My life as an active combatant has led to deaths... Plenty of deaths. Not on this scale, mind you, but enough that it keeps me awake at night.”

“Well, then we’re all at the same impasse, aren’t we?” Gamora asked.

“Those actions should still matter, though,” Tony said.

“Yes, they should. And yet, here we are,” she replied. “You should talk to Rocket.”

“Fuck. No,” Tony growled and tried to roll away from Gamora. She dared to reach out and gently grab his wrist that didn’t contain the Aether, and now the Power Stone.

“He hasn’t eaten since before the battle... Groot is worried about him. Rocket is the closest thing he has on this ship to a parent. Groot needs him, Tony... And so do we,” she said. She let his wrist go, stood, and walked away with soft steps. The door closed behind her.

“Will you speak to me now?” Stephen asked after a moment’s silence.

“Yeah, babe... I’m so sorry... I was just... totally overwhelmed. Still am,” Tony replied. Ever so slowly, he sat up. “Fuck, have I been a glow stick all this time?” Tony’s body still radiated with what he was. A slow grin crept across Stephen’s face at seeing Tony moving and talking.

“It’s been growing on me... Like a pretty night light,” Stephen replied. Tony concentrated... and found his effort came to nothing. The light didn’t stop. Tony’s expression became confused, and then plaintive and frustrated.

“I... I can’t turn it off,” Tony admitted, thinking he might cry again. This whole trip had taken so much out of him, now including some of his relatable humanity... And wasn’t that just a final kick in the teeth? Stephen got up, the IV stand hovered alongside him, and he sat next to Tony on the medical bed. Stephen put an arm around Tony, unworried about his appearance.

“You’re beautiful, Tony. Any way I can have you, you’re beautiful,” Stephen said. He leaned in and pressed a kiss to Tony’s unshaved cheek. “I love you.”

“I feel as though I failed all those people, Stephen. They all deserved the same chance I got... We won. We did everything we needed to do, and I feel like we failed,” Tony said.

“Well, on one particular thing, yes we did fail... One of the worst days of my life was the first time I was unable to save a patient. Sometimes, you lose that battle, despite all of your experience and
best intentions... No one ever said the way of the greater good was composed of easy choices.” Stephen took Tony’s hand in his. “If the choices are easy, then we’re getting to be too much like Rogers.”

“Fuck, I still have to testify when we get home... Won’t I look a treat for that committee?” Tony said and sniffed.

“I suspect we might all be affected by the proximity of the Power Stone... Clearly it juiced up Thanos like an 80’s pro wrestler,” Stephen said.


“FRIDAY says we’re both still running at enhanced human levels. It’s the only way to get the caloric intake we need to regain our strength,” Stephen explained.

“Tape itches,” Tony said, and sniffed again. He wiped his eyes suddenly, trying to stem tears. He tried to force it down, tried to deny it, but when Stephen pulled him close and ran his trembling fingers through his hair, Tony cracked again.

“Remember what my mom said? That Thanos was in love with death? I feel like all we did was make him happy,” Tony said, his voice heavy with grief.

“You destroyed him right? Unmade him?” Stephen asked. Tony nodded into his shoulder. “Then he isn’t happy, Tony. He isn’t anything anymore. He’s gone.” Tony nodded again. He gulped in air, and dug his fingers into the Cloak of Levitation, grounding himself in Stephen’s presence. “And... part of our shared humanity is that we cannot save everyone, Tony. It’s an awful thing to try and get through, and you just experienced it on an unprecedented scale. I’m so sorry you had to feel that. I can’t imagine it.”

Tony was steadied by Stephen’s voice and calmness. Even if it was brought on by his own exhaustion. His breathing once again became steady. “Sorry I lost it.” Tony murmured.

“Don’t ever be sorry for your compassion, love,” Stephen said, and drew his fingers along Tony’s jawline. “Be sorry for scratching at your IV tape.” Tony’s laugh was high pitched and exhausted. He lingered against Stephen’s body, sharing warmth on the cold ship.

“I should talk to Rocket,” Tony said, his head hanging.

“What are you going to say to him?”

“I don’t know... But I won’t be the reason another kid loses their parent,” Tony said.

“Do you want me to come with?” Stephen asked.

“Nah, he’d see that as a threat,” Tony replied.

“Take your IV with you,” Stephen said.

“Sure, doc,” Tony said, He stood tentatively, and went to where the armour stood, waiting and inert. “Hey, FRIDAY.”

“Hiya, boss,” she said, sounding relieved.

“Sorry about that,” Tony said softly.
“I get it... I felt the same after Siberia, I think,” she replied.

“Yeah, pretty much. It sucks.”

“It’s bollocks,” she agreed.

“Can you give me Emergency Snack Kit Number 1?” Tony asked.

“You have an emergency snack kit?” Stephen asked. “All these weeks we’ve been out here, and you’ve been holding out?”

“I have four in here, actually. Just need one though, FRI,” Tony said. A plate popped open on the thigh of the armour. Tony grabbed the contents, and tossed a bag of trail mix at Stephen, and relieved the fridge of two of the shitty energy drinks with his other hand.

The door to the engine room wasn’t locked. Rocket’s ire was enough to keep most people away. It was also dark, with only the nighttime lighting on. Tony’s feet were bare on the slatted grate floor, and he could feel the same metal grit and dust he’d walked over in his own shop many times. Groot was reclined on the far end of the room. He had Quill’s headphones on and his attention stuck in a video game.

Rocket was hunched over his work bench, not moving and tense. Some project or another abandoned in front of him. He must have detected Tony’s entrance, but didn’t react. Tony pulled up a stool beside him, but didn’t attempt to make Rocket acknowledge him.

“Story time... Thanos told me I committed genocide before I killed him, and he wasn’t wrong,” Tony said. He popped the lids on the drinks, and set one in front of Rocket. “When he commanded the Chitauri to attack New York, my own people let a nuclear bomb off the chain, and they were going to destroy the whole city to get rid of the invading force. The fallout from that, would have made much of the Eastern Seaboard uninhabitable. Roughly one hundred million people we’re talking about... To avoid that outcome, I grabbed hold of the warhead, forcibly changed its trajectory, and flew it up into the portal over the city, and right into the Chitauri mothership... I thought I was going to die that day... And that was okay. Perfectly fine with me at the time... But I didn’t die. The Hulk plucked me out of the sky, and softened the landing so much that I wanted to eat immediately after the battle.” Tony rubbed his eyes.

“It was the first act of denial over what I’d done... And I denied it for years, Rocket... No one on Earth seemed to notice that I might have wiped out an entire species, and for awhile, I slept easy on the fact that Earth was safe. Job well done... I wasn’t looking for absolution, because I hadn’t done anything wrong. But it ate at me in other ways. It cost me a potential wife. It distanced me from the people I care about the most. It caused me to obsess over building new armour, because I thought if I could build a better suit, then that would fix the problems with me. It caused a rift between myself and the people I thought were on my team... Some of whom eventually tried to kill me... It impaired my ability to connect, because I needed to control.

“The hurt got worse. My heart got harder and more desperate... All because I didn’t deal with a grave moral issue... I did it as a desperate act of war, and mostly I still don’t regret it. But it changed me. It made me more willing to ignore unjust acts of war, the very thing I became Iron Man to put a stop to... And even if I was perfectly justified, I still don’t know if it was the right call... I suppose even with what I am, it’s not my call to make. But I do know that I’ve gotten angry at those who did unjust things when I thought I could see a better way. I’m leaving that debate up to courts, because I don’t know how to judge... So I can’t judge you, Rocket. I did what I had to do to save Earth... And you did what you thought you had to do in order to save your loved ones... One of our religions on Earth has a sacred text, that at one point says he who saves one, saves the world
entire. So, it doesn’t matter if it’s one planet or one child... The intent is the same.” Tony looked over pointedly at Groot.

“You didn’t want him to have to suffer any more than he already has... I get that. What we both did... Wasn’t right. But we did it protect those we love,” Tony said, and opened one of the bags of trail mix, grabbed a few pieces and set the rest of the bag in front of Rocket. He then looked away, casually pretending he didn’t care if he got a response.

“You gonna tell your Earth authorities about what happened?” Rocket asked.

“If I did, that would make me a giant goddamn hypocrite... If I hadn’t freaked out, and am what I am, do you think anyone else on this ship would have batted an eye at what you did? I sure as hell don’t. I am working through my compassion I have for all souls, Rocket... Because I felt them dying. Every individual and so many of them. My brain recoiled in horror at that. Because I felt we’d proved Thanos right... And if Earth finds out, I will be painted as the villain by certain influential people back home... I’ve had people try to coerce me into serving evil before. I resisted, but I had to pretend to go along so I could plan my escape... There were a lot of people in Thanos’ thrall, and they were just waiting for their opportunity to try to go back to their lives. It was their deaths in particular that fucked me up. I hope you understand why I’m conflicted... I think I can see where you’re coming from on this, but there’s this whole other pile of shit that is my problem to deal with... Unless I’ve gotten it wrong,” Tony said.

Rocket gulped down some of the drink and looked at Groot. “Nah, Stark... You got it right,” Rocket said.

They continued their shared beverage in silence, with Rocket munching away on Tony’s offering of food. “Say, what are these?” Rocket eventually asked, holding up a nut.

“Cashew,” Tony replied.

“Gezundheit,” Rocket said, aping a word he’d learned from Quill. “But what is the nut called?”

“Cashew,” Tony said again.

“What, are you allergic to ‘em?” Rocket asked. Tony smirked. From the end of the room, Groot slowly moved the headphone Tony and Rocket couldn’t see back over his head, refocused on his high score, and smiled.

There still wasn’t much in the way of excess conversation for the remaining travel time, but the mood had simmered. Stephen got the impression that the Guardians no longer had the general desire to shove them out the airlock. Tony and Vision sat with Groot for hours, explaining how the armour went together, patiently explaining it as they and FRIDAY did maintenance on it. It was during that time that FRIDAY picked up the nuance of Groot’s language, and Tony delighted in watching them sass one another. Rocket watched from a distance, wary of Tony, but not completely untrusting if he saw fit to let Groot so close to them.

Nebula emerged from where it was she’d been hiding for food. Tony didn’t talk to her about anything. It wasn’t a conversation she was ready to have it seemed. Loki had spent a few minutes with her here and there, and Nebula seemed to have gained some understanding of what had transpired from Tony’s perspective, and how dangerous that could have been.

When she sidled up next to Tony in the ship’s tiny mess while gathering a small meal, she
whispered an apology that only Tony could hear, and he gave her a nod, accepting it, but avoiding eye contact. She and her plate were gone in the next instant, but Tony understood the monumental thing that had just taken place.

Loki, for his part, had turned down the flirting with Tony, but still seemed very interested in his fellow Infinity Stone bearers. In the rare moments he could get away from Thor, he was with Tony, Stephen, or Vision. Tony assumed it was the pull of the Tesseract to its siblings, and hence tried to set a good example.

Just before they arrived home, a discussion was started about Tony’s appearance. Loki confirmed Tony’s possession of the Power Stone as the reason for his light show, and he seemed baffled as to why it was a concern to Tony. “Humanity is at a precarious place, Loki... There is value in being seen as the same as my fellow humans,” Tony said.

“How are you like them at all, Stark? Other than superficially, I see little resemblance between your mind and theirs,” Loki observed.

“That’s why it’s important, Loki... I don’t want to be a saviour type, or an overlord type. I want humanity to step forward together en masse,” Tony replied.

“Question,” Stephen said softly. Tony smiled at him, welcoming of Stephen’s lateral thinking.

“Have at it,” Tony said.

“What motivated you to reveal yourself as Iron Man?” Stephen asked.

“To be honest, I was high on my myself. Thought I deserved the moniker. Ordinary man who overcame some extraordinary things, ya know? But I am not at that phase anymore. I doubt myself a lot more now, and that is a good thing. No one person should have say over everything. It also means that I don’t have to do everything on my own... And while I invite honest challenge to my ideas, I don’t want to have people dismiss them out of fear of what I am,” Tony replied.

Stephen ran his still tired, trembling hand along Tony’s jaw and cheek. “I... I can take care of that if you want me to,” he murmured to Tony. “But know that you shouldn’t have to. Would it be so wrong or dangerous to let them see you how I see you all the time? Would it make you any more vulnerable to let them know what you’ve been through to protect them?”

“This is pretty neat looking,” Tony agreed, looking at his hand. “But I don’t want them to see me as less than human... or more than human come to think of it.”

“But you are, Tony... You are more than human... That’s okay. Humanity should be grateful to have you. And with the help of some very talented and dedicated people, you saved the rest of humanity,” Stephen said, a smirk crept across his face. Tony returned it. Stephen kissed Tony’s forehead.

“Thanks, babe... You always know just what to say,” Tony said.


“And humble,” Tony added, laughing a little at his own joke.

“Yes, my self-effacing nature is legendary,” Stephen replied dryly.

“Oh, aren’t you two just darling,” Loki said, no sarcasm in his voice. Tony burst out laughing.

“Did you really just say that?” Tony asked.
“I have spent more time among mortals than my brother. Yggdrasil’s branches welcome me readily, and I have been gifted with having seen much in my time,” Loki said.

“I’d like to hear about that if you’re willing to share,” Stephen said.

“As would I,” Vision agreed readily. Loki betrayed a little surprise at their enthusiasm.

“That... could be arranged,” Loki said.

The day they arrived home, Tony asked to be let out a little early, so he could buzz over New York City in the armour. Everyone they cared to see was already waiting at the compound, including Stephen’s parents. Tony had told Rhodey to make sure that there was nothing so ridiculous as a victory party, and begged that there would be as few debriefs as possible. Still, he wanted to generate some feelings of well-being, and so threw himself from the hatch of the Milano, and flew alongside it, low over the city, so the population could see them. Window cleaners, office workers, everyone outside, and especially people in Central Park all looked up. Many of them waved. There were fewer middle fingers thrown at Tony than there used to be. Tony would have to determine how much of the truth that would come out in the days to follow, and so he felt that this wasn’t a victory lap by any means. It was to show the world that they’d survived. Tony still worried about stragglers from Thanos’ army coming for them, but their motivation would be zealotry, and those would be easier on his conscience to dispatch. He only hoped he’d laid down enough of a reputation to keep Earth safe for the time being... At least until they caught up to the rest of the galaxy.

Tony returned to the ship for the final few moments of their journey upstate to the compound. He stepped out of the armour, and grabbed on to a handhold. “Okay, one more thing, Loki, how is Hulk going to react to you?” Tony asked.

“I do not know,” Loki said. “Has he not become his more mild self?”

“No. He’s working through some issues with a therapist, and Banner is still in the back seat,” Tony explained.

“We stayed away from one another on the Grand Master’s ship before Thanos attacked... When he did, the Hulk seemed more focused on fighting Thanos than being upset with me,” Loki said.

“Okay, so we’ll have to do a careful introduction. He can be excitable. The key is to remain calm and non-threatening, and to trust him,” Tony said.

They were all quiet as the compound came into view. There was a large group of people waiting on the tarmac. Tony took a deep breath, and Stephen did too. Vision watched their approach silently. Tony still felt woefully unprepared for this, but there would be no avoiding it.

Quill and Rocket brought them down for a soft landing, and everyone gathered what they thought they needed. The hatch lowered, and Thor was the first off, dragging an unsure Loki along behind him. He went for Heimdal, Valkyrie, and the gathered Asgardians. “Greetings!” he called. “Victory is assured!”


“Here we go,” Tony said. Stephen stopped him on the ramp and pulled him close.
“No matter what, I love you, and I’m not going anywhere,” Stephen murmured into his ear.

“Thanks, love,” Tony whispered back. He then turned to the crowd. “Hey Pep, yeah... It’s me,” Tony said. He continued down the ramp, wearing the tactical suit he’d left in that worked with the armour and the nanites. FRIDAY followed behind and set the armour down on the pavement gently.

Pepper walked up to him, Rhodey and Happy were right beside her. She raised a hand, but was shy to touch. “Hey, it’s okay,” Tony assured. “I’m okay. You can touch. It won’t hurt.”

“My god. Tony, what happened out there?” Pepper asked breathlessly.

“Lots... But we won,” Tony replied. Pepper touched his face gently, trusting Tony’s opinion that it was safe to do so. Tony opened his arms, and she hugged him. Happy put a hand on his shoulder, and Rhodey put his hand on Tony’s upper arm, near his elbow. Tony smiled in the embrace, catching the low notes of Pepper’s perfume, and absorbing the love that was being thrown his way. “We made it, Pep... Almost didn’t, but Stephen saved us all.”

Pepper looked to her right, where Stephen was giving his parents a quiet hug. Mr. and Mrs. Strange were hesitant at seeing Stephen in his full sorcerer’s garb, but he was trying his best to normalize it for them. The Cloak of Levitation played it cool and polite. Though, it gave Wong, who was standing off to the side waiting, the cloth equivalent of a fist bump. “I’ll have to get him something to say thank you,” Pepper said.

“We could build and fund some schools in rural Nepal,” Tony suggested. “He’d love that.” Pepper smiled at him and flicked his chest.

“Trust you to find the one who isn’t at all concerned with money,” she teased.

“Hey, he happens to be one in a line of very good people who I’m pretty sure like me for who I am,” Tony said, giving them all a look. Pepper hugged him hard again, and let him go. Rhodey was waiting to pounce as soon as he was free.

“Always got to have a one up on me then?” Rhodey teased. Tony laughed.

“I didn’t mean for this to happen, Platypus... I can’t turn it off right now,” Tony explained. Rhodey pulled him in for a long, solid hug.

“You okay, Tones?” Rhodey whispered.

“I think so, Jim... I’m just juiced up by the Power Stone right now... Hope to get a handle on all of this soon,” Tony whispered back.

“How is Thanos really dead?”

“I unmade him,” Tony replied gravely. “There were other losses though, much of Thanos’ army has been compromised beyond repair.”

“Musta been a lot of angry souls floating around,” Rhodey extrapolated.

“Yeah... Nearly drove me a bit crazy... Talking about it hurts right now,” Tony said.

“We’ll get there,” Rhodey said with an understanding nod.

“Yeah, you, me, and a pile of therapists... I don’t think anyone on Earth will give a shit about it
though.”

“If we’re safe? Probably not,” Rhodey agreed.

“Yeah, Honey Bear, we’re safe... for now,” Tony said. Rhodey let him go, and Tony shook Happy’s hand, and gave him a half hug.

“Good to see you, Tony,” Happy said, choking back emotion.

“Good to be back,” Tony replied. “How’s the Spider-Rugrat?”

“He’s good, Tony... He’s here somewhere. Worried about you the whole time... But I’ve been taking him and May to therapy appointments,” Happy answered. Tony smiled.

“Good, that’s fucking great actually,” Tony said. “I’ll go find him in a second... I just have to go make sure Jolly Green is okay.”

Tony looked over to where the Hulk was looming at the back of the group. “Hey buddy,” Tony said. He threaded his way through the crowd, avoiding all eye contact except for the Hulk’s. Tony was as fearless as ever, though Hulk seemed unsure of Tony’s changed appearance. “Were you okay while I was gone?” Tony asked. Hulk leaned down and sniffed deeply. He then raised his hand and gently prodded Tony’s chest. Tony remained still and calm for the inspection.

“Hulk fine. What happen to you?” he asked.

“We almost lost, but Stephen rallied us and kicked my ass into gear... Thanos is gone, buddy. I... ended him,” Tony said tentatively.

“Why you so sad then?” Hulk asked.

“Because of what I am... I feel deaths. Thanos wasn’t the only one to to die, and I can empathize with people who have been made to do that which they didn’t want to do,” Tony answered.

“Hulk not sad Thanos dead,” he declared.

“Me neither,” Tony agreed. “I’m not sad about that... I have a question for you though,”

“What’s that?” Hulk asked. Tony preened at his use of the contraction.

“Will you be okay if Loki stays with us for awhile? I know you probably don’t have the warmest feelings for him, but he was used by Thanos too, and he needs our help to bring him back around,” Tony replied. “But this is your home first, and I don’t want you to feel uncomfortable here in the slightest.”

“Hulk... I... I will deal,” he said. Tony grinned wide, and opened his arms. Hulk moved in and hugged him close.

“You tell me if that changes, okay? You promise?” Tony whispered.

“Okay,” Hulk agreed.

The second after the Hulk let Tony free of his clutches, Tony was nearly flattened to the pavement by Peter, unable to hold back any longer. “I’m so happy you’re okay, Mr. Stark,” Peter said, his face in the crook of Tony’s neck. Tony could feel his skin and part of the tactical suit getting wet.

“Hey, hey, it’s okay,” Tony soothed. He brought his hands up and held the boy close in a hug to
calm him. “It’s fine, Pete, really. I’m fine,” Tony said.

“Sorry,” Peter said, trying to pull away, but Tony held him fast.

“It’s alright, Pete. I swear it’s alright. I missed you too,” Tony whispered. Peter sniffed loudly and nodded into Tony’s shoulder, and let himself hang on to Tony.

“I’m so glad you’re home,” Peter said. Tony let Peter lead him over to May, and Tony steeled himself for whatever reaction she might have. When it was clear that she didn’t hate him, Tony breathed a sigh of relief. She even thanked him for his dedication to helping them and shook his hand. Tony pledged that it would continue in perpetuity if they so chose it, and added that he hoped they would as he was grateful to have Peter in his life.

“He’s a good kid,” Tony concluded.

“Most of the time,” May agreed, and mussed Peter’s hair. Tony laughed as Peter squawked. Happy came over then and relieved him, and Tony was able to return to Stephen, his parents, and Wong.

“Hi future in-laws,” Tony said, trying to be normal and chipper. “My apologies for the weird.” Wong outright chuckled, and Tony lit up and pretended to be shocked at such a show of emotion, but it ended with a smile. “I like making him laugh,” Tony said to Beverly and Eugene. “Feels like victory every time... How are you?”

“We’re fine,” Beverly said breathlessly. “How are you?”

“Kinda messed up... Really messed up, actually. But your son saved my life, and we think we’ve got Earth safe for the time being,” Tony admitted. Stephen reached out and took Tony’s hand. Tony gave it to him easily.

“We’ll heal together, love,” Stephen said.

“Yeah,” Tony agreed. “Hey, you still serious about getting married?”

“Yes... What? Like, right now?” Stephen asked.

“I dunno, we could hit the local Justice of the Peace tomorrow... I’d really like something good to associate with this. Everyone we know and love is already here. We may as well. I figure we were headed that way as it is,” Tony said.

“Won’t Pepper want you to have a prenup done?” Stephen asked.

“I had one done up months ago... A set, generous alimony will be allocated in case we ever split... You get most everything in my will though,” Tony said. Stephen looked poleaxed.

“Okay? You’re realize you’re effectively immortal though, right?”

“I saw what Thanos had in mind to do to me if I didn’t already have the upper hand. I can be unmade too... Anyway, wanna get hitched? We’ll go on a really nice honey moon to recover to make up for the lack of an elaborate wedding,” Tony said.

“You just want to get out of here,” Stephen said shrewdly.

“That is a bonus yes, but I think we’ve earned some quiet time together,” Tony replied.

“Yes,” Stephen said.
“Yes?” Tony asked.

“Yes I’ll marry you,” Stephen said, all in a rush, as if afraid to lose his nerve. Tony’s face lit up and he leaned in for a kiss, which Stephen obliged him with. “But for the love of god, we’re bathing first.”

“Agreed, square deal... Oh Rhodey! My darling honey bear, I need to borrow your mom and dad tomorrow!” Tony hollered across the tarmac. Rhodey gave Tony a look that showed he already knew Tony was up to something, as did Mrs. Rhodes. “Beverly, Eugene, come with me, I have some people I need you to meet,” Tony said warmly. He offered his arm to Stephen’s mother to lead them over to where the Rhodes were gathered, and she smiled at his charm and took it.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys!

Hope that was a gentle enough landing for you... Our precious babies are still precious. Is this schmoopy af? YES. Was that my intention? YES. Do you love them just the same? Of course you do.

So yeah, again:

NO ENDGAME SPOILERS.

I LOVE YOU, BUT DON'T BE AN ASSHOLE.

ALL CAPS!

That being said, comments are love, and I adore all of you so fucking much. To your guts. You have no idea.
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

The end...

Chapter Notes

Hiya folks!

I am releasing the no spoilers rule on Endgame in the notes and comments. So if you haven't seen it, avoid the notes and comments. The story will still be spoiler free.

Please leave any loose ends I forgot to tie up in the comments, and I might try to write little bits as separate stories and post them all together as a series. If there are outtakes you want, things I glossed over... Heck I might take a crack at a sex scene if you want... But I make no guarantee for the quality of that content.

Thanks for coming on the year and a half plus ride with me. Holy shit, how did this even happen?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Debriefs sucked more than anything. Tony hated them with every fibre of his being. He would happily have left everything to the suit’s video recording. He had installed that feature for a reason. He spent the evening he should have been preparing for his future wedded bliss, talking to representatives of the U.N., the World Security Council, the federal government, and the military, but he’d managed to corral it all into one meeting. Thankfully there was enough shock over his appearance to distract them from most of the real concerns. Stephen, Vision, Quill, Gamora, Thor, and Loki all sat in on the meeting, giving their accounts of events.

On advice from Stephen, Tony revealed in part what his mother had done, in that it had made him partial to the use of the Infinity Stones via sorcery done before his birth. There were looks of disbelief from the other side, but the flash of red and purple at Tony’s wrist made them step back from their aggressive tone. And fuck Tony thought it was it nice to just be taken at his word again. He accepted questioning his authority on the subjects of his expertise, but he was sick and tired of it being undermined.

The revelation of the location of the rest of the Infinity Stones shook the officials, and the questions the others received got very respectful after that. Tony’s defence of Loki was most surprising to them, but Tony balanced it with the promise of oversight and transparency. He also told them of Thanos’ mind control of Loki when he attacked New York, and vouched that he was now free of that influence. Loki, savvy in matters where it concerned keeping his hide, remained amiable and contrite enough to set the various officials slightly more at ease.

Tony then had Mr. Palmer, his highest soaring legal eagle, take over the proceedings and weave the course of events into the purview of the accords. They discussed the threat of attacks by
remaining Thanos loyalists, and Tony was adamant that all they’d really done was buy themselves
enough time to catch up with the rest of the galaxy. “Everything needs to continue as we were.
Going over the records I’ve been granted access to by the Guardians, there are even bigger nasty
things than Thanos out there, and we’re going to have to be on it... Really, it’s kind of everything
you assholes hope for, perpetual war and threat in order to keep the populace compliant. However,
this time it’s going to be a better version. A society progressing forward together,” Tony said.

“And do you plan to use those to gain that end?” one of the U.N. officials asked.

“No,” Tony replied. “I cannot make that choice for humanity. That’s not my place. I can help
humanity get to somewhere better, but I will not become a totalitarian piece of shit or anything. We
get to Utopia by working together, not through a cult of personality.”

“What are your plans for the stones, Mr. Stark?”

“I intend to keep them safe for now. They all have a rudimentary sentience. Some are more
developed than others. The Aether here is very sociable now as she’s been in my company for
months. The Power Stone is less developed, but we’ll bring him along I hope. If they want to help
me defend Earth or in the more mundane aspects of our lives, then they can do so... But not
without permission from both parties. Basically it’s teaching them manners, and nurturing a love
for life... Not so hard. Parents do it every day,” Tony said with a little shrug. Stephen grinned.

“How have you had the Aether without our knowledge for all this time?”

“It was picked up by Dr. Strange on a foray out into space while gathering information about
Thanos. We didn’t think it was prudent to hand her over, as you wouldn’t have been able to nurture
her in the same way I can. I hope to do the same for the Power Stone.”

“Nevertheless we should have been consulted,” the official spoke in a tone that made Tony’s teeth
set on edge.

“So, you could take it from me and try to twist to your advantage you greedy fuck? I am so fucking
tired of people thinking they can lie to me about their intentions. It’s exhausting. You want to know
why I kept it from you? Quill and his crew here held the Power Stone, and it tore the flesh from
their bones. Powerful aliens and a Celestial hybrid, and it took all of them nearly dying to even hold
the thing. What makes you think you are capable of containing it?” Tony asked. He popped the
Power Stone off his wrist, and cradled it gently between his fingers. The stone’s attitude was still
snappish, but was overall more accepting of his current situation.

“Can confirm,” Quill said. Gamora agreed with a nod.

“Something I would not care to repeat,” she said.

“But this is easy for me. This is what Maria literally made me to do... Howard once called me his
greatest creation... Joke’s on him though, as apparently I’m Maria’s greatest work... But she didn’t
need to tell me that for me to know,” Tony said. Stephen held back a laugh. Tony put the Power
Stone back on his wrist, where it settled in quietly into the form of a dark coloured cuff. “Anyways
folks, I am very fucking tired, and before I get married tomorrow, I have to train some adorably
incompetent robots how to be a flower girl and ring bearer, so can we wrap this up?”

“Mr. Stark, surely you can understand the importance of transparency under the circumstances.”

“And you’ll get it... After I have some time to decompress, and to make sure that the man I love is
recovering from our latest trauma keeping this planet in one piece,” Tony replied.
“And you must understand our urgency in sorting out what happened.”

“Look, I need to sleep, or I’m going to start either not being serious, or not being all that transparent about things... And I still have stuff to do tonight.” Tony heard Stephen sigh loudly, and knew he was rolling his eyes. His temperamental sorcerer was also at the end of his tether of politeness.

So when all of the paperwork in front of them and every official suddenly changed into ghostly technicolour butterflies, Tony wasn’t surprised, but he was definitely delighted. “Oh no, all of your notes are butterflies... How did that happen?” Stephen said dryly.

“Doctor Strange! What did you do?!”

“I’m sorry, I can’t hear you over the fluttering wings... In case you haven’t noticed, there are butterflies everywhere... How very odd... That’s a good sign for the environment though. I hope you all have pollinator gardens.” A smirk crept across Stephen’s face when a butterfly landed in Tony’s hair. Tony’s hand went over his mouth to smother his laughter. Thor and Loki weren’t so subtle and laughed heartily.

“He is amusing, isn’t he, brother?” Thor observed.

“When one is on the benevolent side of his magic, yes,” Loki agreed.

“If you want your notes back, you will let us go for the night. This isn’t Guantanamo Bay. We have rights,” Stephen warned. “Your phones will be the next thing fluttering unaided around the room.”

“We hope that all of you will be available to us for further questioning, Mr. Stark.”

“We will... But not for at least two weeks. I have a honeymoon to take,” Tony said. Stephen’s smirk turned into a mischievous grin. “I will address the world’s media, and Mr. Palmer and I are working on a statement of facts to be released before day’s end... A caveat, if you disturb me while on said honeymoon, my soon-to-be husband will curdle the cream in your coffee for the rest of your lives. Choose wisely.”

For the first time in weeks, Tony sat in the workshop. Dum-E and U were gathered round, playing with a basket full of torn and rolled up paper in place of the flowers that would be in it tomorrow, and an old throw pillow that now had a few tears in the seams while they learned to manipulate it gently. Tony had gotten the basics down, and that would have to do. The Cloak of Levitation would run point between the two it seemed, and Tony was just rolling with the idea. He was waiting on Stephen to end his meeting with Wong, where he was catching up on all the things he’d missed while away. He shuffled the holographic notes around that contained the statement he was about to read, which Mr. Palmer had agreed was appropriate. He had the words memorized now, and went over the inflection in his mind a few times.

Stephen eventually arrived, the door opened for him and he took in the sight of the bots and the Cloak still playing with the pillow and basket. Tony looked over the back of the sofa, and smiled. Stephen was carrying a plate of food that could be easily nibbled on. Tony hopped up and grabbed a couple bottles of mineral water from the fridge.

“Ready for this?” Stephen asked.

“Yeah... I think so... Rip the bandage off and all that,” Tony replied. Stephen set the plate down carefully on the coffee table in front of the sofa, fingers aided by magic to keep it steady. They
settled in, and ate a bit in silence before Tony took Stephen’s hand in his.

“Okay, FRIDAY, hit it,” Tony said.

“Starting live stream, boss,” she replied. FRIDAY projected a point for them to focus on and use as a camera.

“Hi, honey bunnies,” Tony said. “Uncle Tony here... Please forgive my odd appearance. I have a confession to make, but I will get to that in a moment... First of all, an update. A few Avengers and myself, and the Guardians have just returned from a raiding party into deep space. Long story short, we were successful... Thanos has been... neutralized... But not without consequences. There will be some of his followers left that will have a big grudge against Earth. So, preparations for invasion will continue. All those plans are still in motion. All of those jobs are safe. Because of our actions, Earth will be on the RADAR of other powers out there. Sadly, or not so sadly, depending on your level of fear of the future, our time as a galactic backwater has ended. There are empires out there that will challenge us. I’m not looking forward to it, but I will not shy away from reality.

“So while imminent threat is gone, all we’ve really done is buy ourselves some time. But, thanks to the Guardians, I am starting to make contact with some reputable allies, and as soon as communication can be established, I will turn negotiation over to the U.N. ...So the U.N. is about to become relevant again. Congrats, and you’re welcome. These reputable allies are far ahead of our widespread technology on Earth, but the Guardians maintain that they will embrace us as an emerging culture.

“Now, about this...” Tony waved his hand in front of his face. “It’s another long story, but I will do my best to be concise. My mother was apparently a sorcerer. No, she didn’t tell me, and probably rightfully so. Yes, it breaks my brain too. Her family made a generations long effort to protect one of the Infinity Stones... The result of which appears to be me. I’m not terribly thrilled with the prospect. The idea of having any kind of enhancement is foreign to me... But I am learning to live with it, because I hope it will allow me help the world.

“Because of my mother’s efforts, I can handle Infinity Stones without my skin peeling off and being ground into a fine paste, so naturally, that came in handy when fighting Thanos. Hence the light show. Wielding the Power Stone has physical consequences... But I am not a totalitarian and I vow to be accountable about this. So I am finding others whom I think will handle the stones reverently, and I hope they will use them to help us defend Earth... And yeah... That’s where we’re at. I will keep this short, as I have spent the entire day talking with officials about all this, and I have some important things to do come morning... Sleep easy tonight, folks, and then tomorrow, the work continues.

“I firmly believe that the future will be wonderful, I really do. Even if it is frightening to some... Growing up, my father and I didn’t often get along... But one thing he did teach me was to not fear the future. That a person can always adapt and change if they want it badly enough... I hope you’re willing to take that journey with me. Because I still think it’s gonna be awesome... Now, I am going to get some well deserved rest. Sleep well, and we’ll get back at this soon.”

Tony waved his hand, and FRIDAY cut the live stream. He and Stephen both sighed heavily simultaneously, and it ended with them chuckling once they realized what the other was doing. Tony got up on still unsteady legs, and held out his hand to Stephen, who followed him up, only pulling on Tony gently as a counter weight. On the way out of the lab, Tony gave Dum-E an U a pat and a side hug, and told them to get charged up for tomorrow.

Tony led Stephen to their quarters in silence, and Tony started seeing the chinks in Stephen’s mental armour. The Cloak drifted alongside them, as if afraid either of them might collapse. Once
finally alone in their room, Tony tried to herd Stephen toward the shower, but he saw Stephen hesitating. There was a distance in his eyes that made Tony worry, and he knew he had to deal with this right now. “Don’t clam up, talk to me, Stephen,” Tony said, hoping to head Stephen’s dour mood off at the pass.

“I should check on Mordo,” Stephen said, looking out the windows into the darkness of the compound at night.

“He’s okay, Stephen. Carol said he was being held on other charges for the physical assault of former sorcerers he took magic from... What we should do is have a hot, cuddly shower, and then try to get some sleep,” Tony countered. He took Stephen’s hand in his, turning him away from the window. “I can feel you, love. I can feel your turmoil. What’s eating at you? How can I help?” Tony whispered.

“I... I think all those lost lives are finally starting to sink in,” Stephen admitted, again speaking fast as if he had to in order to get it out. Tony took careful note of how Stephen revealed his vulnerability, and was determined to not fuck this up.

“Ah,” Tony said. “And your natural inclination is to isolate yourself to sort your head out.”

“Yeah,” Stephen said, his voice hoarse and tense, but fuck he was trying and Tony loved him even more because of it.

“Don’t,” Tony said too quickly, and then took a breath. “Please, don’t... Please don’t leave. I don’t want you to have to face that alone. I’ll be right here. We’ll walk through this together.” Tony raised his hand and stroked Stephen’s jaw. “It... This sucks. I’m so sorry you ever had to see that. I know how important that oath is to you... I’m sorry the less evolved of us handle things the way we do.”

Tony’s expression of understanding melted Stephen’s tension in a way that reminded him of his lost sister, who could make him open up and reveal himself so easily. He softened his body language, and pulled Tony close to him, so their bodies were pressed together gently.

“I’m not fragile, Tony... I can accept reality... I’m just conflicted because it has been so easy to just move on from that battle... I frightened myself because I realize that I’m fine with the deaths... So long as you were going to survive. If you’re alive, then it doesn’t matter who had to die... I don’t think that is the moral position. But I don’t regret it. I don’t regret anything that will let us continue to live as we are now. And I’m not sure that is the right way to feel. To value one over everyone else, but that is how I feel... And I would normally isolate myself to sort it out... I find it somewhat frightening the degree I would go to in order to keep you safe,” Stephen said. He was thinking out loud and unsure of how much sense he was making, but Tony seemed to follow his rambling.

“Are those feelings based off of love for me?” Tony asked.

“Yes,” Stephen admitted. “Love so deep that I might watch the world burn to keep you.” Stephen ran his hands up and down Tony’s back.

“It’s nothing to be frightened of, Stephen... I hope you’re aware that I would most likely do the same for you.”

“But I swore an oath. Beyond the Hippocratic, I mean. I swore to help protect the world, Tony. I have obligations, and I fear that will get in the way of loving you the way you deserve.”

“Keep in mind that I have made that same promise... As soon as I said I am Iron Man, I was in this
thing. So, protecting the world is clearly a goal we both have, and the best thing is, we can complement each other and do it together. What matters to you, matters to me,” Tony said, his voice soft and calm. “And we use that love to take care of as many as we can, Stephen... I know you’re guarded, but please don’t be afraid... Or at least understand that I’m scared too. I have no idea where to go from here. But... Fuck I wanna see it, and I want to be by your side to see it.”

Stephen held the back of Tony’s head, and pressed his forehead gently to Tony’s. They spent a long time that way, Tony let Stephen be still and quiet as long as he needed. He breathed softly, and opened his mind to Stephen. He took joy when he felt Stephen connect to him, and felt relief in the way Stephen drank in how much he was loved. It allowed him to temporarily lay his guilt aside. Stephen finally pressed a soft kiss to Tony’s lips, who responded in kind. His fear melted away, and perhaps for the first time since his sister had died, he felt heard and understood on a level he didn’t think possible.

“Do you need some time? Before the wedding, I mean? We can hold off,” Tony said. He sounded concerned, but supportive and loving.

“No. We are getting married tomorrow... It’s arbitrary and antiquated, but I want this for us. I can hardly wait... Thank you for being willing to ride out so much for me, Tony.” Stephen said. He caressed Tony’s cheek and lightly scratched his beard.

“No less than you’ve done for me,” Tony replied softly, and smiled at Stephen. “Got your vows written yet?”

“I have an idea of what I want to say. You?”

“Same. I’ll probably wing part of it though. You know me,” Tony replied.

“I’ll step on your foot if you start rambling,” Stephen said. Tony laughed lightly.

“Appreciated,” Tony said. This time, when he pulled Stephen toward the bathroom, he followed easily.

Tony had worried he might balk when it came time to exchange vows. The day had run very smoothly so far, which admittedly, put him on edge a bit. Even Dum-E and U had done their parts without a hitch, which was miraculous. And to his surprise, the words he’d thought about for so long tripped easily from his tongue, like it was the most natural thing he’d ever done in his life.

“Stephen, when we first met, I wanted to know you. I was intrigued. I was slightly terrified. But I was instantly aware that I wanted to know you better... What we have built between us has been amazing up to this point, and I cannot wait to see where it goes. Thank you for loving me, and letting me love you... I give you my kingdom, Stephen, and I give you myself. I promise to continue building a life together, and to put in the work to keep at it. Because you are precious to me. I will strive to not take your patience and strength for granted. I promise to treasure every part of you, including your icy toes, and to always hold your hand gently and reverently, with the respect you deserve... I promise to love you when life is easy, and to try and love you even more when it is hard. I promise you all the effort I have in me, in order to show you how much I love you. My heart is yours, Stephen Strange,” Tony said, and took a breath, trying to keep his eyes from dampening too much. He was holding Stephen’s hands tenderly, with the same care he always did.

“Tony, I come here today loving what I know about you and eagerly anticipating what I have yet to
learn about you. I want the chance for us to grow together as people. I promise to love and cherish you no matter what life brings us... I promise to try my best to speak up when I’m struggling, and to set aside my pride and embrace partnership. I promise to come to the table again and again until we work things out when something is wrong. I will never try to prevent you from trying something new, because I know that would stifle your vast creativity. But if it goes wrong, I will do everything in my power to help you after. I beg of you to always encourage me to be a better man, and to help me to see life as it is... And I want to state to you, and everyone here, that everything we’ve been through to get here... It was worth it. It was worth it to me, and I am so damned lucky to have found you,” Stephen said. His voice was steady and calm, but his eyes were just as damp as Tony’s and the situation wasn’t getting any better in that regard.

Tony took utter delight when Dum-E held up a box of tissues he had perched on his chassis. He patted the bot fondly, took two, and passed one to Stephen. They dried their eyes, and smiled at one another, as the officiant picked up again. There were a few more words, and an exchange of gold titanium rings. Another thing Tony had quietly made ready months ago, and told Stephen not to worry about.

For a perfect moment, the only sound was the breeze moving the water, and the birdsong around the small lake on the compound. The quiet bliss of the moment was broken by a collective whoop as Tony and Stephen kissed and sealed the deal. Instead of confetti or rice, Pepper had somehow conjured birdseed for Dum-E, U, Hulk, and the younger Avengers potentials to toss. Tony and Stephen blinked, and ran through the crowd hand in hand laughing.

A photographer that had been found yesterday by Rhodes, and Peter were cornering them for photos, and after his focus being solely on Stephen, Tony dared to look around him. The assemblage of well-wishers was chaotic, colourful, and odd. In short, it was perfect for them. Stephen squeezed Tony’s hand ever so slightly. Tony looked back at him, smiling so wide he worried about straining a muscle in his face. “Think we can get away with taking a portal off to our honeymoon now?” Stephen teased.

“I wish,” Tony replied. “Stark Industries meetings tomorrow. Sorry, love. But the second I am done, we are out of here.”


“I’m in,” Tony agreed, and gave Stephen a peck on the lips for the photographer.

After all of the ceremonial things were done with, Tony took a moment to observe the crowd. He had thought the first meeting of Peter Parker, Ned Leeds, Kamala Khan, Sam Alexander, Princess Shuri, and Harley Keener would have ended in some kind of explosion. To his surprise, it didn’t. Though the group did seem to get on like a house on fire from the start.

Judging from how the conversation seemed to be going, it made Tony proud that he had invested in Harley’s future as much as he had. The boy’s tutors and distance learning classes had him running neck and neck with the gifted educations that Parker and Leeds were getting, and his natural smarts were enough for him to get the gist of how Shuri explained things. There was a mutual spark between Harley, who was on the cusp of heading off to M.I.T. on a scholarship, and Shuri, who was already familiar with university life. Tony hung back, observing from a distance as people danced under the stars and hastily set up twinkle lights that surrounded their makeshift dance floor.

Stephen had sidled up behind him, and placed a hand on his back. “What mayhem do they have in store?” Stephen murmured into his ear.
“Surprisingly none... At least not the kind we need to concern ourselves over. They’re comparing school options and dissing one another’s taste in music,” Tony replied, turned and pressed a kiss to Stephen’s cheek. “Shuri is giving them the heads up on higher education institutions... And I think she is forming a small crush on young master Keener.”

“T’Challa will hate that,” Stephen said and smirked.

“Most likely. I’ll have a word with the boy about his intentions,” Tony said. “Shuri is wise enough in the ways of the world. But Harley and Sam have a streetwise edge that comes from economic hardship. Harley was the worst for it until I broke into his garage.”

“That would make for an interesting relationship dynamic,” Stephen observed.

“And oh fuck how T’Challa would hate it. Harley is far too rough around the edges as he is right now. I’ll give him a warning about it... It was nice of the royals to come though,” Tony said.

“Well, any wedding you would have is a party worth attending.”

“I think this has been pretty tame all things considered. No one is naked in the pool yet,” Tony said.

“Not so. The Asgardians have broken out some kind of mead that will strip paint... I think it’s the Janx Spirit base for the Pan Galactic Gargle Blaster. They and the Guardians are having a lovely time floating around. The Hulk is with them, and has been instructed to not blow any butt bubbles in the pool. Rhodey put some of the Iron Legion on lifeguard duty.”

“That... Really doesn’t surprise me. None for me though thanks. I don’t feel like getting hit in the head with a wedge of lemon wrapped around a large gold brick.” Tony rambled and waved a hand. Stephen wrapped an arm around him, and placed it on Tony’s middle. Tony intertwined their fingers with delicate care so as to not make Stephen feel any pain. “How soon do you think we can escape?” Tony asked.

“I think most any time now would be acceptable. We’re newlyweds. They’ll understand,” Stephen replied.

“One would hope... I’m kind of proud that I wasn’t the one to get naked at my wedding. That says a lot about my maturity level these days,” Tony mused. Stephen bowed his head, and put his chin on Tony’s shoulder.

“Well, not naked yet,” Stephen teased. Tony laughed, turned, and pulled his husband close.

“I loved what you said today. It was beautiful,” Tony said as quietly as the music would allow as it changed gears to something quieter and more intimate.

“I love how eloquent you get when you mean what you’re saying,” Stephen replied.

“I’ve been thinking about it for months. I was only hoping it was comparably as good as whatever it was that you were going to say. I don’t know if I made it, but I tried,” Tony said.

“It was wonderful Tony. You made me cry. Isn’t that enough for you?” Stephen asked.

The song that had started had a steady and sure waltz beat. Tony had no idea where FRIDAY had picked up this particular song for the playlist, but he found he liked the quiet charm of it, and the lyrics were strangely applicable to both he and Stephen. He could have fought her on it for the cheesiness of it, but chose not to upon seeing Stephen’s content expression. It was the one he got
when he was really feeling a song, and it was one of Tony’s favourite things to see. Soon they were swaying along quietly to the music, looking at the main portion of the dance floor, where Pepper and Happy, Carol and Rhodey, and both Stephen and Rhodey’s parents were taking advantage of the sweet, sentimental song that carried over the loudspeakers for a dance.

“I feel like we built something today,” Stephen said.

“Our little tribe,” Tony agreed. “Wong needs a girlfriend.”


“A boyfriend then? A platonic life mate? Clearly that shouldn’t be an issue for us,” Tony said. Stephen gave Tony an indulgent smile.

“Certainly not, but everything in its own time, love. There is no hurry,” Stephen reminded him. “Let’s finish this, and head off for the night,” Stephen said.

“Sounds perfect,” Tony agreed, and was slightly surprised when Stephen let him lead them a little further out on to the floor as the music carried them away for a few moments of well-earned peace.

-The End

Epilogue

Six weeks later...

Tony slowly spun his wedding ring on his finger with his thumb, as was his new habit when anxious. The choice to not hide what he looked like now wasn’t making this situation any easier. Once again the eyes of the world were on him, but this time there was no barrier of having his reactions prerecorded and able to be edited.

He hadn’t watched the tape since Siberia. It was something he hadn’t wanted to revisit. Ever. He didn’t have a direct view of the screen that it was being shown on, but he didn’t need one. Every second of the fuzzy old VHS recording had been seared into his memory. When the audio picked up Maria’s voice Tony wrung his fingers together, and tears sprang to his eyes. There was nothing he could do to stop the terrible process about to unfold. When Howard’s struggling ceased and the Winter Soldier circled the car, Tony put his face in his hands, unable to watch anymore. He choked down sobs, and in the same moment he had to calm the Aether and the Power Stone. As he reached out to them mentally, Stephen reached out to him physically from the seat behind him. It was as close as he could get since he wasn’t testifying. Stephen put his arm around him and pulled him close, over the dividing rail between the two of them. With his other hand, he pulled gently along Tony’s jaw.

“Hey... Hey I got you... Look at me, love. I’m right here,” Stephen said gently. Tony loosened and put his arms around Stephen, and put his face on Stephen’s shoulder.

“I hate this. I hate this. I hate this,” Tony repeated, mantra like.

“I motion for a recess to allow my client to collect himself,” Mr. Palmer said as soon as the recording stopped. Tony didn’t move, and he didn’t look at the WSC committee members conducting the inquest into the events in Siberia, and he certainly didn’t look at the shackled Steve Rogers across the room.

“In light of the emotional gravity of this evidence, I second that motion,” said one of the WSC chairwomen. “Reconvene in thirty minutes,” she said and dabbed at her eyes with a tissue.
Stephen was sure that this would be the end of Rogers’ defence. His single-minded mania had been on display several times over the past few days, and it had only gotten worse once Tony had been called to testify. Stephen only hoped the rest of the world would see it the same way. He stood up, and Tony went with him, trusting him to handle it. “We’ll be at the hotel, Mr. Palmer,” Stephen said. “Send a text when they’re calling us back.”

Stephen opened a portal to several gasps, and felt Rogers’ eyes on them. Tony was pliant as he was led through and into their suite. Once the portal closed, Tony took a deep breath, grabbed some tissues, and went on to the balcony. Stephen grabbed a couple of drinks and followed him.

Tony leaned heavily on the railing, his head hanging down, arms wrapped around himself. Stephen set the bottles of water down on the bistro set and went to his husband. He put his hand on Tony’s shoulder, asking if Tony wanted him close without a word. Tony put his hand over Stephen’s and Stephen took that as his cue. He wrapped his arms around him and held him firmly.

“If it weren’t evidence, I would ask the Aether to destroy every copy of that tape,” Tony whispered.

“I wouldn’t blame you if you did,” Stephen replied.

“God that sucked. It sucked the first time, but this sucks more. Knowing how vastly different my life might have been,” Tony said.

“Well, hopefully not so different that we wouldn’t have met,” Stephen said. He was thrilled when Tony laughed quietly into his chest.

“Point,” Tony said. “You’re worth it... You’re worth all of it. Like you said, having you is worth everything that happened to get here. You saying that at the wedding was probably the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me.”

“It was very nice of me to say wasn’t it?” Stephen said, giving a small hum. “And since you acknowledged it, I think that’s worth a blow job tonight... Are you okay?” Tony breathed deeply several times before he answered, his ear pressed to Stephen’s chest, listening to his heart beat.

“I will be,” Tony said. “Let’s make the time to have dinner with your parents next week, okay?”

“Sure, Tony,” Stephen said. They remained in the sun for a long time, holding one another and taking the air.

When Friday announced that they were being called back, Stephen was quietly amazed when Tony dutifully went back to finish what he’d started in his testimony, giving a devastating statement about the emotional impact finding out about his parents murder had had on him. He didn’t waver, even when Rogers’ team brought questions about his own level power nowadays. Tony snorted derisively at the idea, claiming that he’d wanted none of what had been done to him. The man was a marvel in these situations, and Stephen couldn’t be more proud of him.

At least by the end of the day, Rogers had the decency to look admonished by what he’d done to Tony. Still Tony wanted nothing to do with him, wouldn’t look at him, and wouldn’t address him directly when speaking. When the press questioned Tony on why that was, Tony looked sincerely at the reporter. “Imagine your parents were murdered decades ago. And a guy you thought was your friend, a guy you’d been to war with, found out about it, and didn’t tell you in order to protect his other friend. Not only that, he made a solid effort at killing you once you did find out... Captain America and Iron Man or no, I am allowed to not permit people like that in my life... No one should have to. I just want to be done with him to be honest, but I am here today to finally let the
world know what happened, because you deserve the truth... Howard Stark never let the greater
good get in the way of his self interest... But my mother wasn’t like that at all. She lived her entire
life in service of others. Her murder by HYDRA shouldn’t be swept aside by history, and those
who would try to do so will be brought to justice.”

“What do you say to the concerns that you yourself now have too much power?”

“They are probably correct,” Tony said, and enjoyed the half second of shock on the reporters’
faces. “But that is why I am looking for a home for the Power Stone... He needs someone who
won’t use him like he’s been used up until this point. And I am being choosy about it, because I
know what it’s like to be used to other people’s evil purposes. So I need someone ridiculously
morally upright, and with enough knowledge of these things to be responsible with them... And
sonofabitch, I think I just thought of the right person... Stephen, let’s go,” Tony said in a rush.
Stephen looked curious rather than perplexed, and opened the portal to the hotel suite without
complaint for the sake of finding out who Tony had chosen for the task.

By the next day, Stephen still wasn’t entirely sure... But Tony was, and he was trying to calm
himself with that. His uncertainty lay in not knowing the outcome of whether or not Tony’s choice
would agree to this. Tony was absolutely calm and satisfied, and felt it would be the best possible
option for all involved. So Stephen opened the portal to Kamar-Taj, and followed Tony through.

He’d been polite about it this time, bringing them to the hallway leading to the library and not the
actual room itself. There was no need to start this conversation off on the wrong chord.

Wong raised an eyebrow at seeing them walk through the door for a change. “What are you two up
to?”

“Fine, thanks for asking,” Tony replied cheerily. Wong rolled his eyes.

“I’m busy, Tony. I could use the extra time saved by foregoing niceties,” Wong replied.

“I’m gonna need a minute of your time. I wouldn’t ask if it weren’t ridiculously important. Sorry to
throw you off your groove, but I have to get this done soon. Glowstick Tony is throwing off the
press, and I don’t think this should go on much longer. I might get to like this level of power, and
that is not a good thing. Also, I wonder if this will eventually blow my body apart into itty bitty
pieces,” Tony said.

“How so? What is wrong?” Wong asked.

“Tony thinks he’s found a new home for the Power Stone,” Stephen said.

“No,” Wong said.

“No? You haven’t even heard my idea yet,” Tony said.

“The spot where the Eye of Agamotto was held is not a safety deposit box for Infinity Stones.
Agamotto didn’t design it that way. You can’t just drop it off here like... like a doggy daycare,”
Wong said.

“And that’s fine. We don’t need it,” Stephen said.

“Well, clearly your intention is to leave it here,” Wong said, his expression frustrated.
“Not just... here...” Stephen said.

“With you,” Tony clarified. Wong’s eyes opened wide.

“I’m sorry?” Wong said, incredulous at the suggestion.

“Wong, we’ve looked. There is no other person Tony and I trust more for this task,” Stephen said quietly.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Wong said, pulling back from them a bit.

“It’s not so ridiculous. You’re very much like me with all of the bad habits removed,” Stephen said. “You’re dedicated to protecting this world and our reality.”

“More importantly, I get the impression that you and he will get along,” Tony said.

“How so?” Wong asked. His natural curiosity rising.

“Natural stoicism is a big part of it, and I think since you understand that so well, you will be able to foster a love for creation in him. I’ve only gotten so far. The Aether and I... We’re a bit too touchy feely for him. He needs someone with a more reserved nature... And this way he’ll still have proximity to the other stones. It’s the one reason that kept me from asking Carol. First, she doesn’t have the telepathic ability to connect to others when required. Second, I never know if she’s going to have to answer some off world emergency call... I think, for now at least, you would make a natural match for him,” Tony said. He pulled a case out of his blazer pocket, opened it, removed the stone from his wrist, and placed it inside. The Aether stayed put, but shimmered a farewell to the Power Stone with gentle tendrils of red.

“This is madness,” Wong tried again.

“It’s really not,” Stephen insisted.

“It makes logical sense... And I know how much you love logic,” Tony teased.

“Logic is sexy,” Wong joked. Tony laughed, and knew then that they were going to win the argument.

“You know you can get a hold of Stephen or I any time if you feel like it’s too much. The case has a number of settings for comfort of use. It can be worn as a wrist cuff, on the belt, et cetera. Choose whatever is most comfortable for you,” Tony said. Still, he was a bit surprised when Wong accepted the case from him. “Take care of each other,” Tony said and smiled at Wong.

“I still think this could go very badly,” Wong said.

“I still think that this is the best possible option,” Stephen said.

“What if it... he... tears me apart?” Wong asked.

“He won’t,” Tony said, grinning at seeing Wong reach out mentally to the stone with a reserved politeness and respect. “He’s just looking for answers. Help him learn.”

Tony stepped back, and as his fingers fell away from the case, he took a deep breath. As he did, the ever present light that had been pouring from him for weeks now finally faded back inside of him, settling at his chest like it had before. He looked down at his very normal looking hands, relieved. He then looked over to Stephen. “Am I still pretty?” Tony asked. Stephen stepped in close and
kissed him.

“Fucking gorgeous,” Stephen declared. Wong rolled his eyes at the couple.

“Newlyweds,” he muttered, and then walked off into the stacks. Stephen kissed Tony again, and if Tony grabbed his ass, well at least they knew Wong wouldn’t be watching them.

Chapter End Notes

If you're wondering what song I had in mind for their little waltz together, it can be found here... It's safe for work/school/etc... It's called Don't Like to Dance by Alan Doyle Copy/pasta: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7YvnigskCXc

Endgame soft spoilers here:

Sorry for the delay on the ending... Endgame... kinda broke me. For a bit anyway. I realized two days after I saw it that I was legitimately in mourning for a friend. My body felt heavy and tired, and there was a fuzz around my brain. I kind of knew it was coming TBH... I saw it in the way that people who write tend to be able to call the endings of stories. And while it was well done, and I was okay with it, it still hurt like hell to watch. Such is the beauty of comics... The characters can just go on and on there, and spring back to life, and it's all okay. Movies with certain actors can only last so long. That's okay too. I respect a well told story. I respect when characters die. It makes them more precious, and gives their actions real stakes.

So yeah, to turn around and try to tie this up with the Wayne's World Mega Happy Ending wasn't so easy for a few weeks.

Legitimately, I think writing this thing might have saved my fucking life... I think about where I was in November of 2017, and where I am now, and holy shit have I made some strides. This story has flaws, hoo boy does it ever... But that's okay, because I wrote it, and I finished it, and in doing so I reminded myself that I can do solid, long form creative work, and that people will want to read it. I have never had a story with so many hits or comments before ever. Thank you all for that.

"Thanks and thanks and ever thanks"

As always, comments are love.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!