Sunrise in Exile

by Ragdoll (Keshka)

Summary

Tony does the math and realizes their best chance to save the universe is by... not confronting Thanos on his own turf.

So he steals a wizard and a spider and a space ship. And he runs.

(Three humans and an A.I in space, the alien friendships they make along the way, and discovering how science and magic might coexist in a universe where they can be one and the same.)
What you can expect from this story:

1. Tony and Stephen and Peter slowly learning to be each other's family. That's it. That's the heart of the story. Priority number one.
2. Slow burn IronStrange romance. And when I say slow, I mean like molasses. Slower maybe. So slow at times it's almost like they're moving backward! They have a lot of work to do before they can come together and the romance is, after all, only one part of this tale. So be prepared. Sloooooow.
3. Plot. I love to write it. It's going to take over this entire story at times. It's going to be everywhere, like that glass of wine that shattered on the carpet last Christmas I never managed to scrub out. Stuck forever. Not going anywhere.
4. An attempt to apply real-world explanations to comic book science. Which is actually ridiculously hard, but I'm going to do my best anyway. Oh dear. Wish me luck!
5. Alien exploration of culture and new (old) characters, including whole planets when it's called for. I intend to build a small pocket of the universe in this story, and I love world-building. This is literally going to be a space opera.
6. Endless pop-culture references, because that's what you get when you put Tony, Stephen and Peter together on a ship for months on end.
7. A happy ending. I know, I know. Spoilers! But I might as well tell you now, because there'll be plenty of angst and adventure along the way, and it's going to get dark sometimes. But at the end of the day, please always keep in mind: I am a very firm believer in happy endings.

So, if all of that (or any of that) appeals to you, feel free to park yourself with some popcorn and enjoy the journey ahead! It's going to be a (very) long one. Cheers!

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

The journey of a thousand miles begins with... a genius inventor and a spaceship.

Tony knew what he was going to do before they'd even finished catapulting the bad guy into space.

Not that it was a fully laid out plan, then; not at all. More a glimmer of a plan his mind kept adding details to somewhere in the background. The rest of him was occupied in playing his part and taunting the creepy alien into turning away from the wizard. Tony had never been more grateful for the villainous tendency to monologue. It was enough to make a guy wonder if evil oration was actually a universal constant; maybe it was like a rite of passage all bad guys had to pass to be let into the supervillain clubhouse.

Then Tony blew up one side of the ship, and the guy with the unfortunate squid face lost all his evildoer privileges.

There was a moment in the midst of the chaos, when Tony's nanotech anchored him to the ship's deck plating and Doctor Strangely-Irritating went hurtling through the air as it evacuated out the hull breach. A moment where Tony could have saved him. A quick application of bonding gel could've frozen Stephen to the deck plating, or one well aimed repulsor blast could've knocked him off trajectory, put him in the path of a wall or obstacle while Tony repaired the breach. Probably would've smashed a few bones, but from the look of the guy's hands it wouldn't be the first time he'd dealt with that.

Ultimately, Tony could've powered after him and pulled him back from the brink of death without much fanfare, and really, that was the plan. Peter was backup, because Tony never wanted the kid to be on the frontlines again, but Tony had first dibs on grabbing the guy as he flew past.

But he hesitated. If the sorcerer went and froze in space vacuum, that meant the shiny green rock around his neck would be up for grabs and open to finding its way to the intergalactic equivalent of the garbage disposal. To date, Stephen hadn't exactly been eager to part with his favorite piece of costume jewelry. This could be their best shot to remove Thanos' crown jewel from the treasure vault before the alien conqueror even had a chance to lay eyes on it.

The life of one wizard Or the fate of the universe.

So it might have ended then, with Tony stuck firmly on the fence of 'should I? shouldn't I?', caught in the infinite quandary of trading one life for a hundred-trillion-million others. But then Peter, being the new kid on the block, decided he hadn't gone enough rounds yet to be that jaded, and he leant the flying sorcerer a web, and then a hand, and then a whole body. So in the end Stephen Strange lived to fight and complicate Tony's life for another day.

He left striking the superhero victory pose to Peter. The kid still had faith; he still had hope. Let him thrive on that triumph while Tony looked to the more practical side of the equation and tried to figure out how to save the most amount of people by spending the least amount of lives.

Tony'd worked hard to erase his old moniker as the Merchant of Death, but apparently some
identities never quite died.

"Why couldn't you have just run?" Tony asked, and when Stephen turned to him the man didn't even have the decency to pretend he was sorry.

"I had to protect the stone." Stephen looked remarkably unruffled for a man who'd been in agony not minutes ago, and who'd then nearly been killed by maybe-allies. Tony was almost impressed. From one game-player to another, that type of mask took years to develop and a lifetime to perfect.

"There a reason you couldn't have done that from a beach in the Bahamas, far away from the streets of New York?"

"As long as they had a magic user there was nowhere on the planet they couldn't find me," Stephen said. "Better to face him directly."

Tony grit his teeth on a howl of frustration. "Yeah, I see how well that worked out for you. And then, while you were busy proving you were the big man on campus, you ended up shanghaied and on your way to the real Big Man on Campus."

"The stone has to stay with me."

"Sure, and it would have. Right up to the moment Thanos stole it off your corpse."

"It's impossible to remove a dead man's spell," Stephen said, calm and smug, and Tony wanted to put the suit back on and punch him in his pompous face. Except that he wore a familiar expression; Tony was sure he'd seen it looking back at him in the mirror a time or two.

Tony wondered if this impotent rage was what other people felt when Tony put on that face. If so, he'd remember to use it more around people like Ross, and less around Pepper, and he'd have to commend people like Rhodey for not killing Tony sooner. Those two had the patience of saints. Pepper and Rhodey. Tony could feel his thoughts turning to ice. What was he going to do without -

"Pretty sure Thanos won't more than pause at your flimsy protection spell," Tony said, only able to devote half his brain to the conversation. The other half was busy sounding a red alert.

"It's a kill-switch, you moron," Stephen said.

Well, that proved it. Tony definitely should've let him die. That would have solved all their problems in one go; no more irritating wizards, no more Time Stone's, no more villainous universe-ending plots. And the only thing Tony would've had to do was shove Peter in a nearby storage locker and throw away the key for ten minutes.

Hindsight was twenty-twenty.

"Well, Squidward didn't look all that worried," Tony said, "so unless that switch can literally kill in some hitherto undreamt of fashion, I doubt Thanos is going to be intimidated."

Stephen looked mulish. "You underestimate the power of the mystic arts." And Tony could swear his cape puffed up like a stage prop, flaring dramatically around him. It was as though a loyal Saint Bernard had gotten mixed up in the laundry and come out looking well-ironed and embroidered.

"No, I don't," Tony said. "I just watched your mystic art get its ass handed to it by a bad cartoon knockoff. Not exactly inspiring confidence here."
"Whereas clearly you had it all under control. They say nanotechnology could save the world, but so far it hasn't been much to look at."

"Well, nanobots are individually difficult to see, so that's actually true. And it's not that nanotech *could* save the world; it *will* save the world."

Stephen sneered. "I seriously don't know how you fit your head inside that helmet."

"Oh, sorry. Pot, meet kettle." Tony swiped a hand over his face, frustration burning like a brand beneath his skin. "Admit it, Strange, you should've ducked out when I told you to."

"I don't work for you, Stark," Stephen said, or tried to; halfway through he took a step and stumbled sideways before his cape seemed to independently swing the other way to right him. He tried to turn it into a swagger and might have managed it if he hadn't swivelled his head to the side with eyes that clearly weren't tracking in the right direction for a fraction of a second.

Tony almost paused to ask if the guy was alright, because torture was torture, whether it took minutes or hours or days. And a lifetime ago Tony had been there and done all that in a cave in Afghanistan.

But then he remembered that time was short, and emotional disclosure gave Tony hives, and they had more important things to be worrying about anyway.

"I tried to bench you. You refused and now we're stuck here, alone." Tony turned when Peter hopped forward like a puppy, all eagerness and solicitude. "$Don't speak." And Tony realized he was more angry than he could ever remember being with the kid, even counting that stunt with the ferry and the time he'd hacked Tony's multi-million dollar suit. "$You're a stowaway and the adults are talking."

"But, Mr. Stark, I -"

"Wait, I'm confused." Stephen affected an air of scorn. "$What exactly is the relationship here -".

Tony turned away then, the sickness of doubt and agonized indecision churning his stomach. If only Peter hadn't come, then Tony could have done what needed doing with a clear conscience. The wizard wouldn't weigh on Tony's moral compass; that was already too bogged down with past dilemmas. No room for Stephen Strange and his oddly autonomous cape. But Peter was all the best of Tony and none of the worst. Loyal and eager and unbelievably smart. Young enough to grow into wisdom; old enough to fear his lack of it. Tony couldn't imagine a universe in which he had any part in cutting all that thriving potential short, a place or time in which Peter was lost on the cusp of adulthood.

And yet.

"Why couldn't you have just run," Tony repeated softly to himself while the other two circled warily.

Tony thought about Pepper, because he couldn't not think about her. About his clumsy attempts asking her to share a life with him, and his desperation to have that life before it all came to the end he'd known it inevitably would. He hadn't known when he'd gone with Stephen that it was the beginning of that end. He wondered if Pepper had, because she'd held on so tightly, been so reluctant to let him go, even when Bruce had begged and pleaded. She'd looked at Tony with such fear, and he'd assured her, he'd sworn he wouldn't go back on his promise. And then he'd done it anyway.

He'd known the Big Bad was coming for years now, but he'd been hoping he could at least enjoy a
siesta of peace before it did. He'd been hoping he might have time to walk Pepper down the aisle and leave her with a legacy and maybe even a family, and certainly with better memories than he'd ever given her before. He'd wanted to taste a glimpse of happiness he didn't deserve and a future that probably belonged to someone else.

If wishes were horses -

"Stark!"

Tony turned. It was clearly not the first time his name had been called. Stephen was using a tone; Tony was familiar with that tone from Pepper, or Rhodey, or even Cap back in the day. But the wizard hadn't earned the right to use that tone, and it grated.

"Can you get us home?" Stephen asked, and Tony shrugged.

"I don't know," he said.

"You can't?"

"No, I don't know. Hey, doc, what can that kryptonite around your neck actually do? Can you roll us back to a time before Thanos showed up with his lackeys?"

"The Time Stone doesn't work that way." That note of superiority hadn't quite disappeared from his voice, but in this Tony could hardly blame him. Time travel and sorcery were pretty good excuses to feel a bit superior.

"How does it work then?"

"You couldn't understand it," Stephen said, and lost all his brownie points, because there was being superior, and then there was being outrageously condescending.

"Break it down for me." Tony smiled with saccharine sweetness. "Use little words."

"Using the stone to affect reality has risks." Stephen was clearly dredging up civility from the very bottom of his reserves. "The wider the area of effect, the more chance of rupturing time. Something small might be possible; something large might be catastrophic. If a rupture occurs, a paradox could be just the tip of the iceberg."

"When you use it, does that create branches of probability? How far back can you go? A day? An hour? A minute?"

"I'm not going back at all, and neither are you, so the answer to all of that is: No."

"What, not even for the end of the world? That's pretty selfish, I don't mind telling you."

"I'm not going to stand here and try to explain temporal magic to you. Let's just say it's something you need to be a sorcerer to understand."

"I was more interested in casualty and general relativity and whether you were operating from the multiverse theory or not," Tony said. "But fine. If you want to reduce quantum mechanics down to foolish wand waving and silly incantations, I can't stop you. Bottom line: you can't break time without risking a closed spatial loop or a paradox, but if the risk were worth taking, the potential is there."

Unfortunately, that wasn't everything Tony had been hoping for. That didn't preclude the possibility
of Stephen using the stone to hit pause on time; it just meant it was risky. And not so risky that he
mightn't use it if he was given good enough cause.

Tony imagined if he set off the bombs he'd planted all around the ship's interior, Stephen might
consider that sufficient cause. Tony'd taken his time setting the bombs up. He'd placed them
strategically and well. And they were good; they were Stark-tech; they were designed to blow things
up. But they weren't so good as to do it instantaneously. There was a decent chance if they were
triggered that a ship with this much mass wouldn't actually explode so much as slowly deconstruct
and fall apart around them.

Plenty of time for an enterprising wizard to use his big green reset button.

And ultimately Tony really, truly didn't want to blow up this ship. It had seemed a reasonable plan
when he'd thought it was just him, the wizard, and the supervillain, but Peter was on this ship. The
kid had an airtight suit and could probably survive the initial explosion, but his oxygen reserve was
finite, and Earth was a long ways away. Peter wouldn't die the same death as the good doctor; he'd
die slower, watching the end come in agonizing increments.

Tony really would prefer not to die or kill anyone by slow and painful inches if he could avoid it.

"This ship's course-correcting itself. It's on auto-pilot. What if we bring the fight to them?" Tony
asked. And part of him was considering it. But the larger part was busy buying time while he
frantically thought up other solutions.

Stephen blinked in surprise. "Under no circumstances can we bring the Time Stone to Thanos." For
the first time he looked worried, actually tuned-in to the gravity of the situation. Probably he'd
realized without Tony's cooperation there was quite literally no way to get home, no way to avoid
arriving at whatever destination the ship was bound for. He'd realized he needed Tony's help and
that Tony might not be very inclined to give it.

"News flash, doc," Tony said. "He knows you have it, he's coming for it, and he doesn't seem the
sort to take no for an answer. And on that note, how did he even know where to find it? I assume
you guys don't go shouting about it from the rooftops."

"As long as humanity's existed, the Time Stone has been protected by the Sorcerer Supreme on
Earth."

"So, what, you're an inseparable pairing, like peanut butter and jelly? Guns and Roses, lock and
key, Earth's Supremely-Annnoying-Sorcerer and Time Stone? And this is a known, immutable fact
just randomly understood by the universe at large?"

"Certain powers in the universe would be aware of it, yes."

"Great. What're the odds Thanos sent Loki after us specifically because he knew there were two
infinity stones on Earth?"

For once Stephen had nothing to say, standing in grim and forbidding silence.

"Seriously, why do these things keep coming to Earth's doorstep?" Tony wondered aloud. "There's
apparently a whole universe of people out there. What makes our little blue marble so special? Wait,
don't tell me. There's probably some mystical vortex of fate at the center of the planet."

Stephen turned away, sighing. "Don't be ridiculous."

"Oh, I'm sorry, I guess that would be too much compared to six hunks of rock that can apparently be
used to control the entire universe," Tony said. "A fight like that is going to tear whole planets apart, and you want to bring that back to Earth? You saw what they can do. No, I say we take the fight to Thanos. If we take it to his turf, maybe he won't be expecting it."

Stephen looked hollow as he considered this, fatigue and weariness dragging him down. Tony could relate. He hadn't even been the one under threat of torture, and he felt totally exhausted.

He seemed to come to some resolution. "Alright, Stark. We'll do it your way. But understand: If it comes down to saving you, the kid, or the Time Stone - I won't hesitate. I'll leave you to die if I have to."

Tony believed him. And maybe a part of him even appreciated how up-front Stephen was about that. It wasn't as though Tony could claim the same. He was basically plotting how to knock the guy on his ass and steal his wallet and all his valuables before he could recover and fry Tony where he stood.

"Right," Tony said, thinking. "You sure I can't just convince you to shove that stone out the nearest airlock? It's still the only way to be certain Thanos doesn't get his hands on all six."

"Not going to happen," Stephen said serenely, which basically clinched it. Tony didn't have the time to try and convince the doctor of the error of his ways, and even with the nanotech the odds were against him beating Stephen one-to-one. If he was lucky he could maybe kill Stephen before he realized what was going on and put up a solid defense, but there was no guarantee on that. Wizards had mysterious spells up their sleeves and Tony had to assume Stephen was packing some serious firepower to be as overconfident as he was.

Also, the sorcerer's self-governing cape would probably thwart the whole endeavor and strangle Tony to death before he could get off more than a couple shots. Not to mention Peter might become uppity and self-righteous if Tony tried to murder Stephen in cold blood, so there was that too.

Which left Plan B.

"Alright." Tony sauntered over to what looked like the navigation console. It had star charts on its screens, anyway, with a giant flashing dot that either stood for their destination, or indicated something really terrible Tony couldn't even begin to fathom. "Then we bring the fight to him."

Tony had lived and breathed technology for as long as he could remember. His mother used to say he'd learned how to use a calculator before he'd learned how to walk. It was one of the few things safe to joke about at home. Howard even got in on it, saying the only thing that came faster than Tony computing was Tony talking, and after he'd started they'd never been able to shut him up.

Tony couldn't claim to be an expert on interstellar space travel, but one thing he could comfortably guess at: any ship capable of travelling fast enough to get them from one star system to the next in a human's lifetime was using light speed or some kind of equivalent. And while Tony was salivating at the idea of having a closer look at the engine, that would have to wait. The most important part he already knew: Any ship capable of that velocity was going to have a vanishingly small margin for error in its navigation and propulsion systems, making it vulnerable to even minute positioning corrections.

Tony pretended to study the layout while he carefully eased a few stray nanobots onto the interface to burrow and give FRIDAY access to the ship's mainframe. The A.I wasn't as versatile when it was cut off from the larger interface on Earth, but Tony'd learned after Siberia it always paid to have a self-contained backup and a spare power source to hand. Presuming they ever got back to Earth, this copy of FRIDAY would reintegrate with the S.I server and propagate any learning achieved while
"Looks like we have about two days before we're due to arrive." Two days was an exaggeration; as far as Tony could see from their trajectory, they'd been due to arrive tomorrow insofar as Earth counted time. But the buffer was important; the longer Tony had before his deception was discovered, the better. "Which is crazy considering the massive amounts of space I don't even know how we're crossing. So we might as well sit back and catch our breath."

In the end, it really didn't take much to force them off course. In fact, accounting for basic interstellar obstacles, Tony barely had to nudge them a tenth of a percent in the wrong direction before the ship autocorrected with a destination to an entirely different star system. Then he just kept doing that until it seemed like they were maybe moving in the opposite direction squid-guy had had them on.

Tony was grateful the alien computer system was intuitive, because all the data was labelled in a bizarre language Tony couldn't have read if his life depended on it. And it really would've burned to decide to save the universe and then not be able to follow-through because he'd forgotten his Alien-to-Human travelogue.

Somewhere in the far reaches of his thoughts, forgotten and spinning madly off course, Tony wondered why all the best and worst decisions he made in his life were all so stupidly, horrifyingly easy.

Tony stepped off toward Peter, scanning the familiar face turned trustingly toward him. He ached to give the kid reassurance, send him parachuting home the way he'd originally wanted to, but they were beyond all that now. There was nothing else Tony could offer, except silent regret for what he was about to lay at the kid's feet.

"Hey, kid," Tony said, and the rest of the words lodged hard in his throat.

"Mr. Stark?" And there went the knife driving in even further.

"Guess you're an Avenger now." Tony wanted to put on a smile and knight him like he'd always planned to when he was ready. Because Peter lived in a generation where history rarely entered his worldview, and poking him with it could be almost as entertaining as poking Cap with pop culture used to be.

But he couldn't do it. He couldn't compartmentalize his own shame; it was too crippling for words.

Tony confined himself to one wooden pat on Peter's shoulder. Then he went and sat in a corner far away from the two men he'd confined to exile and possible slow death, not that they knew that yet. And he pictured the woman he'd left behind and wondered what she was going to think when she woke up tomorrow or next week or next month and Tony still wasn't back. He'd made a solemn promise when he gave her that ring: no more leaving, no more heroics, no more Iron Man.

Even if they ever made it back, Tony knew Pepper was never going to forgive him for this. Not again. Not after all the selfishness that had come before, not after he'd left her pleading into dead air and hadn't even had the decency to look back before he'd run off to high-jack a space ship. He'd chosen to leave, this time; no one had forced his hand, no terrorists had stolen him away to do their bidding. This was all on Tony.

Breaking his word to Pepper had come so easily, in the end. Apparently his promises didn't amount to much these days. Or at least, they amounted to much less than his need to be what he was: he was Iron Man. And Iron Man didn't flinch at making the impossible calls.
Tony closed his eyes and resolutely pretended that didn't make him feel like a monster.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

The truth sets no one free.

Tony wouldn't say time crawled as they made their way in a stolen ship into the far reaches of space. Time clearly went along exactly as it should have done, or Stephen probably would've kicked up a fuss and started moaning about his stone breaking the space-time continuum or something. But while common sense told Tony time was marching on just like normal, the passing minutes and hours felt like they were moving through molasses.

After doing all he could to reasonably reprogram their course and make some headway into taking over the ship's systems, Tony found himself at loose ends. He slept for a time, easing a layer of nanobots beneath him for comfort as he stretched out on harsh metal grating. Possibly there were living quarters on this thing; really, there'd have to be given the size and relative function of it. The scientist in Tony wanted to tear down to wherever the engineering section of the ship was and take it all apart, satisfy his burning curiosity (were the interlocking rings of the ship moving to generate power? kinetic energy? was the spin generating enough centrifugal force to account for the artificial gravity or was it something else -), but all the other parts of Tony were too tired to be bothered.

Besides, his nanotech was already busy eating its way into the ship's mechanics and deconstructing them for study, so Tony could afford to take a nap in the meantime.

But sleep was elusive, and after a solid few hours of it, it disappeared to linger tantalizingly out of reach. Not that Tony was surprised by that.

He wasn't the only one having trouble; Stephen had prowled around the ship like a restless cat for almost an hour before finally settling down. Tony had no idea the extent of the man's power, but he'd waited on tenterhooks the whole time, sure at any moment some mystical alarm system was going to start clanging and blow this whole thing out of the water before they'd even vaguely set off in the right direction. But no wrathful magician bore down on Tony with vengeance in his eyes, and the cape didn't try to suffocate him unexpectedly, so probably the secret was safe for now.

Eventually Stephen stooped to lean against a ramshackle assortment of metal parts and eased himself down with the heavy gait of one exhausted and in pain and probably a bit of shock. Tony wondered if he should worry more about the transparent spikes the alien magician had been jabbing into Stephen's head; that couldn't possibly have been healthy. But it wasn't like Tony had the first idea how to check Stephen over for damage, or what to do even if he found any. The man was a doctor; he'd have to figure it out, and if he couldn't they were all probably screwed anyway.

So eventually Stephen slept, and then Tony slept.

Then Tony woke up. And Peter -

"Mr. Stark?"

"Yeah, kid?"
Peter had hung from the ceiling for a time, watching Tony work, living up to his arachnid namesake in a very disturbing way. Tony wanted to ask how he did it, because being named for a spider did not change the fundamental physiology of the human body. Peter ought to have been uncomfortable with blood rushing to his head for hours on end, but you wouldn't know it to look at him.

The kid eventually noticed Tony was awake and eyeing him skeptically. He made a halfway waving motion and flipped to land lightly on his feet. When Peter retracted the suit helmet Tony could see he was wearing that hangdog expression Tony had grown familiar with. The same one he'd had when Tony'd taken back the suit, and also the time he'd discovered the kid's first spider-onesie. In spite of Peter's vehement denials, Tony was still nearly certain the kid had made that thing out of old sweaters from Goodwill and his aunt's nylon stockings.

"You're awake," Peter said unnecessarily.

Tony sighed heavily. "I wouldn't say awake. I haven't had enough coffee for that. But my eyes are open, and I'm vaguely conscious and capable of using words up to two syllables. Maybe three."

"Oh. I guess that's - good?"

"It's tragic, actually. Man was not meant to wake without coffee, kid."

"I've never really liked coffee."

" Philistine."

"Mr. Stark, are we going to be," Peter started, diving right in. "I mean. Do we have a plan?" He puffed up a bit, clearly trying for suave and confident and falling painfully short.

"We do not have a plan," Tony said. "I have a plan."

For a moment, Peter looked profoundly and intensely relieved. "Oh, great!" Relief was quickly disguised beneath studied indifference. "What is it?"

"Details are need to know, kid," Tony said. And while Peter needed to know, he couldn't trust him not to blow it all to hell by screeching about it where Stephen might hear. And then there was the fact Tony wasn't exactly chomping at the bit to reveal everything to Peter, at which time his hangdog expression would probably legitimately change to one of betrayal.

"Oh, but, shouldn't we all know what to do when we arrive at, well," Peter fumbled.

"Don't worry kid, I don't know where we're going either." And that was nothing but the truth. "Guess if we wanted to know where we were headed we should've asked old squid-face before we keelhauled him."

"The computer doesn't say?"

"Sure, it's got lots to say," Tony said. "It's just saying it in a language I don't understand."

Peter frowned. "Oh."

The ship's computer was proving an interesting challenge. Tony was used to most systems he hacked crumbling pathetically beneath the combined assault of his ingenuity and FRIDAY's brute force. But the scribby alien language was troublesome. They'd managed to parse the simplistic subsystems, the logical give and take of the programs already engaged, and FRIDAY was even now constructing a workaround for more sophisticated manual input. But actually comprehending the
source code embedded at the core was another issue. FRIDAY could've read any language originating from Earth, living or dead, but learning an alien one was a whole new task for her. Thankfully, even stripped to bare programming essentials, she was still an excellent learning system.

"Do we at least know what it'll be like when we get there?" Peter asked.

"Nope. It'll be a surprise to all of us."

Peter looked away, and Tony waited impatiently for him to buck up the courage to say whatever was on his mind. And there: it didn't take long for Peter's look of guilty anxiety to firm up into teenage bravado. "Mr. Stark, you know why I had to come, right? I just, I couldn't do nothing. Not while the world was in danger."

"Still wish you hadn't done it. You know that whatever happens to you is on me." And of course, there was some really bad things about to happen to them, courtesy of Tony.

"I knew what I was doing," Peter protested loudly, and they both froze as Stephen made a noise, rolling from his side onto his back. Pain was carved deeply into his face even in the awful light, standing out in lines as obvious as the scars across the backs of his hands. The-cape-of-uncertain-origins fluttered to mold around the man as he shifted, snuggling close and buoying him up. Tony wondered what a guy had to do to get a cloak like that. If the only requirement was being an arrogant ass, he should've been gifted one a few decades ago.

Tony was surprised Stephen had chosen to sleep anywhere near them; warm and cuddly the good doctor was not, and there was no love lost between that man and, well, anyone. Tony supposed they'd all decided to stay together in the central room because there was strength in numbers. And also because the rest of the ship was a terrifying amalgam of indecipherable machine parts and darkness.

Once or twice in the oppressive black, Tony could've sworn out of the corner of his eye he'd seen the hazy glitter of stars through the edges of a wormhole. It wasn't real, of course. He knew it was just his mind playing tricks on him, and he'd fought back mounting anxiety with the grim knowledge that having a panic attack now wasn't a treatable affliction. Here, he had nowhere to run to find fresh air or snow to bury his face in. They were completely alone in the vast expanse of space.

First order of business on tomorrow's checklist: find the lights.

"I knew what I was signing up for," Peter said again, more softly.

"I doubt that." And he really, truly did. "But I get it. You're here for the same reason I'm here. To save people, to stop the bad guys. Pepper tried to talk me down, but it's the same for all of us who start fighting and never really stop. Once an Avenger, always an Avenger."

"Well, I was never really an Avenger," Peter said sadly, and Tony was not going to take pity on him, he wasn't, he absolutely wasn't -

"Hey Peter. Don't kid yourself. You've always been an Avenger. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise."

"But, Mr. Stark, you said -"

"Don't tell the press, but I do actually fall into the same category as 'anyone'."

"Oh." Peter fidgeted, a slow grin taking over his face. He tried to hide it but it kept breaking through, eager and delighted. Tony hoped it wasn't the last time he ever saw it.
"Just remember what I said before, kid." And he knew Peter wouldn't understand even as he said it; he couldn't. Not yet. "There're no do-overs out here."

"Right," Peter said happily, still clearly lost in the joy of a job well done. "Hey, so how long were you hanging onto this suit for me?"

The kid thrust out an arm experimentally, the smooth outer plating bending and flexing as he contorted the limb into awkward shapes. Tony let him play for a moment, thinking back on the days refining it after the kid first turned it down. It wasn't long after he'd finished the Spider-Man suit that Tony started designing the nanotech systems, and shortly afterward Stark Industries had skyrocketed into all sorts of new developmental fields. Patents were pending in a dozen different areas, everything from environmental science, to transportation, to engine dynamics, and even medicine. Unfortunately for S.I, Tony had most of the developmental crop of nanobots in his housing unit right now, like a million tiny soldiers built for his beck and call. But Tony wasn't worried. Presuming Earth survived the little problem of Thanos, Pepper would see to it the nanotech kept flourishing so it could eventually do its saving-the-world thing.

"Finished that one for you about a year ago," Tony said finally. "New model. You like?"

Peter practically glowed with excitement. "It's amazing, Mr. Stark! I don't know about the claw things that come out, they're a bit weird, but they saved us. I mean, wow. Oh, whoops."

Peter looked over at Stephen after instinctively hushing himself, but the sorcerer hadn't stirred.

"This suit will be amazing when we, well, when we get there," Peter whispered. "What other stuff does it have? Does it have wings; is that a thing? Oh! Does this one have reconnaissance mode like the last one? It doesn't have taser webs, does it? Or ricochet webs? Man those things were, uh. Well, they were great, but -"

"Those were supposed to be available after you passed training and could appreciate the genius of advanced combat mode."

"Yeah, sure. But you left those out of this suit, right?"

"Can't leave out genius, kid," Tony said just to watch Peter's face fall with horror before he valiantly tried to hide it.

"Oh but, well, okay -"

"Relax." Tony grinned. "That suit's old school, just a few flourishes. Made to your exacting blue-collar standards."

Peter's look of relief could not have been more obvious and Tony felt so fond of the kid just then, so proud of his selfless accomplishments. Peter had a lot to learn, not least of which discretion and self-preservation, but to jump aboard a spaceship for no other reason than he knew it was the right thing to do, risking life and limb -

Tony stopped smiling and the glee faded into dismal reality again. Peter was still risking life and limb; he just didn't realize that the dice had already been cast, or that Tony had stacked the chips against them.

"You should get some sleep, kid. You're going to need it."

"I can't," Peter said. "I'm not good with, like, inactivity when there's a big fight waiting."
"Then go do your homework. Young people these days; they'll do anything to get out of school. And don't even think about using interstellar hitchhiking as an excuse, you have only yourself to blame for that."

"Technically, this ship was still on Earth when I hopped onboard," Peter muttered.

"Technically, I tried to kick you off it before it left Earth, but you dug in like the tick you are not named for and refused to go. Thus, hitchhiking."

"I guess it kind of is. Wow, Aunt May is going to kill me," Peter said mournfully.

"Is this the same Aunt May with the very attractive -"

"No!"

There was a sudden clang as something hit the ground heavily and Tony and Peter both looked over to see Stephen sitting up and glaring. The sorcerer was clearly aiming for angry and intimidating, but he only managed the first and missed the second by a mile because he got tangled up with the cloak and nearly fell over sideways.

"If neither of you were planning to sleep," Stephen said loudly as his wardrobe hastily resettled itself around him, "you could've at least had the decency to let the rest of us do it."

"Last time I checked you were the only other person here, doc," Tony said. "So unless that cloak of yours takes naps or you're using the royal 'we', you've got problems."

Stephen ignored him to lever carefully up to his feet. He moved with the deliberate caution of someone who knew pain was waiting for them around most every corner. Tony watched as he started contorting his arms and legs, slowly twisting and stretching side-to-side in the dim light. His cloak hung next to him for a moment before getting with the program; it started copying Stephen's back and forth movements, left and right, left and right. Eventually they both apparently worked out all the kinks, because Stephen stopped and the cloak immediately floated through the air to settle itself after ruffling idly around his shoulders.

"Actually," Tony mused, watching with involuntary interest. That cape was something else. "If you are using the royal 'we', I might have to challenge you to a duel, Sir Strange-a-Lot. There's really only room for one king of the mountain on this ship."

Stephen looked skeptical. "Afraid I'm looking to dethrone you, Stark? Don't be. What's there to dethrone? This isn't exactly Buckingham Palace. And didn't you decommission your castle tower when your vengeful boy band broke up?"

"Excuse you, Black Widow is going to have words for you when she shows her face stateside again."

"I'm shaking in my boots."

"Well, I certainly would be," Tony said. "Though to be fair I wouldn't be caught dead in those boots of yours. Where did you get that wardrobe? Wizards-R-Us? Sorcerers Incorporated?"

"Sears," Stephen said.

He waited for the punch line, but either that was it, or Stephen was sincere. Tony began to despair for the fashion sense of the entire Earth. "Seriously?"
"No. Where are we right now?"

"Somewhere between Earth and our next destination," Tony said, entirely truthfully. "And without speaking alien that's about all I know. We're still a ways out. If you need some more shuteye now's the time to take it."

"I was trying, but this annoying douchebag wouldn't shut up."

Peter looked stricken, full of honest apology. "Sorry."

"Sounds awful," Tony said breezily. "Have you thought about filing a noise complaint with the owner? I hear he's dying to talk to you."

Stephen sighed. "Do you really never stop talking?"

"Only when given unavoidable reason to. Or when Pepper makes a face," Tony admitted. "You feeling okay, doc?"

"What?" Stephen turned sharply to frown at him. "I'm fine. Why?"

"Because your body temperature's elevated two degrees above normal," Tony said as FRIDAY silently streamed him the readouts over his glasses. "And your electrolytes are completely out of whack."

"How," Stephen started, then seemed to change his mind. "It's nothing. None of us have eaten or had anything to drink since - yesterday? Has it been a day since we got on this ship?"

"Yesterday was when the formerly-alive alien beamed you up for probing, yes."

"Are there any consumables here?"

"What, am I supposed to know that just because I understand a bit of machine language?"

"Are you saying you don't know?"

"It wasn't exactly my top priority to run out and find some fast food," Tony said. "But as it happens, it makes sense there'd be living quarters on this ship. It's intended one way or the other to provide transport to people. So far our oxygen supply seems infinite. I'm also assuming an unlimited fuel supply or a self-perpetuating engine core, because we're somehow travelling faster than the speed of light and any variety of fossil fuel would've been exhausted long ago."

"I'm surprised you didn't take the time to gawk at the engine before you tried to blast me into space," Stephen said.

Tony shrugged philosophically. "I thought about it, but in retrospect that seemed like kind of a dick move. So I only ran a couple simulations. No more than four or five. Left me with plenty of time to try blasting you into space afterward."

"Actually, that was my plan," Peter said shamefacedly. "I saw it in this old movie. But we were never going to let you die in space! Right, Mr. Stark?"

"Sure, right," Tony said dubiously. "Strange, if you're hankering for a snack, why not just magic something up and have at it?"

Stephen brushed invisible lint off his sleeves importantly. "We're not close enough to Earth for me to pull it from there, and producing food out of thin air would require tampering with universal law."
Tony laughed before he could stop himself. "Oh, I'm sorry, are you saying magic has rules? Do tell."

"Mostly they're the same rules scientists have already discovered," Stephen said. "Except for all the ones they got wrong."

"If you don't know what they are, you could've just said that," Tony said, then threw a blueberry at him.

The cloak annoyingly caught it in midair and offered it to Stephen with the solemn contemplation of an object that did not understand what food was.

Stephen took the berry suspiciously. "Where were you hiding that?"

"You don't want to know," Tony said, and threw two more at him before he mastered the petty urge to use food as ammunition and tossed him the entire bag.

"Oh," Peter said, craning his neck to stare at Tony hopefully. "Do you have any more?"

"Nope." And gave him a packet of dried banana slices instead.

"Do you always carry food around in your pockets?" Stephen asked, taking a mouthful without a word of thanks, the ingrate.

"You're welcome, and no. Obviously I just figured you were the hangry type and planned accordingly."

He produced a package of mixed nuts next and tossed back a few before handing those to Peter too. "Can't do anything about our water supplies, though, so eventually we'll have to go exploring."

"If your calculations are right we'll reach Thanos today or tomorrow," Stephen said. "We'll survive."

Tony almost wanted to laugh. Stephen was definitely going to be surprised when tomorrow showed up with no Thanos in sight.

"Still, it can't hurt," Tony said. "By the way, you should probably sit down before you fall down. Your blood pressure's tanking."

The worst part was that Stephen didn't even bother arguing with him about it and just sat down shakily where he stood. Tony took back the bag of nuts from Peter and ambled over to shove it at the guy. "Here. My treat."

Stephen took the bag with hands that shook, looking straight ahead. "Thank you," he said softly, like it hurt.

Tony shrugged, magnanimous with success. "No sweat. You know it's not just because you haven't eaten, right? It's not every day a guy suspends you from the ceiling and skewers you with pain."

Then he thought about that more closely. "Or maybe that is your every day? What do I know."

"Is this your version of therapy, Stark?" Scars stood out clearly against Stephen's knuckles as he closed his hands into fists. "Don't give up your day job."

"That's good advice. I mean, I would actually make a really terrible therapist. Doesn't mean you don't need one."

"Have some experience with that?"
"More than most," Tony admitted candidly. "Afghanistan was the fulcrum my whole life changed on, but I was in therapy long before that. You'd probably benefit, but fair warning: no amount of therapy can change how much of an asshole you are."

"I suppose you'd know," Stephen said. "I certainly would."

"Mr. Stark?"

Tony looked over, grateful for the interruption of what was fast becoming a more personal conversation than he'd been banking on. But his heart sank at the sight of Peter. The kid had moved off while the adults were having a heart-to-heart, and he was standing in front of the navigation console with his hands on either side of the display and his brows beetled together in confusion.

"I think there's a problem," Peter said while Tony made his way over.

"What is it?"

"I know you said we were due in tomorrow, but I think this display's counting down weeks."

Tony technically could have told them it would take weeks to get to Thanos, and maybe he should have, but he hadn't thought Stephen would buy the idea of Squidward reeling them in that slowly. Peter would've accepted it, because he accepted everything Tony had to say. That was really going to hurt when it disappeared in about a minute.

"How can you tell?" he asked, casually.

Peter pointed. "There's a timer." And, of course; that was the same marker to first catch Tony's attention too. The numbers weren't written in English, but it didn't take a genius to count out the timing of disappearing seconds and extrapolate from there.

"Did we change something?" Peter asked worriedly. "When we put a hole in the hull?"

"It momentarily destabilized the ship's forward momentum. But that started up again after I repaired the breach and the air pressure equalized."

"Is there something wrong with the engine now?"

Tony could see out of the corner of his eye Stephen stand up slowly, likely only the man's physical discomfort keeping him from stomping over to inspect the console for himself.

Tony considered hedging, or even outright lying. He'd had significant practice at both in his life, and being as he was the only engineer on the ship, he had a lot of scientific leeway to make things up. Peter had even given him an excellent head start with his innocent questions.

But a story elaborate enough to be convincing for weeks sounded not only unappealing, but exhausting beyond words to keep up. And maybe it was better to get it out in the open, anyway; Tony had never been good at hanging onto his guilt or shame. That was why entire tabloids kept themselves employed on his numerous public scandals.

Tony blew out a breath and smiled grimly. "Nothing's wrong with the engine, kid. We're just not going where the ship thought we were going yesterday."

"What?" Peter asked, while Stephen straightened up in alarm. "Why not? Where are we going?"
"I told you, I don't know," Tony said. "Wherever that blinking red dot is on the map."

"But what's there?" Peter asked, apparently too stuck on the logistics to realize the implications. Stephen wasn't having that problem; a thunderous rage was quickly overtaking his expression.

"Not sure."] Tony looked straight at the sorcerer challengingly. "But definitely not Thanos. And definitely not Earth."

Peter looked almost comically bewildered. "What? But -"

"What have you done?" Stephen interrupted, and stepped into the air with his hands outstretched and an expression of menace on his face. Tony was reluctantly impressed; he didn't want to be, but the man was floating without the benefit of repulsor technology or a magical hammer. Sorcery was kind of awesome; it made Tony itch to take it apart to its probably bizarre and unscientific constituent parts.

"I've done lots of things," Tony said. "Most recently I was trying to cat nap, and a second ago I was snacking. You should try it some time. Take care of the hangry."

"What have you done?" Stephen repeated, with real power in his voice and magic glittering in his hands like ropes of fire.

"Saved the universe," Tony said, shrugging. "Or at least delayed its hostile takeover."

"By taking us away from Earth?"

Tony hummed contemplatively. "Technically the dead alien did that. I just reprogrammed the autopilot to take us away from Thanos, too."

"But why?" Peter asked. "I thought the whole point was we were going to surprise him!"

"Sure, we could do that, kid. But then we'd die, and Thanos would still end up with the keys to the universe. So I decided to go with another option."

"And which one's that?" Stephen asked contemptuously.

"Run like hell."

"What happened to taking the fight to them?" Stephen almost seemed to glow, the outline of his form blurring behind strands of glittering light. FRIDAY streamed Tony a confused set of numbers as the energy built around the sorcerer in blistering waves. "What happened to meeting them on their own turf?"

"I lied," Tony admitted. "I'm good at that. Also, in this case discretion really is the better part of valor. And since you wouldn't give up the stone, or go into hiding, or get off the damn playing field, this is me sidelining you. Unfortunately that means I have to come along too, for babysitting purposes."

Tony turned to face Peter, taking in the shocked disbelief on his young, energetic face. "And Peter gets to come too, because he bought a one-way ticket," he said softly. "And I'm making a sacrifice play."

"But, Mr. Stark." And there, Tony could see reality was setting in, the gaping hole where his trust in Tony used to reside being swiftly filled with horror. "How am I - I mean, how are we going to get home?"
"We're not, kid," Tony said, and ruthlessly forced himself to watch the light of any lingering hope fade away. "We're fugitives on the run. This isn't a day trip. This is exile, and it only ends when we're dead, or Thanos is, or that stone around Strange's neck is nothing but space dust."

"I don't know about Thanos," Stephen said with intent, "but if you're looking for death, Stark, I can certainly oblige you."

Tony laughed, softly, and knew he skirted real danger doing it. "That's a zero sum game for you. Whereas I would've benefitted hugely from killing you before this, and don't think I didn't consider it. But whether I'm dead or alive, this ship is on an intercept course with the middle of nowhere, and good luck prying the navigational controls out of FRIDAY's nonexistent hands after I'm gone."

"Friday?" Peter asked dazedly.

"My A.I. Like a suped-up version of your last suit lady. By the way: Karen? Really?"

"What's wrong with Karen? I like the name Karen. What kind of name is Friday?"

"The Stark kind."

"Turn us around," Stephen ordered.

"No can do," Tony said cheerfully. "Destroy that stone, and then we can talk."

"Never going to happen."

"Then you might as well buckle in, because we're going to be here a while. Guess it'll come down to which of us is more stubborn. I'm betting me."

"You'd lose that bet." And the look on Stephen's face gave Tony pause, because there was something there that was confident when it shouldn't have been. Tony had a reputation, after all.

"I guess we'll see," Tony said. "But here's the kicker: if I lose, everyone else loses with me. So I'm not going to lose, and you can be absolutely sure I'll cheat to make sure of that." He considered this thoughtfully. "In fact, I suppose I already have."

"So your answer is to hide until this all blows over? The great Tony Stark, running away from a fight. I never took you for a coward." Stephen was clearly aiming to wound, but he missed by a wide margin. Tony'd been called worse, and by far better people.

"It's more like running at an oblique angle from the fight," Tony said. "With the damsel in distress as a hostage slung over my shoulder and a sidekick accidentally tucked into my luggage."

"I really should've stayed on the bus," Peter said softly, and Tony couldn't look at him, not and keep it together, not and keep all his masks in place.

He smiled; all teeth, no mirth. "Too late. Welcome to your new field trip. For what it's worth, I can pretty much guarantee it'll be more interesting than Coney Island."

"Stark," Stephen said, threateningly.

"Game over, doc," Tony said, and turned away to lean against the wall. "Guess this one's a stalemate."
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Living with the consequences.

When Tony opened his eyes, it took him a confused jumble of moments staring at the black metallic ceiling before he remembered where he was. One quick glance around his drab, barren surroundings confirmed it. These walls had started to become uncomfortably familiar.

"FRIDAY, what time is it?"

"4:36 a.m. Eastern standard time."

"What day are we on? Five?"

"Day six, boss."

Tony's first thought was of Pepper, as it so often was. After almost a week gone from Earth, Pepper's penchant for practicality would've kicked in by now. She'd have moved past any lingering hope Tony was just making a pit stop on the alien ship and correctly assumed he was long gone. Tony liked to think she'd know he was still fighting the good fight, or at least the fight that had the best odds of winning, and that she might even be cheering him on.

Alternatively, she might think he was dead. That was also a possibility.

"Four-thirty," Tony sighed. "How long have I been out?"

"Three and a half hours."

"Fantastic."

There'd be no getting back to sleep now; there never was. Sleep had become an exercise in futility. Listlessness and nerves and sheer loneliness threatened to turn the close walls and corridors of the ship into nightmares about a floating tomb drifting endlessly in space. Tony blinked into the darkness around him, lit only by the nanotech housing unit. Anxiety was a familiar flutter, kept only partly in check. In spite of his every effort, Tony could feel a panic attack slipping closer every day.

"FRI, can you raise the lights yet? Fifty percent?"

The lights obediently brightened to half-capacity.

"Good girl. When'd you pick up that system?"

"Three hours, two minutes ago."

Tony hummed in pleasant surprise. "Do we have any other systems yet? Aside from navigation and propulsion."

"I have also gained full access to security and life support systems, as well as partial control of tactical systems."
"Still working on communications? Did you shut down the outgoing signals yet? Last thing we need is our old pal Thanos tracking us from halfway across the galaxy."

"Yes, boss."

"What about the computer core?"

"Still in process."

"Not bad for a week's work," Tony mused. And it had by no means been an easy week. He'd spent most of it dodging adolescent pleas for clemency. Speaking of -

"Is the kid still outside my door, FRI?"

"Mr. Parker left ninety-six minutes ago."

Small blessings. Peter was more stubborn than Tony had given him credit for. Tony hadn't wasted any time hightailing it off the bridge after the truth came out, ostensibly to search for the basic necessities they were sorely in need of it, but mostly to remove himself from the line of fire. But it hadn't been half a day before Peter was after him, armed with big wounded eyes and stumbling entreaties. His favorite question seemed to be 'why'. The problem was that no matter how frequently or how creatively Tony explained it to him, the kid never seemed to get it.

On the other hand, Tony hadn't seen hide nor hair of Stephen Strange since the confrontation on the bridge, and frankly he rather preferred it that way.

"FRIDAY, mark the calendar," Tony said, lacing his hands under his head to stare at the ceiling. "One week anniversary of my career change from mad scientist and international business mogul, to space pirate. What should we do to celebrate?"

"Boss?"

"Now, I know what you're going to say. Celebrating a one week anniversary is so middle school. Any other time I'd agree with you, but we're officially pirates now. Pirates are allowed to celebrate ridiculous anniversaries. They operate outside the normal social order." He paused, frowning. "On the other hand, so do superheroes. What actually constitutes normal in the social order? It's possible I've never actually made the criteria."

Tony considered this thoughtfully for a time.

"Maybe a celebration is premature. I suppose the only thing we've really pirated so far is this gloomy, technologically advanced ship and all its nonexistent cargo. Well, Strange was the cargo, so one could argue we pirated him too. But that's barely a drop in the bucket. Technically if we're pirates, we're poor, penniless ones. Whoever heard of poor pirates? I suppose those pirates probably ended up dead before they could sully the pirate name. Pirate goal one, FRI: amass a fortune and do not end up dead."

"Boss?"

"It's asking a lot, I know. But I want to set my goals high, start off on the right foot. Dread Captain Stark, his eight-legged first mate, and their mutinous Strange prisoner. Has a certain ring to it, don't you think?"

FRIDAY was silent, having probably exhausted her limited allotment of curiosity for the day. That wasn't unusual. In the past few days, Tony had gotten very familiar with FRIDAY's indifferent
silence. Backup mode stripped and stored her personality subroutines and extraneous programming to allow sufficient processing power and memory. It was really the only way to carry a semi-functional A.I in a pocket sized format. But it made for very one-sided conversations.

"FRIDAY, be a dear and start the coffee maker for me, would you?"

"There are no coffee makers aboard this ship."

Tony sighed mournfully. "You could at least lie to me. I keep asking, thinking one day you might surprise me."

But FRIDAY didn't. She couldn't. Tony had never realized how painfully dependent he'd become on having a perpetually loyal helper to talk to, one who talked back. Next time, Tony'd have to seriously consider scrapping some of her processing power to make room for at least a humor algorithm or two. FRIDAY wasn't half as much fun to have around when the closest she got to making a joke was reading out the dictionary definition.

"Do I get breakfast at least?" he asked plaintively.

One of the drawers built into the wall opened with a mechanical whir, an assortment of colorful sealed packages obediently on display. Tony rose from his bed and took one, wrinkling his nose.

Tony cracked the seal dubiously. "Our host wasn't much for creature comforts, was he? Does this stuff remind you of fish food, FRI? It reminds me of fish food. Maybe it's just because our alien buddy was a squid."

"The nutrient base is comprised of -"

"Never mind, I retract the question."

It hadn't taken Tony long after staging a strategic retreat from the bridge to stumble across the ship's crew quarters, and from there the alien equivalent of the lavatory. Finding the food stocks and a supply of drinkable water hadn't been far behind.

The water was the biggest relief; after one day stuck on the bridge, they'd already been feeling the effects of dehydration. A lack of liquid intake could've quickly put them out of commission. Thankfully the supply seemed vast; as far as Tony could tell the ship used an atmospheric water collector and a purifier to keep the stores up. But whether that meant it was pulling frozen water vapor from space or whether that meant they had to drop the ship into the troposphere of a planet to fill up their reserves, Tony had no idea.

The ship had whole storage compartments full of sealed and packaged food, or something that could loosely be termed food by Earth's definition. It was mostly gelatinous, probably for quick storage, and packed with nutrients, vitamins and minerals. Tony'd scanned them as thoroughly as he could before taking a leap of faith and eating one; the taste has been thankfully mild, almost like sampling artificially sweetened jello. He hadn't died afterward, which left him cautiously optimistic at their ongoing chances for survival. He'd had FRIDAY send word to the other two of the discovery.

Tony had no idea what their resident wizard made of the whole thing, but Peter hadn't been long hunting Tony down to share his thoughts, and after that he'd followed Tony through the ship like a wayward duckling, or a barnacle. The only way Tony'd managed any privacy was by having FRIDAY slam a door in the kid's face and pretending he couldn't hear Peter shouting furiously from the other side.

Tony felt antsy to start working and hastily finished off his uncertain meal. "Time to head to the
workshop, FRI. Fire up the forges. No, strike that, don't respond. Just power up the engineering consoles for me."

"Sure thing, boss."

Tony had deliberately claimed the set of living quarters most closely situated near engineering, so when he headed out he didn't anticipate a long walk. And he didn't get one, but that was mostly because he discovered his passage had been rather thoroughly and spectacularly blocked.

"FRIDAY," Tony said, examining the floor to ceiling wall of webbing barring him from the engineering section. "How many cubic feet of that stuff would you say he had to use to do that?"

"Unclear."

"What are the odds if I cut it down he'll just try this again tomorrow?"

"I wouldn't wait until tomorrow," Peter said, and Tony tried not to jump like a startled cat, but he wasn't used to being ambushed by people hanging upside down from the ceiling. He looked up to find Peter in full costume, the white expanse of the suit's eyes watching Tony with chilling intensity. Apparently he'd done a good job rendering the suit at least marginally intimidating.

"Besides, it's not that easy to cut through," Peter continued, the muffling effect of the mask flattening his voice into grim severity. Or maybe that was just the anger talking. "It tangles up most solid objects."

"Good luck tangling a laser," Tony said, demonstrating with three red, cutting beams as the suit formed around his wrist.

Peter flipped off the ceiling to land on his feet, watching avidly as the web started to slump and collapse. "You have lasers? I thought you just had repulsors. That's so cool! Hey, does my suit have lasers?"

"No, I did not give you lasers," Tony said. "You can walk up walls, jump higher than a kangaroo, lift a small building when motivated, and are basically impervious to simple injury. You do not need lasers. You'll have to make do with ricochet webs."

Tony couldn't see Peter's face, but the way his shoulders slumped spoke of tried and true disappointment.

"Can I assume you have no intention of letting me get to work peacefully?" Tony asked.

"I just want to talk. Can we talk?"

"You say that every time, kid. If this is going to be a re-run of the same old sob story you've been feeding me, you can save it."

"Mr. Stark," Peter said, and there was the same pleading note Tony'd gotten used to, the one that tried to dig in beneath his skin and burrow until it found his heart. Peter should really read the tabloids; most of them were still convinced Tony didn't have a heart.

"Hell, kid, how many times do we have to go over this? I'm not turning this ship around. The only way that's going to happen is if Strange agrees to space his precious Time Stone or our favorite galactic despot gets unexpectedly dead. So unless something's changed in the five hours since you last asked me, we're here to stay."
"But!" Peter cried, the helmet finally retracting to show his earnest, youthful face, looking about as woebegone as Tony remembered it from yesterday. "Then why did you even bother saving him? Why did you send me to help him if you were never planning for us to return home?"

Well, that was new. Usually the kid just ended up on an endless repeat cycle of awkward appeals and pleading. Apparently Peter had moved on to the bargaining stage of his grief.

"One, when I sent you after the wizard, I didn't know we'd end up on a spaceship. Two, I tried to kick you off it, and you refused to go. Three, saving Strange was your plan, Peter; not mine. Four, technically Strange doesn't need to die for everything to still come up Milhouse, he just needs to be reasonable. And five - no, okay, there's no five. I was just on a roll, thought something else brilliant might crop up."

Peter looked like he couldn't quite decide on being scandalized or horrified so his face was settling somewhere in between.

Tony made a beckoning gesture. "I'm happy to take questions from the audience now."

"What do you mean, saving him was my plan?" Peter asked dazedly. "What were you going to -" He frowned, suddenly, and Tony braced himself for a flood of disgusted vitriol, accusations, cries of 'how could you!', but Peter surprised him.

"Is this about all the bombs?" he asked.

Tony blinked, calmly. "What bombs?"

Peter rolled his eyes like now Tony was being unreasonable. "The ones you had all over the ship. I snuck onboard, remember? I basically followed your footsteps. They were everywhere."

"They were not everywhere," Tony said. "They were placed in key locations. Strategically."

"Were you really planning to blow up the ship?"

"Yes, blowing things up is usually the point of planting bombs."

"I thought they might be a backup plan. Like if the alien guy had maybe decided to hold Doctor Strange hostage or something."

"Nope. The bombs were technically Plan A if I couldn't get the irrational sorcerer to stop being irrational. I only went with Plan B because you got in the way. So take heart; if things had gone along as intended we could all have been dead by now."

"Oh," Peter said. "Well, thanks. I think."

"I never meant for you to be here, Peter," Tony reminded. "I almost went with the suicide plan of facing Thanos directly rather than cart you off into exile with me."

"We can still do that!" Peter insisted, a phrase familiar from the first day or so he'd dogged Tony's steps. Peter was convinced all it would take to beat an insane tyrant powered by infinity stones was the barebones of a plan and copious amounts of firepower. Apparently he thought if he could just convince Tony of that, all would be well. "We could still beat him if we work together."

Tony sighed. "Kid, you've been watching way too many Saturday morning cartoons." The words stung unexpectedly; he'd heard a similar lecture about teamwork before, but not from Peter. From another guy in red (white) and blue. "In real life, you don't take on the bad guy with a three to
endless-army disadvantage and walk away with anything but a hell of a beat down. And in this case, the grand prize trophy is universal domination."

"But we have that stone he wants. Doctor Strange said -"

"Forget what Strange said. I know I'm trying to," Tony muttered. "Putting Strange and Thanos together on one planet is a disaster with only one outcome. I know I have a reputation as a risk taker, but this one's too rich even for my pay grade. I'm not willing to gamble the fate of the universe on our ability to take out someone strong enough to down Thor."

"Then - then maybe we could just turn around," Peter said; pleaded really. Tony closed his eyes and hardened his heart. "We could go back to Earth, we could -"

"Peter, you jumped onboard a spaceship. You had to know it was dangerous, that you might never make it back. You did it anyway. You made a hard call, and so did I. Now we both have to live with the consequences."

"But, Mr. Stark, if you just -"

"Peter." Tony watched the teenager hunch into anguished silence at the admonition, and parts of Tony ached in places he hadn't known existed before Peter came into his life. "Please believe that I would like nothing better than to get you back home. If you'll recall, I tried to do just that. But I can't get you back to Earth now without bringing Strange back too. And that just can't happen."

"No, but, I," Peter said despondently.

"Hell, kid, why aren't you bugging Strange about this? If he'd get off his magical high-horse and weigh the cost of half of all universal life versus his baby green pride and joy, we could pulverize that stone and be home in time for supper. Or at least before S.I has me declared dead."

"Doctor Strange says he can't destroy the stone. And why would they declare you dead?"

"He says he can't, but all I hear is he won't. And I've disappeared enough times now, Stark Industries wrote a policy on when and how they can release my shares into the care of my inheritor. I mean, it's Pep, and she's already CEO, so I don't see what all the rush was about. But that's business for you, kid."

In fact, Tony could almost imagine Pepper standing before the board, fiercely declaring that as CEO and now-majority shareholder, she was revoking the declaration of Tony's death until proven otherwise. If the company had had to deal with Tony's many disappearing acts, Pepper had had to deal with them on a far more personal level. He always came back, she'd say, and he'll come back this time too.

He wished he could tell her he was coming back, but that was as much a mystery to Tony as it was to everyone else.

"So, wait," Peter said. "How long do you have before they -" he made a quick, cutting motion at the neck, complete with sound effects. "You know?"

Tony tilted his head thoughtfully. "Legally? Probably years before I'm officially buried. But since I'm a bit prone to peril, and I'm the majority shareholder, they wanted some earlier assurances. I could've chosen not to sign off on it, but honestly they kind of had a point. I get two months before they release my shares to Pepper."

"Oh, so that's still plenty of time." Peter looked relieved, and Tony supposed that to a teenager two
months would probably seem like a lifetime.

Maybe it would make more sense to the kid once they'd actually been on the ship for two months. Or longer.

"I'll go by faster than you think," Tony said. "Speaking of time slipping away, where is Strange at these days? I thought he might come stab me in my sleep, but so far he's been quiet as a mouse. Should I be worried?"

"He's on the bridge," Peter said. "He's always on the bridge."

"Why? What the hell does he do there? Watch the stars? If he's looking for familiar constellations, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but he won't find any."

"He meditates? Maybe. Well, he tries to, but he gets really tired if he does it for long, so after a while he stopped."

"He meditates." Tony sighed, turning a beseeching look up at the ceiling. "Of course he does. How stereotypical of him. Anything else? Does he hold séances? Chant at the moon or, well, not the moon, one of the passing planetary bodies? Has he tried to use you for potions ingredients yet?"

"What?"

"I'll take that as a no. I don't suppose he's told you how he flies around, has he? If it turns out he really does have a magical hammer hidden in his pocket, I'll be relieving him of it. For science."

"For science?"

"Magic is only magic until it's science, kid, and don't you forget it. Do me a favor? Go hunt Strange down and make him give you all his wizardly secrets."

"I don't think he's going to tell me anything," Peter said dubiously.

"Won't know till you try. Now skedaddle. I need to get to work deciphering this lovely alien alphabet so FRIDAY can take over the ship's core. Go keep Strange occupied for a while. Yell for help if the guy gives you trouble so I can watch from afar."

Peter rolled his eyes. "Thanks."

"You're welcome. Now get going. You can come back tomorrow for another episode of Days of Our Exile."

"No, but -"

"No, but, seriously. That was your thirty minute opportunity to state your case. Your case has been stated. I have work to do."

Peter reluctantly started to trudge away, and Tony tried to close the sliding door on the engineering section so he wouldn't have to watch, but -

"Dammit, Peter, how much webbing did you use on this?"

"Oh, sorry," Peter said sheepishly. "You wouldn't open your door, and I didn't want you to sneak away before I could talk to you."

"I didn't open the door because I was sleeping. Do you know what sleeping is? It is a thing people
do when they're tired. Why the hell weren't you sleeping? It's ass o'clock in the morning."

"It is?" Peter was surprised, and Tony was surprised by his surprise. And then he realized that on this ship one of the only ways to keep track of Earth-standard time was with FRIDAY's help. Tony hadn't exactly been eager to make the A.I available to the other two onboard. Clearly that would have to change, at least the basic functionality.

"Yeah, kid, it is. Go get some shuteye, or contemplate the meaning of life, or whatever it is you've been doing to keep busy this week. Actually. What have you been doing to keep busy this week? Aside from stalking me."

"I've been exploring, a bit," Peter said. Which was worrying on several hundred levels. "Did you know the ship has a dining area? And two cargo bays?"

Tony considered this. "I didn't. Interesting. Find anything else in your journey?"

"No?" The cornered look on Peter's face was not at all promising.

"If you blow up this ship, I will ground you for life."

"I thought you wanted to blow it up," Peter muttered petulantly.

"Do not make me send you to bed without supper, young man. Now get out of here before I make you clean up the mess you made."

"Oh, I could -"

Tony glared at him until the teenager slunk away, temporarily thwarted. Tony had no doubt he'd be back again, and probably before too much time had passed. Persistence, thy name is Parker.

"Boss," FRIDAY said.

"Yes, dear?"

"Someone's trying to access the navigation systems from one of the bridge terminals."

Tony snapped to attention. "Strange?"

"It would appear to be Doctor Strange, yes."

"Does no one sleep on this ship? What the hell's he doing? He can't hope to put this ship off course. One, I've already done that, and unless he's got some way to read Alien, he can't have any better idea of our destination than I do. Two, if he thinks he's going to out-science me, he has another thing coming. Give me the console layout, FRI."

An overlay appeared on one of the nearby screens. Tony watched for a time as alien characters appeared in clusters, separated into very specific sets of patterns. "What's he up to?"

"I believe he's attempting to backtrack your course corrections to return the ship to its original trajectory."

"Okay, I stand corrected. That could almost work. Clever bastard," Tony muttered. "I suppose he'd rather face Thanos than face exile. Better the devil we know?"

"Boss?"

"Forget it. Is he entering all of those manually?"
"Looks that way."

"From memory? I can't do that from memory. Why can he do that from memory? Has he actually figured out the numeric system, or is that just straight memorization?"

"Unknown."

"I suppose he *was* hailed a genius before he hared off into parts unknown to study eastern philosophy. But unless he's a closet pilot, I can't see him recognizing the coordinate patterns. Please tell me he's a closet pilot. If he's not a closet pilot and it turns out he has a photographic memory on top of everything else, I'm filing a complaint with life."

The numbers paused momentarily halfway through the sequence.

"He trying to initiate the partial course change, FRI?"

"Yes, boss."

"Think he's noticed yet that I locked out the bridge controls and routed navigational command functions through engineering?"

"Based on his use of profanity, I estimate a high probability he has become aware."

"Poor guy," Tony said. "Foiled at the starting line before the race even began. Better luck next time, Strange."

For a moment, Tony entertained himself imagining the sorcerer cursing futilely and shaking a fist at the heavens upon discovering Tony's workaround. Tony watched as more alien characters started to appear on the overlay.

"He's trying again? Should I rig the console to give him an error buzzer every time he tries to register the course change, or would that be too much?"

"Boss?"

"Analyze, FRI. Would pranking the wizard now get me killed, you think? Or just severely maimed?"

"Why would you wish to trick Doctor Strange?"

"Because it's funny," Tony sighed. "Though, really it isn't. Good point, FRI. If there's one thing I can count on you for right now, it's reminding me how un-funny all this is. But don't worry, I won't hold that against you. It's not your fault you left your sense of humor behind."

Tony did not add an error buzzer to the navigation console. There was really no use in kicking a man when he was down, and in this case, discretion was once again the better part of valor.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Magic makes an appearance and reveals a serious problem.

Tony didn't make much progress deconstructing the inner mysteries of the ship that day, or the day after. The wizard kept him remarkably busy in a two-man war of covert piloting.


"Not according to my information, boss."

"Then please explain to me how he's re-writing the navigational course of this ship faster than I can."

"Unknown."

"Yeah, I don't know either, but I'm going to guess the answer rhymes with magic."

Tony had three sets of overlay simulations running, with FRIDAY dissolving one string of coordinates while Tony re-routed through the second and third. Stephen was fast, unnaturally so, and it wasn't impossible to stay ahead of him, but it was annoyingly difficult.

"Why do I get the feeling he's just getting started?" Tony asked, watching string after string of alien text scrolling over his screen. "Where is he, FRI?"

"Doctor Strange has re-located to one of the secondary control consoles in the aft section."

"How many redundant command consoles does this ship have? And how did our master of the occult know about them while apparently we did not?"

"I'm detecting command functionality from eight consoles in addition to bridge terminals."

"Can we shut them all down?"

"Not all. I only have partial control of power systems. Doctor Strange is in a section of the ship I have yet to access."

Tony cursed. "This is getting irritating and suspicious. FRIDAY, back-hack his current console and isolate it into a virtual environment. That should keep him busy for a while."

"On it, boss."

Stephen stopped for a breather not long after that, and Tony took the break for the blessing it was and paused for a quick bite to eat.

"FRIDAY, do we have bots in that section of the ship?"

"Yes."
"Get me eyes on," Tony said. "I want to see how he's doing this."

"I can have visual surveillance ready in an hour."

"That'll have to do."

It wasn't quite forty minutes later that Peter came swinging by, probably looking for his daily dose of answers. Tony locked off the engineering section before the kid could gain access.

"Sorry, Peter, no time to play twenty questions today," he muttered. "FRIDAY, keep an eye on that door."

"Sure thing, boss."

With all still quiet on the wizard front, Tony took the opportunity to call up the information FRIDAY had assembled from the engineering sections. Only about half of it made sense. They'd made some inroads into interpreting the alien gibberish, mostly by comparing navigational variables they already knew to the associated characters and lettering in the ship's systems, but needless to say it was slow going.

"How far along are we in translating this mess?" Tony asked.

"Nineteen percent deciphered with questionable accuracy."

"Alright, keep it up. Do we have control of the ship's sensor net yet?"

"External sensors only, boss."

"Might not need those for a while, but the internal ones could come in handy. Bump that up the priority list, FRI. Let's have a look at the engine core in the meantime. Give me a -"

There was a loud, jarring clang from above. Tony looked up, blinking.

"The hell was that?"

A second booming clang sounded.

"Mr. Parker is attempting to breach the room's perimeter."

"I can hear that, thanks," Tony said. "I thought I told you to watch the door."

"I have been, boss. Mr. Parker is attempting ingress through the ceiling ducts."

Tony exchanged glaring at the ceiling for glaring at the nearest active console. "Are we sure you left your personality behind? That sounded almost snarky."

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"Uh huh," Tony said. There was a higher, more ominous sounding clang followed by the unmistakable sounds of scurrying footsteps. "What is he doing up there? Dancing?"

"Unknown."

"Oh, forget it. Open the door, FRI."

The lock disengaged and metal paneling slid aside. Tony waited for the kid to come slinking in, but
instead there followed another series of crashing sounds from above. Tony rolled his eyes.

"Tell him to use the front door like a civilized arachnid," Tony said.

"Yes, boss."

Moments later Peter was swinging into the room, a rope of webbing stretching out behind him. He'd put the helmet back on.

"Hey, kid," Tony said. "Even heard of knocking before attempting a break and enter?"

"That was me knocking," Peter said flatly. "I've tried knocking on your door before. You never open it."

"There's a good reason for that."

"What, that you don't want to talk to me?"

"Mostly that I don't want to repeat myself endlessly. First sign of insanity, right there."

"Maybe if you'd just listen," Peter muttered crossly, almost too low for the suit's speakers to project.

Tony smiled grimly. "Maybe if you'd just give me a different sales pitch. Business consulting hours are every other Thursday, eight to five, and I have a general policy barring solicitors, reporters, SHIELD agents, junior superheroes, and evangelists. Guess you missed the sign."

"You must've left it back on Earth."

"Along with many other things," Tony agreed. "So what brings you to my humble abode?"

"Doctor Strange needs you."

Tony rolled his eyes. "Right, like he needs a hole in the head. Try again, kid."

"No, see, he was trying to turn the ship around -"

"Yeah, I saw that. You two should really leave piloting this thing to the professionals."

"We tried that, but the professionals aren't interested in getting us home," Peter insisted more heatedly.

"Sounds like the professionals have some legitimate concerns about a return trip. I can't imagine why."

"That's why we've had to try doing it ourselves."

"Have you been helping Strange break into my systems, Peter?" Tony scolded. "What is it with you and hacking into my things?"

"The suit wasn't actually me," Peter protested half-heartedly. "That was my friend."

"I know. Ned Leeds, right? Kid has guts, I'll give him that, and he's handy with computer systems. I already had the S.I recruitment team reach out to him."

Peter startled, blinking. "You did?"

"Any teenager who can remote hack one of my suits, even if it was just to unlock existing
functionality, definitely deserves a closer look or three. He'll have an internship waiting for him after graduation if he wants it."

"He'll want it," Peter said brightly. "He was so excited when he thought I had one and then he found out I -" And then he stopped, white mechanical eyes turning downward. "Well, that I was Spider-Man." His voice had flattened out again.

"Well," Tony said. "I don't know that working for Stark Industries is comparable to being Spider-Man, but the hiring department'll do their best to spruce up the offer accordingly -"

"Are you really never going to even apologize?" Peter burst out unexpectedly. The helmet retracted, and Tony could suddenly see that what he'd taken for grim anger was in fact hurt, a deep injury of wounded fear and anguish.

Tony wanted to retort. He did. He even had a witty response lined up for just this question; he'd crafted it within five minutes of making the hard call to strand them in space. Something about the fairness of life if sorry's were dollars and Tony already being a billionaire, but the metaphor got lost somewhere in the middle, and all of it went flying out of Tony's head anyway when Peter looked up at him with beseeching eyes.

"I wasn't going to," Tony said slowly. "Because nothing I can say will fix this, and I won't undo it, and I don't deserve your forgiveness."

Peter barked a laugh that sounded like it hurt. "Obviously. But you could still just say it."

Tony didn't particularly want to, because it felt on the very edge of dishonest, and of all the things he regretted doing, stranding them in space wasn't actually one of them. But it occurred to Tony he might be letting his pride get in the way. And probably an apology was the very least he could offer.

"I don't regret doing it, Peter," Tony said gently. "But I do regret you got caught up in it. Yeah. I'm really fucking sorry about that."

"Good," Peter said. "That's a start." Then he looked down, fidgeting with the mechanism of his web spinners, lips pressed tightly together. "Are we really never going home?"

Tony held out a hand, tilting it thoughtfully side to side. "Never say never. But probably not for a long time."

"But my English Lit paper is due on Thursday," Peter protested quietly, bizarrely. "And I have a chemistry test next Tuesday."

Well, Tony had asked for a different sales pitch. Apparently this was it. "I'll write you a note. Complete with the whole saving-the-world clause. If that doesn't work, I'll just buy your school board."

"It's my birthday in three weeks," Peter said, soft and low, and there it was; that was the thing that had hold of his gut and wasn't letting go. It was a good one, too. Now that the kid had said it out loud, it also had a good hold of Tony's gut.

"May had dinner planned. Italian." Peter looked wobbly and far off; he wasn't actually talking to Tony, he was just saying it out loud like he was realizing it for the first time. "She's not so good at cooking, so she made reservations at the new place downtown. She doesn't think I know, but I overheard her on the phone."

And now the thing that had hold of Tony had developed teeth and was consuming him slowly from
Guilt was the best and worst type of weapon; it was the sort that wounded deeply and never healed on its own.

Fortunately, Tony was used to being wounded, sometimes fatally. And at heart he'd always been a survivor.

"I know," he said. "She called me."

"She what?" Peter blurted. "She did?"

"Yeah. I think she's slowly warming up to me again. After, you know, she found out I'd corrupted you into crime fighting. Which I did not actually do, by the way. You were fighting crime long before I arrived, I just gave you better equipment for it." Of course, any progress with May would shortly implode when it became clear Tony had absconded into space and taken Peter with him, however inadvertently.

Peter smiled guiltily. "I know. I tried to tell her."

"Guess this means I have to come up with a different birthday gift," Tony mused. Suddenly that full ride to any school of Peter's choosing didn't seem like such an inspired present. Distance education had certainly evolved in the last couple decades, but interstellar options were probably still a work in progress.

"You got me a - really?" Peter asked shyly, and he was trying not to be pleased, but it was breaking through anyway, his shocked misery slowly giving way to a more natural exuberance. "What is - what was it?"

"It'll still be there when we get back," Tony said, hedging.

Peter brightened up unexpectedly, looking suddenly cheered. "When we get back."

"Well, like I said. Never say never."

Peter smiled at him, genuinely happy, and Tony had never been so grateful to have a smile aimed at him. Tony had ruined a lot of lives in his day. Some deliberately, but most accidentally. The closest he'd ever come to ruining someone who owned a part of his heart was with Pepper, but Pepper was resilient; she was one of a kind, she was strong. Peter was just a kid, and the first one Tony'd ever been remotely invested in. Hurting Peter felt like hurting himself, like he was shaving off pieces of his soul every time he did it. That smile told Tony that maybe they could find a way through this.

Tony really hoped they could find a way through this, because they could be stuck on this ship together with the wandering wizard for a very, very long time. And he'd rather not do this alone.

"Good heart-to-heart, kid," Tony said finally, feeling remarkably lighter. The resilience of youth was something to behold. "But let's not do this again anytime soon. I was joking about this being a daytime soap opera. Days of Our Exile sounds catchy, I know, but I just can't see my publicist going for it."

"I saw this movie once, it totally reminds me -"

"No, Peter," Tony said firmly. "No more pop-culture references."

"But you use them all the time!"

"Only as witty rejoinders."
"I can use them like that too!"

"I think we need to discuss the difference between absurd and witty."

"Doctor Strange doesn't mind them," Peter muttered rebelliously, then his head shot up in wide-eyed shock. Tony stared back, equally surprised.

"Oh!" Peter exclaimed. "Doctor Strange needs you."

"I feel like we've already had this discussion -"

"No, he really does need you. He collapsed in front of the viewport on the bridge."

"What?"

"Yeah, one minute he was walking, and then he wasn't. He told me he'd be fine and just needed to rest, but I think he was lying. He didn't look so good. I don't think he'd want me coming to you, but there isn't anyone else."

"Shit," Tony said, and led the way back to the ship's bridge. When they arrived, it wasn't readily apparent Stephen was actually still in the room. The alien lighting gave the room an almost verdant glow, and the white and blue expanse of space streaking by them was a silent, eerie backdrop.

"See?" Peter pointed, and Tony followed his gesture to a red bundle of fabric wrapped tight around a huddled form in the corner, presumably their absent wizard.

Tony started to approach and faltered. If that cloak took its cue from its master, there'd be trouble ahead. Tony doubted Stephen was at all interested in Tony getting any closer to him than was absolutely necessary.

"Hey, Strange," Tony called loudly. "I hear you swooned like some kind of romance heroine earlier. You know I wasn't serious about the damsel in distress thing, right?"

No answer.

Not good. Tony crouched down and tried to tap into FRIDAY's sensor net, but he wasn't close enough to see any part of Stephen, and interestingly enough that cloak of his made for good camouflage. FRIDAY couldn't scan through it.

"Kid, need you to go play Nurse Nightingale." Tony pointed at a nearby wall. "Scuttle over there and have a look at Strange and tell me what you see."

Peter snuck over on silent feet, hopping up on a console, then to a nearby rail, then casually scaling up a ninety-degree angle like it was just a stepping stone. While Tony watched, he inched nearer the wizard until he could look at him upside down. The cloak untucked itself from around one foot to flutter warningly at him. Peter hesitated with one hand stretched for the next hold and looked helplessly at Tony. Tony shrugged and mimed putting a hand on his chest with exaggerated inhalations. Peter twitched a toe closer, wavering doubtfully.

"He's breathing," Peter said in a loud whisper. "I think. It's hard to tell, actually." And Tony wasn't worried, exactly. He'd been thinking about offing Stephen himself, so having the guy up and expire before they could even get to wherever-they-were-going wouldn't exactly break his heart, but it was definitely a waste, and -

"Anything else?" And okay, maybe he was a tiny bit worried. It wasn't like Tony was eager to see
the guy dead, it was just that might be an unfortunate by-product of saving the universe. Besides, that pretty green rock around Stephen's chest had a kill-switch on it, and that could mean anything from an anticlimactic fizzle as it disintegrated, to a giant inescapable boom.

Peter hopped further down the wall with nimble, inhuman reflexes, looking for a better angle. "I don't know. His cape is rolled up tight around him. I can't see anything from up here."

"Well, get down there and check if he has a pulse."

Peter stepped off the wall and the cloak tensed into a hunting stillness. Peter froze accordingly.

"Uh, maybe you should check," he said, unmoving.

"What? You afraid the wizard's security blanket'll try to smother you if you get too close?" Tony asked, only halfway joking. The possibility was more than real; they actually had no idea what else that cloak could do. It could fire laser beams for all Tony knew. It certainly seemed to have some kind of personality. How Stephen had gained its loyalty was a total mystery. Maybe it imprinted on the first thing it came into contact with, like a misguided duckling.

Either way, odds were Tony was going to have to get over there and chance immolation if he wanted to assure himself Stephen hadn't kicked the bucket. And FRIDAY was going to need some line of sight to get a reading anyway. Tony sighed and levered up to his feet, feeling old bones creek distressingly at the abuse. Being near Peter always reminded Tony to keep in mind superhero-ing was a young person's game, and Iron Man didn't exactly fit that bill anymore.

He approached Stephen neither too slowly nor too fast, hands held steady at his sides. The cloak raised one corner of itself warily, weaving back and forth like a two-dimensional snake. Tony flicked his fingers at it and kept walking even when it slithered out a bit further to flap at him angrily. He was feeling lucky; the thing hadn't actually attacked him so far, which was better than he'd been expecting.

When he was close enough to get a proper look, Tony stopped and crouched down again. He could feel Peter hovering in the background like the avenging arachnid he was. At this angle Tony could see Stephen was definitely breathing, but erratically, the shallow rise and fall of his chest muffled under layers of concealing fabric. Tony frowned and reached for him, not surprised when the cloak slapped his hand away.

"Don't get your brocade in a knot," Tony told it. "Unless you have first aid certification written on your dry cleaning tag, you better let the humans have a look."

The cloak warily fluttered back, settling securely around the sorcerer again. This time it didn't interfere when Tony reached to test the man's pulse; he would've sworn Stephen was the sort to wake abruptly at any uninvited touch, but he didn't. The sorcerer's face was clammy with sweat and his eyes beneath pale lids were flickering rapidly.

Tony exhaled softly. "FRIDAY, give me a level three scan. What am I looking at?"

"I read an arrhythmic heart rate, boss," FRIDAY reported. "His cellular patterns are fluctuating wildly."

"Well, the guy's a wizard. Maybe that's how he always looks. Is there any way to tell if this is naturally occurring or not?"

"Unclear, though I'm detecting the presence of foreign matter."
Tony was at a loss. "What kind of foreign matter?"

"Nonbiological," FRIDAY said, and sent him a reading that was unexpectedly familiar.

"Is that what I think it is?"

"Boss?"

"Oh, that can't be good. I'm guessing Squidward's friendly little interrogation had something to do with this," Tony mused. "FRIDAY, play me back the HUD footage of Strange just before we breached the hull."

Tony re-watched as it play out, the alien magician and his aesthetically interesting tools of torture, the hull breach and evacuation of the air, Stephen flying without the aid of his magic cloak, Peter catching him.

"Wind it back, FRI. Now run it through at half-speed. Stop. Give me a close up of one of those transparent spikes, lower left quadrant. Magnify and enhance."

When the image resolved after rendering, Tony hummed long and low. "Those things didn't actually penetrate his skin, they're phasing through his skin. FRIDAY, what was their material makeup?"

"Unknown, boss. Not enough data available to extrapolate component properties."

"Damn. They're clearly embedded past the subcutaneous level, but what are they? What the hell were they designed for?"

"Microsurgery," Stephen said, and Peter promptly fell off the wall behind him with a crash. Tony frowned in the kid's direction.

"What kind of microsurgery?" Tony asked.

"Our alien friend wasn't kind enough to explain that before stabbing me in the face with them," Stephen said calmly, so calmly Tony was reminded that this was the first time they'd come face to face since Tony's deception had become common knowledge. Suddenly, crouching over the man with two fingers pressed to his neck seemed like a very precarious position to be in.

Tony inched back, out of the man's personal bubble. "Well, one thing we can probably say for sure. The original intention of those things probably wasn't to be jabbed into someone and then dragged out by the vacuum of space after an explosion."

"You're a master of insight, Stark." Stephen sat up, panting, the cloak sliding away to allow his limbs some freedom. He put a hand to his chest with a grimace, pressing as if to still the organ inside it.

Tony settled thoughtfully back on his heels. "FRIDAY says you're riddled with contaminants. Looks like our daring rescue might've ve broken off a few pieces of medical science inside you, doc. I've only seen interphasic molecular structure on one other person. And for all Vision let me take a million scans of him, I don't have the technology on hand to replicate it. Those things went in hard and they won't come out easy."

"My body must be rejecting the material the same way it would any foreign matter left behind," Stephen said musingly. "If they're left unaltered an infection is sure to follow."
"Well, it's possible. But that's not the part I'd be worried about."

Stephen frowned, and Peter leaned in close, tension pulling all of them taut. "What then?"

"Interphasic matter isn't like normal matter," Tony explained. "You're not dead yet, so we know it's not phasing anything out of alignment that would kill you quickly. But your cells are in rapid flux." He paused expectantly. "I'm guessing that's not normal for you."

Stephen made an impatient noise. "No more so than for you."

"Assumptions like that are what get people dead, Strange. For all I know, cellular flux is just another by-product of you making magical fireworks."

"It's not."

"Then taking that at face value, you have a serious problem. And I'm not a doctor, but if we can't stabilize your cells soon, I'll go out on a limb and guess that's going to mean a hell of a lot of trouble."

"That's an understatement," Stephen said distantly. "Catastrophic cell failure would mean my death. So you might get your wish after all, Stark. If I go, that solves your worry about the Time Stone."

"The Time Stone going would be a definite bonus," Tony admitted. "But I'm okay with you not dying to make that happen. One is not necessarily a requirement of the other."

"Generous of you."

"We have to assume removing the foreign matter can only help your case. Odds are it certainly can't hurt. The problem is I have no idea how to go about doing that."

"I suppose microsurgery does seem more my field than yours."

Tony hummed with interest. "Physician, heal thyself?"

Stephen ran one hand over his face, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I don't know if I can. I've been using magic the last two days to get ahead of you -"

"I knew it!"

"But I had to stop. My body couldn't process the energy requirements." He gestured sardonically as if to encompass his whole person. "As you can see."

"How long ago did you notice it? Just today?"

"Since the beginning," Stephen said.

"See, that's what I get for making assumptions," Tony said knowingly. "I labelled that a run of the mill psychological crisis, not biological. Has it worsened over the week or stayed the same?"

"Worsened."

"Is this the first time you've collapsed?" Tony asked shrewdly.

Stephen curled his lip in a grim smile and didn't answer.

"Does knowing what's causing the difficulty make a difference? Can you magic this away?"
Stephen blew out a breath thoughtfully. "It's possible. I could try and channel energy directly into my nervous system. See if I can burn the contamination out."

"Sure, that sounds simple, like a walk in the park," Tony said. "I'm sure anyone could do it. Well, there's no time like the present, Strange. Go ahead. FRIDAY'll keep an eye on your vitals."

The sorcerer looked down at his hands, flexing them in the dim light so the scars stood out.

"Magic is meant to be used for something greater than ourselves," Stephen said softly, clearly lost in a far away memory. For the first time Tony felt like they were maybe speaking the same language, talking along the same wavelength instead of working from two opposing positions.

"Power's always meant to be used for something greater than ourselves," Tony said, and Stephen looked back at him with cool, assessing eyes. "But in this case if you don't use it selfishly, pretty soon you won't be using it at all."

Stephen sat back, shutting his thoughts away as he let out a long breath in something not quite a sigh.

"Try not to move," Stephen advised, and raised shaking fingers to draw orange light down the length of his body, building fantastic geometric patterns in moments to warp and spread around him. Tony had to sit on the almost overwhelming impulse to touch, interrupt that spread of light and examine it beneath the microscope of his intellect. Seeing Stephen perform this trick back on Earth had been fleeting, a minor footnote when other things like the end of the world had Tony's full attention. Now that urgent distraction was missing, and Tony wanted to reach out and play this new energy between his fingers like the strings of an instrument until he learned how to make it sing.

"Don't," Stephen murmured, eyes still closed.

"Wasn't going to," Tony said.

"Not you." And Tony turned slightly to see Peter guiltily snatching his hand away and rocking back on his feet.

"Sorry," Peter whispered, shamefaced, and Tony stifled the urge to laugh.

"Boss," FRIDAY said urgently, just as Stephen made an odd choking noise and slumped heavily into the wall behind him.

"Shit." Tony reached out with both hands only to find himself blocked by a well-meaning cloak. "Out of the way, friend," he told it. "If you try to hamstring me again, I'll clip your collar. Understand?"

It ignored him, tightening around Stephen defensively even as the man started to struggle against it. The sorcerer started to cough violently. Tony reached again, and again the cloak knocked him away. Tony sat back on his heels, ignoring the rising urgency of Stephen's wheezing exhalations.

"If he dies because of you," Tony said calmly. "You'll have only yourself to blame."

The cloak froze, and if Tony hadn't been aware of its sentience before that moment, he was certainly convinced afterward. Anything that lacked a face but could still manage to look horrified clearly had enough consciousness to be counted as alive and aware.

This time it didn't try to stop Tony as he freed Stephen from the unintentional restraint and pulled him forward.
"Head down," Tony said serenely, arranging the man on his back, face-up, carefully supporting his shoulders and neck. "Feet up. Peter, help him out."

Peter did, and Tony could see the kid was practically shaking, all his normal confidence wiped away by a danger none of them could fight off. This wasn't like taking down bad guys; this was someone's body betraying them in a time of need. It was hard to beat that into submission with their fists. But it was something Tony had some unwilling experience with.

Tony took pity on the poor cloak hovering uncertainly at his shoulder, reminding Tony of nothing so much as a kicked puppy.

"Cover him," Tony told it. "Keep him warm, but don't smother him." It glided silently to do as bid, settling tentatively atop Stephen to lie flat rather than tucked around him.

"Breathe," Tony reminded Stephen, when it seemed like he might be forgetting.


Tony blinked. "How do we control it? They use drugs for that, don't they? I don't suppose you brought a pharmacy with you. I left mine in my other jacket."

"What kind of - billionaire are you?" Stephen gasped, sweat sliding into the crow's feet at the corner of his eyes, dampening the edge of his hair. "Stranded with no resources. Headlines of your genius - clearly exaggerated."

"News stories are always exaggerated," Tony said. "That's why it's called news and not facts. Got to sell articles somehow. You'd know something about that. You made a few."

"Not half so - many."

"You're too humble. I had FRIDAY download the coverage of your accident. I'm sure I saw the words 'miracle survivor' stamped over more than one press release."

"Miraculous according - to whom?" Stephen tried to sneer, but the chalk white of his face made it less than intimidating.

"Statistics," Tony said. "Also, your emergency room physician. I saw the pictures of your car. Well, the thing you owned that used to be known as a car. Good choice on the Huracán, by the way, very flashy. I prefer the Audi line, myself."

"Prosaic."

"Hey, don't knock it until you've luxuriated in it. How's the heart?"

"Still tachy. Hopefully slow on - its own. Otherwise with electrical shock."

"You want me to shock your heart? That sounds like a fantastically bad idea."

"If necessary."

Tony laughed grimly. "Let's hope it's not. I can produce a shock, sure, but I can't control the voltage the way they would in hospital. Odds are I'd make things worse rather than better."

"Risk worth taking."
"Listen," Tony said brightly. "You know, I think you and I got off on the wrong foot. I don't actually want to kill you. If I did, I would've done it by now."

"Like to see you try," Stephen gasped. He dragged in enough air to cough a few more times and then abruptly went limp. "Finally." They all sat in a frozen tableau for a time, each of them waiting tentatively for something to send the whole thing spinning on its axel back into crisis, but Stephen didn't start convulsing or dying. After a while he even started to breathe normally again.

Tony gave it another minute before he interrupted the peace. "I take it that did not work as intended?"

"What gave it away?" Stephen asked, glaring up at the ceiling sourly. "The fact I couldn't breathe? Or that I nearly went into cardiac arrest?"

"Both," Tony and Peter said simultaneously. Stephen rolled his eyes expressively.

"So you can't fix it either?" Tony asked while Peter scuttled gratefully away, looking thoroughly spooked.

Stephen shook his head distractedly. "No. The contaminants are insoluble. My cells are whole, but they're not transmitting the right signals to each other at the right times. For once, it's not my body that's the problem."

"How long until this does permanent damage?"

"It likely already has," Stephen said. "It won't kill me quickly, but it won't be long before the short-term side effects start edging into long-term side effects."

Peter made an urgent, tentative sound. "Mr. Stark, maybe we should turn around. If we could get him home -"

"Then he'd probably just die on the operating table there while they try to dig out foreign contaminants they can't actually see," Tony said calmly. Stephen, tellingly, said nothing. "The only reason I know they're there is I know how to look for phased matter, and if we head back to Earth I can guarantee you I'll be occupied with too many other things to help him."

"Plenty of free time now," Stephen said darkly. "Any ideas?"

"I'll think of something."

"Before or after I'm dead?" Stephen tried to lever himself up into a sitting position and failed. Tony wedged his hands underneath the man and they got him halfway reclined before he slumped and Tony had to subtly prop him up.

"Hopefully before. But no promises."

"I'll be filing a complaint with your Board," Stephen muttered.

"You do that. Pepper'll tell you to -" But Tony couldn't finish that sentence. "I'll have FRIDAY log your feedback," he said finally. "Though you should know S.I still has a lot of work to do when it comes to intragalactic communication. You might be waiting a few centuries for a response."

"If you turned us around, she could probably give it to me in person," Stephen said, moving to sit backwards against the wall again. "But don't worry, I'm sure she'll still be there after we get back from our tour of the universe. No guarantees on the wedding bells, though." Even ground out with
exhausted vindictiveness, Tony felt those words hit their mark.

"Thankfully, not a sentiment I had to worry about when kidnapping you," Tony returned shortly, deliberately cruel. "As far as I could see, not many people to miss the great Doctor Stephen Strange. Except maybe Wong, and I'm going to assume he'll put on his big boy panties and somehow find a way to trudge on without you."

Stephen was silent long enough Tony managed to get stiffly to his feet, the resentment somewhere between righteous and shameful. Stephen had a right to be angry; Tony had only abducted him, after all.

"Stark." Tony looked over to see Stephen staring up at him, blank and remote. "It's not too late to turn this ship around. You could still marry her."

"That door closed, doc, the second I put this suit back on and took off after you." The only thing Pepper'd asked of him when he gave her the ring was honesty and stability and no more superhero drama. Tony was fairly certain this had thoroughly proven those were among the few things he simply couldn't give her.

Stephen closed his eyes. "You don't know that. You could try. We could still go home."

"This is home now, doc. From now until you decide to torpedo that stone. Might as well get used to it."

"Even if I were willing, it isn't that simple. You don't know what destroying the stone would take."

"Odds are, neither do you, since in the history of the entire universe apparently no one's ever done it before," Tony said. "And it's less that I don't know, Strange, and more that I don't care."

"I care," a tentative voice said from somewhere to the side and they both looked to see Peter, hanging from the ceiling on an improbable string of webbing. The three of them hesitated in a triangle of wary regret, three reluctant combatants stymied in a ceasefire.

"I mean," Peter said finally, quietly. "Just. If anyone was wondering."

Stephen sighed resignedly, tipping his head back to address his words to the ceiling. "You could always just let me die."

"Don't tempt me," Tony said darkly, and stalked out to start some research.
Tony has a brilliant idea that no one else appreciates. Nothing new there.

Tony spent a busy few hours designing a trace through the ship's databanks, looking for any signs of an infirmary or medical bay. It stood to reason a ship with living quarters might have one, and any medical equipment to examine, if not use, could be of value. While the search program integrated, Tony returned to take more readings from Stephen, and also to set Peter up with babysitting duties.

"Remember to take him for frequent walks," Tony instructed. "And water him occasionally. I can find a crate for you to lock him in if he gets rowdy. But keep in mind you can always just throw him outside if he really starts misbehaving."

"Isn't that more for dogs?" Peter looked like he couldn't decide if it was permitted to laugh or not.

"Dogs, kids; aren't they basically the same thing? In both cases you have to clean up after them and most of their care consists of patting them on the head and bribing them into doing tricks."

Peter grinned in a way that made it clear Tony was missing a few essential care planning tips.

"Maybe best not to use the crate," Tony admitted.

"I've always wanted a dog," Peter said.

"Then it's win-win. But be careful with this one, I get the sense he's only partially housebroken. Don't be surprised if he starts chewing on the furniture. If he does, just smack him on the nose with a rolled up newspaper."

"We don't have any newspaper."

"If you're willing to smack him with it," Tony said seriously, "I will find a way to make some."

Stephen was staring at them narrowly, propped comfortably against a wall and too far away to hear, but rightly suspicious they were conspiring about him.

"Come get me if you need help holding him down at feeding time," Tony finished. "So I can point and laugh."

Peter cleared his throat tentatively. "Speaking of feeding time. Um. Have you found anything else to eat. I mean, something not -"

"No complaints, Parker. I slave away all day and night to put food on the table, and if you can't appreciate artificially flavored gelatin designed to meet all your nutrition needs, you can go to bed hungry."

Tony took pity on the kid when his whole face fell into silent despair. He handed him a sealed bag.

"Some kind of dried nut or legume," Tony said. Peter opened up the bag eagerly, peering inside.
"Found a box of them in one of the storage rooms. They're safe enough; taste a bit like cashews. Don't give them all to Strange. Make sure he eats his jello like a good boy."

"Thanks!" Peter said, shoving a handful in his mouth.

"Might be a while, Peter. Don't hesitate to let FRIDAY know if you need me, and don't let the doc fool you. He's not doing so hot."

"Yeah, I sort of figured that out when he started collapsing everywhere."

"Always knew you were a smart kid. Do your homework if you start going stir crazy. That chemistry test was coming up fast. You ready?"

"It's not like I actually have to take it now."

Tony snorted, grinning. "That's what you think. I'll let you pass on the English paper, but chemistry I know a thing or two about. Hop to it, kid. I'll be generous and give you to the end of the week."

"How do you even know what we were studying?" Peter asked skeptically.

"I had FRIDAY download your school schedule and curriculum when May called," he told him, luxuriating in Peter's speechless horror. "Tony didn't have to heart to tell the kid he'd needed a peek when he'd been looking at Peter's most likely candidates for post-secondary education. "Also your grades. Not bad, kid. A little light on the extracurricular's, and you could stand to do better on your geography and economics, but I'll let it pass considering your part-time job. Your science marks were impressive, which is what really counts." Tony leaned in conspiratorially. "Also, I don't know if you know this, but I happen to be a genius, and genius-ing takes a lot of science. Once I finish fixing up Strange we can set up a study block. We might be lost in space, but that doesn't mean your education has to suffer."

"Oh, well, I guess," Peter said glumly.

"Just making sure you have something to look forward to. Try and keep Strange at least mostly alive while I'm gone. And don't let him scare you; the guy's a big softie at heart."

Unfortunately, fixing Stephen wasn't going to be as easy as Tony made it out to be. Repairing advanced alien technology without an instruction manual would've been bad enough, but this was tech buried inside a person, and it was in about a dozen fragmented pieces. Without any outside guidance they were basically on their own. Which wasn't awful in and of itself; Tony was an inventor before all else, and given enough time he could MacGyver his way out of most anything. But he strongly suspected they didn't have weeks or even days before Stephen would be in serious trouble.

"FRI, any luck on that trace?"

"No signs of an infirmary anywhere in the ship's schematics, boss."

Which was unfortunate, and probably meant their alien host kept microsurgical tools on hand not for the application of medicine, but on the off chance he might need them to one day torture priceless artifacts out of unsuspecting wizards. Sadist.

"There's one brief entry in the ship's inventory that may be of interest," FRIDAY continued. "But without access to the core, most of the historical information remains inaccessible."

"Show me."
The image that came up was vaguely reminiscent of the tools Stephen'd had the unfortunate luck to be stabbed with. Promising. The attached caption was less so.

"I should've majored in linguistics," Tony said, squinting. If he looked at the alien language sideways, some of the lettering almost appeared pictographic. "Forget mechanical and electrical engineering. Who needs them?"

"Boss?"

"I withdraw my inappropriately timed humor, don't worry your pretty head about it."

"I don't have -"

"Don't worry about that either."

Tony stared for a while, considering the elegant simplicity of the design. He tapped his fingers against his chest, brushing against the housing unit contemplatively.

"FRIDAY, is the foreign material in Strange solidly phased?"

"Partially."

"Can we interact with it? Run a simulation using Vision as a template. Would it be possible to fix the contaminates to a solid state and then remove them ourselves using the nanotech?"

Machines were Tony's instrument, the medium he used to make art, and by that he mostly meant awesome science. They were also the most advanced technology he had full control over that was readily available. It wasn't even that great a leap to think of adapting them for medical use; S.I had been working on nano-medical technologies for years now. The problem was, these bots hadn't been programmed with medicine in mind. Chances of making a mistake were high, and incredibly dangerous.

"It might be possible to stabilize the phased material, boss, but I'd recommend against fixing it to a solid state."

Tony frowned. "Is it lodged somewhere critical?" That could be a disaster on a dozen different levels.

In answer, FRIDAY brought up a projection of Stephen's scans, the outline of a skeletal body overlaid by transparent musculature, veins and tendons, various organs in their customary spots. The image pulsed with an ominous red light at danger zones and areas of contamination.

There was rather a lot of red.

"Shit," Tony said, staring. "That's too diffuse. If those were fixed deposits they should've been confined to target areas. They're not. They're spreading."

"Yes. There's a measurable increased dispersion of almost one percent as compared with my first scan eight hours ago."

"If they're dispersing, they're no longer discrete units. How the hell are we supposed to remove broken interphased material that's still fragmenting? Has it invaded any organs yet, FRI?"

"Not yet." The visual narrowed, the red color fading into a dozen different pinpoint areas, mostly in the extremities, one or two in the torso or facial areas.
"Those entry sites are mostly benign." Tony glowered at the projection grimly. "Strange got lucky. Looks like our undersea visitor was more interested in causing pain than causing damage. At the current rate of expansion how long until the interphased material reaches a vital area?"

"I'm already detecting trace amounts in close proximity."

"Either this shit moves fast, or something Strange was doing accelerated the process." Tony scrubbed a hand over his face with a scowl. "It's basically Swiss cheese in there."

"I detect no -"

"We might as well say Strange got shot a dozen times and every one of the bullets shattered inside him."

"Bullet fragments would be easier to remove, boss," FRIDAY corrected. "Metallic components could be isolated and surgically eliminated."

Tony blinked, the beginnings of a very interesting idea coming to mind.

"FRI, what are the odds of Strange surviving if we try removing the foreign material ourselves?"

"Without access to a medical facility, the procedure would be almost certainly fatal."

Which was only what Tony had been expecting. "If we can't remove it, can we contain it?"

FRIDAY paused as if to consider this question from all angles. "Clarify the parameters."

"Could we suspend the spread by stabilizing the phased matter into an inert state? Using Vision's molecular structure as a basis for comparison."

"Containment would be possible. However, extraction of the phased material would still be required to preserve life."

"In the long term. In the short term, inert phased material in a stable, dormant state shouldn't pose any immediate threat."

"Doctor Strange would be required to remain in a confined area with access to emitters until such time as the material could be removed."

"I have a better idea," Tony said.

When Tony walked onto the bridge two days later, it was to find Stephen and Peter involved in what was quickly obvious was a game of checkers. Tony entertained himself for a quick second imagining Peter badgering the wizard into playing. Apparently, Tony wasn't the only one Peter liked to practice persistence with.

"I'm back, folks," he announced loudly, for the pleasure of watching them both jump. "And I come bearing gifts. Have you two been playing nice while I was away?"

"Mr. Stark!" Peter said, hopping nimbly to his feet. Stephen made no move to rise, but Tony didn't take it personally. The pallor of the man's face told a rather uncomfortable story.

Peter stepped forward eagerly. "Did you figure it out?"

"Yes and no. I have good news and bad news. Which do you want first?"
"The good," Peter said, at the same time Stephen said: "The bad."

"There's a joke somewhere in there about optimism versus pessimism. Strange, I have a possible solution for you, but the odds are good you're not going to like it."

"That seems to be my reaction to most of your solutions," Stephen said. Tony grinned reluctantly.

"Touché. I'd say you'll thank me for all this later, but you probably won't." Tony sat down across from him, gesturing Peter into a nearby crouch.

"What did you find out?" Peter asked. "Can you fix it?"

"The short answer is no," Tony admitted, watching both of them tense. "The fragments have broken up into thousands of pieces inside you, too small and complex to easily remove, and they're still spreading."

Stephen looked away, troubled. "How long?"

"If left unattended, and provided you do nothing to hasten the process, they'll cause irreparable harm in a little under a week."

"If your solution is 'do nothing', then I can confirm I definitely don't care for it," Stephen said.

"O ye of little faith. There's a way to put that timeline on indefinite pause, and I don't mean with your shiny green rock. In an inert state, phased matter shouldn't interact with physical matter in a perceptible way. It would also stabilize the cellular flux. I have enough information on hand to induce an inert state on a permanent basis, if needed, but it requires a small, constant power draw."

"I thought you didn't have the technology on hand to replicate this?"

"I can't recreate it," Tony said. "So I have no way of removing what's already inside you, not without cutting you open stem to stern."

"I vote we don't take that option," Peter said quickly, anxiously.

Tony made a noise of agreement. "Not my first choice. FRIDAY estimates a nearly one-hundred percent chance of fatality if we did try to remove it."

"How far has it spread?" Stephen asked, not exactly doubtfully. Tony shrugged, understanding from a scientific perspective the need to be assured of all the facts.

"Too far. But don't take my word for it. I hear you used to be some kind of surgeon, Strange. Care to consult on a case?"

Stephen smirked faintly. "I don't think I can afford my consultation fees. I charge by the hour, and I spent my last dollar in Nepal."

"I'll spot you this one," Tony said. "I have modestly deep pockets, and I'm guessing you're the 'see it to believe it' type."

"Sometimes not even then," Strange said, with genuine amusement. "Some things I've seen defy all belief."

Well, Tony certainly understood a thing or two about that. "Can't say I blame you. You'll probably need these, then." Tony took off his glasses and turned them in his hands. He offered them solemnly to Stephen, who looked at them with one raised eyebrow.
"Put them on."

The sorcerer accepted them with the air of a man who'd been handed a bomb. Tony noted that even that small movement made some of his debility clear; his hands weren't just trembling, they were visibly shaking. The nerve damage must be immense, enough so that he was probably lucky to still have all his fingers. Likely made precision activities like knitting and basket weaving difficult. And surgery.

Stephen slipped on the glasses, looking surprisingly good in the large square frames, and then his eyes went wide with surprise.

"Neat, huh?" Tony asked cheerfully.

"What -"

"FRIDAY consolidates ambient data from my nanotech and other accessible systems, sorts and compiles it, and streams it to me through the lenses."

"Implying you have electronic spies everywhere around you," Stephen said absently, still clearly analysing the data projection. There was a lot of it.

"Yep. Millions in this housing unit alone. They're designed to shut down if they get far enough away from FRIDAY or one of her backups. Sadly we're still working on breaking down the machine code this ship uses for higher functionality, or I'd have more information sources to pull from."

"Impressive," Stephen said reluctantly, adjusting the lenses on his face. "But why show it to me?"

"Because," Tony said, skimming them off the sorcerer's face with deft fingers, noting the warmth of Stephen's skin as he did so. Higher than average; feverish. "I wanted to give you an example of the level of data FRIDAY'll be running to give you this." At 'this', Tony dramatically waved a hand at the air in front of them and a wavering hologram in blue appeared, a digital representation of the three of them sitting on an unseen surface. The ghostly images of their bodies were featureless but moving in real time to their reactions; one of the ghosts, for example, shot up when Peter did, first backing away and then moving closer in fascination.

"Whoa," Peter said. "That is so cool." He reached out to touch, much as he had with Stephen's magic show the other day, and then almost fell over when the hologram expanded at his point of contact. He backed away urgently. "What happened? Did I break it?"

"Nothing happened. It's designed to do that. It's interactive." Tony pressed his two index fingers together, compressing the image back to its original shape, then dragged it closer with a beckoning gesture and spun it so Stephen's holographic representation was near enough to tap. The image of three ghostly figures became one figure, at two times the previous size.

Stephen had moved past looking impressed, Tony noted smugly, and was now openly eyeing the projection with the genuine hunger and insatiable curiosity of a fellow scientist.

"How interactive is it?" Stephen asked. He started to stand, stumbled halfway up, and righted himself. His cloak fluttered around him soothingly, but it didn't have the stranglehold on him Tony had witnessed the last time. Apparently the thing had learned its lesson.

"Very. FRIDAY can give you the rundown as you go along. Try it," Tony encouraged, unfolding himself to sit with one leg tucked underneath him, one knee up to prop his hands on. This could take a while.
It did. Stephen was a thorough bastard, Tony had to give him that.

"Mr. Stark," Peter whispered urgently while they both watched Stephen tinker with the program.

"Yeah, kid?"

Peter looked almost wistful. "Could I maybe use the hologram sometime?"

"What for?"

"Well, for," Peter stumbled. "Because it's awesome?"

Tony basked in this well-deserved praise for a time. "That the only reason?"

"It could be good for studying?"

"The holo-projection is powered by the nanotech," Tony said. "You'd have to use it in close proximity to where the bots are clustered."

"Oh, so that's here? And?"

"Here and engineering." And in the quarters Tony'd claimed for his use. And various sections of the ship Tony wanted a set of eyes and ears stationed in, just in case.

"Oh," Peter said dubiously. He looked around like he was maybe scoping out how best to set up shop in this room and never leave it. It occurred to Tony to wonder where Peter and Stephen had been sleeping all this time.

"You did stake out a guest room in our lovely flying hotel, didn't you? Please tell me you've been availing yourself of the opportunity for proper hygiene. Do I have to tell you to wash behind your ears?"

"No!" Peter said, and they both looked over at Stephen, but the doctor was far too occupied to be disturbed by their conversation. "No, I have a room. But you told me to look after the wizard, and he's mostly been staying here. So we've been playing a lot of checkers."

"What, for two days?"

"Longer," Peter said morosely. "Like a week."

"How has your brain not rotted? You could have at least been playing chess, or poker, or something marginally challenging. Lawn bowling would've done in a pinch."

"We tried to make a chess set, but the pieces were harder to reproduce. And I forgot my deck of cards in our solar system."

"Finally, something I can help you with," Tony said, and snapped another hologram into being. "FRIDAY, give me a standard fifty-two card deck, randomized generation."

The image shrank into a small rectangle, and Tony swiped his fingers over the top five times, demonstrating a hand of five cards to Peter. "Please tell me you know how to play five card draw or hold 'em."

"A little?" Peter said, swiping with fascination at the holographic deck until he had more than a dozen cards in his hands. He caught Tony looking at him and flushed, putting them down like a guilty third grader.

"What do you mean, a little? What's a little? You know poker or you don't."
Peter rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. "I mostly played chess at school. Poker's the game where you want all the same kind of cards to win, right?"

"Dear God, why," Tony said. "Okay kid, time for a crash course in awesome. Poker is a game of strategy and bullshit. Which is why it was always hilarious to play with Cap, because he excels at both, but he has absolutely no poker face to speak of. Word of advice: never attempt cards with Widow or Hawkeye. Not if you want to live."

Peter looked startled. "You played poker with Captain America?"

Tony eyed him speculatively. "Sort of. I could never get the guy to bet, must've been a holdover of that wholesome Depression-era upbringing. But he had a weakness for M&M's I was happy to take advantage of."

"But I thought you were," Peter started, and trailed off. "Well."

Tony pretended to examine the cards in his hand before tossing them over his shoulder unceremoniously. "FRIDAY, reshuffle the deck and reset." The ones in front of Peter vanished as well. Tony dealt out two new cards each and started to flip up three. "Kid, just because Cap and I aren't on speaking terms now doesn't mean it was always like that. We worked together a while before it fell apart in the end. Not surprised. Rogers always did walk to the beat of his own drum."

"A bit like you?" Peter said boldly. "No wonder you guys fought."

"Don't get smart with me, kid," Tony said cheerfully. "I am the king of getting smart with people. I've perfected it into a science."

"Right."

"You want to learn poker or not?"

Peter coughed insincerely. "Sorry, sorry."

"Please tell me you at least understand how the hands work?"

"Yes?" The question mark was very obvious. Tony rolled his eyes.

"Okay, we have our work cut out for us. FRIDAY, bring up a chart of poker hand rankings. Peter, I'm going to guess you have about as much talent at bluffing as Vision does at telling jokes, so we'll take that off the table for now. Let's start from the bottom up. Aces are the highest card in poker, with twos being the lowest. If all you have is a high card, you're mostly shit out of luck in this game, kid. After high card, a pair is the weakest hand you can have - "

Tony knew he wasn't always the most patient of teachers, but Peter was a good kid, and a great student. The few times he ended up distracted it was due to some rather impressive holographic tricks, which Tony could hardly hold against him.

Enough time passed for them to run through some practice hands which Tony won handily, and one round in earnest which he lost spectacularly to Peter's innocently displayed straight flush.

"Did I get it right?" Peter asked. Tony eyed him suspiciously. Maybe the kid was a closet card shark; weirder things had happened. If he wanted to, Peter could probably excel at cards, actually; with that honest face of his, no one would suspect him.

"Sort of," Tony said. "The chances of you having that hand were pretty infinitesimal."
"That's good, right?"

"That's suspicious, is what it is. Did you have the nine hidden up your sleeve? FRIDAY, did he have the nine hidden up his sleeve?"

"Boss, it's impossible to -"

"Don't be getting any ideas, Parker," Tony said sternly. "I have my eye on you."

"So this means I win, right?" And the gleam in the kid's eye could have been cunning or sincerity. It was disturbingly hard to tell.

"We'll call that one beginner's luck," Tony muttered. "Why do I feel like I'm about to be fleeced? Alright, go again FRIDAY, reset. Best two out of three."

"Deal me in?" Stephen asked, and they both glanced up to squint at the sorcerer. Stephen looked exhausted and grim, but he also had the satisfied air of a man having met and conquered an interesting new piece of technology. Tony could tell; it was a look he himself wore often.

"Finished already?"

Stephen nodded. "For now. The holo-interface is remarkably accurate."

"The margin for error in the imaging should be less than point-zero-two percent," Tony agreed. "So what d'you think, doc? Should we book an operating theater, stat?"

Stephen shook his head in frustration. "If we actually had an operating theater, and if we ignored the fact that my hands shake holding a pencil, let alone a scalpel, it could possibly be done. But we're literally light years away from anyone I'd trust to act in my stead. So I concur. It's impossible."

"If it were less complex, the nanotech could've handled the load. The bots have the ability to perform basic bio-repairs. In the hands of a skilled surgeon they can literally act as someone's hands, eyes, and ears."

"You have nanotechnology available for surgical intervention?" Stephen asked, frowning.

"Technically, I don't. S.I is still working on prototyping, but I had a hand in the original research and development. Unfortunately, these bots are only encoded with basic medical algorithms. But even if they were fully prepped, we'd still need access to the proper facilities, and by that I mean a hospital."

"I haven't heard anything about Stark Industries releasing medical nanotechnology." Stephen slowly lowered himself to the floor again, legs crossed lotus style, and for once the look on his face was contemplative rather than challenging. "And something like this definitely would've made the news circuit. It hasn't been mentioned in any recent publications, either."

"I'm surprised you get medical journals in your mystical home away from home. But in any case, it's not publicly available yet," Tony admitted. "It's still in the developmental stages."

"You're not talking about nanotech drug delivery, are you? You're talking about microsurgical repair of high risk sites." The scientist in Stephen was peeking through again, luminous curiosity wrapped around a scholars heart. "How long has Stark Industries been working on this?"

"Two years, give or take."

"Have you made any progress repairing nerve damage?" Stephen asked intently.
Tony hesitated, because he'd seen the man's hands, and giving false hope had never been his thing. Tony was too much a realist for that. "Some. Not enough. Cellular regeneration is tricky and long-term results haven't been that promising yet. Medicine was never my forte though. I have Helen Cho on staff; she'd be a better one to talk to, or if Bruce is back to stay he'll probably be all over that." Assuming they survived to do more research, and that Earth was still in one piece.

"That's incredible," Stephen said, looking like the words had been pulled involuntarily from him.

"I know," Tony said. "Point is, nanotech or no nanotech, the spread of contaminants is too extensive to try removing them while on this ship. But we can't allow it to go on, either. That leaves containment."

"I take it you have a plan?"

Tony whistled obnoxiously. "I thought you'd never ask. FRIDAY, show him."

The holographic card game vanished, replaced instead with the image of an object, circular in shape, a triangle of brilliant light shining at its core.

"Wow," Peter said, his nose practically glued to the projection. "What is it?"

"An arc reactor, and mostly I used it for illustrative purposes." Tony condensed the image until it had shrunk to almost the size of a quarter, until it was shining like a star between his two fingers. "It wouldn't actually be a whole reactor. Just a miniaturized version of an already miniaturized version. We're not powering an electromagnet this time, just a low yield emitter to keep the phased matter inert. Small bananas in comparison."

"And what do you intend to do with that?" Stephen asked, but the look on his face said he already knew.

"Well, place it inside you, of course," Tony said cheerfully. "What else? Do you think I design these things for fun? Don't answer that. By the way, I particularly recommend putting the device in the chest cavity. Speaking from experience, that worked out beautifully for me."
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

What’s a bit of unexpected banter and minor surgery amongst friends?

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay on this chapter; it fought me all the way, but! Enjoy some compensation with a lengthier than usual update.

On the day of Stephen's pseudo-surgery, Tony woke two hours earlier than he'd intended. Partly because he was a poor sleeper and he always woke at odd hours. But mostly because he couldn't breathe.

"Boss," FRIDAY said calmly, placidly, when Tony opened his eyes. Her melodic voice cut eerily through the darkness. "Your heart rate is dangerously high. Are you well?"

"God," Tony choked, and twisted out of the bed, falling to his knees. The panic was as real as the floor that rose up to greet him, more so because the floor was just a blip of pain, but the anxiety closing his throat was excruciating. The dream lingered like smoke in the air. He could still see the familiar shape of Yinsen, hands curled in unnatural claws to hold ropes of shining wires like puppet strings snaking inside his chest. Tony was no longer holding the car battery, but the ghost of it was like an anvil, pressing all the air from his lungs. Fear clawed at him to leave terrible, rending wounds behind. "FRIDAY, lights. Get the lights."

The darkness lifted, enough so Tony could make out the details in the floor pressed so near him. Enough so he could be reminded of the confined space of the ship they were trapped on.

"FRIDAY. FRI. Say something."

"What, boss?"

Tremors shook through him like electric shocks. "Something. Anything." He turned, pressing his cheek to the cool metal floor, the ship seeming to heave with the frantic beat of his heart. "Just talk."

"I believe you are on the verge of an anxiety attack. I recommend you take deep, even breaths."

Tony gasped out a laugh.

"If you would like me to assist you in a meditative breathing exercise, I have access to twenty-six highly recommended guided imagery sessions."

"Yes, fine, that," Tony said, cold sweat prickling all over. "That, go."

"Begin by finding a comfortable position to remain in," FRIDAY instructed, intoning in an artificially even voice that was simultaneously soothing and grating as hell. "You may close your
eyes or keep them open, but you must focus on one spot in the room. Focus on your breath -"

Tony lost track of FRIDAY somewhere in the middle of her recitation, but that was fine; it wasn't about the content of her words, it was the rhythm of speech itself. It reminded Tony he wasn't alone. He was no longer a prisoner in a dark cave, alive only at the whims of his tormenters. He'd won; he'd escaped them, long ago.

"- this will serve to calm your mind and relax your body -"

His heart pounded, but it didn't set the port in his chest to throbbing; that no longer existed. The cold was just cold. It wasn't the icy burn of water soaking into his face and shirt. He could take deep breaths; his air wasn't rationed. There was no pain.

It took Tony a long time to come out of it, to steady himself to a space where FRIDAY's voice began to filter in as more than just a consistent drone of noise fluttering past his ears.

"- the floor beneath you. Wiggle your fingers and toes. Focus on the temperature, the texture of it. Flex your ankles. Feel the -"

"Thanks, FRI," Tony interrupted, muttering. "That's good."

"Are you recovered?" FRIDAY asked. If Tony hadn't known better he would've said she was worried about him.

"No. Nope," Tony said into the ground. "Definitely not. About as close as I'm likely to get, though. I'm okay. I'm great." He sighed. "So many words to describe great things. Awesome. Excellent. Incredible. Breathtaking. Incredibly breathtaking. You know, breathing is actually much harder than people make it look. They should give Olympic medals for it." He laughed, shortly. "I would lose."

"Boss?"

"This is so stupid," Tony said, pressing both hands to his face. "I fucking hate this. But I should've expected it. Unpredictably predictable, that's my brain." He let his hands thud back to the floor and propped shakily up on his elbows. "FRI, please tell me we've found some awesome sedating drugs in the ship's manifest. Something that might knock me out for a week but not kill me. Strange can have a small dose too, I guess. Since he's up for surgery and all."

"Sorry, boss," FRIDAY said, and impressively did manage to sound apologetic. Curious. "I've found nothing that would result in those symptoms which would not also cause significant permanent damage."

"Figures."

Forcing himself up on unsteady feet, Tony hopped into the nearest alien equivalent of the shower, surprisingly similar to what they had on Earth. Tony really did hope this ship had some deep water reserves, or that he could figure out how to replenish them if they ran out. Maybe he could invest some time looking at that once Doctor Strangely-Accident-Prone was back on his own two feet. Of course, then the man would probably dedicate every waking hour to sabotaging Tony's plans.

Tony really needed to do something about that soon.

When he felt halfway to being human again, Tony shrugged on clothes and headed out into the corridor. He tried not to feel hunted. He walked for a while; long enough to lose track of time, to start counting the rhythm of his feet like the ticking of a grandfather clock. Tony hadn't meant to
head anywhere in particular, but he found himself approaching the bridge, though normally he'd go out of his way to avoid the place. It was beyond early, and he didn't expect to find anyone there. But the first thing he saw when the door slid open was Peter, sleeping on a web hammock stretched out high in the air between two walls. Tony stopped at the threshold to eye him, frowning.

It occurred to him to wonder if the kid had an infinite supply of web fluid. Probably not.

"If you keep staring at him like that, you'll wake him," Stephen said quietly, and Tony tried not to jump out of his skin, but, well. Apparently surprising the shit out of Tony was a game everyone excelled at on this ship.

"He has some sort of prescient instinct," Stephen continued. Tony turned to squint at him in the poor light. "Too much attention, even devoid of specific intent, and you'll set it off." The sorcerer was sitting in an alcove just barely removed from the corridor, basically just another shadow in a corridor full of them.

"Prescient instinct," Tony repeated skeptically. He stepped back to let the bridge doors close. "Like clairvoyance? And how long have you been sitting there like a magical ninja? And why?"

"More like a predatory intuition. And a while. Likely for the same reason you're skulking around at this hour."

Tony snorted in amusement. "Predatory prescient instincts. Say that five times fast." He blew out a sigh. "Well, that's great. Unenhanced human flying in a ship with a Hogwarts reject and a kid with extrasensory perception. One of these things is not like the others."

"Ilvermorny. And I wasn't rejected."

"What?"

"My early formative schooling was in the United States," Stephen said, with a completely straight face. "The equivalent would've been Ilvermorny, not Hogwarts. It wasn't until late adulthood that I trained in Asia."

Tony paused. He could feel a reluctant grin start to stretch the corners of his mouth.

"Seriously?"

"If you're going to try insulting someone, you could at least be accurate about it."

"You actually read them? Isn't all that a little beneath you? I mean, I fight aliens in a suit of armor; doesn't mean I spend my Monday nights playing Halo." Tony squinted thoughtfully. "Except when Rhodey has the time. Or when Grif and Sarge set my heart aflutter. RvB gets me every time."

"I have no idea what that means," Stephen admitted. "Another Stark product still in the developmental phase?"

Tony waved a hand magnanimously. "No. Sometimes awesome things are allowed to exist outside the Stark name. Not that I wouldn't be happy to put my stamp on that series, but celebrity endorsement is a symptom of the modestly rich and somewhat famous. Whereas I'm disgustingly rich and infamous."

"And modest," Stephen said archly.

"I'm not sure you have a leg to stand on, there." Tony looked around for a place to sit. Stephen's
recessed perch was probably originally intended as a maintenance bench. Lacking other options, Tony plunked himself down beside him. "Didn't I see your name down in print at a few conferences? Or was it conventions. You wear costumes at both, right?" He gestured widely with one hand. "Scalpels, wands; are they really so different?"

"Thank you for illustrating why I read the books. After you've heard one pop culture reference, you've heard them all. Sometimes it's just better to know."

Tony huffed a laugh. "Don't think that'll stop me making them."

"I would never expect that level of maturity from you." Stephen twitched, a very peculiar look on his face. "I sound like Christine."

"Who?"

"Never mind."

"Speaking of maturity," Tony said, gesturing back at the room with the sleeping teenager. "How many times did you wake him up staring before you figured it out?"

"Once," Stephen said. He shrugged, shifting further into the light. He was sitting cross-legged; the pose made Tony's knees ache in sympathy. "I asked. He was bored."

"Can't really blame the kid," Tony mused. "Smart adolescents with too much frivolous time on their hands are a recipe for disaster. I should know."

"I never had the time to be frivolous," Stephen said. "Some of us weren't born to our wealth." He sounded surprisingly mellow about it, almost amused.

"At least some of us still have our wealth. You burned through your accounts like money was going out of style. I'm guessing sorcery doesn't pay well, because FRIDAY found twenty-six cents in your savings account. And if FRIDAY can't find it, it can't be found."

Stephen grimaced, though a shadow of a grin tipped up one corner of his mouth. His facial hair, like Tony's, was starting to look more than a little unkempt. "It's good to know our confidential information is safe from prying eyes."

The lighthearted banter was new, and so was the smile. Or at least foreign to Tony's eyes and ears. He blinked warily. "It's probably safe from the average hacker, but my girl FRIDAY eats lowball software encryption for breakfast." He tapped the housing unit fondly. "Speaking of breakfast, did you eat your Wheaties this morning, doc? Wouldn't want you passing out again anytime soon."

"If only we had Wheaties," Stephen sighed. "I'd even settle for Wong's tuna melt." He made a thoughtful noise. "It's interesting the food on this ship is compatible with human physiology."

"Isn't it?" Tony shrugged. "Why that is, I have no idea. On that note, does it seem odd that so far a lot of our extraterrestrial encounters have had a surprisingly Earth-centric theme to them?"

"You mean because our host spoke English?" Stephen tilted his head side to side doubtfully. "Considering the level of technology, should we assume some level of universal translation? Or perhaps a spell. I know a few."

"For everyone? Thor and Loki spoke English right out the gate too. How much you want to bet any aliens we encounter will also speak English?" Tony threw up both hands flippantly. "Hell, for all we know, English could be the dominant language of the galaxy."
"Yes, and I'm sure Earth is at the center of the universe, too," Stephen said dryly. "Geo-centrism has certainly come a long way since it was disproven. Or maybe it's just egocentrism."

Tony smirked. "Easy there, doc. That was almost funny. If you aren't careful, I might mistake you for someone who has a sense of humor."

"Must be something I ate," Stephen said. His stomach grumbled quietly, as if on cue. "Or didn't."

"We should really put in a complaint with the management," Tony sighed. "What I wouldn't give for a good cup of coffee right now. Even just a couple fresh coffee beans. I could probably figure out how to science the shit out of them, Mark Watney style."

Stephen rolled his eyes. "Somehow I doubt you have a green thumb."

"Yeah, full points to you," Tony said. "Thankfully, no one's ever trusted me with a pet. Pep got me a cactus once. But I had to replace it three times because it kept dying." Thoughts of Pepper were still guaranteed to send desperate tension sinking right into Tony's boots, but he shoved that aside. "After six months I finally just had DUM-E set it on fire. Bye-bye cactus."

"You set it on fire?" Stephen asked dubiously. "You could've just lied and given it away."

"To who, Widow? Bruce, maybe. A green buddy for his green buddy. But no, lying to Pepper is ridiculously hard. She cheats. It was easier to just set it on fire. DUM-E got all excited to legitimately use the extinguisher for once. Win-win."

And Tony'd never considered himself terribly sentimental, but now he thought about it, for all DUM-E's uselessness, he would've been a good one to bring on this little road trip. The bot could've kept Peter occupied for hours, if only to save the machine after it inevitably got stuck or did something ridiculous. Or maybe they could've used DUM-E as a nursemaid during the upcoming surgery. The bot had done well enough handing Tony the requisite tools when he was down one arc reactor and crawling slowly away from death across the workshop floor.

"You ready for this?" Tony asked abruptly, pushing thoughts of Earth and Obadiah away.

"Would it matter if I weren't?"

"It might," Tony said. "Honestly, I was surprised you agreed to it so easily in the first place. I thought for sure I'd have to twist your arm. Or your leg. Or both."

Stephen tilted his head back to regard the bland ceiling above them. "The decision to say yes to surgery is almost always an easy one when the alternative is death by week's end."

"Don't be so pessimistic," Tony said. "I said irreparable harm by week's end. I would've estimated death at a month."

"Not at the rate I was using the stone," Stephen said.

Tony pursued his lips in a silent whistle. "That's it, then. I figured you were doing something to accelerate the process." He leaned forward, a thousand questions already scrolling through his head. "Have you been opening rifts in space-time, Strange? I thought you assured me you had no intention of doing that."

"I was looking ahead," Stephen said. He closed his eyes as if to recapture whatever grand sights he'd seen. "Viewing alternate futures, possible outcomes of the path you've set us on. The act of looking in and of itself has no impact on temporal continuity."
"I guess your stone doesn't take the observer effect into account then," Tony said mildly. "So, how do we do? Do we win?" He wasn't sure he wanted to know, but he felt compelled to ask anyway, if only to see if he could trust Stephen to answer.

Stephen was silent for some time, long enough for a prickle of foreboding to crawl up Tony's spine.

"Ask me tomorrow," Stephen said finally.

Tony smiled bemusedly. "Why? Does something monumental happen between today and tomorrow? If you're worried about the insertion, don't be. As far as surgeries go, this one's as simple as they come." He beckoned impatiently for more. "Do we crash into an asteroid? Get caught in the gravity well of a black hole?" He snapped his fingers delightedly. "No, I know. We probably run into real space pirates."

"I can't tell you. Ask me tomorrow."

Tony wiped the grin off his face. "Why not? If you've looked ahead, you should already know how this whole thing ends." Honestly, the idea of it made Tony's skin crawl. He was an inventor, always concerned with creating new things, better things. The idea of skipping all the middle points of discovery and starting off with the best just because he could cheat. Well. Might as well play Monopoly without ever passing Go.

"Nothing is certain," Stephen said, distantly. He looked far too solemn for a man who could apparently glance in his crystal ball and tell all of them their fortunes. "Sometimes the future is just an array of possibilities."

Tony felt his curiosity spark in spite of himself. "How many did you look at?"

"Millions."

"And you remember all of them?" Tony asked, incredulously. "How far did you look ahead, like a minute? I'm not saying you're full of shit, Strange, but you're basically full of shit. If you've looked at a million futures and you can remember everything in them, your brain has to be literally the most magical thing about you. And I say this knowing you have a cape that can think for itself and a stone that can break the space-time continuum."

Stephen shrugged lightly, seemingly unbothered by this skeptical reception. "It doesn't work quite like that. You might compare it to having a million different dreams. The details slip away when I open my eyes unless I put incredible effort into retaining them." He laughed, not nicely. "Which is unfortunate, because the details are almost always important to you. You seem to change the future at the whim of apparently random thought. And being as we're now in this together, that never bodes well for me."

Tony crossed his arms smugly. "Don't resent me just because I have profound, timeline altering thoughts every other minute."

"I don't resent you just for that," Stephen said. "I have dozens of other reasons." The sorcerer squinted. "Everything would be so much easier if you were more prone to soliloquy."

"People have actually accused me of that before. Does it count as talking to yourself if you're talking to machines? Sounds like a philosophical question until you take my A.I into account." Tony shook his head, smirking. "If you're looking for Shakespeare in the Park, I'm not your man. I definitely know a guy, though." Then he hesitated, humor quickly draining away. "Well. I knew a guy. The idea of Thor being gone still didn't feel quite real. Not that Tony had seen his fellow Avenger in
ages, but Thor had a presence that was larger than life, and the idea of the universe being less one Asgardian prince seemed very wrong.

"Who?" Stephen asked curiously.

"No one you'd know," Tony muttered. "So, you can't entirely predict the future even with the Time Stone?"

"Predict, yes. But there are no guarantees."

Tony narrowed his eyes. "You must at least know which ones we fail terribly in."

"If you want to know," Stephen said calmly, "ask me again once we're finished surgery."

Tony glared, thwarted. "Fine, be like that," he grumbled.

"Are you sure I can't just wear the emitter?" Stephen asked, clearly keen to change the subject.

"Like that pretty stone of yours?" Tony shrugged, holding out a hand to tilt side to side contemplatively. "It's not impossible, but it'll be more vulnerable than you think. Even having the reactor embedded in my chest was no guarantee against interference. If it helps, think of this like having a pacemaker inserted. You wouldn't ask one of your patients to wear their pacemaker hanging around their neck for anyone to take away."

"I didn't insert pacemakers."

"Left that to the average shmuck doing general surgery, did you? Makes sense. Not much fame in run of the mill cardiac care."

"And I suppose you used to do oil changes just because you're a mechanical engineer," Stephen said dryly. "Out of the goodness of your heart. I don't remember reading that in the Tony Stark biography."

"Fair enough," Tony admitted, amused. "You read that, too? God, Strange, is there anything you won't read? It doesn't do me justice, by the way. Best seller on the New York Times for ten weeks running, but I swear seventy percent of it was embellished."

Stephen snorted. "Well, I was skeptical about the tales of your personal self-sacrifice and altruism in chapters six and nine."

"Maybe it was only sixty percent embellished," Tony mused. He winked obnoxiously. "Presuming we ever make it back, I should have my publicist commission an updated version. I'm flattered, by the way, that a man of your considerable former means could be tempted into reading what amounts to cosmopolitan drivel about me. Something you want to tell me?"

"Yes," Stephen said seriously. He leaned forward conspiratorially. "The picture they used of you on the cover? Not one of your better angles."

His manner was almost jarringly playful. Tony felt honestly a bit thrown by it. Part of him was instantly suspicious of some kind of deception, but if anything Stephen seemed to be making an effort to be deliberately, painfully transparent.

He wondered what Stephen could possibly have seen in those futures to create such a paradigm shift.

"I know," Tony said finally, recalled to the discussion. "They pulled the image from one of the few
"They lied. I notice the only pictures of you with the arc reactor were when you had the Iron Man suit on." Stephen gestured at Tony's chest, eyes dropping to stare at the housing unit stationed there appraisingly. His gaze held an unexpected weight. "And mentions of it in your press coverage were surprisingly sparse. How superficially was it embedded?"

"Not at all," Tony said, keeping his hands carefully still, his breathing light and deliberate. The sense-memory of the arc reactor and a car battery returned briefly to haunt him before fading back into Tony's dreams. "Directly into the chest cavity, dead center. There was a hole in my sternum the size of a fist. Missed my heart by half an inch, and I lost twenty percent lung capacity. I get bronchitis like once a year when the weather turns, predictable as clockwork. Makes jogging through central park an adventure and a half some days."

Stephen looked truly disturbed. "That level of invasive surgery would kill some people even in the best of medical environments."

Tony laughed unpleasantly. He held out a hand and a handful of nanobots flowed into his grip. He snapped a holographic display into sight and nudged it in front of Stephen.

"FRI, load up the scans from just before I had everything removed." The blue-gray light shimmered into a skeletal image, recognizably Tony. The top layer of muscle and bone was cross-sectioned to show the intersection of the reactor, cradled deeply in his chest cavity. Stephen studied the image critically, looking at the intimidating anatomy of the power source Tony had previously carried.

"Had a plate installed after I took out the implant," Tony said, examining the hologram himself. It really was an alarming picture. Stephen tapped on the chest area, which magnified at two-hundred percent for his convenience. The reactor seemed to crawl with brilliant light. "Had to reconfigure it to fuse the portion of my ribs I lost when Yinsen originally cracked my sternum."

"How did you survive?" Stephen asked solemnly.

"Your guess is as good as mine, Strange. I must have nine lives. Probably down to my last few, at this point." He shrugged, the nightmare trying to crawl back in front of his eyes so it could hijack his higher brain functions. Tony shoved it back down where it belonged; it went, but slowly. "The Ten Rings were pretty determined to keep me alive so they could torture me into building them weapons of mass destruction. I didn't have the best of medical care, but I did have access to every drug, medicinal or otherwise, known to man. I was a walking pharmacy of antibiotics for a while there."

"Antibiotics we don't have access to now." Stephen didn't look worried at this thought, exactly, but he did look wary.

"Won't need them," Tony said. "Don't worry, doc. I have no intention of cutting holes in any of your bones, or water-boarding you after we're done. The emitter's small. It's a relatively easy insertion; barely qualifies as surgery, really."

Stephen flicked his eyes ironically at the picture of Tony's former arc reactor. "It wouldn't take much to be easier than that." He reached out and traced a hovering finger above the seal where the reactor had met flesh. "The port is remarkably smooth. Considering the circumstances, it looks well-positioned."

"Yeah, I guess in retrospect I should be grateful for the aesthetic symmetry." An off-center arc reactor probably would have looked more hilarious than intimidating.
"I hope you don't intend to install anything like it in me," Stephen commented. "Where did you even find the components necessary to make an emitter on this ship?"

"I repurposed a tenth of the nanotech for the power source." Tony waved his fingers and the hologram flickered accordingly, the nanobots glittering like gold dust in his palm. "The rest I cobbled from stray machinery. There is a surprising amount of unused surgical grade metal on this ship."

"What about your suit?" Stephen asked, seeming genuinely concerned. A glimmer of suspicion prickled at Tony.

"I have enough left to create and power the suit, and the nanotech is self-perpetuating. Or it can be." Tony waved his fingers again and the image of the reactor vanished, the bots retreating into the housing unit without fanfare. "At some point I'll need to find a stash of raw materials to fabricate more, but we're flying through light years of open space. I'm sure I'll find something I can adapt along the way."

"I don't doubt it," Stephen said, too neutrally. Tony's distrustful mind immediately started whispering doubts in his ear. In a million different futures, he wondered in how many of them he may or may not have fabricated more nanotech. And what he might have used it for.

"Time's a wasting," he said, easing to his feet before his paranoia could get the better of him. "Shall we?"

Stephen frowned. "And you're sure your A.I can do this? I'm not used to assisting others with surgery. Quite the opposite."

"Sorry Strange, but for this to work you'll have to put yourself in FRIDAY's hands. Yours won't do the trick. I've seen them shake; they're enough to put a caffeine addict in withdrawal to shame."

"Upstaged by a computer program," Stephen muttered darkly.

"By a Stark computer program," Tony corrected. "How do you think you'll manage with the initial insertion? We obviously don't have any anesthetic available."

"As long as your nanotech can contain the point of entry, the pain should be manageable. And I have a fairly high tolerance anyway."

"Did you pick out a likely theater for our little operation?"

"The bridge," Stephen said.

Tony raised both eyebrows in question. "Why? It doesn't exactly scream comfort. Or accessible medical surfaces."

"I assume your nanotech won't suffer from a lack of proper facilities." Stephen looked immovable, almost militant, the more familiar stubbornness finally peeking out. "The bridge."

Tony shrugged. Made no sense to him not to do it in a room with a more comfortable mattress, but whatever; not Tony's call. He swept out a hand gallantly, and Stephen took it after a small hesitation. The sorcerer was slow and unsteady getting to his feet but stood on his own easily enough once he was upright. Tony didn't bother lingering to ask him how he was, just led the march onto the bridge. The doors slid aside to reveal the majestic view of stars scattering like clouds past the viewport. Tony blinked away the film of anxiety that immediately tried to swamp him. His eyes caught on Peter, still sleeping peacefully. Tony stared at him narrowly, then glared as hard as he
Peter yelped, shooting up from his hammock with a bleat of alarm and rolling off to hit the floor with a decisive clang.

"Ow," Peter said faintly.

Stephen breathed a laugh before he could hide it, and Tony turned to wink at him subtly.

"Oops," Tony said, and then more loudly: "Parker! What are you still doing in bed at this hour? Get up this instant, young man."

"Mr. Stark?" Peter asked, staggering back to his feet, his hair a disaster of epic proportions. Tony subtly signalled FRIDAY for photographic evidence. "What -"

"Vamoose, kid. Unless you want to play Nurse Nightingale again, for real this time."

Peter spotted Stephen over Tony's shoulder and the confusion cleared abruptly from his face to make room for concern. "Oh! Oh, right. Okay." The kid skirted around the both of them at a wide angle, scuttling for the door.

"Stay," Stephen called, and Tony and Peter both turned to blink at him.

"What, really?" Peter asked, his face pale with anxiety. "I mean, I will if you guys want, sure. I just don't know what I can do to help?"

"That makes two of us," Tony said. "Mind filling in the rest of the class, Strange? Our friendly neighbourhood spiderling is bursting with talents, but as far as I know nursing is not one of them. He finished Biology with a B average. Doesn't exactly inspire confidence."

"Hey!" Peter looked outraged. "I would've done better but I missed two of the labs that year!"

"I'll guess one of them was the animal dissection. I know they have one at the senior level."

"I was sick that day," Peter muttered, looking resolutely away. "With, like, the flu. Or something."

"I'll buy that it was 'or something'. Strange, this honestly isn't going to be half as complicated as you're making it out to be. We'll manage just fine."

"We might need him." And once again, the wizard had that stubborn, implacable look on his face. Tony tried not to be suspicious and failed. "I'd like him to stay."

Tony looked between the other two slowly, mystified. "Alright," he said finally. "It's your show, doc. Kid, go use the facilities and then hightail it back here."

"Should I, do I need?" Peter gestured widely to encompass the clothes he was wearing, the clothes they were all wearing, actually, not exactly surgical scrubs by any stretch of the imagination. They'd been hand-washing everything, since Tony had yet to find the alien equivalent of the washing machine over the last few weeks. He'd have to make that a priority soon, somewhere down the list after saving the wizard, breaking into the computer core, learning to read Alien, and locating some reasonable toothpaste.

"No help for that, kid. Go scrub the hell out of your hands, just in case."

Peter bobbed his head in a nod and loped out of the room to vanish down the corridor.
Tony turned away, pacing to a narrow stretch of elevated walkway, probably the largest undisturbed surface in the room. "Want to tell me why we need him?"

"Ask me tomorrow."

Tony forced himself to take a deep breath and close his eyes before his temper could put words in his mouth he might regret. He opened them and gestured to the floor in front of him.

"Here?" he asked, willing to let the subject lie for now.

"As good as anywhere," Stephen said. He took off his cloak and tossed it into the air. It soared forward, coming to a stop directly in front of Tony. He looked at it askance, then at the ground.

"I guess this thing's the closest equivalent to a stretcher we have," Tony remarked. "Just in case. You mind bloodstains on it?"

"They won't stick anyway," Stephen replied, muffled as he drew his layered shirts over his head. Tony snuck in a couple quick glances while Stephen had his back turned. Not bad; he had a great physique, long and lean where Tony was compact. Tony didn't always turn his head for men, but whatever else could be said about him, Stephen Strange was certainly attractive. He had a wide array of scars covering various parts of his upper body, but scars were nothing new to Tony. He saw some of his own in the mirror every day. Tony caught the cloak watching him intently, which was an impressive feat for a thing that had no eyes.

"Shut up," Tony told it. "I'm engaged, not dead." Then he looked away, shame and melancholy blazing a path right through him. "And not even that anymore," he muttered.

"What was that?" Stephen asked, turning.

"Nothing. FRIDAY, raise the lights." Tony pointed at the ground. "Down boy, c'mon."

Stephen glared at him.

"I was talking to your loyal security blanket," Tony said innocently. "Does it have a name?"

"The Cloak of Levitation."

Tony blinked incredulously. "Well, that's fitting. Obvious names are obvious, I guess. Hey, you," he said, pointing at it, "stop living up to your name and lie down. There." After a hesitation that seemed designed to inform Tony it was doing this not because he was asking, but because it wanted to, the cloak lay down as instructed. Stephen came over a second later and stretched out on top of it, face up, feet crossed at the ankles and fingers laced over his abdomen.

Tony twitched, suppressing a grin. The urge to make an extremely inappropriate joke was strong. He wondered how gauche it would be to sexually harass a man he was about to let his nanotech become intimately acquainted with.

"Have you picked a likely target location?" Tony said, valiantly maintaining his dignity. He was a professional, after all.

"I believe so. Show me the emitter? I need to confirm size and scale."

"Well, size isn't everything," Tony said brightly before he could stop himself. He removed the emitter from a secured inside pocket and held it out to Stephen. "But in this case, I understand your concern. I've never said this before, but don't worry: it's small."
Stephen ignored him, taking the small, flat disc with curious fingers. It had a matte black surface, as unassuming as Tony could manage, no flashing lights, no buttons. "You've completely encased the power source? How long is it designed to last for? If it needs to be replaced, how -"

"Don't worry so much on those parts, doc. The design isn't perfect, but it's the best I could do given the circumstances, and we don't really have any other options right now. Hopefully it's hardy enough to last your lifetime if needed, but if we have to replace it, we can do that too. Provided I can replenish the nanotech."

Stephen flipped it around several times, examining it from all angles. Tony left him to it, silently sitting down next to him.

"Insertion should be relatively simple," Stephen said finally, handing it back reluctantly.

Tony smirked. "That's what I've been saying."

"Enough to require stitches, though, which unfortunately we don't have to hand."

"I told you, the bots have a basic bio-repair function. FRIDAY can close the wound as easily as she creates it."

Stephen looked simultaneously impressed and disturbed.

"I used to like background music when I performed surgery. I don't suppose you brought any?"

"Nothing but heavy metal rock and roll," Tony said. "Awesome, but not exactly restful."

"I might have guessed," Stephen sighed. "Some people have no taste."

"Hey, I have taste. Well. I have people who buy me tasteful things."

"I rest my case."

"I'm going to put the nanobots in formation," Tony said, linking with FRIDAY to mobilize them. "FRIDAY will need enough on hand to create the necessary tools. I'll situate them on your shoulder and you can guide them from there. They won't start moving until you give them direction."

"That's not as reassuring as you think," Stephen muttered.

"Sure it is. You just haven't considered how creepy it'd be if they started moving without your say-so. I pranked the hell out of Rhodey with it a good five times before he threatened to blow up my workshop."

"Five times? He must also have a high tolerance for pain," Stephen said.

"Well, he's friends with me. One learns to build up an immunity."

"Like any other infectious disease."

"See, now you're starting to get me. And on the topic of medicine, you should know: I've never performed live surgery on anyone but myself before. You'll have to be gentle with me. This is my first time."

"Something I don't think anyone in the history of the world ever thought they'd hear from Tony Stark -"
"Okay, I'm back!" Peter announced. Tony wiped away his grin while Stephen went back to staring serenely at the ceiling. "Not that I know why I'm here or anything. I mean, speaking of, are you really sure you want me here? What if I knock something over? I knock, like, a lot of things over."

"Relax, Peter," Tony said, gesturing. The kid edged closer and sat down, completing their triangle. "Won't need you to do any heavy lifting, just remain on hand. You can provide the smelling salts if the wizard faints. Or hold his hand if he needs comforting. Do you need comforting, Strange?"

"I need ear plugs," Stephen said.

Peter dithered for a moment before his attention was caught by the swarm of microscopic bots easing out of the housing unit and forming a trail down Tony's arm to pool around his fingers.

"That is so cool," Peter said, staring, and Tony preened.

"Incoming bots," he announced for Stephen's benefit. "Don't freak out." Tony put his knuckles down on the sorcerer's shoulder, the tech migrating at the point of contact. Stephen shuddered, and after the bots had finished relocating Tony rotated his wrist to pat his chest solemnly. His skin was very warm, and very smooth.

"Relax," Tony said brightly. "Genius at work."

"There isn't room on this entire ship for your ego. Load the hologram?"

FRIDAY didn't wait for Tony's order, a three dimensional representation of Stephen appearing instantly in front of them, a smattering of ominous red light shining throughout the image. Stephen looked at it critically while Tony noted the phased matter had migrated a fair bit since he'd last seen the scans.

"I need a way to provide precise direction to her without moving," Stephen mused. "Suggestions?"

"FRIDAY, overlay the hologram with a simple coordinate plane, X and Y axis." She did as bid, lines crossing to intersect with the image. "How's that?"

"Workable." Stephen studied the image for a few seconds more. "Narrow it to a single quadrant and break it into a ten-by-ten grid, letters on X, numbers on Y. Magnify the upper torso an additional fifty percent."

FRIDAY followed direction without prompting, the blue light sharpening crisply.

"Looks reasonable. Ready, Strange?" Tony asked.

"You may as well call me Stephen," the sorcerer sighed, shivering as the bots on his shoulder glittered in the low light, shifting to remain in position. "I try to be on a first name basis with most everyone I perform surgery with."

"If you insist," Tony said. "But 'Strange' just has so much potential."

Stephen ignored him, examining the image closely. "We'll need a two-inch incision to start. Start at B1 and progress toward C3."

They all froze as the bots began to move. Stephen's breath left him in a startled whoosh as FRIDAY set everything into motion. The color drained alarmingly fast from his face. Tony reached to put a hand on his shoulder again, in part to reassure, but also in reminder to stay still. Stephen was so tense he resembled a statue.
"Relax," Tony said softly, and they got to work.

It wasn't quite as quick or painless as any of them had probably hoped, but it also wasn't beyond bearing. Stephen had chosen a shallow section just beneath the collar bone, and Tony had designed the emitter to be as unobtrusive as possible. The tissue damage left behind was fairly minimal, though that didn't stop Peter from hunching over halfway through, looking green around the gills.

"Alright, Peter?" Tony asked, ready to give him a graceful way out if needed.

"I'm fine," the kid said, stubbornly. Tony smiled, a flicker of pride burning brightly. Stephen had his eyes closed, sweat beading across his forehead and a deep shadow of pain on his face. His heart rate had been mostly steady throughout the procedure, but his blood pressure was starting to flirt with some dangerously low numbers.

"Stay awake, Stephen," Tony said, gently rolling the name around in his mouth. Not as interesting as Strange, but Tony could probably get used to using it. "Don't pull a damsel in distress on us again."

"Didn't in the first place," Stephen said, faintly. Tony could see, from the corner of his eye, Peter's hand wander tentatively to brush Stephen's elbow. His grip settled securely when the man didn't brush him off. It wasn't clear if the hold was meant to comfort the wizard, or the teenager. Possibly both.

Thankfully it wasn't long after that before FRIDAY was sealing off the final layer of the exit incision. Tony breathed a sigh of relief. The procedure itself might barely count as surgery, but with the conditions they were doing it in, nothing was completely without risk.

Tony watched the readings start to stream in on his glasses as FRIDAY scanned for any anomalies.

"FRI, how's it looking?"

"All systems are go, boss."

Stephen tensed even further, which was impressive given how edgy he'd already been. His closed eyes pinched into a narrow frown. Tony patted him absently on the shoulder again.

"Let's light it up," he said.

There was little enough involved, really, just FRIDAY powering on the device, so Tony wasn't expecting much. It would all have seemed very anticlimactic, except that Stephen was chilled in cold sweat, and his biochemical levels were spiking hard. His adrenaline was through the roof. Which Tony considered more than a little odd given the actual surgical process was complete.

"FRIDAY, any problems?"

"None, boss. The emitter is operating as expected. The phased matter is already stabilizing into an inert form."

Still, Stephen didn't relax. Tony frowned. "What's wrong, doc?" he asked, quietly.

Stephen opened his eyes, and they were very, very blue.

"Let me know when three minutes has passed," he said. Tony could feel his own adrenaline peaking sharply.
"You heard him, FRI," he said after a moment.

"What's going on?" Peter asked, a healthy pink slowly starting to come back into his face. His look of expectant relief was quickly morphing into confusion.

"Nothing to be concerned about," Tony said easily. "Just giving things a chance to shake out. T-minus three minutes and counting."

They all waited in silence, the seconds dripping away like rain. The tension was thick enough to swim through when FRIDAY announced at length that one-hundred and eighty seconds had elapsed since activating the emitter. Stephen finally relaxed, the strain easing from his body like air slowly being let out of a balloon.

"Something you want to tell me?" Tony kept the question light, almost cheerful.

"It's never killed me past three minutes," Stephen said, exhaling slowly. "Not that I remember."

Tony remained still, unmoving. "There's no reason it should've killed you at all."

"When it has, I've never been conscious long enough to ask you what went wrong." Stephen smiled, faintly, and on his other side Tony could see Peter looking absolutely horrified. He couldn't really blame the kid. Seemed a reasonable reaction.

"You knew you could die and did it anyway?" Peter blurted out.

"I knew refusing it would kill me just as surely," Stephen said. "But more slowly. I took a risk. It seems to have paid off."

Tony stared at the faint outline of the emitter beneath Stephen's skin. "Peter," he said abruptly, and the kid startled, eyes wide. "Go grab us some food and water, would you? Have a look through the secondary cargo bay. I found more of those legumes in a couple boxes there."

"What, now?" Peter asked, confused. "Are you sure? Don't you -"

"I'm sure. Begone, Spiderling. Don't dally, the wizard's blood sugar's tanking, he needs a boost."

"Oh." Peter nodded, eager to help. He hopped up to his feet and webbed a handhold on the wall, ricocheting off it to swing to a nearby console, and then out through the automatic door.

"Makes me tired just watching him," Tony commented, watching him leave through narrowed eyes.

"Try dealing with him for days on end," Stephen muttered. "You're not allowed to disappear into the ship on your own again. He's your brain child. I didn't sign on for babysitting."

"Apology accepted," Tony said. "Now, you want to tell me what ridiculous leap of logic stopped you from mentioning you might actually die today? In what way does concealing that make any sense? What if it was something I could've prevented?"

"I've told you before," Stephen said, shrugging, which was confusing as hell until Tony translated that into time-travel speak. "Sometimes it helped and something it didn't. I did say you should ask"
me about the future after the surgery."


"Post-op still counts as surgery," Stephen said, turning to look at the streaking blue stars filling the forward bridge with their mellow glow.

Tony stared at him, incensed. "Are you fucking kidding me right now?" He decided that, no, he was not relieved to see the sorcerer's spirit making a comeback. He could live with less spirit if it resulted in more answers.

"There'll be time to talk about the future later," Stephen sighed, face still turned away. "Do you realize this is the only place on the ship with a standard viewport?"

Tony blinked. "I hadn't really thought about it." Which was a boldfaced lie. Of course he'd thought about it. He'd been grateful for it. Viewing the stars on a dark expanse of space was literally the stuff of Tony's nightmares. There was a reason he avoided the bridge whenever he reasonably could.

"We might never know we were in space if not for this bridge." Stephen sounded almost wistful, and definitely melancholy.

And suddenly Tony got it.

"That's why you set up shop here, on the bridge. The stars." He frowned suddenly. "Do dark spaces bother you, doc? Please tell me you don't have some type of phobia."

"Why? Would it change anything?"

"No, but I'd feel bad."

"Really?"

Tony held his thumb and forefinger a half-inch apart, shrugging.

"No," Stephen sighed. "I'm not claustrophobic."

"So you just like the stars? That's why you wanted to do the surgery here," Tony realized. "In case things - didn't go to plan."

Stephen huffed a quiet laugh, resting shaking hands on his chest, still searching the stars as if for answers.

"Yes," he said. "If anything happened, here seemed as good a place as any. Better than most. My mentor died watching lightning fork on a backdrop of snow. It was one of the first times in my life I'd ever actually stopped to consider how beautiful it was. I remembered thinking there were worse things to see at the end."

"She died?" Tony asked. "You didn't have access to that stone of yours, then?"

"No, she did. Sometimes, even knowing the future can't prevent us from making mistakes. She was proof of that."

"Sounds like your mentor's last sight was something worth seeing," Tony said quietly. "Mine wasn't so lucky. He died in the dark, in a cave in Afghanistan, when I failed to save his life. He told me everything was fine. In fact, as far as he was concerned, it was all going to plan." Tony blew out a
breath, troubled. He shook his head. "He couldn't wait to see his family on the other side."

Stephen turned to look at him, then, the piercing intensity of his eyes like a blade as they slid beneath Tony's skin.

"That's never going to be me," Tony said, calmly. "Lying down peacefully at the end, longing for a reunion in the aftermath. Accepting the inevitable. I'm not made for that. I've lived the last ten years fighting. I'll die the same way."

"Then why didn't you take us to Thanos?" Stephen asked, bleeding and wounded but unbowed. Stephen Strange had heart to him, an unbroken determination to be better, to succeed. Tony could understand that. He could even admire that.

"Because that's how I'm going to die," Tony said. "But that's not how everyone else in the universe needs to do it."

"Maybe that's not for you to decide."

"It's definitely not for me to decide. But I'm doing it anyway."

"Is that using your power for something greater," Stephen asked. "Or just for yourself?"

Tony turned to face the stars, breathing through the predictable panic that tried to squeeze the air from his lungs. He sighed and propped his feet on a convenient piece of decking to link both hands over a knee.

"I can't say for sure," he said, and forced himself to look at the shimmer of the universe streaking past them. "But I hope in this case the answer is: both."
"Peter," Tony said seriously. "Make him stop."

"What?" Peter protested, flailing wildly. "How am I supposed to stop him? Why me?"

They both winced as a booming clang sounded in the next room over. Stephen was in rare form today.

"Because he ignores me. Maybe he'll listen to you."

Peter snorted and scrambled up the ceiling, clearly intending to hide far from the mayhem. "I don't think that's how it works."

Tony glared after him. "Traitor." Another clang sounded and Tony threw up his hands, exasperated. "FRIDAY, make him stop."

The A.I was unfairly tranquil as she considered this. "I'm not sure how, boss."

"Knock him out. Drug him or something."

"I could seal off the forward section of the ship and evacuate the air," FRIDAY suggested. A warning beep issued from one of the consoles.

"No!" Tony backpedalled hastily. "No, cancel that. FRIDAY, we really need to talk about your sense of humor." He held up his fingers an inch apart. "Too far."

"Sorry, boss," FRIDAY said. She even sounded genuinely apologetic. "Still reintegrating personality algorithms. I did mean to suggest recirculating the air once Doctor Strange lost consciousness."

Tony suspected intense pride at that statement was probably the wrong response. But it was a halfway decent idea unless you took into account how mercenary it sounded. "Don't let anyone else hear you say that. They'll think I raised you wrong."

"I wasn't raised," FRIDAY said. "I was programmed."

"And programmed to learn, at that. But do as I say, FRI, not as I do." He paused, considering that more closely. "No, don't do as I say. Or as I do, actually. Wow, that doesn't leave many options." He frowned. "Parenting's difficult. I can't believe I want to be one. I think this experience might be curing me of that."

Somewhere out of sight Tony heard one of the ceiling ducts grinding loudly as it was opened. "Just remember they're like dogs," Peter shouted down. "Use simple commands and water occasionally. Something about newspaper."
"We don't have any newspaper," Tony shouted back.

"You said you were going to make some. I'll go find it!" Peter said brightly, and vanished with another metallic screech.

"Smart kid," Tony sighed. He considered joining Peter but suspected it would come back to bite him later on. Instead he walked toward the cargo bay, three more progressively louder crashes greeting his footsteps.

The doors slid aside, and Tony had just enough time to move out of the way of a storage container as it sailed past him and out into the corridor. "What the hell?"

The container reversed course to go flying past him again, tugged by a rope of trailing fire. A resounding impact followed moments later.

"Stephen, what did that box ever do to you?" Tony called to announce himself, and slipped past the open doorway.

Stephen didn't seem to hear him, although thankfully no more storage containers came flying at Tony's head. He took a moment to watch the sorcerer at work.

Stephen hadn't exactly taken to his convalescence gracefully. They'd all enjoyed barely a week of peace before the man started stirring up chaos. Thankfully that was long enough for Tony to successfully make his way through some of the more important items on his to-do list. First and foremost had been a concentrated effort to crack the source code in the computer core. It took Tony and FRIDAY nearly three full all-nighters to accomplish it, and even so it was a patch job. They still didn't have a full translation on the alien language, but enough to work through the functional commands. Tony now had access to almost every major system onboard.

The best part of all that was FRIDAY. The A.I now had full access to her backup systems and thankfully knew her way around a joke again, albeit with a horrid sense of humor Tony suspected came directly from his hindbrain. Peter had been delighted to encounter another A.I capable of holding a conversation with him.

FRIDAY also served to distract the group from the big picture realities of Tony continuing to strand them further and further from Earth. They'd been weeks on the ship, almost a month; long enough to put many light years between them and their lovely blue planet.

They were now officially and undeniably quite lost in the far reaches of space.

Another storage container went zooming through the air, thankfully angled away from Tony this time. He watched as orange sparks braided into power and took aim. This time, instead of coiling around the container to draw it back, magic snapped out like a whip and crashed into the side, sending the whole thing careening across the floor. Tony wondered if anger gave magic a boost, because the entire display seemed very angry to him.

Beautiful, too; magic was certainly visually impressive. Almost as good as the luminous white glow of an arc reactor.

"FRIDAY," Tony said quietly, tipping up his glasses. "Are you getting this? I want level four scans all across the board."

"Yes, boss."

Stephen huffed with effort, and the magic flared again, snaking around a different container to send it
flying.

Tony decided that was enough watching and summoned a left hand gauntlet, feeling it crawl over his fingers to form a repulsor. He activated it to deflect the box before it could quite land, watching it soar away to crash heavily into one of the bulkheads on the opposite side of the room.

Tony waited until the rattle of colliding metal had died down before he let the nanotech retreat again. "That dent is totally your fault. Don't make me do that again to get your attention."

Stephen turned to glower at him, a sheen of sweat filming his forehead. He was breathing hard and leaning against a nearby shelving unit. "Stark. You could've just said something."

"I did say something. I do that a lot, you know. I'm good at saying things."

Tony studied him for a moment, gauging his health while FRIDAY streamed him information. The readings weren't bad, but they weren't good either. "What's with the magic show, doc?"

"Practice," Stephen said succinctly.

"Yeah, I could tell that much for myself."

Stephen took two sideways steps, gliding gracefully into the air and over to an unblemished stack of containers. He sat down. "I shouldn't still be feeling this weak." He examined one shaking hand. Tony could see the nerves were misfiring more rapidly than normal. "I need to keep training."

"What's your rush? In a hurry to go busk some street corners? There aren't any out here."

Stephen shot him a look of disdain. "If you ever see a street magician performing magic like this, my advice: Run."

"Probably good advice," Tony said. He drifted over to examine what seemed to be scorch marks on one of the walls. "Listen, I know next to nothing about magic, except that it defies most of the known laws of physics. But it doesn't seem like the sort of thing that responds well to intense physical stress, which is what you're subjecting your body to right now. I never thought I'd be on this side of the lecture, but: don't you think you might be pushing yourself a little hard?"

"You're right," Stephen said shortly. "You know nothing about magic."

Tony raised both eyebrows mockingly. "Is there some sort of catastrophic reason why you can't slow the hell down? Is the universe about to end?" He hesitated. "That's only a rhetorical question if the answer's no, by the way."

"I'll slow down when I start getting better," Stephen snapped. Then he blew out a breath and pinched the bridge of his nose, looking irked. "Déjà vu."

Tony watched him solemnly. "Is that a mundane déjà vu or a magical one? Did you see a black cat? I swear I fixed that glitch in the matrix."

Stephen looked up with a hint of amusement on his face. "Do I look like someone who watches lowbrow science fiction?"

"Magic is really just superpowered science, fictional or otherwise, and you got the reference. So, yes. No to the cat, then?"

"No cats were involved in the making of this farce," Stephen sighed. He dabbed at his forehead with
a sleeve.

Tony moved closer, sensing some of the danger had passed. "You know, I doubt your balloon animal skills are going to atrophy if you take a week to let yourself heal."

"I did take a week." Stephen held out one hand and sketched a crackling shield which wavered and dissolved into embers almost immediately. "Things haven't improved."

"This time last week you were predicting you'd be dead by now," Tony noted. "You're still breathing. Most people would consider that a win."

Stephen grimaced, frustration transforming his whole face. "If I settled for breathing, I never would've learned magic in the first place." He gestured with an open hand at Tony. "You don't exactly have room to criticize."

"Hey," Tony protested. "I'll have you know that after Afghanistan I took a good long break before getting back to work."

Stephen gave him a flat look. "How long?"

"You know, each traumatic injury has its own timeline and can't really be quantified like that."

Stephen just stared.

Tony scowled. "Two days."

"I heard you got off the plane from your stint in captivity and went directly to a press conference."

"Okay, maybe it was more like two hours," Tony said. "My point is, your cells still haven't fully recovered. You keep going on like this, you'll end up back on your last legs."

"That doesn't happen," Stephen said simply.

Tony grit his teeth, irritation flaring. It wasn't the first time Stephen had made off-hand comparisons with events in other timelines. The man might not remember all the details, but he remembered enough to be infuriating. They'd never managed a follow-up to their original discussion about the future. Tony'd eventually settled on trusting that Stephen would alert him if the universe was about to come crashing down on their heads. He hadn't really had much choice, since the sorcerer made it plain he had no intention of sharing anything more than crumbs.

"Just because you haven't seen it happen yet doesn't mean it can't," Tony said finally. "You looked at some futures. Not all."

Stephen waved that away dismissively. "It means the odds are poor."

"Poor odds are just another way of saying it happened to one person instead of a million. And a million to one odds in an infinite multiverse aren't as poor as you might think. The opposite, really. I hope you're not still using that pretty necklace of yours, by the way. I have no idea what that would do in conjunction with the emitter."

"I'll work up to it slowly," Stephen said.

"Right, see, that's not the same as not using it. Which I am strongly recommending."

"I might need it later."
Annoyance overrode Tony's common sense. "Doc, I'm beginning to think you have a problem. Do we need to start you a support group? Hi, your name is Stephen and -"

"Are you really about to lecture me on the allure of power?" Stephen asked flatly. "Iron Man?"

Tony twitched, the words striking an unexpectedly deep cord as Pepper's admonishments in the park leapt to the forefront of his mind. Anger was an old, familiar friend and rose quickly.

"No, wait," Stephen said, dropping his head. He dug the heels of his hands into his eyes. "That was uncalled for. I apologize."

Tony stared at him for several long seconds with his mouth hanging open. He shut it. "You apologize. Now you're making apologies? Are you trying to play me, Strange?"

Stephen dropped his hands back down. "You consider an apology a play?"

"Always. Hence why I never make them. That, and I'm really bad at them." Tony consciously tamped down on his frustration, shoving it back in a box where it wouldn't get him into hot water with a man who could probably kill him in his sleep. "Don't apologize to me, Stephen. Apologies are just words, and words are cheap."

"Why does it not surprise me to hear you say that?" Stephen looked at the ceiling and Tony thought he might be seeking divine intervention until he continued speaking. "Are you saying you never apologized to him?" He nodded at one of the nearby ceiling ducts, making it clear who 'him' was.

Tony shrugged. The question was asked mildly enough; Stephen seemed genuinely curious. "Sure I did. And it was just as strategic and mostly meaningless as your apology. I'm sorry Peter got caught up in this, and I'm sorry he's missing out on some of the major milestones of his life, and I'm sorry he's got people back home missing him. But I'm not sorry I did it, and I wouldn't change it even if I could. Q.E.D."

Stephen made a considering noise. "Should I expect an equally meaningless apology at some point in the future?"

"Nope," Tony said brightly. "I wasn't planning to apologize to you at all. But I can put something together if it makes you feel better."

Stephen snorted, amusement briefly coloring his face. "I'm going to guess the Avengers never relied on you for negotiating purposes."

"Not unless they were looking for a fight," Tony agreed.

"You should've sent Peter to do the dirty work. I'm surprised you didn't."

Tony made the executive decision not to mention he'd tried to do just that.

"Look," he said instead, getting the conversation back on track. "Yammering at you like an infomercial isn't my idea of a good time. I've done my civic duty by informing you you're in danger of relapse." He pointed at the wall over his shoulder with a thumb. "I'd also like to inform you that if you put a hole in this ship and somehow end up outside it, I won't be turning it around to come fetch you afterwards. So please stop redecorating the walls. You're scaring the children."

"I thought it was pretty cool, actually," Peter said, and they both looked up to see him hanging out of the ceiling duct Stephen had gestured to not a moment ago. "Can you make that one you were using yesterday? The one shaped like a disc?"
Tony watched in silence while Stephen did so, molding an expanse of bright orange energy until a flat circle sat atop his palm.

"That would make an insane Frisbee," Peter said leadingly.

Stephen blinked, gently lobbing the disc in the air until it hung suspended on a fingertip. "Interesting. I've never used it for that purpose before."

Peter dropped down, a full twenty-five feet, and landed lightly on his toes. Tony's joints gibbered enviously. "Can we?"

"If you were eavesdropping, then you must've heard the part where I said 'slow down, Stephen'," Tony remarked. "I realize that's easily confused with 'show us more magic', but if you want I could point out the subtle differences for you."

"Well, I mean," Peter said cheerfully. "Frisbee would be taking it slow. In comparison."

Which was true enough, really. Tony considered this, turning to Stephen. In response, the sorcerer plucked the disc up with one hand and tossed it easily at Peter.

Who went flying with concussive force at the point of impact.

Thankfully, Peter was a born acrobat. He spun in an aerial dive and caught up against the side of a nearby storage container. His feet skidded along it until he managed a full stop, one hand down for balance and the other braced on a hinge. The disc had vanished.

"Wow," Peter said, breathlessly, while the two adults stared. He straightened up and took three steps forward, confusing Tony's eyes by walking perpendicular to the floor. "That was awesome! Was it supposed to do that?"

Stephen was halfway to standing, one knee on top of his perch and one foot hovering in midair. "No." He sank down again, frowning, and amended: "Well, yes. It's originally designed as an offensive spell. A chakram."

"A what?" Peter asked eagerly, hopping back down to the ground and bounding over. "A chakra? I've heard of those."

Stephen looked like he deeply regretted everything about this conversation. He sighed. "A chakram was a circular weapon, originally used in India and parts of Asia. A spell was first modelled after it in 251 A.D. I suppose weapons shouldn't be used as toys." He gestured at Peter. "Clearly we'll have to come up with some other form of entertainment."

"Actually, this might be exactly what you need," Tony said, silently analyzing the energy pattern that had turned Peter into a flying arachnid. "Presumably the trick is to focus on finesse, not brute force. Not a bad thing to rehearse while you're still in recovery." Stephen turned toward him skeptically. Tony shrugged. "My repulsors can kill with a high enough power draw, but I usually only run them at minimal capacity."

Skepticism gave way to curiosity. "Interesting. Theoretically, the spell has a low power threshold, but it's traditionally cast using more rather than less."

"Casting spells," Tony bemoaned. "My God, it hurts my brain. Please can we not call it that."

Stephen had a very odd smile on his face, almost nostalgic, certainly mischievous.
"What?" Tony asked warily.

"Nothing," Stephen said, and tossed a new disc at him.

Tony would never admit it out loud, but he had more fun that day than he'd had in a very long time. Certainly longer than their voyage into space. He could trace things back almost as far as Sokovia, actually, after which some very dark days had loomed. He'd been part of a team, before that; a team relatively undivided. He'd worked toward common goals and had equals, even (possibly) superiors, both intellectual and physical. The Avengers had at one time been more than a set of individuals drawn together, extraordinary though each of them may have been alone. They'd been friends.

He hadn't realized quite how much he'd missed that.

Tony took two days of solitude afterward, long enough to let old wounds scar back over again. He'd been without the original Avengers for a long time, now. He was familiar with going it alone, and he needed to remember why he couldn't get used to it being otherwise.

And he had other things to keep him occupied, anyway.

"FRIDAY, tell me I'm reading that wrong."

"I don't think so, boss."

Tony stared at the life support readouts. A few of them were hovering alarmingly close to some pretty unmistakable red lines. "How are three people consuming that much of the ship's raw materials? Technology at this level should be basically self-sustaining."

"The ship recycles and purifies most of the oxygen, nitrogen, and water content onboard. However, there was a large drop in supply upon our arrival, and I'm reading significant damage to the main systems."

Tony nudged the readouts aside. "What are you saying, FRI? That blowing holes in ships isn't good for their interior function and decor?" He sighed. "No good deed goes unpunished, I guess. Looks like we'll have to make a milk run if we want to keep up that pesky human habit of breathing."

"The ship will also need a maintenance cycle in order to maintain ideal living conditions. I anticipate requiring a full forty-eight hours. Life support will need to be disengaged throughout."

Tony pulled up a navigation screen. "I think we passed the last gas station somewhere between Luhman and Alpha Centauri. Have you been keeping an eye out for corner stores, FRI?"

"Unfortunately not, boss."

Tony picked up a spanner to toss from hand to hand. "Search our current coordinates against the ship's star charts. Any likely planetary candidates nearby we could pay a visit to?"

"None immediately local," FRIDAY said. "However, there is a K-type star in a neighbouring system, and an M-type star three days away." She loaded the corresponding maps, superimposing two divergent course markers in green. The stars blinked like beacons. "Both are noted as having planets in the habitable zone with oxygen-based atmospheres."

"Are any of the planets inhabited?" Tony asked.

"The K-type star has two planets with signs of life."
"Humanoid or animal?"

"One of them is noted as humanoid, developmental stage unknown. The other has no records."

Tony flipped the wrench over to scratch idly at the back of his neck. He weighed the odds of them making it out of an inhabited star system if that system should, for example, take offense to their dropping by. There was also the very real possibility that at this point in the game Thanos would be watching for them closely. It was more than likely he’d have stationed hostile eyes and ears in any inhabited system he knew about, and at this point they had to assume he knew them all.

Decisions, decisions.

"FRIDAY," Tony said eventually, "what do the life signs look like in the M-type system?"

"No habitation on record."

"Send us there, then." An idea occurred to Tony, suddenly, and he held up a hand. "No, wait. Ask the doc to come see me before we course correct."

FRIDAY paused. "Boss?"

"If we’re going to do a drive-by, the least the time-travelling wizard can do is tell us is what star systems to avoid."

"If you say so, boss. I will request Doctor's Strange's presence."

"Keep those scans running, FRI."

Tony occupied himself waiting by repairing one of the atmospheric intake manifolds. From the state of engineering, it was clear maintenance workers were few and far between in Thanos' army. It made Tony's soul hurt to see the unhealthy particulate buildup on the vents.

Tony was up to his neck in electronics when the door eventually slid open.

"Hey, doc," he called, wincing at the resonant echo that followed. He popped his head out from under the guts of a console. "Welcome to my humble abode."

Stephen looked around, curiously taking in the layout of engineering. It occurred to Tony the man hadn't been down here before.

"What's wrong, Stephen?" he asked, wiping his hands on a nearby rag. "You been shut up in your monastery so long you forgot what technology looked like?"

"It isn't as far off the grid as you'd imagine," Stephen said absently, still taking everything in. "Even had WIFI. Spotty reception in Kathmandu though."

"That's what happens when you courier it in by donkey."

Stephen huffed, trailing one hand along an instrument panel. "Have you finished translating the alien language yet?"

"Nah," Tony said. "That's still as spotty as your WIFI reception. Don't suppose you could help with that?"

Stephen shook his head. "Memorization is just replication. That's not enough for true understanding."
Tony scowled. "That didn't seem to stop you trying to rewrite the course of this ship."

"I needed a way to capture your attention," Stephen admitted candidly. "Preferably a way that didn't involve a direct confrontation between us. You were unexpectedly further ahead of me than I was prepared for, especially given I could see the future and you couldn't."

That sounded suspiciously like a backwards compliment and set all Tony's red flags to waving.

"Speaking of the future," he said, standing up and brushing himself off. "Need your opinion on something. Well, need might be a strong word."

Stephen raised both eyebrows. "Yes?"

"We need to find a likely star system with a planet that has an oxygen-rich atmosphere. We would've had to do this in basically every timeline, unless something happened to us or to the ship before we could accomplish it. Where do we normally stop off that doesn't see us captured?"

Stephen hesitated, just slightly, and Tony watched him through narrow eyes. But the man was perfectly sincere when he said: "I don't know."

Tony grinned skeptically. "You don't know? What, did I lock you up in the broom closet before? Only let you out for bathroom breaks and weekend visitation?"

"Remember that for a number of those futures I was dead," Stephen said dryly. "I have a limited understanding of astrological features. I wouldn't know how to begin directing you."

Tony felt his paranoia take a brief sabbatical. "Alright, then describe it for me, down to the atmospheric components and any sentient or non-sentient life forms we encountered. Geological features might also be helpful. If there's a rock wall we had to climb over, I want to know about it."

Stephen shook his head. "I can't describe any people. We never encountered any on the first planet."

"The second?"

"Sometimes on the second."

"Fair enough. The atmosphere?"

Stephen blinked, considering. "There was always a hell of a lot of rain."

"Perfect. FRIDAY, input the course for the M-type."

"Yes, boss."

Tony handed Stephen one of the spanners and slid in behind the main console. The sorcerer looked at it in question while Tony ducked down to start ripping out the alien equivalent of fiber optic cables. "Hang onto that for me, would you?"

"What exactly are you doing?" Stephen asked, stepping closer. Tony realized the man's imposing height with some surprise. He had several inches on Tony, easily, and was probably a smidge taller than Pepper in her heels. Tony had always appreciated tall people.

"Science," Tony replied, skirting to the side. "This ship is woefully in need of some tender loving care. Thankfully we have nothing but time right now." He tossed a handful of scrap over his shoulder. "FRIDAY told me you and the kid were practicing Frisbee again earlier. How'd that go?"
"Well enough," Stephen said, taking a step back. "My fine control is improving. Peter makes an ideal candidate to practice with. He has a strong intuitive grasp of the basic containment and transfer of energy involved." Stephen had a speculative look on his face. He quirked a smile when Tony turned to look at him. "It's possible he might even have an aptitude for magic himself."

"What?" Tony took the spanner from Stephen just so he could shake it at him. "Don't tell him that. The kid has enough enhancements. He's a walking, talking younger version of Cap. Even has the bright-eyed optimism and desire to help old ladies cross the street. He doesn't need lasers and he certainly doesn't need magic. Keep your mystic mumbo-jumbo to yourself." He smirked. "Unless it's to give me stock market tips."

"I'd be willing to provide those if you turn the ship around."

Tony snorted scornfully. "It's like you're not even trying anymore. Has that ever actually worked?"

"No," Stephen admitted, looking gallyingly amused. "But if you're curious, there are futures where you turn us around."

Tony couldn't see any sign of a lie. He laughed, even though it wasn't funny. "I doubt that highly."

"They exist. I could never figure out what changed your mind, so at first I just waited. I thought you might do it the first week. And then I thought, the second; then the third. But you didn't."

"Yeah, pretty sure the turnoff for Earth was a couple light years back."

"You're that determined to keep the stone away from him."

"I hope you are too, Stephen," Tony said, low and harsh. "I didn't throw away all our lives just for you to waltz up and hand it to him when he does catch up with us. You better be prepared to run for your life or die trying."

"So you do think he'll catch us," Stephen said, soundly oddly satisfied.

Tony crossed his arms in a way that was obviously not defensive. "Of course he'll catch us. The guy's been slaughtering civilizations probably as long as we've been alive. Maybe longer. If he's making this move now, it's because he's confident he can't lose."

"Then why run at all?"

"The longer we run, the better the odds of someone throwing a wrench in his plans. It might even be us." Tony mimed throwing the spanner to demonstrate. "Are you saying we need to turn around to win?"

Tony waited, every instinct on high alert. Stephen looked at him inscrutably for what seemed like a long time.

"No," he said eventually. "That's not what I'm saying."

"Good. Besides, no need to make any hasty decisions." Tony shrugged and pointed at the pendant the other man wore. "I'm still prepared to kill you to destroy that stone if I have to."

Stephen shook his head. "If I die, the kill-switch on the Eye will explode with enough force to destroy any living being within the vicinity. But the stone will survive. It's not possible to destroy it. It can't be done."
"You don't know -"

"I do know," Stephen interrupted. "You were wrong. It's been tried."

Tony twitched in surprise. "What? Really?" He scowled. "And you're just telling me this now? Why didn't you say anything about that before? What if you'd died during the surgery?"

"I didn't know if I could trust you before," Stephen said simply. "I deactivated it before we put in the emitter. Just in case."

Which was, Tony reflected, almost depressingly practical of the man.

"There's a historical anecdote," Stephen continued. "In the book of Cagliostro; an account of Agamotto's discovery and use of the Time Stone. He was the first Sorcerer Supreme. For many years he used the stone to perform extraordinary feats of magic and temporal manipulation." His lips twisted into a bitter smile. "One time it went wrong. A great cataclysm approached two civilizations, but only one of them was in danger of extinction. In trying to save the other, he set in motion a sequence of events that swept away both. Agamotto declared that control over time was too powerful for any one person to have. He tried many times to destroy the stone, and only constructed the Eye when it became clear it couldn't be done."

"What did he try?" Tony asked suspiciously.

"The book doesn't detail his attempts, but it does describe the only way to destroy an infinity stone," Stephen said. "A stone can be shattered if it's overwhelmed with another power of similar affinity. The Power Stone might be destroyed using enough raw power, for example." He paused, expectantly. Tony stared at him.

"What source of temporal power do you imagine could overwhelm the Time Stone?" Stephen asked, almost politely.

Tony snarled.

"I don't know the answer either," Stephen admitted. "I'm not sure if you ever found one, even when I gave it to you to examine."

"You gave it to me," Tony repeated incredulously. "Just like that."

"Just like that."

"Why?"

Stephen almost smiled, just a small twitch in the corner of his mouth. "Is it really so hard to imagine there might come a time where I trust you to hold it in keeping?"

"Frankly? Yes."

Stephen looked away. "Then perhaps this won't be a universe where we develop that dynamic." He had an odd, almost whimsical look on his face that did something very uncomfortable to Tony's gut. "But I hope it is."

"You don't even know me," Tony said scornfully. He clenched the fingers of one hand together tightly enough to feel the grind of the bones. "You don't want to know me."

"Would you like to know me?" Stephen asked, distant and enigmatic.
Tony was reminded how strikingly blue his eyes were. "I haven't decided yet."

"Do let me know when you have," Stephen requested casually. "Also, you realize telling me you might still kill me puts you at a disadvantage?"

"Is this the part where we have a pissing contest to see who can get it further?" Tony asked, more at ease with this familiar, barbed interaction. "Because I've seen yours, and I'll assume by now you've probably seen mine."

Stephen smirked. "You haven't seen all of mine."

"You saying you have the fastest gun in the west?" Tony asked, raising a hand in mock preparation for a repulsor. "Do we finally get to have that duel?"

In answer, Stephen threw a power disc at him. Tony hadn't even seen him conjure it. He barely managed to dodge. As it was, the disc brushed with a static crackle across his wrist before it dissipated against the console. The sting of heat it left behind felt like a tongue of fire.

Tony had meant the repulsor as an empty threat, but he raised it fully-formed to face Stephen.

"Hey," he said grimly, the whine of the power draw undercutting his words. "Watch it."

"I always draw faster," the sorcerer commented matter-of-factly.

Tony bared his teeth in something like a smile. "Thanks for the warning."

Stephen shrugged. "It never seems to matter. Draw fast, draw slow; I can't disable you as quickly with my magic as you can kill me with your suit." Tony wondered if the sorcerer had some kind of death wish, because he looked almost entertained by that notion. "Believe me, we've tried it before." Stephen sketched a new disc in the air and set it to spinning on a vertical axis, showering the room with light.

Tony let the repulsor deconstruct, retreating back into the housing unit. "Then why bother telling me?"

"Because you should know," Stephen said, like that made any sense. He seemed completely untroubled, and also completely sincere. It made the hairs on the back of Tony's neck stand up. "Any other questions for me?"

"Many," Tony said instantly.

"Any of them unrelated to the future," Stephen clarified.

"Spoilsport. No, that should cover it for now. Thanks for the magic demonstration and story time. And the unasked for adrenaline rush. Fly and be free, Gandalf."

Stephen sighed. "I was waiting for that one."

"The way your beard is growing out, you almost have the right look for him." Tony ran a hand over his own face, grimacing. "Though, I'm one to talk. I really need to figure out some kind of razor."

Stephen looked pained. "Please do."

"I'll add it to the list. Somewhere after 'replenish our vital stores, keep Peter from blowing up the ship', and 'make newspaper'."
Stephen blinked, puzzled. "Why would you want to make newspaper?"

Tony smirked at him. "No reason."

Stephen had the look of someone who couldn't decide whether they ought to ask or be grateful for ignorance. He silently backed out of the engineering doors to vanish back down the corridor. Tony watched him go.

"FRIDAY," Tony said, finally, when he was sure he was alone. "You got that, right?"

"Yes, boss. Full spectrum analysis, as requested. I will require several more scans to create a full compositional model of the energy matrix. Would you like to see the preliminary results?"

"Show me," Tony said, and holograms shimmered into blazing life around him.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary


The pretty yellow and red planet first appeared on the screen as a small marble, glowing like a jewel against an inky canopy. The marble grew as they approached, thick cloud cover and other details becoming visible. When FRIDAY finally manoeuvred them into a high orbit, the whole viewport looked like it'd been filled with a sunset.

"Is that it?" Peter asked, his face bare inches away from the glass. He walked five feet straight up the wall for a better angle. "That's where -"

"Yep, that's it," Tony said. "Planet XL3S97M. Or as close in English as I can figure. Ready to explore a brand new world, kid?" He watched Peter hop with barely contained energy from the viewport to the navigation console, peering upside-down at the alien writing. Tony held out one hand dramatically. "One small step for Spider-Man. One giant leap for Spider-kind."

"Do you think anyone's ever been here before?" Peter asked, clearly too distracted to appreciate Tony's awesome wit. "I mean, not humans, obviously, but anyone?"

"There are zettabytes of historical archives on this ship and records of thousands of humanoid species." Tony shrugged philosophically. "I doubt we're the first to stumble on this place. But maybe the first in a very long time."

"Cool," Peter breathed, leaping back on the wall with wonder painted across the width of his youthful face.

"One planet, made to order," Tony said brightly. "Brought to you solely for your enjoyment. And our survival. Happy birthday, Peter."

Tony kept his somewhat less cheerful thoughts to himself. Dropping out of light speed to be greeted by a mostly empty expanse of space had hit him like a sucker punch. The edges of the viewport kept flickering into the ghostly blue ripple of the portal, closing around him like a noose.

"The intermix ratio in the air isn't perfect," Tony noted, making a few basic course corrections as they slowed. "But it's breathable; about seventeen percent oxygen. The gravity's heavier than Earth, so for those of us who don't have arachnid reflexes and young bones, we'll definitely feel it."

"And there's no life signs?" Peter sounded tragically disappointed by that. Tony wanted to laugh. The kid had been attacked by aliens already; you'd think he'd have more survival instincts about meeting the local wildlife, but that was teenagers for you.

"The planet has some subterranean life, but nothing that walks on land. We should have the place basically to ourselves. FRI, start our descent through the exosphere. Keep it nice and easy."

"Sure thing, boss," FRIDAY said. The ship shuddered as it entered the atmosphere.

"What kind of conditions can we expect?" Stephen asked, approaching the viewport with somewhat
more dignity than their stowaway.

Tony held out a hand to tilt side to side.  "Depends where on the planet we land.  One side's in an ice age.  The other's a dessert."

Stephen frowned.  "It must have a massive temperature range."

"Oh, it does," Tony said brightly.  "Enough to cook us to death and then deepfreeze us later.  It's not exactly a balmy beach on the Hawaiian Islands down there."

"Remind me why you choose this place?"

Tony snapped an image into the air, a three-dimensional representation of the globe.  A green light surrounded it in a narrow band, like a stripe of paint.  "There's a small habitable area between the two sides with a more temperate biome.  And a chain of rocky outcroppings in the northern hemisphere, basically a continental shelf exposed by water evaporation.  That'll provide us good shelter."

"Shelter from what?  The heat?"

"No, from the hurricane."


"Of course.  It's the only thing providing this world any kind of atmosphere.  What kind of planet would this be without it?  No kind, that's what."

Stephen looked gamely skeptical.  "If this is another attempt to kill me, Stark, I feel compelled to point out there are much easier ways."

"Calm down, Charlie Brown."  Tony studied the patchwork translation of scans on the console.  "We're heading for the deepest natural canyon this ship can reasonably fit into.  We'll be well out of range of the storm."

"And this is habitable?"  Stephen asked.  "One wonders what would make a planet uninhabitable."

"Life finds a way.  Besides, FRIDAY'll have eyes-on in case anything starts to go unexpectedly pear-shaped.  Isn't that right, FRI?"

"Dropping into the troposphere," FRIDAY announced in answer, this time over the ship's audio system.  Peter and Stephen both looked up automatically, as so many before them had when JARVIS spoke from external speakers.  It never failed to amuse Tony.

"How long until we reach breathable atmosphere?"

"Two minutes, twenty seconds, boss."

Tony shoved back from the console, feeling unexpectedly antsy to set foot on terrestrial land again.  He was used to spending days at a time cooped up in his labs, but a spaceship was a different sort of confinement.  Humans weren't made to be locked up; they needed sunlight and growing things and dirt to sink their feet into every once in a while.

"Alright folks, this is your captain speaking.  Time to fasten your seatbelts and return your tray tables to their upright and locked positions.  Peter turned swiftly, expectantly, and Tony fully believed if there'd been a tray table it would've found itself speedily set to rights.  Stephen just sighed."
"Everyone has their gear, food and water supplies? Beach towels optional; sunscreen not."

Peter obligingly held up a sack of supplies.

"Don't forget your tents. The planet has no day or night cycle, so expect perpetual twilight and comparably less light intensity than we're used to."

"How will we track the time?" Stephen asked. "Obviously my sundial won't work in these conditions."

Now it was Tony's turn to roll his eyes. "I'll give you one guess, and she's named after a day of the week."

Peter looked ready to jump out the airlock and take his chances if it meant he could get exploring faster. "How will we get in touch? Do we have communicators?"

"FRIDAY's integrated into your suit, kid."

Peter looked overjoyed at the prospect. "Awesome!"

"And me?"

Tony scrutinized Stephen. He was dressed in his usual wizard attire, with the infinity stone set in its place of honor around his neck and the cloak-of-dubious-sentience wrapped around his shoulders. He didn't look exactly prepared for a few days on an alien beach, but then, none of them did.

"I could probably repurpose your cell phone to act as a radio," Tony mused. "We could use the ship's communication system as a network hub to route you in."

Stephen and Peter exchanged a look.

Tony sighed. "Or we could not do that, since I'm guessing you left yours a few light years back?"

"I do so rarely take mine into battle with me," Stephen said dryly.

"Savages," Tony announced. "The lot of you. Fine, I have a better plan anyway." He held out a hand, and an assortment of bots collected in his palm, slowly integrating to form a red and gold pendant the size of a large, flat coin. "Here."

Stephen took it slowly, warily.

"Relax, doc. It's not going to bite you unless you ask nicely. Put it on your wrist."

"Am I going to regret this?" Stephen wanted to know, but he didn't hesitate to center it in the same way he would a watch, just below the notch of his left ulna bone. He jerked as the nanotech immediately reformed into a thin band, some of the bulk of the disc slimming to accommodate the lost mass. Aside from having no timepiece, it really did resemble a watch.

"FRI, you got that?" Tony asked.

"Got it, boss," FRIDAY said, issuing tinny and metallic from Stephen's new piece of jewelry. Tony nodded, satisfied.

"Interesting," Stephen said flatly. He clasped one hand over the accessory like he wasn't sure he meant to keep it.
Tony eyed him. "It's not a shackle. If you want to toss it and strand yourself on the planet with no way to get in touch, that's up to you. The tech will make it back to the ship either way. Just be back here in two days."

Stephen nodded slowly.

"The ship will stay low enough in the troposphere to maintain network connectivity with each of us. Don't wander beyond the limits of the canyon and there won't be any issues. We don't have any landing gear, so we're getting off about a half-mile above the ground. Fortunately, in this case man doesn't need wings to fly." Tony rubbed his hands together briskly. "Peter, I'll take you. Stephen, if that cloak of yours drops you halfway down just scream or something. Any questions?"

Peter impatiently shook his head. The sorcerer had turned his attention back to watching the approaching ground.

"Good, great. Thank you for flying Stark intrastellar. We hope to see you onboard again soon."

Peter whooped with delight the whole way down, stretching out to touch the air as if it was something solid and tangible. At one point he turned around to hang by one foot from Tony, as ridiculously comfortable upside down here as he'd been on the ship. He seemed entranced by the freedom of all the open space around him.

"Not afraid of heights?" Tony asked through the internal communicators to avoid shouting. He kept an eye on Stephen through the HUD, just in case his cloak really did drop him in the high, sharp atmospheric currents.

"Not anymore."

Tony watched Peter attach the sack of supplies to his back so he could have both his hands free. Tony considered the structure of the sticky webbing curiously. "I guess your aerial adventures are really only limited by the height of whatever structure you jump off. Have you ever tried making a parachute out of that stuff?"

"No, oh wow, I totally should," Peter said. "Can I, hang on, I'd need to tie some together -"

"Wait until we're on the ground, kid. Then you can play to your heart's content."

About twenty feet from the bottom, Tony picked Peter off him like a bug and tossed him into a tree, or what seemed to be this planet's equivalent of a tree. It had some kind of branches and then maybe fronds or something on the end. Close enough.

Peter yelled exultantly as he went tumbling and Tony had to smile behind the privacy of the Iron Man mask. The kid was just so easy to please.

"His is a happy nature," Stephen said placidly, floating down more sedately to join Tony in watching the arachnid. Peter flung himself joyfully from branch to branch, leaving trails of webbing behind him like party streamers.

"His greatest weakness is his curiosity," Tony agreed. "And a crippling sense of justice. It could definitely be worse. Thank God he's nothing like I was at his age."

"I shudder to think," Stephen muttered, and Tony flipped him the bird and flew off for an aerial recognizance.

The planet's surface was beautiful and decidedly eerie. The trees had mostly developed with dark
coloration, black with the occasional blue or purple sheen. The water was transparent when close up, but appeared red from a distance. The canyon was thankfully protected from the heavier rain over the ocean, but a fine mist kept everything dewy and almost glittering in the low light. It was humid to the point of discomfort.

Tony felt vaguely like he was walking through someone’s stunning and rather artistic interpretation of hell.

He soared in circles for an hour, with the occasional twirl or figure-eight, just enjoying the chance to fly again. He hadn’t just given up superhero drama when he’d cut off most of his ties to the Avengers, semi-retired his suit, and removed the arc reactor. He’d given up the less flamboyant aspects of superhero-ing too. Flying had always been its own particular brand of joy.

Tony made his way out to the very limit of FRIDAY’s communication net, a crest just overlooking the steep mountain range of their canyon. As he came over the top, the force of the wind immediately blew him off course. He had to increase thrust capacity almost ten percent to compensate.

"Boss?" FRIDAY asked, her signal thin and reedy over the line. "I recommend returning to safer elevation."

"All in good time, FRI." Tony settled on the edge of the cliff, sitting to allow the nanotech to anchor him to the rock. He looked around him and beheld the landscape of a truly alien world.

Beyond the shelter of their small spit of land, Tony could see an almost rigid delineation of light and darkness dividing the planet. On one side was a long stretch of vast, bloody ocean churning in violent wind. On the other, crags of stone and ice at much higher elevation sat in majestic judgement over the planet as if on a throne.

Tony took a deep breath and then flipped up his faceplate, squinting into the stinging force of the wind. His eyes immediately started to tear up, but the brief view he got of the incredible divide between two planetary cataclysms was quite literally breathtaking. Tony felt like he was sitting on the fault line of an entire world.

"Boss," FRIDAY said, managing to sound truly alarmed. "Oxygen levels are dropping dangerously. I suggest re-pressurizing the suit."

Tony didn't bother to answer, but he did flip the faceplate back up, if only to placate FRIDAY’s overprotective prodding. He stayed there for a long time, peering past the edge of the map and into the borders beyond.

"Here be dragons," he quoted softly.

Eventually he dropped back down into the canyon to continue a more mundane exploration. He took some time to catalogue the limited variety of plant life on the planet's surface and snagged some samples while he was at it. Might come in handy some day; who knew.

"FRIDAY, any useful mineral deposits we should be excavating while we're here?"

"Nothing accessible. There are several large deposits of nickel and silicon, but all well below sea level."

Tony hummed with disappointment. "Keep an eye out for more nanotech materials. At the rate I'm shedding it, we'll have to start replenishing soon."
Tony tracked Peter down around midday and found him sprawled out on a hammock strung between two trees, swaying gently in the light breeze. He'd taken off his helmet and was staring up at the sky.

"Hey kid. How's it hanging?" Tony swooped closer to examine the hammock critically. "And I mean that literally. What's the tensile strength on that stuff? How much weight can it carry?"

"I don't know, I've never tested the limit per cubic inch," Peter said, sitting up immediately. "Mr. Stark, this place is insane. Can we stay for a while?"

"Just for a couple days," Tony said, continuing when Peter's face fell. "This planet's not really habitable in the long run. We'll look for a system with a G-type star next time, or maybe a K."

"A what?"

"A sun like ours."

Peter frowned dejectedly. "Oh." He brightened back up a moment later. "So that means we're looking for other planets, right? Will we be looking for, like, other aliens and stuff?"

Tony hovered skeptically. "What, you didn't get enough of them before? The last two we ran into tried to kill us, remember?"

"But that can't be everyone out there," Peter protested. "Those were just some really bad guys. There could be tons of aliens out there who could help us! How will we know if we don't ask?"

"Look Peter, in this case admitting we have a problem is not the first step to recovery. Admitting the kind of problem we have might get us killed and mounted on some megalomaniac's wall."

Peter looked like someone had just kicked his nonexistent puppy, and Tony's ever-present guilt reared its ugly head and hissed at him.

"I'm not saying never," he amended hurriedly. "I'm just saying we need to be discreet, keep an eye out for hostiles, that sort of thing. Contacting the locals can be step two of our epic quest."

"Yes!" Peter cheered, almost overbalancing in his hammock to go spinning to the ground below. "Whoa."

Tony snorted in amusement. "Careful, kid. Try not to take a nosedive on a planet with higher gravity."

Peter grinned sheepishly. "Right, right. Hey, Mr. Stark?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you think they miss us?" Peter asked quietly, so faintly the words hardly made it into the air. "Back home, I mean."

"Of course they do," Tony said, lowering himself to a nearby tree branch with a short burst of the repulsors. He leaned against the trunk, an elbow on one of the fronds; it was surprisingly sturdy. "Peter, you know if I could've sent a message back, I would've. Not to mention sending you back."

"No, I know," Peter said hurriedly. "I get that, really. And, actually, being here isn't as strange as you might think."

Tony retracted the entire suit helmet to stare at him.
Peter hastily corrected himself. "Being away from home, I mean. I wasn't planning to disappear into space. Or end up on an alien planet halfway around the galaxy."

"So astronaut wasn't anywhere on your list of possible career paths then."

"But I was planning to attend university," Peter continued. "Or, well, college, if I could afford it. May knew. So this, for me anyway, this isn't so different from what I was already planning." Peter tucked his knees close to cross his arms over them loosely. "It's just, it's funny. I used to complain to Ned all the time that I wanted you to stop treating me like a kid. And then you did. Guess I can't complain about it afterward."

Tony sighed softly. "You are a kid."

"I'm not," Peter said, and it was more than just reflexive protest. There was an element of stubborn pride and bravado in his tone, of course, but there was the barest echo of truth, too.

"There's nothing wrong with being a kid, Peter. There's no benefit in growing up too fast."

"Sometimes life doesn't really give you a choice." Peter sounded matter-of-fact, as at peace with it as any healthy teenager could hope to be. But Tony could still hear the shadow of dead parents and loneliness in his voice. "I thought about just getting a job after school, instead of going to college, but it'd have to be something that paid well. May's great, but I can't expect her to support me forever after I graduate."

"Stark Industries is always on the lookout for bright, motivated young eggheads," Tony said, gently. "There's a job waiting for you anytime if you want it."

"No! I mean, thanks. But if I get a job like that I want it to be because I earned it, not because I'm, well. Not because I'm Spider-Man."

Tony snorted. "You might notice I'm offering a job to Peter Parker, not to Spider-Man. Believe me, kid, you'd pass muster with bells on. The fact you can't put down your superhero work experience is what holds you back. Secret identities are tricky that way."

Peter gestured with an open hand at Tony. "Is that why you decided to be open about it? Because it's easier?"

"I wouldn't call it easier when any crackpot looking to take out Iron Man could try gunning down Tony Stark in broad daylight. But being out of the closet does have its advantages."

Peter bobbed his head in a nod, then paused. "Wait. Is that like the superhero-closet? Or is that like -" he trailed off.

Tony stared at him with big, blank eyes. "Yes? Is that like what?"

"The, um," Peter started, weakly. "The closet-closet?"

"The closet-closet," Tony repeated, straight-faced.

Peter ducked down. "Never mind."

"You clearly don't read any of my press. I can't decide whether I'm impressed or insulted by that."

"No, I do!" Peter protested. "I have a Google alert set up!" Then he lapsed into mortified silence.

missed some of my early scandals, then. In fairness, they were before your time. Before Pepper's time, really, which is the more important distinction." Tony mimed a two-handed swing. "I'm what you'd call an equal-opportunity player, Peter. I bat from every conceivable angle. True for most areas of my life, actually."

"Oh," Peter said. He looked intensely curious. "Isn't that hard? Living in the public eye like that, I mean. The whole world knowing everything about you?"

Tony shrugged. "You may have heard: I'm a bit of an attention seeker. At this point I'm not sure what I'd do without it. And while we're on the topic, you realize a secret identity can make things like romance a little tricky? Keep that in mind when you start prowling around for a girlfriend."

Peter frowned. "I don't want a girlfriend."

"Boyfriend, then," Tony said.

"I don't want a boyfriend either."

"Why not?" Tony asked suspiciously. "What's wrong with you? You're a healthy teenage boy, reasonably good looking, in the prime of your life. Wait." He stopped, gesturing at Peter only partly in jest. "You still have all your - parts, right? Your Spiderling powers didn't have any unfortunate side effects? I know some excellent doctors, if so."

Peter flailed at him and almost took that nosedive after all. "Of course I have all my parts!" he said shrilly, loud enough to echo through the trees.

"So what's the problem?" Tony asked. "Shy?"

"No! I'm just." He looked around desperately. "I'm busy!"

"Peter, you can't ever be too busy to have a little fun," Tony said. "This life - it can't be everything you have, because one day you won't. And then you'll have nothing. So there has to be more."

"Did you? Have more?" Tony could hear the kid meant to be defiant, maybe even angry, but he mostly came across as pleading.

"I tried," Tony said simply. "For the most part, I failed. But I told you, don't be like me. Be better."

"There isn't any better," Peter protested earnestly, and it was clear he hadn't meant to blurt that out when his whole face turned puce. Tony smiled, reluctantly charmed.

"I mean," Peter fumbled, clearly looking for a way to backtrack, as if Tony didn't already know about his poorly hidden hero-worship. Tony'd been so sure after stranding them in space that he'd seen the last of it; he was almost painfully grateful at this small evidence of its return.

"Relax, kid," Tony said, as kindly as he knew how. "I already know I'm awesome."

"No, um, what I meant was -"

Tony yawned dramatically, buffing armor-covered fingers against the suit. "I get it. Don't worry. You didn't perjure yourself; you spoke nothing but the truth."

"Oh, man." Peter put both hands over his face.

"So if the girlfriend, boyfriend thing is just a matter of free time," Tony said, taking pity on him. "Well, a bit of pity. "You better be sure to make some. High school first kisses and college dates are
the highlight of any young superhero's formative years."

"Oh, man," Peter complained, muffled.

"Just remember to be safe. Condoms are a must. You have any on you? Not that it's likely to be a problem in the immediate future, but I always carry a stash on me. You just say the word and they're yours."

"No, I, but," Peter said faintly.

"Wait, they still teach Sex Ed in high school, right? Do they still do the condom on the banana? Because that's actually a surprisingly inaccurate representation for this day and age, you'd think they'd come up with something better -"

"Arg!" Peter threw himself out of the hammock and was momentarily airborne. Seconds later he was swinging away, thwack after thwack of webbing sending him through the trees until he was just a distant shadow.

"But we were having such a nice talk!" Tony called after him. "Was it something I said?"

"If I ever get bored of looking at the stars," Stephen said philosophically, "at least I know I can rely on the two of you to provide me with entertainment."

Tony turned to see the sorcerer floating in plain view beside the hammock, legs folded lotus style beneath him. The cloak fluttered in the breeze.

"Hey, doc," Tony said. "Come here often?"

"First time. You?"

"Same. As far as vacation spots go, we couldn't have found a better. Plenty of shade, predator-free, good odds for privacy. Not a soul in sight for light years."

"It's a wonder it wasn't snapped up before our arrival."

"Well, I suppose the planet-wide hurricane might seem a little threatening to the less discerning eye."

"I'm not sure I'd consider you discerning," Stephen said, turning to glance at the dim horizon beyond the canyon. "Eccentric, maybe."

"Is there a billionaire, past or present, who doesn't fit that bill? Yourself, for instance. Though eccentric seems too mild a word. How long were you eavesdropping, by the way?"

Stephen smirked. "I've been close nearly the entire time. You just weren't paying attention." The smirk transformed into a more genuine smile. "All his parts, Tony? Really?"

Tony hissed a laugh. "Oh, come on. I'm hilarious and you know it. At least the kid seems to be enjoying our little spot of paradise. How about you?"

Stephen waved a negligent hand. "It's pleasant enough. I feel like I'm drowning on dry land, though. This is why I avoid Florida."

Tony nodded. "Man after my own heart. Great beaches and beautiful sunshine, but I might as well be showering with my clothes on. I much prefer California."

"Did you ever rebuild?" Stephen asked, curiously. "After the house in Malibu was destroyed. Hard
Stephen breathed a laugh. "The mansion."

"Go big or go home, that's what I always say."

Stephen looked pointedly at the housing unit in Tony's chest, and pressed two fingers against where the outline of the emitter was detectable beneath his skin.

"That's what I always say unless smaller is better," Tony amended.

"I suppose household construction doesn't fall into that category. I'm surprised you didn't just go ahead and upgrade it to a castle."

"I tried, but Pepper veto'd me after I proposed a moat. Besides, S.I started construction on the Avengers estate not long after that. Fifteen acres, and built to house a small army." Old wounds, still tender, made a brief reappearance. "Not that it's seen more than a handful of people of late."

Stephen drifted closer, watching him. "The news could never pinpoint exactly what happened amongst the Avengers."

Tony sneered, a familiar rage bubbling in his chest. "You mean, aside from the obvious boy band breakup over the Accords? I'm still tattling to Widow about that, by the way."

"Yes, aside from that," Stephen said placidly.

"I told Bruce the truth." Tony rolled his head back to stare at the sky, shining a stunning ruby red above them. "Steve and I fell out hard. We stood on two sides of an equation with no good answer between us. That's the long and the short of it."

"Why?"

Tony glared, the rising tide of temper and the ache of old grief threatening to swamp him. "None of your fucking business, Strange."

The eyed each other in wary silence for a minute.

"I think I've asked you that before," Stephen said eventually, sounding almost lost. "But I'm not sure if you've ever answered. Those details never remain." He looked troubled. "It's odd, not being able to remember."

"The timelines? We talked about that. Magician, yes; impossibly magical brain, no."

Stephen shook his head. "I have a photographic memory. Forgetting anything is very odd to me."

Tony paused, his grief and fury momentarily derailed. "You have a - you know what. No." Tony jabbed a finger at him. "FRIDAY, make a note. I know I'm in no position to complain, but I am. I'm complaining. I'm officially filing a complaint with life. This is ridiculous. Stephen, you're ridiculous."

Stephen floated high enough to settle on one of the branches across from Tony, a painfully bright spot of color against the dark-hued foliage. "You wouldn't be the first to say so."

Tony sighed. "Well, that explains one or two things. Vision would love meeting you. He's got an
artificially perfect memory which unfortunately doesn't prevent him having absolutely zero perception sometimes. Keep that in mind as a cautionary tale, Doctor Strangely-Ridiculous. Knowledge does not equal understanding."

Stephen frowned into the distance, lost to something only he could see. "Vision."

"One of the Avengers," Tony supplied. "Relatively new addition, been all over the news coverage in recent years. He was the inspiration for that little emitter of yours."

"How new an addition?"

"Sokovia new. You saw the news about my house blowing up but you somehow missed Vision? Hopefully he and Bruce are busy gallivanting around Earth as we speak, joining forces with a few fugitives-who-shall-not-be-named."

Stephen jerked, suddenly, like he'd been jabbed with an electric prod.

"Doc?"


"What about him?"

"He's -" Stephen stopped. "He's a friend of yours?"

"Friend, colleague, former A.I; some combination of all of the above." Tony could feel the uncertainty in the air, like the pressure of the hurricane bearing down on them. "Why?"

"He's the one with the Mind Stone." Stephen clasped shaking hands together in his lap. "That's what Doctor Banner said. I assumed by 'with' he meant Vision had it in his possession. But that's not true. It's not with him. It's part of him."

"How do you know that?" Tony asked sharply.

"I know because it's a fixed constant, the lynchpin of Thanos' drive when he finds us." Stephen hesitated. "Tony, I'm sorry. The Mind Stone was destroyed."

For long, endless moments, those words made absolutely no sense. "What?"

"I don't know how it was done, or when, except that it's already occurred. It's part of the past."

Tony blinked slowly, stunned. He searched Stephen for signs of a lie, but he was perfectly and unfortunately sincere. "How can you be sure?"

Stephen shook his head, grimacing. "Thanos makes it very clear, every time he catches us. Without the Mind Stone he can't complete the gauntlet. At this point in the timeline, the infinity matrix is reduced to five."

Tony pictured Vision, the full, brilliant aspect of him gilded in gunmetal gray and red, the cape billowing out behind. The Mind Stone in its cradle, the center of all that had drawn the constituent parts of him together. Vividly, intensely alive, and in love. Tony had never been more proud or more appalled the first time he'd tracked him down on one of those visits to Wanda. Vision had learned to turn off his transponder after that. He was always learning new things.

Had been.
"If the Mind Stone was destroyed," Tony said finally, quietly. "Then Vision's probably dead."

Stephen bowed his head. "I'm sorry."

Tony waved him off. "Nothing to apologize for, doc. Not your fault." He felt like his mind was moving through molasses, limping along numbly under the weight of this new loss. "Though this might work in your favor, actually."

"Meaning what?"

"With the Mind Stone destroyed, there's no reason for us to hightail it to the ass-end of nowhere anymore. The infinity stones can make Thanos powerful, but not universally powerful." He trailed off, feeling impossibly tired. "We could go home."

"Certainly not," Stephen said, forcefully. Tony blinked. "Now more than ever, we can't allow Thanos to get his hands on the Time Stone. This stone is his last remaining option to reunite all six."

"You just said -"

Stephen shook his head roughly. "That first day on the ship." He took a deep, slow breath. "You asked me how far back we could go."

Tony felt a new, ominous prickle creep into his bones and twist. "You said it wasn't possible."

Stephen shook his head grimly. "I said the answer was no."

Dread solidified into certain doom. "Then it can be done."

"It's dangerous, probably the most dangerous thing about the stone. But yes. It's possible to unmake the past with it, even the distant past."

Tony closed his eyes. "For fuck's sake."

"Quite," Stephen said. "Reconstituting an infinity stone should be impossible. For anyone else, it would be. But if Thanos has the remaining four stones and gains this one, that's the end. The universe reduced to half, or further."

Tony tried to run his fingers through his hair, remembered the armor, and let the entire thing dissolve back into the housing unit. "I asked you this before and you refused to answer. Now I need to know. In the futures you looked at, how many did we win?"

Stephen pushed off his branch to hover in a way that made him seem otherworldly and far away. He folded down to sit beside Tony.

"I could have looked at more," Stephen said, lowly. Confidingly. "I could have looked at billions, but I stopped after a few million."

Tony waited for him to go on, gesturing impatiently when he didn't. "Why?" An awful thought occurred to him. "Did we lose them all?"

"Surprisingly few, and those usually very early on. But in most of them, I couldn't actually tell you if we won or lost. They all led to a point in time I couldn't see past; the same place, and no further."

Tony hunched forward, frowning. "Meaning what?"

Stephen shook his head. "Meaning there comes a point where I can't see the future anymore."
"What could cause that?" He frowned skeptically. "Can the stone malfunction?"

"No," Stephen said. "There was a point the Ancient One couldn't see beyond, either, a point at which every future eventually converged on a single moment in time. Where all she could see was lightning and snow."

Tony looked at him; at the profile of his face silhouetted in the red pall of alien twilight. "When she died."

Stephen nodded. They sat in troubled silence for a time, shoulder to shoulder. The cloak flapped between them, pinned, and eventually wiggled far enough out to lay prone halfway over one of Tony's knees.

"Is there another possibility?" Tony asked finally.

"If there is," Stephen said, heavily, "I don't know it."

Tony tapped restless fingers against the housing unit. He thought of the three of them playing Frisbee with magic, sharp wit and laughter flowing openly from one to the other. He thought about that never happening again.

"Not yet, you don't," Tony said, and snapped a hologram into place. Apparently they had work to do. "But don't count your chickens early, Stephen. You will."
They ended up staying on the planet for almost a week. Tony blamed Peter. And when that stopped being convenient, he blamed Stephen.

"I don't know what I'm doing here," Tony complained, staring up at the canopy of dark fronds above them. "I don't even like camping." He rolled his eyes. "What am I saying? I actively hate camping, and I actively hate humidity. Someone please explain how I got roped into this."

Stephen smirked. "Peter begged on bended knee, and when that didn't work he made a pathetic attempt to appeal to your sense of scientific discovery. You folded like a cheap suit."

"What scientific discovery?" Tony muttered. "There's nothing to science, here. Or discover."

Stephen sounded annoyingly smug as he replied. "Exactly."

"So how'd he corral you into it, then? By waxing poetic about the medicinal properties of the plants? All lies. Please do not consume or otherwise use the flora on this planet for any kind of medicine."

Stephen leaned back against a tree. "Maybe I just like camping."

"What, a native New Yorker like you? Please." He frowned. "Though you did live in Kathmandu for awhile, with dubious access to civilization. I'm sure that has a way of corrupting a person."

"Civilization is relative," Stephen commented. "They had tea."

Tony scoffed. "Tea isn't even a poor man's coffee. It's no one's coffee."

"How unsurprisingly purist of you. I doubt you'd be so quick to judge if we actually found tea on one of these planets."

"No, I'd still be quick to judge," Tony said. "It just wouldn't stop me drinking it."

Stephen didn't answer, and Tony looked over to see he'd closed his eyes in seemingly peaceful meditation. He huffed and flopped back to stare at the trees again. That was all this planet had,
really. Rocks, water, trees; more rocks, more water, more trees. All very lovely; peacefully serene and quiet.

It was enough to make him strongly reconsider that remote tropical island he owned somewhere in the Bahamas. Peace and quiet had its place; just so long as that place was far away from Tony. Also, if that island was even halfway as uncomfortably damp and sticky as this planet, he might just have to sink the whole thing into the ocean.

Tony began idly designing a system capable of controlling water vapor and saturation levels. He didn't currently have the materials to manufacture it, but it could be an interesting future project for Stark Industries. Weather modification was still in its infancy back on Earth, and there was a lot of good that might come of the ability to redistribute moisture and possibly even storm systems.

A half-hour later he was halfway through an initial schematic when a familiar red and blue form came swinging through the air and landed in the middle of their shady little grove.

"I finished!" Peter announced.

Tony waved a hand indulgently, his eyes trained on an invisible landscape of technology. "Finished what?"

"Gathering it. It was insane," he continued, "I almost got crushed twice. There must've been a landslide at some point, the ground's all unstable along the east side. I was like that guy with the hat and the whip in those movies. Whoosh!"

"Hat, whip, movies," Tony deadpanned. "I hope you're talking about Indiana Jones."

"Yeah, him!" Peter sent a hand swooping through the air in demonstration.

Tony frowned. "What the hell were you gathering that you risked being crushed? Twice, apparently."

"Well, maybe I wouldn't have been crushed," Peter admitted. "But one time my foot almost got caught underneath a collapsing rock. That would've been embarrassing, if I'd had to call for help -"

"What did you find?" Stephen interrupted, surfacing from his meditation long enough to share a look of painful commiseration with Tony.

In answer, Peter thumped down a webbed sack at their feet, the contents of which clanked as it settled. Tony eyed it.

"A present?" he asked. "For me? Kid, you shouldn't have."

"FRIDAY said you needed it," Peter explained eagerly.

Tony's attention sharpened on him. "Needed what exactly?"

Peter unlooped a length of webbing and tore open his makeshift bag, tilting it to show them the inside.

"Is that -" Tony squinted, disbelieving. "Iron?"

"Nope," Peter said proudly. "It's titanium. Not pure, I mean, obviously, but a high concentration. I got everything I could find at surface level."

Tony scowled at nothing in particular. "FRIDAY, have you been telling tales? You said there
weren't any deposits worth digging up."

"There are no appreciably large deposits accessible on the planet's surface," FRIDAY said promptly.

"Which is not the same as no deposits at all."

"Scanning in closer proximity revealed small layers of composite metals, including titanium, copper and zinc. The titanium was the only material accessible without excavation. Mr. Parker agreed to collect it."

"Took me days to find it all," Peter supplied cheerfully.

"Sounds tedious and exhausting," Tony muttered, and then had the somewhat suspicious thought that FRIDAY's silence was almost smug.

"I also got the firewood," Peter said, and dropped a second bundle into their midst. He pulled several dry, splintering sticks out.

"First titanium, now this? Did someone forget to tell me we scheduled improbable show and tell for today?" Tony frowned in disbelief. "Where did you even find dry wood on this planet? I feel like a drowned rat and I've only been here a week."

Peter paused, turning to glance with wide eyes between Tony and Stephen. "But with Doctor Strange's spell? I mean, the first two days was bad, but after that it's been great." Peter looked tragically sympathetic. "Did it not work for you? Man, that's rough."

"Doctor Strange's spell," Tony repeated flatly.

Peter slowly held up one of the branches of wood like a peace offering. "Yes?"

Tony turned ominously to face Stephen. The wizard blinked at him.

"Stephen, what's this I hear about you casting spells on people? Did I miss a memo?"

"Well, the humidity was getting rather uncomfortable," Stephen explained placidly.

"Was it?" Tony asked. He bared his teeth. "I hardly noticed."

Stephen crossed his legs nonchalantly at the ankle. "I devised an incantation to lower the temperature and water saturation in the air. Then I worked out a method of attaching it to an individual's aura." He affected an air of thoughtful modesty. "It wasn't difficult. A minor modification of the spell to cool tea."

"You don't say. A minor modification."

"Simple, really."

"A simple spell you failed to share with the rest of the class."

"Well," Stephen said, nodding at Peter. "Not the entire class."

Tony took the branch from the kid and brandished it threateningly. "Don't think I won't hit you with this stick, Stephen. I absolutely will." He groaned in sudden understanding. "That's why you didn't mind camping. You're dodging the weather. You cheating little shit."

"Little?" Stephen asked pointedly, and then Tony really did hit him with the stick.
"Size isn't everything. Didn't we have this conversation?" Tony scraped his fingers over the branch. It was, as promised, remarkably dry. "Firewood?"

Stephen shrugged. "At Peter's request, I removed the moisture from a section of deadwood this morning."

"Did you, now. And how does one gain access to the great Doctor Stephen Strange's lexicon of dehumidifying spells?"

"One normally asks."

Tony glared.

"Of course, I'd never expect that level of courtesy from you," Stephen continued, smirking. "Keep this example in mind, Tony. What science can't answer, magic usually can. Next time, ask."

Which only made Tony even more determined to finish preliminary designs on a weather modification system. "And you say there's no room on the ship for my ego."

Stephen sat forward, beckoning. "Come here."

"Why?"

Stephen tilted his head expectantly. Tony warily shuffled nearer, angling sharply away when Stephen reached for him.

"What are you doing?"

"I need a piece of your hair," Stephen said, hand still outstretched. "I assumed you wouldn't give it to me voluntarily."

"Take your own advice. Next time, ask."

Stephen raised both eyebrows. "Do you want access to this spell or not?"

Tony silently handed him a strand of hair. He watched as the wizard carefully drew light from either end and stretched ropes of fire between his fingers until a symbol with three spirals formed, rotating in a slow circle. Stephen offered the spell to him, laid flat on one palm.

Tony eyed it with one part fascination and two parts reluctance. "I don't like being handed things."

"Then I suppose you also don't like being dry."

"I take your point." He accepted it with both hands; energy crackled merrily between his fingertips. FRIDAY was streaming calculations faster than Tony’s eyes could follow. "What do I do with it?"

"Put it on your head."

"Seriously?"

Stephen waved a negligent hand. Tony warily pinched either side of the glowing figure, turning it in a half circle. It was entirely weightless, and although his eyes told him it had mass and breadth to it, it seemed to be molecule thin when he tilted it in the right direction. "You want me to put it on like a hat?"
"Yes," Stephen said.

Tony had already started to raise it above his head when a stifled snicker from Peter alerted him to the fact something was amiss. He lowered it again and glared.

Stephen coughed into his fist, but Tony could still see him fighting off a smile. "Just press it between both hands."

Tony laid it flat on one palm again and then clasped both hands together as if in prayer. The spell broke up, the matrix splintering and pinpricks of light sinking beneath his skin. He stiffened at the wash of cold that immediately suffused his whole body and it took him an uncomfortable three seconds of belated panic to realize the constant nag of perspiration and heat had dissipated from his skin. It was like walking into an air conditioned room after having been in a sauna.

"Wow," Tony said. He took a deep breath, and the air that passed his lips was warm, but it settled into his lungs cool. "I'll own it; that's impressive. I'm impressed. How long does it last?"

"It'll need renewal after twenty-four hours."

"You should find a way to bottle that. You could be a millionaire. Again, I mean."

"Magic shouldn't be used for monetary gains," Stephen said importantly.

"If you subscribe to the socialist agenda, neither should medicine. That never stopped you before."

Stephen narrowed his eyes. "I'd be happy to charge you for that spell if it helps shut you up."

"I'm tapped out; you'll have to take it on credit."

"Hey," Peter interrupted, and they glanced over to see him standing proudly next to a small pyramid of sticks and carefully placed rocks. "Either of you have a light?"

Tony bowed grandly in Stephen's direction. "Let it never be said I stood in the way of progress. Fire away, oh wonderful wizard."

"Oddly enough, fire is one of the few spells I have a limited grasp of."

"You can change water saturation levels and roll back time, but you can't make fire? I think you're evolving backwards, Stephen. Stone age man would be appalled at you." Tony amicably allowed the nanotech to flow into a wrist-mounted laser and sparked a flame in Peter's small mountain of tinder. It didn't take long for the whole thing to catch, blazing up cheerfully.

Peter looked glum as he sat down. "If only we had some marshmallows."

Tony sighed. "If only we had anything except jello." He leaned over to feel the clean, dry heat of the flames, quite different from the stifling damp of the past week.

"Maybe better luck on the next planet," Peter said brightly, leadingly.

Tony declined to comment on that and silently held out his hand to summon a holographic deck of cards. "Anyone for a game of five card draw?"

"Only if we use a different deck this time," Stephen said. He skimmed one off the top suspiciously.

Tony waved that away. "I don't know what you're talking about." The last set had been a collection of occult cards, mostly featuring pompous looking wizards and witches who occasionally cackled
"Oh, cool!" Peter said, having skimmed off a few examples of his own. This set was a collection of arachnids, and three of them were busy migrating around Peter's cards to create a transparent holographic web between them. Peter took several more cards and set them on the ground to watch avidly.

"Or we could just admire my ingenious tech," Tony said. "That works too."

"Put your genius where your mouth is," Stephen muttered. "I bet one spell of dehumidification."

"How the hell am I supposed to counter that?" Tony drew a hand, ignoring Pete's little holographic circus. "I see your bet and raise you ten nanobots."

"What would I do with your nanobots?"

"Aside from using them to keep you alive and in communication with the rest of us?" Tony asked. "I have no idea. You calling or not?"

"I call, and take one."

Tony mutely discarded and picked up three.

"I bet two spells of dehumidification," Stephen said, examining his cards closely. "And a minor incantation for gray hair removal."

"You're making that one up," Tony accused.

"Am I?"

"Maybe," Tony muttered, and folded.

In the morning, or what passed for morning given the planet had no axial rotation, Tony went out early with Peter to scope out his titanium hunting grounds.

"You weren't kidding about the landslide," Tony commented. The entire northeastern wall was a fallen staircase of rubble, with boulders the size of Tony's car scattered like some giant's toys. "Probably caused by volcanic activity or an earthquake millions of years ago."

Peter swung out and over to a large, secure outcropping in the center of the chaos. "I got all the titanium I could reach by hand. A lot of it was too unstable to try moving things around."

Tony hummed agreement, looking around. He flew upwards for a better view, angling along the cliff face. "Stay there, kid."

"Hey!" Peter called, as Tony went soaring away. "Where're you going?"

Tony popped up over the ridge of canyon, braced this time for the force of the wind as it tried to steer him off-course. He briefly took in the incredible view of the flat, open plains beyond their sheltered spit of land. The distant horizon was painted in continuous streaks of red and purple, frozen in a permanent sunrise.

He eventually turned his attention back to the ground below. "Hell of a mess down there," he muttered, examining the readings.

"The rubble is extensive," FRIDAY agreed.
"Any benefit to us clearing it out? Taking the doc at his word, apparently if we just ask magic politely, it can do basically anything."

"The benefits would be minimal. There is little titanium remaining."

Tony hovered indecisively for a moment, finally dropping with a shrug. "Show me where the copper and zinc are then."

"Well?" Peter asked as Tony descended. He jumped three large boulders closer. "What's up there? Anything?"

"Rocks, rocks, and more rocks," Tony replied. "And speaking of, c'mon kid. Time to go find a few shiny ones for our collection."

Peter stood on top of the suit for their flight this time. Which, while practical, left Tony with the distinct impression he was being used as a surfboard.

They eventually came to a break in the sediment, the rockslide petering out into a sandy divide of shale and limestone.

"Here?" Tony asked, looking around from all angles while Peter scaled lightly up the wall. "How deep will we need to go, FRIDAY?"

"About twelve feet down, boss. There's a natural tunnel system and an underground river beneath the surface."

"Wow," Peter said, hopping near again. Tony considered telling him he looked like a frog when he did that. "Is it completely sealed off? Are we going to, like, expose it to air for the first time in millions of years?"

"No," FRIDAY said. Peter deflated with disappointment. "The system connects to the surface through small ventilating shafts, too narrow for humans to pass through."

"Guess we're lasering our way in then," Tony said, and set to work.

After an hour spent clearing away slabs of rock, Tony punched through the final layer of stone to reveal a cavern of vast, unbroken darkness beneath.

Peter leaned over the edge of the cleared opening, his eyes wide and wondering. "I can hear the water."

"FRIDAY, give us an infrared view."

Tony's HUD was already running, but Peter's helmet had to snap closed to engage his. He almost tipped over into the hole in surprise.

Tony pushed him back lightly with a repulsor. "Steady, kid."

"That's so cool," Peter breathed, clearly paying absolutely zero attention. "Can I come down?"

Tony shook his head. "River might be treacherous. Haven't you ever heard the tale of the Itsy Bitsy Spider? Legend has it, water washed the poor thing away. Completely savage. Let's consider it a cautionary tale."

"But -"
"No buts," Tony said, descending into the darkness below. "Stay there."

The cave was eerily silent, as Tony imagined most caves were. The water was the only real noise, the quiet hush of it moving and the collection of moisture in the air providing an uncanny background for the black. Tony pushed aside an instinctive feeling of alarm and peered around at the thermal imaging. "FRIDAY, what am I looking at?"

"The copper and zinc deposits are located ten feet in front of you and to the left, boss."

Tony approached the wall indicated. "This place isn't going to collapse on me if I start digging here, is it?"

"It's structurally sound for excavation up to six feet."

Tony hummed, glancing below him and blinking as movement flickered over the HUD's display. "What the hell's that?"

"There's a level of aquatic life in the water," FRIDAY noted, new information beginning to stream over the display. "Mostly small stygophiles and stygobites. Some insect and invertebrate life."

Tony was even more pleased to have left Peter behind. "Just so long as none of them are poisonous."

"Unknown at this time," FRIDAY said, unhelpfully. "I'll continue to analyze."

"You do that."

While FRIDAY took readings, Tony started to carefully extract the metal deposits, taking them in large slabs up to the surface for Peter to roll into bundles. It took four trips to clear out the majority of it.

"What's down there?" the kid asked eagerly, cheerfully picking up chunks of stone the size of his torso and moving them into a webbed carrying sack.

"Water, water, and more water," Tony said. "And a few of your distant cousins still crawling out of the ooze below."

Peter looked far more fascinated than Tony thought a few alien spiders and insects deserved. "That's awesome! Can I see?"

"Sure you can," Tony said amicably, and when Peter looked ready to hop aboard Tony's shoulders for a ride, added: "FRIDAY can show you when we get back on the ship. Isn't that right, FRI?"

"Of course, boss."

Tony left Peter to absorb this devastating disappointment and descended back underground for a final sweep. He approached the hole in the wall he'd been digging but had to stop halfway there. There was something occupying the space he'd created. It was large, and had huge, cavernous eyes. And teeth.

It had rather a lot of teeth.

"FRIDAY," Tony said quietly, staring. "What the hell is that?"

"It appears to be some sort of reptile or amphibian, boss, similar to a snake or salamander. I recommend returning to the surface immediately."
"Don't have to tell me twice," Tony said, and propelled backward fully intending to jet out of the cave without delay.

Something reached up and snagged his boot, jerking him off course and into the water below.

Tony was thankful he'd had the faceplate fully up and secured; the HUD projection was entirely unaffected. Tony's heart, of the other hand, tried to slam its way out of his chest entirely. The thought of being held under water in a cave in the dark inspired gut twisting memories best left forgotten.

Whatever had hold of his leg dragged him a full two feet below the surface. Then four.

"FRI, little help," Tony said, calmly.

"It seems to be the same creature, boss. It grabbed you with its tail as you approached. It's approximately thirty-two feet in length and seems to be an ambush predator."

"And all thirty-two of those feet are looking to have me over for dinner. Flattered as I am by the invitation, I'm going to have to decline." Tony experimented with pulling away, but the animal only coiled up tighter. "Options?"

"I recommend avoiding weapons systems down here, boss. It could cause a cave in."

"Great."

The HUD shaded suddenly into a red warning overlay. "It's beginning to draw you further into the tunnel system."

Tony activated the repulsors, coming to a firm and jarring halt. The tug on his leg turned into a vicious, twisting wrench.

"FRIDAY, give me a low yield laser. I want to singe it, see if we can scare it off."

"Got it, boss."

But singeing the thing turned out to be a mistake. Tony'd expected it to let go at the first sign of pain, but it did the exact opposite. It wrapped two more layers around Tony's feet and thighs, effectively pinning him from the midriff down.

"No lasers, no explosives," Tony said, breathing shallowly. "Can we electrify the outside of the suit?"

"The charge required to stun the creature would likely kill the other stygophiles and invertebrates."

"I am shockingly okay with that."

"Have you tried talking to it?" Peter asked. "Maybe it'll talk back. The last alien looked like a squid, and he definitely talked."

Tony glared into the HUD. "You better not have hopped into the cave, Peter. If you have, I'm going to ground you forever."

"I heard you crash into the water," Peter said, far too cheerfully. "Thought you might need a hand. FRIDAY patched me in. So, do you? Need a hand?"
"No."

"Any assistance would be appreciated," FRIDAY said.

Tony heard the kid make a low, considering noise. "Wow, that thing really has a hold of you. Oh my God, it's huge. Do snakes get this big on Earth or is it just an alien thing?"

"The reticulated python can grow to a similar length," FRIDAY offered helpfully.

"Wow." Peter seemed suitably impressed. And then: "It has so many teeth."

Tony felt the first niggling tingles of worry. "Why are you close enough to admire its teeth? Who even admires teeth? Why is that a thing?"

"It's not. I'm not," Peter protested. "I'm just saying. It has a lot."

"Keep your distance, kid. The last thing we need is for Stephen to be patching you up because you got bitten by some bacteria-ridden alien reptile."

"I'm being careful. I have the helmet on," Peter promised, which was of course not the same as keeping his distance. "How did this thing get so big living in a cave?"

Tony felt the maybe-snake turn him sideways and then upside down, it's grip still solid and immovable. "It probably didn't," Tony said. "Not entirely. It must get in and out of the tunnels from the ocean. The vibrations from my excavation probably attracted it."

"This planet is so cool," Peter announced, which was easy enough for him to say. He wasn't on the menu as dinner for their new alien friend. "Okay, I think I got it."

"Got what?"

Tony lost anything else he might have said, because at that moment the alien-reptile-snake-thing started to thrash, taking Tony on a dizzying ride with it. "Whoa. Whoa, Nelly! What the fuck did you do, kid?" He could feel his teeth rattle in his head as it swung him into the side of the cave wall. "Bad snake. Sit, boy. Roll over. Play dead. Bad snake."

"I got him. He's all webbed up now," Peter said, and the whole thing shuddered into unwilling stillness. Then strong fingers began prising the coils off Tony, one inch at a time.

"Are you in the water?" Tony asked, seething. "Of course you are. You're in the water. Get out of the water right now, Peter."

"How else could I get you free? I mean, even if it talks, I don't think it's going to let you go just because I ask politely."

Tony growled. "What if there's another one of those things in here? Unlike my suit, yours doesn't come equipped with repulsors. If one starts dragging you away, you'll be screwed."

"Hang on," Peter said, ignoring him entirely. "I've almost got it."

When Tony had full use of both arms again, he firmly clamped a gauntlet on Peter's shoulder, using the other to propel them back to the water's surface. He got stuck halfway there and tugged ineffectually at the two coils still wrapped tightly around his knees and feet. "Kid, I think you missed a spot."

"First you wanted me out of the water, now you want me back in it. Which is it?" Peter sighed
theatrically. He was getting far too much entertainment out of this. Tony would have to talk to him about that. Later.

"Grounded forever, that's which."

"Hang on, I think I see the problem," Peter said, shaking off Tony's hand to swing low and start wedging the reptile off again.

Tony watched some of the readings coming up on the HUD with reluctant fascination. "Have you ever actually measured your average strength, Peter? I have Cap's numbers on hand and from what I can see you have nothing to feel shy about in comparison."

Peter made a pleased noise just as both coils slipped away. "I haven't, like, tested it scientifically. But when I first got bitten, I -"

And Tony had to shelve the 'bitten' remark into a file for later, because with a gasp of surprise Peter was wrenched unexpectedly away, disappearing into the current.

"Shit," Tony said, and dove after him. "FRIDAY?"

"The creature has freed itself from the webbing and is moving away at significant speed." She sounded urgent, which did absolutely nothing for Tony's alarm.

"Fuck it. Give me a full power laser."

"No, wait," Peter said, breathlessly. Tony came to a halt, watching on the HUD as the kid breached the water's surface five feet away, swimming immediately over to the side and scaling shakily up the wall. "I'm okay. I'm fine."

Tony swooped close and snatched him up without a word, propelling them both out of the cave and back into the dubious twilight of the surface.

"I'm okay, really," Peter insisted, while Tony flew them a good distance away from the cave's new entrance. Tony realized he had the kid's wrist in a death grip, forcing him to dangle uselessly in the air like a sack of potatoes. He swiftly set him on the ground.

"Where are you hurt?" he asked grimly.

Peter waved his arms widely. "I'm not. I'm good. I don't think it meant to grab me. I think it was just trying to run off, and I got in the way."

Tony flipped up the faceplate to look him over suspiciously. "Are you sure? Maybe you're in shock. FRIDAY, is he in shock?"

Peter bleated in annoyance. "I'm not in shock. I'm fine."

Tony watched closely as Peter began brushing off the murky water from below, the helmet retracting. The kid truly seemed unharmed, and Tony could feel his instinctive panic start to wane. "How can I be sure of that? Am I really supposed to take the word of a B average Biology student?"

"I told you, that was only because I missed the labs!"

Tony circled him twice, with only slightly exaggerated concern. "What if you're injured and don't even know it? Maybe we should ask Stephen to have a look at you."

"You were down there longer than I was," Peter countered. "Maybe he should take a look at you"
first."

Tony frowned at him. "I'm fine. I was in the suit."

"So was I."

"My suit's more durable."

Peter snorted. "My body's more durable."

"Well, that's just petty."

"Wonder where I learned it from," Peter muttered.

"What could you possibly be implying, young man? I should take away your web shooters and make you walk home."

Peter looked up at him with a poorly hidden grin. "But then I'd have to explain why I was late and that you almost got eaten by an underground eel."

"It was a giant anaconda."

"Right, sure," Peter said skeptically. "Who's Doctor Strange more likely to believe?"

"FRIDAY," Tony said promptly.

Peter scoffed. "But FRIDAY says what you tell her to say. I bet he'd believe me first." He walked over to peer with bizarre eagerness back down into the cave they'd left behind. "Are we all done collecting deposits? Maybe I should go down and get a few more."

Tony flew back over and repulsed a boulder directly on top of the uncovered hole. It settled with a heavy, rumbling boom.

"Yes," he said. "We're done. In fact, seems to me we're done with this entire planet. Time to be moving on before giant, cave-dwelling bats come for us next."

Peter perked up with interest. "Do those exist?"

"Thankfully, not on this planet."

"Maybe the next one," Peter said, far too hopefully.

"Are you kidding me?" Tony stared at him. "Did you not see what just happened down there? That's the second sushi special from outer space that's tried to kill me. And you want to go another round?"

Peter shrugged with an awkward grin. "Maybe we should pick a desert planet next time. Avoid the ocean, you know?"

Tony mulled that over, circling around him once more for good measure. "I'll think about it."

"Wow," Peter breathed, and then picked up all three hundred pounds of the ore they'd collected, threw it over his shoulder, and bounded away.

Tony settled on a nearby rock to watch him go. Peter didn't even have the decency to look mildly breathless at the exertion.
"Remind me not to piss that kid off," Tony remarked.

FRIDAY beeped a gentle acknowledgement. "Noted, boss."

Tony considered the A.I's easy agreement curiously, thinking back on Peter's words. "Kid has some interesting ideas. FRIDAY, are you capable of telling a lie if I ordered you to?"

"Boss?"

"You have the same ethical programming as all the A.I's since Ultron. If I asked you to tell Stephen we'd been fighting Godzilla down there instead of some little garden-variety snake, could you do it?"

FRIDAY gave this due consideration. "My primary function is to fulfill your needs in whatever capacity is available to me. In the event of competing ethical concerns, you've programmed me to complete one of three tasks: begin a full ethical diagnostic and shut down if cascade failure is detected, consult with Miss Potts or, in her absence, consult with you."

"So in other words, yes. You can engage in deception, as long as I say you can."

FRIDAY was slow to respond, but eventually said: "It seems so, boss."

"That's interesting," Tony said, lowly. "I wonder what other loopholes I left myself?"

"Boss?"

"Interesting," he repeated, then flew off after Peter with plenty of food for thought.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Everyone is capable of doing terrible things given the right circumstances. (What makes a good man?)

Tony had always enjoyed the mystery of technological discovery. He was an engineer by trade, but an inventor at heart, and new scientific breakthroughs were of interest. And yet there were some findings he would almost rather have remained ignorant of.

"Run it again," Tony ordered.

"I've run the simulation four times, boss," FRIDAY said. "The outcome is identical."

"So run it five times," Tony said sharply. "Or six or seven, or however many times it takes to find the problem."

"Based on the parameters and variables provided," FRIDAY said, almost gently, "there's no problem."

"You won't know that unless you run it a fifth time. Do it."

"Yes, boss."

Tony paced while he waited, drifting from one engineering console to the next. Eventually, the holographic display crystallized clearly as it finished its most recent projection.

It was the same.

"Come on," Tony said, scrubbing two hands over his face. "What are we missing?"

FRIDAY filtered through to a new screen, a diagram in green and blue. "According to all known permutations and calculations: nothing."

Tony stared at the numbers until they started to blur, until he'd read through them so many times he realized he was no longer seeing them. "What about a design flaw? I know I'm usually faultless, but even I make engineering mistakes once every decade or so."

"According to my final scans, the design was exactly to specifications. No flaw was detected."

"Random misfire?" Tony tried.

"Afraid not, boss."

Tony picked up a spanner and threw it into the corner just to enjoy the hard, clattering crash of it.

"What about a random act of God?"

"Divine intervention might be the only alternative explanation," FRIDAY said.

Tony lowered his head and put both hands on a console, leaning into it hard. He smacked it with the
heel of his palm and stared at the floor paneling.

"Eliminate the impossible and whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth," Tony quoted softly.

"Boss?"

"Never mind."

"Should I run the numbers a sixth time?"

Tony shook his head, straightening up. "No, five's enough. FRIDAY?"

"Yes?"

"Am I a good man?"

There was a small hesitation, barely a blip, before FRIDAY responded. "Boss?"

"I'm not asking you to provide me an opinion," Tony said, rolling his head back to examine the dark ceiling carefully. He felt chilled. "But tell me: by the dictionary definition of 'good', and cross-referencing terms such as 'moral' and 'just'. I don't make the cut, do I?"

FRIDAY was silent for a time, rather a long time actually, given the A.I.'s capacity for instantaneous computation. Tony raised an eyebrow curiously. "FRIDAY?"

"I've screened through all available references," she said. "By the search terms you've provided, you don't meet the requisite parameters of a good man."

Tony laughed and it scraped raw and hard in his throat. "No news there, then."

"However," FRIDAY continued, and Tony jolted. "If I may, I believe your analysis is flawed."

The shock of that lodged somewhere in his chest, just beneath his sternum. "My - what?"

"The initial conditions of your search have biased the results. You've deliberately chosen terms which don't apply to you. They suggest a fixed concept that a good man is someone who operates from a position of moral certitude and applies ethical principles of fairness and justice to all."

"Biased the results," he repeated faintly.

"There are other parameters which might apply to a good man that do apply to you," FRIDAY said. "Parameters such as reciprocity, accountability, perseverance, loyalty -"

"Stop," Tony said suddenly. FRIDAY fell silent.

"Okay, that was interesting. Who fed you that drivel?" Tony frowned at the obvious answer. "Peter?"

"Mr. Parker speaks highly of you, boss."

Tony snorted hollowly. "That doesn't mean you need to go spouting off his words verbatim at a moment's notice. Have some dignity, FRI."

"Dignity wasn't part of my programming."
"Well, that's a character flaw you definitely inherited from me," Tony muttered. He idly tapped his fingers against one of the consoles. "I shouldn't have asked you that. Addressing my insecurities was something I'm sure I left off your programming."

"I was designed to meet all of your needs equally."

"That almost makes it worse. Let's keep this little discussion between us, shall we?"

"Of course, boss."

"Except for the simulation results," Tony sighed. "Unfortunately, can't keep those under my nonexistent hat. Where's our wandering wizard at?"

"Do you mean to inform Doctor Strange? Is that wise?"

Tony laughed shortly. "Of course it isn't. But reckless self-endangerment is my middle name. That's something I hope you never inherit, by the way. Where's the spiderling swung off to? Busy spinning his web somewhere?"

"Mr. Parker is in the dining area. Doctor Strange is on the bridge."

"Of course he is," Tony muttered. He took a deep breath. "Time to face the dragon in its den. Give me plenty of warning if the kid starts migrating toward us, alright?"

"Sure thing, boss."

Tony made his way briskly to the bridge. When the doors opened to the expected view of stars streaming past, the familiar jolt of adrenaline was almost tiresome.

"Stephen?" he called, looking around. The lights were dim, and the sorcerer wasn't immediately in evidence.

"Out from your lair?" Stephen asked. Tony looked up, squinting, and saw him sitting on one of the upper levels, half-reclined against a support strut and deeply in shadow.

Tony spread his hands wide in confirmation. "I have vacated the Batcave."

"The Batcave," Stephen repeated, and Tony could hear the amusement in his voice. "There are parallels, I suppose. Billionaire, fights crime in a mask, has a ridiculous public persona."

"That's not a persona. That's just me."

Stephen huffed, floating into sight as he glided away from the ceiling. He alighted soundlessly on the elevated walkway.

"You forgot to add genius," Tony said.

"Oh, well," Stephen drawled. "Wayne couldn't hold a candle to you."

"He really couldn't. He was only as smart as Einstein."

"Tragically low then, less a genius and more a superior intellect."

"Well," Tony demurred. "I wouldn't go quite that far."

"Wouldn't you? What brings you here, Tony?"
Tony twitched and let one corner of his mouth lift in a self-deprecating smile. "We should talk."

"About?"

The smile became a snarl. "The future."

Stephen leaned back warily. The cloak flared out around him, responding to whatever had the sorcerer on guard. "What about it? What could you want to know that I haven't already told you?"

"Rephrase: what haven't you told me that I could still want to know?"

"Well," Stephen said, "certainly not stock market tips."

"True. You can keep those; I'll take the rest of it."

Stephen grimaced. "Sometimes full knowledge of the future does more harm than good. Especially with you."

"Why especially with me?" Tony asked sharply.

"It's complicated," Stephen said. He must've seen something in Tony's face because he quickly continued. "Nearly every time I've given you the details of what's to come, you inevitably do something to change it. And not always for the better, even if you mean to."

Tony paced some ways further into the bridge, considering this with a sinking sensation. "How and why?"


"And that's a bad thing, why?"

"If the average traveller thinks two left turns ahead, your mind is busy looking at traffic in the next city over." Stephen mimed a collision with two fists coming gently together. "Which just means when the bus hits you at the intersection, you can honestly say you never saw it coming."

"Who rides the bus these days when they can take the train?"

"See?" Stephen turned both hands up in supplication. "Always an answer. You're so sure yours is the only way. You're never quite willing to believe me when I say otherwise, and even when you do, it's only because you're already making an escape plan that may or may not backfire. For you, knowing the outcome is actually a hindrance."

Tony considered this scathing assessment of his planning abilities. "Fine. Let me rephrase my ask, then. I don't want to know about the future. I want to know about the past."

Stephen blinked, frowning. "What?"

"At this point in the timeline, we've passed the point of no return for your condition. In worlds where we never corrected or controlled the phased material, you're officially dead."

"Yes, thank you for that reminder," Stephen said.

"So tell me about the timelines where the surgery killed you."

A hunted look settled on Stephen’s face. "Why?"
"Why not?" Tony returned, impassively. "Who's to say what killed you isn't something that might show up later on? You're the doc, doc. How does it make sense to withhold the information, knowing the emitter could kill you?"

"It didn't."

"It might've. It still could."

Stephen twitched, the red cape rippling along his shoulders warily. He walked a few feet away, outside Tony's direct line of sight. "I don't understand."

"Yes, you do. Prying information about the future from you's been harder than prying patriotism out of Rhodey. And considering who you are, the power you have, and what's at stake, that just doesn't jive."

"Perhaps it's because of what's at stake that I've been silent."

"And your silence is as much a manipulation as your words," Tony said flatly. "You're just as guilty as I am of thinking you know best."

Stephen was still moving, slowly, and from the corner of his eye Tony could see a spark of fire curling around his tall form. "I haven't manipulated you. I've been careful to be openly transparent wherever I can. If I've lied in this timeline, it's only by omission."

Tony turned to him sharply, rage almost overcoming common sense. He had to firmly shove aside thoughts of another Steven he thought he'd known once, who lied with silence. "Absence of truth is still a lie. Well-intentioned or otherwise."

Stephen stopped. "Why are you asking me this now?"

"Something Peter said on the planet. That combined with your little bombshell about your mentor's death. I had FRIDAY run some diagnostic simulations, and the results are impossible to deny. We ran them five times, just to be sure."

"What results?" Stephen asked.

"First tell me about the surgery, Stephen." Tony smiled grimly. "You're not the sort of man to let that failure go unanswered. That's not who you are. You read books just for the sake of reading; for new knowledge, no matter how useless. You have to know."

"What do you know about who I am?" Stephen asked, lowly. "You think just because your A.I picked up some of my biographical information and now we've spent some time trading witty barbs that you understand me?"

"I understand that you spent most of your life at the top of the food chain, second to none," Tony said. "Then you hit the wall, pretty much literally, and remade yourself from the ground up. I know what that's like, and I know you don't get to where you are by burying your head in the sand."

Stephen made a thin, brittle noise. "Have you decided you want to know me after all, Tony?"

"Misdirection, doctor?" Tony laughed, not kindly. Anger felt so close to the surface of him; in their first days aboard the ship it'd tripped him at every step, dogged his every move. Now it came less frequently, but always potently, fueled by old fears and new loss. "That's as bad as blatant manipulation, in its own way. Guessing you learned to be more subtle after some rather spectacular failures in a few other timelines."
"I've made no move against you, and I won't," Stephen said, a seeming non sequitur, which told him one thing: Stephen knew exactly what Tony was talking about.

"In this timeline, you've made no move against me. That wasn't always true. It couldn't have been. How often did you try lying to my face before you realized what a phenomenally bad idea that was?" Tony held out one hand, palm up, and the nanotech gathered in it to form a reproduction of a familiar black disc. "Remember this?"

Stephen reached cautiously for the outline of the emitter beneath his own skin. He never took his eyes off Tony. "Yes."

He started to flip the disc over his knuckles like a coin. "I think we both know what went wrong during the surgical procedures where you died."

"Do we?" Stephen asked, entirely too neutrally.

"There's no way the emitter could've been fatal on its own. The only possible explanation is third-party interference. In other words, artificially changing the design to rapidly disperse and accelerate the phasing process rather than neutralize it. And even then, for it to kill you in less than five minutes, there'd have to be a strong power source to catalyze the speed of the reaction." Tony covered the disc with one hand, reabsorbing the nanotech and then revealing its absence with a flourish like a street magician. "There's only one person on this ship with that level of technical expertise. Two, if you count FRIDAY, whose ethical programming I have total veto power over. FRIDAY does what I tell her to, up to and including lying if I give her permission. She also holds the failsafe protocols for the emitter, and there's only one reason she wouldn't activate them."

"You," Stephen said.

"Me. I killed you in those other timelines," Tony said flatly. He looked directly at Stephen, whose eyes were very open and very clear. "You knew. You had to know."

Stephen glanced away. "Not for sure. I always lost consciousness too quickly to gather any real information, and what limited impressions I made were lost when I surfaced from those potential futures. But I strongly suspected, yes."

Tony shook his head in disbelief. "And you went through with the surgery anyway."

"Well, as you pointed out, in the futures where I refused the operation, I'm already dead by this time. It never mattered how skillfully I lied. You always seemed to know."

"FRIDAY can read any lie or attempt at deception," Tony said, watching the readings streaming to him over his glasses. Stephen leaned back, eyes wide in surprise. "Better than any existing polygraph on Earth. You said it yourself, doc. I have a million tiny robotic spies on this ship. And believe me, in the beginning I had every one of them trained on your every move."

Stephen mulled this over, glancing to the side. To the viewport, Tony realized.

"That's why you've been testing me," Stephen commented shrewdly. "Did you think I wouldn't notice?"

Tony moved, glancing at the viewport himself, locking his limbs against the instinctive push of fear. "Notice what?"

Stephen rolled his eyes. "You're not subtle. Ever since the surgery you've been providing me opportunities to mislead you. Asking me questions that you already know the answers to, or think
you do." He smirked, drawing out a coil of fire between two of his fingers in a long, braided shape. "Rope from which to fashion my own noose."

Tony hummed confirmation, unrepentant. "I needed to see if you'd try to steer me in the wrong direction. Whether I could trust you."

Stephen made a noise of enquiry. "And?"

"Jury's still out. But you're safer today than you were that first week."

"I suppose I should count myself lucky."

Tony shrugged noncommittally. "So, why did I do it? What clinched it for me?"

Stephen looked over with a politely incredulous look on his face. "How can I possibly know that?"

"Because something you did triggered it," Tony said. "I wouldn't kill a man for lies. I'd just maneuver around them. What else happened that tipped me over the edge?"

"Why do you assume it was something I did?" Stephen asked.

Tony grinned sharply. "Because it was. Don't get me wrong. I really was prepared to kill you when I hopped aboard this ship. I was prepared to kill both of us. But it's one thing to kill a man before he can be tortured into giving up a weapon of mass destruction, or even to let him die when I could've prevented it. It's another thing to plan out premeditated murder."

"Learned something new about yourself, did you?" Stephen asked with vicious cunning. "Surprised you could do it?"

"Yes," Tony said, and the word was a knife sunk slowly into the marrow of his soul.

"Good," Stephen said. "We should all know the things we're capable of, given the right circumstances."

"Interesting phrasing. I assume the circumstances were right for you, too. Did you find out what you were capable of, Stephen?"

The sorcerer turned away without answering.

"How much further did you take it? When the lies failed, what happened next? Attacks? Threats?" Tony bared his teeth, even though Stephen wasn't looking at him. "Did you try force, Stephen? How'd that work out for you?"

Stephen made a soft, wounded noise. "Badly. For both of us."

Tony prowled behind him, watching the wizard's silhouette against a backdrop of streaking stars. "Meaning what?"

"Meaning I made mistakes," Stephen said quietly. "I don't admit that often, Tony, so take it as read."

"What kind of mistakes?" Tony asked doggedly. "You've made so many."

"Shall we talk about how many you've made?"

"There's not enough hours in the day," Tony said with brittle humor. "You're still avoiding."
"It's worth avoiding," Stephen said quietly. "You should let this one go."

"I can't. If we're going to keep working together, I need to know. Did we finally have that duel, in those timelines of yours?"

"Hardly," Stephen said, but gently, very gently. "It's never much of a duel." He turned, and Tony stumbled back one wary step when he saw the deep shadow of the man was limned in a ring of blazing magic. "You forget. I always draw faster."

Warning bells of alarm were ringing loudly in his ears. Tony tried to speak, tried to step away, but his feet had somehow become stuck to the decking. His mouth was unexpectedly glued shut.

"Sometimes we fought," Stephen said, fire sparking around him almost lazily. "Sometimes you won. Sometimes I did, temporarily, at least. I always seemed to lose in the end."

A chill settled in Tony's bones and started spreading. Again, he tried to speak, and again he found his voice locked away.

"Other times, I forced you to yield," Stephen said, almost casually. Tony tried to shift his fingers to activate the nanotech, but he discovered with growing alarm that those were also immobile. Stephen looked at him, and he'd never seemed more remote, more alien to Tony.

"It could happen any number of different ways, but most often it was like this," Stephen said, into the silence. "Even now, you have no defense against it. You never do."

And Tony'd been expecting something dramatic, something truly awful, because that was the only explanation he could think of. He'd been prepared for anything from magical confinement, to threats against his life, against someone else's life, maybe even some form of sinister persuasion; pain, intimidation.

He hadn't been expecting this.

"I can't kill you, Tony," Stephen admitted. "But control you?" The sparks around him grew longer angles, taking on the shape of a thing shining with edges like knives. "That's not a difficult thing. I just have to be willing to get my hands dirty."

Stephen studied him, stepping close enough he could reach out to touch. Tony could feel his heart trying to pound its way out of his ribcage as he watched the sorcerer's hand approach, fingers hovering just short of his frozen cheek.

"In most timelines, this really is the only way to get you to stop talking," Stephen said, using Tony's voice to pronounce the words. The sorcerer let his hand fall without making contact.

The feeling of his mouth moving against his will was indescribably awful. Tony could feel a raw, ugly cloud of fear start to swamp him. It was strangely, horribly familiar, the sensation of being trapped in his own body, of being paralyzed while someone pulled the rug out from beneath him. He'd lived this before; watched his deepest fears come to life at the hands of an enemy. Obadiah, Wanda, Stephen; the three blurred together in that moment. Tony was nothing but a puppet dancing on strings, watching the dreamscape of his own nightmares bleed into living color.

"Boss," FRIDAY said suddenly, her voice echoing in the cavernous room. Tony tried to recall why he might be pleased by her voice, why the sudden reminder of her presence might reassure him, but. He couldn't remember. His every thought was shredding into panic. He couldn't remember anything. "Your biorhythms are looking dodgy. Are you well?"
Stephen glanced up as though just realizing the A.I might be on hand, and then down again to take in Tony's still figure with bleak satisfaction. When they locked eyes, though, he faltered. Tony wondered what Stephen could see. Whatever it was, it was enough to make the man look away in shame, the cold facade of his indifference cracking down the center and fading away.

"Compulsion spells are terrible things," Stephen said quietly, and closed his eyes, and suddenly Tony had control of his body back. He staggered and fell to one knee. He could feel violent tremors immediately start to rattle through him.

"The mind is a many faceted thing," Stephen said, almost soothingly. "Yours more so than most. You're a very dynamic man, Tony."

Tony could barely hear him through the roaring drum of his own pulse. He realized dimly his breathing had started to stutter and anxiety was already clawing its way out of his control.

"You always fight it, every -" Tony lost track of reality for a moment, time stuttering by in blips. "- in the end - never gone well for either of us."

Tony's whole world was collapsing into itself, the streak of the stars in the unbroken ink of space glimmering in the viewport. The dimness around him was magnifying the vast expanse until it was all he could see.

"- not something I excel - had few alternatives -"

And suddenly Tony was through the wormhole and he was alone, and there was nothing but death around him. The vice of the approaching end sat on his chest like an anvil. He couldn't breathe.

"Tony?" he heard dimly, and the floor vibrated with the thump of footsteps. Tony tried to take that in, remember that he was safe, that he wasn't alone after all.

Of course he wasn't; the sorcerer who'd just high-jacked his brain was with him. Panic tripped over itself into sheer terror.

"- wrong?"

"Boss -" and there was FRIDAY, her mechanical voice an urgent, broken balm, "- rate - dangerously high -"

"- alright?"

And he wasn't alright, of course he wasn't. He couldn't breathe, he couldn't breathe, he couldn't breathe -

Something slammed into Tony, hard enough to knock him sideways, and the impact was like a punch to the gut. Air whooshed out of his lungs, which reminded his body he had them in the first place, and he gasped in a breath. And then another, and another after that, panting as numbness tingled in his fingers and toes, the sparkles at the edge of his vision warning him he was seconds away from passing out.

Stephen's face came into view a moment later, looking surprised.

"Tony," he said. "Are you alright?"

"Am I alright?" Tony rasped back, feeling the panic dissolving into ribbons of dull, throbbing pain. "Am I - seriously? Fuck you, Strange." He tried to sit up, but whatever had slammed into him was still there. The weight against his arm was heavy. It was straining; it was restraining, it was -
"Let him go," Stephen said, and a moment later the restraint was gone. Tony sat up until he could tuck a knee hard against his chest, wheezing.

"Breathe," Stephen said, and he had a hand against Tony's back, firm and guiding. Tony shoved him off.

"Don't touch me," he panted.

"Alright, I won't." Stephen was crouched, both hands held out and to the side. "I won't. I'm sorry."

"What did I say," Tony rasped, "about apologies."

Stephen looked far too calm and steady for someone who'd just succeeded in momentarily taking over Tony's mind and body. "Some things are worth apologizing for."

"Some things are worth never doing," Tony snarled.

"What, things like kidnapping?"

Tony glared at him speechlessly.

Stephen looked more than a little disturbed. "It's never set you off like that before," he said, bizarrely.

"Are you fucking kidding?" Tony could feel his voice start to steady, the tremor in his hands slowly waning. "In what world would that not set someone off?"

"This one," Stephen said. "Usually."

Tony shook his head. "FRIDAY, lights. Get the lights." The room obediently brightened, and the vice of anxiety ebbed just slightly further away.

"Breathe slowly," Stephen said, clearly moderating his voice. "In through the nose and out through the mouth. Follow my count." He started to tap a hand against the floor rhythmically. Tony wanted to tell him where he could shove his counting, but it was surprisingly settling, so he just kept taking deep breaths at that pace until his vision stopped swimming like soup.

"Better?" Stephen asked quietly.

"Don't expect me to thank you for it," Tony rasped. He uncurled far enough to put both hands on the decking, twin points of cold anchoring him to the here and now. "You're an idiot if you think that's never happened in the other timelines. You're not the first person to screw with my head. There's no way that could ever not set me off."

"Not the first person," Stephen repeated blankly.

"The first, I killed," Tony said bluntly. He punched out a hard laugh at the sickening realization on Stephen’s face. "The second turned out to be an ally; go figure. I still never turned my back on her afterward. If you never saw this happen before, it's only because I never wanted you to."

"I'm sorry," Stephen said, entirely sincerely. It didn't make Tony feel an ounce more charitable. "Truly."

Tony pressed a hand hard against his chest, grimacing. "Tell it to my heart. Two years off my life, at least."
"How long have you been prone to panic attacks?" Stephen asked.

"None of your fucking business. You don't get to ask about my tendency for them after setting one off."

Stephen shook his head slowly. "This wasn't my intention."

"Famous last words from idiots everywhere," Tony snapped. He blew out a breath, forcing himself to look around his rage until he could see the logic on the other side. "Myself included. Caught up in my own need to know. I shouldn't have pushed."

"No, you shouldn't have." Stephen held out one hand between them, palm up. "May I touch you now?"

Tony eyed him warily. "Why?"

"I want to check your vitals."

"FRIDAY can do that," Tony said, sitting back on shaky legs. "FRI, read the doc my vitals."

"Heart."

"No," Stephen interrupted. "If you're willing, I'd prefer to take them myself."

"I'm not exactly feeling keen to indulge your whims, Stephen."

Stephen kept one hand raised in carefully respectful enquiry. "I was a doctor before I was a master of the mystic arts, and I took an oath to do no harm. It took me too many futures to see what I was doing to you."

"Then you're unobservant on top of being an idiot," Tony muttered.

"I admit it was a mistake," Stephen said evenly. "I won't willingly hurt you again, now or ever. And your A.I can tell you whether or not I mean that."

He said it as if he was granting magnanimous permission, but Tony was way ahead of him. He hadn't taken his eyes off FRIDAY's data since walking onto the bridge. Tony gave it another moment of prickly silence before eventually nodding.

Stephen was brisk and professional. "Heart rate about normal for someone who's just had an attack. Respiration's obviously elevated. You're flushed, but cool in the extremities. Excessive perspiration and involuntary tremors. Any dizziness or nausea?"


"Surprise: Tony Stark has issues. Other breaking news: aliens exist, and they really are out to get us. Extra, extra, read all about it."

"Perhaps it's surprising more superheroes don't have them, really," Stephen said.

"How do you know they don't?" Tony scrubbed his hands roughly over his face. "You could've just told me, you know. Could've used little words, even. Didn't have to give me the full demonstration."
"I didn't. That spell can be used for far more terrible things."

"Thanks," Tony said. "Now I feel much better."

Stephen shrugged, folding his long limbs in close. "You weren't going to let it go without some tangible display. You needed to see how completely inescapable that spell was. I needed you to understand why I won't subject you to it again. It's an awful violation."

"I'm surprised I could break free of it long enough to kill you," Tony said.

"So was I," Stephen said wryly. "But somehow you always found a way."

"Congratulations, past alternate me," Tony said. "Herein lies yet another object lesson. I asked for this exhibition, so you get a pass this one time. But we're both aware of the consequences now if you try that again. Understood?"

Stephen let out a long, slow breath. "Understood."

Tony finally looked at the sorcerer, noticing his lack of red designer wear. "Where the hell's your cape? That was what knocked me over, right?"

Stephen nodded over Tony's shoulder. He turned to find it floating there, twitching in a way that seemed almost uneasy. Ridiculous, anthropomorphic cloak.

"Thank you," he told it, and glared when the thing actually folded it's upper half down and then up in a clear nod. "You have to be kidding. How human is that thing?"

"It's not human at all. But it does have a personality. All the old relics do."

"A name, a personality, and at least basic sentience. If it's not human, it's alien. If it joins the rest of the universe in trying to kill us, I'll be really pissed." Tony unfolded himself into a less cramped, defensive position. "What are relics?"

"An explanation for another time, perhaps," Stephen said.

"Spoilsport."

They sat in shared silence for a time, though eventually Stephen stirred.

"When did you first start to suspect?" he asked.

Tony sighed. "I knew something was off when we installed the emitter. You insisted Peter stay during the insertion. You remember?"

"Of course."

"The kid obviously had no grasp of the phasing technology, or the nanotech, or even a basic first aid background to help if something went wrong. But something about his being there could affect the outcome of the procedure. The most reasonable explanation was you thought his presence might affect my actions or yours in some way. I wasn't sure how, at the time, but it seems clear now you wanted to deter me from killing you in front of him."

Stephen hesitated, but eventually nodded silent confirmation.

"Did it work, before?"
"Usually," Stephen said. "You're very protective of him."

"Peter?"

Stephen nodded.

"Well, someone has to be," Tony muttered defensively. "Kid has no survival instincts to speak of. Always getting into trouble. If I'd known how much gray hair he'd give me, I never would've recruited him. I may need that incantation of yours soon."

"He's good for you," Stephen commented. He raised a hand, skimming it down one side of Tony's face without quite touching, the warmth of his hovering fingers burning like a brand. Tony jerked away, startled. "Gray hair and all."

"The kid's a good influence," Tony agreed, leaning warily back. He breathed through a sudden, unexpected surge of adrenaline, warmed all the way to the tips of his fingers and toes. "Or some kind of influence, anyway. He'd make the cut. I wonder if you would."

Stephen glanced at him sideways. "The cut?"

Tony ignored him. "I suppose if I meet FRIDAY's criteria, you probably do too. I'm willing to die or kill to win. You were only willing to lie, threaten, and coerce."

Stephen turned fully to face him, then, curiosity in every line of his face. "Criteria for what?"

Tony shook his head. He'd exhausted his ability for explanations today. It was clear both of them variously succeeded and failed at being good men. Only time would tell how closely they managed to stay true to the course.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Two wary souls learning to work together.

Tony managed to keep his distance from Stephen for almost two weeks.

It wasn't easy. The ship was a confined space, probably medium-sized as far as spaceships went, but naturally too small for any two people to avoid one another indefinitely. Tony grimly made it work.

It wasn't that he had anything against the sorcerer, really. Tony never quite trusted anyone these days, having been burned too many times before. So there was little lost in knowing what he now did. It was actually Stephen's calm acceptance of Tony's murderous tendencies that aggravated him the most. Tony would much rather the sorcerer fight him on that one; then he could spend more time arguing with Stephen about it, instead of arguing with himself. For one of the first times in his life, Tony almost wondered if it was better not to know something.

On the other hand, the truth was now out about FRIDAY's invasive surveillance skills. Tony's paranoia was out in the open for all to see and, shockingly, Stephen had yet to make any objection to it, and even seemed content to let it go on unchallenged. The unbelievable result of that was a part of Tony he hadn't even known existed, unexpectedly - relaxing.

Not having to prove the validity of his mistrust was a new and bizarre sensation for Tony. For all Pepper and Rhodey were his closest family and friends, they believed in a world where the good guys did good things, and the bad guys did bad things, and there was very rarely anything in-between. Those two always baulked when Tony took steps to protect himself; steps like wearing a nanotech housing unit (just in case, Pep), or not operating within any branch of the government (correction: corrupt government, Rhodey). They certainly would've disapproved of Tony surveilling a mostly-ally. Somehow Stephen's acceptance of Tony's compulsive suspicion did more to save the peace between them than anything else the man could've said or done.

It was almost freeing.

Peter clued in quickly to the increased tension, even though there was no blatant clash of titans where he could see. At first he tried asking Tony about it, but he gave that up after just a few days. If he asked Stephen, Tony never found out. Either way, the kid kept any answers he found firmly to himself, and a fragile peace quietly grew between them.

Of course peace, fragile or otherwise, never seemed to last for very long, so Tony shouldn't have been surprised when it ended abruptly during the second week. It was about that time that the engine blew up.

Though, technically, it didn't blow up. It just overheated to the point of melting one of the primary intake manifolds. And nearly crashed them into a small moon when they dropped unexpectedly out of light speed.

"Catch!" Tony called, throwing a sheet of scrap metal behind him and over his shoulder as high as he could. He didn't hear it hit the ground coming down, so clearly Stephen was keeping a wary eye
"How much more can you possibly get rid of?" the sorcerer asked. His voice echoed resonantly in the large, empty chamber of the engine room. "It looks like there's enough here to build a second ship."

"My point exactly," Tony said. "Their redundant material’s ridiculous. Severity of the heat damage, we can't even reuse most of it."

The ship hadn't been designed to stay in constant operation for as long as it had, so possibly Tony should've been on the lookout for something like this occurring. Still, it was clear that faulty technical design was the culprit for most of their predicament.

"Seriously, who designs an engine for a spaceship and then doesn't create a sufficient thermal management system to support it?"

"I don't know," Stephen said. "But I suspect I'm about to find out."

Tony ignored him, grunting as he tore out bundles of unneeded cabling. "Bad engineers, that's who. Thanos should take whoever they were out and have them shot. Hell, maybe he did. Rightfully so."

Stephen sighed. "If he catches us, perhaps that can be your sales pitch. Spare the universe and I'll fix your conquering space fleet. No charge."

Tony paused long enough to wipe away the sweat beading on his forehead. He was probably getting grease everywhere, but he was too exhausted to care. The room was blisteringly hot with the engine panels removed for cleaning and repair. "If this ship is any example? That almost sounds like an even trade."

"I doubt he'll be interested in your expert opinion of his fleet."

"You're just saying that because you don't realize how badly screwed his fleet is. Thanos should be ashamed to be seen in it."

Tony crawled out of the maintenance compartment for a drink of water and narrowly avoided a box of damaged access panels as it went flying past him at eye-level. He looked up to see Stephen hovering four feet off the ground, calmly directing discarded bundles of material into a growing trash heap on one side of the room. Unlike Tony, he had nary a hair out of place, and he looked as clean and cool as any magical cucumber.

"We could tag team it," Tony said. He watched as three rods of rebar that each weighed almost as much as Peter went merrily floating by. "I'll offer to fix the fleet, you offer to do the heavy lifting. Literally. You can lift the heavy things. You have some skill at it."

"Presuming Thanos manages to enact his plan and still agrees to spare our lives, we might end up press ganged into his crew and repairing his fleet anyway."

Tony huffed. "Raining on my parade, doc. I was having a moment there."


"Delusion, inspiration, innovation. Amazing how often those things get confused." Tony picked up a nearby cloth, dampening it to scrub over the back of his neck. "Know what I'm not inspired by? This heat. It's starting to remind me of how we spent our last vacation." He glared at Stephen suspiciously. "How are you not dying in your sparkly wizard's robes over there? Are you holding
Stephen looked down at his outfit speculatively. "At no point does my clothing involve sparkles."

"Obvious misdirection is obvious." Tony beckoned impatiently. "Give."

"I haven't used a spell," Stephen said, coming down to ground level. "I'm simply working more efficiently than you are."

"You're cheating with magic, is what you're doing," Tony said. "I want in."

Stephen sighed loudly, pretending to check his cuffs as he dallied. He had gloves on today, tan leather ones that somehow made his outfit more dramatically magical than normal. Tony suspected a spell of some kind.

Tony kept glaring at him, and eventually Stephen gave up his dramatic posturing and approached with an expectant look on his face. Tony plucked out a hair without being asked and handed it over. He watched as the sorcerer sketched a familiar geometric image, the shape of the spell crystallizing in a shower of sparks. Stephen held the completed spell out, stopping with it halfway between them, waiting for Tony to take it. Or not to take it.

Tony stared at it. He'd demanded the spell mostly on a whim, and at least in part to be contrary. Now that it was down to him accepting it, the moment seemed more weighty than he'd intended, as if by taking it he was acknowledging an unwritten agreement between them: good or bad, I trust you and your magic at least this far.

It was enough to make Tony wish FRIDAY's scans of Stephen's magic were more comprehensive. Maybe then this wouldn't feel so beyond his control.

But, well. No one'd ever said Tony got to where he was by being overly cautious. He took the array of orange fire from Stephen and silently collapsed the spell between two hands, shaking them off as the tingle of dispersing magic spread through his fingers. The relief from discomfort was almost instantaneous.

"Thanks," he said, grudgingly, and felt something slot unexpectedly into place.

"You're welcome," Stephen said, and there was a weight in his eyes too. Or maybe he was just staring.

"What?" Tony asked, feeling oddly exposed.

Stephen hummed, blinking. "You have fibrous tufts in your hair."

"I have what?"

The wizard plucked a white patch of material from Tony's shoulder, telegraphing his movements clearly enough Tony didn't flinch back. He blinked at the cluster of silky strands Stephen let fall off as the tingle of dispersing magic spread through his fingers. The relief from discomfort was almost instantaneous.

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"Huh." Tony examined it, picking out the material properties as FRIDAY streamed him sensor readings over the glasses.

"What is it?"

"Insulation from the wiring. I think." He backed up to put both hands in his hair and scrub
viciously. Small clouds of particulate immediately sloughed off, leaving him in a ring of glittering
dust debris.

Stephen crouched down for a closer look. "You've had your head underneath that console since we
started. Is it harmful to breathe in?"

"No?"

"Was that a question?"

"The individual properties don't set off any red flags. Then again, they thought asbestos insulation
was harmless too."

Stephen picked up a handful, sifting it through his fingers. He frowned. "We should check your
lungs, just to be sure." He made an abortive reach for something and then a noise of frustration.
"Not that I brought a stethoscope with me." He glanced at the ceiling. "FRIDAY?"

"I detect minute traces of particulate in Mr. Stark's lungs."

"Hey," Tony said.

Stephen ignored him. "How is the tissue managing it? The cilia?"

"I detect no abnormalities. They seem to be expelling it without obstruction."

"Who said you could scan my lungs without permission?" Tony protested.

Now it was FRIDAY's turn to ignore him. "My analysis shows no toxicity, though I recommend
avoiding long-term exposure."

"A half-face respirator could be helpful," Stephen said thoughtfully. "Can one be constructed for
use?"

"There should be no difficulty utilizing the nanotech for such a device."

"I'm still standing right here," Tony remarked.

Stephen turned to regard him narrowly. "Standing there when you should be making a breathing
apparatus."

"That sounds like an awesomely uncomfortable thing to wear."

"I'd imagine not breathing would be more uncomfortable."

"Always so dramatic." Tony let the tech flow over his hands until it had completed a reasonable
working model of a respirator. "There, happy now?"

"Overjoyed," Stephen said.

Tony fit the mask over his mouth, reshaping the breather as he did so to allow speech. "FRIDAY,
inform our friendly neighbourhood spiderling he needs to have his suit on while he sorts this shit."

"On it, boss."

Stephen prowled around the nearest console, examining one of the ship's schematics. "Is he still in
the cargo bay?"
"Yep." As the only other person onboard remotely familiar with engineering components, Tony'd sent the kid away with the first batch of scraps to salvage what they could. "I caught him spider-napping earlier. Let him have a couple hours before I had FRIDAY cut the line on his hammock. Speaking of FRIDAY, when did the two of you get so chummy?" Now equipped to brave the apparently hostile depths of the engine again, Tony slipped underneath a floor panel to continue stripping unnecessary parts. "FRI, I thought we had something special. Don't tell me you're cheating on me with a newer, flashier model."

"Never, boss," FRIDAY said.

"I've been teaching her first aid," Stephen explained placidly. "It's required a few intimate discussions, long walks in the moonlight, that sort of thing. Our relationship's grown by leaps and bounds, you could say."

Tony paused with his hands wrapped around a redundant support pylon and scrambled back up so he could poke his head into the open again. "You what?"

"She's building a database of basic medical procedures," Stephen said. He'd folded back into a lotus position and was hovering somewhere near the ceiling. "She already knows the anatomy and the appropriate texts for reference. She doesn't have the adaptive intuition necessary for complex care, but she's quickly mastering the basics."

"You're teaching her medicine," Tony repeated flatly. He stared at Stephen suspiciously. "Why?"

"Because she's a brilliant learning system," Stephen said, almost fondly. "And because I can."

Tony stared at him for a solid minute, searching for any sign of deceit. He couldn't remember the last time someone other than Peter had spoken with such open admiration about one of his A.I.'s. He'd always been proud of them; JARVIS, FRIDAY, even the earlier models like DUM-E and U. It was just that so few others seemed to see the potential, and of those that did no one looked beyond the superficial to recognize the possibility of depth. Tony hadn't realized Stephen could. Most humans didn't want to see machines as having the potential to learn, to grow and become more. If machines could do all that, they were too close to being people.

Then again, FRIDAY had saved Stephen's life. Things like that were known to make a lasting impression on a person.

"Hear that, FRI?" Tony said finally, resting a hand on top of the floor panelling, pushing into the hard surface firmly to still the insistent pound of his heart. "You're brilliant."

"I'm aware," FRIDAY said serenely.

Tony blinked slowly, taking that in. "Just don't let it go to your head."

"That won't be a problem," she said. "I don't have one."

Tony squinted at Stephen, who squinted back. "I can't decide if she's joking or not. That could be dramatic irony, or total sincerity. What do you think?"

Stephen snorted. "I think if you're surprised an A.I you created might be joking, you're more unobservant than I am."

Tony grumbled at this injustice. "Next she'll be inheriting my love of fast cars and hard drinking. Don't do it, FRI. It's a trap."
"This ship is capable of light speed, and we've spent the majority of our time at that velocity," FRIDAY noted. One of the consoles flickered to a navigational overlay to demonstrate their interrupted course and trajectory. "Doesn't that meet one of those requirements?"

Tony moaned, banging his forehead against the floor. "Why me?"

"Why not?" Stephen laughed from above, and the pylon Tony'd been reaching for soared past him and into the trash pile.

They spent the better part of four days with Tony wreaking havoc on the propulsion systems, ripping out substandard components to put better ones in place, reconfiguring what he could, working around what he couldn't. Convincing the computer systems to utilize energy more efficiently and minimize overheating took somewhat longer. Tony was starting to understand the science behind the alien technology, but he was still some distance away from being able to totally recode any of the primary subsystems.

"Peter, hand me that coupler."

"Which one?"

Tony swung out from beneath one of the consoles to find the kid staring at him blankly.

"Round cylinder, two attachments, left-hand side."

Peter handed him an instrument that fit the description. Tony frowned at in bewilderment.

"No, the other cylinder with two attachments."

Peter gave him another one. Tony tossed that over his shoulder.

"No, the - you know what, never mind." He dragged himself entirely out, stretching his knees painfully in front of him. "Maybe it was two cylinders with one attachment. I think I'm starting to see double."

Peter's eyes widened, partly in genuine concern, but mostly Tony suspected in mischief. He held up his hand in a peace sign. "How many fingers do you see?"

"One," Tony said, and flipped him the bird.

Peter laughed.

"It might be time for a break," Tony admitted, working some loud kinks out of his back. "Ow. I can't actually remember the last time I ate." He made a face. "Or maybe I blocked it out. Man can only eat so much jello before he goes mad."

"It's been eighteen hours since your last meal, boss," FRIDAY said. "And I'm registering moderate dehydration. I recommend full fluids and at least a half-ration of food."

Tony glared at the nearest console. "FRIDAY, you're starting to sound suspiciously like a nurse. Exactly whose brain child are you?"

"Doctor Strange has impressed on me the importance of proper nutritional hygiene."

"Of course he did," Tony muttered, quite sure the sorcerer had done it on purpose. Like so many before him, Stephen had gradually come to realize Tony had a priority list in life that put machinery and work at the top, and personal wellness somewhere near the bottom. As far as Tony was
concerned, the sorcerer had no room to judge. From what Tony'd seen of him so far, it was possible Stephen actually had the worst survival instincts of them all.

"I've calculated the frequency at which you consume the daily recommended intake of food and water," FRIDAY offered helpfully.

"I'll go out on a limb and guess it's bad."

"Less than eight percent, boss."

Tony pursed his lips thoughtfully. "It could always be worse, FRI. It could be zero."

There was no way to be sure, but Tony got the feeling FRIDAY's pointed silence was extremely disapproving.

"Come on, kid," he said to Peter, and the teenager scrambled up to his feet. "Lunch time. Or dinner time, whatever."

"I just woke up an hour ago," Peter said. "I think it's morning?"

"I'm in no mood for your sass," Tony said, subtly checking the time. The kid was right. "You'll have dinner with me now and like it."

"Sure, Mr. Stark."

They'd determined the gelatin came in something like five subtle flavors. Or possibly it was one flavor, with five color variations that they could then imagine tasted slightly different. Either way, Tony chose the almost-green-maybe-lime and sat down at one of the dining tables where he could pretend to enjoy his meal.

Across from him, Peter was valiantly trying to be stoic as he picked away at his mostly-red-possibly-cherry.

"What's with the long face?" Tony asked, shoveling in his food without tasting it. "The red one's the best."

Peter slowly nudged his plate until it sat closer to Tony's side of the table than his. "Want mine?"

"I think I've found the first major difference between you and Cap. You know, aside from all the web-slinging, and the decade you were born in, and his general disdain for technology. He couldn't throw away food if his life depended on it."

Peter looked curious. "Did he have to eat a lot?"

"Well, yes. But it was more his generation than his metabolism. Depression-era, remember." Tony pointed with a utensil at Peter's plate. "You like chemistry, kid? The chemical process to make that gelatin is sort of interesting."

"Really?" Peter asked dubiously.

"Scale of one to ten: somewhere in the fives. It has seven vitamins and two minerals the human body doesn't actually need. Thankfully the dose is small enough our kidneys can get rid of them. And that they don't filter through the liver, since mine's pretty shot. I'd probably already be dead." Tony took a contemplative bite, musing out loud. "When you think about it, the fact this stuff meets our nutritional needs at all is weird. Wasn't originally meant for us."
Peter perked up, as he always did when the details of alien life came up in conversation. Tony wasn't sure where the fascination came from, but he could vaguely recall being an excitable teen at one time in his life. He imagined if he'd been abducted by aliens during his youth, he might've been a walking ball of curiosity too.

"Did you ever find out if there were more aliens on this ship?" Peter asked, leaning forward eagerly. "Where they went?"

"No idea," Tony admitted. "Ship seems to be one of a larger complement, designed to dock to a home base at some point. Actually, FRIDAY ran across a failsafe program just the other day. Originally supposed to shut the ship down if it strayed too far, for too long. Guess Thanos didn't trust his minions with his stuff. Though I have no idea what he was worried about; Squidward seemed pretty damn loyal, as far as I could see."

"FRIDAY disabled it, right?" Peter had a confident, expectant look on his face, and for the second time in a week Tony was wrong-footed by someone's reaction to his A.I.

Tony was used to defending his bots from suspicion and censure; he wasn't used to the default response being one of genuine acceptance. It was starting to give him a complex.

"Right," Tony said, blinking back to himself. "Yeah. First week onboard we disabled all the outgoing signals. The 'go home' function relied on tracking the mother ship; no tracking, no return course. Isolated that little gem to one server and then dumped the whole thing down the garbage disposal. They have redundant physical components up the wazoo, but no backup programming to speak of. Amateurs."

"Computers were never really my thing," Peter admitted. "I always asked Ned." He hopped up on his heels to perch on the edge of his chair, tipping it back and to the side to balance it on one leg, full of youthful invincibility. Tony scowled at him, tempted to reach out with his left foot and topple the whole thing over.

"Aren't you from Generation Z? How can you not have picked up a bit of computer hacking? It's practically on the school curriculum."

"Must've missed the lab again," Peter said cheerfully. "I always liked science better anyway."

"Computers are a science," Tony insisted.

"Chemistry's the best, of course," Peter said right overtop him. "I could use lab time to sneak out the materials I needed for my web formula."

Tony made a noise of curiosity. "About that. Interesting choices on the element combinations. The methanol's a bit weird. Why'd you pick it?"

Peter blinked at him with wide eyes while Tony silently finished off his dinner. Eventually he pushed his plate away and leaned back in his chair, tipping it on two legs instead of one. Tony was old and wise; he couldn't risk a broken bone the way the kid could.

Peter still looked shocked, so Tony kindly tapped the side of his glasses, waggling both eyebrows.

"Oh!" Peter said. "Oh, I totally forgot about those! It's, well. The methanol, yeah, it's. A work in progress?" He trailed off weakly. His flush was almost painfully shy and uncertain.

Tony took pity on him and reminded himself it was bad to tease hero-worshipping teenagers. If Stephen found out, he'd probably make Tony pay for it in terrible and creative ways.
"I'm impressed," Tony admitted candidly. "And maybe a little jealous I didn't come up with it first."

Peter's whole face lit up like someone had turned on a light behind his eyes. "Really?"

"Yep. I'd like a closer look at your thought process, if you don't mind filling me in a bit."

"Of course! But don't you know it already? I mean?" He gestured at Tony's face, the glasses there.

"I know the properties. I don't know the why or how, or even when. Organic chemistry was never my strong suit, anyway. I was always more Zen with the physical sciences." He tilted his head thoughtfully. "We need to setup that tutoring session we were talking about."

"When?" Peter looked thoroughly delighted at the prospect. Tony had never imagined seeing anyone so excited over what amounted to school.

"It'll be at least a week before I'm finished with the engine, and we'll need to do another milk run for supplies somewhere in there before I can complete fabrication." He could almost see the joy starting to seep into Peter's bones and continued quickly before it could set in. "Don't get any ideas, kid. Between that and the suit, the mineral deposits I need are substantial. Unless we want to spend weeks digging up deposits on another planet, I'm better off finding a suitable asteroid field somewhere."

"Oh." Joy gave way to tragic disappointment.

"Take heart, Peter. We're bound to run out of food and water sometime."

The kid brightened up considerably at that, which was a bit worrying, really. Peter had some strange priorities.

"A week today," Tony decided. "You, me, science. We'll do a thing."

"Great!" Peter said, once again back in his happy place. Tony suppressed a smile at the resilience of youth.

"Also, in the name of science," Tony continued. "When we get back to Earth, I need you to patent your web formula. That's some phenomenal intellectual property, and it needs protecting."

"You think so?" Peter fidgeted, leaning forward even further, possibly just to show off how completely he could defy gravity. "But aren't patents public?"

Tony slanted one hand back and forth. "Technically, yes. Your name would be on it, so if you're not ready to come out of the superhero closet, that might present an interesting challenge. I'll make an appointment for you to sit down with my legal team; they can give you your options."

"You'd do that?" Peter smiled bashfully. "You don't have to. I never really thought about patenting it before. I mean, it wasn't about the money, and really, who'd want it?"

"Stark Industries, for one," Tony said bluntly, and even though it was the truth, he said it mostly to catch another look at Peter's radiant grin. "Ultimately, if you don't want your name on it, S.I can buy it off you. But you'd make more if you licensed the formula for use."

"You don't have to buy it," Peter insisted. "You gave me this suit! I should just -"
"You haven't actually taught me any science yet," Peter pointed out.

"Because I was mortally wounded by your failure to acknowledge the superior science of computers."

Peter dropped the smile to roll his eyes, which as far as Tony was concerned was almost as good.

Tony was reluctant to insert some sobriety into the moment. But. "Fair warning, though. The most lucrative proposals you'll get will probably be military, most likely offensive contracts."


Tony looked at him skeptically. "You're telling me you made the formula from scratch and can't think of how it could be used as a weapon?"

"No, that's," Peter fumbled. "I mean, obviously, yes. I use it that way sometimes. But not in, like, any kind of lethal way, it can't be used like that. I don't care how much they pay."

Tony felt some small, distant part of him relax. He hadn't really been worried that Peter might agree to have his invention used as a weapon, but sometimes money had a way of blinding people, and more importantly the kid wasn't used to navigating the shark-infested waters of the business world. Thankfully, he had a mentor looking out for his best interests. Two, really, although Stephen could hardly claim to be a successful millionaire these days, penniless as he was.

"Good," Tony said briskly. "S.I realigned its operational model in 2008 after there was a -" death "- change of management. Stopped weapons production. So your patent with a non-negotiable clause on weaponization would fit right in. Even if S.I doesn't buy it from you, we can probably shelter you under one of my subsidiaries."

"You say it so offhandedly," Stephen said from the doorway, "but I saw that press conference live. Realigned its operational model? More like Tony Stark walked into the room and decided weapons no longer suited him."

"Well," Tony demurred. "Sort of. Iron Man is a weapon, and it literally suits me. I designed it personally, and technically that means S.I designed it personally. So there's one exception to S.I's rule."

"I suppose they have to allow their former CEO some leeway," Stephen said, leadingly.

Peter turned to look at him with wide eyes. "Are you not the CEO of Stark Enterprises?" He looked shocked. "But I thought?"

Tony shook his head. "It's Industries, and nope. Do you know how much paperwork CEO's have to do, kid? Was happy to let that one go to Pepper. Guess that happened before your time, too."

"Quite an achievement for Virginia Potts," Stephen remarked, coming over to their table after making a selection for his meal. Somewhat-blue-probably-raspberry. As he sat, Tony noticed he blended more into their surroundings today; his red cape was missing. "I understand before that she was your personal assistant?"

There was no insinuation in Stephen's voice, no hint of disrespect, but Tony felt his hackles rising anyway. He couldn't help but bristle defensively.
"Pep's more than qualified for the position," he said sharply. "She's done well by S.I."

"She certainly has," Stephen said, and Tony deflated. "Considering how your stock plummets every time you end up missing or presumed dead, she must be some kind of miracle worker to keep that company afloat."

"Excuse you, every time I come back it rebounds with interest." Tony drummed his fingers on the table, then admitted: "And I always hold back a few shiny new toys for occasions I need to boost quarterly profit margins."

"Of course you do," Stephen muttered. "Your board must hate you. Speaking of which, I'm surprised they had no objections when you changed the company's business model after Afghanistan." Stephen had a look on his face that was very knowing.

Tony bared his teeth, thoughts of Obadiah too near the surface to be comfortable. "They warmed up to it."

"I'm glad," Stephen said, which derailed Tony's building anger again. That was two in a row. He was starting to think Stephen did it on purpose; sneakily used honesty to deflate confrontation before it could occur. Or maybe that was just how normal people spoke to each other. It was always so difficult to tell, neither one of them being very normal to begin with.

Tony wanted to be annoyed at Stephen's tactics, but that was probably too petty, even for him.

"A patent's probably an excellent idea for Peter's web formula," Stephen said, turning to speak directly to the teenager. "You might get some interest from the medical community, if you speak to the right people. A bonding agent with that kind of adhesive strength that degrades over time could have any number of applications. I know a few doctors who can think outside the box."

Tony raised both eyebrows appraisingly. Medicine; that was an interesting thought.

Peter lit right back up, completely invested at the thought his creation could help save lives on the mundane as well as the heroic level. He and Stephen started a discussion on different functions for the webbing and Tony tuned out the words, letting the drone of their lively voices stream past him. He closed his eyes.

"Tony."

He was floating peacefully on something, surrounded by indistinct shapes, maybe clouds. That was nice; lately, when Tony hovered anywhere, it was in a dark expanse of stars. Stars were so hostile. He wouldn't mind being surrounded by the gentle obscurity of clouds instead. He trailed his fingers through the air, catching on vapour like gossamer silk.

"Tony."

Someone was with him, but Tony wasn't alarmed; the voice was a familiar one. He wondered how there could be a voice in the clouds. Who else but Iron Man could be flying through the air? Thor? No, it couldn't be Thor, that made no sense.

Actually, none of this made sense. How could he be touching the air if he was flying in the Iron Man suit? Or, if he was touching the air, was he out of the suit? But then, how was he flying?

"Tony."

He came awake with a start, instinctively reaching for the hand approaching his shoulder. He
wrapped his fingers tight around a wide, fine-boned wrist, the nanotech crawling out to half-form the chest plate, speedily inching up his shoulder and arm.

"No need for that," Stephen said quietly. He made no move to pull away, even though Tony was holding him hard enough to hurt. "It's just me."

Tony hesitated, the line between reality and sleep blurring the edges of his world just enough to cloud his judgement. Stephen didn't move, letting him work it out in his own time. His stillness more than anything was what allowed Tony to draw the suit back.

"Just you," Tony repeated, letting his fingers slip away from Stephen. "Couple weeks ago, 'just you' was crawling around in my brain, trying to make a point."

"That was a couple weeks ago," Stephen said. He withdraw his hand politely, tucking it down at his side. "And I was the one who said you should let it go."

Tony shrugged. "Fair enough. A word to the wise: if you plan to keep all your limbs in good working order, don't sneak up on me again."

"I didn't sneak," Stephen said. "You fell asleep in the middle of breakfast."

"It was dinner."

Stephen settled leaning against the table in front of Tony. He realized he'd zoned out basically in the remnants of his meal, and in a ridiculous part-reclined position, ass halfway down the chair like he was back in university again with his mind anywhere but where it should be.

"Yes, FRIDAY told me," Stephen said.

Tony refocused. "Told you what?"

The sorcerer silently held out a glass.

"FRI, you're turning into a snitch," Tony muttered. He accepted the water with poor grace, but drained it dry. His mouth felt like a bone yard. Stephen must have anticipated that would be the case, because when Tony finished and looked up, he silently held out a second glass. Tony took that one too.

"Thanks," he said grudgingly.

"Let me help you to bed," Stephen said, instead of offering a simple 'you're welcome', which would've been a gracious and much less bizarre expression of courtesy.

Tony stared at him, the water paused halfway to his mouth. "What?"

"You need to sleep."

Tony finished off the second glass mostly to have something to do with his hands. "I realize that. What I'm confused by is your assumption I need help to make that happen."

"Not at all," Stephen said. "It looks to me like you could sleep anywhere, really."

"There you go making jokes again. Between you and FRI, it's practically a conspiracy."

"Only practically?"
Tony gestured at him triumphantly. "See what I mean?" He started to stand and heard at least two distinct pops. He glared at Stephen, daring him to say a word.

The wizard put up both hands in a universal sign of peace, but Tony could see his lips twitching.

"Just you wait, Stephen," Tony said, levering the rest of the way up. "You're not that far off, I promise."

Stephen held up one hand, the faint tremors a permanent fixture they could both see shaking through the limb. "It's not my joints I worry about each morning."

"You will. It'll be something to distract you from your hands, something new. Won't that be fun?"

Stephen stood up straight, clearly intent on joining Tony for the short jaunt to his quarters.

"Look, doc, I'm sure I can take it from here," Tony said, trying not to feel like an old man as he hobbled toward the door, past injuries and the indignity of age flaring up sharply after his nap. "Where'd the kid get to?"

"History lessons with FRIDAY."

Tony stopped. "What, really?"

Stephen shrugged. "Peter takes his studies seriously. He asked me for tutoring in bio-science last month. And I'm sure FRIDAY's far more suited to handle history than either of us."

Tony couldn't suppress the slow ripple of pride that curled itself warm and solid in his chest. He fought back a smile, then realized there was really no reason to.

"So far all I've managed to teach him is poker." Tony said, resuming his walk.

"Hopefully not how to lose at it," Stephen murmured.

"Hey, I'll have you know I'm a great poker player. The two of you are just card sharks or something. Don't bother denying it."

Stephen didn't bother gracing that with an answer, and they strode briskly through the dimly lit corridors of the ship.

The silence was almost dangerously comfortable. It could've been because Tony was half asleep, but it might also be that Tony was genuinely starting to get used to the sorcerer in his space, the same way he'd become used to other super-powered individuals being in his space through the years. That hadn't always worked out well for Tony. He reminded himself that Stephen was only in his space because Tony had kidnapped him. Then he spent the rest of the walk wondering how it was they didn't spend more time fighting about that. The answer was almost certainly: Stephen. It was a well known fact, biographically published, even, that Tony started fights and wouldn't know how to back away from one even if his life depended on it.

When they came around the corner to Tony's quarters, he stopped abruptly. Stephen kept going a few steps before he paused to glance back in enquiry. Tony jerked his head down the hall, staring. Stephen glanced back at Tony's room and choked off a startled bark of a laughter. Tony blinked at him for some kind of explanation.

Stephen declined to provide one, even though in front of Tony's door, Stephen's red cape was
floating in ominous judgement, a silent sentinel weaving gently from side to side. It seemed entirely unbothered by their presence, moving neither toward them nor further away. It looked like a headless Halloween costume, and it was possible one wrong move might set it off. Tony was definitely not in the mood for this.

"This isn't going to be like a bear protecting its den, is it?" Tony asked warily. "Has it decided to make a nest in my room? Please tell me that thing doesn't make nests. What is it doing? And why is it doing it here?"

"The cloak is a fickle thing sometimes." Stephen looked like he couldn't decide between exasperation, irritation, or amusement; possibly all three. "I'm sure it has its reasons."

"Reasons for what? The hell's that supposed to mean?"

Stephen shook his head. He made a firm, beckoning gesture, but the thing didn't move.

"Wow," Tony remarked. "I can see you've got it trained well. I get that this is probably some weird 'asserting dominance' ritual, but could we somehow move it along? Some of us are on hour fifty-something, and desperately need to sleep."

"Well, you heard him," Stephen said, and he wasn't speaking to Tony. "Best to let the only person who can fix the engine get some rest before he puts another hole in this ship. This one accidental." He beckoned again and this time the flamboyant garment flew over, settling easily atop his shoulders. Usually the thing reminded Tony of a dog, but just then it seemed almost cat-like, wrapping itself proprietarily back into Stephen's personal space.

"What, did you send it to make sure the coast was clear?" Tony asked. "I have news for you; there's only three people on this ship. Famous though I may be, there's no need to clear the corridors for me. I give you permission to axe that custom for the duration of our voyage together."

"How gracious," Stephen said. "I'll have to bear that in mind."

A surprisingly heavy silence settled for just a moment between them, a blip as they circled cautiously like wolves, reminded after an easy stroll and some banter that in fact they did have things to be wary of. Then they mutually took a step apart, Tony tapping for entry at his quarters while Stephen moved off.

"Well, thanks for the escort, doc. Who knows what kind of trouble I might've ran into if you hadn't been there."

"Hardly bears thinking about," Stephen agreed, already starting to turn away. "Rest well."

"You too," Tony said automatically, sighing when the sorcerer laughed. Right, it was morning, and apparently Tony's internal clock was screwed.

Not much different from being back home, really.

"Goodnight, oh wizard," Tony said, and his door slid shut decisively between them.

"FRIDAY," Tony said as he started to disrobe blearily. "We really need to talk about how free you've been with my information."

"Boss?"

"You're giving away all my dirty little secrets."
"Which ones, boss?" she asked.

Tony sighed, the conversation feeling like far more trouble than it was worth. Bed was calling him, and it wasn't using gentle words. "Can't remember. Ask me in the morning."

"It's morning now, boss."

Tony didn't bother answering, collapsing face first on to his mattress.

"Any luck finding that asteroid belt yet?" he slurred, eyes closed.

"Yes. I've located one with the correct compositional makeup in a nearby star system. It should take us less than three days to navigate there."

"Good. Great. G'night, FRI. Sleep now."

"Goodnight, boss."

His last thought was a brief rising memory of clouds in an otherwise empty expanse, and the feeling of flight with comfortably familiar voices droning on about - broken bones and fibreglass casts?

Then everything fell into soft, seductive silence, and sleep swept him gently away.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Yo ho, yo ho, a pirate's life for me.

It was very quiet in space.

Tony'd been aware from the moment he set FRIDAY the task of finding him an asteroid field that he was going to end up in space vacuum. It was the best and only option they had, since the ship naturally lacked the ability to mine asteroids on its own, and Tony was the only one with repulsor navigation. He'd resigned himself to the constant state of low-grade anxiety to follow; really, at this point it was so habitual it was borderline tedious. Exposure therapy at its finest.

He'd made contingencies. FRIDAY had full access to the nanotech, and she had instructions if Tony's brain went walkabout at any point. This time, he'd sternly forbidden her from sharing her readings with their overly solicitous physician.

FRIDAY hadn't voiced her disapproval, but Tony had no doubt it was there. Her silence was very loud.

So, certainly Tony'd been expecting some challenges on this most mundane of missions. He'd planned for them, and considered all possible ways to mitigate them.

He hadn't accounted for the tenacity and determination of his fellow exiles.

"Coming in for a landing," Peter shouted. Tony looked up in time to see the kid go soaring over his head, doing a slow barrel roll and a diving hop to an asteroid a hundred yards off.

"Peter, stop that. If you miss your mark and force me to come get you, I'll be mildly annoyed."

"Please don't," Stephen agreed. "His mild annoyance would probably ruin my whole week."

"No probably about it, doc. I live to make you miserable."

"You do seem to have a talent for it."

"Flatterer."

Tony was distracted as Peter went swimming by again, lazily flipping end over end through zero gravity. The kid hadn't let his lack of repulsors work against him; far from it. Tony cleared his throat sternly. "Spiderling, work now, play later. We still have half a cargo bay to fill."

"Sorry," Peter said, though of course he sounded anything but. He flailed back into a semi-upright position, from Tony's perspective, and crouched down on the first asteroid he came into contact with. "This is just so cool."

"Preaching to the choir, kid. Now start loading up."

"Aye aye, Captain Stark, sir!" Peter said brightly, straightening into a crisp, formal salute.
Tony pinched his eyes shut, sighing. Peter hadn't stopped babbling about captains and treasure and black pearls ever since they'd arrived and Tony made the fatal error of cracking a pirate joke. But he honestly hadn't been able to help himself. Finding an untapped goldmine of raw minerals and precious metals just waiting to be plundered - it'd practically begged for a pirate pun.

Stephen made a noise of consideration over the communicator. "The bay's clear and ready for round three."

Unlike Tony and Peter, the sorcerer had no access to an airtight suit, so he was fully confined to the ship. Tony got the impression the sorcerer rather preferred it that way.

"Great," Tony said. "FRIDAY, start processing the iron and carbon. I want a stock to replace what we used in the engine."


"Yes," Tony said. "Not that you'll follow them: shut up."

Stephen's laughter faded to static, fuzzing briefly as the signal attenuated. The presence of so many heavy metals was playing havoc with their readouts.

Tony cut off a new section of material with a laser, repulsing it in Peter's direction.

"Catch, kid."

"Going long!" Peter said excitedly, and made a heroic leap that naturally faded into slow motion as his momentum fizzled. He easily caught the giant piece of stone and metal and let it spin him into a flip, cheering as he did so.

"And the crowd goes wild," Tony said flatly, though he thought his smile might've accidentally leaked through.

Peter waited until the rotation brought him back into alignment with one of the asteroids. Then he kicked off, zooming back to his former position. "Touchdown!"

"You're having way too much fun over there," Tony said, tossing him two more deposits. "Stop that. It's suspicious."

Stephen snorted. "The number of times I've wanted to say that to you."

Peter loaded the new materials with a flourish. When open, the mobile storage container they were using reminded Tony mostly of a very large shoe box with wings. Peter insisted it looked like a boat, as long as one squinted at it sideways and didn't think about it too much.

"You're about full up, kid," Tony said, watching weight ratios tick up over the HUD. "Time to send you packing. Buckle up."

Peter patted the side of the container almost fondly. "I'll batten down the hatches."

"What were you, a sailor in another life? Stephen, Peter's incoming. ETA twelve minutes."

"Oh Captain, my Captain," Stephen said.

"I hate you."

Peter hopped onboard the container, reaching over to either side to disengage the stationary magnetic
locks. As it floated free, the kid settled with one hand on a hip and one foot propped on what would've been the prow of the ship. He adjusted after a moment to the other foot, clearly going for the most dramatic pose.

"Really, Peter?"

"Avast!" the kid said, in a fierce growl that quickly dissolved into laughter.

"What does that even mean?" Tony asked. "You made that up. I refuse to believe that word can be used in a sentence. FRIDAY, take Peter and his juvenile sense of humor away."

"Aye aye, boss," FRIDAY said.

Tony narrowed his eyes. "Stephen," he said ominously.

The sorcerer was trying and failing not to laugh. "Don't look at me. You created her. I just provide her the comic material."

"I'm going to poke you with so many sharp sticks when I get back."

Peter started humming something distinct enough it was probably some type of theme song. The container he was on moved into the distance, makeshift thrusters carrying it slowly away. Tony shook his head, grumbling as he went back to work.

They'd been excavating the field for almost three days. Its size and the scatter of material objects made it so they couldn't bring the ship close enough to load directly, so they'd had to devise a way of packing and ferrying the minerals back and forth. Between the three of them, they'd made decent progress. Tony hollowed out rock, Peter loaded and shuttled, and Stephen unloaded and sorted when it reached the cargo bay. Their progress had waned a bit as Tony was forced to move to further and further vantage points, increasing the time between ferry rides, and naturally putting him at much greater distances from the ship. Tony was secretly extremely grateful for Peter's playful presence. It was a bright spot on the horizon, a stain of color in an otherwise colorless and isolated world.

The communications line beeped as it switched to a private two-way. "How's it look out there?"

Stephen asked.

Tony shook his head, resigned to the man's shrewd perception. He wasn't sure how Stephen had figured out there was a link between Tony and space and panic. Maybe he hadn't; maybe the guy just got bored waiting for Peter to show up. But they hadn't been an hour into their first day of mining before Stephen made it clear he knew something was going on. Tony strongly suspected FRIDAY's enforced silence had given the game away. In any case, Stephen had been like a dog with a bone ever since they started, rarely leaving Tony to his own thoughts for more than five minutes at a time. Which was at various stages annoying, distracting, and hilarious.

It was also strangely and alarmingly reassuring, and on two separate occasions had successfully kept Tony from absolutely losing his mind. Not that he'd told Stephen that. It was hard to find the right words to thank someone for being nosy and perceptive enough to stop a panic attack before it could start.

"View's great, doc. Black rock, on black rock, on black space. It's a pretty boring color scheme nature's come up with out here, I got to tell you."

"At least we know your armor stands out," Stephen said. "Can't miss it, just as I'm sure you intended."
"Hey. Maybe I just like the color red."

Stephen snorted. "There's a reason people buy red sports cars, and it's never because they like red."

"I notice the one you turned into a pretzel was a respectable gunmetal gray."

"Red wasn't my style. I always preferred to dazzle people with my good looks and amazing personality, not my accessories."

"Why not all of the above?"

"You would say that," Stephen said dryly. "It's probably too much to ask that Tony Stark leave some things to the imagination."

"My imagination never has any trouble. Maybe everyone else just needs to be more creative." Tony grinned as he thought back. "And for your information, red is my favorite color, and I lived up to the cliché. First sports car was this fantastic ruby red; phenomenal machine, great condition, 1968 Shelby Mustang. Really loved that car. Sadly, I'm old enough to admit I bought it when it wasn't quite a classic yet, and of course totalled it before it could become one."

"I'd comment," Stephen said, "but I'm probably not in a position to judge."

"Well, your record was pretty clean aside from that one obvious and spectacular exception. Though I think you helped fund the entire NYPD with your traffic tickets. But it's New York; if you're not getting ticketed, you're not doing it right."

There was a notable pause over the line. Tony raised both eyebrows, wondering.

"Unless there's something not in your record," he said leadingly.

Stephen huffed a laugh. "That FRIDAY couldn't find? Is that possible?"

"Improbable, but not impossible. What's up, doc? Cat got your tongue?"

A few more seconds of surprisingly heavy silence passed, and then:

"I haven't driven," Stephen said. "Not since the accident."

Tony hesitated. There were a lot of things he was good at in life, but compassion and human decency usually didn't make the list. And this seemed like something that probably called for both, not to mention tact.

"That your choice, or did your hands decide it for you?"

Never mind. Tact was a waste of time, and Tony couldn't be bothered.

Stephen had obviously resigned himself to Tony's unique brand of offensive, because all he did was sigh. "Both."

"Please tell me you don't ride the hypothetical bus," Tony said. "Which according to you could hit me at any moment in an intersection. Tell me you hop the subway like a relatively normal and enlightened city dweller."

"I don't use either. Sorcerers have other ways of travelling."

Tony worked quietly for a minute, hearing in that voice a familiar defiant edge, the bloody remnants
of an open wound papered over with a brittle smile.

"You ever feel like getting back on the ground with the rest of us," he said finally, "you know where to find me. We can cruise around Manhattan like rich people with nothing better to do. Well, I can. You can fake it."

Stephen made a faint sound in the negative.

"Don't knock it. You haven't seen New York by car until you've seen it in one of mine. We can spend a few hours racking up new tickets, paying off a few more NYPD salaries."

"I already fear for my life on the road," Stephen said. "I hardly need to make that worse."

"So don't," Tony shrugged. "All my cars these days come equipped with Stark tech, everything from deployable armor, to flight capacity. No safer way to travel, really."

Stephen sighed. "Your cars fly. Of course they do."

"Yep. Tell me you're surprised."

"By you?" Stephen asked. "Every day."

It was said in jest, but there was a thread of startling sincerity to it, something akin to gratitude; almost nostalgic, definitely wistful. Tony could feel hives breaking out at this accidental glimpse of genuine sentiment.

"So," he said hurriedly. "You obviously don't collect cars. What's your vice?"

It was a piano-wire tense moment before Stephen responded. "Who says I have one?"

"It's in the rulebook," Tony insisted, oddly relieved. "Required for all millionaires, past or present. You're new money, or you were before you bled yourself dry. I'd guess cufflinks?"

"Yes to vice, no to cufflinks," Stephen said, the shadow of a smile back in his voice. Tony relaxed. "These days I mostly collect magic spells. It has the benefit of being both unique and useful."

"Magic spells," Tony muttered. "Please can we call them something else? What about science spells? Science 2.0? Breaking physics for beginners?" Stephen's silence said better than words exactly what he thought of that. "Alright, fine. But there had to be something before the spells. I would've put down real money on you collecting cufflinks. Ties?" He rethought that. "No, not ties, too blue-collar. Not wands or wizard hats, either, too modern. Classic art?"

"Watches."

"And you said you didn't like accessories. Admit it, Stephen, you liked to show it off as much as the next highflyer. Still do, obviously; have you seen your outfit?"

Stephen scoffed. "People in glass houses."

"My glass house has reinforced palladium in the windows. Pretty sure thrown stones won't be breaking anything in there. Missiles, on the other hand. People really need to stop throwing missiles at my buildings."

"Boss," FRIDAY interrupted, and Tony twitched. For a second, he'd almost forgotten she was present on the lines, listening to their every word. A private two-way line was only so private when there was an A.I involved. "Mr. Parker is on final approach to the ship."
"No rest for the wicked, doc," Tony said, changing gears. "More on your watch obsession later."

"I wouldn't call it an obsession. More a mild preoccupation."

"As if you could do anything mildly," Tony muttered.

They switched back over to public channels, dropping into the middle of Peter discussing something at breakneck pace with FRIDAY. Stephen jumped in easily enough, and Tony let the drone of their voices hashing out details keep him distracted while he worked.

It was oddly, bizarrely domestic. For a given value of domestic.

"How many more, do you think?" Peter asked the next day, as chipper and cheerful this close to the end as he'd been at the beginning. "Boatloads, I mean."

Tony looked around them at the wide expanse of the field stretching as far as the eye could see. "Two or three more and we'll call it good." It'd be another half a day's work, but worth it. Tony didn't technically need everything they'd mined so far, but he was an inventor stranded in space; he was sure he could find a use for all of it.

"Alright, I'm off then," Peter said. "Time to count our booty!"

"It sounds so wrong when you say it like that."

"Like what?"

"Like you mean it."

Peter saluted cheekily, and shortly thereafter vanished from sight on his longboat full of plundered treasure.

"Stephen, you have a floating arachnid heading your way. Roll out the welcome mat."

"Red carpet special, coming up," Stephen said, fading into static at the end. Tony was at one of the furthest points communication could reach, and the signal was thin and reedy. Peter now had a return trip of up to forty minutes, depending on if he had to maneuver around any asteroid drift on the way back.

"Did you know some spiders actually float?" Peter asked, always happy to share odd and unasked for information about his namesake. "They catch the wind with webbing and it carries them off."

"No webbing in space vacuum, Peter, that's not going to work out well for anyone," Tony said.

"It's called ballooning," Stephen added easily.

Tony sighed explosively. "Why do you know that? What possible use could that information have for you? Hell, who am I kidding. Might as well ask why you know half the weird things you do."


Tony didn't credit that with a response. "Kid, what made you decide on Spider-Man? I'm still waiting on the full story; something about a thing that bit you. Got nothing but time, here. Out with it."

"Oh, it's, well," Peter started, hesitantly. "It's not that interesting, really."
"A thing bit you and gave you super powers. What part about that isn't interesting? Disgusting, maybe, but still interesting."

"Sounds unhealthy," Stephen said. "I imagine that bite would've been severe. I hope you got it looked at."

"Looked at where?" Tony asked. "The local walk-in clinic? It wasn't an STI, Stephen. See, kid, this is why we always use protection. One good bite and the next thing you know."

"So, it was during a school trip," Peter said loudly, cutting him off. "There was this lab -"

Tony kept chipping away at the field, filing away Peter's explanation for later examination. Bit by a radioactive spider; what were the odds, really? Kid was lucky the whole experience hadn't just killed him. Tony made a mental note to look into the research behind it the minute they got home.

"Boss," FRIDAY said suddenly, right overtop of Peter so everyone immediately lapsed into surprised silence. "There are three large vessels approaching our location."

"There's - what?" Tony blurted, the HUD immediately filling with three separate data streams, all scrolling into a blur as the interface turned danger red. "Where?" He heard Stephen and Peter echo his alarm.

"Coming in from the outermost section of the solar system."

Tony turned instinctively to look, which was of course not effective.

"How close?" he asked.

"At their rate of approach I estimate they'll intercept our position in less than fourteen minutes."

"FRI, give me visual from the long range sensors. How did we miss them coming in?"

FRIDAY loaded the requested information, and Tony had to take a second before he could readjust the angle and stare. The fire of unwanted adrenaline and dread stabbed him hard in the chest.

"It appears they maintained light speed beyond recommended safety margins to avoid detection and went sub-light due to a near collision with one of the planets."

Tony felt like he was listening from under water. The only thing that mattered was the image of the ships bearing down on their location.

They were very familiar.

"They're with Thanos," Tony said numbly.

"What? How can you tell?" Stephen asked sharply, at the same time Peter said: "It can't be! How'd they find us?"

"The ships," Tony said, the words coming even though he couldn't feel his mouth moving. He felt totally disconnected from himself. "They're the same as ours. Sister ships."

FRIDAY switched to an extended view, capturing all three of them in the shot. The resemblance was terrible, and undeniable.

"They are of identical design and construction," FRIDAY agreed. "Boss, I recommend making your way back to the ship immediately."
She sounded calm, reasonable even, a strong contrast to the rising swell of Peter and Stephen's vocal demands in the background. But beneath the artificial composure, there was an urgency in FRIDAY's voice that spoke to knowledge the others lacked. Tony wished he could pretend he didn't also know.

He sat, allowing the nanotech to anchor him to the asteroid. The numbness was spreading, taking over everything in his body.

"You know that's not going to happen, FRI," he said. Stephen and Peter immediately stopped talking. "They're fourteen, maybe thirteen minutes out, now, and I'm thirty away, twenty even if I punch it. There's no math in the world that gets me back on our ship in time."

"Boss," FRIDAY said, and her distress was clear and shockingly real.

Stephen understood first. "Tony, no. Start back. We can move the ship closer to you, meet in the middle."

"If we could take the ship into the asteroid field, we would've done it by now. You need to start off, before they get in close enough to get a weapons lock."

"We don't know they'll fire on us."

"Wait, are you saying," Peter started. "You're coming back, aren't you? You have to come back. We have to go."

"You're going," Tony agreed quietly. "You're leaving. FRIDAY, how close is Peter to the hanger?"

"One minute, twenty seconds."

"No," Peter said, raw and trembling. "No, I'll turn it around. I'm coming back, I'll come get you -"

But Tony was way ahead of him. "FRIDAY, shut down his suit. Mag-lock him to the container and bring it in remotely."

Peter made a noise of wounded outrage. "You can't do that!"

Tony's brain was already moving on. "FRI, cycle on light speed systems. Stephen, you'll have to maintain sub-light until you clear the fifth planet, otherwise you'll run the risk of collision. Everything's in working order again, but if something comes up, listen to FRIDAY. She'll walk you through any troubleshooting."

"FRIDAY won't have to if you're onboard," Stephen said, tight and angry. "Start back. You can make it."

"Math doesn't work that way. Don't be stupid, Stephen. You need to leave. Thanos isn't onboard; if he was, you'd already be dead. That means their primary goal will be to cripple the ship before you can escape. They'll fire on you the second they're in range. They'll have to."

"I won't abandon you here." The sorcerer sounded implacably stubborn, and Tony felt urgency twist into rage.

"You were the one who threatened to leave me behind after we made Squidward into calamari," Tony reminded him. He took a deep, uneven breath. "Call it fulfilling a delayed promise."
Stephen made a strange, hollow sound. "That was different. I didn't know you, then."

"Knowing me doesn't change the risk to the stone. The difference this time around is you don't get to wash your hands of everyone to keep it safe. I'm assigning you spider-sitting responsibilities."

"Tony -"

Peter gasped something garbled and indistinct. "Mr. Stark, wait. We'll, we can come back, we'll -"

"Alright, come back," Tony agreed calmly. "Make sure you've lost them, first. Give it a day before you circle around. Make sure you stop at the next system over and do a long range scan first, just in case. FRIDAY, you understand? A day, no sooner."

"Boss -"

"No sooner. You need to start a full systems scan for outgoing signals. We eliminated everything in the computer core, but we had to've missed something, maybe a sleeper virus. There's no way they randomly showed up here."

"Already on it, boss."

Stephen started to say something, and Tony could already hear the excuses in that even, placating tenor of his. He cut him off.

"FRIDAY, take the ship out, maximum thrust until you can engage light speed."

"Boss -"

"Maintain your ethical programming and basic command set. Add Stephen into your priority authentication sequence."

Tony could feel panic starting to slide beneath his skin, the impending abandonment cutting all his thoughts to ribbons like razor wire. There was so much to do, and not enough time to do it in. But one thing stood out, as he thought about Peter and Stephen seconds away from freedom, with him on the other side of an impassable chasm. He remembered saying to Fury, once, something about fathers and the power of words: my dad, he was cold, he was calculating, he never told me he loved me, he never even told me he liked me -

"Peter, you're an awesome kid," he said before he could chicken out. "Second to none. Stephen, I'm trusting you to look after him. Don't let me down. FRIDAY, you're my girl; you better keep an eye on both of them, or there'll be so much hell to pay. Go dark, no radio signals until after you clear the alien ships. Direct order. About face and take off. Go."

The communications line cut to total silence, like a blade had chopped it out of existence. For a second, listening to the empty sound of his own heart pounding in his ears, Tony felt like the universe had come to a total standstill.

But of course it hadn't. That was just Tony.

It took nearly five minutes before he could unbend enough to slump and hunch over the way he wanted to, the clink of suited fingers scraping metal-on-metal as he wrapped both arms tightly over his chest. He forced himself to breathe shallowly, in spite of his lungs screaming for more, better, now, now, now. Hyperventilating wasn't going to help him; in fact it'd work against him. Using up his oxygen in any kind of hurry would be extremely unwise, now. He had a limited supply, after all.
Very limited, in fact. A day's worth if he really, really stretched it. If FRIDAY and Stephen did end up circling back, they'd have one chance to pick up Tony directly, before time got the better of him. The margin for error was going to be very narrow.

Of course, if they didn't get a chance to circle back, it was probably because they'd been caught. In which case they were all screwed anyway.

Tony wanted to move. In fact, his body was really rather demanding he move, but he made himself leave his feet solidly in place, melded to the stone beneath him. In a few minutes he'd put some brain power into thinking up other solutions, into how he might best prepare for the possibility of rescue tomorrow. In a few minutes he'd figure out how he could possibly stay sane for that long alone in the middle of an asteroid field at the ass-end of space.

For now, he just needed to breathe.

The seconds ticked away, ticked down, and he watched on the HUD until ten minutes had come and gone. Then fifteen, then twenty. Until the moment came when the ship would've reached minimum safe distance to engage light speed. At that point, he could finally consider the reality that after just a few minutes of travel, the ship would already be hours or days away from him. Soon they'd be so far away, in fact, that even if they stopped dead and Tony went after them at his top speed, he might never actually catch them in his lifetime.

It was very quiet in space, and Tony had never felt more alone.

Tony allowed himself another ten minutes of self-indulgent misery. But when the time lapse hit thirty minutes, he decided that was enough melodrama for one day and firmly called his sluggish brain back into working order.

It was cynical to say the others might be captured. Between a brilliant A.I, a genius sorcerer, and a teenage superhero, those three had enough brain power Tony doubted there was much of anything they couldn't handle, save perhaps Thanos himself showing up. Tony knew they'd be back, one way or the other. But that wasn't to say they might not be delayed.

There could be any number of reasons for it. The alien vessels might stay too near this system. FRIDAY might have to backtrack further than intended. They might need time to figure out how they'd been tracked. They might run into a hardware issue. The list went on and on, which meant that Tony needed to find a way to stretch out his twenty-four hour deadline. The name of the game was going to be survival.

Maybe he'd strike out for one of the planets; that was probably the easiest way to supplement his oxygen supply. He could get back on solid ground, find a source of water as a priority. Maybe he could leave FRIDAY breadcrumbs, a subtle trail to follow; this way, here I am, follow this, follow me.

Of course, if they weren't delayed, Tony'd be much better off staying where he was. They might miss the trail; maybe they'd never find him. Maybe they'd be the quintessential ships passing unseen in the night.

Maybe, maybe, maybe.

Tony might've spent hours at that, really, one string of possibilities constantly at war with another while he tried to put his formidable genius to good use predicting the odds for success versus failure. But. He didn't get the chance.
It was about that time that a void spiraled into existence beneath Tony and dropped him through a ring of fire.

He couldn't rightly identify his first reaction to this turn of events; probably some combination of shock and confusion. Really, confusion seemed such an inadequate term for Tony's state of mind as he found himself on the ground, blinking through the HUD at a dark, generic metal ceiling.

He'd been looking at similar ceilings quite a bit over the last months, so he probably should've recognized it more quickly, but he didn't. Nothing quite made sense, in fact, until a familiar, anxious face popped into his view, hovering just in front of his nose.

"Mr. Stark?" Peter asked, breathlessly. He reached for Tony, hesitating to touch like the kid thought he might be fragile. Possibly he was right. Tony felt unbelievable fragile, looking at him.

Peter made a noise of distress. "Are you alright?" He turned away, looking over his shoulder at something Tony couldn't see. "Is he alright? He doesn't seem alright."

"FRIDAY says yes," Stephen said, and his voice was impossible. Both their voices were impossible. "Breathe, Tony. FRIDAY, can you retract the helmet?"

Tony's line of sight became immediately less digitized, full range of vision and color returning as the faceplate vanished. He blinked dazedly up at Peter, at Stephen standing over and behind him. The sorcerer looked down at him inscrutably.

"How the fuck," Tony said in a voice he hardly recognized as his own.

"Magic," Stephen replied, and Tony was going to get him with the sharp stick for that. He was. They were going to have so many words.

Just as soon as he got over the painful relief lighting up his bones from the inside out.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Fallout. (I didn't know you, then). Alternatively: Stephen breaks physics. A lot.

It turned out when Stephen said magic, he really meant it.
"You can make inter-dimensional portals by waving your hands in the air," Tony said flatly. He was still on the floor, and this new revelation felt like it might lay him out there permanently.

"It's a little more complicated than that," Stephen replied. "But essentially, yes."

Tony wanted to laugh, but he had the ugly feeling that if he did he might not stop. "Physics is crying right now, you understand? There's you doing magic and then there's this."

Stephen ignored him, crouching down so they were eye-to-eye. "We have a few minutes before we need to start moving again. May I?" He held out one hovering hand in enquiry.

Tony stared at him blankly. "May you what?"

"Your vitals, Tony."

"My - seriously?" He tried to smile. It felt remarkably brittle. "Don't you have better things to worry about right now?"

In answer, Stephen reached for him. Tony allowed it, blinking at the feel of fingers ghosting over his temple, drifting to the corner of his eye to check his pupils. They settled at the left side of his neck, pressing for a count of five. When the hands slipped away, Tony almost called them back. The cool certainty of the sorcerer's touch was an anchor in an otherwise totally mystifying world.

"I don't like your heart rate," Stephen said. "Stress on top of low fluid intake isn't doing you any favors." He turned to address Peter, who was still hovering anxiously. "Bring a double ration of water and food, some of those legumes if we still have any. I want to prevent a crash if we can."

"I can get that," Peter agreed brightly. He bounded away, zipping out the door far too quickly for Tony to track. Of course, at the moment even just watching the door ponderously slide open and closed seemed like too much to track.

"How'd you do it?" Tony asked, looking for something, anything to distract himself from the full-body tremors that wanted to shake him apart. He gestured at the bridge around them, sitting up to allow the nanotech to recede into the housing unit.

"Magic," Stephen said, straight-faced. "In fact, I feel as if we've already had this discussion."

Tony rolled his eyes, the sarcasm putting him back on solid ground more quickly than probably anything else could. "Give me some credit. Unless you've decided to abolish science entirely, an inter-dimensional portal connecting two points has to be bidirectional. So how'd you get me on the bridge without losing the atmosphere to space vacuum?"
"I didn't," Stephen admitted. "Peter and I had to wait in the aft cargo bay. It's the closest area with pressurized bulkheads. Another design flaw for you to work on: most of the ventilation shafts on this ship are interconnected and can't be fully sealed. When I opened the portal, we lost almost thirty-three percent of our oxygen stores before I could close it again."

Tony glanced at one of the ventilation shafts in question, mind happily veering off in this new, distracting direction. He felt himself steadying. It was taking longer than he'd like, but as he got used to the unyielding feel of the ship around him, Stephen across from him, a new problem for his brain to work on, he felt the vice of tension slowly start to wane.

"Sounds reckless," he said. He traced a mental map of the bridge shafts, considering how he might go about sealing them. "I'm not sure if I should be proud of inspiring that or appalled I've corrupted you into rash decision making."

Stephen shrugged, standing to retreat back to one of the consoles. "I would've done it sooner, but we were too far away. I didn't want to chance creating the portal without a visual on your location. I had to be as precise and fast as possible."

Tony nodded agreeably. Then understanding hit him like a brick. "You were too far away. And where are we now, exactly?"

Stephen didn't answer.

"FRIDAY," Tony demanded. "Where are we? What's the location of the ship?"

"Approximately five minutes relative to your previous position, boss."

"Five minutes - the asteroid field. You brought the ship in." Tony found himself on his feet, facing Stephen. The man met his eyes directly. "Are you insane? You have to be. Certifiable."

"No more so than you. It was safer than you think."

"To bring a ship this size directly into the field? Nothing could make that safe!"

Stephen smiled grimly. "Magic could." As if in demonstration, he glanced down when the console blared a collision warning. Tony watched him move to the observation viewport. He held up one hand with his third and forth finger tucked in, a square ring of some kind bracketing two knuckles. His other hand swept into a wide circle, sparking orange fire, but nothing unusual appeared where Tony could see. A second later the warning tone stopped.

Tony stared at him. "What are you even doing?"

Stephen didn't answer, sketching more circles. Tony forced himself to move to the window, peering into space.

There were four enormous rings of fire swirling in front of the ship.

"Holy shit," Tony blurted. He followed the mesmerizing spin of one, watching it swallow an asteroid the size of a car. "You're holding four portals open at once? How?"

Stephen shook his head. "With difficulty. We actually need five for full coverage, but I couldn't sustain that. We're making do."

"You did this the whole way in?"
Stephen nodded. Tony couldn't have blamed him if he'd been smug about it, but he looked too preoccupied for smugness. "I'm moving the asteroids behind us to block any pursuit."

Tony moved closer to him, unwillingly drawn as if on string. His eyes drifted to that odd metal ring around Stephen's fingers and lingered there. "How is this a thing I didn't know you could do?"

"What you don't know about magic could fill libraries," Stephen said dryly. "And does, in fact."

"I'll allow that. Why didn't you say something before? We could've been using this the whole time." Tony only realized after the words were out how ungrateful they sounded. He shrugged philosophically. He'd always been a lousy diplomat; Stephen was more than familiar with that fact about him.

The sorcerer didn't even bother calling him on it. "I'd never considered trying to open more than one connection at a time before," Stephen said. "I still wouldn't advise it except in emergencies."

"Why?"

Stephen shook his head. Small rivulets of sweat were beading on his forehead, sliding down the long lines of his face. His hands, always so prone to tremors, were visibly shaking.

Tony slipped on his glasses to examine FRIDAY's sensor data, where he wasn't surprised to see Stephen's readings spiking completely off kilter.

"Your biochemistry's getting into some pretty alarming numbers," Tony said. "Not that I'm shocked. This probably counts as the single largest strain on your magic since the surgery."


"Problems?"

"Some. I tried three portals first, which was difficult. Four's almost impossible."

"Only almost?"

Stephen nodded at the viewport, directing Tony's gaze to the number currently open in front of the ship.

"Point," Tony conceded. "Navigating must've been a bitch. Good thing you had an A.I on hand."

Which reminded him. "Speaking of. FRIDAY?"

"Yes, boss?"

"How the hell are you still here?"

For a moment the bridge was eerily quiet. "Boss?"

"I told you to take off. You should've been long gone by now. Long before now, even."

"Doctor Strange made the decision to remain."

Tony wanted to take that personally, but it came as no surprise. The sorcerer was carefully not looking at him. "I told you to leave."

"You told me to default my ethical programming to Doctor Strange," FRIDAY said.
Tony gave up staring at physics-breaking magic in order to stare at the console Stephen stood next to. "I ordered you to leave first."

"Technically," she said, "you gave me that order second."

Tony felt his heart thump hard once and then roll into a faster beat. "That's semantics, FRIDAY."

"It's fact."

"Semantic fact. You knew what I meant!"

"In the event of competing ethical concerns," she started to quote, "I've been programmed to complete one of three."

"It was a command, completely in alignment with your authorization protocols. Go dark and take off. I said that. How are you still here?"

"Doctor Strange issued a counter-order. You weren't available for consult."

"Stephen issued -" Tony started. He stopped, turned instead to face the sorcerer. "You issued a counter-order. How?"

"I used words," Stephen said, almost absently. "I realize actually talking about plans must deeply offend your sensibilities, Tony, but it's something people like to do."

"No, forget it, I know, I'm a bad person, moving on. How did you know you could give a counter-order?"

Stephen glanced at him, quickly, before returning his gaze frontward. "It wasn't difficult. FRIDAY said she needed a verbal order to countermand yours."

"FRIDAY said it or you asked about it?"

"Boss."

"Quiet," Tony said sharply, his lethargy from before burning up fast. "Stephen?"

The sorcerer frowned, his concentration obviously and understandably elsewhere. "I wasn't looking for ways to undermine you. She said she couldn't revoke your direction without secondary authorization. Just be thankful you left us a loophole. You realize you'd probably be dead, otherwise?"

"Not yet," Tony corrected, mulling that over. "I had until tomorrow at least."

"Oh, until tomorrow. Plenty of time."

Tony would've said more, but before he could, his sightline was filled with Peter's face. He hadn't heard the kid return, but then, he didn't seem to be hearing much that made sense these days.

"Here," Peter said, handing him two rations of food, a handful of the remaining protein legumes they'd found, and a container of water. Tony took it unthinkingly, blinking at this generous bounty.

Peter stared at him expectantly. Tony wordlessly held it all back out, having no free hands to do much of anything.

"Oh," Peter said, sheepishly taking back the food. "Right. Sorry."
Tony carefully popped the top off the water and downed a mouthful, thirst making a surprise appearance at the first touch of moisture against his tongue. He tossed back half the contents.

Peter was holding out the food eagerly when Tony lowered the bottle.

"Thank you, nurse Parker," Tony muttered, but he took the items without complaint. For once, jello seemed like a luxury. Possibly because Tony had expected to go without it for a while.

He'd expected he might have to go without everything for a while.

Tony ate everything he'd been given, famished. Peter barely let him get in his last bite before taking away the remains. "Better?" he asked politely.

"Yeah," Tony said, and meant it. He could feel his insides start to untwist, settling with the heaviness of food and unforeseen safety. He was amongst friends, when he'd thought he might be a day or longer on his own. Possibly forever. He felt both entirely off-center and amazingly alive about the whole thing.

"Good," Peter said firmly. "So: what the hell was that?"

"What?"

Tony looked over. The kid was glaring at him, hard and incensed and angry. Very angry.

"What was that?" Peter repeated, growled really. Tony took a wary step back. "Locking down my suit like that! Why did you do that?"

Tony had the terrible feeling this conversation was going nowhere good. "For your safety -"

But Tony realized that was the wrong thing to say when Peter's face shaded a livid red.

"I was safe!" Peter said fiercely, even though Tony distinctly remembered him declaring he was coming after Tony, which was obviously not safe. It didn't seem like the time to point that out, however. "What if we'd had to leave and couldn't make it back in time for you? You could've died."

The last Peter said softly, defiantly, and with a faint wobble on the last word that made Tony's gut clench hard.

Tony was too aware of Stephen carefully pretending he couldn't hear every word being spoken. He ducked his head, the prickle of inconvenient emotion jabbing at him. He moved off toward the navigation console. Peter followed him, dropping the remnants of Tony's meal to jump up on one of the girders, hopping onto the wall to skip a few steps ahead.

"If you'd just waited," Peter said heatedly, barging right on top of the display Tony'd been angling for, obscuring readout panels with his hands and feet as he crouched. "Doctor Strange took us in seven minutes after you cut the connection. We could've planned it together."

"We did plan it together," Tony said, stymied. He put his hands on his hips and tried not to feel like he was being scolded. Next thing you knew he'd be getting his wrist slapped for his trouble. "Well, alright. I planned it while you three listened."

"That's not together!"

"Well, I'm not good at together. In fact, I'm bad at it."
Peter barked a laugh. Stephen snorted, abandoning his pretense of deafness. "No kidding. You know, this wouldn't have happened if you'd just listened."

"I'm bad at that, too."

"We noticed," Stephen and Peter said together.

Tony sighed. All things considered, that seemed only fair.

"You need to stop making one-sided judgement calls," Peter ordered. "Especially when you use bad judgement. Which is, like, all the time."

"That's the only kind I'm good at." Tony reminded himself of who was the adult in this scenario, then gave that up as a lost cause when Peter turned those big, wounded eyes on him. "Give me a break, kid. I was trying to save your lives. Democracy isn't my strong suit, okay?"

"Not okay," Peter insisted. "What if we hadn't made it back in time? What would've happened when your air ran out?"

"Figured that out, did you?" Tony muttered.

Stephen hummed from where he was standing, impressively still keeping his concentration as he sketched circles in the air. "I asked FRIDAY to run the calculations."

"You three've been busy. What fun discussions those must've been."

"We were at loose ends after shaking off the ships. They didn't seem to be aware of your presence; I didn't want to open a line with you in case they intercepted the signal."

Tony glanced over, drifting near to join him at the viewport again. "They can't have given up that easily. You're sure we're not being followed?"

"Not at the moment." Stephen looked up briefly from his work. "And certainly not into the field. FRIDAY?"

"The ships have been unable to clear the debris. One has remained stationary, but two have split to either side in an attempt to intercept us at different exit points."

Tony nodded, considering. "Odds of us making it out before they can cut us off?"

"Guaranteed. We should exit the field in forty-three minutes. It will take them approximately three hours to follow the circumference to that point."

"Will they be able to track us after we take off?"

"Our sensors weren't able to track their approach at light speed. We should escape detection in the same way."

"Hopscotch us a bit anyway," Tony directed. "Use a few of the nearby stars to obscure our escape. Did you figure out how they found us?"

"Yes," FRIDAY said. "Mr. Parker?"

Peter was still grumbling darkly under his breath, but he stalked off obligingly enough. He was back a second later, carrying a rectangular device, two feet across, dense and compact and heavy. Tony blinked as Peter handed it to him.
"What's this?"

"Similar to a black box, boss. It's emitting a low-frequency radio wave which can only be detected when the light speed slipstream is inactive."

"You're shitting me," Tony said. "All this technology and it's an antiquated homing beacon that almost does us in?"

"Seems so."

Tony considered the box with a frown. "Thanos is certainly paranoid. A universe-conquering tyrant should have more trust."

Stephen laughed shortly. He was worryingly breathless, almost wheezing. "I imagine paranoia is how he made it this far."

"We should all take tips," Tony said. "FRI, if this has been on the whole time, how did they not find us when we stopped at that planet?"

"Unknown, boss. Possibly the beacon was active but no ships were near enough to respond to it."

Tony speculatively drummed the fingers of his right hand against the box. "We need to deactivate this before we reach a departure point." He turned it upside down to peer at the underside. "Got to be an access panel somewhere."

"I already did it," Peter said, straightening proudly when Tony glanced at him in surprise. "FRIDAY walked me through it. After she let go of the suit." The last he said very pointedly, and Tony ducked his head to hide a grin.

"Oh, that again," he said, as casually as he could. "Alright, fine. Sorry about that, kid. You too, doc. My bad."

Stephen choked on a startled noise, and Tony looked up politely.

"Sorry," Stephen repeated. "You're doing apologies, now, are you?"

"Under protest. On occasion."

"Stop doing things that need apologies," Peter muttered.

"Do my best," Tony said, shrugging when they both turned at that to glare at him. "Can't make any promises. I'm bad at this, remember?"

"Get better at it," Peter ordered.

"Got the feeling I'll have to. You guys'll never let me live it down otherwise."

"We won't let you live it down now."

"Thank you for that motivation." Tony set aside the black box, turning his attention back to Stephen's magical lightshow. He watched critically as portal after portal continued to clear their path.

"You're good at that," Tony noted, a tiny olive branch extended between them.

Stephen raised an eyebrow, one half of his mouth quirking in an almost smile. "Yes, I am."
"See," Tony said. He took a steadying breath, forcing himself not to chicken out on this one, either. "Knew I made a good call. If ever I had to trust someone with my girl FRIDAY and my favorite webslinger, can't go wrong trusting Stephen Strange, master of the mystic arts and Sorcerer Supreme."

"You didn't always think so," Stephen said.

Tony looked straight ahead. "Well, kind of a lot's happened since then."

"Oh? I hadn't noticed." Stephen switched suddenly from wry, to entirely serious. "Tony?"

"Stephen?" he parroted back.

Stephen was still looking outside, but Tony could feel the full weight of his attention like the heat of a flame. "I appreciate the trust. Truly."

Tony side-eyed him warily. "But?"

"Don't do that again."

"I can't," Tony admitted, and knew it was unwise even as he said it. Still, Stephen had come back for him; he deserved some kind of game prize for that, if nothing else. "FRIDAY has her orders. She defaults to both of us, now."

"You could change that."

Tony tipped his head to stare at the ceiling again, thinking back to that first moment of seeing it, the long seconds of realizing it was familiar and not knowing why. "No, I can't. She needs a dual failsafe, in case one of us is incapacitated. If this proved anything, it's that it's a dangerous game of hide and seek we're playing here. If we get away scot-free today it's only blind luck and your magic that'll have accomplished it."

"With a little help from FRIDAY and your favorite teenager," Stephen said. Tony could see from the corner of his eye Peter puff up eagerly, flourishing in this well-deserved praise.

"No doubt. I should've amended FRIDAY's command defaults a while back, really."

"Why didn't you?"

"Well," Tony said, flooded with the unique and peculiar joy of being alive, of being free. "The times were different."

Stephen raised both eyebrows. "Different?"

"I didn't know you, then."

And Stephen had nothing to say to that.

They made it to the outer edge of the asteroid field with plenty of time to make the jump to light speed. They were ahead of schedule, even. Unfortunately, it was still about thirty minutes beyond Stephen's capacity to comfortably handle the magic.

"Your vitals are crashing all over the place," Tony said grimly. He was on Stephen's left side, the wizard's arm slung over his shoulder. Peter was mirroring him on the right side. It was incredibly awkward, since Stephen was taller than both of them.
"I'm fine," Stephen slurred. "I'll be alright."

Tony heroically refrained from pointing out the man could hardly walk. "Didn't realize it was this bad. You should've said something."

Stephen rasped something that could've been a laugh. "Why? So you two could wring your hands and worry? It wouldn't have changed anything."

"You implying I'm useless with magic, Stephen?"

"Useless is putting it mildly," Stephen said. He accidentally leaned in the wrong direction, sending them all off balance. Peter righted them, carelessly taking all of their weight for a confusing moment.

"Kind of like saying your feet are useless right now," Tony retorted mildly.

Stephen blinked, and his eyes looked disturbingly glassy. They were also fixed to a point where, as far as Tony could tell, absolutely nothing existed. "At least they're not shaking like my hands," the sorcerer said.

"How can you tell? You probably can't even feel them. You're basically drunk."

"Oh, hardly," Stephen said, then tripped over nothing and slammed them into a wall.

"Here, hold this," Tony told Peter, handing off Stephen and his uncoordinated limbs. Peter carefully propped him up. "Should I just carry him? I could just carry him."

"Way ahead of you, kid," Tony said, the nanotech already crawling along his frame to form the suit. He tugged Stephen out of Peter's grasp, lifting him bridal style with a flourish.

Peter grinned, mischief in his eyes. "I mean, I could've done that without the suit."

"Peter, this is obviously no time to show off," Tony scolded. "FRIDAY, I want full video footage of this."

"Already done, boss."

"Or even, you know," Peter continued heartlessly, "his cloak probably could've done it without either of us."

The garment in question twitched, fluttering eagerly in an unseen breeze. It was mostly pinned between Stephen and Tony at the moment. Now Tony thought about it, it seemed a bit odd the thing hadn't made any move to defend or otherwise support Stephen in their stumbling journey through the ship.

"What's up with you?" Tony asked it. "Please tell me you're not also drunk."

It ruffled itself, the collar edging up and then out in what might've been a shrug.

"You worry me sometimes," Tony said, and it reached out and tapped him twice as if to say 'there there'.

"Don't be alarmed," Stephen said. The effort he had to put into keeping his words clear would've been funny if it weren't so alarming. "It chooses friends wisely."

"It chose you, so you're not allowed to say that."
"The wand chooses the -" Stephen started, then stopped to squint into the distance. "Damn."

"What?"

Stephen glared at the ceiling. "I was about to make a pop culture reference."

"See? Told you you were drunk." Tony started making his way down the corridor, the hydraulics in the suit whirring gently.

"Tipsy, if anything."

"I've never been drunk," Peter commented, easily keeping pace with Tony. "What's it like?"

"You've never been drunk?" Tony asked dubiously. "We need to fix that, obviously. Staple of every teenager's misspent youth."

"No, I mean, I tried. I think my body breaks down the alcohol too fast. Best I got was a really weird tingling in my fingers."

"How much did you have?"

Peter looked shifty. "Enough," he said.

"Such a subjective term. What's enough? One drink? Two?"

"I tried two," Peter said, then grudgingly followed up with: "Bottles."

Tony's brain immediately wanted to segue and chase that rabbit to its inevitably fascinating end, but. Now did not seem the time to work on corrupting the youth of America. That was for tomorrow.

"Hold that thought, Peter."

Tony kept going for half a dozen steps before realizing he was automatically navigating to his own quarters. And that he had no idea where Stephen's room was. The sorcerer seemed to spend the majority of his time on the bridge.

Tony jostled his cargo. "Stephen? Where do you stash your sleeping bag these days?"

The wizard didn't answer, and a quick glance down confirmed he was unconscious.

"Is he?" Peter asked, wide-eyed and anxious.

"FRIDAY?"

"I detect no critically dangerous abnormalities. It appears to be simple overexertion."

"Knew it. He really is a heroine in a romance novel."

"Who just saved your life," Peter reminded him, frowning.

"I did say heroine, didn't I? Of course he saved the day before swooning. FRIDAY, any signs of pursuit yet?"

"None, boss. The ships were poorly positioned to follow us into light speed. I believe we have successfully evaded capture and detection."

The relief was so intense it was actually painful. "Perfect. I should take a look at the engines, make
sure everything's working to capacity. Last thing we need is another thermal malfunction grounding us after almost getting caught with our pants around our ankles."

Tony hesitated, considering the insensate man he was carrying. His first instinct was to tuck the guy somewhere FRIDAY could keep an eye on him and let him sleep it off. But Tony was reluctant to leave him alone. Stephen was apparently prone to reckless acts of self-endangerment.

And also, Tony could still feel a panic attack trying to slip in under his guard to cripple him. The thought of striking out alone, of allowing Peter or Stephen out of his sight for long - it was enough to make his skin crawl.

Besides, nothing said the sorcerer had to sleep it off in his quarters.

"Peter, go snag a mattress and some blankets from one of the rooms and haul them down to engineering. You're going to play nursemaid while I make sure the ship isn't about to blow up."

"A mattress?"

"Heroines need comfortable places to sleep. Just don't bring any peas back with you."

The look of confusion on Peter's face was comical. "Peas? What?"

"Missed that fairy tale? You can add classic literature to your curriculum. For now, go grab that mattress, there's a good spider."

Peter went without protest, his ever-present desire to help in full swing. He hopped away, performing a spinning kick to push off from one wall and ricochet down the corridor.

"I said no showing off!"

The kid's laughter trailed behind him like an echo. As he vanished around a corner, the knife of his absence sank quickly into Tony's gut. He had to suppress the almost overwhelming urge to go after him, demand he stay where Tony could see him. He could feel his feet lock rigidly against the floor, his entire body freezing up.

FRIDAY wordlessly brought up Peter's biorhythms, streaming them in over the glasses.

Tony let out a long, slow breath, achingly relieved. "Thanks, FRI."

"Anytime, boss."

He looked down at Stephen again. The bulk of him in Tony's arms was a substantial, solid weight, unexpectedly welcome and close. The sorcerer had slumped with his cheek pressed to the suit's left shoulder. His eyes were closed, and a fan of long lashes cast gentle shadows over his face and across the edge of his sharp cheekbones, his nose and brow. And his mouth, with its surprisingly soft-looking lips, parted on an unspoken word.

Stephen really was an unfairly beautiful man. And the sight of such stillness on his usually proud and patrician face did something to Tony's insides he would rather not think about. Thankfully, Tony was a master of avoidance, and looking at Stephen reminded him of something else he'd been putting off for a while.

"FRIDAY, start up fabrication on projects Geek and Chic. I think I owe our two heroes a thank you."
"Sure thing, boss," she said. Then: "And for me?"

"Oh, don't feel left out, FRI. I have all kinds of ideas for you. Just you wait."

She didn't seem particularly reassured by this, but that was fine. That was exactly as Tony had intended.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

But honey, I can't sleep.

Tony entered engineering and stopped dead.

"Stephen," he said. "We have to stop meeting like this. People will talk."

Stephen didn't answer. He was lounging just above one of the new intake manifolds, reclined on his back in mid-air. He had his eyes closed, hands interlaced over his middle, feet crossed at the ankles. If he weren't glowing to Tony's eyes, limned with a faint shine of magic through the glasses, he might've thought the sorcerer was sleeping again. Stephen'd slept quite a lot in the last few days.

Tony dropped his supplies on the floor, the ringing screech of metal-on-metal echoing through the room. "FRIDAY, I distinctly remember telling you to lock the door while I was out."

"Sorry, boss. My previous protocols have been overridden."

"Did you steal that line from your big brother? It didn't work for him and it won't for you."

Stephen broke his pretense long enough to glance over, curious. "Big brother?"

"Long story." Tony snapped open his supply bag to start rummaging noisily. "Maybe I'll tell it to you sometime. When you're not invading my sanctuary and getting your muddy footprints all over my equipment."

"Invading?" Stephen asked languidly, closing his eyes again. "How quickly one forgets. I was invited."

It hadn't taken Tony long to realize he'd made a tactical error in temporarily stashing Stephen and Peter in engineering for safe keeping. They'd taken it to mean they had an open invitation to enter his private domain whenever they felt like it, and between Stephen's magic and Peter's sticky fingers, there wasn't a lot Tony could do to deter them. He could've retreated to his quarters to sulk in peace, but. He'd tried that once, and it'd been a spectacularly bad idea. Days later, and he still couldn't quite forget how vividly graphic the nightmares had been.

"I didn't invite you," Tony said, finally. "I had Peter make a nest for you in the corner while I made sure the ship didn't fall apart and you practiced your heroic fainting."

Stephen hummed peacefully. "I do make it look heroic, don't I?"

"The important part was the fainting."

"Not the part where you made me a nest?"

Tony withdrew one of the welding clamps and dropped it onto the console with a clang. Stephen winced. "Peter made it. Besides, I can't be held accountable for my actions. I'd just been yanked from the jaws of maybe-death. I was in shock."
"You barely let me leave to use the facilities."

"Trauma," Tony insisted. "People do strange things when they've been traumatized."

"You asked Peter to sleep above the power transfer grid because there was something wrong with it and you wanted to test his spider sense."

Tony glared. Peter was currently napping in one of the cargo bays, having spent an hour collecting mineral samples at Tony's request before naturally getting distracted. "So?"

"So there's nothing wrong with the grid," Stephen said dryly. "And now Peter's convinced his instincts are faulty."

Tony looked over his shoulder at the grid in question. It was centrally located in engineering, hence why he'd wanted to station Peter there, where he could keep an eye on him. Not that he was about to admit that to Stephen. "You don't know there's nothing wrong with it. There was a reverse flow fluctuation."

Stephen snorted. "That you induced."

"FRIDAY," Tony said seriously. "If you don't stop giving away my secrets I'm going to strip you down to your bare circuits and sell you to the highest bidder."

"Sorry, boss," she said, and actually sounded contrite this time. "Though I suspect Doctor Strange would win my bidding war."

"With what money? The man's broke. Don't hitch your wagon to failed millionaires, FRI, I programmed you to have better taste than that."

"I could trade you a spell of -" Stephen started.

Tony threw the empty supply sack at him. The sorcerer's cloak, ever-present and always vigilant, blocked it. Tony resisted the urge to throw anything else.

Stephen sighed. "You realize if you wanted Peter to stay close, you could've just asked. Being needed would've made his day. He worships you like a plant worships sunlight."

"He does not," Tony protested automatically.

"FRIDAY, play back what Peter said when he brought up the water yesterday -"

"FRIDAY, belay that," Tony said loudly. He could see the sorcerer smiling, even with his face turned away from Tony in profile. "Stephen, stop abusing your power. I gave you authorized access for a reason, and it wasn't to spy on me or corrupt my A.I."

Stephen waved one negligent hand. "If I wanted to spy on you, I have easier ways than trying to convince FRIDAY to help me."

Tony walked over and raised a spanner to poke him in the boot suspiciously. "What kinds of ways?"

Stephen let the small shove tip him sideways, curling gracefully into a half-roll that ended with him sitting cross-legged and meditative. He opened his eyes, blinking into the low light. "Sorcerers use a mirror dimension to practice spells, a place that doesn't affect the real world but mimics it exactly. It also serves as a means of shadowing someone in this reality without their knowledge."
Tony put both hands on his hips, staring at him. "What a fantastically disturbing thought. Thanks for that. Now I definitely won't be sleeping tonight."

Stephen rested both hands on his knees like a skinny Buddha. "It's no worse than your nanobots giving you eyes and ears everywhere. I doubt there's a corner anywhere on this ship unoccupied by them, at this point."

Stephen wasn't wrong, but Tony had no intention of justifying that with an answer.

"Besides," the sorcerer continued. "You weren't going to sleep tonight anyway."

Tony did an about-face and marched back over to his supplies. "Tonight, tomorrow," he said flippantly. "There's really no difference in space. No sun to inspire a diurnal sleep cycle. The fact we sleep at all is probably just habit."

"No, that would be circadian homeostasis. The brain needs sleep to regulate basic biological functions." The sorcerer regarded him skeptically. "Not that one would know it, looking at you. You're still walking and talking after day, what? Four, five days without sleep?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Tony said.

Stephen ignored him. "It's been the better part of a week, Tony. Have you caught more than a handful of hours?"

Tony resolutely turned his back, staring blindly at the engine readouts. "Maybe I could sleep if you'd get out of my space."

"If that were true, I'd be gone," Stephen said. "But it's not."

Tony flexed his hands against the console until he could feel his bones protesting. "Who died and made you the sleep police, anyway? I wasn't the one passed out on the floor a few days ago."

"And unlike some, I've actually managed to sleep that off," Stephen said. "Full recovery. As I'm sure FRIDAY's already let you know."

"Any lingering side effects?" Tony asked, curious.

"None. No interactions with the emitter, either."

"None at all? That's interesting. We should -"

"Tony," Stephen admonished.

Tony sighed. "Yes, not sleeping, I know. I'm a terrible person, and I suck at doing normal-people things; we all know this. What's your point, Stephen?"

"My point is this: you wanted us near, because to use your own words, Tony Stark has issues. Now you're trying to regain distance because, again, Tony Stark has issues." Stephen didn't sound smug about it. Tony might've had to hit him if he'd sounded smug about it. "And one of those issues is going to result in an injury soon if you can't find a way to sleep."

Tony wanted to deny it, but the proof was in his blurry vision and inability to concentrate, not to mention his hands shaking more obviously than their resident sorcerers. Tony'd been ignoring his vitals crashing everywhere in the last twenty-four hours; he could only imagine Stephen's interpretation. He'd undoubtedly been watching with FRIDAY's help.
“Tony,” Stephen said quietly. “Tell me how I can help you.”

“You can’t, doc. I asked Pep to move in the last time this was an issue, and that still didn’t do it.”

They’d been gone from Earth for months, and he’d never stopped missing her, missing Rhodey, but the sharp blade of it had dulled as time went on. And Tony had room in his head to stop missing them, now, too. Room to focus on Peter’s unfailing optimism and Stephen’s dry wit, their combined companionship. Those two had not only seen the worst of Tony; they’d been bludgeoned and blindsided by it, cheated and deceived in all the worst ways. But they’d remained steadfast; they hadn’t turned away. Tony couldn’t fathom it. But he was starting to realize he could rely on it.

He shook his head, blowing out an explosive breath. "Shelve the worry, Stephen. Eventually I'll pass out from sleep deprivation if nothing else. Just toss a blanket over me when that happens. We'll call it good."

They lapsed into silence for a time, then. Tony started tinkering with some of the power ratios, not because they needed it, but because he needed something to occupy his fingers. Whenever he stopped tinkering he could feel the exhaustion starting to creep over him, and the thought of closing his eyes was enough to send him into a tailspin.

He was changing the numbers for the fifth time when Stephen spoke again.

"You could let me spell you asleep." Stephen waited until Tony looked over, then carefully sketched a glowing octagram of magic, a secondary ring of triquetra symbols rotating around it burnished in fire. "I am a sorcerer, after all."

"That sounds like a terrible idea," Tony said, even though it very much didn't. "No offense, but I doubt your sleep spells have FDA approval. I require at least three double-blind studies before I'm willing to allow third-party interference with my REM cycle."

"As opposed to not having a REM cycle."

"So glad you understand."

"I understand that you have trust issues," Stephen said.

"Pot, kettle."

Stephen sighed, shaking his head. Tony felt a tug of reluctant guilt, considering recent events.

"It's not you I don't trust," Tony said. He shrugged when Stephen glanced over in surprise.

"The magic, then? You didn't mind the cooling spell."

"You may've noticed, I have what some might call a difficult relationship with sleep. Nothing personal, doc. I don't take pills for it either. Besides, I took that spell before I knew you could rip holes in the fabric of space with your fingertips. Magic might be science, but it's not one I can quantify. Don't trust what I don't understand."

"Would you like to try?" Stephen asked. He held out one hand, and in the center of his palm was the two-fingered ring he'd been wearing when he'd opened a portal into space. "I've heard magic described as a program. If it helps you to look at the source code, you can attempt it. I have no doubt you've been trying since the beginning anyway."

"I would never," Tony said, trying not to stare too greedily at the ring. He beckoned and Stephen
came obligingly down to ground level, settling lightly on his feet.

"You're willing to perform like a circus monkey? What's the catch?"

"Every minute you spend examining the data is a minute you spend sleeping."

Tony considered this deal with a frown. "You mean under a spell. Stephen, I know I'm as stubborn as a Disney princess, but let's be clear: I'd make a really terrible sleeping beauty."

"You can spend it trying to sleep, if you prefer that to actually sleeping," Stephen said dryly. "But if you're willing to accept a spell afterward, I'm certainly willing to provide you one."

"This all seems very one-way. I propose a counter-offer."

Stephen raised an eyebrow. "A counter-offer of what?"

Tony reached into his left pocket and casually withdrew the object there. Stephen's gaze honed in immediately.

"I call it Project Chic," Tony announced, casually tossing the electric razor from hand to hand. The way Stephen's eyes followed with avid interest made him smile. "What do you think?"

"How long have you had it?" Stephen asked, staring.

"Few days, thereabouts. Haven't gotten around to using it yet myself. Meant it as a thank you for saving my life, but this could work too." Tony politely offered it to him. "Shall we call it a trade? One razor, one magical double-blind study."

Stephen handed Tony his ring without another word. The metal felt textured and unusually heavy, oddly warm to the touch and almost - slick? Tony held it flat on his palm, letting the nanotech flow underneath it to create a small platform on his fingers.

"FRIDAY, light it up," Tony said, trying not to sound too excited. He probably failed miserably, but really, it was magic given physical form. The possibilities could be endless.

Though apparently not as endless as he might've thought. He blinked, startled by unexpectedly familiar readings.

Standing across from him, carefully examining his own prize closely, Stephen blinked back. "What is it?"

"Nothing bad," Tony said automatically, mind whirling. "Just. Unusual. Do you know what this ring is actually made of?"

"No," Stephen admitted, shrugging when Tony gave him a look. "The composition of it mattered less to me than what it could do."

"Fair enough. It's actually an alloy, though what exactly makes up every element of the alloy I've never been able to figure out. Half of them aren't recognizable from Earth's periodic table."

"And yet you recognize it?"

"It's not naturally occurring on Earth, or I suspect anywhere even remotely close by. But then, I hear Asgard's a realm far removed from any of the worlds we know."

"Asgard," Stephen repeated, genuinely surprised. "You've been?"
"Please," Tony muttered. "Like Thor'd ever let me. He gave me some crap about it being a protected realm, not suitable to outsiders, blah blah blah. Pretty sure the whole thing was a ruse to throw me off the scent. He must've known I planned to raid the armory."

Stephen looked amused, whereas words like that probably would've sent most anyone else running. "You wanted the weapons themselves? Surely not."

"Surely not," Tony echoed. "I wanted to break one of them down to its constituent parts. I would've settled for armor if no weapons were handy. A chest plate, a helmet, a gauntlet. Even a boot; I'm not picky. Sadly, Thor must've read it off me: no dice."

"Perceptive of him."

"More's the pity. Want to know what I did get an occasional look at? That fancy hammer of his. And the metal used to make it? Closely resembles that ring of yours."

Stephen looked up sharply, narrowly. "That's unlikely."

"Don't get me wrong, it's not quite the same. But it's more similar than it isn't."

Stephen picked it up again, turning it over in his hands intently before slipping it on two fingers. "Apprentice sorcerers are given one early in their training. I've seen close to two dozen in Kamar Taj at any given time."

"Two dozen? Plenty of extras," Tony said brightly. "Sounds like they won't miss one. Any chance -"" 

Stephen smiled, silent and bold, and Tony deflated.

He put on a wheedling grin. "It's not like I want to use it for magical purposes, you know. Not in the long-term. I just want to have a look, see what makes it tick."

"And then break it down to its constituent parts," Stephen quoted helpfully.

"I'd put it back together," Tony protested. "Or, well. I'd try."

"No."

"Fine, be like that. Do I get a consolation prize?"

"That depends," Stephen said, leadingly, and with an unexpected drawl. "What are you looking for?"

Tony glanced up. Stephen stared back at him, his face entirely innocent of overtones except for the bare hint of a grin tugging at his mouth.

Tony returned the smile automatically, long-ingrained instincts kicking in almost before his mind had quite caught up. "Oh, I'm sure I can think of something you can provide."

"Do tell."

Tony beckoned him forward, leaning in suggestively. Stephen mirrored him, but warily, a reluctant humor already beginning to replace the innuendo.

"I want to watch," Tony purred, and surprised himself when a thrill of real interest threaded into his voice. He hadn't meant to do that.
Stephen twitched, hearing it too, and what had been playful banter faltered into surprise.

"What do you want to see?"

"Well," Tony said coyly. "Magic."

Stephen grinned reluctantly. "You want to watch me perform magic?"

"Using that ring of yours," Tony confirmed. "All other accessories optional, of course." He flicked his fingers negligently at Stephen's shoulder. "Though I'll be disappointed if you don't at least strip off that cape of yours."

The cloak bristled in clear indignation, fluffing itself up immediately, collar straightening with angry precision.

Stephen soothed it absently. "What, this old thing?"

"Yes," Tony purred, then dropped the seductive tone. "Seriously, it interferes with my sensors. The thing's like a shield against science on so many levels. Fascinating as that is, it'll ruin my readings."

Stephen smirked. A rope of fire twisted into sight, snaking over his fingers like a living flame. "Careful, Tony. You might offend it."

"You've met me, right? Offensive is my middle name. Or maybe my first. I'm sure the name Tony Stark could be considered a curse word in several languages native to Earth."

Stephen laughed, power retreating from him like a tide. The look on his face slipped from flirtatious to genuinely fond, which was actually not what Tony'd been going for. It was a good look on him. And Tony had far too many other things to be doing than admiring Stephen Strange's good looks.

Tony pointed a demand. "Cloak, off. Magic, on."

Stephen shrugged the relic away, and for a moment it hovered, looking somewhat lost. Then it soared through the air, flying off to the side. Right at Tony.

He ducked, instinctively, but of course that wasn't overly helpful; the cloak wasn't bound by linear direction. It slipped over where he'd been standing, the heavy brocade of it trailing over one shoulder. When Tony straightened up again, it was to find the thing swaying just next to him. It brushed along his left side like it had no concept of personal space. Which it probably didn't.

Tony took a wary step away. It didn't try to follow him, but he had the strong suspicion it wanted to.

"Stephen, control your pet."

Stephen sounded no less amused than he had before. "Apparently you'll have to work harder to offend it. As I said before, it's fickle."

"Fickle is another word for badly housetrained." Tony sternly held up a hand to ward off his surprise visitor. "Do not make me housetrain you. You won't like it."

The obnoxious garment rippled with smugness, but it made no other move to accost him.

Tony spent the next two hours racking up entire servers of data as Stephen created portal opening after portal opening for FRIDAY's sensors. Eventually, Tony had pulled so many readings on Stephen manipulating the device, apparently called a 'sling ring', that he ran out of new tests to try. So then he went back and started repeating the old ones. He only stopped when FRIDAY
announced that Peter was awake and headed in their direction.

"I swear that kid created his web formula just so he could make hammocks wherever he went," Tony commented, watching his magical research compiling. "Spends more time napping in them than you do communing with spirits."

"I don't commune with spirits. I monitor the rhythms of the multiverse," Stephen said. "And have you ever tried one of his hammocks? They're surprisingly comfortable." He vanished his portal conduit away somewhere Tony couldn't see. (and that was what it was, a conduit rather than a generator, a key in a lock that only ever needed a bit of magical turning. magical objects seemed the way to go, really, accessible to all, only a little bit of training needed -)

Tony resolved not to tell Stephen about his budding plan to one day steal into Kathmandu and find himself a sling ring of his own.

"Well?" Stephen wanted to know. "Do I pass inspection?"

Tony waved him off. "You're gorgeous and you know it. A one-two combination I'm familiar with. And I guess your magic is alright, too."

Stephen smirked. "High praise, I'm sure." He created a small spell in his hands, one Tony recognized, and floated it near, close enough for Tony to touch. If he wanted to.

"Verdict?" Stephen asked, quietly.

Tony stared at it, twitching. Half of him desperately wanted to take it, more than ready to drop like a stone into slumber. It'd been long enough now that Tony was starting to forget what it felt like to be properly rested. The exhaustion dogged his every step, dragged down each of his thoughts like weights.

But that was just half of him. The other half -

That half remembered the yawning blackness of space in an endless field of rock, the razor's edge of knowing he'd been left behind, however unwillingly. And sleep seemed more frightening than any army Thanos could send after them.

Tony opened his mouth to say something, what he wasn’t sure, but at that moment Peter came barrelling into the room, a full supply sack slung over one shoulder.

"Sorry I'm late," he said, slinging the bag down on the ground with a clang. He looked insultingly chipper. "Got distracted. Found everything on the list, though!"

"Great," Tony said, blankly. For one awkward moment he had absolutely no idea why he'd wanted the ore samples in the first place. Fortunately, common sense returned to him swiftly. "All of it?"

"A little bit of everything," the teenager confirmed.

Tony brought up a holographic overlay of his nanotech housing unit, tapping until he was at a cross-section of an individual nanobot. He wasn't sorry to leave the topic of sleep behind.

Peter made appreciative noises as the hologram sent a web of reflected light cascading over each of them.

"Still cool," the kid announced, playing his fingers through the air.
"Your admiration's noted. FRIDAY, you ready to start your new profession as a metallurgist?"

"I was created ready," she said.

Tony shook his head, a reluctant smile tugging at his mouth. "FRI, no. If you're going to do a play on words, make it a pun. They're catchier."

"Puns are the highest form of literature," she quoted in agreement.

"Please, no," Stephen said, pained.

Tony ignored him. "How're our fabrication units looking?"

FRIDAY streamed in a set of statistics beside the hologram. "Nano-unit manufacturing systems at twenty-six percent completion, boss. Full assembly estimated in sixty-one hours."

Tony grinned, success lighting up every pore. "Ahead of schedule. You rock my world, FRI. What'd I ever do to deserve you?"

"Unknown, boss."

"Must've been something awesome."

"I suspect so."

"I'm curious what you did to deserve us," Stephen commented, glancing at Peter. The sleep spell had vanished, and Tony was simultaneously relieved by that and bitterly disappointed.

"I think it's called felony kidnapping," Tony said.

"Oh, that's right."

"Easily forgotten, I know. Time flies, having fun, all that."

"Your interpretation of fun leaves something to be desired."

"Everyone's a critic."

"I'm not," Peter said cheerfully. He'd hopped up on the wall for an upside down perspective on their light show.

"You're a teenager, kid, you're always criticizing."

"No, that's, hey." The kid frowned down at them. "That's unfairly judgemental and indiscriminate."

"Exactly."

Tony moved to one of the consoles, studying the data. "This'll serve as a model for a new nanotech template. We don't have quite the same materials I used to make the first housing unit, but this alloyed substrate should still be viable. I hope. Fortunately, we have a lot of it to experiment with."

Peter turned with a look of glee on his face. Tony urgently flailed at him. "Kid, if you say one more word about a pirate hoard I will end you."

The look of disappointment on Peter's face was tragic.

Stephen idly picked up one of the smaller deposits, examining the obvious flecks of metal in the
"I take it you're satisfied with your haul then?"

"And then some," Tony confirmed.

"Even though you're still missing two key elements?"

Tony glanced at him sharply. "How do you know that? Dammit, FRIDAY -"

"No spying necessary," Stephen said. He shrugged. "Or rather, I did my spying much earlier on. One of the materials is very rare. You've never managed to find it free-floating in space that I can recall. We have to stop somewhere for it."

"Yes!" Peter blurted, hopping on top of a console in his excitement. "We totally should. For, uh, the mineral. Obviously."

Tony stared at Stephen narrowly. "We've stopped at that asteroid field before."

Stephen smiled, but not happily. "Yes."

"You knew we'd be ambushed," Tony said flatly, new anger starting to burn in his gut.

Stephen shook his head. "I didn't. It's only happened a handful of times, and never before in the field."

"You still could've warned me."

"If I have to warn you that Thanos is looking for us," Stephen said dryly, "then we're in serious trouble."

Tony muttered something vulgar under his breath.

"But we got the beacon, and FRIDAY cleared the rest of the ship," Peter piped up quickly. He leaned forward, paying no attention to gravity. "I think. Right? FRIDAY?"

"Confirmed," she said. "I detect no further signals unaccounted for by normal ship operations."

"You didn't detect the homing beacon before, either," Tony said. "Even after breaking the core encryption. I vote we avoid dropping out of light speed for awhile."

"How long is awhile, Tony?" Stephen asked, knowingly. "A lifetime, perhaps?"

Tony glared at him.

"How long are we intending to run?" Stephen put the deposit down between them like a thrown gauntlet. "What happens the next time we run afoul of Thanos' army?"

"You're sure there's a next time?"

Stephen rolled his eyes. "You don't need me to tell you that. What are you intending, now you've got most of your ducks in a row?"

"Start quacking, I guess."

"Tony."

Tony ground his teeth, biting back words he'd probably regret later. "I have no idea, Stephen."
Nothing’s changed. I still don’t have any grand plan to take him down. Do you?"

"No," Stephen admitted candidly. "But I know we certainly won’t find it flying from one end of the galaxy to the other. Running has a finite end. We need a plan before Thanos catches us at the finish line.”

Peter lit up excitedly. "Hey, I know. We could look for people this time, aliens, maybe they could help us -"

"No," Tony said immediately.

"But -"

"No. We just had our third encounter from the black lagoon. Did you miss the part where we almost got caught? I’ve had enough of aliens."

"I don’t think they’ve had enough of us," Stephen said quietly. "One way or another, this journey is eventually going to end. You’re someone who has exit strategies on top of exit strategies. What’s your plan?"

Tony realized he was drumming the fingers of one hand on the console in a rapid, faltering rhythm, the restlessness inside him needing some kind of outlet. "Originally the plan was to hold out until you agreed to space that pretty rock of yours. Obviously that one’s been out the window for awhile."

Stephen breathed a laugh. "Tell me you have a backup."

"Nope. Figured I’d improvise. I’m good at that." He gestured expansively. "I mean, look where we are now."

"Oh, hell." Stephen put a hand to his forehead, an exaggerated look of dawning horror on his face. "I need to get off this boat."

"Don’t be so dramatic. We only almost died. Once or twice."

"We should maybe avoid that in future," Peter said. Tony looked over and blinked when he saw the kid had secured a sling of webbing to sit on, swaying gently as he kicked his feet. Tony shared a private grin with Stephen and felt the anvil-heavy tension in his chest unwind a few inches.

Peter continued, oblivious to their byplay. "Maybe if we look for civilizations that are, like, more advanced than us? Maybe they’d have new weapons we could fight Thanos with."

"We’ll have to stop somewhere, regardless," Stephen remarked. "Our oxygen stores are back in the red."

Tony crossed his arms mutinously. "We’re still on a half-tank."

"Tony," Stephen said, all joking aside. "We stop sooner or later. We have to."

"I’m thinking later rather than sooner."

"It was you who said this was a dangerous game of hide and seek. If we want to take on Thanos with any chance of winning, we need options. That doesn’t happen unless we stop."

"And," Peter added brightly. "Maybe we could ask the next set of aliens for, you know. Something to eat. Something not-jello."
Tony would never admit it, but it was that argument more than any other that came the closest to convincing him.

"Tony," Stephen said. When he looked over, the sorcerer drew up both hands, framing the pendant he wore with them. A slip of striking green energy spilled from inside. "If you can find a way to destroy it, I'll consider giving you the stone."

Tony stilled, narrowing his eyes. He felt his sluggish thoughts kick into high gear and start spinning as they tripped over this surprising offer. "Just like that? What happened to protecting that stone with your life?"

Stephen shrugged, letting the pendant close again. "At this point, if the best I can do for the stone is prevent it from falling into enemy hands? Then I'm willing to entertain the possibility of its end."

Unspoken between them was Stephen's distant confession that there may come a time where he wasn't around to protect the stone at all. In which case it would fall to Tony to discharge that duty, in whatever way he deemed necessary.

"And you'd just give it to me," Tony said skeptically. "No questions asked."

"Oh, I'd ask questions. But if you can find a way to do it, destruction's no longer out of the question."

Tony glanced at Stephen's data stream over his glasses. The readings remained perfectly steady; he wasn't lying. He was serious.

Tony squirmed like a bug on its back, stuck in a web of his own faulty logic. If he didn't take them to a planet, nothing changed. If nothing changed, presumably they lost. Stopping anywhere had the potential to change everything. If everything changed, they had the chance of success, but Tony would no longer know all the variables. If he lost the variables, he lost control.

He'd never been very good with losing control.

Stephen must've read some of that off Tony's face, because he said: "We're in this together. You don't have to do it alone."

Tony smiled, sharp and brittle. "I've been lectured on losing together before, Stephen. It's not the together I have a problem with. It's the losing. It's the end-game."

"Then find us a way to win," Stephen said simply.

Tony closed his eyes, sighing. Decisions, decisions, decisions.

"Which planet?" he asked. He ignored Peter's instantaneous glee. The arachnid was practically vibrating as he launched himself into a victorious triple flip through the air. Tony stared hard at Stephen.

The sorcerer shrugged. "I still know very little about astrological features. The choice is yours. Pick one, Tony. The rest will follow."

Tony made a wretched face. "Oh, God. We've become a pop culture reference. We've become Star Trek." He squinted in consideration. "Stark Trek. There's one for your pun lexicon, FRIDAY."

Stephen grinned confirmation. "Boldly going where no human has gone before."
Tony rolled his eyes. "FRIDAY, find us another planet, preferably desert conditions. Look for a humanoid species, one unlikely to eat us, if we can manage that."

"Sure thing, boss. Scanning."

Peter whooped, bounding from one corner of the room to the other.

"If you mean to explore a new planet, you realize you should be well-rested," Stephen said archly, both eyebrows raised suggestively. Tony sighed.

"I give it another eight hours, ten tops, before I do my own heroic fainting. Pretty sure that's the best I can hope for at this point."

"And you're sure you won't -" Stephen started, the beginnings of the sleep spell curling into reality.

Tony hesitated, eventually shaking his head. Stephen stared at him thoughtfully.

"What?" Tony asked, warily.

"Would it help to see another magic trick?"

Tony pretended to buff his nails casually. "Maybe. What'd you have in mind?"

In answer, Stephen tossed out his right hand, and the space next to Tony shattered.

Tony leapt away, the armor automatically starting to melt over his form. He stared at the place beside him, at the crack rending the air like broken glass. Peter dropped from the ceiling, gaping.

"Wow," the kid said, verbalizing what Tony refused to. "What is that?"

"Relax," Stephen said. "It's supposed to do that."

"What is?" Tony asked.

Stephen walked forward, and as Tony watched, the crack began to spread, rippling outward like an ocean of mirrored fragments, a kaleidoscope of color. Stephen paused just in front of it, turning so half of him was silhouetted by the strange effect.

Tony watched as FRIDAY’s every scan slipped over and around this obvious tear in space, error message after error message appearing on his glasses. Whatever it was Stephen had there, as far as FRIDAY was concerned, it didn't exist.

Tony took one step toward it before he could quite stop himself, burning curiosity overriding natural caution.

"Boss," FRIDAY said urgently. "Be careful."

"Don’t worry, FRIDAY." Stephen looked up at the ceiling, even though he had to know by now it wasn't necessary. "I'll keep him safe." Then he looked back at Tony. "Trust me."

And that last he obviously meant for Tony. Just Tony. Who stared back at him and wondered if maybe the sorcerer had cast another compulsion spell, because he could feel himself being drawn toward Stephen Strange like hooks had been laid into his soul and were reeling him closer one inch at a time.

Stephen held out a hand, scarred and powerful and impossibly inviting. "Well?" he asked, as glass
fractals broke the world behind him. "Are you coming?"

Helpless to resist temptation, Tony took his hand and let the sorcerer pull him into a world of magic.
James Rhodes sat in front of his luxurious floor-to-ceiling windows, overlooking a massive courtyard in matte black and chrome. His eyes skipped from one side to the other, automatically counting the tiny faults. There weren't many. Wakanda prided itself on quality, primarily in technology, but also in design. Imperfections, no matter how small, rarely made it into anything they produced. That included their architecture.

That didn't stop Rhodey from looking for them anyway.

In the last three months, he'd come to realize he had a tendency to that. Looking for imperfections. It was something he did, something he'd always done. That hadn't mattered as much when he was still on the military's payroll. The military was a place that thrived on perfectionism, on routine. But Rhodey wasn't part of the military anymore. He'd ceded that right by siding with enemies of the state.

He didn't regret it.

What he did regret was having so much time to think. He'd spent the better part of his life with a very specific set of rules and values, one that leant itself to a sense of moral certainty. Now he lacked that compass, Rhodey found he lived many of his days wondering about past choices he'd made. Which ones he stood by, which ones he'd change, which ones he wouldn't. People he'd done right by, those he hadn't.

He thought a lot about Tony.

Rhodey had just moved on to searching out imperfections in the facade of the nearest building when he was surprised by a light, ponderous tapping at his door. Five knocks, precise and measured. Cautious, but not tentative, calm but not quite perfunctory.

Rhodey considered that knock, listening to it sound again before he reached for the intercom.

"Romanoff?" he guessed.

She huffed an almost silent laugh. He could hear her smirking. "You're getting better at that."

"That's me. Just bursting with hidden talents. What do you want?" he asked.

Natasha rarely appreciated small talk, mostly Rhodey suspected because she hated to use it herself.
Rhodey had come to know enough about the Black Widow to recognize she only bothered with pleasantries when she had someone to impress, someone to manipulate, a job to do. Left to her own devices, Natasha Romanoff was blunt to the point of being rude, but she wasn't unkind. In fact, Rhodey had started to find her no-frills, no-nonsense approach refreshing.

"Heads up," Natasha said, her voice echoing tinnily over the speaker. "Team meeting in thirty."

"Sitrep or urgent update?"

"Sitrep."

"Wonder what it says about me I was hoping for something urgent."

The smirk vanished from her voice. "It probably says we've all been idle so long we'd do anything for a change of scenery."

"Copy that. I'll be out in ten."

She left without saying goodbye, and Rhodey rolled to his feet. Such a strange sensation, rolling to one's feet. It'd been more than two years since he'd last done it without the leg braces, and a few months with them fixed by Wakanda's charity wasn't long enough for it to feel commonplace yet. Rhodey couldn't seem to get over the urge to jog from place to place, just because he could. Which at least had the added bonus or getting him most everywhere he had to be, pretty much always ahead of schedule.

By the time he arrived at the meeting, though, everyone else was already there. Which maybe said less about him, and more about the others.

"Cap," Rhodey greeted, taking a seat.

Steve nodded at him solemnly. He always seemed to be solemn these days. Or maybe he'd always been like that; Rhodey probably wasn't the best judge.

"We've had word from Thor," Steve said without preamble now they were all present. The whole room seemed to come alive with their combined curiosity. "He's been scouring all his contacts, looking for information, answers. No change."

"No change as in no sign at all?" Bruce asked.

Steve shook his head.

"Of anyone?" Bruce pressed. "Thanos, Tony, Doctor Strange? The Time Stone?"

"None."

Rhodey felt that small ember of hope he kept well-hidden in his back pocket start to gutter just a little bit further.

"Does that seem funky to anyone else?" Bruce asked, and Rhodey blinked. "It's been what, three months now -" "Three months, six days," Rhodey corrected.

Bruce hesitated, looking for a moment as haunted as Rhodey felt. "Okay, so almost thirteen weeks, and still not one word about Thanos. He's literally the strongest creature in the entire universe. He had Thor's axe in his chest last time we saw him, and it barely seemed to slow him down." He raised
his hands wide in a universal sign of bewilderment. "Three months. I mean, how has he not made another move yet?"

Steve hesitated, and Rhodey felt every instinct he owned sharpen into clarity.

"Cap?"

Steve crossed both arms over his chest and shrugged, looking troubled. "Thor's come across a few rumors."

"Rumors?" Natasha asked, and Rhodey could see her frown. T'Challa, standing next to her, seemed equally uncertain. Beside the Wakandan king stood the head of the Dora Milaje. Unlike the other two, she had absolutely no expression on her face, but that didn't concern Rhodey; in the months since he'd arrived, he'd never so much as seen her smile.

"Apparently Thanos is looking for a ship," Steve said, and Rhodey's attention snapped back to him. "Or at least, he has his followers asking about one."

"A ship?" Bruce repeated blankly. "He has four infinity stones and he's looking for a ship? What, he doesn't like the fleet he already owns? Time to look for a newer model?"

Steve leaned back against the table with one hip. "Maybe. According to Thor, it's a circular ship. With a track of interlocking rings, rotating around an empty center."

Bruce jackknifed to his feet, and for one horrifying second Rhodey was sure the Hulk was about to make a mess of all Wakanda's pretty, perfect architecture.

But no, the wide eyes and open-handed flailing were just Bruce.

"That's the same design as the ship in New York!"

"I saw the footage," Steve agreed quietly. "Sounds right."

"If that ship never returned to Thanos," T'Challa mused, rubbing one hand absently over his chin, "then much might be explained."

"Then Tony could still be alive," Rhodey heard someone say. He saw a few people wince, glancing over, and realized it'd been him. He'd spoken. He repeated it just for the novelty of it, the idea, that a thing that'd seemed more impossible every day might actually be true. "He could still be alive."

"If Thanos searches for that ship above all else, we know that someone is," T'Challa said gently, into the uncomfortable silence. "A ship must have a pilot."

Rhodey didn't look at him. He looked instead at all the others, the reluctance, the quiet pity on their faces, and felt anger ignite inside him.

The king didn't let the silence dissuade him. "We must assume the infinity stone is aboard. Whoever its keeper is, they are our ally."

Natasha made a considering noise. "Or at least an enemy of our enemy. Not the same, but I've worked with worse."

Rhodey's fingers hurt, and he realized he'd tightened them into bone-jarring fists. They weren't so crass as to say it, but each of them had their doubts, their skepticism that Tony might still be breathing. Rhodey wanted to tell them all exactly what he thought of their ambiguous fatalism, their
doubt in a man who'd always beaten the odds.

Bruce beat him to it. "If anyone could steal the Time Stone and hide it from Thanos, it'd be Tony. He might use it to remake history in ways we'll all regret, but I'd bet my bottom dollar he's on that ship."

Rhodey carefully unfolded his hands, stretching out the ache in sore knuckles. He wanted to clap Bruce on the back in solidarity, but truthfully the doctor had no concept of how out on a limb he might be stepping. He hadn't been here for the Accords. He hadn't seen the destruction wrought, the trust broken.

Then again, he'd had three months to read all about it. Maybe he was more aware than Rhodey was giving him credit for.

"Do you even have a dollar?" he asked, instead of what he was itching to say. He kept it light and airy. Neutral.

From the corner of his eye, Rhodey could see Sam turn to him sharply, the Falcon's sharp eyes and keen perception serving him well. Of all those present, Rhodey identified with Sam the most; just one more soldier trying to do his best when faced with the end of the world. That didn't mean he wanted to talk to the man today.

"What?" Bruce looked shifty, tugging subtly at the clothes he wore; Wakandan style, and obviously not his by any stretch. "Well, I -"

Natasha interrupted. "If the ship went walkabout and Stark's onboard, he pulled a fast one."

"Or Doctor Strange did," Bruce mused. "He didn't seem the space ship type, but those portals of his were something else."

Steve nodded thoughtfully, and if he had any question about the benevolence of magic, there was no visible sign of doubt on him. Rhodey couldn't exactly say the same, and he knew he wasn't the only one who found the idea of a couple of inconspicuous wizard's living quietly in New York a little hard to swallow.

Rhodey pictured magic and he thought: Loki. Wanda. Not exactly people or power built to fly under the radar.

"Doctor Strange is an unknown quantity," Natasha said. "Motivations unclear. Assuming it's Stark -"

"It is," Rhodey said firmly.

"- the question remains. Where would he take a ship like that? Or where did he take it? Thirteen weeks is a long time."

"And why didn't he bring it back here?" Steve mused, considering.

"What, and park it in our backyard?" Rhodey asked. They all turned to look at him expectantly. He wanted to tell them they were barking up the wrong tree, that even after years, decades of friendship, there was only so much a person could know Tony, only so far he let people in. Rhodey had no idea where Tony would go with access to a spaceship and endless possibilities spread out before him. But there was at least one thing Rhodey knew for certain.

"He wouldn't have brought it back here, not as long as Thanos was going to show up chasing it. If
there was going to be a showdown, he'd've taken it somewhere, anywhere else."

Minimize the collateral damage, Rhodey didn't say. Collateral damage had become so important to Tony, in the last years. The shadow of Tony's failures sat like a noose around his neck, and every time the world spun around on its violent axis, he seemed to feel it tighten just a little bit further.

Steve nodded, clearly having come to the same conclusion himself. "Either way, all we know now is whoever else might be on that ship, the Time Stone's probably with them. We need to find it before Thanos does." He let that sink in for a moment. "Thor could use some reinforcements."

Disbelief swept through the room like a chill wind, but Rhodey just closed his eyes, a hot brand of relief rolling through him. He'd been a military brat almost as far back as high school. The court martial offense of disobeying direct orders and abandoning his post had effectively guaranteed the end of that career. And it had been worth it, of course; the fate of the world always was. But that hadn't made the aftermath any easier for Rhodey to bear. The idea of finally having something to do, of at last being able to throw himself into the fray again -

Rhodey felt something slot into place that'd been lost for a while now, the part of him that had spent the last three months screaming about duty and honor and purpose.

"I'm in," he said, before anyone else could. He saw a few incredulous eyes turn his way, but he didn't look away from Steve, who nodded in agreement.

"Thank you, Rhodey," Steve said quietly. "I'll be going, too." He held up a hand to forestall immediate protests from several corners. Bucky Barnes, silent to this point, stepped forward mutinously and only subsided when Steve added: "Voluntary basis only, but any one of you would be welcome. We need to start spreading a net, as far reaching as we can make it."

"Won't be that far," Natasha said. Rhodey had no sense of her opinion on their choices; she might have thought them heroic, or foolish, or ridiculous, but her tone and countenance was bland at best and indifferent at worst. "The galaxy's pretty big, Steve. We could send entire armies from Earth into the black, and still not cover more than a fraction of the ground we'd need to. You can bet that Thanos has already done that, which adds a whole new layer to our problems."

Bruce was quick to interject. "And I'm assuming we're not doing that. The armies thing, that just seems. I mean, assuming it's Tony, and that one of us actually manages to find him, it has to be someone we know we can trust. An infinity stone is a pretty big temptation, you know? Big leap of faith to give total strangers access to it."

"Could be that total strangers already have access to it," Natasha pointed out. "Stealing a ship's a big ask for one person. They could've been attacked by an unknown third party. Or Doctor Strange could still be alive. We assumed KIA when he disappeared, but if Stark's alive, he might've made it out too."

"There's too much we don't know," Rhodey said. "All the more reason to try and send people Tony will trust. If we don't, the minute he smells trouble he'll book it to the nearest galactic highway exit, first chance he gets. I guarantee it."

He wondered unkindly how many of those present still met the criteria. Maybe two in this room; maybe three or four on the whole planet, really.

T'Challa made a soft, disgruntled noise. "I cannot join in such a quest. My place is here, among my people. A search of this nature can have no known end. I cannot be away for so long. I will watch from my position here on Earth for signs of attack." He shrugged, the long elegant lines of his
formal overcoat rippling with the movement. "I would offer you the eyes of the Dora Milaje, but I do not believe they will go with you. Our numbers are depleted since the battle, and their loyalty is to Wakanda, forever." His body guard snorted her stern agreement, and T'Challa smiled with one side of his mouth at some inside joke. "My sister, however, is less predictable. She may choose to assist you."

"I'm with Steve," Bucky said.

Steve turned, and if the look on his face was aiming for neutral, it missed by a very wide margin. Rhodey suppressed a smile. Honestly, he would've expected Cap to have a much better poker face, but somehow it fit him to always be wearing his heart on his sleeve.

"Buck," Steve said quietly. "I don't know if that's a good idea."

"You said volunteer-only, Cap," Rhodey said. "I know you guys go way back, but at this point? None of us are any safer on Earth than we would be off it."

Steve shook his head. "That's not what I meant. You said yourself it needs to be someone Tony can trust." He raised one hand, palm open. "That's not Bucky."

Steve reached up, pinching at the bridge of his nose. "Thor's run into a few allies in his travels too, and they'll be on the lookout." Rhodey raised an eyebrow, a smirk pulling up one corner of his mouth. "On the lookout? You might want to clarify what that means with the demigod, Cap. If his friends try and take Tony down gently, you know it'll turn into an all-out war. If Tony's attacked, or thinks he's being attacked, there's no way he'll hold back. War is kind of what he does."

Steve blinked. "You saying they should take him out hard, Rhodey?"

Steve closed his eyes, and Rhodey almost felt bad, because from the looks of it there was a lot of genuine regret there. Unfortunately, that didn't change the truth, and the truth was that Tony didn't trust anyone anymore. They were going to have to chance that if it was Tony behind the wheel of that ship, he could be convinced by a familiar face to at least stop and listen before he went haring off in the opposite direction.

Steve reached up, pinching at the bridge of his nose. "Then start asking questions."

"Hmm," Natasha said. She'd lost the neutral look, and a glimmer of genuine good humor was shining through. "Reminds me of a birthday party I remember being at, once."

Rhodey shrugged unrepentantly. "I call it the Stark maneuver."
"This is such a bad idea," Bruce said, before anyone else could get a word in. "I was just in space. I woke up there. It's really not all that welcoming."

"Don't think we're going to be out there looking for new friends," Rhodey said. "Old ones, more like."

"Such a bad idea," Bruce repeated. "But. I guess I'm in."

Natasha turned to him abortively, reflexively. "Bruce -"

"No, I mean," he said, ignoring the interruption, "this is basically the last thing in the world I want to do. It's really, honestly, a terrible idea. But." He grimaced bitterly. "I don't every time get what I want. The big guy refuses to come, but I can work on an algorithm to track Tony's arc reactor. He was using nanotech when I saw him last, but the arc energy still seemed like the primary power base. That's probably the most unique signature we can ask for to track him down."

"Bruce," Natasha said again, softly. She sighed when he turned away, a painful flush working its way up his neck.

"Thanks, Bruce," Steve said into the uncomfortable silence. "I know it's a lot to ask of you. Your help will be invaluable."

Bruce waved a hand over his shoulder, still turned away. "Just glad to finally have something to do."

And with that, at least, Rhodey could not agree more.

Natasha seemed of a different mindset. "Space isn't exactly screaming for the espionage skill set." She made a face, something not quite a smile rising. "I guess I'm probably more use to you guys here on the ground."

Steve shook his head. "I don't agree. It's up to you, but we could always use someone used to flying beneath the radar."

She was entirely inscrutable. "Not sure how much a human can hope to fly under the radar amongst aliens."

"From what Thor says, there's a lot of folks that could pass for human out there. I'm willing to chance it."

She grimaced and shook her head. "Steve, I don't think you could fly under the radar if your life depended on it. And it's probably going to. " He looked ready to protest his innocence, and she held up a warding hand. "I'll think about it."

"Man, I got the same concerns," Sam said. He wasn't wearing the wings today. "I'm basically a guy in a flight suit and some heavy artillery. Don't know what help I can be for you big guns, but if what you need is reliable bodies at strategic sites, you can count me in."

Rhodey wondered if that's how the rest of the world saw them. Not just the disgraced Avengers, not just powerful or influential humans, not even superheroes. Big guns.

"What's our timeline?" Natasha asked.

"Nothing concrete," Steve said. "Thor's due to swing back in a week. Anyone looking to join should be ready by then."
"Good." She nodded thoughtfully. "That gives us time to get a few more players at the table."

"Yeah, speaking of," Rhodey said, because it seemed like no one else was going to. "I know this is probably insensitive, but we’re kind of on the clock here. What are the odds that - Wanda?" He trailed off, letting the rest of them fill in the blanks.

Steve turned to T’Challa, who shook his head. The king looked grim. "Miss Maximoff remains under the care of Wakanda's best physicians. Her physical recovery is complete. Her mental recovery is less so. I would not recommend asking her to join you in this task."

Rhodey sighed. "Well. Was worth a shot."

"There was that other guy, too. Spider-Man?" Bruce said, halfway to asking. "He was there, that day in the park. Has anyone seen him, since? Does he operate out of New York? Or the other one you mentioned, Ant Man?"

"Family man," Natasha reminded. "I doubt he or Clint will be signing up for this mission."

"I can look into Spider-Man," Rhodey said. "Tony worked with him a few times. He was on the roster at the compound. Always kept his identity on the down low, but I've got a few contacts I can ask."

"There's also that guy Doctor Strange was working with. Wong? He was in New York too."

Rhodey nodded, standing, mind full of drive again. It was a damn good feeling. "On it. Don't go planning the fate of the universe without me. I got to make a couple calls."

He received a round of nods as he left, high tailing it back to his quarters. He was already composing the questions he might need to ask; who to ask them to. If he were back at the compound he could’ve just put in a service request to FRIDAY, but here he had no access, and more to the point Rhodey knew FRIDAY had gone dark, all systems on lock down with Tony out of communication for more than two weeks. It was Tony's failsafe against tampering when he wasn't around. Rhodey hoped she was frustrating the hell out of Secretary Ross; there wasn't a man alive who deserved it more.

It was only when he was almost back that Rhodey admitted to himself he was needlessly complicating things. And he was doing it mostly to avoid thinking about the one phone call he actually needed to make, the one that might solve a number of problems. The one he had to make first.

Pepper took a long time to answer; longer than the time of day warranted. It was early afternoon in Wakanda, making it late evening in New York. Rhodey didn't hang up. He let it ring through four, seven, nine times. He hung up when it went to voicemail and tried again. Eleven, thirteen, sixteen. He waited patiently.

She picked up after the nineteenth ring, her tired face filling the screen in his room, the video feed.

"Rhodey," she said, no apology present at having obviously ignored the phone. He didn't hold it against her. She could've not picked up at all; let it go to voicemail again, blocked him. Put her head in the sand, buried so deep she never had to see the light of the superhero world again, the world that had pretty much exploded every part of her life in a variety of really awful ways over the years.

Rhodey took a deep breath and steeled himself. "He might still be alive."

"Of course he's alive," Pepper replied, calmly, with no surprise. "Tony's a survivor. It's what he
Rhodey hesitated. He hadn't been expecting that, but maybe he should've. Rhodey'd known Tony the longest between them, but Pepper'd known him best. Or, well. She'd certainly known him in ways Rhodey never had and never would.

"Not exactly," he admitted. "That's the holdup, actually. Looks like he got tangled up with someone bigger and badder than him. Now he's ghosting."

"Where?"

Rhodey smiled weakly. "Anywhere not Earth."

"Of course he is," Pepper said, still quietly, still peacefully. But that last had a tremble, just the barest brush of sorrow sweeping up against it. Rhodey hadn't meant to look, but the picture was a wide shot, and Pepper was sitting ramrod straight, hands tucked in front of her, clenched into fists that belayed her calm. There were no rings on her fingers.

"You know if he could've stayed, he would've." Rhodey wanted to qualify that, wanted to point out that Tony had so far, to their knowledge, delayed if not actively prevented the death of an incalculable amount of lives. But Pepper knew that, of course. Others might doubt, but not Pepper; she'd known from the very beginning how Tony must've been pulled in, where he must've gone, that he wouldn't have been able to turn away.

She shrugged and looked off to the side. There was a hint of genuine fondness in her voice as she spoke. "I guess I should be grateful he put the suit away for as long as he did." She turned her gaze back to him, and Rhodey felt pinned, skewered. "You know he was talking to me about kids, just before? The day before, even."

Rhodey jolted, more shocked than maybe he really should be. Tony and kids; Rhodey would never have seen that one coming. Then again, Tony'd spent the last decade of his life looking for redemption. Sometimes kids could be a road to that.

"No," he admitted. "I didn't know."

Pepper laughed tremulously. "I told him if he was serious about that, he should never have put the housing unit on." She closed her eyes. "It was one of the last things I said to him."

Rhodey didn't know what else to do except offer her the same conviction he offered himself. "We have to believe he's still alive. Tony doesn't give up. We can't either."

She almost seemed not to hear him. "I knew it wasn't going to last," she said. Her voice was thin and thready.

"He loves you, Pepper," Rhodey said, because there was really nothing else he could say.

"I know," she said. This time her voice was more present, less distant, and more painful for it. "But he needs Iron Man more than he loves me."

Rhodey took a long, slow breath. "The world needs Iron Man."

Pepper nodded. "I know that, too."

"Pepper -"
She shook her head. "I thought I could live with it, Rhodey. I thought eventually he'd change. But he won't."

Rhodey couldn't say anything to that. He'd wanted to change Tony too over the years, more so than might be healthy for any normal friendship. But only Tony could change Tony. And Tony wanted, needed, to be a superhero, to make up for lives ended with lives saved, until the scales balanced.

Rhodey'd tried to tell him, once, that the scales would never balance. But Tony hadn't wanted to hear. And maybe it was better that way, because if he had, there was no telling how many people would be lesser if Tony had given up being what he was: he was Iron Man.

Apparently Pepper could read minds, because the next thing she said was: "And maybe I don't want him to change. But I can't marry who he is. And I can't ask him to be who he isn't."

"I'll find him, Pepper," Rhodey said, helplessly.

"Good. I'm glad. Bring him home."

But nothing more. Bring him home, she'd said. But not bring him home to me.

Pepper smiled again, genuine and encouraging this time. Real. "And bring yourself home, too, Rhodey. Be safe."

"I will," he said. He continued quickly before she could sign off. "Wait though, just before you go."

She looked at him expectantly.

"Remember that kid Tony was working with, the one who likes to go swinging through the streets of New York?"

She nodded curiously.

"Right, so what can you tell me about Spider-Man?"

Three months and six days since Tony Stark vanished. It was a long time for Earth to be without one of its heroes. And well past time to start bringing him home.

Chapter End Notes

Rhodey is an awesome guy who genuinely cares about Tony, but if the films prove anything to me it's that he really, honestly, doesn't understand Tony. Does anyone else feel like Rhodey's (bad) Tony planning is going to come around to bite everyone in the ass?

Yeah, me too. ;-}
Chapter Summary

Interlude: Stephen

In which the future is a million different possibilities, and trying to keep track of them is enough to drive anyone mad.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Stephen didn't expect that his offer to let Tony analyze the magic would result not in a day of anticipated study, but a week of solid, grueling, scientifically brutal research. But obviously he should have; they were talking about Tony Stark, after all.

"These readings don't make any sense," Tony said, for probably the fifth time in as many days. He'd let Stephen go after the first three days, calling him back periodically so he could accuse him of breaking physics again. Today he'd yanked Stephen in almost every hour, on the hour, seemingly just so he could belabor this terrible point.

Stephen laughed. "Not to you they don't."

"Don't get smart with me, Stephen. I know where you live and I'm not above petty revenge. See this measurement? It's saying that when you use magic, at the atomic level you're accessing energy that physically can't exist in our universe. You're pulling from a force beyond our dimension."

Stephen pursed his lips, unwillingly impressed. "That's accurate. Sorcerers use energy from other planes of the multiverse and convert it to a useable form in this world."

Tony waved him off impatiently. "That much I'd speculated from day one. Theory confirmed. But these other readings." He gestured to encompass a significant portion of the math on the screen, essentially just numbers to Stephen's eyes. "The part where my scanners say all you're doing is wiggling your fingers to crack open the universe and start yanking on another one like yarn? That's bullshit, because one, the human body wasn't built to channel dimensional energy, and two, your fingers are not antennas searching out new signals from other worlds."

"If you're asking me how you get from waving your hands uselessly in the air to opening portals with them, I have a simple answer for you."

Tony stared at him expectantly. "Yes?"

"Study and practice," Stephen said, grinning. "Years of it."

Tony groaned a protest. "No, don't do that, don't pretend to be worldly and wise instead of a charlatan. It's obvious your magic is false, I'm convinced. It's a sham job, barely worth more than some dime-store eight-ball's predictions."

Stephen raised both eyebrows. "It's saved a lot of lives for a sham."
"How do I know that? You could be lying. Except for my life, clearly, saving my life was a thing. Maybe you could tell me how it's a thing?"

Stephen gestured with some amusement at the four consoles around them, each of them lit up with separate scanning parameters. "Perhaps it's you who should be telling me."

"See?" Tony complained. "Magic eight-ball. Your answer to all my questions is basically 'it is decidedly so'."

Stephen nodded sagely. "Signs point to yes."

Tony poked him with one of his instruments, leaving his point firmly stated and a bruise behind.

"I will get this magic thing," Tony announced determinedly. "I will. Even if I have to get you to perform actual miracles just so I can take readings."

Which Stephen would not in any way put past him. "Fair warning: if you try blowing up a sun, I won't be able to stop that."

Tony frowned. "That sounded pointed. Was that pointed? Did I try that at one time?"

Stephen had meant it mostly as a joke, but it occurred to him he'd felt very sure when he'd said it. And he vaguely recalled there were at least two futures he'd seen where a sun going nova had actually featured at one point. He tried to remember where and why it'd featured, but the details were too murky, too indistinct to pull from. Stephen could feel each timeline he'd witnessed ringing through him like a bell, resonant and implacable, but their echo so often escaped him. In the past week even the act of reaching for them had started to bring on increasingly painful headaches.

"I can't remember," he said.

Tony looked satisfyingly disturbed by that. "Right. No blowing up suns. Check." He subsided, looking at the readings again. "Okay, riddle me this, Batman. Why does magic have a physical form?"

Stephen blinked. "A what?"

"A physical representation. It appears visually as sparks. It has color; it has depth, or it seems to. We experience it in a spectrum our eyes can detect. Why?"

It had never occurred to Stephen to wonder, though honestly it seemed like an interesting question now Tony mentioned it. "Energized particles can appear in the visual spectrum."

"More often they don't without some kind of equal and opposite interaction. The visual spectrum is ridiculously small, comparatively speaking, and dimensional energy doesn't seem the sort that would be easily perceived."

"You're saying it would make more sense if it were invisible?"

"Possibly." Tony threw up both hands, frustration stamped across his brow. "No, honestly, it doesn't make sense no matter how you cut it." He pointed emphatically at Stephen with one finger. "But at least if there were nothing to see I'd feel better about it."

"Who has seen the wind?" Stephen started to quote rhetorically.

"Neither you nor I," Tony finished impatiently, and Stephen caught his breath in surprise. "Thanks,
I always appreciate being fobbed off with Victorian poetry."

Stephen had to physically restrain himself from reaching out. The urge to touch, to covet, was very strong. He wanted to beckon with magical fingers, wrap fire around Tony's wrist and yank him closer. He wanted Tony to laugh when he did it, wrap strong fingers around Stephen's wrist in turn, grin in that charming way he had. He wanted -

He waited until the impulse had subsided before shaking his head. "I was trying to say that in some respects magic shares commonality with the wind. It's tangible, harnessed for thousands of years as an energy source, quantifiable and material to some, but inexplicable to others."

"I'm not 'some' or 'others'. I'm Tony Stark. I'm good with tangible. Show me the theoretical proof, give me math, explain to me how known laws can measure it."

"Natural law persists, but no math is going to be able to adequately explain magic for you, not insofar as humans understand math." Stephen thought back to words he'd heard once, in a time when he hadn't been ready to hear it. He could remember every wonderful, terrifying second of his own introduction to magic, courtesy of the Ancient One. "Tactile, material existence is only one of an infinite number. At the root of awareness, the body's only part of -"

Tony interrupted. "If you're about to go off about streams of consciousness and the human spirit, I'm leaving. I didn't sign up for a religious sermon."

Stephen didn't think now was the time to point out Tony had called him to have a look. He changed tactics. "Maybe if you got some sleep the numbers would make more sense."

"I've slept," Tony said immediately. "Not well, but that's just another day of the week as far as I'm concerned."

"Define not well. Have you ever -"

"Uh uh," Tony said, waving an admonishing finger. "This is my interrogation, doc, not yours. I've kept to our deal. That's all I'm going to say about that."

"The magic will still be here in the morning, Tony. So will your readings."

"Easy for you to say. You realize how all that new age stuff sounds, right?" Tony thunked one side of his hand down like a blade against a console. "As a doctor, imagine a patient listening to you go off about immaterial existence while you're cutting into them with a scalpel." He swept the hand aside, dismissive. "Never fly. All science has method and mechanism. If it's quantifiable, then so does magic, one way or the other. It's that or you lied."

"I didn't."

"I know," Tony said. He looked more frustrated than ever by this information. "I was watching."

Stephen thought he really should find that intrusive, even violating, but he didn't. Almost the opposite, really. FRIDAY watched for lies, because Tony needed her to in order to feel safe, and Stephen found there was something addictive in making Tony Stark feel safe.

He spread both hands in supplication. "If we ever get back to Earth, I can show you the library in Kamar Taj. There are books there that might explain this better than I can. My own study was focused on understanding magical application, not the atomic theory."

He could see the offer had surprised Tony, who actually subsided into an awkward, searching
silence. The weight of his eyes felt heavy and tangible on Stephen's skin, like the trail of an inquisitive touch.

"Unless you want more poetry," Stephen said dryly, to fill the quiet. "That I can provide."

Tony blew out a loud breath, eager to jump on that distraction. "Only if you pick more interesting verse. I refuse to listen to anything that goes on about the soul or determinism or nature or some other esoteric concept I'd like to set on fire."

Stephen raised both eyebrows, only half in jest. "I'd be interested to know what poetry you'd find acceptable."

Tony didn't hesitate. "Abide the twin-damnation, to fail and know we fail."

Kipling, Stephen wanted to say. Hymn of Breaking Strain, 1935. The urge to blurt that out was strong; he'd always been like that, mind churning out facts to fit the words of his colleagues. Stephen knew he was prone to showmanship, one-upmanship. He'd never hesitated before to use that, to blatantly display his own brilliance for the world.

But here he didn't need to. Tony's mind rivalled his as a black hole of information, albeit usually of different varieties. The engineer needed no reminder of Stephen's brilliance.

Perhaps it sounded arrogant to say, but Stephen had never met someone who could keep up with him before.

"Of course you'd pick one about engineering," Stephen said at last.

Tony nodded decisively. "Only poetry worth reading. And maybe not even then."

"Damned with faint praise."

Tony handed Stephen a spanner to hold while he entered new information on the data overlay. He trained his eyes on the numbers and carefully didn't look up. "My mom had a thing for poetry. Loved the rhythm of it; said it helped slow things down, helped her see the world through new eyes. She used to read it to me when I was growing up."

Stephen didn't move, hardly dared to breathe. He remembered millions of different futures, some of them incredible, others horrifying. But in none of them could he recall Tony ever talking about his mother.

Tony obviously felt the weight of his own words. He shrugged, apparently nonchalant. "It was never my thing. But it made her happy."

"She sounds like a woman of taste," Stephen said softly.

Tony cleared his throat. "Anyway, I suppose magic is a bit like poetry. Relies on a level of absurdity to work and uses incomprehensible language that glosses right over the details. Offers zero explanation and remains widely open to interpretation, but dresses everything up in a pretty package for the average person to admire." He spun the overlay to face Stephen, where a scrolling set of red numbers and error messages faced him. "I'm not an average person, Stephen."

"Yes, what was my first clue?"

Tony ignored him, looking forbidding. "If I can't quantify it, I can't measure how finite it is. Everything has limits. Magic must too, and if I can't predict it, then I can't rely on it."
"Then don't rely on it," Stephen found himself saying before he could think better of it. "Rely on me."

Tony paused, glancing over for just a moment, the whole of his mind turned to this idea. "I am relying on you. If I wasn't, you wouldn't be here." He gestured back and forth between Stephen and the console, but Stephen could see that for the deflection it was.

"You have all the readings you could ask for, at this point. You may have to build an entire new subset of science to understand them, but I have faith you'll manage it one day. In the meantime, magic is going to be an integral part of our fight against Thanos. If you can't trust it, then trust me."

Tony wasn't moving, his tinkering hands for once still in their work. "Barking up the wrong tree, doc. Pretty sure we've openly established I'm bad with trust."

Stephen shrugged, feeling out the razor sharp edges of the moment before they could cut him open. "Your choices are your own. But if they should include me, I need you to know: I'm here."

He saw Tony clench one hand into a fist, probably involuntarily, then deliberately relax it. They stood in silence for a moment.

"How is it," Tony said, almost too softly to be heard, "that you so often hit the same note as another Steve I once knew?"

A lightning bolt of memory almost struck Stephen down. Tony's voice, a thunder of sound in a forgotten future, a tortured rasp as he said 'Steve would've liked you, you're two peas in a pod, lying to my face and mostly lying to yourself, telling yourself it's for my own good, it's justified, it's necessary, let me go, get out of my head, I'll kill you for this, Strange, I'll kill you -'

"- need to fix the calibration of this console, there's a two second delay in FRIDAY's overlay, the display's gone wonky, and - you're not even listening, are you? Where'd I lose you? Stephen?"

Stephen blinked back to the moment, feeling his heart pound nauseatingly in a rib cage that felt too small to contain it. "Sorry?"

Tony looked amused, one half of his mouth slanted in a grin as Stephen watched him slip underneath the console to pry up an access panel. "You were drifting, doc. Something I should know about?"

Stephen could feel bile try and crawl up his throat, the distant sense-memory of this man's rage battering at everything he thought he'd known about himself.

"Nothing I'm keen to share," Stephen said, conscious to be as honest as possible.

Tony looked at him sharply, but to Stephen's relief he didn't push. Stephen thought about leaving, quickly, before the ripples of an averted future could pull him beneath an unseen tide and start to drown him. It wouldn't be the first time it'd happened; not even the first time this week.

"We're two days out from our next planetary adventure," Tony said, hopping back to his feet before Stephen could decide. "Anything I should know about planet number two?"

There could be a hundred things, really. Stephen knew Tony spent most of the time frustrated at what seemed to be Stephen's refusal to disclose vital information, but the truth was that even with the Time Stone, so much of the future remained uncertain. For all his photographic memory, Stephen could never be sure what would be sharing enough, what would be sharing too much; what mattered and what didn't. Did he reveal the name of the first humanoid they most often traded with, the physical characteristics of the two others who tried to cheat them, the color of the sky on the planet
where one almost killed them? Did he try to describe the ship in twenty-seven futures that had
ambushed them and crippled their systems, the same ship that in forty-three others had been their
ally? Did he point out how many planets were in every system they’d stopped in, how the sun in one
system had made them ill for a month, how the moon in another had drawn all the magic from
Stephen like a siphon? Did he talk about the times Tony died, the times Peter almost did? Did he
tell Tony how on some days Stephen ached for an intimacy they hadn’t achieved in this world and
might never if the future didn’t turn in that direction, how some days he woke up and reached for
someone beside him and it took him full minutes before he remembered he was alone, and why -

"Nothing I'm keen to share," he repeated tightly. He waited for Tony to shove at that tenuous
boundary, demand more. Tony was a man not easily put off.

But Tony was watching him, the quality of his attention focused and specific. Stephen realized he
must be looking at FRIDAY’s readings, judging for himself how the question had sent all Stephen's
levels fluctuating wildly, how adrenaline must be spiking in his system.

"Just tell me we don't bite it," Tony said at last. "Or tell me that if we're about to, you'll warn me."

"As long as I'm alive and able, and if I could prevent it, I'd never let the future unfold in a way that
might end our lives," Stephen said, entirely honestly. "Or anyone else's."

"Okay," Tony said, almost too cheerfully. "Then I guess I'll have to, what was it you said? Rely on
you."

It was an olive branch clearly meant as a gift. The words were casual, out of alignment with Tony's
sharp attention, the thoughts Stephen could see darting behind his eyes. Stephen had never known
someone whose mind actually worked faster than his. Not better, not more adeptly, but faster. Tony
Stark was someone for whom the world was almost inevitably two steps behind, and staying ahead
of him was an exhausting prospect some days, an effort in futility on others.

Millions of futures Stephen remembered piecemeal, like old film-reels flickering in stopgap motion.
Hundreds of thousands where he'd had opportunity to see Tony's mind in action. Many more where
Stephen was able to demonstrate his own brilliance, where he'd been subject to the laserpoint
intensity of Tony's curiosity, his attention and regard. More importantly, his trust. There were a
million futures Stephen had never managed to earn that, and a million breathtaking more where he
had. It never stopped being exhilarating.

And dangerous. Tony's Stark's enmity could be almost literally a death sentence, and having his trust
was only slightly less perilous, but for different reasons. It was fragile, like glass, and Stephen had
lived through futures where he'd broken it beyond repair, and futures where he'd seen what that trust
could become, given time.

"There you go again," Tony said.

Stephen looked up, startled. "What?"

The engineer was smiling at him oddly. "You were off in Neverland." He tapped a spanner against
the console thoughtfully. "Find anything interesting there? Fairy dust? Analog clock? Detachable
shadow? Pirates?"

The word triggered another sense-memory. There were a number of futures where they'd run into
real pirates. He could clearly visualize one of them, an alien tall and red, fins on either side of its
head, battle armor over its chest. Stephen remembered being startled, the shock of meeting
something, someone so different. He could hear Tony's voice, even, saying 'sorry buddy, you're not
the first sushi special to try eating me, fins off my ship -'

Stephen tried to remember how that ended, where the pirates got to, but the details slid past him like water on slick ice, and the more he tried to chase it the faster it slipped away. What had been the beginnings of a headache bloomed swiftly into an excruciating migraine.

Stephen shook his head, feeling the world slosh painfully from side to side. "Nothing I'm keen to share," he said again, with heavy irony.

Tony sighed. "Stephen, we really need to work on your communication skills."

"What's that phrase you favor?" Stephen asked, forcing himself to smile through the first flickers of visual disturbance, colors starting to blur and twine. "Pot, kettle -" "No need to get touchy, I'm just saying -"

Hours later, with Tony left in the engine room to tweak some of their course values, Stephen sat on one of the bridge girders and stared at the stars streaming past their ship. He'd spent a solid sixty minutes in his quarters, a cold cloth over his eyes while he fought the urge to wretch and desperately missed analgesics. He'd made his way to the bridge when he felt like he could reliably walk in a straight line again.

The dark and the starlight had finally managed to dial the migraine back to more tolerable levels. Stephen had always preferred the bridge, for the view if nothing else, but in the last week he felt like he'd barely left it. It wasn't the first time he'd had to use the stars as a meditative focal point when the headaches started. It'd made Stephen pause; he'd had to consider that maybe his efforts were doing more harm than good, that potentially they might not be making any difference at all, or that the only real difference might be an increased danger to his health. So far he'd managed to convince himself that he could make it work, that he had to keep trying, all the way through days five, then six, then seven.

A week since he'd opened the Time Stone again.

Stephen fingered the Eye, one hand at the catch of the chain. That first day, the very first time he'd done it since the emitter was installed; that had been a disaster. Stephen'd been confident. He'd activated the stone with a flourish, without enough thought given to how it might affect him. He'd been sure he could feel his way through it, that he'd sense if anything started to go awry, that he'd have time to withdraw if something went wrong.

That lasted until he woke on the floor, an anxious cloak hovering beside him and Peter calling his name, two hands gripping him with painful strength at the shoulders. The dried remains of a bloody nose (maybe caused by him falling, but more likely caused by the magic overload) had given Stephen enough of an excuse to put the kid off, beg for his silence, but Peter wasn't stupid. He'd been watching Stephen like a hawk ever since, sure something was wrong.

He was more right than he knew. Which only made it more paramount that Stephen avoid any scrutiny while he practiced.

"FRIDAY," he said.

She filtered in through the ceiling speakers, vast and echoing. "Yes?"

"Can you alert me, please, if Tony or Peter start making their way to the bridge?"

"Of course," she said, as calm and pleasant as ever. He thought he could detect a note of curiosity in
her voice, but she said nothing further.

Stephen framed the Eye with both hands, locking his fingers in a three-pronged position, sweeping them over the face of the pendant. The bright emerald glow of the stone spilled into the air as it woke.

He stayed that way for a time, just letting the air breathe with potential, charge with the power. The borders of the past and present started to blur.

"Doctor Strange," FRIDAY said, and he blinked in surprise. "I'm detecting an unknown molecular energy at your location."

Stephen smiled. It was the same thing she'd said last week when he'd opened the pendant. "Yes, I know."

"Do you require assistance?"

He shook his head, even though she couldn't see it. "No, thank you."

Stephen let the seconds count down, let the moment start to saturate. The magic snuck along his senses. He waited until he was sure he felt steady, that there was nothing unexpected. Then he let it slide down his arm and tighten into a shadowy bracelet, rotating clockwise. The first hint of temporal energy slipped beneath his skin.

It settled into his bones and began to violently shake him apart.

Stephen let it go, disappointment stabbing at him bitterly. The green dissolved back into the ether without a sound. He breathed through the first wave of disorientation, unfortunately familiar, and then through the secondary wave of nausea and light-headedness. He reclined against the wall before his crashing blood pressure could force him down off the girder.

FRIDAY's voice filtered back into the room. "Doctor Strange, your biorhythms appear to have destabilized. Should I request assistance from Mr. Stark?"

"No," he panted, fixing his eyes on the trail of stars painting the viewport a serene white and blue. He cleared his throat, put one hand against his chest to sit against the pressure there. "Just give me a second."

Stephen waited until everything had settled again before shuffling his legs into a lotus position beneath him. He rested both hands on either knee, frowning. After a few minutes he silently urged the cloak into the air, the slipstream of its levitation cushioning him in a gentle grasp as they rose. He waited warily for a return of the nausea, the weakness, maybe the first prickles of a hollow pain, but there was nothing. Magic thrummed through him normally, completely unchanged.

Stephen called until it manifested, curling into physical form around him, a rope of orange, sparkling fire twining over his wrist, up his elbow, his shoulder. He waited for the sickness to come again, but nothing happened. All was frustratingly, annoyingly well.

He let the magic melt back into nonexistence, blowing out a rough breath. "Dammit."

"Doctor?" FRIDAY asked politely.

He sighed. In the early days aboard the ship he'd had limited interactions with the A.I, but as time went on that had changed. Her use of formal address was starting to wear thin. "FRIDAY, please just call me Stephen. This is too small a ship to stand on ceremony."
She sounded almost surprised as she considered this. "My protocols encourage a respectful address for all forms of personal interaction."

Stephen frowned dubiously. "You call Tony 'boss'."

And now she sounded defensive. "That form of address is acceptable in describing Tony Stark's role and function as my creator and primary commandant."

"No, I'm sorry." Stephen closed his eyes. "I didn't mean to imply you were being disrespectful. Just. I doubt you came up with that one on your own. Did Tony ask you to use it?"

"He did."

"Then can't you use Stephen if I'm asking you to?"

She was silent for a long, speaking moment. "That seems in alignment with my etiquette programs."

"Good." Stephen traced the outline of the Eye with his fingers, careful not to accidentally open it. "FRIDAY, how closely are you able to monitor the emitter now that it's fully installed?"

"I maintain hourly scans to ensure the emitter's operation doesn't deviate from predetermined parameters."

"How's it looking now?"

"The emitter is functioning to optimal specifications."

"You took hundreds of scans when I was activating my sling ring last week. Did that affect the emitter's function in any way?"

"There was no detectable change in function or process at that time."

"So even magic used to a significant degree doesn't affect it," he mused, thinking.

"It doesn't appear impacted by your method of harnessing dimensional energy," she agreed.

Stephen had to smile. Like Tony, FRIDAY insisted that magic had its basis in science. Although she didn't seem capable of true disdain, she made a subtle point of never calling his spells 'magic'.

"I'd like to try an experiment. Can you run a continuous scan?"

"Of course."

He slipped one hand over the Eye, rotating his fingers just enough to tease a ribbon of green from beneath its protective cage. Dizziness immediately assaulted him, but he held it for five seconds, ten. He let the energy wrap into a smaller temporal construct this time; not a bracelet, more a ring.

A warning tone sounded. "Level three scan indicates a fluctuation in emitter functionality. I advise caution."

Stephen closed his eyes, breathing through the third wave of chills and the fourth wave of spasmodic tremors.

He'd almost made it to the fifth wave (pain) when FRIDAY issued an urgent alarm. "I'm registering a significant power flow disruption. Emitter readings are beginning to degrade. I recommend stopping immediately."
He thought about continuing, regardless. The urge to push, to shove at the boundaries of his power until they gave way to new limits was very strong.

But the first lightning-shocks of pain were starting to pull at his extremities like barbed hooks, and he wasn't eager to see what the sixth wave might look like. He let it go.

This time it took much longer to subside. He tipped over to lay on his back, staring at the ceiling. The cloak supported him gently, tucking beneath his legs and feet to provide some purchase.

"Did the emitter return to baseline when I closed the Eye?" he forced himself to ask, though opening his mouth made him feel like his whole stomach might try and squirm out of it.

"Readings are still stabilizing."

"Let me know when they're fully back in range."

Rather than confirm the request, FRIDAY issued a curious series of beeps. "May I ask why you're tracking this data?"

"Research," he said, relieved as the discomfort finally began to dissipate.

"Research?"

Stephen grinned tiredly. "Your boss isn't the only one capable of it."

"This method of research seems ill-advised. Disruptions to the emitter could potentially cause damage, with both short term and long term consequences."

"Needs must." Stephen stretched, the world steadying around him as the last of the symptoms sloughed away.

"Emitter readings have returned to normal," FRIDAY said. "Functionality is ninety-six percent baseline."

Stephen nodded. He was starting to get a sense of the borders, the limits of the box their alien host had unintentionally locked him in. Infinity stones weren't to be trifled with, and after the emitter, after all the dizzying illness that'd come before it, Stephen had been content to let the stone lie dormant. He reasoned that he'd gone through most of his life not knowing it existed. Obviously he could manage without. It wouldn't be difficult; just a return to the norm.

But Tony's words had hit closer to home than he might have realized, all those months ago. Had stung more than Stephen'd let on, more than he'd been willing to acknowledge. *Doc, I'm beginning to think you have a problem -*

So Stephen had been comfortable letting the stone sleep. He hadn't had much of a choice, really; that was what he told himself.

But that was before they'd almost been caught. Before Tony almost got left behind.

"Alright, FRIDAY. Keep that scan running. Let's try this again."

This time Stephen let slip only a bare fraction of the stone's magic, less a ring construct and more the suggestion of one. The symptoms were much slower to appear, but still powerful for all that. Stephen forced himself not to rush it, not to take more than he needed. FRIDAY had a point; the phased material could still kill him if he wasn't careful.
Like the others, and in spite of Tony's accusation, Stephen had been as surprised as any of them by their ambush in the asteroid field. He hadn't seen that one coming, and they'd all nearly been killed because of it. He knew then that he had to use the stone again, that before it all came to a head, one way or the other, he had to know enough to keep them safe. Destroying the Time Stone was a red herring, one he'd offered Tony because it was the only thing that might convince him they had to move forward, that there was no going back. And if the engineer managed to find a way, Stephen meant to honor his word. But in all the millions of future he'd seen, all the ends, one thing he remembered clearly: the stone was always there.

"Emitter readings are beginning to fluctuate," FRIDAY said. Stephen could feel the sickness lurking like poison in his bones. He closed his eyes.

Study and practice. That's all this would take. Stephen was sure of it.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 14 felt a bit like the closing of one chapter (ie: time to stop running away) and the opening of another (ie: time to start running to). So it seemed like a good time for an interlude. And why write just one when I can write two?

But next: oh, the shenanigans to come...
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Alien first-contact and what to do when sarcasm isn’t a universal language (answer: use more of it).

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tony had known vaguely that looking for an inhabited alien world probably meant at some point actually interacting with an alien species. That was sort of the point, really. But it was something he’d thought about for a maximum two minutes, between other more significant considerations like the preservation of all universal life and the acquisition of new technology and the pursuit of science (not necessarily in that order). If anything, he’d probably worried more about how they’d avoid armed conflict if someone took exception to their ship dropping itself uninvited into the neighbourhood.

Of course, it occurred to Tony about sixty seconds into trying to communicate with the alien-lizard-reptile that possibly he should've thought of this sooner. And in spite of all evidence to the contrary, apparently English was not actually the predominant language of the galaxy.

"FRIDAY," Tony said through a fixed, pleasant smile. "Fade out the signal to static. Make it look like we've caught some solar wind and can't compensate."

Not really a lie. Tony’d had to recalibrate most of their equipment, including communications, to account for the significant electromagnetic activity in this system. It wasn't much of a stretch to say they might've had trouble maintaining a video and audio feed.

"Sure thing, boss," FRIDAY said, and the picture started to fuzz and warp, the image of the aliens distorting into an unrecognizable watercolor painting before slowly disappearing.

"Shit," Tony said.

Peter looked like he couldn't decide between explosive excitement and apprehension. He gesticulated wildly from where he’d been hovering on the ceiling. "They looked like dinosaurs. Space dinosaurs! Wow!" He stopped flailing to cross his arms thoughtfully. "Our dinosaurs died out, what, sixty-five million years ago? Maybe these are, like, descendants -"

"I think I've seen this cartoon before," Tony muttered. "Let's speculate on their possible origins after we figure out how to tell them we come in peace. Options? FRIDAY?"

"The ship's memory does not contain any specific linguistic data for this world," FRIDAY said apologetically. "Nor do I find any entry on the equipment manifest to assist with communication."

"So much for universal translation. Damn Squidward, anyway. He set my expectations too high."

Stephen made a low, considering noise. He’d stepped up to peer speculatively down at one of the consoles. "I doubt technology was what our host relied on."
"You're about to say he used magic, aren't you? Of course you are." Tony sighed. "Of course there'd be a spell for it. Color me surprised."

Stephen waved that ingratitude away. "If you'd prefer to go without -"

"Hell, I think that ship's sailed. Or this ship has. And now I'm mixing up my metaphors."

Stephen ignored him. He steepled his hands together as though in prayer, touching the tips of his fingers to just under his nose.

"Do you need hair for this one?" Tony asked, tugging demonstrably at his, short and neatly trimmed once more. After almost three months without a cut, he'd had a crazy-mountain-man look going, but a quick razor application had fixed that. A more dapper Tony Stark had returned, and with style.

Stephen shook his head, pulling his fingers apart to show a web of interconnected strings stretching like molten wire between them. "No. This is a generic spell." The strings sagged until they started to separate, fluttering down to form overlapping concentric circles. The circles broke into rings moving gently around one another, like a dizzying slow-motion explosion. Eventually Stephen seemed satisfied and set the whole thing spinning atop one finger, the same way a sportsman might with a basketball. He widened his eyes at Tony expectantly. Behind him, Peter hopped down to the floor, almost vibrating with enthusiasm.

Tony held out both hands dramatically. "Alright, doc. Hit me with your best shot."

When they called back five minutes later to find the hissing, clicking vocalizations of their new intragalactic pen pal now made sense, Tony silently admitted to himself that in spite of magic doing unholy things to physics, sometimes it really wasn't half bad.

"Hi, hello," he said brightly, once it was clear their new friends could understand him. "This is Dunkin Donuts, party of three calling. We mean you no harm, so please don't shoot or otherwise maim us. I just got my hair back the way I like it, so let's not make all that work for nothing."

Beside him, Tony could almost feel Stephen rolling his eyes.

The two aliens on the screen, who may or may not share ancestry with a velociraptor, had twin looks of confusion on their faces. Or possibly that was just how their faces always looked. Tony doubted an alien species was going to have the same micro-expressions as the average human.

"Sir," the one on the left said, and the word seemed to slip away for a second, almost disappearing into a guttural clicking. Tony wondered if that was some kind of affectation from the spell; maybe this species didn't have sirs. "I am unfamiliar with your words. What are your intentions in our system?"

Tony had an excellent but entirely inappropriate response to that, one Peter might approve of since it heavily featured the word pirate, but Stephen pre-empted him.

"We come seeking trade opportunities," the sorcerer said. "We're in need of a variety of supplies."

"Yes, this is often so," the one on the left said. "Our world is far removed from well-travelled paths and rarely visited. You search for food?"

"Among other things," Stephen agreed. "Would you be willing to consider a deal?"

The aliens turned to each other, silently conferring. Tony wondered how they were managing that without even twitching the muscles in their face. Maybe through scent, or subtle sign language, or
telepathy. Or magical, undetectable air currents.

It was amazing what seemed possible, or even probable, when considering the behavior of an entirely alien species.

"I cannot speak for our chancellor," the first alien said finally, turning back. "But a trade of essential supplies seems reasonable. I expect an arrangement can be made."

"Thank you," Stephen said. "I'm not sure what you might accept in exchange. I'm afraid we don't have much in the way of local currency."

Or much of anything, really, Tony didn't say.

"We have little use for galactic coin," the one on the right said. "What alternative do you offer? The chancellor may negotiate a price."

"Awesome question," Tony said cheerfully. "I don't suppose you folks eat jello?"

"Jello?" The word came across with a distorted hiss, the spell again seeming to compensate.

Tony nodded peaceably, then had to pause and wonder whether nodding to this species meant the same as it did to humans. Probably not. "Yeah, jello. Gelatinous MRE, comes in a variety of colors and maybe flavors. Life saving and soul destroying little snacks. I'll be honest, if you don't take them off our hands I might have to sneak them into a care package for you anyway."

Tony could hear Peter make an emphatic noise of agreement while beside him Stephen stifled a beleaguered sigh.

The alien, meanwhile, looked entirely unimpressed. "I don't understand."

"Not surprising," Stephen muttered, before clarifying: "We have non-perishable foodstuffs and valuable metals and ores onboard. We'd also be willing to consider a trade of knowledge. We have access to information from far off star systems."

"Knowledge." And Tony could assume that lilting hiss was interest, maybe, even though the facial expression hadn't changed one iota. "That is interesting. Do you have additional water supplies?"

"Water supplies?" Stephen echoed.

"Such supply is often sought on our world."

Which, actually, now Tony thought of it that shouldn't surprise him. FRIDAY'd been taking readings since they'd arrived in this system, and of the six planetary bodies orbiting the A-type star, all of them were desolate. The only one with humanoid life was not only primarily sand and rock, most of it volcanic, but solar activity had stripped off most of the planet's atmosphere, leaving it in drought, or with just barely livable environs. Given those circumstances, Tony supposed water would be a precious if not absolutely priceless commodity.

Tony broke in before Stephen could say anything. "Well, I'm sure we can come to some arrangement. I'm certainly willing to trade water for a couple things on our wish list. A look at your very pretty satellite systems, for example."

The aliens shared another speaking glance.

"Sir?" the leftmost one asked.
"Your satellites," Tony repeated. "They're kind of a work of art. Lots of tender loving care in their layout, impressive structural design, all that. The thing that interests me most, though, is we're half a system removed and you're still getting our signal loud and clear in spite of the solar winds. That's impressive. Mind giving me a sneak peek?"

"A sneak peek?" one of them echoed slowly, clearly feeling out the words.

"Yeah, I'd like to take a look under the hood. Well, under the communications grid, really. What're the odds we could make that happen?"

"You wish to examine one of our communication arrays?" the one on the left asked, and there, Tony could finally say for sure he'd gotten a reaction out of one of them. He could hear the alien's curiosity. "Why?"

"I'm an engineer, and I like shiny metal things and seeing what makes them tick."

"You are a machinist?" the right alien asked, more pointedly than Tony thought was warranted. Maybe they didn't like the term engineer on this world, or the spell didn't have an equivalent translation.

Tony grinned at the understatement anyway. "I work with machines, sure, and I'd like to work with yours."

"That is an unusual request."

"I'm an unusual guy."

Alien sign language voodoo took place again, and it was eerie how they both stared at each other in absolute silence before turning to look at him in tandem. "You offer a unique proposition. It will be for the chancellor to decide."

"Good, great," Tony said brightly. "Put him or her on the line."

One more glance. "Chancellor Zet will not negotiate over remote communications. Traditionally, the chancellor would meet travellers at a designated place to discuss terms."

"Maybe he could make an exception in this case," Tony said.

"That is not possible. Negotiation is often brief, but it is followed by a ceremonial sharing of food to close relations."

"We're in," Peter interjected quickly, because obviously his stomach was doing the talking for him.

Tony spoke right overtop of him. "No, see. Thanks for the offer, really, it's kind and probably generous. But we're really not looking to come and visit, per say. We're more interested in -" running off with your more interesting technology, or minerals, or valuables, or any other items of interest "- just trading for supplies, and then being on our way. No muss, no fuss."

"Honored guest," the one on the right said, in a tone that was overly patient. It was obvious they'd decided to treat their unreasonable alien visitor with kid gloves, since Tony couldn't be counted on to demonstrate common sense. "Even if that were possible, we have no available space-faring vessels. To effectively trade, you must land in order to receive supplies."

"Okay, but say we didn't," Tony said. "Imagine if you will that we might be able to pick up and transport things using this thing called technology."
The one on the right looked as scandalized as it was possible for a lizard to look. "You would demand Chancellor Zet forgo the ceremonial meal?"

Which, well. Said in that tone of voice, it sounded like Tony was asking this chancellor to commit murder, or at least join in some kind of bloody rampage. These people obviously took their meal times way too seriously.

Which of course immediately spawned paranoid thoughts about being the main course in a post-negotiation celebration. "Guys, I’m flattered by the offer, really, but I’m not sure dinner’s such a good idea. I have a sensitive stomach. Food allergies, you know. It could just never work between us."

It was clear by their non-expressions that they weren’t amused. It occurred to Tony, as it had obviously not occurred to Peter, to wonder what these people actually ate. Judging by the size of their incisors, they probably weren’t all about their leafy greens.

"We're practicing vegetarians," Tony tried. "Or jello-tarians, maybe. Three months strong and counting?"

The aliens looked at each other again.

Tony smiled weakly. "Vegan? We could be vegan." He grimaced. "Of course, then we'd probably have to do crossfit -"

"What my companion means to say," Stephen broke in dryly, "is we're honored to be invited and we'll be happy to join you for this ceremonial meal in exchange for your cooperation in trade supplies. Are you able to provide coordinates for us to land and travel to you?"

And that downward head-tilt paired with a squint was probably meant to be relief, or something like it. Tony should start a database. He doubted he was going to have much luck reading these people, otherwise; they clearly had no sense of sarcasm, which was basically the only language Tony spoke.

"We will provide coordinates," the one on the right said. "Our chancellor will be pleased to greet you there."

"Thank you," Stephen said graciously.

The live feed cut abruptly, leaving behind a picture of six planets painted in bright, monochrome color across their viewport. The sun in this system created beautiful but distinctly odd light that shaded into the blue spectrum for the human eye.

"Why do I feel like we're about to star in a fairy tale?" Tony asked the room at large.

"Which one?" Peter asked. He'd approached the viewport the moment it no longer held a communication from an alien species. He had his nose pressed nearly to the glass.

"Hansel and Gretel comes to mind. Or maybe Goldilocks and the three bears."

"That’s not too bad. I mean, at least everyone survived in those stories." Peter pulled himself up one side of the viewport until he could peer at it upside down. "Except the witch, I mean."

Tony shook his head. "Depends which version of the tale it is, and who's telling it. But gold star, kid: you've expanded your collection of classic literature. Moving up in the world."

"Thanks," Peter said brightly.
Tony turned to Stephen. "So, doc, what're the odds of someone trying to roast us alive if we touch down somewhere to break bread with these people? Have we eaten at this drive-through before?"

Stephen grimaced, a brief look of frustration shifting over his face. "I don't know."

Tony raised a skeptical eyebrow. "You don't know, but you're still sure it's safe to dine with them? And if you tell me signs point to yes one more time, I will do something we'll all regret."

"We've met them," Stephen said. "But that's all I remember."

He looked no more pleased about that than Tony felt.

"Sure you can't think of anything more helpful?" Tony asked. "Like if they have any giant space guns, who this chancellor is they were talking about, whether we'll be the main course at dinner or just guests, the correct fork to use if the latter. " Tony paused expectantly. "You know, important stuff like that."

"I doubt they even use forks," Stephen said. "Did you see the claws on their hands?"

Tony grimaced. He had. At two inches long, they were a good complement to their enormous fangs. "Yeah, thanks for that. I was doing my best not to imagine eating dinner next to someone who could disembowel me before I can try stabbing one of them with the butter knife, but now that's all I can think about."

"It won't be that bad. I doubt they use butter knives, either."

"Thanks for that scintillatingly useful speculation."

"You want useful?" Stephen asked. He rubbed at his eyes as though he might just claw them out. "Usefully, I can tell you that we badly need to top up our oxygen supplies and we’d probably end up on the surface of this planet one way or another. And also that none of our deaths in any universe involved evisceration by dinosaur."

"Yes, I'm more pleased than words can say that's the measuring stick we're using to gauge our safety."

"I'm kind of okay with it," Peter piped up, subsiding when Tony glared at him.

Stephen pinched the bridge of his nose. "Most of your life's been spent avoiding safety anyway. Why stop now?"

"I'd accuse you of defamation," Tony said, "but I'm on public record as a self-proclaimed adrenaline junkie. Also, why is your blood pressure hopping around like a rabbit on steroids?"

Stephen laughed, looking up. "A rabbit on steroids. Dare I even ask?"

"What?" Tony said, light and airy. "It is." He glanced at Peter. "Or maybe a spider on sugar high."

"I don't really get those," Peter admitted. "Metabolism. But if we can find sugar, I'm totally willing to try."

Tony shuddered dramatically. "I take it back. Stephen? You obviously don't get the sugar excuse."

"I've been getting headaches lately," the wizard said. He didn't look concerned, shrugging philosophically when Tony peered through his glasses at him. "Don't worry about it."
"Your mouth says don't worry, but the rest of you says worry."

"You'd probably know something about that," Stephen muttered.

"In my defense, that's usually just because I don't want to talk about it." Tony took the hint, turning to one of the consoles. "Alright, FRI, take us in."

It didn't take FRIDAY long to maneuver down through the atmosphere to the coordinates given. There was no aeronautic traffic from what Tony could detect, so nothing to be careful of avoiding as they descended to near-ground level.

That was where they discovered a problem. Well, several.

"This sucks," Peter declared with a frown.

Tony hid a grin behind one hand. "Can't be helped, kid. Still don't have much in the way of landing gear. You didn't mind it on our last planetary adventure."

"But we weren't meeting aliens the last time," Peter protested. "The trees were the only ones to impress. Well, and that giant eel, maybe."

"Don't even start. It was an anaconda. Don't make me leave you behind, kid. I'll do it."

Peter gazed at him with limp, pleading eyes and Tony could feel himself cave like a wet noodle.

"Okay, I won't take you in a fireman's carry. But no standing on top of me like a surf board this time, either."

Peter nodded eagerly. Tony turned to Stephen, waiting for the inevitable objections from that quarter too.

Stephen surprised him. "It makes more sense for me to take us down."

Tony raised both eyebrows. "Well, we already vetoed the fireman's carry. So unless you're planning to cart me off bridal style, afraid I'll have to pass."

"I can do bridal style."

The image that brought to mind was at once hilarious and strangely compelling. "Oh, I'm sure you can." Tony smirked. "Planning to carry me over the threshold, too?"

"Perhaps. But only if you ask me very, very nicely," Stephen said, and there was something a little too even in his voice. His eyes were charged with a heat that made Tony itch to respond in kind, something prickling beneath Tony's skin he didn't dare name.

He forced himself to backtrack. "Doc, I never do much of anything nicely."

"You will," the sorcerer said, continuing before Tony could respond. "Though perhaps we can skip the bridal carry during negotiations. I have a better suggestion, anyway."

Stephen's cloak rippled like an excited red flag. Tony looked at it automatically, skeptically.

"I'm not sure that fancy flying carpet of yours has enough square footage to fit all three of us," he said. It immediately snapped to rigid attention, bristling with outrage. Tony rolled his eyes. "No offense."
"No, the cloak will need to stay behind," Stephen said. He tugged it off, gently brushing aside its immediate efforts to slip back into place. It gave up after a few attempts and hung beside him very forlornly. Tony reminded himself it was an overrated piece of outerwear and incapable of feeling forlorn, or anything else for that matter. But it certainly faked it well.

"There a reason you're grounding one of the best tricks in your arsenal?" Tony asked.

Stephen snorted. "You haven't seen most of my arsenal. The cloak presents too convenient a target. There are several species that're all too happy to get their hands on a relic. I won't take it down to any planet we visit."

The cloak threw itself over a nearby console, looking absolutely inconsolable at this news. Tony tried not to laugh.

"Without the cloak, how exactly are you suggesting you'd get us down? Throw us overboard? Wouldn't be my first low altitude free-fall, but I honestly don’t recommend it for the uninitiated."

Stephen flicked out one hand, turning it over to emphasize the square metal ring there. Tony blinked in surprise.

"FRIDAY can give me a visual," Stephen said, gesturing at the viewport. The scene obligingly changed from an open-screen view to an aerial perspective; the ground recorded from one of the external sensors, Tony realized. "I can put us down out of sight. There's no reason to reveal the Iron Man armor prematurely."

Tony narrowed his eyes. "Said with particular emphasis. What do you have against the armor?"

"Nothing, except perhaps its overly ostentatious design."

"Hypocrite," Tony said. "That cloak isn't exactly demure. So is this tit for tat? You’re leaving your fashion accessory behind so you figure I should too?"

"Partly," Stephen admitted. "But mostly it’s because that suit is a beacon for the kind of attention we want to avoid. I realize it goes against your nature, but if we’re going to search other worlds we’re going to need to blend in."

Which made far more sense than Tony wanted to admit.

"You’ve met me, right?" he asked flippantly. "Do I seem like the type to blend?"

"Iron Man has his place. Let’s not advertise it for the entire universe."

Tony had the urge to keep arguing, but it didn't take more than opening his mouth to realize the urge wasn't because he had a good reason; it was because he wanted to have a good reason.

Tony liked being Iron Man. He liked others knowing he was Iron Man.

Being told to put his toys away and pipe down didn’t exactly sit well.

"For all we know, they have a million cameras setup at this location and they'll catch your little light show just as easily," Tony muttered.

"Unlike some, I can be discreet. And if FRIDAY detects surveillance we can pick a more removed location and walk in."

Tony made a couple more token protests, but eventually he gave in with as much grace as he could
They showed up at ground level, sheltered behind an outcropping of rocks. The air was crisp and dry, warm but not necessarily as hot as one might expect on a desert planet.

"At least it's not a water world," Peter commented, hopping immediately atop a convenient boulder so he could scale up it to the top. "No fish people. That's a good thing, right?"

"Define good," Tony said.

"Well, maybe they won't try to eat us?"

"You obviously weren't paying attention to the size of their teeth. Ten to one they're carnivores and probably not all that picky about who they put on the dinner table. Oh, sorry, who they invite to it."

"Children, please," Stephen admonished. "Our escort should arrive soon. Try not to alienate them."

"Alienate," Tony commented. "Now that's an interesting word. In this context, are words like that considered racially charged? Or species charged. *Specially* charged?"

"Tony."

"What? I'm just saying. FRIDAY, you can add that one to your lexicon."

"Yes, boss," FRIDAY responded, coming through tinny and blunted over their micro-receivers, tucked just inside the ear. Tony had insisted they each wear one before leaving the ship, miniscule nanotech deposits converted to basic radio wave transmitters. Warm greeting or no, they could never be entirely sure what to expect out in the black, and having a subtle way to communicate with FRIDAY and with each other could be the difference between life and death.

Besides, the receivers also doubled as a tracking device. Tony had even eventually, *reluctantly* shared that with Stephen and Peter when Stephen made it clear he knew exactly what Tony was up to and wasn't putting anything in his ear until he got the full story.

It was almost like Stephen knew Tony for the radical paranoiac he was.

They heard the greeting party before they saw them, a string of slow-moving ground vehicles gliding easily over the rough, rocky terrain. The humans stood in the open for visibility and eventually the vehicles stopped. Out poured a mix of stately looking officials and a slew of people clearly meant as security. Tony eyed the latter warily.

Although really, they almost needn't have bothered with bringing any muscle. The shortest of the delegation still stood a foot taller than even Stephen, and all of them had the bulk and natural weapons that came from being, well -

"Dinosaurs," Peter breathed, eyes round with wonder. Tony elbowed him in the side.

"Hello," Stephen called as the group approached them in eerie tandem. He cleared his throat. "Thank you for coming out to meet us. We're grateful. But we could've come to you."

The official looking people stepped forward, and Tony recognized one of them: the leftmost alien from their earlier communication. It was this one who spoke. "The desert can be treacherous for those unfamiliar to its ways. We would not ask you to traverse it unaided."

Tony wanted to ask why they'd told them to park this far out, then, but he heroically refrained.
"I'm sure your guidance will be invaluable," Stephen said. Tony grinned. From the faint wry note in his voice, the sorcerer was politely not informing their escort of how three superheroes weren’t likely to be intimidated by a desert.

Except for the intense ultraviolet radiation given off by the A-type star. That was actually pretty dangerous. They’d had to slather on an impermeable protection compound over every inch of skin before they could even leave the ship.

The ship, which was still hovering a good half-mile above the ground, and which their alien friend was now busy looking at.

"Will your vessel not be required to land?"

"Fortunately not," Stephen assured them. "It will remain airborne. Though we can relocate it if its position is troublesome."

The alien continued to study the ship curiously for a moment, eventually looking back down. "No need. This area is set aside for your use. I am the chancellor's aid, Gwar."

"Hello Gwar," Stephen repeated easily. "A pleasure to meet you. I'm Stephen. This is Peter, and that’s Tony."

Tony waved, but Peter was basically ignoring everything being said, staring intensely at their greeting party as if to immortalize every line of their faces. Tony wanted to tell him to take a picture, it'd last longer, but technically he was already doing that. FRIDAY was recording their whole adventure planet-side, actually.

"Unusual names," Gwar commented.

Tony shrugged. "Only to you. Besides, like I said before, we're an unusual people."

"Some of us more so than others," Stephen said blandly.

Gwar looked interested at this. "I am sure our names and ways must also seem strange to you."

"I’m withholding judgement until dinner time," Tony said. "Speaking of judging, though, here’s something I honestly can’t tell, and it’s driving me crazy. Gwar, buddy, are you a guy or a girl?"

Now it was Stephen’s turn to elbow Tony.

Gwar blinked. Twice. Once by slowly opening and closing an eyelid vertically, as a human might, and then a second time horizontally when a nictitating membrane slid from one side to the other. Tony twitched and tried not to stare too obviously in reaction.

"Guy?" Gwar asked, the word wobbling with the alien’s pronunciation.

"Male," Tony clarified. "On my world, we mostly identify along binary gender lines, being born either male or female, or in some awesome cases both. How about you?"

Gwar made an odd gesture, half a shrug and maybe a bow. Some kind of acknowledgement? Or possibly a prelude to offense, in which case Tony should probably be prepared to start running.

"Like you, we have two genders," Gwar said. "I am male. All who you see before you are male."

Which was interesting. Tony couldn’t decide whether that meant everyone present was male, or everyone they’d be allowed to see was male. Maybe both.
Gwar went on, oblivious. "Forgive me, I have delayed unnecessarily. I will show you to the chancellor."

Which, as far as Tony was concerned, marked one of the more peaceful ends to his growing repertoire of alien first-contacts.

Or it did. Right up to the moment they stepped onboard the chancellor’s ground transport and the almost nonexistent whine of FRIDAY’s transmitter went abruptly silent in Tony’s ear. At the same time, Gwar stepped forward and said: "Chancellor Zet. Our guests have arrived."

An alien at least three feet taller than Gwar turned around, blue and purple where the others were green, long and graceful and clearly not at all related to a velociraptor.

And every biorhythm sensor Tony had on Stephen slid into a red danger zone.

He turned to find the sorcerer chalk white with shock. Behind him, Tony could see Peter glance down at his own arms in surprise, and then up again a second later with alarm.

"Greetings," Chancellor Zet said quietly, amicably.

"Shit," Stephen replied, and immediately raised both hands in a clear sign of surrender.

Which made sense, because not two seconds later their escort all pulled out some kind of impressive looking space gun and pointed it at them. Tony raised his own hands slowly, staring down the length of a half-dozen weapons. Peter did the same, eyes wide.

"Well," Tony said into the ensuing silence. "I hate to be that guy who says I told you so, but -"

Stephen sighed loudly.

"- I fucking told you so."

Chapter End Notes

Out of town and had to post this from my phone. Autocorrect sucks! Please point out any grammar errors for me, thanks.
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Tony's mouth has a history of getting him into trouble, but this planet seems specially designed to press all his buttons. Also, prime directive, what prime directive?

(Warning: This chapter and the two following all live up to the tag for violence. They are triggery. Read at own risk.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Remind me again why we're not just busting out of here," Tony said.

Stephen muttered something vulgar, the low tone of it echoing in the darkness. The lights in their cells had been turned off hours ago and now every sound seemed amplified.

"It's weird," Peter said, almost wistfully. His voice was muffled; Tony watched his thermal image roll so his head pressed into the flimsy excuse for a mattress each of their cots came equipped with. "They seemed so nice."

Tony growled at that. "No, they didn't. They seemed nominally willing to trade with total strangers entering their star system unannounced. In retrospect, maybe our first clue something was off."

"That's not a good measure," Stephen said. Unlike Peter he was sitting up, both feet planted on the floor. "There're any number of species willing to trade out here. It's actually one of the few options for commerce from a galactic perspective. That, or true piracy." He paused. "Or slavery."

Tony scowled. "Maybe those'd be less attractive if they established a universal system of supply and demand. They could call it a galactic marketplace. G-Mart for short."

"Perhaps you could pitch the idea to the powers that be," Stephen suggested dryly.

"Maybe I will. And I'll exclude this planet for unethical trade practices. Kidnapping prospective customers is so gauche."

Stephen huffed a disbelieving laugh. "Yes, kidnapping people does seem inconsiderate, doesn't it?"

"We're talking about our captor's bad behavior, not mine. Which brings me back to my original question: why the hell haven't we already flown the coop? I know you said we can't, but maybe you could elaborate. I'm sure there's more to it, because I'm telling you right now we absolutely can."

Stephen made a low, considering sound. "How certain are you there's no surveillance in our cells?"

"Certain. They left me the glasses after I whined ad nauseam I couldn't see without them. More fool them." Tony adjusted the frames smugly before considering no one else could see it. "No electronic monitoring devices to speak of."

Shuffling sounds came from the darkness, and Tony had to ward off a shiver of apprehension when
he realized he couldn't tell whether it was coming from Peter or Stephen's cell. Glasses or not, he was starting to lose all sense of acoustic direction. He breathed through the first inklings of anxiety.

"You know, I'm kind of with Mr. Stark on this one," Peter said, suddenly. "I mean, they did point guns at us and drag us away from the ship and lock us in cells. Why wouldn't we want to escape?"

"This would've been much easier if Zet had spoken to us himself," Stephen sighed. "He always has before. He enjoys laying the trap. If I'd seen him earlier I would've been prepared."

"Prepared for what?" Peter asked. "Who is he?"

"Is he in league with Thanos?" Tony asked evenly.

Stephen laughed without humor. "No. Or at least, we've never encountered them at the same time, and there were futures we were months under his thumb. Of all the planets to choose from, Tony, you had to pick this one first."

"Hey, you were the one who said choose and the rest would follow. Besides, technically FRIDAY picked it. Blame her."

Reminded, he checked the transmitter in his ear, thankfully overlooked by their captors. Unfortunately, it was still silent. Tony frowned and tapped his fingers unsteadily against his chest. The hollow of the missing housing unit felt like a physical wound in some ways, as if the arc reactor itself had been plucked from his sternum and carried off.

"What did you do with the Time Stone?" Tony asked, thinking back on the incident darkly.

Unsurprisingly, the aliens had been eager to relieve them of their weapons and equipment. Equally unsurprisingly, Tony hadn't been eager to give it to them. He'd side-stepped the first lizard who reached for the housing unit, backing up so he could calculate a dive, already thinking about escape, about gunfire vectors and minimum safe distance.

One step was as far as he got. Stephen wrapped painful fingers around his wrist and looked at him from a white, shocked face and said: "Don't."

"Give me one good reason why not."

Tony could remember the small army of lizard-beings milling uncertainly around them, looking to the chancellor for guidance. He could remember how Zet had let the tension mount, how he'd watched them all with a strange, unsettling intensity, fixed and interested but in no way afraid. The whole scene had felt frozen with the potential for violence.

"Because I'm asking." The look on Stephen's face had been half a demand, half a plea. "If you can't trust it, Tony, then trust me. Don't."

Stephen’s horror couldn't have been any more obvious. His biorhythms were all still firmly in the red. Tony had hesitated, letting his mind skip ahead, weighing what he thought he knew against what Stephen clearly did know. It came down to a leap of faith, in a way; whether he was willing to rely on Stephen's instincts over his own.

The next time one of the aliens reached for the housing unit, he'd let them take it.

Of course, that peaceful coexistence lasted all of two seconds. One of the aliens apparently thought this meant it was open season and reached for Stephen's ornamental and seemingly innocuous necklace. It promptly gave him severe third degree burns. The guy made a sound like an angry
snake, and before anyone could move he'd smacked the barrel of his gun into Stephen's gut. The sorcerer hit the deck, wheezing.

Tony'd shoulder-checked the guy flat on his ass, but that was just about all he managed; the aliens were faster than they looked and they weren't gentle about putting Tony on the floor right next to Stephen. Which was fine, because then Peter was barrelling toward them both, and the one that tried to block him got slammed into a wall, and then into the floor for good measure.

"Don't do that," was all Peter had said to their captors while he helped Stephen and Tony to their feet. The aliens had given them a much wider berth after that. Except Zet, who was still watching it all as if observing a wonderfully interesting performance put on solely for his amusement.

All that, but it still wasn't until Stephen reached out and silently handed over the Eye that Tony realized something truly, phenomenally bizarre was going on.

"What did you do with the stone?" Tony repeated.

Stephen hummed low in his throat. "My options were limited at the time. Fortunately, the guard gave me an opening when he so graciously helped me down to the floor. While everyone was distracted watching you two pretend to be knights in shining armor, I took the stone from the Eye and hid it among the stars."

Casually. Like he was talking about folding up laundry and tucking it away in a drawer.

"You hid the stone among the stars."

"Yes."

Tony waited for more, but nothing else seemed forthcoming. "And that's a thing you can just do, is it?"

Stephen sounded infuriatingly smug in the darkness; Tony could almost hear him smiling. "Well, it's a thing I've done. Watch the stars and learn, Tony."

"I doubt Einstein was talking about infinity stones being among them when he said that."

"Or perhaps that's exactly what he meant," Stephen said. "He was a philosopher as well as a scientist. Who's to say he wasn't also a sorcerer?"

Tony held up both hands warningly. "That's not a thing. That's not ever going to be a thing. Magic isn't allowed to subvert science that far."

"I thought all magic was science. Conversely, that would mean all science is also magic."

"I know you can't see me right now, but I currently have my fingers in my ears. I'm not listening, understand? I can't hear you."

Stephen laughed, so loudly it echoed around their small enclosed space. Tony felt some small, cramped part of him relax, hearing it; Stephen had a genuinely infectious laugh. It lightened the ominous pressure of the dark and their captivity just a bit.

"I have no idea what you two are talking about," Peter said plaintively, lightening it even further.

"No problem, kid. Add epistemology to your curriculum when we get back."

Stephen made a musing sound. "I never read all of his philosophical works. Did you? FRIDAY
might have them on hand."

"Closest I ever got to philosophy was a dinner date with someone who majored in it. Spoilers: no second date. But speaking of FRIDAY. You realize we probably have a day before she confirms something's wrong? We lost the transmitter signal in the car and I'm pretty sure we're underground right now. There's no way to tell her we're alive, if not well."

Stephen sounded appropriately worried about that. "Does she have any kind of protocol in place for this?"

"What, for our mass kidnapping and imprisonment?" Tony asked archly. "Not really. As an authorized user, her default if I'm kidnapped would be to tell you. If either of you were kidnapped, she'd tell me. For lack of other options, she's probably talking to your cloak right now. Sadly, it's probably not talking back. We have a forty-eight hour window to do a communications check with her. After that we'll be considered overdue."

"What will she do after that?"

Tony hesitated, because everything he knew about A.I programming said one thing. But his instincts said another. "I don't know. Might depend on our timeline. How long do you think we'll be stuck in this hellhole?"

"Difficult to say. Weeks, perhaps. We won't be in suspense for long in these cells though. Zet will make an appearance shortly. He's not a man of any great patience."

Tony growled impatiently. "You keep saying his name like that alone explains our predicament, Stephen. Who is he?"

Stephen stood up, his thermal marker moving until it ran into the confines of his cell. Tony watched him reach out and wrap both hands around the bars tightly.

"A fascist dictator," Stephen said. "An extremist. One who does a credible imitation of a wartime Nazi. He and Thanos might work well together. They have views that aren't totally dissimilar."

Tony felt a sliver of dread work its way into his bones. "Sounds like the two of you had some interesting chats."

"In the few timelines I was conscious in, certainly," Stephen said flatly. "Be careful of him, Tony. He looks harmless, frail even, but he's not. He has some kind of telekinetic power, not unlike that of our previous host."

Tony groaned. "Oh, come on. Does every alien species we run into feel the need to pervert physics? This is getting ridiculous."

Stephen ignored him. "Zet preys on travellers, particularly ones with any skill or talent he can exploit. He's going to pressure you to work on his behalf. If you don't, or you resist, he'll persuade you. He's good at that."

It was probably the lack of light that had Tony listening so closely, but he heard a tone in Stephen's voice then that he hadn't been expecting.

"He seemed welcoming enough," Tony said, testing. "Creepy and a little standoffish. But hardly this paragon of evil you're describing."

"He'll be cordial at first, but don't be fooled. He's a tyrant and he's ruthless." Stephen paused,
blowing out a shaky sigh. "Don't underestimate him. Whatever he asks, if it's within reason, at least pretend to go along with it. If you don't, he'll use anything he thinks he can against you to force your compliance."

And that wasn't a tone anymore. That was an obvious warning sign painted in flashing neon red on the wall.

"Anything he can," Tony repeated softly. "And anyone, I assume."

Stephen didn't answer. From the dark, an uncertain shuffling came from the other side, the other cell.

"You mean us," Peter said, closer; his thermal outline was standing at the bars, looking hesitantly into the black. "He'll use us."

Stephen sighed, long and low. "I won't let it get that far. The other times we were taken, it happened violently and fast. I was - seriously injured." Dying, Tony heard him carefully not saying. I was dying. "That's not the case now. I still have my magic." He snorted in amusement. "And if Tony doesn't have his nanotech stashed somewhere nearby I'll revoke his genius card."

"You can't do that," Tony said patiently. "Mensa awarded it and there's a process to take it away. What kind of question is that, anyway? Of course I have the tech."

He tapped again on the center of his chest, shaking his wrist to feel the concealed cuff of the bots there. He almost hadn't managed to hide them in time. They weren't as versatile without the housing unit, and he hadn't quite siphoned the entire batch, but it hardly mattered. Even a handful of nanobots with the right formation and programming was enough to bring entire cities to a standstill.

"I don't have my suit," Peter said suddenly, anxiously. "I left it behind. I mean, we were trying to blend in. I thought I'd be better off without, you know?"

Tony shook his head, even though the other two couldn't possibly see him. "Doesn't matter, Peter. You don't need the suit. You know that."

"Oh," Peter said, since apparently he'd actually forgotten. And then, cheerfully: "Right."

"So Zet's going to ask nicely for my help and I should give it to him - why?" Tony asked. "Because he's such a nice guy? All arguments seem in favor of us getting the hell out of dodge. In fact, why are we still standing here debating? They took your sling ring, but there's a million other ways magic could get us out of these cells, even if I didn't have some fancy lock picks hidden under my sleeve."

"We can't leave yet," Stephen said. "Our presence here sparks something that leads to an uprising. Zet will be overthrown. We can't leave before that happens."

Tony just about choked on the realization. "You want us to stay here to help these people overthrow their government. You're talking about some kind of revolution." He seethed, incensed. "Dammit, Stephen. I didn't take off into space to start revolutions. A universal one."

"Some revolutions are necessary."

"Yeah, that sounds exactly like something Thanos might say." Tony modulated his tone until it was at least marginally neutral. "Look, I'm sorry these people got stuck with a dictator. I really am. But I'm not going to risk our freedom and maybe the fate of the universe to save them. They got themselves into Hitler's clutches; they can get themselves out. Earth certainly did."
"Yes, and all it took was a world war and more than fifty million dead," Stephen said flatly.

Tony scowled. "We didn't take off into space to save every alien species down on their luck."

"Oh, were we only interested in saving half the universe then? Or perhaps just Earth. Maybe just ourselves." Stephen dropped the mocking tone for a coaxing one. "We have the chance to help these people find a new and better path. We can't just walk away."

Tony really hated being coaxed. "We can and we should. We don't have the resources to help everyone, Stephen. We barely have the resources to help ourselves."

The sorcerer sighed in frustration. "I'm not suggesting we help everyone. Just these ones. Just the ones we meet along the way we can make a difference for."

Tony smiled, not happily. He was starting to understand Stephen Strange, and he didn't need a full uplink with FRIDAY to tell him the sorcerer was only giving him half a truth. "Right, sure. Just the ones we meet. A dozen, maybe two if we have the time. It'll never amount to more than that. There's no chance we can live all the futures you've seen, save the millions of people I'm sure are out there who need it. Tell me you'll be satisfied only saving a handful of them, Stephen. Tell me you won't have nightmares about all the ones you can't." He paused, but the sorcerer said nothing. "This is a fight with no end. It's not one you can win and it's an awful path to failure. Believe me, I recognize what that looks like better than most."

Stephen uttered an ugly curse and something crashed into the bars of his cell. Probably a foot, or from the pained grumbling that followed, a hand.

"Um," Peter said, startling them into silence. "I know this probably won't go over well. But, uh. I agree with Dr. Strange."

Now it was Tony's turn to kick at his cell. "Of course you do, kid. He's basically proposing vigilantism on a galactic scale. What's not to love? Except for the part where we get ourselves killed trying to impose Earth-centric morals on the rest of the universe. Have neither of you heard of the prime directive? You clearly need to watch more Star Trek."

Peter cleared his throat quietly. "No, see, that's not it. I just. My uncle Ben. Aunt May's husband, I mean. He used to tell me stories. Big fan of the knights of the round table and Camelot and everything. He'd act them out for me and I'd pretend I was one of them, had this awesome wooden sword that I - well, anyway." He coughed. "That's not important. The important part is that, that Ben used to say people with power had a responsibility that couldn't be put aside. To help others, to give to others, because great power brings with it great responsibility."

Peter paused, possibly to listen to the thumping sound Tony's head made as he banged it repeatedly against the wall to highlight the painful inevitability.

"I think we should help them," Peter said softly and with finality. "It's the right thing to do."

"The right thing to do," Tony muttered sarcastically. "For who exactly? And how have I become the voice of reason here? I mean, this is going to go so badly, you two. Seriously. So badly."

"It's no use protesting, Tony," Stephen sounded entirely too confident as he spoke. "I've listened to you argue yourself into staying before."

Tony grimaced, because what he heard there was Stephen admitting he hadn't been in any shape to argue with Tony himself.
"Zet will come for you soon," Stephen continued. "As far as he's aware, you're the only one he wants. We can use that to our advantage. He has no idea of my magic, and as long as it stays that way we'll always have an escape route."

Tony snorted, musing silently on what a fascist dictator might do with Stephen's magic at his beck and call. The power to break physics, even if they discounted the Time Stone entirely. It didn't really bear thinking about. "Great. So I get to be the face of this little spy game, and you get to be our sleeper agent. I officially hate this plan."

"Should we take your complaints to mean you're in agreement with it?"

Tony rolled his eyes. "I wouldn't call it agreement. This is more a temporary contract. A provisional accord."

"I can work with that," Stephen said.

Peter's only contribution was a muted cheer.

Tony sighed, feeling very put upon. "If we do this, we're going to need some better ground rules in the future. I was serious. We can't help everyone. I'm willing to give it a shot today and that's as far as I'm committing. But at the first sign of imminent peril, we're out of here. I want your word, Stephen."

The sorcerer was grave and solemn. "You have it."

"Right." Tony shook his head. "Superheroing in space with a madman on our tail. What the hell am I thinking? I must be crazy." He sighed. "So when do we start the ball rolling? When does the creepy chancellor come calling?"

The words were almost eerily prophetic; it wasn't thirty seconds later that the lights flickered on in their cells and the main door swung ponderously open.

But it wasn't Zet who came. It was his assistant.

"Good morning," Gwar said, stepping into the cell block while the three humans squinted at him with watering eyes.

"Is it?" Tony asked, sighing when the sarcasm once again went right over the alien's head. "Okay, rephrase: no, obviously it isn't a good morning. We were just kidnapped and thrown in jail yesterday. How could that equal a good morning?"

Gwar stared at Tony inscrutably. "I apologize. It is a customary greeting on my world."

"To go along with this customary predicament we find ourselves in," Tony muttered. "Your hospitality skills are seriously lacking."

"I understand why you would think so," Gwar said. He passed his hand over the reader beside Tony's cell door and it unlocked with a click. "Please come with me."

Tony stepped out warily. Gwar turned without another word, gliding back to the cell entryway. He paused at the door to look expectantly at Tony.

Tony returned his stare, glancing pointedly at Stephen and Peter, both stood at the door of their cells with their fingers wrapped around the bars.
Gwar followed his gaze. "Your companions will remain here. The chancellor has requested you attend him alone."

Tony raised both eyebrows mockingly. "And I’m just supposed to take your word they’ll be safe?"

"That would be optimal," Gwar said peaceably.

Tony shot a questioning look at Stephen, who shrugged back.

"Just don’t do anything too crazy," Stephen said. "I’m sure we’ll be fine."

"Please. Do I seem the type to do crazy things?"

Peter looked truly alarmed, but Stephen just rolled his eyes. "Don’t make me come save you again."

Tony scowled at this reminder. He turned resolutely away to face Gwar. "Alright. Lead the way, Kemosabe."

The alien blinked at him with his strange reptilian eyes. "My name is Gwar."

"And mine’s who-gives-a-shit. Let’s just go, please and thank you."

Gwar stepped out, and Tony could see one guard stood at bored attention beside the door. He straightened when they passed by and turned to follow them down the hall.

"I understood your name was Tony," Gwar said.

"Yeah. That’s short for who-gives-a-shit."

"I see," Gwar said, though he obviously didn’t. "Interesting."

Tony firmly kept his next response hidden behind his teeth, since it wasn’t very polite and might actually get him slammed back into the floor. That effectively ended the conversation, leaving Tony free to examine the halls of the complex as they walked. He was distantly vindicated to have his theory confirmed; they were underground.

Actually, it became clear they were in rather crude surroundings underground. The walls were bare stone, the doors they passed made of crude metal with no finishing. Even the floor was mostly rough mesh or brick. The only sign of sophistication was the occasional swipe reader like the one that’d been outside Tony’s cell, a flat black panel roughly embedded in the rock.

Tony frowned. Set against the backdrop of advanced satellite communication and ground transport vehicles and space guns, this underground complex seemed almost insultingly rudimentary.

"Where are we, exactly?" Tony asked, memorizing corners and turns, counting cross-sections and doors.

Gwar seemed not to notice Tony carefully crafting his mental map. "This complex is located underground at the foot of -" a hissing, clicking word the translation spell failed to interpret "-mountain. The surface of this world is unsafe for extended habitation."

"Yeah, we noticed. But what is this place? Some kind of prison for those foolish enough to land on your planet? Military base, maybe?"

Gwar paused, looking at him curiously.
Tony smiled brightly into the alien's face. "What? Are you about to give me some story about us not being prisoners? Those cells make really crappy guest quarters, if so."

Gwar didn't react to the dig. "A military base is a facility designed to house and coordinate martial forces?"

Tony stared at him skeptically. Had there been some kind of communication breakdown? Maybe the translation spell wasn't working.

"Yes," he said finally, when it was clear Gwar was waiting for an actual answer.

The alien resumed walking. "We do not have those."

Tony only started moving when the guard gave him a hard nudge to keep up. He glared at Gwar's back, wondering what game they were playing now. No military bases. Right. And those space guns were obviously just decorative.

"Okay, fine. Don't tell me, then. How deep underground are we?"

"This complex is by necessity limited to the natural caverns of the mountain. Depth changes accordingly."

Which probably meant there was no way Tony could sneak off and secretly message FRIDAY. Tony looked at the ceiling, seeing evidence of stalactites. "Do all your people live underground?"

"We have grown used to the mountain."

"What kind of food stores do you grow? Not exactly prime farming environs on this world. How do you -"

"If I might offer some advice?" Gwar interrupted conversationally.

Tony snorted. "Could I really stop you?"

"Questions of this nature will not be appreciated by all. I am willing to answer them." Gwar paused pointedly. "The chancellor will not be."

"You saying I should sit down and shut up when I get in there?"

"I am saying you should be cautious." They stopped, and Tony backed up a step when Gwar turned to look at him. No, Tony realized, to look at the guard behind him. He sidestepped to keep them both in his sight, watching them exchange an impassive glance. Tony had the distinct feeling there was some sort of subliminal nonverbal communication happening that he couldn't perceive.

When they finished it, whatever it was, the guard gave Tony a speaking glance, touched his claws in Gwar's direction, and did an about-face to retreat back down the corridor, disappearing quickly out of sight.

"Alone at last," Tony commented, circling to find Gwar staring at him. "Darling, I thought he'd never leave."

"It is best to limit witnesses," Gwar said ominously.

Tony shifted his weight to his heels, prepared to tuck and roll if necessary. "Witnesses to what?"
"Sedition. It is a punishable offense to speak ill of the chancellor."

Tony narrowed his eyes. "And that's what you're about to do? Speak ill of him?"

"Nothing so simple. Please listen, as we have little time. We expected resistance when we captured you. Others have always resisted. You gave us little, so Chancellor Zet will seek to make an example of you here, to impress on you his authority, that you may know how little rebellion of any kind will be tolerated. He will search for the slightest provocation to apply punishment. You must do your best to give him none."

Tony backed up further, until he could feel cool stone against his back, grit shifting against his fingers.

"Why would you tell me that?" Tony asked flatly, forcing himself to grin though it was the last thing he felt like doing. "Is it because you think he won't find my jokes funny?"

Gwar dropped his head, staring down at his claws. "You do not want to see what the chancellor finds funny. If you wish to avoid injury, heed my words. If you cannot, then remember: Chancellor Zet requires you whole and capable of work. Whatever happens, he will do you no permanent harm."

Which was nowhere near as reassuring as Gwar probably meant it, but certainly succeeded in quashing any further impulse Tony had to crack jokes. He followed Gwar the rest of the way in silence.

"Good morning," Chancellor Zet greeted the minute Tony stepped into his office. If one could call it an office; it definitely wasn't strewn with paperwork or electronic gadgets or even a nameplate, as far as Tony could tell. Instead the room was setup in an elongated fashion, no desk, a recessed table in the center of the room and some kind of seating area and then a floor to ceiling canvas of bright blue and red and green colors on one wall. Zet was stood in front of that, and the contrast of his purple skin was striking.

Tony had noticed the guy's height in the car; it was hard to miss, really. But outside the cramped quarters of the vehicle it was even more obvious. He had to come close to nine or ten feet, easily. He was also willowy, where others from his world were made up of massive bulk, and his limbs were almost disjointedly long in proportion to his body. Not to mention his facial structure was totally off, not lizard-like at all. And he had feathers or some kind of fronds waving down from the top of his head, like the strangest hair Tony had ever seen.

In fact, as Tony stared at him he realized with some misgiving that Zet was so entirely dissimilar from Gwar, it was possible they weren't actually related as a species.

Tony only understood he was staring when the silence had gone on long enough to echo back at him. "Oh. Yeah, hi. Good morning, I guess."

Zet turned to Gwar, and the assistant bowed his head, retreating from the room silently. There was no door, just an open doorway, which Tony felt on the one hand should maybe make him feel less trapped, but on the other hand did absolutely nothing of the sort.

Tony tried to smile and failed. "Chancellor Zet, was it? I'm Tony."

Zet tilted his head to one side curiously. "On this world, one normally waits for a person of authority to speak first."

Tony managed to stomp on his first instinct to say something rude about people being locked in cells
lacking patience. "Right, no speaking out of turn. Check."

Zet waved one languid, three-fingered hand, looking for all the world affable and gracious. "Having viewed the record of your contact with my aid, I suspect controlling your speech is a challenge for you."

Tony wanted to laugh; he would've any other time. Not now. "You're probably right."

"That is often the case," Zet said.

Tony forced himself to stand in silence.

"Good," Zet said, as if praising a pet. "It is fortunate for you I was occupied at the time of your initial contact. I would not have been so tolerant of your foolishness as my aid was."

The alien didn't quite smile, and Tony had no idea if that was because he didn't know how, or wasn't physically capable. Either way, it was clear he was amused, and the lack of expression didn't stop Tony from wanting to wipe that off Zet's face with a well-aimed punch. He wondered if he could just pre-empt the whole maybe-revolution to come by killing Zet right here and now.

Zet made a low, hissing sound. "It seems your insolence can be tempered when supplied with the correct motivation."

"What motivation is that?" Tony asked flatly.

Zet repeated the hissing sound. It was rhythmic and chilling. "I would think the answer obvious after your capture."

Which, put like that, perhaps it was.

"Why capture us at all?" Tony asked, leadingly. "You could've just killed us."

"Do not be foolish," Zet chided. "I require access to your skills. You are a machinist."

"I'm an engineer," Tony corrected automatically.

Zet turned his head slowly to look at Tony directly. And maybe he and Gwar were related after all, because the man had reptilian eyes, and there was something in his flat stare that set every instinct for self-preservation Tony had to ringing.

"You are a machinist," Zet corrected, so simply and pleasantly that Tony didn't understand the words at first. "Though your designation perhaps matters less than your purpose. Whatever you were before is now nothing. You are mine."

Tony sneered, real anger curling in his gut and flowing rashly from his mouth. "Sorry bud, I'm not good with sweeping declarations like that. Commitment issues, you know."

Tony couldn't have described afterward quite what happened next. One minute he was standing there stupidly shooting his mouth off, and the next he was choking on blood as his face met the wall, a high pitched ringing in his ears while he scrabbled for purchase from three feet in the air.

Zet looked at him, looked down at him, even, from no less than half the room away. He hadn't moved, and yet Tony felt the clutch of the man's slender hand at the notch of his throat, pressing hard against his windpipe.

Tony couldn't help it; his first response to danger had always been defiance. "Was it something I
"said?" he rasped wetly.

Zet clicked gutturally and took one step closer. An invisible finger trailed over Tony's neck, his cheek, and the violation of it was crawlingly intimate. Tony could feel panic trickle into his lungs and choke off any remaining breath he might have.

"You were doing well, or nearly so," Zet said softly. "You almost managed to pretend at deference, in word if not in deed. But of course that could not last. Not for one like you."

He said the last with particular relish, with such perfect disgust it couldn't be mistaken for anything else. Tony swallowed, the metallic taste reminding him of Stephen's warning, of Gwar's. He tried to modulate his tone to something approaching civil, clogged though it was with blood and resentment. "Sorry. My bad."

Apparently Zet didn't like civil, because the touch of a finger became the ripping tear of a claw, and new red warmth slid down his cheek. Tony grit his teeth.

"You must not allow emotion to goad you so." Zet glided toward him lazily, coming to a stop a short length away. "Insubordination will only earn you pain."

Tony felt the claw trail up to the corner of one eye and tried not to panic when it pressed in there, gently.

"What do you want?" Tony forced out, feeling the hovering threat like an impossible weight.

"Hmm," Zet said. "Better. But not good enough." Reptilian eyes blinked wickedly, the secondary eyelid slipping slowly out and back again.

Tony crushed the impotent rage that tried to rise, feeling it lodge somewhere in the vicinity of his heart where it could start to fan itself into a flame.

"What do you want, chancellor?" Tony asked, struggling to keep his tone even, his eyes clear.

He didn't succeed. He could see his misstep in the sway of Zet's head, his chiding hiss.

"The words are pretty, but they cannot disguise your lack of humility." Zet stepped away, turning to take in Tony fully. There was something like greed in his eyes, a depth of cruelty that was almost stunning, and Tony felt true atavistic fear prickle along his nerves. The chancellor made a noise like hissing music. He could sense it, Tony realized. Whether through scent or magic or some other mechanism, Zet knew he was afraid. As he'd said, none of Tony's words could sway him. He didn't want a pretense of obedience. He wanted fear.

"I suggest you not move," Zet said, in a voice dripping with satisfaction. The claw at Tony's eye tapped once, in demonstration, before tracing a quick line of fire just beneath it. Tony made a sound then that he'd deny to his last breath later. "Struggling will not benefit you."

"Please," Tony said, giving him what he wanted, hating himself for it. He reminded himself it wasn't only his life, his pride or his pain on the line. Stephen and Peter were counting on him not to screw this up. Tony could stand anything, as long as he kept that goal in mind. "My mistake. It won't happen again."

"I know," Zet said, exultantly. "Careful, now. Be still, or you will spoil my aim."

It seemed to go on for a long time, but of course it didn't really. When it was over, Tony found himself shaking with the effort of locking down his rage, keeping it from doing something there'd be
no turning back from. The pain was transient, a pale shadow of the real wound, the impotent wrath Tony had to swallow down. Zet hadn't been aiming to injure; he'd been aiming to terrify, to humiliate. Tony had to uncurl his hands from the kind of shaking tension that told him he might actually have sprained something. Probably his left third finger, which ached fiercely. But that was okay, that was fine; curling his fingers had kept them from reaching for the nanotech activators. If nothing else, he could say he’d safely concealed that.

"There," Zet said, when he was done. He admired his handwork with sickening satisfaction. "You see? With sufficient incentive you are capable of proper behavior. A marked improvement."

Tony bit the inside of his lip to prevent any unwise words from emerging, and the flare of teeth sinking into broken skin was like the final nail in a coffin.

Zet made a low hiss of approval. "Yes. Much better."

Tony spoke for what felt like the first time in years. "What is it you want me to do?"

He was proud; he managed to keep that exactly civil and totally absent of the emotion boiling inside him. He imagined his anger was more than obvious to someone with extrasensory perception, but Zet didn't seem bothered. Apparently, helpless rage was to be preferred over feigned respect. And the chancellor had already gotten what he wanted out of Tony.

"I require your services in repairing some of our equipment," Zet said, as if they'd never broken from their calm discussion before. "You will do so, and once you have, I will consider allowing you to leave this world unharmed." He looked at Tony's face, hissing slightly. "Well. Alive, at least."

Tony digested that for a while, until he could keep his tone just as even as before. "What am I repairing?" A thought occurred to him. "And how, exactly? I have no idea how your technology works."

"You will learn."

Tony focused on breathing. "What if I can't?"

Zet stared at him, unblinking. "You will. My aid will give you an allotment of repairs for every quarter. If you do not complete it, I will exact a price for your failure." The lightest touch of a sharp edge brushed over Tony's cheek; a pointed, bloody reminder. He shut his eyes, breathing, just breathing. "The price will grow as your failure does."

"I should probably get started, then." Tony licked his lips, daring to ask one more question. "How long are these repairs going to take me?"

Zet rumbled something, that same rhythmic series of hisses coming from him, and the pressure against Tony's throat and chest pinning him to the wall finally vanished. He dropped half a body length, stumbling as he landed jarringly back on his feet and slipped involuntarily to his knees. He tried to get up, but an invisible force held him down. Tony looked up from this new vantage point, that ember of rage burning brightly.

Laughter, Tony realized dimly through the haze of his own revulsion. That recurrent hissing sound was laughter, or Zet's version of it. He was laughing at the puny human asking what to him must seem a very, very stupid question.

"You will be finished when I say you are finished," Zet said. "That is how it works on this world."

The heavy-handed implication being: don't step out of line again, or you might never be finished.
Tony only just barely kept the rest of his comments to himself. Zet watched him for a long, considering moment.

"Well done," the alien praised gently, and Tony had to look away before he forgot himself.

"Gwar," Zet said, suddenly. Tony jumped and looked to the open doorway, where he could see the chancellor's aid now hovering. Tony had no idea how long he'd been there. He'd sort of lost track of his surroundings some fifteen minutes ago.

"Yes, chancellor?" Gwar asked, completely ignoring Tony, which suited him just fine

"Show him to his duty station," Zet said, almost negligently. He'd turned away to glide back over to the decorated wall. It wasn't just a collection of color, Tony could see suddenly. It was a crudely painted image; a depiction of a planet either in sunrise or sunset, the blue of the alien star cascading over a desert background with a gray shapes, clouds, on the horizon. The sand had been marked with red. A lot of it.

"As you command," Gwar said, and the next thing Tony knew he was being hauled up to his feet by an alien hand and shuffled down the hall and out of Zet's domain.

Tony yanked away the minute they were out of line of sight. "Don't touch me," he said flatly.

Gwar gave no reply. Tony concentrated on the shuffle-step of his feet, fixing his eyes ahead. He had the grim certainty if he let his mind wander the way it wanted to, he might never get it back.

Gwar barely waited until they were three halls away before he turned to Tony again, suddenly. He raised one hand, with its vicious claws, and Tony jammed himself back against the wall, both hands up. He had to put up with abuse from Zet; that didn't mean he had to put up with it from anyone else. He glared at the aid, itching for an excuse to call the nanotech and release some of the dense storm of emotion crawling inside him.

Gwar hesitated, seeing his defensive posture.

"No harm is intended," he said, gesturing from a distance toward Tony's face, his chest. "You are injured. I only wish to check the extent."

Tony glared at him. "Don't bother. I'll live."

"Allow me to verify that. The chancellor's strength is great and he is not always cautious. Severe damage is sometimes unclear at first."

Even just the reminder of it was enough to send anger swinging like a pendulum inside Tony. "I'm fine. He avoided permanent damage, like you said. I'll survive. What did he write?"

Gwar hesitated, ducking his head mournfully.

Tony felt numb at this silent confirmation. "I know it's lettering of some kind. He was too careful about the pattern. He wasn't aiming for depth; he wanted finesse. What does it mean?"

Gwar looked at his face, his cheek, and clicked again quietly. "There is an animal long dead on this world, a beast of burden known for its obstinacy. It was eventually domesticated and broken to obedience, but it was not an easy thing. It is called -"

But it didn't really matter. Tony thought back again to Zet's approving words. Well done, he'd said.
Good dog, he'd meant.

Gwar made a surprisingly helpless noise, an almost sorrowful hiss. Tony blinked, startled. The film of emotion retreated from his vision by tiny increments.

"He was more angry than I anticipated. I am not usually involved in initial discussions with travellers. I believe he felt deprived of his game."

Tony laughed, raw and so very ugly. "His game. Of course it is. Of course it is."

Gwar gestured again with his hands, projecting his movements clearly. "Please, will you not allow me?"

Tony shook his head, backing away from Gwar as he hadn't been able to with Zet. "No. Don't touch me."

Gwar clicked again, looking down. "You do not trust me."

"Well, no," Tony said, still laughing. "Of course I don't. If you'd really given a damn you wouldn't have lured us down here in the first place."

"You are not the only one under threat," Gwar said.

"I don't care." He took a breath, forced himself to stop and think. "You're in league with the guy who just bled me. How can you possibly be surprised I don't trust you?"

Gwar lifted both hands again and while Tony watched warily, he extended his curled claws until his palms were visible. Across the smooth, fine scales of both lay an odd assortment of raised lines, crisscrossing in an unpredictable pattern. One hand had a raised patch, entirely smooth and pale, like something had sanded the scales there away. The other, Tony realized suddenly, was missing one finger and two claws, leaving him asymmetrical. Tony had the sinking feeling that wasn't at all natural.

"It is not an easy thing to defy the chancellor," Gwar said quietly.

Tony closed his eyes. "Let's just go. The faster we go, the faster you can take me back to my cell." Back to Peter and Stephen. The thought was like a wash of cool water, an aching balm against the bloody memory of his time with Zet. He wanted more than anything else in that moment to retreat back into the careful confines of his ship, with FRIDAY ever watchful for danger, and a sorcerer and a spiderling at his side, a mischievous cloak to entertain them. The thought was an oasis in this lousy desert of a planet.

"Vámonos," he said, when Gwar hesitated. "Get a move on. Time's a wasting."

Gwar reluctantly turned away to take them down an endless series of corridors so he could finally show Tony his work station.

Although it wasn't much of one; there was nothing all that impressive about it. A simple desk, a set of tools. A scattering of broken machinery, looking almost familiar. Gwar stepped forward to name them off, and Tony hated the part of himself that immediately perked up with interest. The part that wanted to examine each new thing presented, where scientific curiosity overcame the distaste of being ordered like a collared animal.

But the science was calming, at least; science, Tony knew. It succeeded in reengaging Tony's brain as nothing else had. He stared at the tools on the table, the first sign he'd seen in this mountain that
"Why haven't you had any of your own machinists fix this stuff?" Tony asked abruptly, staring at what he thought might be a spanner of some kind. Gwar paused in the act of naming the implements.

"We have no remaining machinists."

Which was - surely impossible. "Then how did you get this technology in the first place?" Tony picked up one of the items, having no idea what it was for, but knowing from the circuit board and the conductive insulation it was well beyond stone walls and mesh flooring. "An engineer of some kind built this. Where are they?"

"We have no engineers," Gwar said. "And no remaining machinists. We must rely on travellers to provide their assistance."

"For your entire civilization? That's." Tony stopped, realizing. "Zet has no intention of letting us go." It wasn't unexpected, and yet something in Tony managed to be surprised. "He never lets any of them go, does he?"

Gwar tapped his claws together and looked down.

"How can you lure people here, knowing that?" Tony asked, honestly interested, morbidly curious.

Gwar hissed softly to himself, curling inward around some invisible hurt. "He has my clan-sister and two of our clan's hatchlings. Zet is devout in providing strong incentive."

Tony snarled, the maelstrom of fury growing ever stronger.

"Had I been alone at the time of your signal I could have tried to turn you away. I was not. I cannot be seen to defy my orders except in dire need or among allies."

"Yeah, okay, I get it." Tony frowned. "Guy likes his hostages. No surprise there. Why do you guys follow him?"

"I believe I have already explained -"

"No," Tony said impatiently. "I mean you as a people, not you as in you. No way Zet controls everyone by threatening them or a loved one with bodily harm. Too much for any one person to accomplish, even one with his power."

"He is not alone. He has many enforcers pleased to do his bidding."

"Another shocker." Tony considered this at length. "You say he's not alone, but I have yet to see another one that looks like him. Why is there such a difference between you?" Tony watched Gwar look up at that, silent. He smiled mockingly into the alien's expressionless face. "Oh, what's wrong? Don't trust me, Kemosabe?"

"Why do you call me by that name?" Gwar asked slowly.

"Because I can't keep my mouth shut," Tony said automatically. The shadow of Zet's punishment for insolence tried to rise, but Tony shoved that firmly down. He refused to let Zet have dominion over him, over who he was, what he said. That way lay madness. "You know, this is crap. I think you guys should have to learn sarcasm instead of me learning to not-sarcasm. Kemosabe was a sidekick. Particularly apropos, since I'm all kinds of Lone Ranger."
Gwar didn't seem to know what to say to that. He looked at the table of instruments. "On this world, there has always been two peoples; those like me and those like Chancellor Zet. History tells us there have been times of harmony, where all lived together. But more often there is division. As you see, one has unseen abilities, and one does not. It is a simple thing for those with power to overcome those who have none."

Gwar looked at him then, and it was clear where he thought Tony fell on that spectrum. Tony grit hit teeth and firmly stomped on the urge to show him how very wrong he was.

"So there are others like Zet."

"Yes, though few of his mindset," Gwar said. "His is a radical view. But none will stand against him. All fear the consequences."

Tony raised a skeptical eyebrow. "One man holds your entire population in check? I'm not buying it. There has to be more to this story." There was something here Tony wasn't getting. A question unanswered that would open a door to understanding if he could only find the right one.

Gwar looked down at his own hands again. "There are less of us than you might imagine."

"How many?"

"Perhaps a hundred clans yet remain. All others have perished."

Tony had no idea what made up a clan, but that didn't sound like a lot, really.

"Perished from what?" he asked, putting aside how tactless the question was.

Gwar was very still, looking at him, and Tony realized he'd brushed up against a dangerous boundary, something taboo, raw and bleeding. He settled back cautiously, instinct nipping at his heels.

"You brought me down here," Tony said evenly, cruelly. "Odds are, I'm never leaving. I deserve to at least understand why."

Gwar stood up, suddenly, jerkily, and Tony felt his heart lurch with adrenaline in his chest.

"Come," the alien said, a series of unintelligible clicks and hisses following agitatedly. "You wish to see? I will show you."

They slipped out into an adjoining corridor and started to make their way back down a long series of halls.

"Did you see the city as we came in?" Gwar asked, staring ahead intently.

Tony rolled his eyes. "No. Must've missed it. Not much of a vantage point from the floor of a moving vehicle. You only let us out when we reached the underground."

"Yes," Gwar agreed. "I understand this would make observation difficult." They kept walking and Tony carefully kept words to himself, waiting out the silence.

"The city is abandoned," Gwar said finally. "No, that is incorrect. It is destroyed."

Tony hummed, uneasy. "Why?"

"Our world was not always as you see it," Gwar said. "The desert was once a very small part of it.
Most was lush and green. Many hundreds of thousands of clans thrived together. We lived above-ground then, in cities teeming with life. We had no desire to travel space, but we built satellites to explore the stars around us. With these, we captured the attention of a space fleet nearby. There was a man who led it. He came down to our world, we thought in peace, but of course it was not so. He killed many of us, at first only those who posed a threat to him, but then more. He found us fascinating, so the records say. He called us a world at odds with itself, two so different coexisting as one. He said he would rend us into a true world divided, half to live and half to die. Balance."

Tony felt his heart drop into his boots. He stopped walking, but Gwar didn't and it was breathless moments before Tony could catch up again.

"What man?" Tony asked, urgently. "When?"

Gwar didn't seem to hear him. "He destroyed our cities, our homes. Thousands of clans fell; thousands more limped on into slow death. For my people, clan is who we are. When it is lost, many fall to grief. Those of strong will and purpose may rise again. Those without join their loved ones."

Tony wanted to care about that, he did, but he was too distracted by the awful ring of panic in his ears.

"Gwar, how long ago? When?"

"Generations," Gwar said, still walking at such a rapid pace Tony had to jog to keep up. "Before my lifetime. Not before Zet's. He survived, you see. He survived to turn this world into a home of death and fear. Death begets death, and now we are nothing but wraiths, waiting our turn for the end."

They rounded a corner, coming into a large, open space, a cavern, the rubble of an old cave-in piled high as a towering backdrop.

"The man that came, he left us our satellites," Gwar said, "that we might call for help into the void and receive nothing in return -"

But Tony had stopped listening. He was busy staring into the cavern. There was a ship there. A very familiar ship.

"- this ship, and though we tried to learn, few scientists survived. Fewer still had the desire to understand. Most sought to destroy -"

Tony couldn't breathe. He wondered vaguely if Zet had made another appearance, whether he had hold of Tony's throat again, because the pressure there was immense, inescapable. He could feel his field of vision narrowing, tunnelling -

"- led to war, and from war, more death and disease inevitably followed -"

And the ship was - the ship was moving. As Tony watched, the face of it, the Chitauri mouth and jaws and teeth of it started to animate, the articulated plates of its spine twitching into motion. The head started to turn in his direction, and across the front, beneath the carapace, two empty, awful eyes were opening -

Tony blinked and found himself sitting in his cell, with Stephen and Peter huddled on the ground beside him.

He blinked again, looking around in confusion. His head was aching, and his eyes felt like two hot
coals in his head, burning fiercely.

"What happened?" he asked, startled to find he was slurring his words.

"We were hoping you could tell us," Stephen said quietly. Tony realized with lazy surprise that he was leaning against the man, reclining against him actually, almost in his lap. Stephen had Tony's head halfway on his chest, shoulders turned in and propped against him. It was a surprisingly comfortable arrangement, not that Tony felt in any position to say so. The sorcerer's hand was laying full length against Tony's cheek, too, which was a nice touch; restful and almost soothing. Pleasant. He could feel pressure around the fingers of his right hand and glanced down, expecting to see Stephen cradling that too. But that wasn't Stephen; that was Peter.

"Are you alright?" the kid asked, with such even, artificial calm that Tony immediately had to assume the worst.

"I don't know," he replied warily. "Am I?" He glanced down his own body again, expecting to find some kind of wound, maybe blood or a variety of telling injuries. There was nothing.

Which was strange. There'd been something wrong with Tony's face and neck, hadn't there? Red had stained all up and down his chest and shoulders, seeped into his undershirt, the jacket. Now all that seemed entirely absent. Tony frowned.

Stephen tilted Tony's face back up, and he thought about being annoyed at that; he'd never much liked people physically moving any part of him without his permission. But this was Stephen, and he'd made promises to Tony and meant them, because Tony'd been watching to see if he lied, and he hadn't. There was something very peaceful in knowing that he could trust Stephen because he could trust FRIDAY to trust Stephen, and because Stephen could be trusted to be Stephen. Or - something. Somehow. Some combination of that.

The sorcerer gently tapped at Tony's temple for attention. Tony slowly brought his eyes back into focus, looking at Stephen’s face; his incredible eyes, his cheekbones. His mouth with its clever, compelling tongue, and lips Tony couldn't seem to look away from. Lips that were moving -

"Tony," Stephen repeated.

"Yes," he agreed. That was him. He was Tony.

"What do you remember?"

Tony frowned, thinking. The flavor of distant anger and fear curled his lip like a sour aftertaste, but the reason why was slower to come. "I left with Gwar to see Zet, didn't I? Gwar seems okay, I guess. For what amounts to an indentured servant. His boss, though; that guy's a real gem -" But Tony's mind had skipped ahead while his mouth engaged, and he stiffened all over as the memory of humiliation and pain came trickling back, carried on a wave of low, hissing laughter.

"Tony," Stephen said. He looked up. "Do we need to leave?"

Tony stared at him, his sluggish thoughts struggling to keep up. "What?"

"I gave you my word." Stephen tightened his grip, cradling Tony in the crook of his body with warm, gentle hands. "I have a tracer on the Eye. I can take us to it in minutes. Tell me we need to go, and we'll go."

"Go?" Tony repeated blankly. He laughed and couldn't be bothered to care about the brittle, ragged edge in it. Peter tightened his fingers, clutching with fierce strength at Tony's forearm, his wrist.
"We can't go now. He's made it personal. I'm not leaving for hell or high water." He let the laugh trail into a snicker. "Congratulations you two. I'm officially invested."

Tony regretted that last, because Peter made a soft, wounded noise and huddled into himself, starting to withdraw. Tony reached out blindly to pat the kid on the knee, draw him close enough to hug one-handed. "No, hey, it's fine. I'm fine. Really. If we needed to go, I'd say. We're okay." He frowned blearily. "I think."

"Gwar brought you back some time ago," Stephen explained gently, taking Peter by the shoulder and pulling him into the shelter of a shared embrace. "But you weren't quite - you weren't yourself. He offered no explanation, but he agreed to allow us to share the cell. You were injured."

"I was," Tony agreed automatically. "I am. I think?"

"I removed the blood," Stephen said, because apparently that was another thing he could do. "The injuries remain. I've never seen him damage you like this before."

"Probably because in another life he damaged you instead," Tony muttered.

Stephen hissed in realization. "Perhaps. On a scale of one-to-ten, where's your pain?"

Tony frowned, distracted. "Hang on. You removed it. The blood. Is that magic's answer to laundry? Did you just launder my shirt? Is that how you've been doing yours? Have you been making me wash my clothes in the sink this whole time when I could've just -"

"Tony," Stephen said calmly, patiently. "Focus. I know it's difficult. Most of your injuries were superficial, but some weren't. You have a concussion. Are you in pain?"

That sounded like the sort of thing that Tony should be in pain from, but he found he could feel very little at all, actually. "Nope, no pain."

Stephen looked oddly displeased by that. "You have at least two fractures in your left wrist, probably more I haven't found. You can't feel that?"

Tony blinked, looking down his body again, flexing both hands. He was certain Zet hadn't broken his wrist; that would've defeated the purpose. He frowned, noticing suddenly that the nanotech beneath his clothes had moved out of alignment. It was no longer stationary as a wrist bracer. He shifted, feeling the familiar cascade of a composite layer instead, a body armor formation. When had he done that? He had a vague memory of it crawling out over his hands, his chest and legs, the faceplate trying to form and failing for lack of sufficient nanobots. There'd been the whine of a repulsor, hadn't there? Gwar had shouted in alarm, and then he'd heard the distant thunder and crash of rubble cascading toward him and the ship, the ship -

"Oh," he said, slowly. "Oh, holy shit. You guys are never going to believe what I found."

Chapter End Notes

This monster chapter comes at a good time - because the next one will probably be a few days late (sorry folks) as I'm out of town again. Cheers!
Gwar never said a word about the nanotech.

Tony waited for it. The first day, after their trio was allowed to catch their breath and then quietly shuffled into more spacious but no less locked guest quarters (apparently Gwar had taken his complaint about the cells seriously). The second day, when Tony was dragged back to his Zet-approved duty station in the morning. Then the third and fourth and fifth days. By the time a week had passed, Gwar still had yet to mention the Iron Man suit, or the repulsor technology, or the obvious fact that Tony'd been concealing what amounted to weapons on his person since their capture.

Peter was convinced Gwar's silence meant he was secretly on their side; a spy and a potential ally hiding in plain sight. A true sleeper agent, just waiting to strike.

Tony had a different interpretation.

"It's blackmail material," Tony said decisively. He shrugged when Peter rolled his eyes and flopped back on one of the beds, muttering a few choice words about superheroes and paranoia. "What? A hundred bucks says it is."

"You don't have a hundred dollars -"

"Excuse you, I'm a billionaire."

"- out here, and neither do I. Just because you'd use it as blackmail -"

"Just because you wouldn't." Tony turned to Stephen. He didn't have to turn far; larger though these quarters were, they still would've easily fit into one of Tony's many bedrooms. But at least they came with lavatory facilities. "Stephen, help me out here. Tell the spider it's not paranoia if they really are out to get you."

Their friendly neighbourhood wizard had been ignoring them both up to that point, laying meditatively on one of the beds with his legs crossed at the ankle, hands laced over his middle. He opened one eye to glance over and then shut it again. "It's most certainly paranoia. But they're probably still out to get us."

"One man's paranoia is another man's good sense," Tony insisted.

"I wouldn't go that far, Tony," Stephen said. "Few people would accuse you of having good sense."

Tony waved that away. "Good, bad. Sense is sense."

"Tony Stark in a nutshell," Stephen sighed. "It does us little good to speculate on Gwar's reasons. The one thing we know for sure is he hasn't told Zet. You certainly wouldn't be in here resting if he
"Resting?" Tony brandished the latest in a long line of useless technology at Stephen. "This is slave labor. I'm being told to work on these in our quarters now, not just the workshop."

"You were told, or you asked for it?"

Tony scowled. "I was going out of my mind with boredom. And anyway that's not the point, the point is my brain's a precious commodity. Do you even realize how much these guys owe me for my time?"

Tony flipped his current project over in his hands, fumbling at the last second to catch it. Wrist fractures and splints made it very awkward to look suave sometimes.

"Careful with that," Stephen said without opening his eyes.

Tony raised an eyebrow. "Why? Do you know what it does?"

"No. Do you?"

"Fair point," Tony muttered. "You know, so far every repair job I've been given is a cannibalization or outright replication of the Chitauri tech. Someone should get back to these people about copyright infringement."

Someone should probably also get back to them about what a terrible idea it was to give prisoners with any level of technical knowhow the tools of their craft to use without supervision. Tony should put them in touch with the Ten Rings. Then they could hear all about the error of their ways.

"I imagine they're more concerned with survival than copyright infractions," Stephen said.

"If you can call this survival. From what I can tell, they're using the more advanced tech mostly because their own tech is ancient in comparison. Problem is, the disparity's so wide the two types aren't remotely compatible. These people are basically Earth, circa 1980. With the exception of their satellite systems." Tony frowned. "Whoever designed those was ahead of their time. I'm still not sure how they manage to compensate for the solar wind, and Zet's not letting me do more than stare at those from afar, the jerk."

"You poor, deprived man," Stephen said.

"That's exactly what I said. The one piece of native technology actually worthwhile and they want me working on things that're so far beyond their ability to integrate they might as well bin it. It's no wonder they need to lure in travelling tech guru's. They're basically trying to construct mnemonic memory circuits using stone knives and bearskins -"

Tony blinked at the sound of the door unlocking. Early; he didn't normally see his morning escort for another hour yet. He turned to watch it open, unsurprised to see Gwar step in. He wasn't expecting the two people that shuffled in behind him.

One of them was purple.

It took Tony longer than it should have, an eternity counted in the pounding beats of his heart, but eventually he realized the purple face staring at him was different from the one he remembered. Thinner, more angular; a wider forehead and a narrower nose. And one reptilian eye was framed by a mass of scar tissue.
"Gwar, buddy," Tony said, smiling with all his teeth. He clamped a hand down on Peter's shoulder when the kid made to stand up. "Is it that time already? How about that."

Gwar paced close enough that Tony could see the alien's hands were slack in front of him, claws loose and open. He relaxed fractionally. After a week of observation, Tony could recognize a few of the basic body language signals, if not the biorhythms of their hosts. Gwar was comfortable with his entourage, or at least he didn't feel under any particular threat from them.

"Who're your friends?" Tony asked.

Gwar touched his claws in the direction of his two companions. "This is Minister Jira and his aid."

Tony forced himself to look at the alien again, relaxing further when he did. Where Zet had been cold civility and cruelty, this one had a look of intense wonder on his face. The aid beside him was mellow and distracted; bored. Tony couldn't see any obvious signs of malice from either of them. From behind Tony, Stephen rolled easily to his feet. Tony tried to catch hold of his arm but wasn't quite fast enough.

"Minister Jira," the sorcerer said, ignoring Tony's warning cough. "Minister of what, if I might enquire?"

Tony waited to see if this alien put the same emphasis on etiquette as Zet did. Jira saw him watching and returned the scrutiny unabashedly. His eyes settled unerringly on Tony's healing face, where vividly red lines still marked the bloody remains of Zet's efforts at calligraphy.

"I oversee the education sector," Jira said, and then, apparently reading Tony's mind: "Please do not cater to ceremony. I have come to engage in discourse. You may speak freely."

Tony highly doubted any of the aliens would enjoy him speaking freely.

"Education," the sorcerer said, meaningfully, glancing sideways at Tony. Tony blinked a question at him. "A noble cause. On our planet, a wise man once said that education was the most powerful weapon one could use to change the world."

Jira seemed enchanted by this notion, peering down at Stephen with enthusiasm.

"I have been eager to meet you since your arrival," Jira announced, as if imparting a very great secret. "But the chancellor was not disposed to grant requests for an audience. I was required to petition four times before he would allow me to see you."

Which set Tony's metaphorical alarm bells to ringing, but Stephen got there before he could say anything. "Admirable persistence. I can understand the lure of learning from foreigners. Studying abroad is a time-honored tradition on our world."

Jira swayed from side to side, the thin membranes at the top of his head rippling with excitement. "Is education highly prized where you come from, then?"

"It's considered a fundamental basic right across a wide variety of nations."

Tony stared at Stephen incredulously, half expecting him to throw in a flirtatious wink next. "Laying the flattery on a bit thick, aren't you?" he muttered under his breath.
"Shut up, Tony," Stephen said pleasantly.

Jira looked beyond thrilled. It was clear Stephen couldn't have struck a better note if he'd tried. Which he obviously had. "A fascinating notion. Education on this world has languished for many years. Would you be willing to discuss this with me further?"

Stephen nodded. "I'm something of a scholar myself. In another life we might've been contemporaries. I'm sure in this life we'll be allies."

The words were formal, very pretty and dressed-up, and completely out of context. But Stephen obviously didn't mean them for their alien hosts; he meant them for Tony. Apparently Jira was a familiar and welcome face.

That didn't make Tony any more inclined to trust him.

Jira and Gwar shared a look, that strange nonverbal communication filling the room with momentary silence.

It went on for two seconds too long for their young arachnid. "Hi," the kid piped up, even though Tony just about dragged himself off his feet trying to pull the teenager back. Peter seemed not to notice. "I'm Peter, by the way."

Jira turned to him, hair fronds fluttering.

"Maybe he's born with it," Tony whispered before he could stop himself. "Maybe it's Maybelli -"


"Hello," the minister said, stepping closer to loom at Peter, looking him over extensively. "I understand you are different from these other two. Is that true?"

"What?" Peter looked as startled as Tony felt, staring up at the alien. "No. I'm exactly the same. Why?"

Jira hissed something unintelligible. "Then you are all part of the same species? You do look the same, but I was told you are significantly stronger than your companions. Is that not so?"

Tony glared at Gwar, betrayed. Gwar blinked back at him innocently.

Peter's eyes went wide, alarmed at having his secrets bandied about so casually. They really needed to work on the kid's poker face. "What? No! I'm just like everyone else. Well, not you, obviously. But, like, everyone from my planet. I'm just like them. Of course I am." Peter swallowed with a sickly looking grin. "Why wouldn't I be?"

Jira looked at Gwar, questioning. "Then strength of your level is typical to your race?" He turned to stare speculatively at Stephen and Tony. "Is it that these other two are defective, then?"

Peter quietly had a coughing fit while Tony raised both eyebrows expansively. "Yeah, kid," he drawled, staring at the teenager. "How do you explain that? Go on. We're listening."

Peter floundered. "Well, I. No, that's just because. Not everyone. No, it's - they're old!" He pointed a wild finger at Tony and Stephen. "And I'm. Um, younger? On our world, older people aren't as strong. They're -" He glanced over, deflating when he caught sight of Tony and Stephen's twin stares.

Jira stared in wonder, eyes roaming as if he might find evidence of their advanced age hiding on them somewhere. "I see. On our world, it is also the case that the very old and infirm no longer possess the strength of the young."

Peter looked horrified. Tony smiled brightly into his panicking face. "Old and infirm, that's nice." He turned confidingly to Jira. "On our planet, the very old also have a tendency to forget things. Which'll make a lot of sense when we leave you behind, Peter."

Peter groaned, covering his face with both hands.

"I would be interested to hear more about your world," Jira proclaimed. "I have permission to take two of you with me for discussion."

Tony went still, realization hitting him like a truck. "Two of us."

"Yes." Jira eyed him closely, turning to Gwar, who clicked some type of agreement. "Unfortunately, Chancellor Zet was unwilling to lend me all three of you. A machinist's time is too highly in demand."

Peter suddenly looked far less interested in joining the discussion. "Maybe we could just stay here and talk." He looked uneasily back at Tony. "Together."

"Nonsense. We would only be a distraction for your companion. And machinist matters do not require the oversight of educators." He beckoned to Stephen and Peter respectively. "Come. We have much to discuss."

Jira started back for the door. Peter took a questioning step in his direction, but Stephen didn't move.

"A moment, Minister," Stephen said calmly, staring at Tony. At the panic Tony was sure must be working itself onto his face. "Please."

"Yeah," Tony managed when Jira stopped, turning back. "No one's taking anyone anywhere until we establish some ground rules. I only ever loan these two out on curfew."

"Curfew?" Jira hissed, amused.

"Absolutely. Someone has to keep an eye on them to make sure they wash behind their ears."

"I'm certain we'll be fine, Tony," Stephen said. Which was all well and good for him to say; he wasn't the one being left behind. Stephen caught his eye, having no trouble discerning where Tony's thoughts were. He shook his head just slightly. Tony stubbornly shook his head back.

"Enough delay," Jira said suddenly. "You two will come with me while the machinist goes to his work. My time is limited and I have no wish to waste it."

He crooked his fingers at Peter and Stephen, who rose suddenly into the air with two startled exclamations and started floating toward him.

Tony surged to his feet, twitching toward the nanotech involuntarily and only strangling the impulse by shaking out his left wrist and hand, jarring the healing bones there. The pain fed an anger he'd been nurturing for what felt like years. The curiosity in the alien's eyes was really rather closer to the same greed and avarice Tony had seen in Zet, if for different reasons. Tony was reminded of the lengths people could go to in order to acquire knowledge. Thoughts of human experimentation came
to mind.

Gwar looked at him, then, maybe sensing something in that invisible way these people had, maybe not, but obviously far more aware of the undercurrents than the Minister. Tony ignored him to stare balefully after Jira, who was already turning away, oblivious. His aid made to follow the floating humans without complaint.

"If you hurt them," Tony said, softly, barely loud enough to be heard, though it stopped Jira immediately. "If you harm them in any way. I'm going to hurt you back."

Really, there were so many ways he could hurt these people; ways they had no concept of. Tony'd always had the means to do great harm, no different from any other superhero, really. It was only that he lacked the motivation. And Jira had two of those floating in the air behind him.

Jira didn't look at Tony, though he was clearly listening. Something in his stillness spoke of interest.

"I won't hesitate," Tony said to his back, and meant it. "If you damage them, I promise you'll regret it."

Jira turned back, while Gwar made a hissing noise of distress and dropped his eyes to the floor. Tony braced himself for something painful. But Jira only stared at Tony for a long time, head tilting slowly to the left and then the right. Tony had no idea what he might be searching for, but if it was anger, he found it all over Tony in spades.

"I believe you," the minister said at last. Jira looked slowly at Stephen and Peter floating peacefully next to him and then back at Tony. His non-expression was too studied to be anything but deliberate. "Interesting. It has been an age since I was last threatened. Longer still since the threat was of any real consequence."

Tony smiled sharply. "Not a threat. Just a friendly warning between maybe-allies."

"Allies," Jira echoed, hissing. "You think rather highly of yourself. Tell me, machinist, even if I meant you harm, how would you propose to stop me?"

And there; that arrogant, infuriating dismissal, that mocking edge was enough to set Tony off like a spark to dry tinder. He reached out to do something, probably something very unwise, but -

"Minister," Stephen said. "It's really quite unkind to provoke him. Wouldn't you agree?"

Tony glanced at him sharply, but Stephen was looking at Jira and the alien was looking placidly back from the corner of his reptilian eyes.

"I have no idea what you could mean," Jira said.

Stephen didn't look impressed. "Don't you?"

Jira clicked thoughtfully. "Well. Perhaps a little." He affected surprise at seeing Stephen and Peter still aloft and set them back down with a flourish. "But can I truly be blamed? Your companion makes provocation so easy. It will not serve him well with the chancellor. Zet tolerates no challengers."

"Maybe if more people challenged him," Tony snarled, "he wouldn't be the tyrant he is today."

Jira blinked at him, suddenly serious. "Perhaps." Then he looked coy, all gravity immediately lost. "Well! If you insist, I suppose we could stay here instead of retreating to my office. Gwar will be
taking you off to your duty station soon, anyway. A machinist's work is never done."

There was a not-quite smile on his face. It was the same one Zet had worn when he'd ripped into Tony, but different for all that; there was no cruelty in this one. Only good cheer.

He'd pushed deliberately, Tony realized. Jira meant to talk to Stephen and Peter; that was obviously his goal. But he hadn't needed to drag them away. He didn't intend to, even; he'd just been looking to press at invisible boundaries. He'd only wanted to see what Tony would do.

Someone obviously needed to tell this man he was playing with fire.

"Really, Tony," Stephen said dryly. Tony jerked out of his thoughts and found the sorcerer smiling at him knowingly. "Flattering as it is, you must stop treating me like the damsel in distress I'm clearly not. Ever the knight in shining armor."

"Right?" Peter said, hopping with two feet back on one of the beds. "He has this protecting-people thing. Super annoying. Makes plans on his own. Never consults others."

Stephen huffed at the teenager. "You're in no position to criticize. Half the reason we're having this discussion is because you couldn't keep your strength to yourself."

"That's not the same thing," Peter protested. "The guy shouldn't have tried to stop me. I wouldn't have hit him if he hadn't hit you first."

"He wouldn't have made contact," Stephen insisted, "if I hadn't let him -"

"I withdraw my protest," Tony announced, shooing at Jira with both hands. "Please take them away. I can already feel a headache coming on."

But Jira had sat himself down on one of the beds and was watching Stephen and Peter banter with blatant fascination. "I think not. You may leave at your leisure. We shall remain here. Yes, I think I much prefer this arrangement, really. Now, please, someone tell me: what is a knight in shining armor?"

Tony had the overwhelming urge to flatten him into a purple alien pancake, but Gwar got to him before he could give in to his baser impulses.

"I have your allotment of repairs for the day," Gwar said, gesturing to the door, where Jira's aid had parked himself to watch the spectacle. "If you will follow me, Tony?"

Tony looked on as two humans and a lizard-person started to descend into a deep philosophical debate about round tables and heroism and honor, decided that spending time with Gwar and science seemed infinitely more appealing, and silently followed his escort out.

That was how they spent their second week, with Jira coming and going as he pleased in spite of Tony glowering at him every time. The minister had developed something of an alien-love-triangle-crush on Stephen and Peter and corralled them every morning to wax poetic about culture and academics and higher learning. Tony was more than happy to miss out on those conversations. He kept on with his mindless machinist work, which was so incredibly bland and monotonous it gave Tony frequent opportunities to sneak peeks at more interesting technology when no one was looking. Sometimes even when they were.

"What is this thing?" Tony asked, tossing his latest project carefully from hand to hand. Gwar watched anxiously, as he always did, his claws twitching with what Tony knew was a desperate need to intercede and snatch the thing out of Tony's grip.
"To my understanding, it is a propulsion device of some sort," Gwar said, his nictitating eyelid slipping out three times in distress as Tony casually twirled it on one finger and then pretended to drop it. "Please be careful with that."

Tony stopped, but not because Gwar had asked him to. The alien's answer proved these people really had no grasp of even basic reverse-engineering. It honestly hurt Tony's soul a little.

"A propulsion device, huh? Who classified it?"

"I am uncertain who," Gwar admitted, searching a manifest. "It has been inoperable for many years."

Tony huffed a laugh. "Alright, tell you what. You give me a look at one of those neat little space guns you and your friends were packing the day you shanghaied us. And I'll tell you what this actually does. I'll even give you a hint: it has nothing to do with propulsion."

"Really?" Gwar asked, staring. "What is it?"

Tony clicked his tongue disapprovingly. He held the thing out temptingly. "Space gun first. Explanation later."

"Perhaps the explanation now," Zet said pleasantly. "And the space gun never."

Tony went rigid, his heart kicking once painfully before tripping into overtime. He and Gwar both turned to the open doorway.

"Chancellor Zet," Gwar said immediately, dropping into a half-crouch, touching his claws together at the center of his forehead in a painstaking sign of respect.

Tony wondered if mimicking that might help him. He'd never been the bowing and scraping kind, and yet desperate times sometimes called for desperate measures. But he felt too stiff with the echo of remembered pain and humiliation to move.

Zet paced into the room and Tony could feel the blade of his eyes, an invisible force moving in the air around him. He and Jira looked superficially alike, but their similarities ended at the physical, really. Where Jira's presence was light and lively, even when he was busy snatching people up like toys, Zet's was all unnatural pressure and malice, tangibly heavy and ominous.

The chancellor came to a stop near Tony, who trained his eyes on the floor.

"Hmm," Zet said, looking at him. "Acceptable, or nearly so. I will allow it."

Tony reminded himself how unappreciated sarcasm was on this world and that using it now might end up with his face being introduced to the floor. He said nothing.

Zet clicked gently in approval. "And even better. Lovely. In future, however, keep in mind: obeisance is preferred over silence."

Face-floor-introduction.

Zet cut behind Tony, reaching out with one hand to pluck up the piece of technology he'd been tossing around. "Since you seem to have some desire to boast of your knowledge, tell me then: what is this?"

Tony unlocked his jaw to speak. "A power coupler."
"Interesting. And for what reason did you wish to examine one of our weapons?" Zet floated the coupler close, turning it curiously. "Perhaps to put the two together?"

A warning prickle lit the air. Tony ignored it. "No."

"Why, then?"

"Just curious about the bits of technology that actually work on this world," Tony said civilly. "There aren't many."

"No," Zet agreed. "There is little that works on this world, anymore. We are a bleak and barren place. I am often curious that travellers should choose to stop here at all. We have little to recommend us to the galaxy beyond."

"Must take some convincing," Tony said leadingly, bitterly.

Zet hissed a familiar, skin-crawling laugh. "Sometimes. But an impression of kindness is usually enough." He set the coupler down on the work station. "The universe outside must be a harsh place. It breeds desperation."

"You'd know something about that," Tony muttered. He breathed evenly through the feeling of a powerful unseen grip taking hold of him, turning him to bear the side of his face and neck.

"Insolence so soon?" Zet asked, tracing a proprietary touch over the marks he'd left on Tony. "And barely minutes into our discussion. You took your last lesson well. Do you require another?"

The lazy contempt in his voice was almost enough to send Tony's anger spilling out.

"No," he forced himself to say. "Sorry."

He wasn't surprised when Zet cut him anyway, the narrow edge of an invisible claw reopening a wound on his cheek. Tony didn't flinch.

"Apologies are an afterthought for misdeeds," Zet said. "I will not accept one as an excuse in future."

"No apologies," Tony repeated. Which was fine; he hated them anyway. "Check."

Zet made a series of clicks, still staring at him. Tony felt a sharp coil of pressure slip around his left wrist, creeping beneath the splint to squeeze over the bones there. Tony made no move to resist; it wouldn't do him any good anyway.

"I did not cause this," Zet noted, interested. The pressure tightened. "How did you come by such an injury?"

Tony wanted to say something pointed about Zet's concern for his wrist when he had no apparent concern for Tony's face, but he bit his tongue. "Stupidity. Mine."

More clicks and hisses. "That does seem to be one of your frequent traits." He pretended to look thoughtful. "Or perhaps you are simply prone to accidents. Men who speak thoughtlessly so often are."

The threat was so obvious and heavy-handed Tony couldn't help himself. "Not thoughtless. Witty rejoinders actually take quite a bit of thought."

The coil wrapped once more around his wrist, contracting with enough pressure to do damage, and
twisted. Tony had to go down on his knees with the turn of it or risk another break. He chose to go
down, sliding into a controlled drop.

"Chancellor," Gwar said, startling Tony badly. He'd forgotten the alien was there. "Please. The
machinist requires the use of his hands to work."

Zet hissed in annoyance, waving an arm. "Be silent." Tony saw Gwar stagger back into the wall as
if pushed. At the same time the pressure against Tony's wrist vanished. "You try my patience today,
Gwar. Take care. The machinist might require the use of his hands but you do not."

Gwar shrank into himself, claws tucked close to his chest. "Yes, Chancellor."

Tony ground his teeth, enraged. Zet looked thwarted, staring at Tony. "A very frequent trait," he said
flatly. "You are a curious creature. Do you enjoy suffering? I can find few other explanations for your
repeated disrespect."

"Born like this," Tony said shortly, trying to regain his footing and failing when an impossible
weight parked itself on his shoulders. "Ingrained behavior. Difficult to change."

"Shall I assist you?" Zet asked, tracing again over the healing marks of his handiwork, reopening a
second wound.

"No, I think I've got it now," Tony said.

"We will see," Zet said. He paced away, holding out one hand and floating Gwar's manifest into his
grip. He scanned over it briefly. "You are managing with our technology quickly." He looked at
Tony again. "Unexpectedly quickly."

Suspiciously quickly, Tony heard, and ducked his head down. "Yeah. I'm good at what I do."

"Hmm," Zet said. "See that you continue in that vein. I will be doubling your quarterly allotment.
Don't fall behind." He turned suddenly. "Gwar."

Gwar flinched, rallying a moment later. "Chancellor?"

Zet handed him back the manifest. "You will continue to monitor his progress. Keep me apprised."

Gwar touched his claws together, bowing. "Yes, I will. Of course."

Zet swept out of the room, leaving Tony with the distinct feeling of having just barely dodged a
bullet.

Gwar waited until they could no longer hear Zet's gliding footsteps before he spoke. "Are you
well?" He reached out to touch Tony's left arm gently. "Your wrist? I apologize. I was unaware he
planned to visit today."

"I'm fine," Tony said shortly. "Are you?"

Gwar blinked. His claws went lax with surprise. "Me?"

"Yeah." Tony gestured at him, head to toe. "Is he always like that with you?"

Gwar hissed defensively, backing up. "As the chancellor's aid, it is my responsibility to provide for
his needs. When I fail, he corrects me. But I do not often fail, and I receive many rewards for my
good work."
Tony felt a sharp stab of pity. "Hits you with the left hand; rewards you with the right." He offered Gwar a twisted smile. "My world has a name for that kind of relationship."

Gwar clicked querulously. "The chancellor has never hit me."

Tony shook his head. "Not with his hands, I'm sure." Reminded of his own hands, he shook them out, relieved to find no evident injuries. "Think I got off easy today. Thanks for your help. Pretty sure he meant to break my arm, there."

"Yes," Gwar agreed.

"You don't speak much when he's around," Tony noted, picking up the discarded power coupler. "Guess after that I can see why."

Gwar looked uncertain. "I must be sparing with my words. My value is in my obedience. Without it, I can be easily replaced. It has happened to others, before."

Which sounded like an impossibly precarious position to Tony. He wondered darkly what'd happened to those 'others'.

"Wasn't criticizing," Tony said, tossing the coupler back and forth easily. "Just an observation."

Then he paused. He looked at his hands, wriggling the left fingers, stretching them cautiously as far as they'd go. He experimentally rotated his wrist first one way and then the other.

Gwar tapped him with the tip of one claw, like a tuning fork, listening for something Tony couldn't see or hear. "What is it? Is there some new injury?"

Tony shook his head, frowning. He prodded carefully at the flesh of his left hand, felt around the splint and wordlessly broke it off.

"What is wrong?" Gwar asked, anxious, looking at the remains of the brace. "I sense no pain."

Tony flexed his entire hand and arm, staring incredulously at his wrist. "Yeah, that's the funny thing. Neither do I."

Which really only had one explanation. And it rhymed with magic.

"What did you do to my wrist," he demanded, barreling through the door and brandishing his un-splinted limb in Stephen's direction. The sorcerer was sitting unnaturally still on one of the beds and didn't respond. Tony glared at him, then around the room in growing alarm. Jira was nowhere to be found, but more importantly, neither was Peter.

Panic immediately tried to shove its way down Tony's throat. He stormed up to shake answers out of Stephen, hesitating at the last second. The sorcerer was completely upright, not out cold on the bed; obviously his immobility was deliberate, and probably had an explanation rooted in some kind of mysticism. Shaking him out of it was liable to set off something rather unfortunate, like an explosion, or a stern lecture. Tony counselled himself to patience. He sat on the edge of the bed beside him instead.

It was an eternity later, ten minutes at least, before Stephen roused from his stillness. Tony didn't notice right away, busy examining his left wrist narrowly. He nearly jumped out of his skin when the sorcerer spoke.

"I'm impressed, Tony," Stephen said, blinking himself back to reality. He glanced over. "That's
more patience than I normally see from you."

Tony didn't waste any time.  "Where's the kid?"

Stephen looked around as though to confirm their missing spider wasn't going to pop up out of the woodwork on his own.  "Peter asked for a tour of the mountain.  Jira was more than happy to provide him with one."

Tony glared at him incredulously.  "You let them go off alone?"

Stephen rolled his eyes.  "Of course I did.  And I wasn't just monitoring them with my astral form, and I didn't put a tracer on Peter before he left the room.  Yes, that sounds exactly like something I'd do."

"You have an astral form," Tony repeated, ignoring the rest of it.  "Seriously?"

Stephen scowled.  "Which is somehow more unbelievable than the existence of an entire mirror dimension or a stone that can break the space-time continuum."

Tony wagged a finger in Stephen's irritated face.  "No need to get snarky, doc.  You should probably eat something.  You always get tetchy when you haven't eaten."

"I'm not hungry.  I have a headache." The sorcerer frowned at him.  "And you're back rather early today, aren't you?  Did something happen?"

Reminded, Tony shook his wrist in Stephen's direction.  The man blinked, leaning back warily.

"Explain this," Tony demanded.

Stephen eyed him, taking Tony's wrist slowly in his hands.  "I realize anatomy isn't your forte, Tony, but I thought you at least had the basics.  Do you need me to show you on the doll where -"

"Cute, really, you're hilarious." Tony pointed at him.  "Two weeks ago I had a total of three fractures in this wrist, according to you.  When I finally screwed my head on straight again, they hurt like hell.  Now they don't hurt at all.  Care to explain that, doctor?"

"Not especially," Stephen said.

"Let me put this another way.  Either you've been magicking me without permission, or I've spontaneously become an Enhanced.  Much though I think the latter would be awesome, I'm going to assume the former."

"An Enhanced?  Is that how you refer to -"

"Don't even try it."

The sorcerer didn't even do him the favor of pretending to be chastised.  "It was a legitimate question."

"Not today it isn't." Tony wriggled the fingers of his left hand demandingly.  "Forget the doll.  Show me on the human where you did the magic."

Stephen stared at him, a frown slowly beetling his brows.  "You don't seem disturbed by the idea."

Tony blinked back.  "That you healed my broken bones?" He paused.  "I wasn't until you said that.  Should I be?"
"No. But you usually are."

Tony rolled his eyes, wondering if he ought to be more annoyed at Stephen constantly referencing alternate timelines, or at himself in those timelines for proving he was truly an asshole.

"I'm not going to look a gift horse in the mouth," he said, watching Stephen pull aside Tony's sleeve to carefully palpate along the ulna and scaphoid bones. "Even if you should've told me. I'm guessing you couldn't do anything about my face because it's, well, my face."

"Someone would've noticed," Stephen agreed.

"It does draw attention, doesn't it? Always has, if I do say so myself. So how did you do it?"

Stephen followed the metacarpal to the phalanges in the thumb and pointer finger, gently enough it tickled. Tony shivered, an intriguing prickle of energy whispering up his spine.

"Technically, you did it," Stephen said. "I just sped things along. Channelled energy directly into your stem cells to stimulate bone growth. You have a remarkably healthy bone marrow system. Can't say the same about your liver."

Tony grinned. "Live fast, love hard, die young. Leave a beautiful memory. I got one out of four at least."

Stephen laughed. "That was such a terrible song. Not even I could listen to it more than once." He rested Tony's wrist and hand on his thigh. "These bones feel near enough to fully healed. Six weeks or more along. Not bad."

Tony turned over his hand, sliding his fingers along the sorcerer's palm and further. He traced a line over two of Stephen's knuckles, counting the hatchmark scars. He felt the other man jerk in surprise.

"If you can do that with stem cells, you can do that with nerve cells," Tony said quietly, feeling the ever-present tremor increasing. "You could have these back."

Stephen let Tony draw his hand into the air for them both to see. He stared at it like it was the worst kind of temptation life could offer: the kind that haunted him every day. "It doesn't work like that. Your bones only required a nudge. My nerves would necessitate a constant drain. I can have my hands or I can have the magic. Not both."

Tony quirked a smile. "Sounds like the same dilemma all superheroes face. A normal life or something greater."

"What an interesting choice of words," Stephen said, looking at him.

Tony observed the visible tremor of those gentle, spellbinding fingers and felt warm appreciation sweep through him slow and thick, like honey. A familiar impulse immediately stirred in his gut and he only realized he'd started to lean closer when Stephen blinked at him in question. Tony forced himself to stop, to think first, because it wasn’t the wisest choice; it probably wasn't even in the same ballpark as wise, really. But then, as Stephen had so kindly pointed out, Tony was so rarely accused of having good sense.

And yet he hesitated, because if he got this wrong it might paint them both into a dangerous corner. One it could be very hard to come back from.

But. He didn’t think he was wrong.
Locking eyes with the other man, Tony bent his head and deliberately exhaled against the skin of Stephen's wrist, heated and intimate and close. The sorcerer made a noise Tony doubted he meant to, startled but not quite surprised.

Tony smiled at him slowly, innocently. "Oh, sorry. Am I making you uncomfortable?"

Stephen's eyes were vividly curious, the remarkable blue of them rich with interest. "Yes."

"Working as intended then." Tony bent again, close enough he could graze first his lips and then his teeth over thin skin, feeling the flutter of Stephen's pulse like wings beating against his mouth. "Have I thanked you yet for healing my hand?"

"I get the sense you're doing that right now," Stephen murmured, cupping Tony's jaw with the tips of his fingers.

Tony pressed a kiss to the base of Stephen's hand, then his palm, hearing him suck in an unsteady breath. "I'm usually as bad at thanking people as I am at apologizing. How am I doing so far?"

"Oh, adequate, I suppose."

Tony brushed the prickle of his beard the wrong way, just to feel Stephen twitch in reaction. "Is that nerve damage," he whispered against him, "or is your hand shaking?"

Stephen laughed like it'd been shoved right out of him, closing his eyes with a helpless sort of smile. "That's an awful pick-up line."

Tony grinned. "Very me, don't you think?" He stared at the flush rising in the other man's face. "Tell me if I'm reading this wrong. This could go so incredibly badly if I am."

"You're not."

"Oh, good," Tony said, dropping his eyes to Stephen's mouth. "I'd hate to think that -"

"Guys, you'll never guess what I found!" Peter exclaimed, launching himself into the room.

Tony drew back as naturally as he could, feeling Stephen do the same. He brushed off his hands as though he'd been looking for something on them, then glanced up casually. Peter had stopped in the open doorway. He had a very peculiar look on his face.

"Peter," Tony said reasonably. "What have I always said about knocking?"

"I," Peter started, frowning. "I have no idea. Have you ever said anything about knocking?"

"Probably not to you," Tony conceded. He looked at Jira, standing behind Peter. Tony wiggled his fingers meaningfully, the same way he would to call the nanotech. He watched Peter's eyes widen in understanding and almost felt bad for misleading him. "But my point stands. You might want to do more of it from now on, before coming into my room."

"But," Peter said. "This is my room? Too?"

Tony raised both eyebrows at him, subtly poking Stephen, who he could feel shaking with badly suppressed laughter. "Was that a question?"

Peter looked terribly, terribly confused. "No?"

"Are you sure?"
So terribly confused. "No?"

Then Peter startled, his hand flying to his ear. He blinked rapidly. "Oh! Oh, right. I, uh." He looked back at Jira sheepishly. "Do you mind if we pick up the rest of the tour tomorrow? I think I should maybe talk with my," he stumbled, "with Doctor Strange and Mr. Stark."

Jira looked mutinous. Apparently he didn't like having his time with new friends cut short. "You said you only needed to return briefly."

"Well, but, I," Peter said, floundering.

Jira kept talking right over him. "Tell me, why do your people use such a wide variety of names and salutations? It is a very confusing custom. I have never heard of such a thing before."

"You need to get out more," Tony muttered. He pretended to check his nonexistent watch. "Gosh, Minister, would you look at the time? I think you might be late for a very important date. Better go meet it."

Jira blinked in confusion. "I have no pending appointment."

"Sure you do." Tony waved him on. "Bye now."

Jira took the hint, finally starting to edge back toward the door. "Perhaps I could just -"

"No time to say hello, goodbye," Tony said loudly. "You're late, you're late, you're late."

Jira looked extremely unimpressed by this as he shut and then locked the door behind him.

"Wow," Tony said, unenthusiastically watching him go. "I thought he'd never leave."

"FRIDAY says we need to reset our transmitters," Peter blurted.

"What?" Tony stared at him. Stephen sat up straight next to him. "When?"

"Just now! She says she can create a new VPN off the satellite carrier signal? I think. But you have to open the transmitter line to scan for new frequencies."

"But how will she know which one I'm -"

Peter frowned at him. "Computers aren't my thing. Ask me chemistry or physics. I'm just telling you what she said."

Tony moaned in despair, covering his face with both hands. "I thought I'd taught you at least the basics."

"Hacking satellite communications isn't basic," Peter protested. "The only reason FRIDAY caught me in the first place was because we got near the top of the mountain. I think the mineralization's thinner there. But then I couldn't talk to her much because the minister was with me. The signal cut off, like, twenty minutes ago."

Tony frowned, thinking about that. "I wonder what the metallic stratification looks like in this mountain. The lattice must be denser toward the base. Maybe if -"

Peter made an impatient sound. He stared at Tony with big, pleading eyes. "Transmitter line?"

Tony reached for his ear, glancing at Stephen as he did. The sorcerer was watching him, a small
smile curling the corner of his mouth like he couldn't quite help it. His eyes were bright and fond. Tony grinned back at him, feeling something warm and eager bubbling in his chest. He dropped his unoccupied hand down between them, slipping it subtly over Stephen's knee with a wink.

"FRIDAY," Tony said, cycling the transmitter while he watched Stephen silently laugh at him. "Tony Stark, master of all things engineering, calling FRIDAY. Come in, FRIDAY."

He heard the open line sync with an audible whine.

"Boss," FRIDAY said, loud and clear and never more welcome. "Is that you?"

"There's my girl," Tony exulted. "Now, FRIDAY. We have so much to catch you up on and tons of work to do. But first: be a dear and tell me how much you missed me."
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Change starts with one and ends with many.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

If Tony'd been asked to guess any one thing to turn the tide of an alien revolution, he'd probably have said technology, or magic, or war, or some other massive and unstoppable force of nature or politics or power.

What he got was not massive. But it was certainly unstoppable.

"You're a lot smaller than the aliens I usually get to see," Tony said.

The tiny creature looked up at him from somewhere in the vicinity of Tony's left knee. "That is because I am the smallest of my age-mates."

"Don't doubt it."

A large part of Tony wanted to reach down and pluck the miniature being up to examine from all sides, as he might any new and interesting discovery. But the tension in the room was thick enough to cut, and Valk was watching Tony like a hawk. So really, it was probably a very bad idea to pick the hatchling up.

Valk was interesting. He was Gwar's equivalent of a second-cousin, six-or-seven-or-eight times removed; the tiny lizard-being was his, and it had eyes much too large for its face, and a row of teeth much too sharp for its mouth.

"I am also the smartest and the fastest," the hatchling continued, fragile claws pulling with prickling scratches at Tony's calf and shin. "And the most beautiful."

Valk hissed in exasperation, slipping around Tony to stare down at the smallest member of his clan. "You know it is rude to say these things out loud."

"But you say them to me every day," the child protested.

Valk clicked uncomfortably, reaching down to gently tug stubborn hands away from Tony. "Please forgive her. She is young and has much to learn."

"No harm done," Tony said easily. "I'm of the opinion if someone's got it, flaunt it." He paused. "She?"

Valk didn't answer, lifting the hatchling so she could balance with a painful looking grip over his right forearm. The child stared in Tony's direction, reaching out with one hand.

"Are you full-grown?" she asked.
Tony had the fatalistic feeling he knew exactly what was coming. "Yep. All grown and released into the wild to fend for myself."

Her face didn't quite change, but she somehow looked very confused. "But you are small." She looked up at Valk, towering over all of them at nearly eight feet, Gwar a close second and of course Tony at the bottom of that totem pole. She looked back at Tony unreadably. "Are you like me, then? The smallest of your age-mates?"

Definitely knew exactly where that was going. "That's kind of a personal question. Didn't anyone ever tell you it's rude to ask a lady her age?"

She whistled and clicked with surprise. "You are female?"

The hilarious urge to say yes was strong, but Tony heroically refrained. "No."

She looked more confused than ever. She turned to Valk for an explanation, but he had none the offer. When she turned to Gwar, he hissed something sympathetic in her direction.

"He is most confusing," Gwar confided, making no effort to modulate his tone or volume. "The others of his kind are less so. I believe this one is unique."

"Thanks," Tony told him. "Nicest thing you've ever said to me."

"What unique things can he do?" she asked, skeptically.

"He is an engineer," Gwar said. Tony looked at him sharply. "He designs and makes new things. Mostly machines."

"Can he make me a toy?" she asked.

Valk jostled her, tapping her sharply in the center of the forehead with the knuckle of his third claw. "More rudeness. Must we have another discussion on manners?"

She drooped. "Do we have to?"

"Not if you behave."

She clicked a squeaky sort of sound. "Yes, of course. I was impolite. I must be respectful." She turned to look at Tony earnestly. "Please, will you make me a toy?"

Gwar dissolved into hissing laughter while Valk put her down on the ground, touching his claws in her direction resignedly.

"That is not what I meant by manners," Valk tried to say, half the words lost to his own amusement.

"Then what did you mean?"

"Tell you what," Tony said. "Maybe you say what kind of toy you want, and I'll say whether or not I can make it."

She looked awestruck by this. Her face seemed designed to be more expressible than either of the adults; Tony wondered whether that was an age thing, or a biology thing. "I get to choose?"

"Were you not telling me just recently of something your clan-sister broke?" Gwar asked, crouching down to look at her solemnly. "Perhaps you could ask Tony about that."
"Can he make me another?" She asked, now tugging at Gwar's knee in excitement.

"Or perhaps fix the one you have," Gwar suggested. "Engineers can also fix old things to be new again."

She paused in her prodding to turn and look straight up at Tony. "You fix things?"

"Yep, that's me. Fixer of things. I break a lot of things, too, but most people prefer I not talk about that."

She looked a question at him that was two parts demand and one part plea. "Can you fix me?"

It was obvious by the guilty bow of Gwar's head that this was the real reason he'd brought them to Tony, in spite of his cousin's reticence, in spite of knowing the likely futility. And it wasn't an inconsequential question; though she looked normal enough on the outside, FRIDAY's data stream showed that wasn't at all the case on the inside.

Tony crouched so he could see her more clearly. She reached out to touch his hand, his chin now that it was on level with her, finally resting her hands over his arm. He suppressed a wince when she accidentally dug in, sharp claws leaving bloody furrows behind. He could tell by Gwar's sudden stillness he sensed either the blood or the sudden pain.

Tony smiled at her. "I think the answer to your question is supposed to be: No, you're perfect, and there's nothing to fix."

"But that is not true," she protested. Tony felt her eyes roaming over his face with avid interest.

"Well, I fix machines, so what do I know?" He tapped her once on the nose, watching her eyes cross in surprise. "See, people aren't my specialty. But I definitely know a guy."

It took Tony ten minutes explaining what a physician was and Gwar a half-hour of sweet talk before Valk was even remotely willing to let another stranger near her. But nothing could calm him when he realized the stranger came with an audience.

"You brought one of them?" Valk hissed, reptilian eyes full-blown with shock and horror. He was staring unerringly at Jira. The minister was looming comically over Stephen, who loomed comically over Peter, who the tiny lizard-hatchling had attached herself to like a barnacle. Peter had a look on his face that said he had absolutely no idea what to do, but he was willing to wing it.

"You know, I'm kind of with him on this one," Tony said, scowling in Jira's direction. "I mean, does he really have to be here?"

Gwar ignored Tony. "You should not address him in that way," he told Valk. "They are not all alike."

"Of course they are!" Valk said, clearly torn between storming over and removing his hatchling from Jira's sight, and recognizing the fact that even if he wanted to, the only way that would happen is if Jira let him. "They are all the same. Arrogant and cruel and vile."

Gwar clicked in rebuke. "They have power we do not, but that does not make them evil. Minister Jira has always treated us fairly and well. You may ask your clan-brother if you doubt me."

Tony glanced a question at Gwar, who shrugged back at him. "The minister's aid. He has served for longer than I have, happily and well."
Valk subsided, fixing his eyes intently on the scene. Stephen’d steered Peter and his clinging burden to one of the nearby chairs. The hapless teenager gently helped her into the seat, picking her up like she was made of glass. Valk hurried over, then, snatching her away so she made two startled, ear-splitting whistles of surprise. Jira looked enchanted by them, and Valk looked fiercely suspicious of his enchantment.

"Tony," Stephen said, beckoning, and Tony ambled over so he could be dragged into one of the corners, well away from all the fuss and concern.

"What's up, doc? If you wanted to get me somewhere private, you only had to ask."

Stephen had a fixed, pleasant smile on his face. "You realize I was a surgeon and not a general practitioner? Neurosurgeon, even, at one of the busiest hospitals in New York."

"What?" Tony stared at him blankly. "Are you saying you're a living, breathing doctor? No way. I thought for sure you were making that up."

"My point is, what about my credentials suggests to you I'm in any way qualified to examine this child?"

"Mostly the lack of other people with credentials," Tony said. He took off his glasses, passing them over to Stephen. "We don't have enough biological information about these people for full analysis, but obvious indicators are obvious. FRIDAY?"

Silent to this point, FRIDAY filtered in over both their transmitters, tinny but clear. "Scans show a high incidence of abnormal cell proliferation."

Stephen looked distantly through the glasses, the wide, square frames sitting low on his nose to leave him looking oddly vulnerable. A stray curl of hair worsened the effect, accenting his striking eyes with their collection of laugh lines at the corners. Tony reached out, deliberately nudging the glasses more securely into place.

Stephen blinked at him, momentarily distracted. "Tony."

"Yeah, I know. Hands to myself, first things first, yada yada. Heard you last week, doc."

Stephen pinned him with a stern glare before his eyes glazed over again. Tony sighed. One might think sharing a room on this planet would provide many opportunities to explore interesting new personal developments, but in fact Tony was finding quite the opposite. For one thing there was Peter to consider, and for another there was the revolution at hand; both those things took priority. Or that was how Stephen put it, anyway. Tony had yet to be completely convinced.

Stephen frowned as something caught his attention. "That's odd. Her cellular mitosis is more rapid than I'd expect, even in a child."

"Early development in this species -"

"It's increased by a factor of four even comparing extrapolated data from the adults," Stephen muttered over top of him.

Tony tried not to be turned on by his brain, but, well. "Maybe we could talk about my cellular mitosis sometime. Or yours, I'm not picky."

Stephen took the time to glower at him, though a small uptick at the corner of his mouth gave him away. "Thank you for reassuring me you haven't lost your touch with terrible pickup lines."
"Just means they're unique and unforgettable."

"Yes, unfortunately they do rather stay with a person. FRIDAY, give me a chromosomal analysis, or any genetic information we have."

"Readings are preliminary and of limited accuracy," FRIDAY cautioned. "Twenty-two percent estimated margin for error."

"Show me the highlights."

Stephen blinked, both eyes widening in surprise.

"What?" Tony asked.

"She has an abnormally high incidence of homozygous alleles. Much higher than the adults."

"Meaning what?"

"In and of itself, it might mean nothing. From a population perspective, if she's the norm, it means everything. The genetic drift in this species must be extremely low. Approaching a critical flashpoint. Her genetic mutations are off the chart."

Tony allowed no expression on his face. "Will she die?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. She might experience lifelong growth abnormalities, though. Not the most comfortable condition. And if this is any example of the current generation, I can't imagine what consecutive generations will look like." He hesitated. "Or if there will be any consecutive generations."

It was FRIDAY who provided the translation. "They're dying," she said, with a very real note of sorrow in her voice.

"What?" Jira demanded, rearing up over them suddenly, ominously. Tony stared up at him and had to remind his pounding heart that Jira was not Zet. "Who is dying? When?"

"Keep your voice down," Tony bit out, looking over to find Valk and Gwar thoroughly distracted attending to the hatchling. But Peter was looking at them with wide, horrified eyes, having heard FRIDAY loud and clear.

Then reality struck and Tony flailed at Jira. "And how the hell did you hear that?" He looked at the space between the two groups, a solid ten meters if it was a foot. "Aren't lizards supposed to have shit hearing? And FRIDAY's basically sub-vocal."

Jira ignored that. "Your crew member mentioned death. In what way are they dying? Why?"

It took Tony a second to realize he was referring to FRIDAY. (Crew member. Ha.) "Cool your jets, Minister Malcontent. You'll get your explanation as soon as I get mine."

Jira rose to his greatest height, which was unmistakably impressive, but Tony stood his ground. He glanced up with a bored sweep of his eyes, refusing to be intimidated. It wasn't a minute before Jira folded to the staring contest like a cheap suit.

"Your transmitters are clever," the minister admitted finally, a sentence that set all Tony's metaphorical alarm bells to screaming. "But my kind are able to detect sounds up to and including the ultrasonic range. I became aware some time ago that your ship had breached the satellite
safeguards. An impressive feat."

Tony stared at him. "Jesus. You have telekinesis, ultrasonic hearing, and great hair. You're practically a supervillain." He looked over again. The hatchling had climbed onto the arm of the chair and was now trying to scale Peter like a miniature mountaineer. Valk looked torn between intense parental pride and terror. "Not the same for them, I take it?"

"No. Our anatomy is quite different."

"So you had us pegged from the start," Tony said. He looked at Stephen, who seemed just as surprised as he was. "I assume you haven't told Zet?"

"If I had told him, or if he had heard you previously, you certainly would not be standing here right now," Jira said.

"Fair enough."

"I expected some type of escape attempt to follow. The others all attempted early escape attempts. You have not conformed to pattern."

"If we wanted to escape, we'd have done it a while back." Tony scowled. "What would you've done if we'd tried?"

Jira hissed impatiently. "Let you go, of course. Those clever enough to escape deserve a fair chance. Why did you choose to stay?"

Tony stared at him, disturbed to think he might actually grow to like Jira. "Well, don't look at me. I wanted to leave and got outvoted. This point, we're mostly here to help you people not die. If that's possible." He turned to Stephen, questioning. "Is it?"

Stephen shrugged doubtfully. "Difficult to say. If the population keeps shrinking, perhaps not." He didn't look at Jira when he added quietly: "For those like you and Zet, the genotype variance will be even smaller. It's probably already too late for your kind."

"Of course it is," Jira said. "Ours has always been a sub-species on the brink of extinction. We live long, but pay for that in low numbers. After the culling, and then the war, there was no hope of recovery."

"You knew?"

"Naturally. It has been obvious for several generations. Zet always railed against it. He has stolen minds both brilliant and dull to repair technology beyond our grasp, all in the hope it might eventually provide a solution. But nothing can do that."

"You must realize his oppression stifles an already endangered people," Stephen said. "They need to break free or they'll join you soon in extinction."

"I know what you will ask me next," the minister said. "You wish me to help you. But I cannot. Already I have done more than I should. Each day you remain is another where he might discover my duplicity. If he does, be warned: I cannot lie to him. I will tell him all I know, and you will die. Or perhaps you will only wish you had."

"Wow," Tony said. "So you'll help by turning a blind eye, and that only if it's convenient for you. Thanks for nothing."
Stephen sighed. "Not helping, Tony."

"Just calling it as I see it, doc. Far as I can tell from Gwar, no one much cares for Zet's way of life except Zet. Maybe one or two of his enforcers. Someone has to make a stand."

"Impossible," Jira said. "In terms of raw power, Zet has always been the stronger. He cannot be bested, and I cannot condone the violence needed to depose him. Nor would I want the Chancellorship, even if it were offered to me."

Tony rolled his eyes. "Then you're condemning this entire world to die. And everyone who encounters it. We're being held because we tried to engage in fair trade. How's that for justice? We should've stuck to pirating. Equal chance of imprisonment, but less chance of bullshit."

"Zet lacks fairness, and he can be cruel," Jira acknowledged. "He can also be kind to those he knows well."

"Tell it to my face," Tony said flatly, turning to show the red lines still fading even weeks after Zet had put them there. Jira traced his eyes over the marks, the fronds at the top of his head falling in sorrow. "No, better yet, tell it to Gwar's hands."

Jira drooped even further. "That was a very bad time. The war had just ended. You were not there. You did not see."

"No, you won't see -"

Stephen cleared his throat. "Perhaps we should spread the web wider."

"The web?" Jira asked.

"Yes. He glanced at where Peter had started a game of tag, or possibly he really was trying to run away from the hatchling. "If you're unwilling to support change, there must be someone who will."

Jira chose not to respond to the implied criticism. "It is unlikely, though not impossible. But spreading this web would be a perilous endeavor. It will not take long for word to reach Zet's ears. He has many spies."

"Right," Tony said triumphantly. "A kind man who keeps hostages. That's a new one."

"Now, see here -"

"Gentlemen," Stephen said dryly, but he was staring directly at Tony. "And I use that term loosely. We need more support and it has to come from somewhere."

"I have a plan," Jira announced, sounding suddenly rather excited. Tony immediately had a terrible feeling. "I sometimes host a gathering with several -" the translation spell slipped away for a moment before supplying "- contemporaries. I will arrange this for tomorrow, and you will join me."

Which translated, far as Tony could tell, into: I want to show you off to all my buddies and maybe if you manage to impress them enough they might consider helping you on a cold day in hell. Or never. Whichever comes first.

"So sad I won't be able to join you on that one," Tony said dryly. "Zet's tripled my quarterly allotment. I barely have time to breathe, let alone swan around eating capers and canapés."

"Yes, of course," Jira said. "An auspicious arrangement, as I do not believe the gathering would
benefit from your presence."

"You implying I have a tendency to annoy people, Minister?"

Jira stared at him. "Yes."

Stephen made a considering noise, bridging his hands to rest his chin on them. "That could work. We'd have to discuss strategy, of course. What we intend to say, who to, how and when; likely responses."

Tony sighed. Loudly. "So you and Peter head into the lion's den and try not to get eaten while I, what? Stay home and polish the silverware?"

"You need not fear," Jira told Tony. "No one will attempt to consume them. That would be quite unhealthy."

Tony grimaced. "I hate you." He turned to Stephen. "Please feel free to educate this man in the art of sarcasm."

"Let's not pollute this planet any more than we have to," Stephen replied.

A throat clearing softly caught their attention and Tony turned to see Peter had finally allowed himself to be caught. He had a small lizard perched on his shoulders who looked like she was considering making a nest there for the foreseeable future.

"What's going on?" Peter asked, quietly.

Tony sighed, squared his shoulders, and went to convince a little girl that she really was perfect and there was no way to fix her. And then to convince her clan members that they had to do something about that, and why, and why now.

All told, news of the dire timeline facing the aliens took less than a day to start circulating. And it was just the sort of motivation a revolution needed in order to grow claws and teeth and heart, and supply people with the right amount of righteous resentment to use them. It wasn't long before Earth's mightiest heroes had a veritable army of dissidents growing in their ranks.

Of course, Tony later reflected, the thing about armies was they were visible coming from a mile away. And for all he was an insane, power-hungry tyrant, Zet wasn't blind, and he wasn't a fool.

"No," Tony explained patiently for the fourth time. "You can't move there. It has to be a diagonal space connected to the one you're on, or reachable by jumping over one of mine. No, the same type of square. No. No. Yep, there you go. Got it."

Gwar tilted his head to the side, staring at the makeshift checkers game Tony'd made. Five days and three games since Tony had first introduced it to him, and the guy seemed to have no better understanding of game mechanics now than he had in the beginning.

"No," Tony said two minutes later. "Only kings can move backwards. Good, there, now you have to jump my piece on your next move unless I block you. Which sucks for you, but that's the rules."

"I do not understand," Gwar said, as he had many times before. "The purpose of the game is to capture all your pieces. Why would I not wish to jump this one?"

"Because I set up a trap, see? Here and here, and boom."
Gwar clicked at the board in consternation. "Then I will not jump this piece."

"No, you have to," Tony corrected him.

"Why?"

"Because that's what the rules say."

"Why?"

"Because rules exist to make life difficult. Now shut up and jump me, Kemosabe."


"Who?" Tony said immediately. Gwar looked up in confusion.

"From thermal imaging, I believe it is Chancellor Zet. At his current pace, I estimate forty-six seconds before he intercepts your position."

Tony felt adrenaline spike with a hard kick to the gut. The chancellor'd been making more frequent visits recently, ostensibly to check on Tony's progress but in reality probably just looking for reasons to take Tony to task. Zet made no effort to hide his growing suspicion, probably not helped by the swelling tide of dissent slowly picking apart his empire.

"Twenty seconds," FRIDAY said.

Tony turned, snatched up the game board, and shoved it underneath a sheet of corrugated metal. Pieces scattered everywhere.

Gwar backed away, raising his hands in surprise. "What -"

"Company," Tony said shortly, sitting hastily down at his workstation and picking up one of the unfinished projects on the desk. He snapped it open, disconnecting the defunct power source and cracking the casing at the same time. "Pretend to be giving me a severe talking to. Throw in some nasty words for authenticity. Or maybe don't. Do you even know any nasty words?"

"But -" Gwar cut himself off, turning sharply toward the door, pupils blowing wide as Zet's footsteps became audible. He scrambled upright and to rigid attention just as Zet came around the corner at a fast clip, stopping in the open doorway. Tony watched him them both via the strategic vanity mirror he'd placed on the desk specifically for this reason.

"Have you not yet finished that?" Gwar asked Tony, pretending to be ignorant of the chancellor's presence, though the slight tremble in his claws gave him away. "I expected this lot to be done by now."

"No need to be a drill sergeant about it," Tony said cheerfully. "I'm down to the last two. This one needed soldering, that's all. It's busted."

"If you required additional scrap materials you should have -"

Gwar wrenched abruptly to the far right, crashing into the wall and then hitting the floor with an unceremonious thud.

Tony leapt to his feet, more out of surprise than anything. "What -"
And then Tony had no time for surprise or speaking or really much of anything, because he was flying through the air too, yanked into a familiar grip and thrown into the wall opposite. His breath whooshed out of him heavily.

It was Zet, of course, but a new one to Tony's eyes. If Zet before had been cold menace and cruelty, there was real anger in him today, and it burned very brightly.

"Chancellor," Gwar gasped, the shock in his voice genuine and bewildered. "What is -? Is there a problem?"

"Of course there is," Zet said, and Tony felt himself dragged away from the wall and to his knees, skidding and rolling once before he could find his balance. He banged his shin somewhere in there, heavily enough he could feel the low ache of it in the bone. Before he could rise, an immense weight immediately landed on him, smothering and intensely claustrophobic.

"Chancellor, please," Gwar said, barely audible over the pound of blood in Tony's ears. "What -"

Zet clearly had no time for trivial things like explanations. "Be silent unless you wish to join him on the floor."

Gwar's voice faded away, and Tony could hardly blame him. If there was more anger in Zet today, there was also less control, or maybe less time for pretense.

"Leave us," Zet said.

"But -"

"Do not give me reasons to question you as well, Gwar. If I find out you helped him, you will bear the weight of your sedition as any traitor would."

"Leave him out of this," Tony tried to say around the thick taste of blood in his mouth. He'd bitten his tongue, so the whole thing probably came out as garbled nonsense.

Zet clearly understood the insolence, if not the words, because suddenly Tony felt his air cutting off, a noose of force wrapping around his neck and tightening to choke him into silence. His lungs immediately started screaming for air.

FRIDAY silently buzzed three times in his ear, their silent call sign for danger. Which was enough to make Tony laugh, the dry hack of it hurting his chest, panic only just starting to catch up with him. He scrambled to send an SOS return signal.

From the corner of his eye, Tony could see Gwar plant two trembling feet firmly on the ground.

"I do not understand," he said. "What has happened?"

It was a good question. A variety of suspicious answers were already streaming through Tony's head, everything from Stephen and Peter being caught (unlikely) to one of the other aliens selling them out (very likely), to Zet discovering he was running out of time (most likely), and everything in between.

Zet hissed low in contempt. "The machinist has overstepped himself. Worse; to do so, he will have had help. Yours, Gwar? For your sake, I hope not."

"Chancellor, I would never -"
"Would you not?" Zet asked, and suddenly the scattered pieces of the checkers set floated past Tony's darkening view, like damning evidence of a crime.

Gwar's silence was wretchedly telling and Tony would've rolled his eyes if he were able. Gwar seriously needed to acquire some acting skills if he meant to survive on this rotten little world of his.

"It is a game," Gwar said tremulously. "A thing his kind does among -" He trailed off.

"Among whom?" Zet asked. "Among friends? Yes. Exactly. Tell me once more how you would never."

Gwar whistled, suddenly and piercingly high in pain and distress, and it was that more than anything that tempted Tony to reach for the nanotech, rage burning inside him. A second later Gwar cut himself off, hissing in wheezes of broken air.

"Leave us," Zet said again, and this time Gwar went.

The grip around Tony's neck finally fell slack.

Zet let him get in three solidly heaving breaths before he tightened it again. "I will ask you several questions, machinist," the chancellor said while Tony forced himself not to show signs of the fear Zet could undoubtedly already sense. "You will answer them promptly and truthfully. If you fail, we will repeat this exercise," he tightened and relaxed the invisible noose, "until you reconsider your defiance or I succeed in doing you permanent damage. If the latter, understand your usefulness to me may come to an abrupt end. Do you understand?"

Tony stalled long enough to wet his lips and tongue, panting. Zet rattled him around, like someone shaking the leash on their dog, and Tony overbalanced and smacked his cheek and nose into the rough mesh flooring. Blood was a coppery reminder of how little he could afford to blow the whole operation now.

"Yes," he rasped.

"Who helped you?" Zet asked.

"Stephen," Tony said immediately, the easiest of his rehearsed responses. He remembered the sorcerer's careful touch, the way he'd whispered magic into Tony's bones. He might need another session after this, if Zet had his way.

Zet made an impatient sound. "Who else?"

"Peter." His earnest desire to stand up for others, to save a world not his own. His laughter and his trust.

Power coiled around Tony's throat warningly. "Answer the question as it is intended, machinist. Who?"

"No one. Everyone," Tony grated, and before the noose could tighten again: "You."

Zet paused, his implacable grip on Tony slackening with surprise. "Me."

"Couldn't have done it without you," Tony confirmed, meaning it. Zet was the fulcrum, the motivation, the common interest uniting people. Shared enemies were powerful that way; they created allies in the strangest of places.
Zet stared at him, hissing, and Tony heard him being surprised. "You believe that. I sense no lie."

Tony did his best to keep the triumph out of his face. "Truth hurts."

Zet was silent a long time, considering. His calculating eyes felt like a headman’s axe hovering above Tony’s shoulder. Then: "How many crew members are still aboard your ship?"

Tony stiffened, and in his ear FRIDAY was silent, both of them tense with a sudden doomsday expectation. Tony'd rehearsed his answer to this question too, but it wasn't as simple as the one preceding it. It required conviction Tony lacked.

"None," Tony said, hands and palms pressed to the floor, the nanotech bracer digging uncomfortably into his skin, but ready if he needed it. If he could even get to it before Zet stopped him.

"Lies," Zet accused softly and the noose squeezed so tightly it felt like wire trying to cut right into Tony's skin. "How many?"

"Not a lie," Tony rasped when he could. Zet stared at him, unappeased. "Isn't. No one else onboard the ship."

"You do not quite believe that," Zet noted, something like triumph shining in him. "Nearly, but not quite. Interesting. I see, now. You are using ambiguity of language to your advantage. Lying to me not with words, but with context."

Tony's heart sank, but he didn't bother to deny it. That, at least, would absolutely read as a lie. Less than two questions and Zet had already figured out the correct tactic. Tony'd been banking on more.

"It is a clever strategy," Zet said. "I am almost impressed."

Tony felt himself suddenly dragged upright, forced to look up into Zet's face. He glared, thoroughly finished with trying to appease this man.

"Do you know the punishment for treason on this world?" Zet asked.

Tony sneered, finally able to get in more than a few sips of air. "Is it something more unpleasant than this?" he said. "Because this is pretty unpleasant."

"Of course. It has been so long since I last needed to use it, but still the practice remains, ready. It begins with dragging the guilty deep into the desert. From there, the severity of their crime determines their punishment. For minor infractions a person is freed to walk home again within three days. Three days is how long one can survive the radiation on the surface, though surviving predators is another matter. For moderate infractions, it is often banishment. But for the most severe, there is a cage." Zet leaned forward, hard and cruel. "A traitor would be locked inside it, to burn alive through the days and nights until they succumb to hunger and dehydration. It is a terrible way to die." He clicked an admonishment. "That is what I will do to anyone found helping you."

"You first," Tony said.

FRIDAY buzzed him suddenly, a four-tone response signal. Tony tried to signal back but suddenly found his fingers frozen.

He looked up and found Zet staring at him, amused and baleful. The silence went on for a long time while Tony tried to twitch every muscle in his body and found them lifeless.

"If there is no one aboard your ship," Zet said, "then who are you communicating with?"
The transmitter in Tony's ear, small enough it certainly shouldn't have been noticeable from a
distance, was suddenly plucked out and floated in the air between them. Tony stared at it, tracked as
it flew closer to Zet, watched in silence as it was pulled apart by an invisible force.

"This signal was in direct contact with your ship, outside the mountain." Zet let the tiny broken ruin
of the transmitter rain down in the air between them. "How many more devices like this do you have
on your person, I wonder?"

Zet swept suddenly toward the door. Tony found his fingers released, but it wasn't a kindness; Zet
had a hold of him, that same leash yanking him right off his feet and into a stumbling, unwilling
pace. He tried to snap the wall and earned himself a sprained finger and bloody knuckle for his
trouble. The nanotech was a powerful temptation, the urge to hammer Zet into the floor until he was
pulp. Tony would've like to say better sense prevailed and he refrained until a more opportune time,
but in the end it was the fear. Tony was fast, but Zet was probably faster. And what he'd do once he
realized Tony could control technology on that level. Well.

They went down the corridors, passing several people. Some Tony recognized; some he didn't.
None of them looked at him, and most of them froze where they were as Zet stormed past, too afraid
to move, lest the chancellor acknowledge their existence.

"It is clear you think me a fool," Zet continued. "Do you believe I have been oblivious to your
pathetic rebellion?"

There was no safe answer to that, really, and Tony didn't have the breath anyway, so he said
nothing.

"Life has grown barren on this world," Zet said as they went. "But people still have so very much to
lose. It was no more than an hour after you began that I first heard tell of it. Did you really expect
these people to keep your secrets?"

Tony frowned, barely listening, because he'd suddenly realized the walls and doors and halls they
passed seemed strangely familiar. No different from anything else in this complex, uniformly boring
in their sameness, and yet - familiar.

They turned down a long corridor and something about it thickened the limited air in Tony's lungs.

"Need to work on my cardio," he gasped, puzzled.

Zet made no response, pulling them both around a corner, where there was -

A large, open space, a cavern, the yawning black of unlit darkness flirting with the weak illumination
of the corridor. The rubble of a new cave-in obstructed the massive body of an old, forgotten relic of
a ship.

Tony stared, pinned with the cold, terrible realization he knew exactly where they were.

"Okay," he said, letting his mouth run while he tried to pull desperately back and away, "but look,
machinists are good with machines. Rocks are a bit beyond me, always have been. So simple, and
yet so complex and nuanced -"

Zet put him on the floor, but Tony was on a roll by then and it was clear the jig was up anyway, so,
"- really, I always wanted to be a geologist, honest, but my dad was a bit of a slave driver, wanted
me to go into the family business -"

Something slipped over Tony's face, an invisible gag of some kind, cutting off his words. And then
a tiny needle of power sank with painful delicacy into his lips and began to stitch them firmly shut. Tony looked up to see Zet watching him, still flat, but with a faint hint of awful satisfaction in his eyes.

"Be grateful I do not take your tongue," Zet said, almost conversationally. "It is tempting. But I imagine I will need you to speak again at some point."

Tony went for the nanotech and felt it start to crawl over him with aching, breathless relief. Relief that faded quickly into alarm when it stopped, halfway through materializing a body armor formation, slamming into inertia as though it'd hit a wall.

Zet was still staring at him, and if there was any surprise in his face, Tony couldn't see it. "Interesting. I wondered what other equipment you had managed to hide away. This is more than I expected. With that level of technology, I assume you could have left this world at any time." Zet gestured and Tony felt himself float to eye level, an uncomfortable height off the ground. Zet leaned in, searching Tony's face for evidence of secrets. "What did you hope to accomplish by staying?"

If he'd been able to, then, Tony would've told him the whole truth of it, because it was basically: they'd set out to incite rebellion, and it was so close now it could almost be felt in the air.

Zet turned back to the cascade of debris obscuring the ship and waved a hand. The entire thing started to dislodge itself, one rock after another floating away. Tony tried to will himself to move, but he was as stuck as those rocks, maybe more so.

Tony almost didn't hear the shuffle of new steps behind them, but the drag of something heavy managed to distract him just as Zet started to uncover some rather important bits.

"Gwar informed me this was a naturally-occurring cave-in," Zet said, hissing a laugh. "He has not dared lie to me so blatantly in a very long time. Like you, it seems he will need a lesson. One in the folly of misplaced trust, perhaps." He paused, turning just slightly to look behind him. "Don't you agree, Jira?"

"Oh, we all benefit from lessons in trust," Jira said, and the heavy dragging sound stopped. "You and I simply learned ours early."

"Yes, of course," Zet said. "You brought only one?"

Jira stepped past, into Tony's line of sight. He strained to look up, into the towering visage of Jira's affable, open face staring back at him.

"My aid is bringing the other," Jira said. "The younger one proved difficult to capture."

Zet turned back, clicking something scornful. "How can one escape you? You have grown slow and complacent in your old age."

Jira hissed a quiet laugh. "Well. I have grown, at least. He scaled the mountain wall beyond my range. His hands have some kind of adhesive quality. A very unique specimen."

Zet resumed uncovering the Chitauri ship. "Always you are distracted by them. You may have the other two back for your use, but only after the machinist tells me what I want to know."

Jira was watching in that curious way he had, lively and cheerful and incredibly deceptive. "And what is it you expect him to tell you?"

"Where he has seen these ships before," Zet said easily. "One of my informants tells me this one
was attending the cavern with my aid when the cave-in occurred. He caused it. I can think of little reason but that he wishes to conceal something of importance. He will tell me what that is. If he refuses, I will damage his companion until he capitulates."

Jira hissed something almost sorrowful. "I prefer the other two remain intact. I still have so many questions for them."

"I allowed you access. It is no fault of mine if your methods were too slow. I require at least one of them to motivate the machinist. He has little sense of self-preservation. I must find other means of persuasion."

Tony cursed, the nanotech rippling around him as he yanked some of it back to form a repulsor. It whined, charging, but his hands snapped suddenly into closed fists, impossibly tight. The only way the repulsor was doing any damage was by taking his fingers off first.

"You see?" Zet said, almost gently. "Already he is willing to reveal more than he has before. Yes, this will be much more effective than other methods."

Jira shuffled until the edge of his delicate feet were close enough Tony could almost reach out and snap an ankle. He tried, but whichever of them had hold of his hand had thoroughly locked down every part of him. Beside Jira, dragging limply on the ground, Stephen lay still and motionless. A halo of blood caked his forehead. His eyes were closed.

"Zet," Jira said. "Must you do this? What do you hope to accomplish?"

"My goals have never changed, Jira." Zet looked back, something broken and angry in his face. "This machinist has an understanding others have lacked. He will help us."

"And if he cannot?"

Zet turned away, new rocks sliding out of their resting places. "He will." They piled haphazardly behind Tony, floating over and around him to begin blocking the exit. It wasn't a coincidence, of course; Zet meant for them to have nowhere to go. The artificial lights, high in the ceiling, provided dim and shadowed illumination. The darkness in the cavern itself was weighty and terrible.

"Perhaps there is no need for this violence. They might be convinced by other means to help us."

"You always say that," Zet admonished. "Every time."

"Or perhaps there is nothing they can help us with. Answers cannot be produced when there are none to be had."

"You always say that too."

"Then perhaps it is time you listened," Jira said, quietly. Tony's roaming eyes shot up to stare at him, but the minister wasn't looking even remotely in his direction.

Zet paused in his interior decorating, turning slowly to face them. The pits of his eyes were shadowed in the poor light, twin pools of black. The ominous quiet made something in Tony's hindbrain sit up and start shouting. "Jira, whatever you have done, tell me it is nothing foolish."

Jira clicked with consideration. "Well, who can say whether it is foolish? But whether it is or is not, I have done it."

"Done what?"
"Brother," Jira said quietly, the word falling like a stone in the middle of all of them. "You cannot truly believe, after all this time, that there is any hope left for us."

Zet did not answer.

Jira continued, gently. "You did all you could when disaster struck. I was there. I remember. What happened to us was not your fault."

"No," Zet said, flaring suddenly into rage. "No, of course not. It was yours."

For a moment Jira seemed not to hear him, standing tall and firm and unyielding. Then he crumpled while Tony watched, the alien shrinking to become a shadow of himself. "Yes, I know."

"I warned you," Zet said, and Tony felt himself vibrate as the power surrounding him rippled, squeezing hard enough to shake the breath from his lungs, to rattle his bones. "I told you what would happen when you commissioned the satellites. I said no good would come of reaching into space, but you would not listen. You have always been so concerned with meeting new alien life. Look what your curiosity has wrought."

"I accept my responsibility."

"No, you accept guilt. You punish yourself with it. That is not the same. Responsibility is a willingness to dirty one's hands to set it right. But you will not lower yourself to such things, not even to save our people."

"Nothing can save our people," Jira said. "We have been dead for a very long time. But it is not too late for our cousins. If you will only let them out from under your sight, they have real hope of recovering. The grief has come and gone from our world. The wars have all ended. It is time for us to stop and step aside."

"Never," Zet said, pulling Tony toward him, hissing in fierce anger when something yanked Tony right back.

"Brother. If you do not, they will die."

"Let them," Zet said with finality. "They did little but cower when it mattered most. When calamity came. Their lives are nothing to me."

"Yes, I know that too. We are long-lived, but not so long I have forgotten your ability to hold a grudge. Nor your flair for the dramatic."

Of course, that was when Stephen rose to his feet with a flourish, unbowed and uninjured and the faintest glow of magic about him. Because the sorcerer had his own flair for the dramatic.

Zet stared at him, unimpressed. His eyes drifted from Stephen to Jira and back again.

"You cannot be serious," Zet said flatly. "You would betray me, after generations gone, for such as these? Why? They are nothing. They are weak."

Jira clicked quietly. "Anyone can be weak when faced with superior power."

Stephen rolled his eyes. "And assumptions can be a greater weakness than any other." The sorcerer slid a glance down at Tony, still held fast on the ground. "Let him go."

Zet stared back at him, hissing in amusement. "Or?"
Stephen smiled. He put his hands together as though in prayer and then drew them apart. A long blade of light appeared in the space he made, a sword of glittering fire. He held it aloft, levelling it against Zet evenly.

"As I said," the sorcerer murmured. "Assumptions can be so very dangerous."

Even Jira looked surprised then, something in his animated, sorrowful face falling slack in wonder. "You did not tell me you could do that."

Stephen didn't take his eyes off Zet, the sword lighting the dimness around them with red. "You never asked."

"Yes I did!"

"No, you didn't. You made your own assumptions."

Jira looked offended at the very idea.

The weight holding Tony in place, holding the nanotech inert, holding his mouth closed all suddenly lifted away. It took him a breathless, shocked moment to realize that could only mean Zet had other priorities he needed to contend with, something he considered more important than Tony.

"Stephen!" he called warningly, but too late; the sorcerer was already flying through the air, propelled by an unseen force toward one of the rocky walls. Tony finished calling the armor, feeling the gaps where insufficient bots made themselves known, but it didn't matter anyway, he could already see he'd be too late -

Stephen slowed, wobbling as though skidding along an uneven surface, and then stopped. Tony stared.

Zet made an angry hissing sound. "You never did master the fine control needed."

"I dislike using it," Jira said, setting Stephen gently, if unsteadily, on his feet. "And it is much more difficult when you are simultaneously trying to wrest control from me."

Tony slid to Stephen's side, free of Zet's iron grip. "You alright?" he asked the sorcerer.

"Fine," Stephen said, two round geometric discs materializing over his hands. One expanded into a large rectangular kite shield, standing like a wall between them and the two aliens. The light from the magic gilded Stephen in a warm glow, burnishing his hair with filaments of gold.

Tony had a terribly inappropriate urge to kiss him, and it must've translated onto his face, because Stephen slanted an incredulous glance at him. "Really, Tony? Now?"

"What?" Tony said defensively. "They say near-death experience is life-affirming."

"You didn't nearly die. You barely got injured." Stephen frowned at him. "Except for your face. Again. Why does he always go for your face?"

Tony could still feel the terrible slide of an impossibly sharp needle gouging into his lips, but probably those wounds were covered up by more obvious damage from his earlier face-floor introduction. He pushed back an instinctive shiver of revulsion at the memory. "Can't say, exactly. Must be my irresistible charm."

Stephen dropped the smaller shield to reach out and touch his cheek, tipping his chin with one
finger. "Well, you certainly -"

Stephen reached suddenly for his own throat, gagging on unsaid words. The kite shield dissolved and his eyes widened in shock. Tony whipped back around to find Jira a crumpled mess on the floor, and Zet staring at him thunderously.

"Did you really think it would be so easy?" the chancellor asked, sneering.

"Easy?" Tony asked, walking toward him, testing. Zet froze him in place after two steps, and behind him he heard Stephen gasp in unsteady air. Triumph flared. Zet's power was greater, yes, but his concentration was finite; he could hold two of them, perhaps, but not all three. "No. Just necessary."

Stephen took advantage, because he was a brilliant man who knew when to seize the moment, and a chakram of energy winged past Tony, heading toward Zet. The chancellor released Tony to catch it on an invisible shield, and then Zet made a whistling, startled sound, staggering back and to his knees, his long limbs folding unexpectedly beneath him.

Jira rose to his feet. There was a black smear of something oily and wet on his forehead. "That was rude, brother. I was speaking to you. Why do you always go for the face?"

Zet clawed back upright. He gestured with one hand and Jira stumbled toward him, dragged by invisible rope.

"You were always so soft," Zet said. "So willing to believe the good in people. I thought you had changed. But apparently not even Thanos could teach you differently."

"He taught me madness is catching." Jira skidded to a stop, mere feet away, a look of intense concentration on his face. "Do you know, it has been so long since anyone said it out loud, I had actually forgotten his name?"

Zet made a wretched, terrible sound. "I never have."

"I know. You would have everyone remember his legacy even lifetimes after he left us to die. You have carried it on and now it ends, just you and I. The same as it began. Ironic, is it not?"

Jira looked upward, at the ceiling, the great cavern above them, and pulled -

"Fool," Zet said, backing up as the rock rumbled ominously around them. "You will bring the mountain down on top of us."

"Yes," Jira said. "I know."

Tony grabbed Stephen, but Stephen was already grabbing him, already moving. He was dragging Tony not back toward the exit but closer to the battling, insane aliens, closer to Zet's roaring anger and Jira's pain.

"Stephen, where the fuck -" He tried to pull back, but Stephen kept yanking on him, the both of them running and sliding over the heaving, groaning floor.

"Trust me," Stephen said, pulling and pulling. "FRIDAY, where, how close -"

Tony found himself on the ground, his ears ringing with the boom of the whole world breaking apart. The cavern was a true cave-in, now, rocks and rubble and one entire side of the mountain starting to buckle inward. Tony couldn't see anything through the growing cloud of dust and debris
and darkness.

"Stephen -"

But then Tony lost what limited breath he'd managed to catch. A void of red fire spiralled into existence beneath his feet and dropped him through the air and into a place where blindingly blue light seared across his eyes. And then gravity snatched him up to send him into gut-wrenching freefall.

"Got you!" Peter crowed, and something sticky and strong like wire snagged on Tony's arm, his leg, banding together underneath him as he tumbled down, landing gently as if amongst a forest of colorless leaves.

Tony squinted into the unexpected glare of the alien sun, reflecting blindingly off webbing. He turned to find Stephen beside him, the sorcerer blinking with at least some of the surprise Tony felt. Beyond Stephen, as far out as the eye could see, stretched an enormous net of white.

They'd been caught in a spider web, Tony realized slowly. Stephen had thrown open a passage from one side of the mountain to the other, and they'd plummeted down through the air to be caught by a giant spider web. Caught like insects.

Tony started to laugh, sputtering and coughing up dust as he listened to the cascading tremor of settling debris moving in the mountain beneath them. He waited until all fell to silence before he turned back to find Peter watching him speculatively.

"Are you okay?" the kid asked. "You're good, right? You didn't fall that far. We weren't sure the exact height, but this was the best we could estimate. Doctor Strange?"

"Here," Stephen muttered, and Tony craned to see him looking more gray and chalky than the dust could account for. Tony wondered if he was more injured than he'd let on. He'd assumed that head wound was a fake, but maybe it was real.

"What kind of plan was that?" Tony asked. "We almost died. Who came up with this one? Tell me it wasn't Gwar."

"I had to improvise when you wouldn't stop back-talking the alien overlord," Stephen said. "FRIDAY panicked when we lost contact with you and ended up on the clock. Speaking of."

He sat up, offering Tony the transmitter from his ear. Tony eyed it warily. He could already hear the tiny squeak of FRIDAY's berating voice even from three solid feet away.

"You know, I made that one specifically for you. It was almost a gift, really. Rude to give it back."

"Coward," Stephen muttered, and put it back in his ear, wincing at whatever he heard a second later.

"Speaking of plans," Peter said. Tony looked over to see the kid cheerfully scrubbing a hand through his hair, practically glowing with the satisfaction of a job well done. "He wasn't supposed to be here. What do we do with him now?"

Tony followed the kid's pointing finger, jolting with alarm and then annoyance.

"Seriously?" Tony asked. He jerked a thumb at Jira's sprawled form. The minister was looking at his own limbs with some surprise. Gwar was helping him to his feet, hissing words too low to follow. "You had to bring him? I mean, I'm glad he finally grew a pair, but really. Was he in on the whole thing?"
"Good lord, no," Stephen said. "He was supposed to bring me to Zet and walk away. That was all he originally agreed to. Something must’ve changed his mind."

"About fucking time," Tony muttered. "You realize you probably ruined his dramatic exit, right? He was all set to go out in a blaze of glory. Now we have to actually explain shit to him. He's not going to shut up about the magic until we can get off this rock."

"He wouldn't be here without it, so perhaps some explanation is called for." Stephen glanced in the minster's direction and smiled suddenly, guilty amusement spreading over his face. "Oh dear. I couldn't see very well in the cavern. I think I misjudged the portal aperture. It's not very forgiving if it’s closed early."

Tony looked over for some explanation. It took him a second to spot it, and then he howled with laughter.

"Oh, well," he said, suddenly feeling much better about life, the universe, and everything. He took in Jira's decidedly lopsided appearance; half of his hair-fronds were missing. "I take it back. Dibs on telling him. Best plan ever."

Chapter End Notes

Sincere apologies for the delay. I need to cut down the size of these monsters, I think. Too difficult to get ~10k out in a week.
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Where Tony explain things, and Stephen explains things, but nothing really makes sense until someone gets shoved into a dark corner away from prying eyes and -

Tony let the bags in his arms hit the deck with a loud, echoing clang.

"Honey, I'm home! Wake up. Roll out the red carpet. It's party time."

"Welcome back, boss," FRIDAY said, voice echoing over the ship's audio system. "It's very good to see you again. All of you."

"Hi, FRIDAY!" Peter piped up, hopping past Tony to run along the wall. "Oh, man. It's so good to be back. I'm never leaving again."

Tony snorted, rolling his eyes.

"I'm never leaving for, like, a week," Peter amended. He dropped down to start rummaging through one of the many haphazardly-stacked supply crates.

A red projectile, suspiciously cloak-shaped, hurtled past Tony and went ricocheting down the hall. A second later they all heard the muffled thump and crash of it impacting with something solid. And alive, if the cursing that followed was any indication.

"Stephen, I think it missed you," Tony shouted over his shoulder.

Stephen shouted something back that was decidedly less than friendly.

Tony looked around him, taking in the bridge in all its metallic glory. After spending nearly a month planet-side working on inferior technology, laying eyes on the ship again was an indescribable relief. It was like an extraordinary breath of fresh, familiar air after the cloying suffocation of their desert adventure.

It felt like coming home.

Tony strolled up to one of the instrument panels, patting the interface fondly. "How about you, FRI? Did you miss us?"

"To the moon and back, boss," FRIDAY said solemnly.

"Must've been quiet up here by your lonesome."

"It was quiet, but I was not alone."

He grinned. "Right, sorry about that. Didn't mean to leave you with the crazy caped crusader for so long. Thanks for babysitting."

"Babysitting is an unfortunately accurate description," FRIDAY said. "It attempted escape. Twice."
"Might have to rename it the *craftery* caped crusader. How close did it get?"

"I captured it in an outflow vent the second time."

Tony whistled. Very close. "Glad you two had fun playing hide and seek. What other diabolical things did you get up to while we were away?"

"I've consolidated a list. I will sort it for you by most diabolical to least."

"Of course you have, and of course you will." He knocked thoughtfully on the console. "What's our ascent looking like? Tell me we're about to do something out of this world. Like leave it."

"Soon, boss. We're on schedule and should reach orbiting distance in thirty-six seconds."

"Have I ever told you how much I adore your efficiency, FRIDAY? Don't tell your siblings, but you're my favorite A.I."

"I am currently your only A.I," she said. "It follows that logically I would be your favorite."

"Just don't let it go to your head." Tony pulled up the ship's navigational data. "Alright, prepare to break orbit the second we clear the atmosphere. Cycle on light speed systems and move us out to a launch point."

"Course setting, boss?"

"Second star to the right," Tony said, "and straight on 'till morning."

Shuffling footsteps came up behind Tony. He glanced over to see Stephen staggering forward, the last of the supplies waver in the air behind him and a magical nuisance wrapped around his person like a second skin. Tony reached out to steady him when he almost took a nosedive.

"Careful there, Stephen. You're looking a little drunk."

"More than a little," Peter put in, plucking heavy containers out of the air for sorting.

The cloak waved in colorful irritation but it was too distracted to do more than that.

"You know," Tony told it. "Even if you break one of his ankles, he's probably still not taking you down for our next layover."

"Definitely not," Stephen muttered. He stumbled when the whole thing squeezed around him in protest. "Stop that."

Tony patted him firmly back into place, with more hands-on contact than was probably necessary. "You might not have a choice, Stephen. I don't think it's planning to let you go anytime soon."

The cloak flapped at him in agreement before finally settling peacefully over Stephen's shoulders.

Tony tweaked the collar playfully. "I hear you gave FRIDAY a run for her money. Know something? You might be a little too loyal for your own good."

The cloak responded by wrapping itself once around Tony's wrist, squeezing tightly and yanking him closer. Stephen grunted when Tony overbalanced into him and they both went down in a painful mess of limbs.

"Whoa," Peter said, swinging over to a nearby console to stare at them. "Are you both drunk?"
"No, but I think the cape might be," Tony said, propping up on his elbows to observe Stephen from inches away.

"I think it missed you, too," Stephen remarked, just as the cloak wrapped itself happily around the both of them, cocooning them in a flutter of darkness.

Tony blinked into the newly shadowed space, intimate and close. "If I didn't know better, I'd think this thing had separation anxiety." He couldn't see Stephen, but he could feel the faint tremor of the man's silent laughter. "Or maybe I don't know better. Does it?"

"Not exactly," Stephen said. "But it's not a subtle relic. It likes you."

Tony grunted as he searched out a seam in the darkness. "Since when?"

Stephen shrugged and the ripple of it translated to Tony in very distracting ways. "You must've done something to endear yourself. I suppose saving my life might count."

"I guess no one's explained the finer points of kidnapping to it."

"The cloak doesn't recognize morality in the same way we do. It recognizes intent, spoken and unspoken." Stephen hesitated, another shrug doing unholy things to Tony's imagination. "It recognizes my intent."

As if to confirm, the cloak tightened, pushing them more closely together. Tony had to laugh then, flailing against the gentle confinement.

"You're kidding me. It's a fucking yenta cloak -"

Light spilled into the close quarters between them and Stephen leaned away. Tony squinted up to see Peter peering at them, easily holding the struggling cloak in place when it tried to twitch itself out of his grasp.

"Okay, but seriously," Peter said. "Do you need help? With, like, standing upright? Or walking?"

"Release us," Stephen said, not to Peter, and suddenly Tony found himself without purchase. He just about fell over, forcing Peter to catch him quickly. The look of disbelief on the kid's face was priceless.

Tony shrugged at him, smirking. "What can I say? For some inexplicable reason it likes me." He let Peter help him to his feet while Stephen floated back upright, the cloak suddenly as docile as a mouse. "Though I usually like to be asked before getting molested by inanimate objects -"

"Boss, we have an incoming signal," FRIDAY interrupted.

"That'll be Gwar confirming our departure. Load it on the viewport, FRI."

An image solidified on the screen, a familiar raptor face fading into view.

"Hello," Gwar said.

"Hey buddy," Tony said. "Looking sharp."

He did, too. Tony'd never really paid much attention to the clothes any of the aliens wore, but Gwar's wardrobe had evolved since he'd been elevated to ministerial status. It suited him.

"I will assume looking sharp is desirable," Gwar said. "Though I cannot imagine why."
"Means you're dressed to kill," Tony said cheerfully. "Metaphorically, of course, not literally. Very in vogue these days."

Gwar clicked in resignation. "I do believe you have grown more confusing with time rather than less. I suspect this is purposeful on your part."

"I'm not sure I like your tone. What are you implying, sir?"

Peter and Stephen snorted, sharing a look of commiseration. Tony glared in their general direction. Peter immediately slunk away to resume sorting supplies, but Stephen was totally unrepentant.

A second person stepped into range of the screen, someone far more purple than Gwar but just as well-dressed.

"The implication seems clear enough," Jira said. "You are rather confusing."

"Thank you, Captain Obvious," Tony said. "I see you still haven't mastered sarcasm."

"I am trying, but it is a most confusing practice. I am not certain I will ever fully understand it."

Stephen sighed. "You're probably better off that way, Chancellor. Like any other infectious disease, Tony's a difficult thing to cure. But if you're lucky, his influence will fade with time."

Tony scowled, offended. "Please. No amount of time can erase my influence. I'm permanent. Like that one stain that never comes out in the wash no matter how much -"

"I'm really very sorry about him," Stephen said.

"Hey," Peter said. He was holding up a parcel from one of the supply crates triumphantly. There was a look of almost-euphoria on his face. "You gave us food."

"That was the agreement," Jira said.

"But now I have it in my hands, and it's awesome. I thought you might cheap out at the last second because Mr. Stark - well, because you - uh, never mind. No offense."

"I'm sorry about him, too," Stephen said.

Jira seemed willing to ignore everything about that. "Did you receive the clothing as well? We sent enough for all of you."

"Yep," Peter said, holding up one of the new garments. The fabric was odd; coarse but not scratchy and a bit too raw to be entirely synthetic. Absolutely nothing fit them to specifications, but that was no surprise given the relative size of their hosts. "Thank you. Coolest thing ever."

"It was our honor," Jira said magnanimously.

"Question," Tony said, raising one hand high. Stephen tried to shove it back down, but Tony won the brief wrestling match that ensued.

Jira blinked at him in a way that seemed very knowing. "Yes?"

"Why was I the only one to get a dress?"

He tugged demonstrably at the long billowing tunic of fabric that came down to his ankles. Between being Zet's punching bag, the cave-in they'd barely escaped, constant wear, and a minor accident that
may or may not have involved a rather large electrical fire, Tony's clothes had been basically toast. Unfortunately, the replacements provided to him were going to need some work before he could show his face in public again.

Jira whistled in surprise. "But it is not a dress. It is a most fashionable garment worn by scientists who have mastered particular fields of study. I could not clothe an engineer in anything less. Unfortunately there were none in your size, of course. You are rather -"

"You gave Stephen dress shirts," Tony said loudly. "Normal-sized, even. And he's a doctor."

"I thought he might appreciate a less ostentatious wardrobe."

"This is about me telling you your chancellor robes made you look like an aging Victorian widow, isn't it?"

"Of course not," Jira said. "Though the explanation your companion provided of a Victorian widow was certainly not flattering."

"Kind of like these clothes."

Jira looked very superior. "If you mean to imply vengeful motives, you are incorrect. A chancellor must be above repayment of trivial insults."

"You've only been chancellor for like a day. What about ministers? Are they above all that?"

"I imagine most are," Jira said.

"You lying little -"

Stephen coughed, clearing his throat loudly. "We're very grateful for the supplies and necessities."

"Especially the dress," Peter added.

"Careful, kid. Chancellors might be above trivial payback, but I'm certainly not."

Gwar cleared his throat. "I believe time may be running short. How long will you be able to maintain this signal?"

Tony reluctantly turned to more practical concerns. "Depends how far we got adapting the satellites. FRIDAY?"

"Progressing slowly, boss," FRIDAY admitted. "Eighteen percent completion and not currently useable. However, I estimate by the time total integration is achieved we will have improved our communication range, signal clarity, and carrier efficiency by a factor of ten."

Tony patted the nearest available ship's surface. "Like I said before, my favorite A.I. Means we probably only have a few more minutes before we lose the call, though."

"Then the schematics met with your approval?" Gwar asked.

Jira leaned down to peer at the viewer closely. "If they did not, I have no intention of redesigning them for you."

"Chancellor," Gwar protested.

"I'm sure we'll manage," Tony said haughtily. "They're too primitive to assimilate into the ship
directly, but I made a workaround. Eventually we'll get them up to speed."

"Whereas I am not as confident in my ability to modernize your aqueduct designs," Jira clicked mournfully. "I may have to restructure them entirely. Though your aquifer map has been at least marginally helpful."

"Listen, if you'd prefer to go without, you can just give those back."

"Oh, I could not. It is considered quite rude on this world to return gifts, even inferior ones."

"Exactly. That's why Stephen wouldn't let me give back the dress."

"Don't pull me into this," Stephen muttered. "Besides, unless you prefer to go around naked -"

Tony gave him a sly grin. "Admit it, doc, you like it when I flash my ankles in your direction -"

"I think you look good in it," Peter said, laughing. "Really brings out your eyes. And your beard."

Tony nodded seriously. "I know. That's because I look good in everything, even Renaissance-style dresses. But the real question is: does it make me look fat?"

"You're really not as funny as you think you are," Stephen sighed.

"Of course I am. Part of my charm."

"What little there is of that."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Did you want to be charmed, Stephen?" Tony threw him a shallow wink. "Why didn't you say something sooner? I'd be happy to oblige."

Stephen reached out with one finger to tap him on the forehead solemnly. "There's something wrong with you. I'd try to pin down what, but I suspect it's not any one thing."

"It's everything," Peter supplied, grinning.

Tony grumbled. "Peter, you used to be so respectful. What happened?"

"Long-term exposure to a contagious agent," Peter said promptly.


"Boss," FRIDAY interrupted. "We're approaching the outer range of communications. Do we proceed or hold?"

"Hold a second, FRI." Tony rubbed his hands together briskly. "Alright, folks, this is the captain speaking. It's time for takeoff. Return all tray tables to their upright and locked positions."

"Are you sure you would not rather stay?" Gwar asked. "Until you have finished incorporating the satellite systems. You may encounter difficulty."

Stephen was the one who answered. "I'm afraid we've been too long here as it is. We really must be going."

Tony nodded his agreement. "Time to leave the nest and make our way in the world. It's been real. Mostly a real pain. If you know what I mean."
"I do not," Gwar and Jira both said.

"Philistines, all of you. Take care of yourself, Minister Gwar. Make sure you keep your new chancellor in line. It's a big ask, I know, but someone has to do it."

"I can hear you," Jira commented.

Tony ignored him. "And say hi to Valk and his suspiciously adorable kid. She looked ready to lock Peter in the dungeon when she heard we were leaving. I tried to explain why she couldn't come with us into space, but I'm not sure 'fate of the universe' really translates well."

Gwar hissed with amusement. "I am certain her new toy will serve as adequate consolation."

"It was a good one, wasn't it? It's actually a fairly accurate representation of our native solar system, not that she's old enough to appreciate that. Still. Something to remember us by."

"No gifts or toys are required for that," Gwar said seriously. "I will remember. We will all remember."

"How could we forget?" Jira muttered, because apparently he'd mastered sarcasm after all.

"Sure you guys don't want to reconsider appointing him?" Tony asked Gwar. "It's not too late to change your minds."

"Goodbye Tony, Stephen, Peter," Gwar said, touching his claws to his forehead in a ceremonial bow for each of them. "And thank you. All of you."

"Once more unto the breach, dear friends," Tony announced dramatically, then cut the feed before things could get maudlin. The image on the viewport wavered and then disintegrated into a new view of the planet itself, golden desert sands and mountain ranges burnished in fiery blue sunlight.

They each took a moment to soak in the dazzling sight.

"Desolate yet all undaunted, on this desert land enchanted," Stephen quoted softly.

"Seems apropos," Tony agreed. "Or just Poe. One or the other."

Peter rolled his eyes. "Are you guys talking in riddles again?"

"Only to you," Tony said. "And probably our alien friends. Which, by the way, I actually have no idea how that revolution even worked. The whole thing was basically a treatise on how to make friends and influence people. Which I think we can all agree I'm terrible at. You're both thinking it, I'm just saying it."

"I don't know," Peter said. "I mean, by the end there I think even Jira kind of liked you."

"Loved me, even. Or loved to hate me, maybe. Always hard to tell those two apart."

"Definitely loved to hate," Stephen said.

"Good to know I haven't lost my touch."

"Do you think they'll be okay?" Peter asked, as they made the jump to light speed and the planet was lost in the vast landscape of stars behind them. "They still have so much to do. Should we have stayed longer to help them?"
Stephen sighed. "What they had yet to do were all things that wouldn't benefit from us staying. Restructuring government, political reform, demography. The most important part was the momentum toward change, and we accomplished that." The sorcerer tilted his head at Peter appraisingly. "Some of us more so than others."

"Oh, well, maybe," Peter said bashfully.

Tony rolled his eyes. "Drop the modesty, kid. I was there. You had them eating out of your hands. Who knew what this world really needed was a trustworthy babysitter?"

"I didn't really do much," Peter protested half-heartedly. "I just, you know. Thought maybe Valk would lighten up if he saw Jira around the kids. I was mostly a spotter, anyway. There was always someone else around to help."

"I should hope so," Stephen said. "I counted thirteen hatchlings the last time they had you."

"Fourteen. One of them liked to hide. Jira ratted me out. He told them I'd give them rides up the mountain if they asked."

Stephen hummed curiously. "I seem to remember him flying several of them through the air. Carefully."

Peter grinned. "Well, I ratted him out first. I think that was what did it in the end, actually. All that power and he was wasting it entertaining kids. None of the adults had a bad word to say about him after that." He sighed wistfully. "I'm going to miss them, you know? The kids. I've never had siblings. It was fun."

Tony rolled his eyes. "Kid, we seriously need to talk about your idea of fun."

"Like yours is any better. I heard you tried to teach Gwar how to use one of the Chitauri hovercrafts and set the lab on fire."

"Okay, in my defense, I deactivated the weapons system before I let him on there. How he managed to reactive it is anyone's guess."

"Probably a good thing we left when we did," Stephen said. "I'm trying to imagine where you go from setting the lab on fire."

"They figured it out in the end though, right?" Peter hopped up onto the wall, looking at the stars upside down. "The hovercraft?"

"Close enough. I left them an instruction manual and schematics for some of the more useful Chitauri tech. If they set something else on fire they have no one to blame but themselves." Tony surveyed the cramped bridge area. "We really need to start unpacking. The cargo bays are still full of unprocessed mineral deposits."

"On it," Peter said, vanishing between two precarious stacks of boxes to start sorting again.

Tony moved away. "I need to have a look at the satellite systems, see what the holdup is. I'll be back in short order. Don't do anything too destructive while I'm gone."

"I think I'll wash up first," Stephen muttered. He rubbed a hand over his beard, frowning. "Get this back in order."

Tony paused, zeroing in. They'd been a long time on that planet; long enough they were all looking
a bit rough around the edges, unkempt. He had a sudden vision of Stephen clean-shaven and sharp and available for Tony to touch in a way he hadn't been before. He could picture running his hands and then his lips up the slope of Stephen's chin and then his cheek, the soft corner of his mouth -

"Lend me a hand before you do," Tony said, mildly. Stephen glanced up. "I could use some help with the heavy lifting while Peter unpacks our ill-gotten booty."

"I already moved all the satellite equipment into place," Stephen said.

"Come move some more," Tony suggested, snagging a piece of the sorcerer's cloak to tow behind him as he made for the door. The cloak obligingly dragged Stephen along.

Peter popped out from behind the crates quizzically. "I can help lift things too, if you need."

"No, you really can't," Tony told him. "Back to work, kid. Get those food rations on ice before we all regret it."

"But -"

"No time to lose, food safety is serious business," Tony said brightly. "And those satellites aren't going to integrate themselves."

He shuffled them out before Peter could get another word in edgewise.

Stephen let Tony pull them half a corridor away before speaking. "I thought we agreed: first things first."

"Technically, you agreed. I just went along with it. Besides, first things got dealt with. And then second and third things. Pretty sure we're down to fourth, fifth, and sixth things."

Stephen ignored that. "We also agreed to be discreet."

"That was discreet."

Stephen slanted him an incredulous look.

"For me."

Stephen let them round the corner before he tugged them into a slower stroll. "Where are we going?"

"Engineering," Tony said immediately.

"Opposite direction," Stephen pointed out.

"Engineering, eventually. We're taking the scenic route."

Tony could hear Stephen being amused. "And what exactly are we planning to do on this scenic route?"

"I thought you'd never ask," Tony said, yanking them into a nearby niche. He shoved Stephen ahead of him and crowded close, ignoring the cloak righting itself, cushioning the both of them as they slid into the shadows. Stephen's hands rose to rest on Tony's shoulders, light and almost insubstantial. The touch was automatic and perfunctory. He was careful not to push Tony away, but he made no pretense of pulling Tony closer either.
"Tony."

And there was something cautious in that voice, something that made Tony hesitate in the act of reaching for him.

"Stephen," he returned carefully.

"What are you doing?"

"Well, I think it's called flirting." Tony squinted at him thoughtfully. "But it's hard to be sure because you're being all inscrutable about it."

The inscrutability didn't change when Stephen looked at him. "I'd call this a step past flirting."

"You say that like it's a bad thing." Tony stared into that enigmatic face, searching for answers. Stephen said nothing. "You told me I wasn't reading this wrong."

"You weren't." Stephen closed his eyes and blew out a long, slow breath. "You aren't."

"Thanks for that wild endorsement. Careful, or you'll scare me off with all that enthusiasm."

"It's not that I'm uninterested."

Tony scoffed in disbelief. "I'd be more inclined to believe you if you weren't being two-hundred percent careful not to touch me."

Stephen smiled, and it was a small but genuine thing. Tony felt the coiled tension inside him relax just slightly.

"Habit," Stephen admitted. "I suppose I got used to not touching."

"We should fix that," Tony said. "Here: Carte blanche to touch me anytime you'd like."

Inscrutability cracked clean down the middle, and something real slipped into Stephen's eyes; something raw and hungry and wanting. "That's a generous offer."

Tony could sense the refusal coming from a mile away. "But?"

"You don't mean it."

Tony leaned into him firmly. "Don't I? That's strange. I don't normally yank sorcerers into dark corners that I don't want to touch."

"Oh, no. You're happy to touch me. That much is clear."

"That obvious, huh? And here I thought I was being so subtle."

"But you're not really prepared for me to touch you," Stephen finished, sliding a hand to either side of Tony's neck gently, in direct contradiction to his words. Then they moved further; up the side of his face, into his hair, across his temple and the corner of his eye.

Tony stared at him, bemused. "And this is what, exactly?"

"Proof," Stephen said, closing his fingers with a pinch around the edge of Tony's glasses. He pulled them down so the glare of FRIDAY's digital stream was no longer in line of sight, so he and Tony could lock eyes with nothing between them. Then he started to slide them entirely off Tony's face.
Tony didn’t remember consciously deciding to intervene. He didn’t remember actually moving his hand. But somehow he found his fingers clamped down over Stephen's anyway, hard enough to hurt.

The sorcerer made no effort to resist him. His fingers were completely lax. Stephen was watching Tony with caution in his eyes, and Tony realized suddenly there was a chasm between them where there hadn't been one before.

No, that was wrong; it'd been there, but Tony hadn't seen it. He hadn't been looking for it. He'd only been seeing what he wanted to see.

Eventually Tony managed to unclamp his fingers and let him go.

"Carte blanche," Stephen murmured with irony.

Tony grimaced, baring his teeth. "FRIDAY doesn’t fall under that umbrella." He tapped his chest and the housing unit there, finally back in position after Jira had returned their equipment. "The suits are part of me. You don’t get one without the other."

"I don’t want one without the other," Stephen said. He slid a hand down to his own chest to trace a finger over the Eye. It opened to release the smallest slip of green light. "Magic is as much a part of me as your tech is of you. It’s who I am. Iron Man is who you are."

"Then what?"

The sting of rejection was remarkable, really. It wasn't that Tony didn't experience rejection on a regular basis. He did. Tony Stark was in no way universally loved or desired on Earth, and he'd been shot down more than his fair share over the years. It didn't bother him. He’d grown a thick skin early in life. But that was what made this sting so extraordinary. There were few people in his life he'd ever gone after that really, truly mattered; he could count them on one hand. And whenever Tony managed to implode those relationships and they ended in heartache and pain, somewhere in the middle it usually began with a small, awful sting like this.

"It’s not the tech," Stephen said. "It’s your knee-jerk reliance on it."

"What does that even mean?" Tony asked flatly. He felt partly absent from the discussion. Half of his attention was focused elsewhere, already considering multiple escape vectors from this conversation.

Stephen stared at him, sighing in sudden, sharp exasperation. "I don't need magic to see what you're thinking. Don't."

Tony blinked at him, surprised. "Don't what?"

Stephen leaned in, backing Tony into the corner, a look of intense frustration on his face.

"Why do you always assume the worst?"

"Self-preservation," Tony replied automatically.

Stephen offered no words in answer. Instead he slid their mouths together, stealing Tony's breath and immediately derailing the discordant thoughts in his head. Tony let Stephen have the lead, surprise and relief falling over him in a daze. He let the sorcerer fit both his hands to either side of Tony's face and angle them closer. He even restrained himself to sliding his lips along Stephen's with just a gentle, tingling pressure, soothing the angry frustration of the first kiss into passion with
the second, third, fourth.

He waited until Stephen tried to pull back, until the man had just barely started to break away. Then he stepped in, put one foot behind Stephen's and leaned into his left shoulder hard, pivoting them around to slam Stephen into the wall. The sorcerer hit with a sharp exhalation. One that stuttered in his lungs when Tony yanked him close with a hand on his ass, tilted Stephen's chin down, and kissed him until he opened to Tony's tongue. Tony licked into his mouth as deeply as he could and dug a thumb into the sensitive bundle of nerves at the base of his spine until a strangled moan caught like flame in the air between them. Then he did it again. And again.

It didn't take Stephen long to put a stop to it, but seconds could feel like hours with the right motivation, and Tony certainly wanted to provide Stephen that. He didn't fight when Stephen pushed him back, just made sure to angle out with the right flex of legs and hips to feel the unmistakable press of Stephen's arousal. He let Stephen feel his, in turn.

"Tony," Stephen said breathlessly, and Tony'd expected an admonishment, maybe even some anger, but that wasn't what he got. Stephen reached up and put a hand on his cheek and didn't try to move away. Tony stared at him, watching closely for some sign of rejection, but Stephen's eyes were clear. Flushed and blown wide with arousal, but clear.

Tony sighed, absently retracting his hands to rest on the sharp points of Stephen's hips instead. "I don't understand you."

The sorcerer twitched at this new touch and Tony watched with interest as pale skin flushed further. "Maybe if you'd let me explain before you start making assumptions."

"Maybe if you'd stop giving me ammunition to make them."

"Then let me dispel one," Stephen said. "I wasn't saying no."

"Well, you have a funny way of saying yes," Tony muttered.

Stephen rolled his eyes. "There's a lesson the Ancient One tried to teach me. It's one you could stand to learn as well."

"What's that?"

Stephen leaned closer, enough so Tony wondered if he was about to be kissed again. He started to close his eyes.

"It's not always about you," Stephen whispered, close enough that the breath of his words caressed Tony's lips. Tony swayed toward him before he could quite stop himself.

"Well," he whispered back. "I'll go out on a limb and guess at least half of it's probably about me."

Stephen sighed a laugh against him, drifting close enough to drag his mouth across Tony's cheek, his temple, the tickle of it whispering across his skin. "Maybe. I meant what I said about your tech. You're not ready. But neither am I. I haven't been with anyone since before my accident."

"Since before your -" Tony stopped. He leaned back warily, raising both eyebrows in question. Stephen looked back at him blandly, no sign of a lie in him. "Your car accident? That was, what, two years ago?"

"Three, working on four," Stephen said dryly. "Thank you, I'd almost forgotten how long it was. And how many years has it been since you were willing to leap without your technology as a safety
Tony ignored everything after the first part. "Three, four years of absolutely nothing? What, did your entry into magic school require an oath of celibacy?"

Stephen grimaced with the faintest touch of defensiveness. "I was a little busy recovering from a life-altering disability. Then I was learning how to safeguard reality itself. Neither of which provides the best backdrop for dating."

Tony held up both hands in the universal sign for peace. "Right, my bad, I'm an ass, we all know it. I just usually get to skip this part of the negotiation. Whole world pretty much knows my history."

"You and Miss Potts," Stephen said quietly, not quite a question. Tony realized it was the first time Pepper's name had been brought up in earnest between them since they'd learned to find common ground. It wasn't an accident, either; Stephen had a look on his face that was at once curious and very, very watchful. He'd obviously been waiting for the right opportunity to ask, and now he looked braced for some kind of blow.

Tony took a deep breath in, held it, and considered how much he trusted Stephen Strange.

"Pep's special," Tony said, slowly.

Stephen blinked, the barest flinch tightening his eyes. "I imagine she must be, to capture the attention of the great Tony Stark."

"She's special in all the ways you're thinking, sure. She's talented and she's funny and she's gorgeous, inside and out. But that's not what I meant."

It would've been easier, much easier, really, if Stephen had just left it at sex. Sex was easy. It was fun, it was exhilarating, and it was something Tony enjoyed for the deep, visceral thrill of losing himself in someone else's body. Sex could be like learning a whole new science; experimentation and ingenuity and creativity set on endless repeat. For most people, Tony knew, sex usually also equated to trust.

Not for Tony. He'd had sex with plenty of people he wouldn't trust with anything more complicated than picking up his dry cleaning, and maybe not even that. He could count on one hand the number of people he'd ever slept with that mattered, and on just three fingers those he'd trusted well enough to watch his back, to tell him the truth, to safeguard his life. And trusting anyone with Pepper was a step beyond even that.

It was a step Tony wanted to take with Stephen.

"Pep's special because she needed me," Tony said. "I mean, really needed me, as much as I needed her. Not for my money, or my fame, or my brain, or something tangible I could give her. She just needed me. She just wanted me."

"Hence why you were getting married," Stephen murmured, leaning away. Tony reached up and quietly snagged hold of his collar, tugging him back.

"The problem is: that's all she wanted. She could put up with me being petty and selfish and thoughtless, because that's who I am. It's not all of me, but it's a lot. The other parts that weren't just me; the superheroing, the risks, the world always knocking at the door, all that she hated. And most of all she hated that a part of me looked forward to the knock, because it meant I had an excuse to break my promises to her."
Stephen searched his eyes. "The fate of the world's usually a decent excuse for broken promises."

"Not if you break them enough times. In the end, the line between the parts of me she loved and the parts of me she didn't was pretty blurry." Tony nudged up until he could rest their foreheads together. "She was going to marry me anyway, and I was going to marry her, because that's what happens when you love someone you need and then you make them your everything. You learn to ignore the parts of them you can't live with, because you're not sure anymore how to live without."

Stephen hesitated, looking at him from too close. Close enough to see something in Tony that Tony wasn't sure he was ready for anyone to see.

"If 'everything' is what you want from me," Stephen said quietly, "then we should stop this now. That can't happen. It won't. So little of what I have is mine; not my life, certainly. Not yours. I can't promise to be what you need, or even what you want -"

Tony kissed him before the last of it had left his mouth, locking the words between them where he could taste the heat of Stephen's desire and the temperance of his conviction. It was more compelling than Tony'd thought; he wanted to lose himself in it, sink beneath Stephen's skin and bones and hook into the marrow of his soul.

Tony wanted Stephen in ways that didn't even come close to sex, and the shock of that was as sobering as it was alarming.

"I'm not interested in one night in your bed," Stephen said, quietly. "I want more. As many as you'll give me. But I won't rush it, because that's a quicker way of ending it than never having begun."

"Square deal. Slow and steady wins the race." Tony kissed him again, slowly, as promised. "Stephen, I've done 'everything'. Know the problem with being everything? It's that there's no room for anything else. And I can't do that again."

"Where does that leave us?"

He let Stephen go, licking the flavor of him off his lips, like cinnamon and smoke and electric fire.

Tony grinned. "Let's find out."
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Tony learns discretion and Stephen has a secret (or three) and Peter is fascinated by absolutely everything.

Tony made no effort to sneak onto the bridge, but that was mostly because it was impossible to sneak when one came bearing two large, heavy cases. And also, he knew for a fact Stephen was too busy to hear him coming. As the doors slid open, revealing the yellow light of a new alien sun on the viewport, Tony could hear the smooth baritone of the sorcerer's voice rising and falling.

"Not all injuries can be addressed in the same way," Stephen was saying. "Some wounds will have unique symptom constellations that won't fit predetermined parameters."

FRIDAY made an understanding sound. "I will need to create a protocol of priority intervention criteria."

"For a start," Stephen said.

Tony grinned, amused. The sound of Stephen teaching had become a familiar one, but more so in the last week. They hadn't been back aboard the ship a day before FRIDAY had politely demanded some additional updating to her systems; particularly the systems dedicated to her burgeoning medical expertise. She'd made no secret her determination first started after getting a better scan of Tony's bloody face. Stephen had obliged by incorporating the lessons into Peter's homeschooling. The program now included Advanced Anatomy and Introductory Healing.

Stephen hummed in consideration. "The method you have of effecting tissue repair with nanotechnology. How exactly does it work? Are you simply closing the wound? Or are you interacting with the cells?"

"Stark Industries employs Doctor Helen Cho on retainer," FRIDAY said. "She designed a regeneration process in which artificial biological material could be bonded to host cells, effectively creating synthetic tissue. The nano-molecular substance I use is based on her design. It can be applied to organic or inorganic matter."

Stephen huffed out a disbelieving laugh. "That's bleeding edge medical tech. Incredible. Helen Cho? I never had the pleasure of meeting her, but I've certainly read some of her research. She's one of the leading geneticists in the world. How'd Stark Industries manage to snag her?"

"I am uncertain. However, I believe there was a great deal of money involved."

"All the money you make will never buy back your soul," Stephen quoted dryly. "I'm curious about the polypeptides. Do you have any of her covalent formula's on file?"

"I do. However, the information is considered proprietary. I am unable to share it with you, as you are not an authorized user."

Tony could well imagine the incensed look on Stephen's face by his outraged silence.
"Oh, let him have a peek, FRI," Tony called, setting down the cases so he could slip into the shadows along the wall. "Sign him in with a non-disclosure agreement. We'll cite extenuating circumstances, which certainly applies. Besides, S.I owns two of the patents, and I own S.I."

"Technically Miss Potts remains CEO," FRIDAY corrected.

"Yeah, but it's still my name on the company logo."

"Tony?" Stephen asked, peering around one of the giant metal girders. Tony ambled closer, using the overhang equipment for cover.

"Stephen. Helen Cho's a beautiful woman who's something akin to a genius. Should I be jealous?"
Stephen snorted. "That depends. Something akin to a genius?"

"Well, I wouldn't want to speak out of turn. Helen's not a big fan of flattery. Or parties. Or me, really."

"I'm sure your ego will recover." Stephen turned to watch curiously as Tony moved around the circumference of the bridge. "What are you doing?"

"Who, me?" Tony asked cheerfully, ducking behind one of the consoles.

"If this is an attempt at hide and seek, it's a poor job of it."
Tony ignored him. "Where's Peter? I thought he was supposed to join you for this lesson."

"He is. He's running late." Stephen walked closer, stalking Tony halfway up one of the elevated platforms. His red cloak, inert until then, obligingly fluttered to give him a dramatic look. "You're being coy. You're only ever coy when you're about to do something you think is hilarious but probably the rest of us won't."

"Stephen, everything I do is hilarious. You just lack the appropriate sense of humor to appreciate that." Tony let the sorcerer get close enough to see him fully. Then he turned so the brilliance of the alien star slid across his face like a warm breeze. Stephen froze.

Tony spread his hands, angling to let the dazzle of light hit him from every direction. "I wanted to try on a new outfit. Hot off the press. What do you think?"

"It's a little East-Central Asian for you, isn't it?" Stephen asked slowly.

"Nonsense," Tony declared, putting his hands on his hips. "I can rock the East-Central Asian look as easily as the next guy."

Stephen didn't move, didn't take his eyes off Tony, where a face very unlike Tony's usual now stared out at the world. "What is it?"

"A photostatic veil," Tony said. He pretended to tap himself thoughtfully on the chin. "Or my bastardized version of one."

"Which is what, exactly?"

"Ever seen the Mission Impossible movies?"

"No."
"Remember the masks they use? The ones that allow Tom Cruise to slip into every improbable disguise you can imagine in ways that defy reality? But the audience doesn't actually question it, because it's not as entertaining otherwise?"

"No."

"Yeah, it's basically that. Only better, because it's mine."

"Technically -" FRIDAY started.

Tony waved a magnanimous hand. "Credit where it's due. It was FRIDAY's idea. But my brain was what actually did the plagiarizing."

"You should be proud, boss."

"Like a peacock," Tony confirmed. "We'll all have to wear them, but don't worry, Stephen: I promise you can have a say in how pretty I make you."

Stephen finally seemed to reconcile the incongruity of seeing a new face on Tony's body. He blinked, refocusing. "Wear them where?"

"The planet, of course. Unless you're planning some kind of costume soiree up here I didn't know about. In which case we're set. These go like hot cakes at masquerade balls."

Stephen frowned. "Since when are we going down to the planet?" His cloak flared out excitedly before drooping, dejection in every line of its nonexistent spine. "When we scanned it yesterday, FRIDAY indicated it was pre-industrial. The probe she sent down corroborated that. And I seem to recall you saying planet's without a certain level of technology didn't merit a visit."

Tony shrugged noncommittally. "I may have implied technology was the only worthwhile measuring stick."

"Implied?" Stephen said wryly.

"I may have said technology was the only worthwhile measuring stick. But I'm forced to recant my words, because of this." At 'this', he threw out his hands dramatically, allowing a bubble of holographic light to enclose them, scattering in a sphere over their heads.

Stephen looked up, the deep blue of his eyes reflecting the holograms in a very distracting way.

"What is it?" Stephen asked, taking a step back for better perspective.

"An element," Tony said. "A very rare one, actually. It's one of two I'm missing."

Stephen zeroed in on Tony again, new curiosity bleeding through. "The nanotech template?"

"Yep. It's in a different isotope than I'm used to, but that won't be a problem. What is a problem is I can't find the source, at least not with the limited imaging FRIDAY's been able to gather. Odds are we'll need to go scouting. And Stark's Law says we'll run into trouble along the way, so we might as well be prepared." He gestured at his own face and the disguise on it. "Hence, photostatic veil."

Stephen twitched an eyebrow. "Stark's Law?"

"Like Murphy's law, but with more me."

Stephen sighed loudly. "Just once, I'd like to have something named after me. Strange's Law. Has
"That's," Stephen said, hesitating, "very odd."

"Isn't it, though?"

"How does it work?"

"Magic," Tony said promptly.

Stephen quirked a smile, still watching his fingers trace over the mask. Tony nipped at them playfully when they passed over his mouth; the sorcerer slanted him a narrow look. "Unlikely. I'm not sure I've ever met someone with as little magical aptitude as you."

"How do you explain it, then?"

The gentle touch turned to a firm, sliding grip that yanked him forward for closer inspection. Tony blinked through the heat spreading like honey beneath his skin.


"Akin," Tony repeated, insulted.

"Well," Stephen demurred, "I wouldn't want to speak out of turn." He leaned in to brush his lips lightly over Tony's cheek, and then his lips. Tony kissed him back until Stephen broke away, blinking.

"That's really very awkward," Stephen admitted, rubbing absently at his mouth. "Kissing you while you wear someone else's face."

"Technically this face doesn't belong to anyone else. It just has a collection of East-Asian characteristics combined into a generic facade."

Tony blinked at the sound of the bridge doors sliding open, the distinctly cheerful step of their third crew member coming into range. Stephen let his fingers fall away.

"Okay, I'm back," Peter called. "Sorry I took so - whoa!"

Tony looked over to see Peter skidding to a stop, arrested by the scattershot display of blue. The kid craned his neck, eagerly taking everything in.

"What's going on?" Peter asked. He hopped on a wall to scale up one side of the bridge, bright eyes merrily absorbing the cascade of light decorating the air. "What is this?"

Tony gave Stephen a brief smirk, putting one finger to his mouth for silence. "Oh that? Just a little something I cooked up in a lab somewhere."

"Mr. Stark?" Peter glanced up briefly before being reabsorbed back into the holographic display. "You're here?"
"No, this is my life-model decoy," Tony said. "Where've you been? You're late. You missed my dramatic reveal."

"I got distracted," Peter said absently. He reached out, plucking one magnified blue electron out of the air to pull and expand in his hands, like holographic taffy.

Tony smiled, charmed almost again his will. Peter's youthful curiosity was so easily satisfied. "Hey kid, what do you think of my new outfit?"

"What outfit?" Peter jumped quickly onto one of the consoles, tossing the blue orb back into the air so he could watch it reattach to the projection seamlessly. He turned to hop closer. "Did you finally fix the clothes you were -"

Peter stumbled to a halt mid-jump, the result of which was an entertaining aerial tuck and slide that ended up with Peter hanging sideways off a girder, staring. He raised both hands defensively.

"Who are you?" Peter demanded.

"Who do you think?" Tony replied, watching with glee as the spider crashed to the floor, shock written in every slack-jawed muscle of his face.

"What," Peter said, stuttering on a string of half-formed words, until finally he managed: "How?"

"Well, that's a bit of a story, really. It involves me desperately plagiarizing technology not my own, if you can believe that."

Peter looked simultaneously fascinated and repelled. He slowly got back to his feet, brushing himself off. "That's so weird. You sound like you, but you don't look like you. Dude, that's insane."

"You think this is something? Wait until you don't look like you."

Peter didn't quite seem to hear him. "What?"

"I brought you one to try on, too," Tony explained patiently, heroically enduring the adoring stares.

"What?" Peter reengaged suddenly, like someone had flipped a switch. "I get one too?"

"If you're planning to come down to the planet, you get one," Tony confirmed.

Peter's whole face lit up. "We're going? I thought you said we weren't?"

"Changed my mind. Captain's prerogative."

"Yes!" Peter punched a hand into the air triumphantly.

Tony sighed. "So eager to meet new aliens. It's like you've somehow blocked out all our previous extraterrestrial encounters. Teenagers have such short memories." He turned to Stephen. "Do we really want him coming down to the surface with us? Maybe we should leave him up here."

"I'm coming with you if I have to ride down in a shipping container," Peter insisted. "This is going to be great. But, uh, seriously, what's with the -" he gestured wildly in a manner that seemed to partially indicate Tony's face and mostly indicate the kid's bewildered confusion.

"When in Rome, dress like the Romans do, Peter. We're going incognito this time."
"Like spies?" Peter asked eagerly. "Like James Bond?"

Tony nodded agreeably. "Complete with spy gadgets."

"Plagiarized spy gadgets," Stephen reminded.

"Alright, tell the world why don't you?" Tony sniffed with wounded dignity. "The only reason someone else came up with it is because I didn't have time to think of it first."

Stephen raised both eyebrows. "I'm no legal expert, but I'm reasonably certain that attitude is exactly why patent legislation exists."

"Yeah," Tony admitted, "we really are in serious breach right now. Shh, don't tell the enforcement corporation. Or my attorneys. Or Pepper."

"Is it a hologram?" Peter asked. Tony looked up and took a step back when he found the kid an inch away, carefully scrutinizing the mask from upside down. "It looks too solid to be exclusively holographic. The light diffraction is too complex."

"Good call. It's a combination of holography and nanotechnology, structured into a physical mesh. It can mimic any facial feature I program into it."

"Interesting," Stephen said. "I assume you had to draw the bots for it from your housing unit?"

"Yep. Supply's getting low. But I should still be able to run the suit if I'm careful."

"I've seen you use this before," Stephen said. "But usually not outside of dire circumstances. Did FRIDAY find something here we should worry about?"

"Not yet," Tony admitted.

"Then why all the cloak and dagger?"

Tony shrugged defensively. "We haven't found anything concerning so far, but that's not to say we won't. We've only been watching them for a day. If someone watched New York for one day, they might think Central Park at night and rush hour gridlock was the worst the city had to offer."

Stephen looked at him, hearing something in the words Tony hadn't intended for him to hear. Seeing something Tony hadn't intended for him to see. "But why now?"

"Why not now?"

"Tony."

"Look," Tony said roughly, "you don't think it's a good idea to maybe get a better lay of the land before we go revealing who we are to aliens all over the galaxy? If we'd had eyes on Zet before we straight up told him who we were, last planet's imprisonment could've been entirely avoided."

"Zet wasn't your fault, Tony," Stephen said quietly, while Peter quietly alighted on one of the consoles, rightly sensing some rather large landmines hidden in this conversation. "He was mine. It was my error."

Tony grimaced, feeling the phantom edge of an alien touch bleeding him. "Not assigning blame. Just saying, we got caught with our pants around our ankles on that planet, and we should probably avoid doing that again. Besides, you do realize we're on a super secret Thanos-killing mission, probably not aided by the whole universe being able to identify us by the shape of our beards."
Right?"

"Really?" Stephen looked terribly amused. "That's what you're going with? Mr. I-Am-Iron-Man?"

"Well, I was young then. Impulsive. Inexperienced in the ways of superheroing."

"And you'd probably still do it exactly the same today."

"Probably."

"I concede your point," Stephen admitted. "There's safety in anonymity. I suppose I'm just not used to you being prudent." He gestured at Tony's face, the unfamiliar features there. "But why this particular disguise?"

"FRIDAY built a composite scan of the people on the planet. Improbable as it seems, they look almost indistinguishable from humans. Humans of Asiatic descent."

"They look like us?" Peter asked with breathless excitement.

"Sort of. They actually look like they walked right out of Ming dynasty China, or Thailand. Maybe Mongolia. Needless to say, three white men walking around on the planet will raise more than a few eyebrows."

Stephen's stiffened, a light of realization suddenly brightening his eyes. "Mongolian, you said?"

"Possibly," Tony drawled, giving him a narrow look. "Why?"

Stephen ignored him, tipping his head back thoughtfully. "Did FRIDAY take any images of the city structures?" He didn't bother waiting for Tony to answer, instead turning to ask the air: "FRIDAY?"

"Yes, Stephen, I did. However, I would not describe their residential arrangements as cities. Most of the people on this world appear to live in tents or small nomadic communities."

Stephen pressed his lips together, but something in his face was dancing with a sudden flare of laughter. "Did you happen to find any pillars or structures carved with runes, scattered around inhabited areas?"

FRIDAY projected an image into the air in front of them, red so it'd be visible in the dapple of the blue element hologram. The dim picture was of an elongated square pillar standing in the middle of a field. It looked almost like a support column, tiered as if to hold something up, but there was nothing atop it.

"I discovered a large number of these crowded into open areas, but I was unable to discern their purpose," FRIDAY said.

"Maybe you could tell her," Tony suggested to Stephen mildly.

The sorcerer's amusement had bloomed into a full, genuine smile. "Oh? How could I do that?"

"Please. You look like the cat who ate an entire family of canaries and then made a feather pillow or three out of the remains. You obviously know who these people are. Spill."

"I think not," Stephen said, openly chuckling now. "I'll leave you to discover this one on your own."

"But you'd tell us if there was something to worry about," Peter said, not quite confidently.
"Wouldn't you?"

Tony studied the sorcerer's infuriating grin suspiciously. "I'd ask friend or foe, but from that smile I have to assume the former."

"A fair assumption," Stephen agreed. "The veil is a good idea, though. They won't take kindly to aliens, but they're an inclusive community. If we present ourselves as travellers or merchants, like them but from distant lands, they'll welcome us quickly enough."

"But now I'm tempted not to give you your veil," Tony complained, curiosity burning. "Or to hold it over your head until you spill. What the hell do we find on this planet that's so amusing?"

"Oh, nothing."

"That nothing doesn't sound like a nothing, it sounds like a something. But what kind of something?"

"Well," Stephen drawled. "I suppose you'll have to give me the mask and head down there to find out."

"Anyone ever tell you you're an annoying pain in the ass, doc?"

"Rarely to my face."

"But," Peter said slyly. "We're going to have different faces soon."

"Kid's got a point," Tony noted. "Speaking of." He walked back to the bridge entrance, picking up one of the cases. "Before I present you with Exhibit A, I have here Exhibit B for inspection."

"Exhibit B?" Stephen asked.

Tony ignored him, ambling back over to stand in front of Peter. The kid tentatively accepted the case Tony gave him, a question in his eyes.

"I present to you," Tony said, "Project Geek."

Peter stared at him with wide, wondering eyes, finally flipping the case around to open with cautious fingers. Tony could tell from the look on his face he wasn't quite sure what to make of the unexpected array of vials and containers stacked inside.

"I've been working on this one for a while," Tony said. "FRIDAY and I had a close look at the chemical composition of your webbing. I know after that gigantic spider-dragnet you used on the planet, you can't have much web formula left. This has everything in it you might need to make more, and a few things besides. In case you want to try a little experimentation."

Peter looked up with wide, wondering eyes. "You made me a chemistry set?"

"Something like that," Tony agreed. "Now, do me a favor and try not to blow us all up with it. Okay?"

Peter grinned with genuine awe and delight. "Really? It's - for me, really?"

"All for you," Tony said. "Though, fair warning: we didn't have the exact same ones you used, so you'll have to improvise a bit. Also, I didn't have enough solvent variety, so had a bit of trouble with one or two of the extraction procedures. Distillation mostly took care of that, but you'll want to keep it in mind before you start mixing things together. FRIDAY had a look to make sure they're all as
pure as can be given onboard conditions."

Peter clutched the case to his chest and waved one hand in excited mania. "Oh, wow. I don't even, this is - wow! I always had to use school supplies before, like, in secret. This is amazing."

"If you run out of anything, let me know. More where all that came from."

"I will."

"Also," Tony said sternly. "I'd appreciate it if you only use it in the cargo section closest to engineering. That bay has a hatch leading into space and a protected ceiling duct you can hide in if a reaction gets out of control. I doubt you'll actually manage to make anything explode, but a little fire might not be beyond your capabilities."

"No, I'll be careful, I will!" Peter insisted earnestly. "I want to - can I?"

"Go on, have a look," Tony said indulgently. "No experimenting today, though; I want to be underway in an hour, two at most."

"Thanks," Peter said dazedly. "I'm just going to. I'll just. Yeah."

Peter stumbled into a corner of the bridge, the case clutched reverently close to his chest.

"Was that wise?" Stephen asked under his breath, watching as the kid began to excitedly sort through it all.

"Probably not," Tony said. "But neither is a lot of things I do, and this one was more wise than leaving a very smart teenager to wander aimlessly through a giant flying doughnut without the ability to make his self-soothing army of hammocks. FRIDAY will keep an eye on him, anyway, make sure he doesn't throw anything together that would poison him. Or, you know: Us."

"How reassuring."

"Are you feeling neglected, Stephen? Don't. I brought you something too." He proffered the second case. "Exhibit A."

Stephen opened it and extracted one of the gauzy, flexible veils, transparent and flickering with light in its inert state. The sorcerer balanced it between his hands for a moment, examining the iridescent surface intently.

"You've let me use them before," Stephen said. "But I forgot what it felt like to touch. Insubstantial; like a film of cobwebs. I lose so many details when I wake from each timeline."

Tony eyed him, hearing something oddly melancholic in his voice. "You were the one who told me to live in the moment and not lose myself in the future. Maybe you should take your own advice."

Stephen sighed, letting the veil pool in one hand to rub the other over his eyes tiredly. "It's not that simple for me. The future is a web of possibilities strung together by fate and circumstance. I have to tease each strand apart to keep us safe."

"Hey." Tony plucked the veil away and caught hold of his loyal cloak to tug him closer. It curled briefly around his hand in welcome. "Some crazy guy I know gave me this lecture about not doing things alone. I can't really remember it all, he's kind of an arrogant shit sometimes, but the bottom line was something about us being in this together."
"You're going to lecture me about arrogance," Stephen said, pressing at the bridge of his nose, squinting.

Tony ignored that. "Something wrong with your eyes?"

The sorcerer looked up, a scowl creasing his brow. "No. I have a headache."

"You seem to get a lot of those. Something I should worry about?"

"I'm not worried about it."

Tony frowned. "Which - neatly dodges the question. Stephen, is this something I should worry about?"

"Is there anything you don't worry about?" Stephen asked wryly. "You have a remarkable number of mother hen qualities for a self-involved billionaire."

"Stephen."

The sorcerer shrugged. "I'm still working on an answer. Ask me another time."

Tony stared at him, searching. "When a guy asks if he should worry, and the answer isn't immediately 'no', you know what that means, right?"

"In this case it means have patience."

"I'm bad at patience."


"Don't even start. At least tell me if whatever it is might result in my having to carry you again like a damsel in distress."

"It won't. And that never happened."

"My photographic evidence says otherwise."

Stephen gestured at the veil, forgotten in Tony's hands. "Give me that. Might as well start as we mean to go on. I seem to remember it has to calibrate first?"

"Yep. It'll conform automatically once you fit it to your face. Just press on either side at the temple so it can start mapping topographic markers." Tony paused, watching the mask flicker as it went through its start-up process. "Can't do anything about our hair color. Of course, I hear you might have some options when it comes to hair color. Gray hair removal, for example."

"I only said that to annoy you," Stephen admitted.

"Can you do it though?"

"Of course."

"Playing dress-up with you is going to be the highlight of this whole trip," Tony said. "I can tell. Okay, leave it on for ten minutes, minimum, and it should be good to go from there. Remember, the mask only hides your face. It won't disguise any superhuman feats of daring-do. So no magic and no wall-crawling for either of you once we hit the planet."

"Oh, sorry, did you not want a mask?"


Tony pointedly started to stalk away. "If you're done insulting me, I'll leave you to try and dig Peter out of his chemistry set. When you're finished, I recommend you both scatter and pack for a few days camping planet-side. I'll meet you in the cargo bay in an hour."

"And here I thought you hated camping."

"Careful Stephen," Tony said as he walked off the bridge with dignity. "That veil responds to my every whim. Don't make me give you a deformity. Or an unfortunate facial tick."

Stephen muttered some kind of answer, undoubtedly snarky, but it was lost when the doors slid shut between them.

"Boss," FRIDAY said a few moments later, her voice tinny as it filtered through the housing unit.

"Yes, dear?"

"Are you sure about this? Visiting another planet so soon seems ill-advised. We have not finished cataloguing the gains from our last encounter. Nor do I believe your injuries have fully healed."

Tony licked his lip, remembering the sharp sting of a wound he'd rather not think about. "I'm fine, FRI."

"I disagree. I have reviewed the uplink recordings. Your treatment at the hands of Chancellor Zet leaves much to be desired."

"I'm not bleeding and everything's on its way to recovery. Can't ask for more than that."

"And the unseen wounds?" FRIDAY asked, almost gently. "Boss, my last record of uninterrupted sleep for you is almost -"

"FRI, no. We can't languish in space just because I'm having issues. If we did that, we'd never leave the ship again. You may've noticed, but my issues don't really go away with time. They just get worse."

"Perhaps if you would consider speaking to someone about the difficulty. Stephen might -"

"He's not that kind of doctor. Besides, that's not the point. I bet you never thought you'd hear me say this, but the point is: It's not about me."

"Of course it is," FRIDAY insisted.

"Really isn't."

"Boss," FRIDAY said firmly. "For me, everything is about you."

"FRI, I had no idea you were such a flatterer."

She had a few more choice words for him while he packed up supplies, but after a solid thirty minutes she seemed to accept the futility of the argument and limited herself to the occasional barbed comment. Tony met back up with the other two exactly an hour later, everyone packed and ready to
go. Which set them up nicely to start their journey ever onward, but then also left them with one remaining all-important question -

"Wait a minute," Peter said, the crinkle of a frown appearing between his eyes. Eyes which were now elongated and dark, in a face which was now far more Asian than it had been before. "We're not bringing the ship into the atmosphere?"

"Gold star," Tony said.

"But then how are we getting down there?" There was a look of resignation creeping onto the kid's face. "You're going to carry me again, aren't you?"

"Only if you ask me nicely," Tony said cheerfully.

Peter turned with a hopeful stare in Stephen's direction. "Or maybe Doctor Strange could get us down with a portal. Like when we pulled Mr. Stark out of the asteroid belt?"

Tony scowled. "It's like you hate travelling in Stark style or something." He raised both eyebrows, questioning. "Well, Stephen?"

The sorcerer tilted his head side to side in consideration. "From this high up? It depends. How close into the atmosphere can we descend before gravity forces us downward?"

"The engine on this ship has enough power to counteract the gravitational pull at any distance, really, but that's not the problem. I want to avoid scaring the locals, but we also need to maintain radio contact with the ship. Which means, given the planet's core and the size of the exosphere, FRIDAY will have to keep a minimum safe distance of at least two-hundred miles. Three hundred would be more ideal."

"If we can break that down to a hundred and fifty and FRIDAY can provide me a specific location with imagery, I can probably do it," Stephen said. "Sorcerer's use pre-programmed orbs to travel great distance, but the longest I saw anyone create a stable independent connection was just over a hundred miles."

Tony hummed skeptically. "A hundred miles to a hundred-fifty. That seems like a significant leap."

Stephen shrugged. "I'm willing to try. Portal physics mostly requires intent and strong visualization."

"Portal physics requires suspension of disbelief," Tony corrected, scowling when Stephen only smiled at him serenely. He realized suddenly there was a flash of red missing from their motley crew. "Where's your loyal St. Bernard? I expected it to cling to your boot heels until the very last second. Did you lock it in the storage closet so it couldn't give chase?"

"No. That seemed far too obvious." Stephen shrugged. "So I had Peter lock it in."

"I felt really bad about it," Peter admitted. "Like locking a puppy in the bathroom. I swear I heard it scratching at the door."

"FRIDAY'll keep an eye on it," Tony reassured, then just about hurt himself rolling his eyes. Like he needed to provide reassurance about the ridiculous cloak, which would of course be fine. "We should probably get the ball rolling before the levitating menace stages a jailbreak. We can descend to one-fifty, but not for long, and we'll have to be careful about the angle of entry. FRIDAY, you know what to do."
"Sure do, boss."

When Tony walked out of the portal twenty minutes later, it was to find himself in a vibrant field of green and brown and gray, a massive sprawling forest surrounding them like an ocean of vegetation. A film of frost decorated the entire thing with the glitter of ice, like diamonds.

"Wow," Peter said, speaking for them all. "I've never seen so many trees. Is this what Canada looks like?"

"Why Canada?" Tony asked.

Peter shrugged. "I don't know. People say Canada, this is what I think of. Don't you?"

"Nope. I hear Canada, I think igloo's, dog-sledding and Mounties. Moose. Beavers. Maple syrup -"

"Clearly neither of you have ever been to Canada," Stephen said.

Tony squinted at him. "What gave it away?"

Stephen ignored them both to start walking toward a section of trees. Which was easy to do; the entire area was basically sections of trees. Tony followed him, Peter close behind.

"FRIDAY, you there?" Tony tested, reaching up to activate the micro-transmitter. "Planet XL8 something something calling FRIDAY. Come in FRIDAY."

"Reading you loud and clear," FRIDAY said, quiet but smooth, no sign of static or interference. Tony glanced up, seeing Stephen and Peter both reach for their transmitters with waves of acknowledgement.

"Excellent. Wouldn't want to lose you this trip," Tony said.

"That's my goal too, boss."

"Alright." He turned to face Stephen. "Civilization is a few miles out. Don't suppose we could send a drone ahead and have you hitch us a magic portal ride closer?"

"I thought you wanted to be discreet."

"Yeah, but I want to avoid walking even more."

"Walking's good for you," Stephen insisted. "After spending months cooped up on a spaceship and then as prisoners beneath a dictator's thumb, we could all do with a bit of fresh air."

Tony eyed him shrewdly. "And this planet's going to give us that, is it?"

"Can't hurt," Stephen deflected easily.

"Remind me to remind you to your face how annoying you are. When I can actually see your face again. You know you make a pretty ridiculously tall Asian man? If this adventure winds up like Gulliver's Travels, don't blame me."

Stephen ignored him. "Any sign of the element you're looking for?"

"More trace amounts. Nothing substantial."
"Then I suppose we continue walking."

"Or you could just tell me where to find it, since you seem so knowledgeable about the neighbourhood."

"No, I think we'll continue walking," Stephen said, and matched actions to words.

Peter jogged a bit ahead to examine one of the tress. "These look mostly coniferous. Some deciduous." He scaled halfway up to poke his head past the scraggly branches at the bottom. "There's even some pinecones. I mean, what are the odds of another planet having pinecones?"

Tony scowled and thought about throwing one of those pinecones at him, or possibly a missile. "I said no wall-crawling on this trip. Get down from there before I send you to bed without supper."

Peter dropped down fifteen feet, an armful of greenery in his arms. "Right, yeah, sorry. But what are the odds?"

"Probably similar to the odds of extraterrestrial life looking superficially identical to humans. And why do you know anything about coniferous trees? Better question, why would anyone want to know anything about coniferous trees?"

"I started Ecology with FRIDAY yesterday," Peter admitted, tossing three sticks behind him and shoving two pilfered pinecones into a carry sack, thankfully made of fabric and not webbing. "All the images of this planet had trees, so."

Tony sighed. "Well, at least we know it has rich oxygen content. And the star in this system is a G-type, so no radiation protection needed beyond the obvious."

"FRIDAY's started me on astronomy too," Peter said excitedly. "She said I should ask you for more advanced lessons, though."

"Space isn't my specialty," Tony admitted. "But I can give it a try. Might as well. Apparently there's nothing else to do on this planet except enjoy nature, which, if I go crazy before we get back, you'll know why. Where did you and FRIDAY leave off?"

"We were talking about planet classifications. Element composition, gravity, um." He looked sheepish. "Something else I forgot. She kind of goes on sometimes."

"I heard that," FRIDAY said.

Peter flushed. "Oops."

"Well, let's talk terrestrial planet conditions," Tony said. "Since it bears on our galactic game of hide and seek. We certainly won't be visiting any Jovian planets anytime soon."

"Solid versus gaseous planetoids?" Peter asked.

"Yep. Let's use this planet as a reference point. It's twenty-three percent oxygen, compared to Earth at twenty-one percent. Nitrogen contents are similar -""

Stephen left them to talk science for a solid half an hour, about the length of time it took them to start coming across actual habitation, mostly the smell and sight of smoke from wood fires. They slowed as they started to approach the tree line, taking in the distant hum of animals and people milling about. It sounded very odd to Tony, almost unnatural, and he only realized he was listening for the sounds of industry and technology when it became obvious there wasn't any.
"When we're asked our purpose, destination and point of origin, keep the story simple and straightforward," Stephen said. "We're traders coming from lands in the West. We lost most of our gear and product when one of the rivers overflowed its bank. We're looking for shelter and safety for a few nights. That's it."

"And when they start asking us more personal questions about who we are and what we want?" Tony asked.

"Decline to answer. It'll be considered rude, but better than the alternative. They'll provide food and lodging, regardless. This culture believes strongly in hospitality. If they ask about your glasses, just tell them it's a magnifying instrument for sight."

"And if they ask about -"

"Maybe just let me do all the talking," Stephen interrupted.

Tony glared at him, insulted, but Peter was already nodding along.

"Here we go," Stephen said, just as they cleared the dense forest to find a valley at their feet, and a bustling village of people occupying it. Large pavilion-type tents were set up in a crude residential area down one half of the valley, while an arrangement of barrels and cauldrons full of supplies, presumably food, occupied another area, protected from the elements by large overhangs. The other half of the valley was full to the brim with animals, some foreign, but most of them shockingly familiar.

"Are those," Peter began incredulously. "I mean, are they - horses?"

"Looks that way," Tony said with a frown. He considered the highly unlikely scenario that they'd actually stumbled back to Earth, somehow, possibly in an earlier timeframe. Because the idea of them running across a civilization made up of humans and pine trees and horses seemed truly bizarre. The odds had to be astronomical.

A strange and familiar scent tickled Tony's nose and sank deep into the recesses of his hindbrain. He blinked, freezing.

"Is that," he started, staring, sniffing in what was probably something embarrassingly reminiscent of a hunting dog, but Tony couldn't really be bothered to care.

"Yes," Stephen said smugly.

"It's really."

"Yes."

"What?" Peter asked, bewildered.

"Coffee," Tony breathed.

"Well, it's really more of a tea," Stephen murmured.

But Tony wasn't listening. He was busy following his nose.
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Tony hates (to love) mysteries. And Peter is more charming than he realizes.

"I seem to remember," Stephen murmured far too smugly, "someone saying tea was no man's coffee."

"Shut up."

"How the mighty have fallen."

"Stephen," Tony said, sipping reverently from his mug, "no one likes condescending assholes who say I told you so. Believe me, I should know."

Stephen turned to Peter, something halfway mischievous in his face. "Shall we wager on how badly the universe is doomed if Thanos comes armed with coffee?"

Peter snorted. "Are you kidding? If this is how he is with tea, I can't imagine him with coffee. Sucker's bet."

Tony muttered something vulgar into his cup before taking another sip. "I'm not that bad."

Stephen raised an eyebrow. "No?" He tapped a finger against the sturdy metallic kettle they'd been given to share. "Then I suppose you won't mind if I keep the rest of this for myself?"

"Doc, you just better hand that over before someone loses a limb."

"The tea is my favorite, I admit," a feminine voice said slowly, "but I've never heard it inspire such fierce loyalty before."

They turned to see a young woman, one of their hosts, standing just visible around one of the cloth partitions. There was a covered tray in her hands and a look of surprise on her face.

Stephen grinned, inviting her into the joke. "That's only because you've never met Tony before."

"It only seems extreme until you realize I've been deprived of caffeine for more than four months now," Tony explained.

"Nope, still extreme," Peter said. "Besides, you kind of deprived yourself."

"Semantics."

She blinked. "I hadn't realized your journey was so long. When you said your belongings were swept away, we assumed that was quite recent."

"Oh, it was," Tony assured her. "Very recent. That river was treacherous. Snuck up on us like a cat stalking prey. Pouncing, screaming, flailing; the works."

"It seems a strange thing," she mused. "Most of the streams near here are shallow and peaceful and
at this time of year still nearly frozen. There must've been heavy snowmelt or rain to swell a river in such a way."

Tony winced. "Right. Well, whenever that last heavy rain was, then."

She looked shocked. "But that was two cycles ago! To have gone on for so long without supplies. It's incredible."

"That's us, the Incredible Three. Not to be mistaken for the Fantastic Four." Tony smiled brightly. "Our walk here didn't seem that long. We must've been further off than I thought."

"Yes. On the lee of the mountain we don't receive much rain, but our crops on the windward side do. It's two days by horseback to reach them. Of course, in winter very little grows on the mountain."

Tony looked with alarm down at his mug. "I hope you're not short on your tea supply."

"No," she said, laughing, clearly having picked up on Tony's obsession. "It is spring now, and besides, there is always tea."

"Oh, thank God."

A man came up behind her, ducking beneath the cloth screen so he could shuffle into the room, squinting.

"Esan, are you harassing our guests with questions again?" he asked, scolding.

"No, father," she said. "I only came to offer them breakfast."

He took the tray from her hands, peering beneath the cloth cover. "So you did." He turned to them congenially. "It is little enough. We don't have much left after the cold season, but what we have we are glad to share, of course."

"Thank you, Verdun, but you really don't need to do that," Stephen said. Tony theoretically agreed with him but couldn't help twitching toward the tray in protest. (Maybe it had tea on it)

The alien shook his head, smiling. "Of course we do. We can't leave you without provisions when we have the means to supply you. That would be the height of dishonor. Here."

He handed them the food, which turned out to be warm, breaded meat rolls, some kind of root vegetable, and a collection of soft squares covered in syrup. Delicious as it looked, Tony felt a small part of his soul wither at the lack of more caffeine. He surreptitiously pulled the kettle closer to him.

"How do you fair this morning?" Verdun asked cheerfully. "You seemed overwhelmed yesterday. I hope a night's rest has settled any difficulties."

"Not really," Tony said, "but you have caffeine, and that makes the whole world a better place."

"Your hospitality's been more than generous," Stephen said overtop of Tony. "Unfortunately, we have little means to pay it back at this time."

Good humor dissolved into indignation. "Payment is unnecessary! We would never ask for such a thing."

"That's why we're offering."
The pretty words mellowed the man's face back into a smile. At first, they hadn't seemed like much for smiling, these people; they not only appeared to have Asiatic ancestry, but possibly some of the traditional stoic mannerisms as well. But it hadn't been long before curiosity wore down the strict etiquette between host and guest. Apparently they received few visitors this far up the mountain.

"We have little to give but food and shelter," Verdun said. "But you are welcome to both for as long as you need."

"We were late coming in before," Stephen said. "We saw the spread of your camp, of course, but numbers were difficult to determine from the tree line. How many of you are there?"

Verdun smiled with great pride. "We started as a small caravan, just two or three families strong. Now we are twelve families."

"A large community by all accounts."

Tony blinked incredulously. "It is?"

But Verdun was nodding happily. "Indeed. We've begun to feel the stretch of supplies for so many. It won't be long now, perhaps one or two more winters, before our young ones may wish to break from this camp and start their own." He slipped an arm around his daughter and she leaned into him with an indulgent grin. "My Esan will be full grown then, and will have her first chance to secure a place in the caravan."

"Father," Esan complained, aggrieved. "I am full grown now."

He smiled indulgently. "Of course, of course."

Peter looked at them in surprise. "You'll leave? But you look... I mean. You look younger than me."

"I don't think so," she said, scanning her eyes over Peter carefully. The kid flushed scarlet and ducked away. Tony shared a knowing look with Stephen. "Your family left your camp to travel distant lands. You must feel the call to find new places as I do."

"My family?"

Esan blinked at him, startled. "Well, of course." Then her eyes went wide, darting between Peter and Tony and Stephen rapidly. "Unless - are you not related?"

Verdun stopped smiling at her question, a deep frown carving lines in his face. Tony had the ominous feeling there was something cultural he was missing here and he froze, making the executive decision to sit on anything he might want to say in case it got him beheaded.

Stephen stepped in to rescue them. "Peter and Tony share common ties. I had no connection to either of them until quite recently."

Peter looked like he couldn't quite decide whether he should be protesting that or not. Tony grinned, throwing an arm around his shoulders and stuffing one of the meat rolls in his mouth before the kid could say anything too cheeky.

Esan looked enchanted. "Then you are two families who have joined as one. How did you come to be together, the three of you?"

"Ah," Stephen said, smiling. "Well, I was on a different path not so long ago. But then Tony came
along and swept me away."

Tony put on his most charming expression. "I can be irresistibly persuasive sometimes."

"That's one way of putting it," Peter muttered around his roll. Tony shoved another one at him to shut him up, the flaky crust reminding him to take one of his own. He offered one to Stephen, who accepted absently.

"What inspired you to join them?" Esan asked Stephen, still curious.

"At first it was more Tony's idea than my own. He didn't want to let me out of his sight."

"What did he offer you that enticed you to go with him?"

"Oh, well," Stephen said inscrutably. "I think it's safe to say Tony basically ran off with me before I quite realized what was happening."

She brightened with youthful excitement. "That's so romantic."

Peter promptly started to choke on his second roll. Tony obligingly smacked him on the back a couple times.

"Are you well?" Verdun asked, leaning forward with concern. "Is the food too dry? Sometimes the pasty can be very flaky when it's fresh."

"No, it's," Peter gasped, hacking. "It's fine."

Esan looked alarmed by all the fuss. "Perhaps some tea will help."

"Tea helps everything," Tony agreed loyally.

Verdun poured a cup and Peter took a gulp to clear his throat. He made a face at the taste.

"Sorry," the kid said when he could talk without coughing up a lung. "It went down wrong, that's all. It's actually really amazing food. Awesome."

Verdun looked pleased by the praise. "We are honored. I will tell my wife of your enjoyment."

Peter nodded vigorously. "Seriously, it's the best thing I've eaten since Earth."

"Earth?" Verdun asked, reaching out to top up Tony and Stephen's tea as well. Stephen blocked Tony's attempt to sneakily take both for his growing collection.

"Yeah," Peter said. "Earth, that's -"

"Not a place at all, of course," Stephen interrupted. Peter looked over in surprise, catching the sorcerer's stern warning glare.

"Oh," Peter said. "We're not - that's, I mean. Good old, uh, mother Earth. No one quite does home cooking the same? That's. Obviously what I meant. Because we're from the -" He fumbled, shooting a panicked look in Stephen's direction. "- the west? Here. Right? Yeah. West of here."

Stephen rolled his eyes so hard it looked like it hurt. Tony dubiously nudged his own mug of tea toward Peter.

"Here, I think you might need some more caffeine," he said. "That was bad."
"It wouldn't help," Peter muttered. "I've always been terrible at this."

Tony raised both eyebrows slowly. "At what?"

"At -" Peter fumbled again, clearly searching for a safe way to phrase it before deciding there wasn't one. "At talking."

"That, I believe," Tony said.

"I'm not sure you're in any position to judge," Stephen said. "Verdun, we truly appreciate your offer of food and shelter. After so long making our way alone, it's a kindness to take rest. But now we've broken our fast, I wonder if we might borrow your knowledge of the land."

Verdun looked curious. "Of course. I don't know whether I'll have much to tell you, but you may ask."

"Tony's a craftsman," Stephen explained. "A stonemason and metal-smith of a very unique variety. Do you know of any areas of rock or stone nearby?"

"I have rarely seen stonework done before. The bulk can be a difficult burden when the camp moves. Do you not find it so?"

"We only take what we can carry, as you would. If you know of any caves or quarries nearby, we mean to search them out today. We're looking for a particular material."

Verdun frowned in consideration. "There is a valley up north, not far from here, where you might find what you're looking for. It's mostly bare rock from what I remember. One of the flatlands."

"How far's not far?" Tony asked.

"Two hours at a brisk walk. Perhaps three if you are very slow. I would offer you the use of one of our horses, but we really can't spare them. Spring is short lived on the mountain. We must make preparations for it quickly."

"We understand, of course," Stephen said. "A walk will do us no harm."

"Says you," Tony muttered.

Peter sighed wistfully, picking up another roll to eat. "I've always wanted to try horseback riding."

"It's not as romantic as people make it out to be," Stephen said.

"Your previous camp did not utilize horses?" Verdun asked skeptically. "That is very strange."

"Oh," Peter said. "Oh, no, obviously, they did. Just. There wasn't any for, um, personal use?"

"That is often the case," Verdun agreed. "In the camp, there is often little time or resources to spare for things of personal use."

"Perhaps if there's time enough in our visit," Stephen suggested, "you and your family might show Peter some of the camp's daily tasks. He's young, with much to learn, and new skills are always welcome when one is journeying far."

Peter looked like he had several choice words to say to that but was choking them all back because he was too polite. Tony hid a laugh.
Verdun nodded happily. "Of course. We're always happy to have a helping pair of hands. Perhaps while you examine the valley, your young one might stay behind."

Tony jolted out of the lazy amusement he'd fallen into. "No."

Verdun blinked in surprise. "No?"

"We stay together," Tony said, sitting up straight. "No exceptions."

"He would be perfectly safe in the camp," Verdun insisted sharply. "You needn't fear for him."

Stephen stepped in again to save the day. "There's a history here you're not privy to. You may have noticed we're a non-traditional unit to be travelling together."

"Yes, of course," Verdun said, mellowing. "When you approached yesterday there was some concern you might be thieves or bandits."

"A reasonable doubt," Stephen agreed. "Other camps are also doubtful. This is not the first time we've approached a place only to find ourselves forcefully separated and imprisoned."

Verdun looked pained by this. "Always there are those among us who are unscrupulous and ill-mannered. I'm sorry you fell victim to such a thing." He held out a hand in tentative offer. "Clearly you escaped from your previous trouble. Perhaps it is a story you would be willing to tell, sometime? There will be a shared meal tomorrow evening in your honor. We would've had it tonight, but preparations are needed in the camp now that spring has come."

"Oh, a party," Tony said. "I love parties. And being at the center of them."

"Then you will adore this," Verdun said amiably. "Are you sure you wish to travel further this day? You've had only an evening of rest after what sounds like a long journey. Perhaps you should wait until tomorrow?"

"We're eager to know our prospects," Stephen said. "We'll return before nightfall. We don't have the supplies to camp on the mountain overnight."

"No, I imagine not. The nights are still bitterly cold, even now. I am frankly surprised you survived the winter without provisions."

"There we go again, the Incredible Three," Tony said. "Surviving all the unsurvivable things. Cats with nine lives, that's what we are."

"Ignore him," Stephen instructed.

Verdun drew the plate and its remaining breakfast foods closer to him, tipping it upside down so it lay on the cloth cover. He tied it off into a rough sack, drawing a length of rope from a nearby drawer to thread it through, then held it out to them.

"If you mean to go, then you had best do so now," he said. "Do not dally. Dark will be on you quicker than you imagine. Return promptly, and safe, else I worry Esan will have no one to torment with questions in the coming days."

"Father," she said, scandalized.

"I must allow her to ask them," Verdun confessed conspiratorially. "If I don't, she will simply ask them of me. Then I will be forced to break the rules of etiquette myself to get the answers, and my
wife will scold me terribly, and it will all go quite ill in the end, you see."

"I know exactly what you mean," Tony said.

"There, then. You know why you must come back safely. Take care you don't wander from the path. The mountain can be unkind to reckless travellers."

"Reckless?" Tony protested automatically. "Please. Do I seem like -"

"Yes," Stephen and Peter said in concert.

Tony glared at them. "Guess we'll just be going, then. Verdun, you wouldn't happen to have a thermos for the - no, I guess not. How about a portable tea kettle for the road?"

"But it will grow cold, even in the kettle."

"I'm not sure if you've ever heard of this thing called iced tea. I wasn't a fan before this trip, but I got to say, the idea's starting to grow on me."

The journey to the valley took them a bit longer than anticipated. Twice they lost the path and had to backtrack. After the second roundabout, and a good deal of cursing, Tony dragged Stephen and Peter behind a sheltering thicket of trees where he could frown at the sorcerer severely.

"Okay, you know what? I don't know about you two, but I'm cold enough I think I'm starting to get frostbite in places a guy really doesn't want to get frostbite. How is this their spring weather?"

Stephen looked amused. "This climate is warmer than other places on the planet we've touched down. It's not even snowing, Tony."

"I feel like snow might be an improvement. At least there'd be cloud cover. Stephen, if you can't find a way to warm me up, pretty sure some rather delicate bits of me are going to freeze and fall off soon."

Stephen made a sympathetic face. "That would be a tragedy."

"I've actually felt pretty comfortable," Peter said.

Tony rolled his eyes. "That's because you have the metabolism of a hummingbird on speed."

Peter blinked. "Is - that a thing?"

"It is now." Tony turned wide, pathetic eyes in Stephen's direction. "Hey, I remember it being advertised somewhere that you can do things. Magic things, which would un-freeze important parts of me that, should they remain frozen, I'll be making all of you very unhappy about shortly."

"Well," Stephen demurred mildly. "I'm not sure -"

Tony plucked out a hair, holding it out to Stephen magnanimously. "Here, you can use this. I don't mind, really. Go right ahead."

"I can tell I won't stop hearing about this until I do."

"You were the one who said to ask. I'm asking. I'm going to keep asking, ad nauseam. But, fortunately for you, there's an easy way to shut me up."

Stephen sighed dramatically, only the laughter in his eyes giving him away. "If that's all it took to
shut you up, I'd have employed this method long ago." He took the hair offered, pinching it between two fingers so he could draw it into a long, blistering string that broke into three spirals, rotating counter clockwise to each other. A row of runes sketched itself into place, completing the circle. Stephen handed it to Tony, who barely waited for a nod of acquiescence before he closed the spell between two hands, dissolving it into sparks that flared and sank into his skin like pinpricks of fire.

"Much better," he said, slumping with relief. "All my delicate bits thank you. And other bits of me are pretty grateful too."

"Let it never be said I wasn't considerate of Tony Stark's delicate bits." Stephen turned to face Peter, a questioning look on his face.

The kid shrugged, lifting one hand and then the other in weighty consideration. "I'm okay, I think. I'll pass."

"Suit yourself." The sorcerer wasted no time arming himself with the same spell, blinking when the orange flickers of it melted away.

"Better?" Tony asked.

"Hmm. I hadn't realized how cold I was." Stephen flexed his hands, frowning.

"Welcome to my world."

When they walked out of the tree line some thirty minutes later, it was to see a field of abandoned rock and stone and very little else.

"Wow," Peter said, blinking. "It's like someone moved the forest."

Tony glanced behind them, at the sudden sharp contrast of peaceful green vegetation against the more barren landscape in front. "Weird. FRIDAY, scan ahead. How far across does this valley stretch?"

FRIDAY came through, but for the first time Tony heard a fizzle of static across her line. "I'm having some difficulty with full perspective, boss. Scans are limited, but I'd estimate three miles long."

Tony crouched down, touching the ground and letting a few nanobots skitter off to start collecting mineralization data.

"I wonder why no one's established more permanent city structure on this planet. There's enough building material here to make the Brooklyn Bridge ten times over. And pretty sure there's a whole forest of wood behind us."

"They've always been nomads," Stephen said quietly. "It's their way. And they never needed to change."

Tony raised an eyebrow. "And no one's been innovative enough to suggest some progress?"

Stephen shook his head. "To these people, progress is in the spread and expansion of family and culture. Not industry. They're mutually exclusive."

"Wow. So what you're saying is, if I'd been born on this world I'd have been lynched long ago. Maybe burned as a witch. Still might be, if I'm not careful."
"They might have more tolerance of you than you think, but they still won't respond warmly to technology."

Tony scowled. "How long have they lived on this planet that they're still in the camping and fire-pit stage of technology?"

"Tens of thousands of years."

"What?" Tony blurted incredulously. "And they haven't moved past tents and horse-drawn carts? They're basically still in the Iron Age. Maybe Bronze Age."

"By choice," Stephen reminded. "It's not for lack of time or opportunity. They simply don't seek out expansion. They're not looking for advancement."

"But why?"

Stephen shrugged. "They're not interested in change."

"Tens of thousands of years." Tony shook his head. "You know, there's a point where lack of change becomes a slide toward stagnation."

Stephen said nothing for long, heavy moments, and something in his silence compelled Tony to look up. He blinked at the intense stare Stephen directed at him, the slow smile that stretched the sorcerer's mouth and the unexpected heat that lit his eyes.

"Sometimes," Stephen said softly. "I forget beneath the sarcasm, and the hyper-rationality, and the science that Tony Stark can be a very wise man when he wants to be."

"Well," Tony said, oddly wrong-footed. "Every dog has his day. Just don't tell anyone."

Stephen smiled so fondly it made something in Tony's chest hurt.

"Earth moves exponentially toward change," Stephen explained quietly. "In part because our need to understand is fueled by a lifespan limited to a hundred years. As far as the universe is concerned, a mortal lifespan is an aberration and a curse, not the norm. Most species outlive us, and usually not by years. By centuries. In some cases, millennia."

"Shit," Tony muttered. "Who wants to live forever?"

"Someone told me once that death is what gives life meaning."

"Yeah, I've seen the never-dying movie before, and it never ends well." Tony waved a hand dramatically. "There can be only One!"

Stephen sighed. "You're quoting Highlander. Of course you are."

"You're talking about immortality. Pretty sure there's no better quote I could've made -"

"Hey guys," Peter interrupted. "I think you should come look at this."

Tony looked around, and then looked around again because the area immediately near them was flat and there was no sign of the kid anywhere.

"Look at what?" he asked. "Where are you?"

"Over here."

"They might have more tolerance of you than you think, but they still won't respond warmly to technology."

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Tony looked around, and then looked around again because the area immediately near them was flat and there was no sign of the kid anywhere.

"Look at what?" he asked. "Where are you?"

"Over here."
'Over here' turned out to be back toward the tree line, where at first Tony was sure Peter had broken the wall-crawling rule again and scaled a tree. A closer look showed it wasn't a tree; it was a large stone pillar, covered in moss and other evidence that nature had decided to reclaim it.

"Huh," Tony said, circling the thing thoughtfully while Peter made a show of actually climbing it, in the style of someone who had to look for hand and foot holds. "Stephen, look, it's one of your mysterious structures. Mazel Tov."

The sorcerer hummed in agreement, walking the opposite way around.

"So, go on, share with the class. What is it?"

Stephen pretended not to hear him, reaching out to trace two fingers along the edge of a horizontal shelf.

"Stephen, don't make me come over there."

"Why not? You're going to anyway."

Tony muttered something unflattering at him and proved him right by circling entirely around the thing to look at it from all angles, touching carefully.

"I mean, it looks like a stone pillar," Tony said. "A pylon, maybe? Or a support column. The problem with that is there's no evidence of anything around here that might need a support column. It's literally standing in the middle of a giant stone field."

"Technically," Peter said from the top of the pillar. "It's on the edge of a giant stone field. And it's not the only one. I can see three more from here."

"What?" Tony demanded. "Where?"

Peter shrugged, pointing vaguely across the valley. "There. And two over there."

Tony looked. He could vaguely see several tall, green objects that had the wrong dimensions to be trees. "Stephen, I thought you said these people were nomads."

"Yes," the sorcerer agreed.

"Then what the hell are these? I don't have to be an engineer to tell you there's no chance in hell these would transport well. Imagine if the Egyptians were nomads, moving their pyramids around with a horse and cart. Not a pretty sight."

"Well, you know what they say about the pyramids."

"I didn't actually know people said anything about pyramids. What's there to say?"

Tony felt his fingers catch over something and glanced down. Beneath a thick layer of moss, dirt and grime, raised stone had been carved into a pattern. It was difficult to see, but it had the shape of something that might be some kind of symbol. Or letters. Tony scowled at the concealing layers of green hiding most of the surface from sight. "Ugh. Nature. Who needs it?"

"Most living beings in the universe," Stephen said.

"Not Starks. We have a natural aversion to all things even remotely organic." Tony scrabbled with his fingers at the pillar. "Help me out here, doc."
Stephen circled around him, watching as Tony worked for a minute or two before saying mildly: "There are easier ways to go about that."

"Yeah, I'm tempted to laser it off," Tony agreed, "but I might take the whole thing down accidentally. That might attract a bit more attention than we're looking for here."

"Back up a bit."

Tony eyed him suspiciously. "Why?"

"Do you like getting your hands dirty?"

"Depends if that's a euphemism or not." Tony examined his filthy hands. "In this case I'm guessing not." He took three dramatically large steps away.

Stephen pressed his hands together until the air started to ripple around him. Tony watched with glee as his glasses, attuned now to Stephen's magic, picked up the swell of energy and translated it into a haloed afterimage around his form, most prominent near the hands. A few seconds later the invisible bloom of magic solidified into three interlocking red bracelets around Stephen's wrists and forearms.

"Don't tell anyone I said this," Tony whispered loudly, staring, "but now I know what I'm looking for, magic's pretty awesome."

"In every universe I share it with you, you eventually say that," Stephen admitted, smiling at him. "Why do you think I offered to let you study it?"

Tony rolled his eyes. "There you go cheating again."

Peter peered over the edge of the pillar, sitting down to watch the show with his legs dangling. "You think anything you can't do is cheating."

"Because it is."

Stephen slid his hands apart and then past each other, sketching a flat, horizontal circle in the air. The energy spiked phenomenally and Tony leaned forward without meaning to.


Tony couldn't bring himself to move.

Stephen glanced up the pillar at Peter. "You might want to come down from there."

Peter flipped off, ruining the illusion he was an ordinary climber by plunging a solid twenty feet and landing lightly on his toes with a delicate skip. Tony's joints twanged just to see it.

"Show off," he muttered out of the side of his mouth.

"Wonder where I got it from," Peter muttered back.

Stephen ignored them both and flung his hands wide, releasing the pent up magic. A wave of wind and a strange ozone scent flash-fired through the air like lightning and smoke. Tony could feel his eyes water immediately. He blinked the sensation away and when he could see clearly again, the pillar had lost all traces of nature's grip. The stonework beneath was smooth and clean, years of grime scoured away in seconds. Lingering vestiges of the magic settled with a faint glitter to give it all a merry little sparkle.
"Wow," Tony commented, examining the work critically. "That was efficient. Do you make house calls? I have a mansion that could do with a scrubbing if you're so inclined."

"Dude," Peter exclaimed. "You have a mansion?"

"It's possible I have many," Tony admitted. "I can never remember how many holdings Stark Industries owns, let alone the ones I own."

Tony reached out to trace a symbol on the pillar, faded and eroded after time had made its mark, but still plainly visible as a pattern chiselled into the stone.

"That spell was insane," Peter said wistfully. "Magic's so cool."

"Bad spider, no," Tony muttered, distracted. "No biscuit for you. Magic bad, science good."

Peter rolled his eyes. "You just said magic was awesome. Besides, magic is science, remember? Science you can't understand."

"Science I can't understand yet."

Stephen hummed thoughtfully. "This isn't quite beginner's magic, but the method of it is easy enough if you understand the basics. Here, I'll show you."

"Busy," Tony said, distracted. "Mysterious pillars now, magic later."

"I wasn't talking to you," Stephen said, tugging Peter away. Peter went eagerly.

Tony whipped around to stare after them, incensed. "Hey. No discussing magical theory without me."

"This isn't theory. It's practice."

"No casting magic without me either!"

"Go back to your pillar, Tony."

"Yeah, Mr. Stark," Peter said cheerfully. "We'll go clear off the other ones across the way. You can come have a look when you're done."

"Are you still calling him Mr. Stark?" Stephen asked, frowning. "Tony."

"What? He still calls you Doctor Strange."

"I keep asking him to call me Stephen. Formality is so awkward. Even the A.I calls me Stephen at this point." The sorcerer winced. "No offense, FRIDAY."

FRIDAY crackled slightly as she came through on the earpiece. "None taken."

"What?" Tony blinked. "She does? Since when?"

"Many weeks, boss," FRIDAY concurred.

"Where the hell was I?"

"Busy mouthing off to an alien overlord," Stephen said.

"Oh, right. Kid, if the wizard convinced FRIDAY, you should probably just follow suit."
"It's weird, though," Peter muttered. "I keep trying, but it doesn't come out right. He's just Doctor Strange, you know?"

"You should just nickname everyone like I do. Makes informality much easier. You can practice by calling me Tony."

Peter looked absolutely scandalized. "I can't do that!"

Tony frowned. "Why not?"

"I just - I can't!"

"Well, I accept nicknames too, if you want to take that route. But I warn you, if you give me one I don't like I will retaliate in kind."

Peter flushed, a slow, mottled array of color, and his expression morphed into something halfway to bashful, or possibly mortified.

Tony eyed him. "What?"

"Nothing," Peter said, almost defiantly. "I want. I just. I can't, okay? I'm not ready to." He took a breath and suddenly started to march away, almost jogging down across the valley. "I'll meet you at the next pillar Doct- uh, Stephen."

"Wait," Tony called after him, bemused, but the kid didn't even slow. He quirked an eyebrow at Stephen.

The sorcerer slanted him an amused look. "Still haven't figured it out yet?"

"The pillar?" Tony turned back. "No, not yet. I was busy being distracted by you two. What the hell was all that about?"

Stephen only sighed, shaking his head. He turned to follow Peter.

"What?" Tony called after the both of them, aggravated. "Seriously. Was it something I said?"

FRIDAY fuzzed into life in his ear. "Boss."

"Yeah, FRI?"

"I have been studying forms of intelligence as they are understood by Earth's standards."

Tony listened warily. "And?"

"And I am confused how someone can excel in one form of intelligence but fail to grasp basic principles of another. Emotional intelligence, for example; something which seems to escape you." She paused. "Can you explain?"

"Very funny, FRIDAY. See if I don't rewrite your humor algorithms when I get back up there."

Tony watched until Stephen and Peter had become indistinct blobs in the distance. Then he allowed the mystery of the pillar to draw him back, with its knots of lines and decorative swirls. There was something strangely familiar about it, maybe in the intricacy of the shape or its position; the presentation.

"FRI, run it through all language databanks, including those from the ship."
"Sure thing. I also have the preliminary mineralization analysis if you want it."

"Hit me."

Scans streamed over the glasses, most of them disappointingly marked off in red. "Presence of elemental material is negligible. I went three feet down over a radius of twenty feet across. Trace amounts at best, boss."

"Dammit." Tony took his eyes off the pillar long enough to frown around the valley. "Thought for sure if we were going to find it anywhere, would've been in a rock field. Maybe we need to be looking at cave systems."

"I recommend against it," FRIDAY said immediately. "Your track record with caves has been abysmal to date."

"We've only encountered one on this trip so far. They can't all come equipped with gigantic snakes."

"You don't know that."

"Don't be such a mother hen, FRIDAY." He frowned sourly. "Though God knows if you're worried you can just send Peter down after me again."

"I did not send him down. He chose to go."

"Yeah, after you put the bug in his ear. Admit it."

FRIDAY was silent, but the sound of her static was very guilty.

"Thought so. We really need to talk about your protective instincts, FRI."

"My purpose in life is to ensure your survival and overall wellbeing," she said. And though she might've been quoting off her programming parameters, she said it with a level of conviction Tony had only ever heard one A.I. use before.

"Technically that was my job first, FRI. Besides, that's a pretty big ask. Who's to say how best you accomplish it?"

"Stephen," she said promptly.

"You're supposed to ask me."

"But boss, in almost seventy-two percent of cases, you've demonstrated impaired judgement about your own self-preservation. Statistically, you are an inappropriate source to ask about such things."

"So ask me and then Stephen, FRIDAY," Tony said seriously. "And always in that order. I mean it. My life is mine. My choices are mine. You don't have to like them, but you do have to let me make them."

She buzzed very unhappily in his ear. "Yes, boss. As long as others are allowed to make their own choices, too."

"Fair enough," Tony agreed. "Okay, FRI, this persnickety pillar perusal is taking too long. I want a full image render with a level four scan. Save it to the ship's computer and I'll examine it later. Meantime, let's have a look at the rest of the valley. Could be other mineral deposits; maybe this was just a bad sample site. Still can't pinpoint a location with external sensors?"
"Not for lack of trying, boss. Whatever the source, it is extremely diffuse. I'm unable to get any reliable lock except that there's a component of it somewhere on this mountain."

"Fantastic. Well, we've seen about five percent of the mountain so far. Just ninety-five more to go."

But half a day and an entire network of stray nanobots later, no treasure trove of rare elements appeared. Tony did find some small supply of marble and copper deposits he excavated by hand to give some legitimacy to their claim of stonemasonry, but otherwise their little day trip seemed unfortunately fruitless. And by the time Tony was done canvassing and caught up to Peter and Stephen the light had started to fade, and their little group was eager to hightail it back to camp.

They found Esan waiting eagerly for them at one of the overlooks.

"There you are!" she exclaimed, rushing forward in a youthful tangle of long limbs and excitement. "I thought you might not return before dark! The sun has already begun to set."

"Yeah, we noticed," Tony said as they all fell in for the final leg of the walk.

Esan jogged ahead of them eagerly. "Did you find what you wanted in the valley?"

"No," Tony grumbled. "A whole lot of nothing. Although apparently your ancestors were more interested in stonework than you might think. Any reason there's four colossal monstrosities of rock and moss surrounding that valley?"

"Colossal monstrosities?" she asked, frowning. "I'm not sure what you mean."

"Stone pillars as high as a tree or higher. They're hard to miss once you know they're there."

"Oh," she said with surprise. "Do you mean the Lighthouses?"

Tony paused and ran that word rapidly through a number of permutations that might explain how a stone structure could act as a lighthouse. He came up blank. "I feel compelled to point out that they seem to lack both a house and a light."

She looked very confused, which told Tony something wasn't translating well; either the sarcasm or just the context.

"What are they for?" Tony asked. "What do they do?"

"They are meant to guide," she said, shrugging. "They are as beacons in the night. In a sea of stars, the Lighthouse marks the path for those who use the Bridge."

Tony stared at her doubtfully. "You have a bridge? That seems unlikely. Are you going to try and sell it to me next?"

"Why would I wish to sell you a bridge?"

Tony sighed and slowly mimed putting his hands over his ears, then his eyes, then his mouth.

Now it was her turn to stare at him. "Are you alright?"

"The uncomplicated answer to that is no," Stephen said.

"He's just upset," Peter explained reasonably, "because he's got no one to play with who understands him. Do you have any more tea? I think that might help."
"Father always has a pot of tea boiling," she said earnestly. "Come. I will show you."

Tony allowed himself to be led back to the camp and into one of the many round, wide tents in evidence. A number of people stopped to unashamedly stare as they went past. As Verdun had said, few visitors came out this way, the result of which was they'd immediately acquired minor celebrity status as news of their presence spread.

"They're doing it again," Peter whispered.

Tony shrugged. "Peter, you normally go around conquering the forces of evil by swinging through town in red and blue spandex. You must be used to staring by now."

"But I'm not wearing the suit now! I thought the whole idea of these masks was to blend in."

"Exactly. First tip about learning to blend; stop flinching every time someone so much as blinks in your direction. Pretend like you belong and most people will assume you do. Take the tea, for instance. It's a staple on this world, so obviously I'm going out of my way to enjoy it. We might look suspicious if we didn't."

"Yes, of course," Stephen said. "I can see how in your eyes everything can be made more authentic with caffeine."

"See, now you're starting to get me."

Esan eventually sat them in a set of chairs surrounding a small table. Another tray of food was already set up, more meat rolls with an array of cheese, and it was only then that Tony realized how desperately hungry he was. It'd been a long, disappointing day. They started to devour the offered food while she brought them a set of earthenware mugs with a metal pot. The smell of the tea was divine as she poured for each of them.

"Okay, but I really didn't mean you had to wait on us," Tony told her. "There's a lot of things I can't do in this world, but pouring tea I could probably manage."

"Probably," Stephen said doubtfully.

Esan ducked her head. "It's no trouble, of course. You must be cold. I can bring you more food, too, if you like. Would you prefer anything particular?" She glanced up through her eyelashes at them. No, Tony realized. At Peter.

Tony stifled a grin and caught Stephen doing the same. Peter didn't answer, shyly picking at his sleeves with clumsy fingers.

"I think this should be enough," Stephen said, taking pity on him. "We're guests here, and we have no wish to be a burden."

"You're not," she insisted loyally. "Father wanted to know when you returned. He's out back with the animals, I think. I'll go tell him."

She scurried off.

"Oh, my," Tony drawled. "And all that talk about the younger camp members striking out on their own pilgrimage soon. Looks like you might receive an invitation, Peter."

Peter's pink face turned dark red. "I don't, um. I have no idea what you're talking about."
"Sure you don't." Tony took a reverent sip of tea, sighing contentedly as the heat and caffeinated flavor of it seeped into his bones. "Oh, that's good. Guys, I think I'm having a religious experience here. What do you think the odds are they'd let me steal a tea plant?"

Stephen shrugged. "Good. If you ask them nicely and give something back in return."

"Done and done. What will they accept? Hyperbolic gratitude? My first born child? Someone's hand in marriage?" He paused, eyeing Peter thoughtfully. The kid didn't notice.

Stephen slanted him an admonishing look. "Working conditions are difficult this far southeast, with the cold. Extra hands are always welcome."

"What about extra mouths?" Tony asked.

"If we were intending to stay here, we'd have to earn our keep. We'll have a few days grace and then the rules of hospitality will be work against us, not for us."

Peter glanced over his shoulder, deeper into the tent.

"Shouldn't we be helping out anyway?" the kid asked, frowning. "I mean, these people aren't exactly rolling in it. They don't have much to spare, but they didn't even hesitate."

"You might've noticed," Tony said, "that we don't have much to spare either."

Peter made a face. "Yeah, but. There must be something."

"Not like we're not going to be busy the next few days. I really need to find the source of that element signature, not to mention the mysterious stone towers are going to drive me insane. Of course, maybe if someone could be convinced to share their toys with the rest of the class."

Tony glared at Stephen leadingly. The sorcerer took a long, calm drink of his tea.

"You'll figure it out soon enough," Stephen said peacefully. "Today or tomorrow. Or on the third day, in futures where you're feeling particularly slow."

"Does it have anything to do with the symbols?" Peter asked. "Is it a language?"

"No idea," Tony admitted. "FRIDAY's still searching the database. I doubt it, though. All the pillars had them, but they looked mostly decorative from what I could tell. They were pretty rudimentary, really."

"Not all of them. The ones at the top were kind of intricate, I thought?"

"The who what now?" Tony asked.

"At the top." Peter stared at him, frowning. "You saw the ones on the top, didn't you? Right on top of the pillar, I mean. Not around it."

"No, I did not see the ones on top of the pillar." Tony scowled. "Unlike some, I wasn't busy breaking our human-abilities-only rule."

"I didn't see you complaining about that when you asked about the heating spell," Stephen said.

Tony sighed. "Well, that's because it worked in my favor then. Peter, why didn't you say something sooner?"
"I thought you knew!" the kid protested. "You took, like, an hour looking at it. How was I supposed to know you weren't looking at all the angles?"

"I thought I was." Tony reached for the nanotech, aborting at the last second as reality reasserted it. "Shit, we're going to be limited to graphite and paper down here, aren't we?"

Stephen grinned. "I think they've advanced to at least the use of ink."

"Fuck my life." Tony checked around quickly for witnesses, then pulled a length of nanobots out until they formed something that almost resembled a pen. "Here. It won't be ink, but close enough to be indistinguishable to the naked eye." He handed Peter the cloth from their lunch, pulling the fabric until it stretched flat. "Sketch out what you saw at the top."

"But I don't remember all of it -"

"Whatever you do remember," Tony said impatiently.

Peter frowned, eyeing the nano-pen thoughtfully. "Maybe we could do something like this for them. Give them pens, I mean. Do they have pens of their own?"

"Not that I know of," Stephen said. "And they wouldn't thank you for them, regardless. As I said, this culture's remained as is for many thousands of years. They don't want progress."

"But there's got to be something we can do for them."

Stephen watched as Peter started to slowly mark out a few shaky lines. "They might accept new designs, if you can think of any. They're an artistic people."

"Artsy people who hate industry," Tony muttered. "This whole place was designed to be my worst nightmare."

Stephen ignored him. "More than even art, these people love stories. That's certainly something they'd appreciate having from us. Granted, we'd have to be careful not to make mention of where we come from or who we are, but we could make it work."

Tony grinned. "Not a bad idea. I feel like Peter'd make a pretty spectacular Scheherazade, don't you, Stephen?"

Peter glanced up, blinking. "A what?"

Stephen smiled, amused. "Fitting, perhaps. Apart from his not waiting for morning execution. Or being the wife of a sultan."

Peter looked shocked. "What?"

"He'd make such a pretty bride," Tony said thoughtfully. "How much you want to bet he'd sweep this whole village off its feet?"

"No bet," Stephen said dryly.

"Yeah, I suppose he's already snared one of our hosts. Guess that bird's flown. Can't be too hard from there."

Peter flushed puce. "I have not."

Tony took another sip of tea. "Have."
"Haven't."

"Have."

"What are you, five?" Peter asked. "Haven't."

"Excuse you, I'm at least six, if not seven. Have."

"Children," Stephen drawled. "Don't make me turn this whole expedition around."

"Yeah, kid," Tony said. "Back to work."

"You," Peter started to say, pointing the pen at him.

Stephen cut him off. "Peter, stop antagonizing him."

"What?" the spiderling protested. "Why me? He started it!"

"Because I can rely on you to be an adult about things. And you know what he's like."

Tony flicked at him with one finger. "Not nice, Stephen. Just for that, I'm taking your tea too."

"Well, I wouldn't want to lose a limb getting it back," Stephen said. "Keep it."

Approaching footsteps had them all looking up. The bemused look on Verdun's face said he'd caught at least some of that last part.

"Esan tried to explain to me this morning that you are quite serious about your tea," their host said slowly, smiling like someone not quite sure whether or not he'd heard the tail end of a joke. "I had thought the tale of possible dismemberment pure exaggeration. Apparently that's not the case."

"It's a low risk, I suppose," Stephen said. "But a risk, nonetheless."

"Yeah, he's having an experience," Peter put in. He'd gone back to sketching.

Verdun caught sight of the pen and blinked in surprise. "I have not seen such a thing before. What is that?"

"A small item that holds ink inside and automatically dispenses it at the tip," Stephen said. "We call it a pen."

"Hmm." The man turned away, obviously losing interest. "What a strange notion."

Tony opened his mouth to say something indignant and probably very unwise, but fortunately Stephen got there first.

"Verdun, you and your family have been more than generous. Even just the food we're eating must be taxing your stores. Have you considered what we might do in return for all your help? As I said before, we have no money and no supplies from which to pay you."

"And as I said before," Verdun said with a thunderous frown, "no payment is necessary."

"Please. I'm sure there's much we could do to help. An extra set of hands can be a blessing, especially in the spring."

"Yes, that's true," Verdun said hesitantly. He wasn't obvious about it, but Tony could see him look
Stephen's hands, scarred and obviously unfit for the kind of labor likely to be needed in a nomadic community.

Stephen caught it too, but he made effort to remove his hands from sight. The look on his face said he'd anticipated this topic.

"An accident in our former camp. A transport overturned with me inside it." He shrugged, turning so his palms were visible, as was the tremor when he extended his fingers. "Unfortunately, I wasn't able to make a full recovery."

Tony nudged a tea mug closer to Stephen. He slid his hand out of sight and over the sorcerer's knee, squeezing gently. Stephen blinked, wrapping his fingers automatically around the hot mug. The natural tremor eased.

"You were not able to obtain healing?" Verdun asked sympathetically, watching the byplay without comment.

"I was, but not in time to be effective."

"You have our sympathy."

"I wouldn't offer too much of that," Tony said, tracing small circles with his thumb. "He managed to land on his feet well enough."

"Yeah," Peter agreed. "Went from being a crazy, kick-ass neurosurgeon, to a crazy, kick-ass -"

Stephen cleared his throat warningly.

"- um. Crazy, kick-ass - scholar?" Peter finished weakly.

"Wow, you really are bad at talking," Tony marvelled. "I got the worst of that on our last stop. Guess it's your turn, kid."

"Oh, no," Peter said, all sincerity. "I couldn't. I'm nothing compared to you."

"I swear, you've gotten so disrespectful since I stole you away from good old mother Earth."

Stephen kicked them both, dropping his free hand over Tony's to interlace their fingers out of sight.

Verdun looked amused. "I do enjoy watching these little chats of yours. I had hoped to speak with you longer this evening, but you arrived back quite late. I sent Esan to bed when she came to find me, and I too must turn in shortly. I suggest you do the same. As you know, the camp stirs early."

"Yeah," Tony said sourly, remembering waking wide-eyed and shocked at the cacophony of noise a nomad camp produced in the small hours of the morning. It'd been as loud as New York in the height of rush hour, complete with people shouting incomprehensible things at each other that may or may not have been curse words. "We remember."

Verdun was silently laughing at them. "You've been journeying long and clearly have forgotten the rhythms of camp life. You may need to learn them again."

"I don't believe we'll be here long enough for that to be necessary," Stephen said.

Verdun made a sorrowful sound. "A shame. As I said, visitors are often a blessing, if only for their stories."
"Those, we're pleased to offer. Understanding, of course, that some tales are not for outside ears."

"Of course," Verdun said. "All families have this. Did you find what you needed in the valley?"

"Not even close," Tony said with a scowl. "There's a particular element we're looking for. It was rare in our previous home. Here I seem to find traces of it everywhere, but none of any real use. Any idea where else we could look?"

"I'm not sure what element you mean," Verdun admitted. "Do you have any remaining? Can you show it to me?"

Which was the crux of the matter, really. Tony could show it to him, sure. But the sight of the nanotech housing unit and the glow of the arc power source might be a little bit startling to someone who had to rub sticks and stones together to make fire.

"No, I really can't," Tony said.

"Then I'm uncertain how to help you. If you're looking for new minerals and didn't find them in the valley, there are few other options." Verdun gestured in a wide, exaggerated circle, smiling. "As you can see, most of the resources we have in our camp come from the forest, or from our animals."


"I suppose it might seem treacherous when it was responsible for washing your livelihood away," Verdun said sympathetically. "Journeying without livelihood can be tantamount to death."

"Preaching to the choir."

Verdun looked very puzzled by that.

Stephen broke in to wave him away gratefully. "Don't let us keep you up, please. We'll finish here and then sleep, as you suggested."

"Yes, of course. I realize yesterday must've been uncomfortably cramped, but today I've arranged for you to stay overnight in one of the unused dwellings. It's larger than our den, at least. If you gather the remains of your meal, I'll show it to you now."

Tony reluctantly allowed Peter to stop sketching long enough for them to use the cloth as another makeshift sack, scooping up stray cutlery to shove inside. Peter picked up the food tray as Verdun gestured them on.

"Come."

They followed, passing beyond the cloth boundary of the tent and back into the heart of the small community.

"This section of the camp is set aside for my family's craftwork," Verdun explained as they walked. "Unfortunately, we do not have an extra domicile to hand. The family who has offered one works to nurture some of the few spice plants which can survive the mountain's winter. They are out now, tending them. I will introduce you tomorrow."

"Right, speaking of tomorrow," Tony began to say.

"Mr. Stark!" Peter whispered urgently.

"Kid, I told you to call me -"
"Look!"

Tony followed Peter's pointing finger, jolting when he noticed what it was pointing at.

Verdun had also turned at the exclamation and hummed his appreciation. "The Lighthouse? But you must have seen them before, of course. Did you not have one near your former camp?"

"No," Tony said, staring. It was hard to believe he hadn't seen it yesterday when they'd come in, or this morning when they'd left, but the pillar itself was mostly concealed by the slope of the land, and like the others in the valley, it was situated off to the side. Unlike the ones in the valley, though, this one was relatively clear of any dirt or debris and seemed to be well-tended.

"See?" Peter said, gesturing upward. "At this angle you can almost see some of the design at the top." He balanced the food tray easily on one arm, tugging at the sack Tony carried until he could turn it so the half-sketched pattern showed. Tony glanced down at it once and then again, recognition blazing through him like a shock of fire. He stared.

"Mr. Stark?" Peter asked, puzzled.

"That man," Tony said slowly, ponderously, "has no regard for lawn maintenance."

Peter stared at him. "What?"

"FRIDAY," Tony said, recklessly ignoring Verdun close behind them. "Tell me I'm not imagining things. Is that -"

She came through clearly in his ear, the static from before gone. "I'm not sure what you mean, boss."

Tony turned dazedly back to squint at the pillar again. "Do you build them where you set up camp?" he asked slowly. "And then move and create another wherever you go?"

"Create them?" Verdun sounded shocked. "Of course not! Well. I should say that at one point we did, of course, but that was many thousands of years ago. Now we simply camp near them for safety and protection, but there are so many we needn't make more." He looked quizzically amongst the three of them. "What a strange place your former camp must've been. You seem to be lacking much of our people's history."

"There is a reason we journeyed far," Stephen said, misleadingly. "Not all camps are as knowledgeable of the past as yours. Some choose to forget. I've encountered a few of them."

Verdun nodded, looking very sorry on their behalf.

"To shelter without the protection of a Lighthouse. How very sad."

"What kind of protection does it offer?" Tony asked, starting to drift toward it. His mind immediately jumped to the obvious level of technology these people clearly didn't have.

"Well, the protection of the Bridge, of course. It's mostly symbolic. Though I understand just a few years ago that many of our brothers and sisters on other mountains were ravaged by marauders from a far away place. Fortunately, our camp did not encounter these beings. Nevertheless, it only reinforces that camps should always be established with a Lighthouse near, lest we need to call on the Gods to help us."


"Yes," Stephen said. He'd come up behind Tony and now laid a steadying hand on his shoulder. Tony felt his touch as if through a haze while his mind tried to cycle through the improbable facts he was being given. "We know about them. Odin. Thor."

"Oh, yes," Verdun said happily, while beside them Peter gasped with realization. "Have you heard the tale of Odin's runes? It is an older one, but I quite enjoy it."

"Nope," Tony said. "Haven't."

"Perhaps you will have the chance to hear it before you go," Verdun was cheerfully. "Come, there is no time to linger. Night is setting in and we must be abed."

Tony stumbled along after him as the man moved away, conscious of Stephen close against his shoulder and Peter moving quizzically beside him.

"Did you say Thor?" Peter asked Stephen.

"He said Thor," Tony confirmed numbly. He glanced at Verdun, slowing to allow some distance to build between them, enough so they wouldn't be overheard. "The design you saw. I've seen something like it before. It's an aftereffect of something called the Bifrost Bridge. Thor was pretty tight-lipped about it, but it's basically a machine that can create an Einstein-Rosen wormhole connecting two points in space for near-instantaneous travel."

Peter lit up with curiosity. "Really? One that people can pass through?"

"Yeah."

"But how do they stabilize it? I thought the Einstein-Rosen bridge was theoretically unstable."

"Some kind of exotic manner. Hard to say, really. Thor was always a wet blanket when it came to Asgardian technology."

"But they've been here before then, obviously? The Asgardians?"

"Yes, but in what capacity? These people are clearly nowhere near the same technological level. What could Asgard want with them?"

"What could Asgard want with Earth?" Stephen asked pointedly.

"True enough. I always used to wonder if -" Tony stopped, turning to Stephen suddenly. "Wait a second. You knew."

Stephen smiled. "I did, of course."

Tony stared at him, an ember of anger trying to work its way slowly into his worldview. "And you couldn't say anything, why? Do you enjoy seeing me squirm for answers?"

Stephen was unbothered by his irritation. "I enjoy seeing your brilliance at work, yes."

Tony struggled not to let the obvious flattery smooth his ruffled feathers. "This is obviously a friendly world. There's no danger here, no overriding concern I might take the wrong left turn and get hit by the bus. So why the song and dance?"
"We've discussed this. Whatever answers you come to need to be on your own merits. I will only interfere in dire need." Stephen's smile sharpened pointedly. "You life and your choices are your own, or so FRIDAY says."

And while Tony digested the fact that apparently Stephen and FRIDAY were best friends forever who couldn't go a day without talking, the sorcerer looked ahead and whatever he saw made him laugh. "Fortunately for all of us, you're a self-proclaimed genius. The future is never hidden from you for long. But you sometimes need particular displays to inspire you."

"Displays?"

Stephen gestured with his chin. Tony followed it, coming to a dead stop when he saw their host had paused to help one of his neighbours. Verdun was knelt next to a cart, replacing a wheel with three broken spokes, while a tiny Asian woman who probably didn't even come up to Tony's nose was levering the cart up above him with one hand. The whole thing probably weighed three or four hundred pounds. Maybe more.

"Congratulations," Stephen commented. "This is the fastest I think I've ever seen you work it out."

"Flattery will get you nowhere," Tony insisted, staring.

"Won't it?"

"Whoa," Peter said, watching the tiny woman pick up and move the cart entirely when Verdun indicated she should test it. "Well, at least I won't be out of place here if I forget about my strength?"

"Just so long as you don't start climbing the walls," Tony muttered.

"They might not be as startled by that as you think," Stephen admitted. "Thor flies, after all. Still, best to keep up appearances as much as possible."

"Right. Last thing we need is to be considered on par with the Asgardians."

"No one could ever be considered on par with the Asgardians," Stephen said quietly. "But as their cousins, the Vanir might be the closest we'll ever encounter. Welcome to Vanaheim."
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Where nothing is ever quite black or white.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Peter Parker was born to be a hero, and Tony'd never doubted that.

The kid's steadfast belief in truth and justice would've given him away, even if he hadn't started running around New York thwarting bike thieves and rescuing cats out of burning buildings and helping little old ladies cross the road. Peter had a natural faith in the decency of people and all the trimmings of a classic knight in shining armor, sword and shield notwithstanding. The phenomenal strength and the wall crawling were just details; window dressing on an otherwise already solid construct.

In a universe where Tony doubted almost everyone and everything, he'd never doubted the potential in Peter. Or that one day Peter would become one of the very best young superheroes ever to swing his way around Earth.

Still; some heroes were born for the shadows and some for the limelight. Tony had never been sure exactly where Peter fell in that spectrum. Until now.

"I need to get that kid started on an acting career," Tony said.

Stephen huffed, his eyes on the small clearing the Vanir had marked off at the center of the camp; a stage. Peter was busy gesturing dramatically from inside it. "Yes, I can just imagine him trying to juggle celebrity status and a secret identity. His first interview would end the charade rather spectacularly."

"He can be one of those press-shy artists," Tony insisted. "We'll build him a PR department and script all his answers. It's what most of the celebrity industry does anyway."

"I've seen some of your interviews," Stephen said, sounding anything but impressed. "I can only assume your PR department quit in protest some time ago. And that any new one you put together will revolt in a similar fashion."

Tony frowned, annoyed. "Creative differences, they said. I threw enough money at them to fund a small country, but apparently no amount could be worth dealing with my many and varied public scandals."

They sat in silence for a while as Peter went on animating his story, soaring his hands through the air in a complicated maneuver that made the youngest of the children watching gasp and shriek with delight. The adults hushed them, trying and failing not to look as captivated as their offspring.

"He really is Scheherazade," Tony marvelled. He and Stephen were sat some distance away. Close enough to hear, if they strained, far enough that the mix of firelight and shadows would cast them as nondescript silhouettes to an unwary observer. The slope of the hill gave them a decent birds-eye
Stephen hummed an affirmation. "He's a surprisingly good showman, all things considered."

"Shocking, isn't it? Kid trips over his words so often, you'd never peg him for a master storyteller."

"Though, unlike Scheherazade, I suspect he'll manage to avoid an arranged marriage under threat of death."

Tony glanced at the people crowded close. Among them he could see Esan and a small group of others her age, all of whom looked completely and utterly enchanted. "Not if he keeps going on like this, he won't."

Peter swooped down to pick up one of the many props he'd made to enhance his new occupation as a professional bard. He'd started off small. An unassuming stick here, a farming implement there; nothing fancy. But while Tony'd spent the last week examining every square inch of the mountain as a monument to science, Peter had occupied himself with different pursuits.

Tony had to give the kid credit. The latest prop was a more than decent replica; the color scheme and the shape were just about perfect.

"But the proportions are all wrong," Tony muttered. "Cap's shield's at least an eighth of an inch wider across the diameter."

Stephen snorted, amused. "Is that petulance I hear? Now, Tony. There's no need to be jealous just because he hasn't made an Iron Man mask in your honor."

"Jealous? Who said anything about jealous. I'm just out for scientific accuracy, here. An eighth of an inch matters when considering the aerodynamics of a vibranium shield."

"I'd wager nothing scientific matters when considering the aerodynamics of a vibranium shield," Stephen said. "I've seen the footage. It doesn't obey the laws of physics."

"Well, neither do you," Tony retorted. "That doesn't mean we just toss away one eighth of an inch of you." He glared at the offending thing as Peter mimed throwing and catching it to excited murmurs from his audience. The kid was in the middle of some weird, stilted dialogue about detention and scripted warnings and something about gym class. He sounded like an infomercial. "I bet you that shield doesn't fly half as well as its Cap-approved counterpart."

"In fairness, this one's made of wood."

"Yeah, well. Who said anything about fairness, either?"

Stephen made soft, soothing noises that did little to disguise the fact he was just barely holding in his laughter. "I'm sure the next story he tells will feature a daring rescue by the heroic Iron Man."

Tony glowered. "At least we swore him to secrecy about the ship. Don't get me wrong, it's a great story, and you make a really awesome damsel in distress, but in that one I'd be the villain."

Stephen held out a hand and tipped it side to side. "Could go either way. Your kidnapping technically came after the rescue. But I doubt you have much cause for concern. There's no version of any story Peter might tell where you come out the villain."

"I think you underestimate how villainous I can be," Tony said. "And also how horrified he looked when I took away his spider suit that one time. It was like I kicked his puppy. And then several
other puppies, just because."

"I think you underestimate his willingness to forgive you any fault."

"No, I don't. I just think some things are harder to forgive than others."

They watched as Peter dramatically swash-buckled his way through a fight with several invisible foes. He was obviously improvising in certain places where Spider-Man's natural inclinations would've taken him into aerial combat, but the stories were meant to be embellished. Peter was disguising Earth's superhero escapades as mere legends and fairy tales.

"Look at that," Tony said with admiration. "He's got them eating out of his hands. You'd think these people'd never heard an adventure story before."

Stephen made a considering noise. "They've never heard these adventure stories before. The same recycled legends have been circulating on this world for tens of thousands of years. Peter's a charismatic young man excited to share new things on a world starved for innovation. Of course they love him."

"Thought you said they'd resist change?"

"That doesn't mean they're not starving for it. See how they hang on his every word? Peter could start reading them a list of his educational subjects and they'd be just as enthralled."

"Yeah," Tony drawled. "Think I'll suggest that for tomorrow's encore performance."

Traditionally, Verdun had explained, the camp shared most of their evening meals together, but they entertained only once every nine days, which on this planet coincided with the full moon in its lunar cycle. But with Tony, Stephen and Peter visiting, the camp had made an exception. For five nights, now, they'd cheered Peter on as the kid wobbled through his first story, picked up steam with his second, and amazed with every consecutive one that followed. They'd originally meant for all of them to share the stage, but Tony and Stephen had (politely) abstained. Peter had been surprisingly happy to fill the void.

"Why did you decline?" Stephen asked. Tony blinked at him. "If you were willing to speak you might achieve a celebrity status here to rival yours on Earth."

Tony made a disgusted face. "Been there, done far too much of that. There's something to be said for obscurity." Tony waved a hand at Peter's antics, grinning with reflected glory. "Besides, knew after that first night the kid could benefit from some time in the spotlight. Look at him go."

"Is that why we're still here?"

Tony paused. "Sorry?"

"Give me some credit. I may not recall all the details of the future, but I remember enough to guess you'll have finished your examination of the mountain two or three days ago."

"Stephen, I'm flattered and slightly appalled by your faith in my genius."

"Tony," Stephen said softly, mildly. "Why are we still here?"

Tony sat back until the shadows started to swallow him, but he suspected no amount of cover would do him any favors with the sorcerer.
"Why ask a question you already know the answer to?" Tony muttered.

Stephen smiled at him, far too fondly. "To hear you admit it."

It was the smile, really, that did Tony in. He found as time went on that he was becoming rather more vulnerable to Stephen's smiles than was probably wise to admit. "Alright, fine. And it was four days ago I found the element, thank you very much. Only took me that long because this entire planet is ridiculous."

"It is a bit, isn't it?" Stephen asked, chuckling. "All of the Nine Realms defy logical understanding, but some of them are truly maddening."

Tony rolled his eyes. "The sorcerer criticizing other worlds for disobeying scientific law. That's rich."

"I wasn't criticizing. Just admiring your unusual forbearance in remaining on such a world. It's clearly not to your tastes."

"You're like a dog with a bone, you know that? Obviously we're not here on my account." Tony glared at everything around him, gesturing at the land, the people, the animals; the world at large. "Good old fashioned country living on a backdrop of science so indistinguishable from nature the only word for it is magic? It's like someone made a special place in hell just for me."

Stephen ducked his head, but his shoulders were shaking with suppressed laughter. "Well, don't hold back now. Tell me how you really feel."

"It's only been a week and I already want to throw myself in one of the fire pits," Tony said flatly. "Send me back to lizard world. I'd rather deal with the fascist dictator."

Suppressed laughter gave way to real laughter and Stephen had to stifle it with a cough when the few people near them looked back in admonishment.

On a roll now, Tony continued with a barely hidden laugh of his own. "Seriously, I could go years cooped up in a lab with only the occasional glimpse of sunlight to prove the outside world still existed." He shrugged. "But Peter needs more than that. FRIDAY's watching the system for trouble and we're under no threat here. There was no better time for the kid to let off some steam."

Stephen looked quietly triumphant. "So what it comes down to is: In spite of all evidence to the contrary, Tony Stark has a heart after all."

Tony waved his hands in protest. "You make it sound so sentimental. It was common sense. Very smart teenager wandering aimlessly through giant flying donut with no release valve; not awesome, remember?"

"Common sense and sentiment aren't mutually exclusive," Stephen said. "Love is common enough. Though it doesn't always make sense."

Tony hesitated, because that was skirting close to some very dangerous territory. "Most people would agree that love and Tony Stark in the same sentence doesn't make sense. Common or otherwise."

"That's because they don't know you."

Tony fumbled for a glib response to that, hesitating over the first six things that immediately sprang to mind before he went utterly blank. Around them, people obliviously went on with the show in
front of them, ignorant to the drama playing out behind.

"If you want to continue spouting the same PR you sell to the press, I can't stop you," Stephen continued into the prickly silence. "But let's not pretend you're going to convince me. You love deeply and sincerely, and not always wisely. And I've never met anyone so calculating or rational who has so much trouble separating his heart and his mind."

"Right," Tony said, a strange constriction in his throat lending weight to his words. "Well. Part of my charm."

"Yes, it is," Stephen agreed. "And you are charming, Tony. Even when you're being foolish."

"I'm glad you think so, because that last bit's true basically ninety percent of the time, and the rest of the time I'm sleeping." Tony cleared his throat uncomfortably. "Since when are you such a paragon of emotional insight? Have you and FRIDAY been gossiping again?"

Tony waited for FRIDAY, ever-present and always monitoring, to hop over the transmitter with an appropriately witty comment. But she was unusually silent, proving she had a better grasp of relationship dynamics than probably Tony ever would.

"Something I've been working on in my spare time," Stephen said. "Perhaps you'd like a few lessons."

Tony gave him a weak but lecherous grin. "You can feel free to give me a lesson on anything, any time, doc."

Tony had more to say, impudent things that called for a grin and maybe an obnoxious wink or two that might salve his rapidly fading dignity. But someone was walking toward them, detaching from the crowd to step lightly up the hill, and Tony had to swallow it back.

The unknown figure quickly resolved into a familiar form.

"Hello," Verdun said brightly as he approached. "It's been a busy week, hasn't it? And some time since I last saw you. How do you fare this evening?"

"Fair to middling," Tony punned promptly, earning himself a bemused look.

"*Fair* to middling," Tony punned promptly, earning himself a bemused look.

Tony couldn't see Stephen roll his eyes, but he could feel it. "We're well, Verdun, thank you. And you?"

Verdun smiled. "Oh, wonderful. These nightly stories have been invigorating. An excellent treat in the transition from winter to spring."

"Doesn't feel like much of a transition," Tony said, who rather thought he'd have frozen to death on this planet by now if not for the subtle art of magical warming spells.

"You only say that because you haven't seen what winter here looks like," Stephen muttered at him. Tony ignored that, zeroing in suddenly on a tray in Verdun's hands. "Oh, hey. Is that tea?"

Verdun grinned, probably at the hope Tony couldn't quite quash from his voice. The Vanir knelt to place the tray on the ground so they could see it did indeed hold a tea kettle, as well as four mugs.

"I've not known you long," Verdun said as he started to pour each of them a fragrant beverage. "But already I understand the key to any successful encounter with you requires tea. Fortunately, that's no
hardship. I quite enjoy tea."

"You and I are going to be great friends. I can just tell."

Verdun handed him a mug, then Stephen, then took one for himself. "I certainly hope so. I have brought extra so that when the performance is over, you may share the kettle with your young one."

Stephen laughed. "That's kind of you, Verdun, but the tea won't survive that long."

Tony dragged the tray protectively closer. "It might. But, I mean, best to drink it before it gets cold, that's what I always say. Look, already it's not scalding my mouth anymore. Drink up, quick."

Verdun sipped from his mug, frowning. "I thought you enjoyed cold tea. Iced tea, as you called it."

"I wouldn't say enjoyed. Tolerated, maybe."

"I tried it," Verdun admitted. "It didn't seem tolerable to me."

"Verdun, how would you compare our stories with those normally shared?" Stephen interrupted before Tony could say anything in defense of all things caffeine. "Very different, I'd imagine."

"Oh, we have never heard the like," Verdun said, setting his mug down. "They are all so unique."

"It's our pleasure to share them, of course. Though, technically, I suppose it's Peter's pleasure."

Verdun looked delighted, glancing down at the performance below. "Yes, your Peter has an impressive theatrical talent. We've basked in it at length this week."

"Well, that's what he was known for, back home," Tony said brightly. "His theatrics. Even had a costume I made up for him. Kid loves his spandex. Big step up from the onesie."

"Spandex?"

"A type of form-fitting fabric that adds elasticity but tends to remove insulation from clothing," Stephen explained. "I doubt you'd find it useful here in the mountains."

Verdun made a moue of distaste. "No, that sounds rather counterproductive. Here we must add layers, not take them away." He turned to Tony eagerly. "What process did you use to create this spandex? I understood you were a stonemason, not a tailor."

Tony shrugged. "I'm a bit of anything that requires design work. Afraid I can't disclose the incredible secret of spandex, though. Mostly because it might be impossible to explain."

"I've never heard of such a secret," Verdun said earnestly. "I would like to learn it. Perhaps I can add the technique to my repertoire if the camp should ever relocate to warmer climate."

Tony eyed him. "Your repertoire?"

Verdun held up something in his hands, the first time Tony'd realized he was carrying anything aside from tea. It was a small contraption, square and flat, banded by multiple cords of string trailing like tassels. As Tony watched, Verdun set it at an angle in his lap and began using a long instrument to interlace new material into the mix.

"You're a tailor?"

"A weaver," Verdun corrected. "Our family works with many textiles, but always the loom has
been my specialty. I started a new work upon your arrival. I will finish it in time for your departure."

"You don't have to do that," Stephen said, looking on with curiosity as Verdun began to swiftly knot and neaten new lines. "We require no gifts."

"Gifts are never required. That is why they are gifts."

"We may not be able to stay long enough for you to complete your project," Stephen said. From the look on Stephen's face, he wasn't quite sure what to do with this offer.

Verdun shook his head. "Don't fear. It will be done."

His fingers danced over the curtain of strings. Tony wasn't sure how he could even see well enough in the firelight to weave, but the man's expertise was obvious. His hands moved as quickly as striking snakes, as quickly as Tony's hands might move with his machines, or Stephen's with his magic, or Peter's with his webbing.

Verdun hummed in consideration. "May I ask a question?"

"You just did," Tony said, at the same time Stephen said: "Of course."

"If Tony is a craftsman of no single trade, and Peter is a student of theatrics, what was your specialty, Stephen? You speak very well, and have done since your arrival. Have you always been a man of great words? Were you a statesman?"

Stephen scowled. "I'm not a politician, if that's what you're asking." His tone made it obvious exactly what he thought of that. "I've just learned to use words wisely."

Tony turned helpless laughter into a coughing fit that only worsened when the sorcerer glared at him.

"Often great wisdom is born of great loss," Verdun said, his eyes on his work. "What loss did you see, I wonder, that you hope to prevent by being wise?"

Stephen stiffened, and for the first time on this planet, Tony saw his biorhythm sensor spike out of range. Tony sat up straight, all amusement quickly vanishing.

Stephen studied Verdun warily. "I'm not sure what you mean?"

Verdun looked at them, blinking to see their serious expressions. "You needn't tell me of it. I only wondered. You've shared before some of the strife in your journey. It sounds like a harrowing experience. A harrowing life."

"It's had parts both good and ill," Stephen admitted. "And more to come, I'm certain."

"And you're sure you can't stay for longer?" Verdun asked, hands still moving with grace. "Sometimes refuge is needed from great adventure."

Stephen looked away. "Your offer is tempting. But I think we must decline."

Verdun hesitated, troubled. "Should you need shelter - this camp, this place is always open to you. You may return any time you wish. You will always have a place of safety here."

"That's a difficult promise," Stephen said, softly. "I don't think you fully understand what it means to offer it."
"Don't I?" Verdun rested the loom on his knees. "My Esan longs to go with you, but that is not the path for her. If all goes well, it's likely she will lead the next caravan, and it will go far from here." He looked down at where Esan sat rapt with the rest of her peers. There was something very sad and knowing in his eyes. "Farther than most, I think. I know it is the way of things that children must grow and find their own way. But already I miss her, and she has not even gone yet."

Tony squirmed, the genuine emotion in that voice making him very uncomfortable. He glanced down too, focusing on Peter, who was currently gliding along with his arms held out to either side of himself. Apparently the spider had turned into an airplane. "She'll come visit, I'm sure. Absence makes the heart grow fonder and all that."

Verdun focused on him curiously. "What a strange thing to say. What does that mean? I've never heard the like before."

"Oh, well." Tony tried to backpedal. "Not speaking from experience, here, but basically what it says on the tin. Absence, fondness; you know."

"I don't know. How are these two things related?"

"Look, I don't make up the quotes, I just repeat them," Tony insisted.

Verdun was bemused. "I notice you have been absent from the camp for long hours this week. Is this an effort to inspire fondness?"

"Okay, know what? Forget I said anything. Absence does not make the heart grow fonder, and I get the feeling I should absent myself from this conversation before I accidentally violate the prime directive."

Now Verdun looked surprised. "I hope I haven't caused any offense. If I have, it was unintentional. What is the prime directive?"

"Stephen," Tony said plaintively.

The sorcerer had been peacefully watching Tony go down in flames a second ago, but he stepped in at that. "No apologies required, Verdun. Tony's been absent this week looking for elemental sources. There's nothing more significant to it than that."

"Ah," Verdun said. "Have you found what you were looking for, then? The mineral?"

"I did," Tony confirmed, eager to jump on this change of subject. "Kind of grows in abundance on this world. And I do mean that literally."

When Verdun glanced sideways at him, Tony scouted along the ground until he found what he was looking for a few steps away. He tossed it in Verdun's direction. The man caught it, turning it over questioningly.

Tony shrugged an explanation. "It looked different where we come from. But here, in your camp, this shit actually grows on trees."

Stephen smiled very knowingly. "Nature, right? Who needs it?"

"Shut up, Stephen."

"This is what you were looking for?" Verdun asked, astonished, looking at the pinecone in his hands.
"Apparently," Tony said. "Not that I can explain it. It doesn't appear anywhere else. Not in the sap or the bark or the roots. It's just the cones. I have no idea why."

Verdun looked completely bewildered. "But this is not an element at all! It is only a Seed."

"Maybe for you it's a seed," Tony said, shrugging. "For me, it's an element."

"You use Seeds in your craftwork?"

"Definitely."

Verdun couldn't seem to wrap his head around that. "If I'd known what you looked for, I could've advised you much better. Though it hardly seems likely to require advice. Seeds are everywhere. I thought you sought a mineral."

"Well, so did I."

Verdun hardly seemed to hear him. "Seeds in stonemasonry. But how? This form isn't suitable to that task." He turned the pinecone from side to side, like looking at it from different angles might offer some supplemental explanation. "And yet other forms are far less stable. They were cultivated like this for a reason. By all camps, I thought."

His surprise was acute enough to almost spark some of Tony's former paranoia awake. "Cultivated? It used to appear naturally in other forms?"

"Of course it did," Verdun insisted, distressed at this new example of Tony's ignorance. "I cannot think what camp you must be from, to not have Seeds. How is such a thing possible?"

"I think there's much that's different between this camp and ours," Stephen said, giving Tony a warning look.

"No Lighthouse, no Seeds," Verdun said, almost to himself. "What a dark place you must have lived in. It's no wonder you chose to leave it."

"Wasn't all that bad," Tony objected. "It had coffee. That's like tea, but better."

Verdun look down at the tea kettle with a suspicious frown. "Is that - possible?"

"I like this one," Tony told Stephen brightly. "Can we keep him?"

Stephen sighed. "I'm afraid not. Your caffeine addiction notwithstanding." He leaned over to touch Verdun's forgotten loom carefully, clearly aiming for a distraction. "Verdun, tell me more of this. I haven't met a weaver before. Is the loom your design?"

Distracted, Verdun leaned back, looking almost dazedly at his forgotten tapestry. He set down the pinecone beside him and Tony discreetly pocketed it.

"It is my mother's grandfather's design," Verdun said, picking apart one of the knots to show Stephen some of the mysterious inner workings of the thing. "She gave it to me. And I will give it to Esan."

"It's something that passes from parent to child, then?"

"Yes. As far back as memory serves, we have always been weavers. There is a tapestry in our tent wide enough to cover the room from end to end. Every generation adds a layer to it. It is a great legacy from my family."
"Perhaps you could show us sometime," Stephen suggested.

Verdun nodded slowly, seriously. "Yes, I think I must. Tomorrow, perhaps, or the day after. I will send Esan for you. She is very proud of her part in it." He looked back toward the performance below and smiled, suddenly. "Though I think perhaps she may be considering more theatrical pursuits these days."

Tony looked down, having almost forgotten there was a production going on. He was surprised to see Peter's story had expanded to include two of his audience members; one was Esan, and the other was an enormous bear of a man, standing more than a foot taller than Peter on stage. The circular shield with its improper dimensions lay off to the side, glittering in the firelight.

"Looks like Peter roped her in," Tony agreed, watching. Both the youths were circling the larger man, who'd clearly been advised he was a prop in this little play; he was flailing at them slowly, ponderously, and something about it woke up a niggling, prickly thing in Tony's hindbrain. "Or she roped him in. One way or the other."

Verdun leaned forward in great fascination, almost dipping his loom into one of the mugs. Tony hastily rescued it before any tea could be ruined.

"Oh, wonderful, they've recruited Jesik," Verdun said. "He's a shy man in spite of his imposing size. Almost a recluse. Your Peter must be very charming if he could convince Jesik to assist."

"Peter can be cunning and persuasive," Stephen murmured. "He gets it from Tony. And from using it on Tony."

"Does not," Tony muttered. "And that still doesn't explain how he convinced Esan. Last I checked, kid still hadn't managed to more than blush in her general direction."

Verdun hummed in agreement. "He has a quiet nature, your Peter. Esan has always been exuberant with those she likes." He sighed. "She wears her heart for all to see, and always has."

"Well, young love," Tony said, wincing in anticipation of some pointed questions. "There one day, gone the next. You know how it is."

"No, thankfully I do not," Verdun mused. "I met and married my wife long ago. It's been nearly a millennia since my last brush with such things, and even that was fleeting."

Tony paused, narrowing his eyes. He opened his mouth and then closed it again. He nudged Stephen for help, but the sorcerer was studiously looking away, innocence stamped all over his face.

"A millennia," Tony repeated, finally. "That's impressive. I mean, you don't look a day over six centuries."

"Youth and longevity runs in my family," the man agreed.

A sudden thought occurred to Tony and he glanced down again, squinting at Esan with thoughtful eyes. "In all your family?"

Verdun followed his gaze, smiling. "As I said, she is not quite grown yet. She has yet to see her three hundredth year. Soon, though. Your Peter is somewhat older, I imagine, but his behavior is gentlemanly enough. I cannot imagine he has any improper intentions toward her?"

That last was obviously a question. Tony felt a prickle of protective panic skitter up his spine and he kicked Stephen sharply with his toe. Tony saw the sorcerer cover up a smile.
"He tells such fantastical tales," Verdun continued, marvelling. "About feats equal or greater than those of the old Gods. His confidence is so great it’s as though he’s experienced them for himself. It is a strange thing. Wondrous, but strange."

He drawled the words almost too cheerfully. Tony wondered if he was imagining a glaring note of skepticism there.

"Well," Tony said, ignoring it, "it's true. We do travel with Strange."

Beside him, Stephen huffed a sound that wasn't quite a laugh. "How long have you been waiting to use that one?"

Tony affected a look of surprise. "Oh, are you weighing in on this conversation now? That's nice. Good to hear from you."

"We have many new tales to offer," Stephen said to Verdun. "You would be surprised the stories one gathers while travelling."

"Esan longs for new things," Verdun said, looking at her fondly, the love obvious on his face. "For adventures like those your young one has shared with us. That is why she looks to him, I think, your Peter. He is different from others she knows. But then, you are all different, is that not so?"

And Tony definitely wasn't imagining the broad hint buried there. Stephen heard it too if the spike in his vitals was anything to go by.

"Not so different," Stephen said quietly. "We come from a camp unlike this one, but we're not so far apart. We have much that's the same."

"Sameness, difference," Verdun said, eyes locked on the stage. "Neither is good or bad. They just are. Oh, he’s recruited Adra and Kel to. Excellent."

Tony blinked, glancing down. "Who?"

Verdun was practically vibrating with excitement. "There, you see, just coming up and around. What are those costumes they're wearing? Is that a cape?"

Tony narrowed his eyes, watching two more people join Peter in the spotlight. The one with the cape was done up in gunmetal gray and red, and the second was decked out in red and gold. They started to rotate around the slow moving colossus in their midst, who flailed and swiped at them angrily.

It was then that Tony realized exactly which story Peter was telling.

"Huh," Tony heard himself say. The word distorted, rippling away from him. It almost sounded as though he'd suddenly been thrust under water.

Verdun didn't hear him, captivated by other things, but Stephen did. He looked over sharply, hearing something odd in Tony's response. Probably the underwater phenomenon. Maybe the sorcerer felt it too.

"Tony?"

Tony didn't answer, caught entirely off-guard. He probably shouldn't have been; in retrospect, letting Peter tell stories about Earth's mightiest heroes was bound to wind up in a dramatic climax about the biggest fight the kid had ever been in, the superhero battle royale of the century.
probably didn't even realize how this story might open the door on things Tony would much rather leave buried. Tony'd never told him the particulars, and the kid hadn't been there for the grand finale. He'd been grounded, and then on a plane home to New York, the threat of Aunt May's wrath taking him away from one of the darkest times in Tony's very checkered life.

The world knew the Avengers had gone to war over the Accords; they didn't know why, and they certainly didn't know the why still. The number of people that did know Tony could count on one hand; and that number didn't include Peter.

"Shit," Tony said, feeling the blood start to pound in his ears as the kid pantomimed his own injury at the German airport, falling to the ground. It reminded Tony clearly of that visceral, heart-wrenching moment; finding Peter, still and unmoving, injured in a fight Tony'd dragged him into.

That whole mission had been full of heart-wrenching moments. There'd been surprises that day that ripped Tony's whole world in two and blew up everything he thought he'd known about himself, about others.

On the stage, the faux-Vision in her long flowing cape went skipping after Esan, who Tony now realized was dressed head to toe in dark gray and who could be no one less than Rhodey -

FRIDAY cut in, the transmitter line opening without a sound. "Boss, my scans indicate a change in your vitals. Are you well? Is something wrong?"

Her voice was a shock, familiar accented tones bringing back sharp reminders of other times, other losses -

"You can't beat him hand-to-hand."

- and the feel of his own rage bleeding everything around him into red, until he'd turned into someone he hadn't known how to recognize, someone who didn't care about common sense or love or anything else Stephen might've accused him of earlier. He'd only cared about vengeance.

Tony felt himself unravelling. He needed to get up and walk away. Run away, really; why walk when you could run, why run when you could fly -

Stephen's hand came down on one of Tony's knees and squeezed once, sharply, jolting Tony back to the present. He gasped in a labored sip of air, remembering how to breathe.

Stephen kept his voice too low to be heard by their fascinated companion just a foot away. "Tony?"

"I need to not be here," Tony said, holding as still as he could. He considered whether his hands, if he held them out, might shake like Stephen's. What the sorcerer might think about that. "I'm not here. I'm going."

He levered himself to unsteady feet and expected Stephen to protest, demand to know why; it wouldn't have been an unusual ask, really, all things considered. But Stephen surprised him, rising without a word. Verdun didn't seem to notice as they moved off.

"What is it?" Stephen asked as they went, skirting around the furthest edges of the crowd.

"Old ghosts." Tony stopped, bringing Stephen to a jarring halt when the sorcerer almost ran into him. "Wait. We can't go. Who'll watch Peter?"

"The whole camp is watching Peter," Stephen said evenly.
"But -"

"FRIDAY will monitor him. And he's in no way helpless, even if he weren't among friends. He'll be fine."

"FRIDAY," Tony repeated. "Right. FRI?"

"Here," she said. She didn't add anything else, in spite of the obvious opening. Her silence was subdued.

"Keep an eye on our favorite wall-crawler, won't you?"

She rallied enough to sound almost offended. "Yes, of course, boss. Always."

They walked until they were well out of sight of the camp and its circle of onlookers. Tony stopped when they reached the tree line, where only a faint murmur of sound could reach them. It was bitterly cold; enough to reach through the spell and bite him.

"Are you going to tell me what that was?" Stephen asked when they came to a stop.

Tony glanced over his shoulder to see the firelight behind them, a glittering boat on an ocean of darkness. "Don't suppose I could convince you I just wanted to take a nature walk?"

"You? Certainly not," Stephen said, though the look on his face was softer than his stern response. "Obviously something about the show triggered you. But what and why?"

"Didn't recognize Peter the Giant Slayer?" Tony asked.

"No. Should I?"

Tony blinked warily. "I don't know, shouldn't you? I just assumed you'd know, because you're a rotten cheater that seems to know everything."


"Really? All those futures and I never once mentioned Germany or -" Siberia "- anything that came after it?"

An intense look crossed Stephen's face, halfway realization and halfway frustration. "You alluded to something on several occasions. But I don't remember you telling me anything that would account for a panic attack."

Which, part of Tony was beyond relieved that was the case, because he felt raw and scoured with vulnerability, and the idea of Stephen knowing was almost beyond bearing. But for him not to know, for Tony to have to explain -

No. Impossible.

"It wasn't a panic attack," Tony said, though the memory of a car on a lonely road was almost enough to destroy his equilibrium again. "Might've been easier if it was. And let me just say that before running off into space with you, I never used to get those nearly as badly, either."

"If not that, then what?"

"Old ghosts," Tony repeated softly, trying to smile. "Thought I'd dealt with them a while ago. Guess sometimes they just need the right motivation to show their faces."
Stephen took a long, meditative breath, obviously schooling himself to patience. "What does that mean?"

"Sorry," Tony said automatically, and saw both of the sorcerer's eyebrows dart up before beetling in a severe frown. "I know. I'm being cryptic and obnoxious and annoying. For once I don't even mean to be. Novel experience."

Stephen slid his fingers around Tony's wrist, and Tony grabbed him in turn, holding on tightly enough he could see Stephen's biorhythms spark with pain. The sorcerer said nothing.

"One day I'll tell you," Tony said quietly. "Not today."

"You always say that," Stephen ground out, a familiar irritation making a brief appearance before the sorcerer could shove it back down. Tony grinned, taking solace in that. Stephen tried hard these days to pretend he was a model fortune teller, calm and confident without fail, but occasionally his foul temper made an appearance. Apparently this particular piece of history was a sore spot.

"I'm sure I always mean it, too," Tony said, and did. "Have patience with me, doc. I've never told anyone before. It's my first time."

"Never?" Stephen asked, skeptically.

Tony smiled, and felt it crack him in half. "There're three other people who know, but I didn't tell them. They told me. Three years ago."

"Three," Stephen repeated, and Tony could see him putting the timeline together for himself.

"Three," Tony confirmed. "You wanted to know what happened with the Avengers? I'll tell you. But not today."

"I could find the answer for myself," Stephen said, but it wasn't a threat. It was an offer. Stephen was giving him an out, so Tony didn't have to say it out loud, whatever it was.

"Don't you dare. There's cheating and then there's cheating, Stephen." Tony squinted at him suspiciously. "And since when are you able to cheat again? Have you been sipping green Kool-Aid behind my back?"

The look Stephen gave him was two parts exasperation and one part guilt. "I can neither confirm nor deny."

"Are you fucking serious right now?" Tony asked flatly, a shadow of his usual ire making itself known. "How? Since when?"

"A while," Stephen said softly. "Nothing near to the type of cheat you're thinking. Basic experimentation only."

"Why?" Tony asked, feeling adrenaline quickly burning the cobwebs in his brain to ash. "You remember why we put the emitter in place, don't you? You know what happens if it stops working? You die. And not easily, either. Stephen, what the hell?"

"I needed to keep us safe," Stephen said quietly, unrepentantly. "Don't be hypocritical, Tony. You've done more, to gain less. I could only do the same."

"It's not the same," Tony snarled, wondering distantly if their raised voices might carry down the slope of the land and back to the camp. He decided he couldn't care less if they did.
"It is. I'm fine. I can show you my progress when we get back to the ship."

"Manipulating again, Stephen?" Tony ground out, the betrayal burning brightly.

"I'm not," Stephen explained patiently. He'd clearly anticipated having this discussion at some point. He looked eerily calm. "It was my secret, not yours. I was always careful, and I never took it far enough to put my life in immediate jeopardy. I wouldn't leave you to face this alone. I never will, if I can help it."

Tony squeezed his hand convulsively without meaning to, easing up when Stephen winced. "Absence of truth is still a lie."

"Then you're lying to me about Germany," Stephen said pointedly. "You're lying to me about sleeping, and that nanotech bracer you think I haven't noticed you're still wearing, and every panic attack I never hear about. All truths are shared in their own time, Tony. Some things are harder to say out loud than others."

And Tony felt that sink beneath his skin with a sting of heavy rebuke, because -

Tony could remember how Rhodey and Pepper had raged at him after he'd been cured from dying, their hurt at his duplicity; how the fear in them had turned to anger that took months to pass.

And he could feel Thor's hand at his throat after Ultron, and the weight of disappointment from the others, how rage had turned to contempt and later to wary camaraderie but never quite trust.

And he could see, through the sick haze of betrayal, the look of agony on Steve's face when Tony found out the truth he'd known but never shared -

"Tony."

Tony blinked back to himself, wrung out and light-headed with the dim reminder there were some things in the world that were never so black and white as he might hope.

"You're kind of annoying when you're being reasonable," Tony said, finally. "You know that, right?"

"I'm always reasonable."

"Please. Pull the other one, it's got bells on."

"I'm usually reasonable," Stephen corrected.

"Remind me again how long you've been sipping the green Kool-Aid?"

"That's not unreasonable. It's just dangerous."

Tony threw up his hands. "How the hell am I on this side of the conversation? I have so much more appreciation for Rhodey's patience through my formative years."

Before Stephen could answer Tony turned and shoved the sorcerer, hard, against one of the nearby trees. Stephen let himself be pushed with a whoosh of air, making no protest when Tony crowded close, leaning heavily against him.

"Stephen, I need you to not be dead," Tony said in a voice like crushed glass. "Can you please stop doing things that might result in that?"
"No," the sorcerer returned softly, as Tony had known he would. "Can you?"

Tony growled with annoyance. "No. What if I promise to tell you when I do them?"

"Promise to try telling me before you do them," Stephen said dryly, "and I'll return the favor."

"Square deal," Tony said, and thunked his head down on Stephen's shoulder with a sigh.

Stephen took his weight easily, reaching up to frame Tony's shoulders with both of his hands. Tony looked up from almost too close to see him properly, jarred by the sight of the sorcerer's borrowed face. Tony dropped his eyes to Stephen's lips, seeing a slip of pink tongue dart out to wet them.

"How determined are you to take this thing slowly?" Tony asked, watching him.

"I'm at least determined enough to wait until you stop calling it a 'thing'."

"Well, you know me and nicknames," Tony said reasonably. "Could be a long journey ahead. Should make a point of enjoying the scenery as we go. Objections?"

"Only to the tree branch jabbing me in the back," Stephen muttered, and then shoved until Tony gave ground, letting the sorcerer walk him backward until he hit an obstacle. Stephen laid his palms flat to either side of him, looming in a way that probably should've felt uncomfortable and didn't.

There was very little transition. One moment they were standing there, sharing space and air, and the next Stephen was kissing him slowly, leaning in to smooth one hand down the side of Tony's face. Tony kissed him back, the previous adrenaline transforming into something just as intense, but far more pleasurable.

"You're a mess of contradictions, Tony Stark," Stephen murmured when they parted, breathing the words into his mouth.

"Another part of my charm," Tony said. He let Stephen tip his chin back, baring the vulnerable arch of his neck. The wizard leaned in, nudging a leg between both of his so Tony could feel the hard heat of him pressed against his hip. Apparently adrenaline did to Stephen exactly the same as it did to Tony. He slid his hands down from Stephen's waist to his ass, rocking to grind slowly into him.

Stephen sagged like his strings had been cut, burying a moan in Tony's throat. He bit sharply in retaliation and Tony sucked in a breath, rolling his head back further.

"Do that again," he hissed.

Stephen obliged, leaving sharp sparks of sensation in his wake as he nipped down one side of Tony's neck and up the other.

Tony punched out a shaky breath. "Harder."

Stephen ignored that, sucking at a sensational spot just beneath an ear that made Tony weak in the knees. "Not unless you want the whole camp knowing what we've been up to."

"Think you've mistaken me for someone that cares."

Stephen kissed him again, longer this time, until Tony's lips felt chafed with it, the prickle of a beard unfamiliar but not unwelcome against him. Tony slipped his fingers just beneath the waistband of the sorcerer's pants, questioning.

Stephen smiled against him, closing his teeth over Tony's bottom lip with a punishing sting. "No
taking liberties."

"Liberties?" Tony asked incredulously, pulling back to lick at his tingling mouth. The shadows made it difficult to see any detail, but it was impossible to miss how the sorcerer twitched abortively after him, yearning. "What exactly do you call this, then?"

"First base."

Tony laughed. "That's the kind of unrefined slang I thought you couldn't be reduced to. Stephen, I'm almost proud."

Stephen kissed the laugh away, stealing it until they were both flushed and breathless. Twice, Tony tried to sneak a hand down further and both times Stephen caught it and moved it away, the second time with a shudder.

"You make it very hard to maintain my conviction," Stephen muttered, leaning against him.

"I make a lot of things hard," Tony agreed, pressing close to demonstrate.

Stephen didn't answer, but he didn't move away either, in fact leaning closer to press his lips almost reverently against Tony's neck again. Tony took pity, guiding the sorcerer's mouth back to his and gentling him with a slow, deep kiss. When he pulled back, Stephen chased him, rolling forward into him instinctively before he caught himself.

Tony grinned, waggling his eyebrows. "Don't feel bad. I'm like that box of chocolates you thought you could get away with opening for just one. It's not your fault. I could tempt a saint."

"To kiss you, or kill you?" Stephen asked dryly.

"Probably not mutually exclusive feelings in my case."

Stephen smiled at him, heat giving way to affection. The arousal banked into a warm simmer and their next kiss was a peaceful, unhurried thing.

They separated after a while, both of them pulling back by unspoken mutual agreement. Tony ran a hand through his hair, refocusing until he could hear the distant sounds of the camp again. Although it couldn't have been long since they'd left, it felt like ages, eons ago they'd slipped away. The world had contracted for a moment until it was just the two of them, and it took Tony a solid minute before he could tune back in.

"Guess we should probably get back before someone notices we're gone and comes looking," Tony said.

Stephen snorted. "I thought you said you didn't care."

"I don't. Thought you might."

"Not me," Stephen said, tugging bunched clothing back into order. "Peter may, however. You realize you need to talk to him?"

Tony frowned, lustful thoughts snuffing out quickly. He bent down, picking up a few pinecones from the forest floor to occupy his hands. "Why me? Emotional disclosure gives me hives."

"Because he looks up to you and needs to know he can talk to you about anything."

"He knows."
"No, he doesn't," Stephen said. "Or he'd have approached you already. You're not subtle."

"Stephen, this is me being subtle. If you think otherwise, may I direct you to pretty much all of my society page press coverage."

Stephen speared him with a stern look. "Just because it's not in print doesn't mean he hasn't seen it."

Tony sighed, tapping his fingers restlessly against the nanotech unit beneath his shirt. "Sure you can't do it?"

"He needs to hear it from you."

Tony screwed up his face, cringing. "That's going to end so badly."

"We'll see," Stephen said as they started to walk back. "Of course, if you want to avoid speaking to him directly, you could always tell it in story format to our new friends."

"Speaking of ending badly," Tony said dryly. "Do you want me to scar this civilization for life? No celebrity interviews for me. What about some stories of Doctor Strangely-Mysterious and his merry band of acolytes?"

They were near enough to see the camp up close again. Tony looked on warily, but Peter had finished with his previous tale. The kid now seemed to be playing second fiddle to Esan on the stage. She had a prop in her hands that looked like a horse with wings and did something dramatic with it that had the whole audience laughing.

"I don't have acolytes," Stephen said, recalling Tony to the conversation. "I have Wong. Or he has me. After this long away from Earth, he'll have been appointed the new Master of the New York Sanctum. If only because he was the only sorcerer in residence familiar with it."

"What exactly is a Sanctum?" Tony asked skeptically. "No, I know, it's the latest school of witchcraft and wizardry, right? So, can anyone go there to learn, or only special snowflakes like yourself?"

"Anyone with an aptitude for magic and a strong moral compass," Stephen said. "Which rules you out."

"Ouch. Doc, you're breaking my heart."

They arrived at their former seats to find Verdun still present, busily working. He looked up at their approach.

"There you are," he said. "I turned to find you'd gone very suddenly. Is all well?"

Tony grinned. "You could say that. So what'd we miss? Wait, don't tell me. Our intrepid heroes defeated the giant. News at eleven."

"With the help of many noble warriors, the giant was conquered," Verdun confirmed. "It was a most interesting battle."

"Yeah, sure, interesting. Iron Man finally shows up in one of these things and it's the battle he was basically useless in."

"Iron Man?"

"Never mind." Tony nodded down at the stage. "I see she's still enjoying the spotlight."
"Ah, yes," Verdun said, glancing at his daughter fondly. "There has been much entertainment from the young this week. The moon shines brightest in two days time. Perhaps when it does I will entertain, that you may all rest and enjoy one of our stories. I think you’ll find it interesting."

It sounded like watching paint dry, to Tony, but he decided saying that out loud probably wouldn’t go over well. Then again, what did he know; maybe watching paint dry was considered the height of style on this planet.

"Great," he said without enthusiasm. “Looking forward to it.”

Verdun seemed not to notice his tepid response. "You’ve inspired me to remember an old legend. As old as the forest around us; older perhaps. It’s about a band of travellers who come from very far away, scaling the World Tree in secret to hide from Níðhöggr’s sight."


"Yes," Verdun said, with an odd little smile. "I’m quite looking forward to it. Sometimes the story tells of two travellers. But this one, I think, will feature three."

Chapter End Notes

Sincere apologies for the delay. I meant to have this out on the weekend and it just didn't happen. The Christmas season is far too busy! I'll return to my regular posting schedule in January.
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Stephen has some surprising hidden talents. And Tony accidentally-on-purpose science's himself into a corner.

Tony eyed the towering creature glaring at him from just behind Peter's shoulder.

"You want me to what?" he asked, taking two dubious steps away. The increased distance didn't help; the animal only seemed to loom larger and stare more menacingly. Even as he watched, it grunted and snarled, tossing its head and thrusting its blunt nose aggressively in Tony's direction.

"Get on," Peter repeated cheerfully, patting his hand solidly against the thing's shoulder.

Tony made a show of looking around, searching for the object of this instruction. "Get on what?"

The kid sighed at him. "The horse."

"The horse?" Tony widened his eyes exaggeratedly. He raised both his hands, taking another two steps back. "Yeah, no."

Peter looked deeply unimpressed. "No?"

"Nope. See, the only horsepower I believe in? Comes with seat belts and a leather interior."

The horse looked terribly affronted by that. Tony tried not to imagine it crushing him beneath its massive hooves.

"I don't think we're going to find many sports cars out here in space," Peter said.

"We don't need them in space," Tony said. "You may've noticed, we have a space ship."

"And here on this planet they have horses," Peter said. "Esan said we can use these two for a few hours. Look, there's really nothing to worry about. They're friendly. See?"

Peter patted the massive beast again, and it laid its head down adoringly on his shoulder. Meanwhile, it didn't take its eyes off Tony, swishing its tail twice in what Tony considered a very ominous fashion.

"Yeah, right, they look friendly," Tony drawled. "But I'm going to pass. No offense. Like I said, I just prefer my rides to have more luxury settings. And less limbs."

"He's never ridden before, Peter," Stephen said from somewhere inside the stables. Tony turned to scowl at him. "Don't hold it against him. You know what he's like when things are out of his control."

Tony glared at him. "As if you're any better, Nostradamus."

"You've never been on a horse before?" Peter asked, surprised.
Tony shrugged. "Not unless you count the plastic carousel ones."

"Here's your chance, then," Stephen pointed out, ducking back into the open with a brush and a rolled up bag in his hands. "I assume you've picked up the basics, Peter?"

"Esan's been teaching me," Peter said.

Tony raised his eyebrows. "Oh, I'm sure she has. But teaching you what, exactly?"

"I'm still not great at it," Peter interrupted hastily. "But I'm getting better."

"Right. So, a novice rider wanting to show two people who've never ridden how to do it. In what world do we get out of this without some kind of fatal or humiliating injury?"

"I've ridden before," Stephen said, and Tony's entire thought process derailed at that. He stared. "Not for a long time, of course. But I remember the basic instructions. We'll be fine."


"My family had farm land in Nebraska," Stephen said, a shade defensively. "I was born and raised in the city, but in the off season we used to visit my grandparents there."

"Nebraska?" Peter asked curiously.

Tony shook his head at him. "A place only memorable for being smack dab in the middle of tornado alley. So better off forgotten, really."

Stephen sighed. "You're not wrong. But my sister and I spent early summers there. It wasn't all bad."

"You have a sister?" Tony asked, frowning. He hadn't found any mention of a sister all those months ago when he'd had FRIDAY run a search on Stephen Strange. In fact, there hadn't been any record of living relatives, except for a scattering of cousins across the west coast who hadn't been in contact with Stephen for more than ten years.

"I had a sister," Stephen said.

An awkward silence fell. "Oh."

Stephen half shrugged, far enough removed from grief that it settled on him distantly. "She died when we were both young. It was part of the reason I chose to study medicine."

"So you didn't hatch from the womb fully armed with the knowledge of how to perform complex laminectomy procedures?"

"No, I'm afraid even I needed the odd bit of medical theory for that. Fortunately for both of us, riding a horse doesn't require a PhD."

Peter perked up at that. "So, does that mean you'll give it a try?" He held out a set of reins to Stephen, accidentally pulling so the horse took a step forward, it's giant head coming over the kid entirely to rest almost on top of him. Peter hugged it close affectionately.

Stephen took the reins gingerly, putting one hand against the horse's shoulder and letting it inspect him with a curious nose when he stepped into its space. Its ears pricked forward with interest, black eyes blinking slowly in the weak afternoon light.
"Mr. Stark?" Peter asked, offering him the second set of ties. This horse was smaller than the one he'd handed off to Stephen, but seemed somehow proportionately much larger. Tony was sure he could feel the thing plotting his demise.

"Nope," he said. "I'm sitting this one out."

Peter choked on a laugh. The horse added insult to injury by giving Tony a loud, snuffling snort, its nostrils flaring.

"Is it sniffing me?" Tony asked warily, taking another solid step back. That gave him almost enough distance to maneuver if the thing attacked him. "Why is it sniffing me? It looks hungry. Has it eaten?"

"I fed them thirty minutes ago," Peter said, turning his face into the horse's shoulder to hide a smile. "They're herbivores. They have a special blend of dry food they eat; hay and grain, some oats. Or they like grass."

Tony looked down at his shoes, covered at this point in all manner of vegetation and natural refuse. Considering they were standing in a paddock, by now he'd probably also stepped in a number of unmentionable horse things Tony didn't want to think about anywhere near his person.

He looked back up, glaring into liquid animal eyes threateningly. "Don't even think about it, horse. I like these shoes. Get your own grass."

"She doesn't want your shoes," Peter explained patiently while the horse made a lie of that by tugging forward, lowering her nose to study the footwear in question.

Tony backpedaled quickly. "Yeah, no. I'm out. You two kids enjoy yourselves. Ya'll come back now, you hear?"

"It couldn't hurt you to learn this," Stephen pointed out while Tony shuffled rapidly away.

"Yes, it could," Tony insisted. "Besides, there's only two horses. And I need to finish gathering up a couple more bags of pinecones."

Stephen looked amused. "That's something I'm sure you never thought you'd say."

Tony grimaced. "Took the words right out of my mouth, doc."

"At least come meet them," Stephen said, and Tony could see he'd graduated from letting the horse inspect him and was now running his hands over its nose, petting it firmly. The thing kept nudging him at the bottom of each long stroke, begging for more. The animal looked extremely smug.

"Not a chance," Tony said, ducking underneath the paddock railing and making a break for freedom. "You two try not to die now."

"No promises," Peter called after him.

Tony took off for the hills, eager to be away before one of the horses decided to give chase, or eat his shoes or his glasses or his nanotech. Or sit on him.

He spent an hour collecting a cache of fallen pinecones. It wasn't difficult. They were abundant through the forest and no one else seemed to have much use for them, making them easy pickings. So far, transportation had been the biggest hold-up; the only way to get them up to the ship was to fly them up himself or wait for Stephen to open a portal.
Though, at this point there was really no hurry; Tony'd managed to harvest enough for his needs two days ago. Any excess now was only to assuage his paranoid survival instincts.

Tony held one of the cones up, watching scans filled mostly with red error messages filter over his glasses.

"FRI, you there?"

She came through crisp and clear over the transmitter. "For you, boss? Always."

"How's your analysis coming on these things? Any luck breaking down the gene sequence?"

"Unfortunately, I've made limited progress," FRIDAY said. "The genetic modification is extremely complex. The level of sophistication required to achieve it seems in direct contradiction with the level of technology on this planet."

Tony sighed. "You say that now, but we're talking about a species whose Asgardian cousins ran around the universe via Einstein-Rosen wormholes, waging war with what looked like bows and arrows. Nothing is ever what it seems with these people. Don't be fooled."

"I understand, boss. I'll continue all avenues of investigation," she promised.

"That's my girl."

Another hour in and Tony could feel himself start to unravel at the seams. Starks just weren't made for the great outdoors; every tree and rock he passed was starting to look familiar, and they all managed to loom in a way that made the whole forest feel claustrophobic. Tony surveyed his two full bags with a critical eye, judging he now had enough element to last him a solid year of nanotech fabrication.

"Which is great, because if I never see another tree again after this, it'll be too soon," he muttered. "Screw this nature thing. I don't know how people do it without shedding a few marbles. If I'm not careful I'll end up talking to myself."

"Boss?" FRIDAY asked.

"Not you, FRI."

On his way back to camp he caught sight of the Lighthouse and, after a brief hesitation, redirected his feet toward it. Being located so near the village, opportunities to examine the pillar freely were few and far between. But today was a busy one for the Vanir and he caught some luck; there was a bare handful of people nearby, and none of them gave him more than a cursory glance when he approached.

Unlike the pinecones, the scans here were frustratingly normal. Even when they shouldn't have been.

"Guess that's strike two then," he commented, sighing.

"I'm sorry, boss," FRIDAY said, subdued. "After thirteen attempts, I've still been unable to penetrate the pillar's surface."

Which should've been impossible, really. The bots had the ability to transform and synthesize countless molecular bonds, down to the atomic level. There should've been no physical substance they couldn't interact with in some way, and burrowing through plain rock should've been the work
of minutes, maybe seconds. But apparently science on this world worked very differently here than it did on Earth.

"Not your fault, FRI," he said finally. "It was worth a shot."

"But I've failed to complete the task you set me."

He frowned. "Only because the entire planet cheats. Try not to take it personally. This place needs to come with some kind of instruction manual."

"It would make my analysis immeasurably easier," she agreed.

"We could always create one," Tony said, squinting thoughtfully. "Vanaheim: The Land of Trees That Aren't Trees. Or, Vanaheim: Where Science Went to Die. Scenery that's literally endless, for those that like that sort of thing. Popular tourist location among superheroes, especially those of the spider variety. We could make it into a best seller, really, if we wrote it as the science fiction it deserves to be, instead of the non-fiction it is -"

"Boss," FRIDAY cautioned, a proximity warning flashing over his glasses. Tony turned to find Esan's familiar face staring at him.

"Well, hi," Tony said. "Look kid, I'll be honest with you. This is nowhere near the worst thing anyone's caught me doing before."

"Who were you talking to?" Esan asked, blinking. "You were conversing with someone."

"What? Who?" he asked, making a point of looking around slowly. "There's just me, myself, and I here. Now, I've had some great conversations with myself over the years, I'll admit, but there's usually alcohol involved."

"This is not the first time I've seen you speaking aloud with no one else present."

"Okay, sometimes I do it sober."

She stared at him with prickling intensity while Tony looked at the pillar to avoid her eyes.

"Is it the Gods?" she asked finally, quietly. "Do you speak to them? It's not a shameful thing, nor unusual. Many petition the Gods for guidance in times of need."

Tony frowned. "Nope, no nattering to Gods. Last time I spoke to one of them, he left graffiti all over my lawn. I make it a point not to talk to people who graffiti my property."

"Graffiti?" she asked, confused. "What is that?"

"In this case, it's the closed aperture of an artificial wormhole disguising itself as art deco."

Esan's wide, wondering eyes became a startled fraction wider.

"Right, I made that last part up," Tony amended hastily. "In retrospect, it makes much more sense for me to be talking to the Gods, so that's obviously what I was doing. Fortunately for my sanity, they weren't talking back."

The wonder didn't vanish, but it tempered as she reached out to put a hand against the pillar. She glanced around furtively before admitting in a low whisper: "I talk to them too, sometimes."

Tony nodded along, watching as FRIDAY silently showed him a comparative energy graph.
"Anyone ever answer?"

"Of course not," she said, amused. "The Gods only respond in times of great need and they only listen to elders. I'm too young to be calling, but I do it anyway. It's a great comfort to me to think that my small prayers might reach them somehow."

Which made no sense to Tony, who would much rather seek out his own answers than wait for them to come from some ubiquitous false deity.

Tony frowned. False deities or not, Asgard was gone, presumably taking all its vaunted power and protection with it. The problem was: no one on Vanaheim knew that, and probably they'd continue on in blissful ignorance until necessity forced them to call for help one day. At which time they'd swiftly realize help wasn't coming.

"Do you usually come here to talk to them?" he asked, gesturing at the pillar. "Prayer by Lighthouse?"

She looked up and patted it with great fondness, tracing two fingers reverently over one of the spiral patterns. Tony watched FRIDAY's slow scroll of scan results blossom with a new array of red and blue numbers.

"Not always," Esan said, "but often. Many do. It's convenient to have a Lighthouse at the heart of the camp."

Tony snorted. Thor and his ilk had a lot of nerve, running around doing good deeds and inspiring religion wherever they went. Then leaving Tony holding the prayer bag, wondering how he was supposed to explain to these people the difference between duty and divinity. "Convenient, sure. Like grocery shopping. Pick up your meat and vegetables and maybe a futile heavenly blessing or two on the way home. Easy."

She frowned at him. "You don't believe in prayer?"

"I don't believe in relying on others to save me when I can save myself. Have as much faith as you want. But when the chips are down, don't assume the stars are going to align and send someone to deliver you from evil. Even if your Gods are listening, they're busy people. Help them out a bit and be prepared to deliver yourself."

She considered this for a long, thoughtful moment. "That is a wise sentiment."

It was Tony's turn to frown. "There's that word again. Why do people keep calling me that lately? Whatever you do, don't spread that around. I have a reputation to maintain, you know."

"You do?" she asked.

"Oh, yeah. Years in the making. Oh, hey, there's something I've been wanting to try." He leaned down, plunging a hand into his bag of goodies. "Do me a favor. Catch."

She did, fumbling the pinecone he tossed in her direction. She looked down at it with a question in her eyes, while beside her the pillar exploded into a kaleidoscope of light that only Tony could see.

"What," Esan started, turning the thing in her hands. "A Seed?"

Tony shrugged. "Sure. If that's what you want to call it."

She looked at him, taking in the two full bags at his feet. "You are collecting them? Why?"
"Why does anyone collect powerful material? To use. Fortunately, not for anything too nefarious. Here, have a few more."

She caught the next three he threw at her with growing confusion.

"Now back up a couple steps."

She did, very slowly. Tony silently watched the readings rapidly dropping back into null range.

"Okay. We're going to try an experiment here. Let's call it a magic trick." Picking up four pinecones himself, Tony placed them equidistantly around the pillar. "Now you. Put your cones exactly where I've put them, base of the pillar."

She did, taking the time to arrange them in an off-center pattern.

"Now, put both your hands back on those weird little spirals."

"Here?" she asked, tentatively resting her fingers back against the pillar. The readings spiked higher, the highest Tony'd seen them to date.

"See!" he spread his arms wide with a flourish. "Voila, it's magic."

She looked up at the pillar, frowning. "But I don't see anything."

"Oh." He stared with exaggerated surprise. "That's right. This is a funny trick. It's designed so only a Vanir can do it, but not alone. You need a catalyst. Don't ask me what you people normally use, but for now I've got just the thing." He put his two hands against the pillar, overtop the third and forth spirals, and silently called up the nanotech, activating the repulsors. "And - liftoff."

Everything Tony knew about physics told him the interaction of two repulsor beams in direct contact with a solid, immovable object should've had one of two results: serious damage to the structure (in this case, the pillar), or serious damage to the repulsor source (in this case, Tony).

That wasn't what happened.

What happened was that the energized particles surrounding the pillar accelerated into a visual wavelength, lit up the Lighthouse like a Christmas tree, and started to hum.

"Tada!" Tony said brightly.

Esan gasped in wordless shock and yanked herself away, pinwheeling backward until she tripped over her feet and landed in a pile of tangled limbs. The pillar's glow immediately vanished, and Tony deactivated the repulsors before the energy feedback could do any damage, watching the readings flare and fade. He glanced around to see if anyone else had noticed, but they were alone.

Tony pretended to dust off his hands, nodding. "That's a pretty good magic trick. Even if I do say so myself. What do you think?"

Esan stared at the pillar, then looked at her own hands and back again. "What was that?"

"Science so indistinguishable from nature the only word for it's magic."

She turned her wide eyes on him instead. "What?"

"It's a lock," Tony explained. "An extra-dimensional lock, capable of converting energy from one form to another. And you're the key. Well, the conductor, really. But we'll go with key, for now."
"A lock and key?" she repeated, staring. "But I don't understand. The Lighthouse _glowed_. I've never seen it do _anything_ like that before. How?"

"It's complicated. But I think the takeaway message here is that you can finally see why it's called a Lighthouse."

Esan seemed hardly to hear him. She got back to her feet and stepped forward to lay tentative hands against the pillar again. An inch away from contact, she hesitated, eventually turning an anxious look in Tony's direction.

He nodded encouragingly. "Go ahead. Nothing'll happen. Like I said, it needs a catalyst."

In spite of the explanation, she still seemed astonished when she touched it and nothing occurred.


"What is?" she whispered, now standing on the tips of her toes to peer closely at the pillar's many runes, as if it were the first time she'd ever really seen them as anything more than just carved lines on stone.

Tony glared at the Lighthouse, outraged. "Oh, nothing. Just ridiculous planets being _ridiculous_. Is your dad handy?"

"My father?" she asked, dazed, rocking back onto the balls of her feet like someone coming out of a dream. "He's helping one of the families pack. They'll be leaving soon for the mountain's windward side to harvest the winter crops and plant for summer."

"When will he be finished?" Tony persisted, gathering up the pinecones briskly. "We need to talk."

She crouched on autopilot to help him. "Not for some time. Food and entertainment flow early during the full moon. If you come to dinner, I'm certain you'll find him there." She brightened with a sudden smile. "He's to entertain tonight. You'll enjoy it. He's an _excellent_ storyteller."

"Oh, yeah, really looking forward to it," Tony sighed. "Stories about people climbing trees. Sounds scintillating."

She touched him on the arm, light and insubstantial, and when Tony looked at her again there was something like fear in her face.

"But I still don't understand," she said, looking back at the Lighthouse, quiet and still once more. "What was that, really?"

"It was just the Lighthouse working as intended, kid. That's all." Tony tilted his head from side to side, considering. "Who told you the Gods only answer calls from an elder? Your parents?"

She frowned intently. "I don't know. I suppose it must've been. It's just a thing that's known. The Lighthouse stands in our defense, but only an elder can use it to call."

"I'm guessing that's because the trick to it gets passed down to camp leaders only. Any of you can do it if you have the right tools, but only a handful of you know what they are and how to use them."

"Then - we _were_ speaking to the Gods?" she asked, hushed. "They heard us?"

"Not in this case."

Theoretically, they could have. But at this point, there was really no _they_ left to hear anything.
"Guess we'll be seeing you tonight then," Tony said, new thought experiments already whirling through his head. "Two of us might smell like horse, but we'll be there. Bright and early."

"You do not care to ride?" she asked as he turned away. "Peter has been eager to learn. He has an aptitude for it."

"He has a lot of aptitudes," Tony said. "Doesn't mean he'll use them all when we leave."

He'd said it perhaps more harshly than he could've, but aside from a small flinch, she didn't react.

"He might use some," was all she said. "The future is ever changing."

Tony tried to envision a future where Peter spent a large majority of his time riding horseback and giving center-stage performances to enthralled audiences. It was surprisingly easy to imagine. The kid had fallen into superhero work early; that didn't mean it had to be his whole life.

"Maybe," Tony said, and left before he could get any more sticky emotions on him.

He found Stephen still in the paddock, lessons apparently concluded. He could see Peter more faintly in the distance, riding his horse by standing up straight on its back, balancing on one foot and then the other with exultant yells.

"I don't think that's how they teach it in riding school," Tony said, staring after the kid narrowly.

"They might if all their students had hands and feet that could adhere to any surface," Stephen said.

"We're supposed to be keeping a low profile," Tony objected.

Stephen seemed entirely undisturbed by Tony's ire. "It's comparatively still a low profile. In a society of horse riders, he won't be the only one who's tried trick riding."

"What about upside-down, magical trick riding?" Tony asked, nodding in the kid's direction when Peter stepped on the side of the saddle, hanging so he was parallel to the ground with no obvious toehold anywhere.

"Well," Stephen said philosophically, "it could be worse. He could be airborne."

"Not if I kill him first," Tony muttered.

Stephen snorted at him, or so Tony thought. But a moment later a large, dark eye peered around the sorcerer curiously and Tony realized it hadn't been Stephen at all.

"Aren't you finished with that yet?"

"With that?" Stephen repeated with amusement. "You really aren't much of an animal-lover, are you?"

Tony grimaced. "Good guess. I prefer my pets to be of the mechanical variety. Less chance of them dying or eating me when I inevitably forget they exist."

Stephen held out a hand to him. "Come here."

Tony eyed him warily and made no move to accept it. "Why?"

Stephen beckoned impatiently. Tony sighed and let himself be pulled, one eye on the gigantic creature pretending to chew placidly on something as Stephen dragged him unwillingly closer.
"Put both hands here, at the shoulder," Stephen instructed, laying one in demonstration against the horse's muscular chest.

Tony tentatively mimicked him, snatching his hand back when he saw its tail swish from side to side impatiently.

"Why my hands?" he complained, folding his arms to tuck them away. "I need my hands. I can't live without them. What about a foot? I don't mind losing a foot. If we're picking sacrificial limbs, that's the one I'd choose."

"No one's sacrificing any limbs," Stephen said patiently, waiting for Tony to let him tug a hand free again. "Besides, if it decided to eat you, you'd have better things to worry about than a few lost fingers."

"Fingers!" Tony protested. "I need those, too. I have an eight finger and two thumb minimum requirement. I know, it sounds insane and entitled, but I have to set the bar high somewhere."

Stephen gave him something, a leafy vegetable red in color. "Give it that. Flat on your palm, unless you've decided seven fingers will do."

"This seems like a very inefficient way of feeding," Tony said. "Why don't I just put it on the ground and -"

"Tony, the horse doesn't have cooties. Give it the carrot."

"It's not a carrot."

Stephen fixed him with a baleful look not unlike that of the horse in front of them. Tony deflated, meekly holding out the vegetable on his hand, palm up. The horse leaned in and took it delicately, the soft bristles of its snout tickling over Tony's hand, narrow ears flicking forward happily.

"Congratulations," Stephen said dryly. "It was a dangerous mission, but to the surprise of no one, you survived with all your limbs and digits intact."

"You don't know that," Tony said. "It's not over yet."

This time, when Stephen tugged him close enough to run his hands over the horse's powerful shoulder and flank, Tony didn't fight him.

Somewhere in the distance, Peter whooped and did a spiral flip in the air, landing in a handstand on the saddle of his steed.

"He fits here," Tony remarked, brushing careful hands over the horse's velvet skin and through its wiry mane of hair. "Doesn't he?"

"He can," Stephen said. "Peter's adaptable. Someone who comes into power that young has to be."

"I think I know how to send him home," Tony said.

He expected some exclamation of surprise, maybe some disbelief or skepticism; at least a strong word or two. But that wasn't what he got, of course, because although this discovery felt cutting and new to him, it wasn't to Stephen.

"That's not your decision to make," the sorcerer said.

"Wasn't my decision to bring him with us against his will, either. Didn't stop me then."
"It's stopping you now, or you wouldn't have told me about it. If you've figured out how to activate
the pillars you already know it'll be weeks or months before you can break down how to target a
specific exit coordinate."

"Time well spent if it can get him back," Tony said. "I've been running differential analyses all
week, but I still wasn't sure I could do it until today. Now I know. I can get him back. All it'll take
me is time."

"I notice you make no offer to send me home," Stephen said dryly.

"Right, because obviously Thanos isn't watching Earth for even the smallest sign that the stone's
returned. Tell me half the planet doesn't immediately go up in flames when he comes after you."

"Not quite half."

Tony spread his hands, point made.

"You need to ask him what he wants, Tony. Peter knows his own mind better than you might think
and he has a right to make his choices. Don't underestimate him."

Tony sighed, silently sketching his hands down the horse's neck. He flinched when the thing
bumped him, nuzzling affectionately closer, liquid black eyes entreating, soft nose questing.

"I don't have anything else for you to eat," Tony told it. "Go bug Stephen. He's the keeper of the
carrots."

The horse turned its beseeching look from Tony to Stephen and back again.

The sorcerer provided more treats to the horse so it could happily crunch away, but Stephen never
took his eyes off Tony.

"Ask him."

"He'll say no," Tony said. "He's too loyal for anything else. He'll say no, and I can't let him."

"He might," Stephen said. "Or he might not. But that's exactly my point. Whatever he chooses,
you may not think it's a wise decision, but it's his decision. You need to let him make it, and more to
the point, you need to hear why he makes it. He might surprise you."

"Yeah," Tony said sourly. "You guys do a lot of that, actually. It's annoying."

But when the kid finally came riding in at Tony's request twenty minutes later, he couldn't quite
bring himself to say it.

"That was so cool," Peter said breathlessly when he swung down from horseback with the easy trust
of someone who loved animals, and who absolutely believed they were loved in return. "Did you
see?"

"I saw," Tony said. "And I'm sure I wasn't the only one."

Peter smiled, halfway proud and halfway guilty. "No one was close enough to see I wasn't using a
safety life."

"I was close enough."

"You don't count; you already know."
Tony sighed, feeling very put-upon. "Go wash up. Apparently dinner's being served early tonight and we can't miss it."

The thought of food was an exciting one. The kid tossed him the reins, taking the paddock rail at a run and vaulting overtop it.

"Feet on the ground," Tony called after him, fumbling with the leather ties when the horse behemoth brushed up against him, happily searching for new treats and rewards now it's run in the field was over. "Hey, Peter!"

The kid turned around, almost too far away to hear. "Yeah?"

"It was pretty cool," Tony admitted, waving an admonishing finger after him. "Don't do it again."

Far enough away he could barely hear; but near enough for Tony to see his brilliant smile.

Stephen came up behind him, leaning warmly into his shoulder. "Going soft in your old age, Tony?"

"You're one to talk."

"Will you tell him?"

Tony rolled his eyes. "Do I have a choice?"

"You did before you told me," Stephen said. "But then, that's exactly why you told me. Isn't it?"

Tony scowled, dropped the extra reins into Stephen's hands, and stalked away.
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

"At the heart of all the cosmos and the Nine great Realms," Verdun said in a clear, ringing voice, "lies the World Tree, Yggdrasill."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"At the heart of all the cosmos and the Nine great Realms," Verdun said in a clear, ringing voice, "lies the World Tree, Yggdrasill."

The words, sudden as they were, sent a cascade of surprised silence rippling over the camp. The last rays of sunlight had vanished beyond the horizon; the full moon in its ghostly glory was at its peak. Verdun was standing high on a hill side, a silhouette in a world of shadows, and he waited politely until the hush had reached even the youngest of the Vanir before sweeping dramatically past them and down to the center of the camp’s makeshift stage.

"Well," Tony said, watching him stalk by in a costume of dramatic blacks and purples and blues, "I'll say one thing for him. Guy knows how to make an entrance."

Stephen hummed agreeably. The three humans were seated at one of the communal eating tables, a bit removed from the rest of the camp. "He certainly does. And yet, on a scale of one to full diva, I'm still not sure he can match you."

"Yeah, me neither," Tony admitted.

"Shh," Peter admonished them, leaning forward. "He’s starting."

Verdun whirled toward the crowd. "We all know the story of the Tree, of course. Yggdrasill is all. She holds in her roots and leaves and branches all the features necessary to this world. To any world." He threw up an arm, his hand pointing to the velvet sky above him. "There are many out there. As many as all the lights we see in the sky and more besides. Millions upon billions. But in all the places beyond us, all the worlds spinning through the void, Yggdrasill deigned to carry only Nine." He paused, turning in profile so his captive audience could see him smile. "Can anyone tell me why?"

"Because only the Nine were worthy!" one of the children shouted with innocent glee.

"To unite the home worlds," a man said. "For Convergence."

"To bring Balance," Esan said, stepping forward from her own collection of shadows.

Tony felt Peter start. The camp hushed while father and daughter locked eyes across an expanse wider than the ground beneath them.

"To bring Balance," she repeated softly.

"Yes," Verdun said, speaking chiefly to her. It was clear they’d shared this story before. "All those
reasons have merit, but in the beginning, in the time of the Ginnungagap, first came Balance. A world of light; a world of dark. One of fire; one of ice. One of life; one of death. And three more at the heart of the Tree, these three blessed with unparalleled beauty and power and unique among all other realms and worlds ever to exist. Midgard, Asgard, and Vanheim."

A hearty cheer rose over the camp and Verdun watched it from on high, a conductor leading the swell of an orchestra. He went on before the noise could get too loud. "Of course, the creation of these realms was not without effort. Many different elements were needed to create the right conditions. Yggdrasill gave six of her roots to feed the new life on her branches, each becoming an essential aspect of existence. Six elements of infinity."

Tony jackknifed upright in his seat, instinctively clamping a hand down on Stephen's wrist in the darkness. The sorcerer grimaced, probably at his bones grinding unexpectedly together, but he gave Tony a split second nod just barely visible in the shadowy twilight. Through the hard pound of his heart, Tony didn't think it was his imagination that in the expectant silence he could feel the weight of Verdun's eyes coming to rest on them.

"The creation of such strong elements drew attention to Yggdrasill," Verdun continued, thankfully moving the laser-sight of his attention away. "Great beings from other parts of the cosmos came, eager to share in the void that now carried life. The giant eagle and its small hawk companion, Veðrfölnir. The four grand stags, among them Dvalinn and Dáinn. Ratatoskr the squirrel, carrying its messages up and down the Tree. And of course, the great dragon Níðhöggr."

The Vanir gasped. Verdun whirled, the coat tails of his costume glimmering in the moon to highlight his entire person in silver.

The sight put Tony's immediate concerns on the backburner, in spite of the adrenaline flooding his veins. He couldn't resist leaning over to nudge Peter with his knee, whispering: "Hey. How come none of your costumes looked like that?"

Peter huffed, whispering back: "Because someone wouldn't let me use the suit."

"Níðhöggr was immense," Verdun said. "No larger, perhaps, than one of the great stags, but filled with a ravenous hunger that made sharp his claws and teeth as he came to the Tree. So sharp were his talons, in fact, and so vast his hunger, that he began to dig furrows into Yggdrasill's awesome trunk, consuming it, jealous of her power and coveting it for himself."

A low murmur of distress took over the crowd. Verdun waved his hands for quiet.

"It was a very dark time, of course. Yggdrasill, life giving and sacred, had never faced such a terrible adversary before. But she rallied; she regrew her bark stronger, her branches thicker, her leaves fuller. She repelled his attacks swiftly and, with a swipe of her heavy boughs, she entangled and dragged him down into the depths of the void, away from the life sheltering beneath her canopy. And there Níðhöggr stayed, trapped beneath the weight of Yggdrasill's roots, biting and chewing and howling for the dominion he was denied. Vanquished."

Reassured by the more triumphant turn of the tale, the audience sighed with new pleasure. But Verdun was in no way finished. He paced again up and down the periphery of the stage, intense concentration on his face. When he turned suddenly to face them, Tony could hear someone squeak with fright.

"But Níðhöggr is sneaky," Verdun proclaimed. "For many years he listened while rattling the bars of his cage, hearing the occasional word from the stags as they bounded from branch to branch. Or speaking to Ratatoskr who, after all, hungered in his own small way as he scurried up and down
Yggdrasill's trunk. And eventually Níðhöggr's patience was rewarded: he heard tell of the powerful infinity elements, scattered across Yggdrasill's branches and out into the void. He listened for many years, too many to count, more than the lifetime of many Vanir. And eventually, when he'd learned all he could and railed until he could rail no more, Níðhöggr slunk away, back into the cosmos, and for a time it was thought he'd given up his great quest for power. But it was not so. His hunger had only changed; not vanished."

Verdun sighed, looking genuinely troubled. "Eventually, many ages later, Yggdrasill felt Níðhöggr's great appetite encroaching on her again and she braced, confident she would win any battle that followed. But this time was different. Where before he'd been a sharp-toothed worm gnawing at her branches, now there was a new power in Níðhöggr. He had been patient, he'd been sly, and in his patience he'd discovered at last one of the things he'd set out searching for: one of Yggdrasill's life-giving infinity elements."

Verdun paused again, a master of drama, and Tony took the opportunity to lean casually back into Peter and Stephen, the younger hunched forward with excitement and the older hunched backward with apprehension. He realized he still had an unbreakable hold on Stephen's wrist and loosened his fingers with an apologetic squeeze.

"I take it you haven't heard this story before?" Tony asked softly, just beneath the din of other noise.

"Not in any timeline to date," Stephen said just as quietly. "The Vanir are always mysterious, but this is unlike anything I've ever encountered. We can only assume Verdun has his reasons for telling us this tale."

"Right. And hope those reasons don't result in us gnawing at the bars of some tree-cage, somewhere."

"They won't," Stephen said.

Tony cut a look at Peter, but the kid was fully absorbed into the nuances of the story and the energy of the crowd.

"Over the ages he'd been gone, Yggdrasill had felt Níðhöggr moving through the void, of course," Verdun said, drawing them all back into the story. "She'd sensed him doing terrible mischief. But always he'd skirted just out of reach; always he'd avoided her grasp. And with the power of infinity in his claws, at last, he could fly close enough to her branches to swipe at the Tree without fear of being trapped again. So, free at last from reprisal and drunk with the power of his success, Níðhöggr cradled close the power of infinity and set out to find more."

Verdun sighed, bowing beneath some invisible weight to give gravity to the scenario. At his feet Tony watched two young children scuttle backward into the legs of their parents, reaching up for comfort.

"And he did. He found many more. And so Níðhöggr's power grew and grew, until his shadow had started to spread so far it could blot out Yggdrasill's life-giving light. And from that shadow came ruin and madness and death."

"Father," Esan scolded softly, and Verdun looked up from his dramatic retelling, blinking to see the fearful eyes of his audience, adults and children both.

"Ah," he said guiltily, and Verdun looked up from his dramatic retelling, blinking to see the fearful eyes of his audience, adults and children both.

"Ah," he said guiltily, and his dismay was so tragically complete that, like a soap bubble popping, Tony felt the tension vanish. More than one person giggled with relieved laughter, setting off a few more, and then a few more, until the entire camp seemed to feel the wave of humor ebbing and
flowing among them.

Verdun waited until it died down before he gave them all a sheepish grin. "Well, it's a story about infinity, after all. What epic wouldn't be complete without a villain who has the power to face the Gods?"

The camp nodded in eager agreement. A story; yes, of course. It was only a story.

"But you see!" Verdun exclaimed happily. "You needn't fear. Because this is where things go awry for Níðhöggr. He searched and plotted and swept his shadow from one side of the cosmos to the other. And he came near to his victory, very near, and in some stories perhaps he even achieved it. But not this one!"

He swooped in, snatching one of the youngest children up and soaring her over his head so first she shouted in alarm and then in glee. The rest of the children laughed, leaping to their feet with their own shouts.

"Not this one," Verdun repeated, putting her down and crouching to stare at her from an inch away. "You see, while Níðhöggr gloated and boasted the inevitability of his victory, warriors from many different realms came together to fight him, realms no one had even heard of before. Some that had been hidden; some that had been forgotten. Even some who'd been enemies drew together to fight. And these warriors, men and women and creatures and beings and Gods from far and wide, they opposed Níðhöggr. The resistance was astonishing. And do you know what happened?"

"They won!" the child said excitedly, with the simple confidence of someone who knew good must always triumph over evil.

"No," Esan said, gently, and the audience turned to her, dismay in every line of them. "They lost."

"Now you choose to be dramatic," Verdun complained good-naturedly, which set everyone to laughing again. "Yes, they lost, trying to match might against might with a being of great power, and greater cunning and malice. But they didn't lose everything; they saved much, and if it wasn't all? Well, there's courage to be found even in just the attempt. And their loss was not in vain, because do you know what happened then? And not another word out of you!"

That last he'd directed with a stern finger at Esan, who stepped back with a hand to her heart in wounded protest. The children at her feet giggled again, swarming around her. She dropped to her knees, grinning, and tugged two of them close.

"No, what happened then," Verdun continued merrily, "was among the heroes, a small few snuck in behind Níðhöggr, where he'd sent minions to do his work. And while the great beast's maw was turned away and blind, they stole the very greatest of the treasures Níðhöggr searched for, the most powerful light in all infinity, so great it could still the hand of time itself. And with it they snuck away and vanished into the cosmic void."

Beside him, Tony felt Peter jerk, and something clamped down hard on his elbow. He looked over to see the kid pale with shock in the moonlight, a question in his eyes. Tony nodded at him shortly. He glanced at Stephen but the sorcerer was too preoccupied to look back, eyes locked on the stage. He had one hand resting on his chest and Tony didn't have to see it to know it was clamped grimly, compulsively over the Eye.

"Into the void?" a man asked, confused. "They ran? But won't he find them?"

"Perhaps one day he will. But they're cunning and wily, these travellers. They -"
"Travellers?" someone else interrupted.

Verdun put a hand to his mouth in imaginary surprise. "Oh, did I forget to say? The heroes were exposed, of course, and as is the way of many heroes, they were obliged to disguise themselves for the safety of all. They donned the masks of nameless travellers, flying through the void, scaling up and down Yggdrasill's trunk more swiftly than the eagle, more skillfully than Ratatoskr."

"But how were they so fast?" one of the children asked, and the adults nodded thoughtfully. "Faster than a dragon!"

Verdun widened his eyes in shared wonder. "There's a strange thing about Níðhǫggr I'll share with you that isn't often told. A great beast he may be, but! Do you know, in many of the old stories he isn't always a dragon. He's a sly one, always changing, and sometimes he's a giant serpent, circling Yggdrasill like rope, and other times he's one of the forgotten titans, descended from a line of Gods born before even the Nine were created." He lowered his voice, as if imparting a great secret. "And in my very favorite tales, he's not a dragon or an animal or a God at all. He's just a man." He smiled fiercely. "And men can be defeated by warriors and Gods, but mostly? Mostly they're defeated by their own greed and malice, their own avarice turned against them."

"That doesn't explain how our travellers managed to escape from Níðhǫggr," Esan pointed out dryly, clearly familiar with her father losing himself to the narrative of the story.

Verdun smiled. "Yes, that's true. How does one stay ahead of a creature whose eye is everywhere, and whose reach is as long as the cosmos are wide? And the stories never quite agree on this point. Most believe they managed it with the aid of a powerful ally, a spirit of great wings faster than light. It is always a great blessing to have the ear and loyalty of spirits. But there are some who insist it must've been Odin himself who flew to their rescue; or, that if it was trickery, it could only have been Loki who took them away. But all agree that, in the end, for anyone to escape from Níðhǫggr they must've had the luck of the Norns."

Something rippled over the camp then, something Tony didn't understand. He frowned, reaching warily for the nanotech. But far from dismayed and confused, the audience seemed eager. Thrilled, even.

"Well, I can see you know the story of them," Verdun said, grinning, and the animated burble of sound spread further. "And if our travellers have their luck and perhaps even their blessing, can anyone guess how many there must be?"

"Three!" one of the youths said excitedly. "One blessed by each."

Verdun nodded sagely. "Yes, in this story there are three. I'm sure some of you heard it told with one, or two, or perhaps rarely four. But in this tale our travellers number three. The blessed of Urðr was how they escaped, for that one was clever, as her chosen so often are." Verdun wiggled his fingers, apparently to demonstrate cleverness. The children giggled. "And the blessed of Skuld was powerful, as hers so often are. Powerful enough to use the light of infinity they'd stolen, casting many shadows in the wake of their escape to keep them safe."

"Will they run forever?" one of the children asked boldly. "Won't they get tired?"

"I'm sure they will and have," Verdun said, nodding. "But I like to think they sometimes find a bit of sanctuary on their journey, a small island of calm in otherwise uncertain lands. Perhaps, dare I say it, they might even someday wander here, to sup the peace and plenty of our lands."

"Here?" one of the men asked, thoughtfully.
"You like to think?" Esan asked at the same time, abruptly enough that the thrall of Verdun's story waned beneath her sudden surprise. "What do you mean, think? Don't you know?"

Verdun smiled, full of mystery. "No. No one knows the end to this tale, and even the middle is sometimes hazy. That's what makes this story so interesting, you see. It hasn't been finished yet."

A disbelieving silence settled on the camp. Tony shouldered back into Peter and Stephen, ready. They sat as a tense ball, not sure what might happen next, not sure they were going to like it.

"And Verðandi's chosen?" Esan asked, suddenly, like a shock of lightning in the quiet. Her voice was brittle with something not quite sadness. "What did he - what did this traveller bring to the triad?"

"Verðandi's?" Verdun asked with surprise. "But that's obvious. She chooses always someone rich with the joy of life. Skuld is the inevitable future, and Urðr is nebulous fate. But Verðandi is grounded in the fleeting moment, the present. All three are needed for Balance, for what is one without the others?"

Esan looked away. "So these three, they'll weave through Yggdrasill's branches until they choose to surrender their stolen treasure, which they never will, hiding until Nóðgögg gives up his terrible quest, which he never will. And where does it stop? Where will they stop? Travellers can't travel forever."

"They'll go as long as is needed." Verdun held out two hands, tipping them up and down to bow them beneath the weight of a scale. "They must, daughter. If they fail, then we all fail. The fortunes of many rest with them."

"But all journeys end," she insisted. "Nothing is forever. Where does it end for these three?"

Verdun shrugged, reaching halfway out to Esan before letting his arms fall. "As I said, their final destination is never told. It's tied too closely to Yggdrasill's fate to be seen. Not by the Gods, not by any gatekeeper, not by any weaver." He smiled. "Certainly not a weaver like me; mediocre at best, plodding at worst."

The camp laughed, released from the strange tension winding tight through father and daughter in an unspoken battle of wills.

Esan didn't laugh. She turned and walked away. Tony felt Peter's fingers tighten fractionally further where he was still gripping Tony's elbow.

Verdun looked after her a long moment, the night casting deep shadows in his face. Then he turned, clapping his hands together suddenly, briskly. "So, you see. Every traveller who comes is as these three; welcome and valued and cherished. And we must always treat them with respect, because one day we might encounter a traveller who comes bearing an elemental power, and we wouldn't want to offend or deter them." He leaned in to stare with mock severity at the children again, putting his hands on his hips so they giggled at him. "Would we?"

"No," they chorused.

"No," he agreed. "So the rules of etiquette were made and passed down through the ages. And this is how we know all our children who leave our side to pilgrimage will be welcome in any camp, wherever they may go. Because on this world, one of Yggdrasill's Nine, we offer sanctuary. Vanaheim is a refuge for weary souls, and all are safe and welcome among us, isn't that so?"

"It is," the children agreed.
"And do you know what else is true of Vanaheim?" he asked, widening his eyes.

"What?" they gasped.

"That our children go to bed early when the moon is full," Verdun said sternly, laughing when they all cried immediate objections. "No, no, it's off to bed with you. Your parents are done eating and must be abed soon too. And I've spoken such a very long tale and answered so many of your questions I've almost gone hoarse. A weaver, going hoarse, unable to tell tales! Can you imagine?"

They shook their unhappy heads while behind them their family hid smiles behind polite hands. A few among them looked like they wanted to join the children, disappointed the thrilling tale had come to an end.

Verdun nodded at them decisively, holding a hand delicately at his throat to ward off any further hoarseness. "So away with you now to sleep. Off you go. Tomorrow comes early."

Those on child-minding duty started gathering the glum children up in droves, walking with them to tents Tony could hardly see in the dark.

And it was about that time, freed at last from the spell of Verdun's tale, that Tony realized there was something he had to do.

He stood up abruptly, almost sending Stephen toppling away from the table before Tony could catch him. He pulled Peter up too. Not ten feet away, he could see Verdun look at them with glittering eyes, a knowing light in his opaque face.

"Come with me," he told Peter and Stephen tensely, walking away from the light, from the camp, back to the tree line. He almost expected to be stopped, for loud shouting and cries of protest to rise behind them, but no voice called out after them. Not even Verdun's.

"Am I crazy or was that whole story about us?" Peter asked urgently as they went. He kept glancing behind him, like perhaps they were being hunted. "I mean, I only understood maybe half of it. But like, I'm not crazy, right? That was about us?"

"And about Thanos," Tony confirmed, still motoring them away at speed. "And about how Thanos is hunting us from one side of the known galaxy to the other, which comes as no surprise, but which I now resent a hell of a lot more somehow. This must be what Frodo felt like, carrying the One Ring across half of Middle Earth."

"I always thought it was weird they didn't use the eagles to do it," Peter commented.

"Oh, for the love of all things Tolkien, thank you. Someone else who asked the question."

"It's a fantasy epic," Stephen said. "It's going to require some suspension of disbelief."

Tony huffed. "As the keeper of the Time Stone and Gandalf's closest relative you'd have to say that, wouldn't you?"

Stephen ignored that, following in Tony's wake probably mostly because Tony still had a solid grip on his wrist. "Tony. It's alright. There's no need to panic."

"Who's panicking? I'm not panicking. Are you panicking?" Tony shook his head firmly. "No one's panicking."

"Yes, I can see how very calm you are."
"No comments from the peanut gallery. It's not what you're thinking, anyway. I just realized there's a billion year old story about the fate of the universe that happens to feature us and talks a lot of shit about destiny. And honestly? I really hate destiny."

Stephen snorted, tugging so he could slide his fingers through Tony's instead of hanging limply from his grasp. "You only hate it because it implies you're not in control of your own destiny."

"No, I hate it because it's bullshit. Might as well start reading horoscopes or listening to psychics, it's all hypothetical nonsense predicated on confirmation bias. But you know what destiny does remind me of? How hopelessly unqualified I am to direct someone else's. Tony stopped, steps away from the edge of the camp but far enough to probably go unheard. He pivoted until he was facing Peter. "Which brings us to my next point. Peter, I can send you home."

Stephen's fingers twitched for a moment in brief surprise before gripping more warmly. Tony gripped him back, probably harder than he should.

The kid, who'd been following with the dazed distraction of someone who'd been smacked over the head with a blunt object, whipped his head up fast enough it probably would've hurt someone without arachnid reflexes. Tony watched him go white with shock. "What?"

"Home," Tony said firmly. "I can get you back. Not today, I mean, and not by ship. If we were going back by ship we'd still be months in space trekking back to our solar system. But yeah, far as I can tell, that whole story was about us, and more to the point, it was about how each of the nine planets on this tree thing -"

"Yggdrasill," Stephen corrected softly.

"Yeah, that," Tony said. "What that is, existentially speaking, I have no idea. But cosmically, it seems to represent an accumulation of quantum energy that can tunnel into wormholes, each one networked through a predetermined set of coordinates. Basically, whatever it is that makes up this stupid tree of theirs, it's tangled with nine particular worlds. Don't ask me why those nine. It makes no sense and nothing I can do will probably ever explain it. But one of them we're standing on, and one of the remaining eight is Earth. At this point it's a matter of finding the right on-switch for the right coordinate set and catalyzing the right reaction with one of the Vanir's help. Simple."

"Oh, is that all?" Stephen asked dryly. "There's a lot of trial and error between now and when you can make good on that simple equation."

Tony shook his head, finally finding the calm he needed. "Trial and error's just time. Which means, given enough of it, Peter can go. I can send him home."

"I'm not saying you can't. I'm saying it's disingenuous to call it easy, or without risk. Because it isn't."

"Yeah, well, what is these days?"

"We can go home?" Peter blurted, interrupting. His eyes were wide with wonder, hope on a backdrop of painful surprise.

Tony breathed through the initial pang of denial. (Peter couldn't go; Tony needed him - the kid was instrumental; he was smart; he had incredible utility; FRIDAY adored him; she'd be lost without him; he loved Tony's tech; who would Tony label with colorful spider nicknames without him; he made Tony laugh; he made Tony want to be better and more; keep the kid safe and happy; he couldn't just leave -)
"Yep," Tony said firmly. "Home sweet home, in reach. I just need a couple weeks to make it happen."

"No," Stephen said at the same time. "We can't go home. Peter, if you choose to, you can go home."

"Wait, what?" Peter asked, all wonder draining from his expression like a candle blowing out. "Me? Why just me? You're coming too!"

Tony shook his head. "No can do, kid. Thanos'll be watching Earth like a hawk. You can slip in under the radar, but Stephen can't, and I obviously can't leave our sorcerer behind unattended. That's like leaving your Audi abandoned on the street with the keys in the ignition and a giant neon sign above it. I mean, you might get the car back eventually, but you can bet they totalled the paint job, deleted all your playlists, and stole the air freshener. Not to mention all your valuables stashed in the glove compartment."

"Comparing me to an Audi," Stephen muttered, disgusted. "Please. I have better taste than that."

"Listen, just because you like to total Lamborghini's in your spare time -" Peter waved them off frantically, clearly in no mood for jokes. "I can't go back alone."

"You won't be alone," Tony said. "You have family on Earth. You'll be the opposite of alone."

"You have family too," Peter protested hotly. "Miss Potts."

"Won't be in the picture anymore," Tony interrupted, more harshly than he ought to, but thoughts of Pepper were just another sharp sting in a rapidly growing wound. "I'm dead to her at this point, remember? And any chance of marriage is long gone, even if I do get back some day."

Peter spread both hands peacefully, obviously aware he'd tread on some thin ice. "Only legally. You guys knew each other for years before you became Iron Man. I read it in your biography. She's still -"

"My God, is there no one in the universe who hasn't read that thing?" Tony demanded. Stephen raised an eyebrow. "I'm almost certain Thanos hasn't."

"Well, that's a relief. I'm not sure what I'd do if he knew the story about the Ferris wheel and the penguins. In fact, I'm not sure how I feel about either of you knowing."

"Or the rest of the world," Stephen put in helpfully. "Although, in my opinion, chapter thirteen was more interesting. My favorite was the bit about the synagogue and the ballet troupe."

"Is the wormhole bidirectional?" Peter asked.

Tony hesitated, because that was a justified but complicated question, and not only for logistical reasons. "Why?"

"What do you mean, why?" Peter asked incredulously. "So I can come back, obviously."

"The simple answer is no. This isn't a day pass, kid. You can go home and live out your life in relative peace back in Queens, but I'm not going to start up weekend visitation. One-way tickets only on this train."

"That's not fair!"
"There's also the fact that there's no way for you to activate the wormhole from Earth, so we'd have to open it from here. And frankly, the universe isn't kind enough to remain perfectly stationary to our needs, so there's no guarantee where the aperture is even going to spit you out, let alone where it might appear again if we open the wormhole a few days later. Can't just sit here waiting for you to discover it and hop through before something far less savory does. Sorry, kid."

Peter's entire face fell. He looked down with a fierce frown.

"Buck up, Peter," Tony coaxed, plastering a smile on his face. "It's not all bad. You can write to us. I've always wanted to have a pen pal. How much you want to bet no one's ever had an intragalactic pen pal before?"

"Possibly because responses might take longer than an entire human lifespan," Stephen commented. "Not to mention forwarding addresses."

"Thanks, Stephen. I knew I could count on you to back me up."

The sorcerer nodded peacefully. "Uncomfortable truths are my specialty. Which brings us back full circle." Stephen turned to face the subdued teenager. "Peter, it's your choice. You can take all the time you need to think about it."

"What's to think about?" Tony asked. "Peter likes home. Home is now in reach. Not a difficult equation."

"Making choices we're accountable for is always a difficult equation," Stephen said quietly. "Isn't it, Peter?"

The kid remains silent. He turned to look out behind them, into the shadowy woods.

The sorcerer wasn't done. "There's something liberating in another person making the hard decisions. It's always so much more paralyzing to be tangled in the mire of our own free will, having to live with all the consequences, good or bad, that might come from it."

"That sounds like the voice experience," Peter said, his expression still totally hidden from Tony's eyes. "You chose to go back before, didn't you? Once?"

Stephen's expression was, likewise, too neutral to be read. "More than once."

"But you didn't have to live with those consequences," Peter pointed out. "You cheated."

"Now you sound like Tony."

"Like a genius, you mean," Tony said. "Come on, you guys are making this far too maudlin. Kid's going home. Time to celebrate. Mazel Tov."

Stephen shook his head. "Time to consider carefully."

"I don't need time for either," the kid said, sighing. "But you already knew that. You knew what I was going to choose before he told me. It's always the same thing, right?"

Stephen shrugged. "I've only witnessed a fraction of all the futures there are, and no two are ever completely alike. Your choices are your own."

"Magic eight-ball," Tony complained.

Peter turned at that, and there was a glimmer of a smile on his youthful face. "Oh, wow. He really
"Is, isn't he?"

"Don't count on it," Stephen said.

Tony nodded seriously. "It is decidedly so."

They all shared a ridiculous grin at that, and something in Tony eased to see it, some tension he didn't want to acknowledge dissolving under his feet. But guilt was a familiar intruder inside him, often ignored but not easily silenced.

"Okay, so you're not totally convinced yet," Tony said. "That's fine. It's going to take me a few weeks to actually figure out the mechanics of all this anyway. You can have that long to make up your mind."

"I don't need weeks," Peter said, with a faint grin that was half-hearted at best. "Or even days. I've already decided."

"Don't be in such a hurry to turn it down, kid," Tony said, before his better instincts could prevail and shut him up. "This could be your only opportunity to go back to being a friendly neighbourhood Spider-Man. Last chance to get back to your family. Family's important, Peter. Don't waste this."

Peter shook his head, resolve bringing his head up proudly. "I'm not wasting it. I'm doing exactly the opposite. I'm staying where I'm needed most."

"Needed?" Tony frowned. "I don't know if I'd go that far."

"Dude, did you see what happened on the last planet? I mean, if I leave, who's going to make sure you don't die every time you mouth off to some alien overlord? There's bound to be others. And I mean soon."

"Okay, ignoring the fact I am actually capable of taking care of myself," Tony started, waiting until the other two stopped laughing hysterically before continuing. "I still have a pocket sorcerer out here with me. He'll keep me safe."


"Maybe we should do that anyway," Peter suggested. "He can keep your cloak company."

"It has taken a rather unnatural liking to him," Stephen mused.

Tony sniffed disdainfully. "Nothing unnatural about it. I'm a very likable person. You're just biased because I kidnapped you that one time."

"Odd how that works, isn't it?"

"Not my finest hour, I'll admit. But I still don't regret it."

"Neither do I," Peter said softly, and Tony felt his throat close on anything he might've tried to say to that.

"Be sure, Peter," Stephen urged. "This isn't something that can be taken back a week from now. If you're staying, then it's time for us to be on our way. Tony has what he needs. This safe haven is almost spent."

Peter bit his lip, losing some of his stalwart confidence as his shoulders drooped an inch. "So soon?"
We've only been here a week and a half."

"The Vanir may have the strength and resilience of their cousins, but Vanaheim isn't Asgard. This planet is a mecca of unprotected, raw power. It's only a matter of time until that attracts attention from the kind of people you never want to attract attention from."

Tony raised an eyebrow. "Oh, I don't know. They seem to've done okay for themselves so far. Still mostly intact and free to harvest trees and tea plants and sing Kumbaya to their heart's content."

Stephen snorted. "Willful ignorance doesn't suit you. They won't defend themselves. They can't."

"I know," Tony admitted. "I was listening. Do you think Verdun added the bit about sanctuary because we were listening, or is that part of every tall tale on this world?"

"I've heard variations of the sentiment. But nothing quite that pointed."

"Variations of what?" Peter wanted to know, frowning.

Tony sighed, pacing a few steps away. "Tree-thing created Nine Realms of equal and opposite function and reaction. Earth is the outlier, and if I've done my math right, that's because of how short and compact our lives are in this ragtag collection of cosmic legends." Tony glanced a question at Stephen, who nodded. "So Asgard and Vanaheim are sister worlds, alike because of the people on them, but with a fundamental distinction; Asgard is a planet of war and warriors, and Vanaheim is a planet of peace and pacifists. Without Asgard's protection, someone'll come along to ransack the treasury before too long. I guarantee it."

"But then, doesn't that mean we have to stay?" Peter asked hotly, the bright moonlight turning the grit of his teeth into a fierce grimace. "To protect them?"

"What, protect an entire world from the universe at large and everyone in it?" Tony asked skeptically. "Who do you think we are? The Incredible Three? Avengers 2.0?"

"Now that you mention it -"

Stephen had a very knowing smile quirming the left corner of his mouth. "Don't trouble yourself, Peter. Tony's already figured out how to protect them. He just enjoys stringing you along."

"You never let me have any fun," Tony complained. "And the only thing I figured out is how sneaky these people are. It's absurd, really. I have half a mind to complain to the management."

"Then I suppose we'd better go see Verdun, hadn't we?"

Which was easy enough, really. They hadn't been all that long at the tree line and when they returned to the camp, there were a few stragglers left enjoying the last dregs of firelight as night closed in. They all pointed the way to a familiar tent, every inch of them naively trusting and welcoming.

"Fish in a barrel," Tony muttered to Stephen as they walked away. "Been here all of a week and they're already happy to hand us the keys to the city. How has no one turned up to enslave these people yet? It's been months since Asgard went the way of the dodo."

Stephen sighed. "The universe is full of mysteries."

Verdun was waiting for them when they arrived; of course he was.
"Hello," he said when they came in, a blaze of flickering lamplight casting him in haloed silhouette. "I'm glad to see you've returned. I thought you might've left without saying goodbye. I was planning how I might give chase."

"We wouldn't do that," Peter said loyally, while Tony and Stephen exchanged dubious looks behind his back.

"Yeah, we had to come back and talk shop first," Tony said, getting down to business. "That was a fantastic story you told back there, by the way. Almost too fantastic to be true."

"What is truth?" Verdun asked brightly. "Except a conviction shared by many."

Tony scowled at him. "What are you, Aristotle? Thanks for the armchair philosophy. Now let's talk facts. Like how you happened to know the future in spite of not having a pretty green stone to call your own."

"Yes, thankfully that particular power was never mine to protect," Verdun said. "An infinity stone is a heavy burden. I don't envy you three its weight."

"An infinity stone," Tony repeated flatly, narrowing his eyes. "You called it an element before. Guess we're giving up the euphemisms."

"They do seem unnecessary."

"How did you know?" Stephen asked, taking a few steps forward into the spacious tent. "What gave it away?"

Tony followed, noticing suddenly that one side of the room was completely covered with a heavy, hanging cloth, a kaleidoscope of color and shapes over endless rows of threaded material. The tapestry was so immense it seemed to take up more room than it physically occupied. Tony skirted around it warily.

"I didn't know, at first," Verdun said, allowing them to come cautiously closer. "I believed you really were simple merchant travellers. But your story had many holes, not least your peculiar lack of knowledge about our people and culture. You didn't belong, and you made little enough effort to conceal that."

Tony glared at him, offended. "I'll have you know, I made just enough effort to conceal it." He gestured at his false features, feeling the insubstantial film of the veil rippling as he frowned. "This isn't just another pretty face, you know."

Tony had the satisfaction of seeing confusion leak into Verdun's expression.

"That can't have been all," Stephen interjected, coming near enough to the tapestry he could reach out a hand to almost touch it, dropping his fingers at the last moment. Tony wondered if he also sensed the odd, looming presence of the thing.

"It wasn't," Verdun admitted. "But I suspected what you might be when you didn't recognize the Lighthouse. I felt it more strongly as the week went on. But it wasn't until the night you showed me the Seeds that I knew."

Tony spread his hands peaceably. "Yeah. I thought that might've tipped your hand."

Verdun laughed, softly, and something about it made the hair on Tony's neck stand on end. "Perhaps not in the way you think. As you spoke of Seeds, Stephen sensed your error and moved to
distract me with talk of weaving. In the end, that was what gave it away.” Verdun turned to the sorcerer expectantly. "You told me then that you'd never met another weaver before. Was that true?"

"Yes," Stephen said slowly.

"I don't think it is. I think it's more likely you have and simply didn't know it. Weavers are as essential to our way of life as builders and artists, farmers and riders. You can’t travel Vanaheim and never meet a weaver. And you certainly can’t travel it with a pendant like yours and never catch unwanted attention."

And he reached out and placed a hand very lightly atop the Eye, where Stephen's restless hands had displaced it during the earlier story.

It didn't burn him.

Stephen jerked away, both arms snapping up and flickering defensively with crackling orange magic. Tony had halfway called the nanotech into being before Verdun took three steps away, holding his hands up calmly.

"Peace," he said easily. "I only meant to draw your attention to the fact one can’t wear Agamotto's symbol on any of the Nine Realms and expect it to go unnoticed."

Stephen stared at him. "You know Agamotto?"

"Know him? Of course not. But I know of him. All weavers do, to some extent." Verdun smiled, and this one looked entirely sincere, even fond. "It's because of him that we weave in the way we do. His work was instrumental in forging the old paths, the well-worn furrows in the sands of time we walk today to see tomorrow. His work and Cagliostro's."

"Cagliostro," Stephen repeated, but faintly. He looked like someone who'd had not only the rug pulled out from under him, but the entire tent and all the support struts attached to it too.

"Yes, Cagliostro. Him, I knew." That fond smile widened further. "Or it's more accurate to say, my family did. My grandfather had the privilege of overseeing one of the first manuscripts Cagliostro wrote in his many studies of Time. I'm told the man was quite rude, really. A phenomenal scholar with unparalleled understanding in theoretical constructs of the infinite. But no appreciation for decorum. Grandfather was glad to be done with him in the end."

Stephen sharpened, his brilliant mind coming suddenly to bear on this news. "Do you have any of them here? The manuscripts?"

"No. Most have faded into memory and those few that remain are not here. You must've learned from one, to use Agamotto's relic as you do. You don't have it with you?"

"No," Stephen admitted. "Not with me."

"A pity. I would've enjoyed seeing it." Verdun swept suddenly to the side, and for the first time his face was fully visible to Tony, and it was shining with something proud and delightfully expectant. He waved a hand at the enormous hanging cloth crowding the room. "But come, let's discuss what I brought you here to see. What do you think of the tapestry?"

Tony looked at it then, almost against his will, and again he felt that there was something skirting just outside his comprehension, some weighted, heavy thing adding presence to the thing in some impossible way.
Stephen felt it too and made no move to step closer, though Verdun's invitation clearly asked him to. "It's as you said it would be. A beautiful work of art. A legacy of your family."

"Not only of mine," Verdun said. "Look closer. Or perhaps look further, if that helps."

They did look, because something seemed to be compelling them to. But Peter was the one who saw it first.


"What?" Tony demanded, looking from Peter to the tapestry and back. "What is?"

Peter reached out, snagging him and then Stephen and yanking them backward, until they all stood almost at the entrance to the tent again, the tapestry and Verdun a lifetime away.

"Think of it like one of those Magic Eye things," Peter said, shuffling to the left so they faced it dead center. "Look at the red and, like, trace it around in a circle."

Tony did as bid, but it still took him a few seconds longer than Stephen, who made a noise like someone had kicked him in the gut. He drifted forward like there was an invisible string pulling him, and that's when Tony saw it.

"Is that - your ridiculous kryptonite necklace?" Tony asked, slowly, seeing it almost more with his mind's eye than with the eyes in his head. "Magnified three thousand percent?"

"Yes," Stephen breathed, reaching out to finally touch it. Tony half expected the thing to fling him away, somehow, but nothing happened except suddenly the pattern Tony had only half been seeing became much more distinct. No surprise; the red was now backlit with a tongue of flame, magic curling sinuously to reveal the hidden pattern.

"And here I thought we were supposed to keep a low profile," Tony sighed, shaking his head.

"I think we're well past that now, don't you?" Stephen asked. "How old is this, Verdun? It's very powerful. Almost a relic in itself."

"Four generations. My great-aunt began it. She saw the threads of Agamotto almost before there was an Agamotto."

"It's incredible."

"It's yours," Verdun said.

Stephen went completely still. Tony wasn't sure he was even breathing. "What?"

"There are a hundred-million-billion paths you might've taken on your journey around the World Tree. Any number of those could've brought you to Vanahem, and any number of those might've brought you to one of the many thousands of camps. I cannot think it a coincidence that this path has brought you to me, wearing a pendant that I've looked on every day for almost sixteen hundred years. The tapestry was completed forty years ago, when Esan first learned the loom and saw it was time to finish it. Now it only waits for a time it might be used. Take it, Stephen."

"I can't," the sorcerer said, backing away. "That's too great a gift."

"It's not a gift. I have something else to gift you. The tapestry belongs with you, so you must have..."
"It's simply the way things are."

"I can't," Stephen repeated, but reluctantly.

"You will. But here, let me show you the gift and perhaps that will change your mind." Verdun reached up, detaching a number of heavy clips and pins. "Peter, assist me please."

The kid did as he was told, carefully releasing the tapestry until it could tumble heavily down, spilling onto the floor in a way not quite natural for something so heavy. Verdun began to roll it, pushing and pulling with motions so careful and practiced they were nothing short of ceremonial. Eventually he had the material tucked into a snug spiral, that extraordinary presence condensed in a way that almost seemed to sing.

"There, you see?" Verdun asked, standing, satisfied. "If it wasn’t meant to go, it wouldn’t allow itself to be so easily wrapped. But there's a piece missing yet; here."

He produced from behind him something thin and small, a collection of braided threads like tassels, knotted together into a rope as thick as Tony's wrist, long and deceptively sturdy. At its center, another symbol; a geometric collection of spirals and lines in a protective circle. Tony had seen its kind many times before; on Stephen's shields of magic.

"It's a seal," Verdun explained, reaching to tie it securely. "Leave it bound or ornamented with it and the tapestry is only a tapestry. Pretty, perhaps, but of no greater significance than any other work of art. Agamotto's symbol will be hidden. Untie it or remove the seal and Time will be clear and awake for any who look with a willingness to see."

Stephen raised a shaking hand to trace the outline of the seal, looking entirely lost for words.

Tony stepped in to fill the silence. "Verdun, I'm no master of the mystic arts, or any arts, really. But even I can see that four generations of work from your family is too much to give away."

Verdun shook his head. "The tapestry is a masterpiece of my craft and my family, but it was always meant to endure beyond us. I'm grateful for my part in making it, but to keep it would be a crime against Yggdrasill."

"It's a very pretty rug," Tony said, blandly, "but, no offense? I doubt keeping it will consign your soul to eternal damnation. You guys put in a few thousand years of work on that thing. We won't hold it against you if you want to hang onto it."

"It is a legacy, and it leaves us only as it was meant to." Verdun shrugged, one part melancholy and many parts joy. "That is what legacies do."

"Right." Tony sighed loudly. "You people are big on legacy. Aren’t you?"

Verdun smiled. "What have you discovered? I knew you looked, and I knew you found, but what, and what it meant I couldn’t say. I assume this has something to do with the Seeds you wanted?"

"Yeah. After that fun little jaunt through Tree-thing's history earlier, it's clear you know your fancy little Lighthouses aren't actually communicating with Gods. Whatever stories you might tell the rest of your people."

"The Lighthouse is used as a means of contacting Asgard and using the Bridge," Verdun agreed.

"Not anymore it isn't," Tony said bluntly. Like ripping off a band-aid, there seemed little point in drawing out the suspense. "Asgard was destroyed. A little over four months ago. The Lighthouse
"Isn't calling anyone, anymore."

"Not so," Verdun said, far more cheerful than he had any right to be just then. "It called you, didn't it?"

Tony stared at him. "What?"

"Vanaheim is fundamentally a sanctuary, and each Lighthouse is foremost a guide. You came looking for something; something you needed. The Lighthouse heard your call, or perhaps called you in turn. But the end result is the same. One of you answered. And now: here you are."

Tony opened his mouth, shut it, and then opened it again. "What does that even mean?"

"Yggdrasil's ways are strange," Verdun pronounced, like that explained anything.

"Are you kidding me? What kind of ridiculous - okay, no, that's beside the point." Tony slashed a hand firmly through the air. "Did you not hear what I said just now? Asgard was destroyed. No more land of warriors to protect you. Poof! Gone."

"We know," Verdun said calmly. "Ragnarök has long been predicted. No one could say when, but we felt it when the shining realm fell. It was a terrible, tragic loss to all the cosmos. We mourned; we're still mourning."

"Who the hell's we?" Tony asked incredulously. "I was under the impression you folks still had delusions of others people's grandeur. Your daughter, for one, seems to be lacking a few essential facts."

Verdun shook his head. "Do you not have knowledge on your world that's gated by age and experience? It's a rite of passage among us that when a youth becomes an adult, they're told the great history of our people and the ties that bind us to Asgard's fate." He grimaced, for the first time seeming troubled. "That bound us. Esan would've been another century before she was told, but she knows more than some. And in any case I believe circumstances will force my hand early. Ignorance will not serve her in the places she must go."

"Never so glad to be born on Earth," Tony muttered. "A world that prizes ignorance. Kill me now."

"A world that prizes innocence," Verdun corrected gently. "But we could debate philosophy for many moons and I suspect gain little. I doubt your words of legacy were about Asgard's loss. What did you mean to tell me of Lighthouses and Seeds?"

Tony sighed. "If you know Asgard's gone, you know it's only a matter of time before someone comes along to take advantage of that. Without their protection you're hooped."

"There is much greed in the cosmos. That it should come to Vanaheim is unfortunate, but not unexpected."

"So what are you planning to do? Quote fairy tales at them until they surrender?"

"Vanaheim won't go to war, if that's what you mean to ask," Verdun said. "It is not our way."

"Guess it's true then: nothing much has changed on this world in ten thousand years. Your Lighthouses? At the heart of it, they're just segmented transmitters; antenna that've been seeded all across this planet, capable of storing, transforming, sending and receiving energy on a scale I can't even begin to measure. You use them to talk to Asgard, but I think in the beginning they were meant to talk to each other. There's a reason your ancestors built so many, and most of them in locations..."
remote enough they’ve been lost to time.” Tony grinned proudly. "Peter gave me the idea, actually. From one of our more recent adventures. It’s a web."

"A web of Lighthouses?" Verdun asked. Not disbelieving; just curious.

"Yep. Or, more accurately, it’s a network. A global network of light, of radiant energy which, with enough contiguous points of origin, could be used to blanket your entire planet with an impenetrable shield. Now, normally the power requirement to create a self-perpetuating loop for something that size would be virtually impossible. But your ancestors took care of that, too." Tony produced a pine cone and tossed it to Verdun, who caught it neatly. "That’s why they converted an elemental source into something that grows on trees. So you could never run out of it."

"You have a very clever mind, Tony," Verdun said, eyes on the element in his hands. "Too clever, perhaps. Urðr chose well."

"I don’t know what that means. But I know this: for a people able to reliably predict the future, or at least some version of it? There’s no way you can’t have known about this option. So why haven’t you done it yet?"

"Well," Verdun said, with a sly smile, "there’s an old story, you see. About a group of travellers who come scaling the World Tree to hide from Níðhögg's sight. And what they might need from Vanahem to help them in their quest; the darkness that could befall us all if they don't get it. For better or worse, your tale has always been linked to Ragnarök. In the times it doesn't come, neither do you. But we couldn't open the Sanctum, the network as you call it, until you appeared. And more importantly, my people have spent so long mired in the inertia of our ways it will take an event catastrophic enough to shake Yggdrasill herself to galvanize them into acceptance, into action. Now it’s here: The age of the Gods is ending. The rise of change has come."

"Ragnarök," a voice said, and they all turned to the tent’s doorway, where Esan stood half in shadow, a wraith kissed in hovering moonlight. "Truly? The time of the ending has come?"

"The time of Asgard's ending," Verdun corrected, frowning, walking toward her. "Esan, you shouldn’t be here. You know better than to listen at open doors."

"Open tent flaps, actually," Tony said. "Not exactly the most secure of all soundproofed structures."

Esan shook her head grimly. "If Ragnarök has come, then nothing can protect me or anyone from the things we need to hear. Father, if you knew it was here how could you say nothing?"

"Daughter, that is a discussion for another time."

"But so much must change, now," she insisted with low distress. "The whole of Vanahem. Everything beyond it. Nothing will be the same. Nothing can be as it was."

Verdun gathered up her hands soothingly, chafing them for warmth. "The people will not change; who we are will not change. It is only that we must learn new ways to adapt. To grow, as we haven't for thousands of years. One era has ended, yes, that's true. But another will rise to take its place."

"The King is dead," Stephen said quietly, startling Tony into turning. "Long live the King."

Verdun turned to him, puzzled. "We don’t have a king."

"Old Earth expression," Stephen murmured. "Or Midgard, as you’d call it."

"Good old Mother Earth," Tony confirmed. "Home to any number of strange creatures. Humans, for one. The duck-billed platypus for another."

"A mortal," she said, dazed. "But how can that be? Mortals are vulnerable creatures, with neither strength nor endurance to protect themselves. But I have seen you over this last week. Your strength is equal to any of our kind."

Tony rolled his eyes. "Vulnerable? Just because we can’t take a tank missile the face. Humans die a little easier than you, sure, but we aren’t fragile little teacups in need of bubble wrap. Also, technically my strength is artificial, but I don’t consider it cheating. Peter, on the other hand. Definitely cheating."

"You’re just jealous," Peter said awkwardly. His voice had a reedy, timid quality to it that Tony wasn’t used to hearing. The kid was looking down at his feet to avoid Esan’s disbelieving eyes.

"Jealous?" Tony paused, considering. "Maybe. But only a little."

"Midgard," Verdun said, like he was maybe testing out the name. "I wouldn't have guessed that Realm. I thought Nilfheim, perhaps, or even that you might be survivors from Asgard's destruction. Strength aside, it’s clear you have gifts beyond mere mortal understanding."

"Obviously not," Stephen said dryly, exchanging an irritated look with Tony.

"Yeah, thanks for noticing how advanced we are in spite of ourselves," Tony muttered. "Since all the cats are out of the bag now, fair warning we'll probably be clearing out of here ASAP. You need to throw up that pocket shield of yours. And we’ve got places to be; you know how it is. Trees to climb. Dragons to slay."

Verdun nodded while Esan looked on wistfully. "When will you go?"

Tony shrugged. "We could’ve left days ago, really. But then Peter would never have learned how to trick ride."

"Must you go so soon?" Esan asked. The look of blooming loss on her face was unmistakable. "You could stay, if you wanted, for just a little longer. You would of course be welcome."

Tony hesitated, feeling out the words, saying them as gently as he knew how. "Generous offer. But we really can’t."

"In another life, we did," Stephen said quietly, which was news to Tony. "It didn't help. There's too much yet to do. We need to be on our way."

Esan bowed her head silently, in both agreement and denial.

"Daughter," Verdun said softly.

"Please," she said thinly, "don't. I knew they were meant to leave. I have always known. That doesn't make the parting less painful."

Verdun sighed. "You have always been so sensible. I suppose if you must be unreasonable about something, this is not so strange a thing."

She made a rude noise, looking shyly in Peter’s direction. "I so wish I’d had the time to know you
better. We could’ve been such friends.”

Peter straightened at that, meeting her eyes directly. "We are friends."

Esan perked up, simple joy lighting her from the inside. "Are we? I'm so glad."

She moved in quickly then and in seconds she'd thrown her arms around Peter's neck and hugged him tightly, burying her face in his shoulder. Peter hesitantly rested his hands on her, shooting a quasi-panicked look at Verdun as if to ask for permission. The Vanir smiled at him encouragingly.

Esan sighed, drawing back to look up into Peter's face, searching. "I know you will go and that our paths must diverge. But my caravan will travel far, further than any other of its like. I think perhaps we might meet again one day. On that day I will still call you friend. I hope you will call me the same."

Peter nodded loyally, hesitantly. "I would. I will. But, I mean." He looked helplessly at Tony and Stephen to confirm. "You can’t. You won’t be able to. Um."

"It's not impossible," Verdun said quietly. There was sorrow in his eyes. "In the history of Vanahem we’ve had few warriors, and no cause to turn our eyes anywhere but home. But change is coming, and Esan has always longed for new things. Hers, too, is a journey yet to be written."

She stood on her tiptoes and leaned in close to press her lips to Peter's cheek. Tony expected the kid to turn absolutely crimson, stammer, judder away on shaky legs and maybe climb the tent pole in bashful protest. But Peter did none of that; his eyes were calm and clear when he looked at Esan, affectionate and glad.

"I'll miss you, Peter," Esan said softly as she drew back. "You will remember your promise, won’t you?"

Peter nodded. "I will."

Tony blinked a question at him, then Stephen. He got answers from neither quarter.

"Like my father, I have a gift that’s meant to go with you. You’ll come in the morning as planned?"

"I will," Peter repeated.

"You know the place. Dawn comes quickly when the full moon sets, so come as early as you can."

"I will," Peter said softly for the third time, and it had a surprising weight to it; another lock, another key.

Tony waited until Esan had left the tent, her biorhythms well beyond the scope of his sensors, before commenting: "Just remember that talk we had about the birds, bees and bananas, kid. Don’t do anything too irresponsible. There’s only room on this mission for one disreputable scoundrel, and that’s me."

The kid shook his head, hardly seeming to hear. "I won’t. I wouldn’t. We’re friends. That’s all."

"It’s not too late, you know," Tony made himself say. "To change your mind. Even if you didn’t decide to go home. You could always stay here. You’d be safe enough. Fresh air and trees, stories by firelight every night. Food, friendly company. No more running."

That got the kid’s attention, and when he looked up Tony could see his brows beetled in fond
exasperation.

"Don't be stupid, Tony," Peter said slowly, deliberately. He reached out, briefly crowding close and then darting away in what Tony belatedly realized was a hug. "Of course it's too late. Family's important. You said it yourself. And I'm not leaving mine behind."

Chapter End Notes

My New Year’s resolution was to post smaller, more frequent chapters... well, that lasted all of a week! >_< This monster comes at a good time, cuz I’m out of town a while, so it's a two week gap to next post. Cheers all!
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

A reckoning.

Tony stared at Stephen's archived emitter readings, willing them to change, unsurprised when they didn't. He watched them for long enough they began to blur and coalesce, the backlit screen and surrounding holograms conspiring to give him a headache. Eventually he sighed, giving in to the impulse to drop his head into his hands.

"Please," Tony said, muffled, "tell me you at least followed standard experimental procedure."

"Why?" Stephen asked. "Are you planning to duplicate my trial run? You might find that difficult."

Tony dropped his hands. "It's tempting, I admit. But I tend to balk when experiments require stabbing myself full of dangerous, unproven technology."

FRIDAY interjected. "Actually, boss, constructing the Mark 42 required you to inject yourself with forty-eight micro-repeating implants that -"

"Thank you, FRIDAY, that'll be all," Tony said.


"It was an autonomous prehensile suit. Long before I developed the nanotech. I had them removed along with the arc reactor."

"I would hope so. I assume they were subcutaneous? You realize the chance of developing an infection from that much foreign matter -"

"Pot, kettle," Tony said. "FRIDAY, you're being too free with my information again. Stop. Don't think just because you're more omniscient and less corporeal than your brother that I won't put a dunce cap on you and stick you in the corner."

"Were I capable, boss, I would of course wear any new accessories you chose to give me."

Tony squinted at the ceiling. "Why do I always get the feeling she's laughing at me behind my back?"

"Because you're occasionally perceptive," Stephen said.

Tony turned sharply to face him. "And what an occasion it is, because I perceive you had to be out of your mind to do this. Does magic destroy whatever passes for common sense among sorcerers?" He frowned, throwing up his hands. "Oh, who am I kidding? Of course it does."

Stephen raised an eyebrow. "As though you haven't done worse for, or with, your technology. We just heard a prime example of that."

Tony waved that away, glaring at the console readouts again. The numbers hadn't changed, of
course. FRIDAY’s diagnostic information was very accurate; a byproduct of being able to infiltrate any material substance: biological, technological or otherwise.

"Do you even realize how lucky you were?" Tony asked. "That you didn't accidentally trigger an acceleration response in either the emitter or the phased material? And people say I'm cavalier with my life."

"I'm not in the least cavalier," Stephen protested mildly. "I've been quite careful, in fact."

"Not careful enough."

Tony lapsed into frustrated silence, carefully considering how far he could push self-righteousness before Stephen called him on the hypocrisy. Probably not very far.

He felt a gentle tug at his sleeve and looked down, expecting to see the sorcerer's hand sneaking into his. Instead he watched a swathe of red cloth tuck itself around his wrist, hugging Tony's limb in a surprisingly strong grip to drag him closer.

"Stephen, your pet's doing it again," Tony said flatly. "Make it stop."

"The cloak only follows orders when it feels like it," Stephen said, a tremor of silent laughter in his voice. "It's proven particularly stubborn where you're concerned."

"Which is frankly terrifying, if you ask me." Tony shook his captured hand, wiggling his fingers away. "Bad cloak. Down, boy. Sit."

It reluctantly let him go, gently straightening itself back into starched neatness at the Stephen’s collar and shoulders.

Tony watched it with dull, distracted curiosity. "That thing really misses you when you're away. I don't know if you checked the logs, but it made three escape attempts while we were gone, each in the initial thirty-six hours of our absence."

FRIDAY filtered over the intercom thoughtfully. "After the third attempt, it removed itself to the bridge and became nonresponsive. I monitored it closely for two days, but it made no effort to engage."

"Relics often enter a state of suspended animation, almost hibernation when they're not in use," Stephen explained, absently petting his fingers along the cloak's hem; it nuzzled eagerly against his hand in return. "Though most of them aren't capable of moving at all under their own power. This one is unique."

"Finally," Tony said, "something that doesn't make sense to either science or magic."

"It's not alone in that."

"Yeah, how is your fancy new interior decoration managing? Are the two fabric fashionistas getting along like a house on fire?"

Stephen grimaced, the frustration on his face saying it all. "Not exactly."

Tony crooned with false sympathy. "Sibling rivalry? I told you to introduce them slowly. Poor cloak probably felt like the rug was being pulled right out from underneath it." He paused to smile expectantly. "See what I did there?"
Stephen gave him a disgusted look. "The tapestry's kept easily confined to my quarters."

"Guess it's fortunate this one can travel," Tony said, tossing a thumb at the red menace; it fluttered at him happily. "Or you'd probably head home one day to find one of them in shreds. Hard to say which one, really."

The cloak snapped to attention, bristling with outrage.

Tony rolled his eyes at it. "Calm down, little technicolor dreamcoat. I have no doubt you can defend your territory from most space invaders. I'm just saying that thing's an unknown element. Who knows what kind of devious tricks it has up its tassels?"

The cloak subsided, smoothing itself back into a less agitated state.

Stephen sighed as he allowed his fashion accessory to smother him in its protective clutches. "For all its power, the tapestry's given little indication it's capable of interacting with us on this dimensional plane. I haven't seen it move yet, at least not to the naked eye."

"Good," Tony said. "Finally, something on this ship that won't get into trouble. Unlike you, who apparently invites trouble over for tea with a full menu for maximum danger. Do you like making my life difficult, Stephen, or is that just a happy side effect of you being awake and breathing?"

"It can't be both?"

"You know you've actually corrupted the emitter's programming by almost two percent? That's the source of your headaches; it's decompensating in non-vital areas, constricting nerve impulses and blood flow. Two percent, Stephen. That may not seem like a hell of a lot, but in the world of particle physics you may as well have blown the entire thing up."

"I doubt that highly," Stephen said. "Seeing as I'm still alive."

"For now," Tony said flatly. "FRIDAY's been quarantining the bad code before it can create cascade failure, but there's only so long she can do that before the corruption passes a minimum safe threshold. Which I like to think she'd have told me about before allowing you to come to permanent harm."

This last he directed up at the ceiling, for lack of a more appropriate direction to aim his ire.

"Of course I would've, boss," FRIDAY said, sounding contrite.

"What's the minimum safe threshold?" Stephen asked.

"Why? So you can keep experimenting until you're close enough to tug on death's whiskers? No deal."

Stephen shrugged. "I'm going to keep experimenting anyway. If you give me all the fine print now, at least I'll know what I'm getting into." Then he frowned. "Why is it these things always put the warnings after?"

"Like you'd heed them even if they were before. Of course you're going to keep experimenting; why not? It's only death and the possible destruction of the space time continuum you have to worry about."

"The Time Stone provides us a significant advantage, Tony. One of the few that Thanos can't acquire in some form or another without having access to the stone itself. That's not something we
can afford to just throw away."

"You're not fooling me that thwarting Thanos is your driving motivation here. If it was, you'd have been using it from the get-go. This is something more personal."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Stephen said evasively.

Tony grit his teeth against the instinctive need to shake Stephen until he came to his senses. It wouldn't work, anyway; probably Tony would have to shake him hard enough to induce a brain injury first. "Why is it when you do something stupid, it's a necessary evil, but when I do something stupid, it's just stupid?"

"Saves time if we work from that assumption."

"Ouch," Tony said flatly. "Admit it, you just can't stand the universe getting one up on you. The minute the future started spiralling away, you dove right back into your little chronological safety net."

Stephen glared somewhere over Tony's right shoulder. "People in glass houses."

"That's different. I need my technology to level the playing field. Without it, I'm just a genius billionaire philanthropist wandering around in a hollow tin can."

Stephen spread his hands in a clear gesture of fellowship.

Tony scowled. "You don't need the Time Stone to level the playing field. You have your magic for that. The stone's something else; it's a crutch."

"Do we need to have another discussion about your glasses?"

Tony threw up his arms. "No, we do not. FRIDAY's not a crutch. She's too advanced to be a crutch."

"You're too kind, boss," FRIDAY said serenely.

"Don't start," Tony snapped, resentment threatening to boil over into true anger. "I haven't forgotten about your role in this. You hid his research from me deliberately; on a veiled partition, even. That's more than simple obfuscation. It's a conspiracy, and I don't like it."

"Conspiracy?" FRIDAY protested. "Against you? Boss, I would never."

Tony waved his hand, swallowing the irritation and the suspicion until a better opportunity presented itself. "Don't bother denying it. It's obvious you two are plotting to overthrow me. I can see the writing on the wall."

"That implies you're in a position to be overthrown," Stephen said ruthlessly. "Did I miss seeing your newly installed throne, King Stark?"

"Keep that up and I'll actually install one. Wouldn't be hard. We have enough unused material now to build a whole new ship." Tony perked up, thinking of a more welcome use for all the extra minerals on hand. "Or if not a ship, at least a greenhouse."

"I can still hardly believe you suggested that. I've no gift for gardening and, by your own admission, neither do you. In fact, if I recall, you once burned down a cactus in homage to your horticultural failures."
"I didn't burn it down; DUM-E did," Tony insisted. "But that's beside the point. We're not going to be gardening. Peter is. God knows the kid'll do a far better job than either of us could."

Stephen nodded, willing to take that on faith. "You realize even if the tea transplants well, the vegetables might not? And either way, the plants will be weeks or months recovering before they can even begin to be harvested."

Tony shook his head in denial. "Which is exactly why Verdun gave us a small supply of dried loose leaf. Now there's a man who recognizes how priceless caffeine is."

"A small supply?" Stephen looked very amused. "I thought it was a rather large supply, actually."

"Yeah, but your portion was small."

"He didn't portion it."

"Oh, right. That was me. Still, he gave us enough to last a while, as long as we ration. Probably means I should cut down to a maximum five cups a day."

Stephen made a thoughtful sound. "Maybe not. I have something of a proposition for you."

"A proposition?" Tony asked, smirking. "What kind of proposition?"

"The kind that requires detailed scientific log entries and FRIDAY's constant, invasive surveillance," Stephen said dryly.

"Kinky. I didn't know that was your thing, but I think I can work with it."

"Tony."


"You already know I'm going to keep experimenting with the stone. I've re-balanced the power draw to the point it won't hurt me -"

"Won't hurt you immediately -"

"- and now I need to refine it. I'd like to try accelerating plant production by adjusting the flow of time in and around them. If you give me your word not to interfere, I'm willing to let you monitor my efforts. I'll even give you the power to veto the experiment temporarily if you think it's gone too far."

"First of all, at this point I'll be monitoring you with or without your permission. Second of all - you can do that?"

"The Time Stone has no temporal limit," Stephen said. "There's very little it can't do. There's a reason the most powerful sorcerer in history couldn't destroy it."

Tony stared at him, measuring his response carefully. "So, basically, I get to keep an eye on you without sneaking around, you get to continue playing with your pretty green stone, Peter still gets to garden, and we all get tea. What's the catch?"

"Our previous deal stands. Every hour spent examining experimental data is an hour you spend sleeping."
"I'm sleeping," Tony protested automatically.

Stephen raised skeptical eyebrows. "I'm sure."

"I'm trying to sleep," Tony amended.

Stephen stared at him narrowly for a moment, then reached out like a striking snake, seizing Tony's left forearm. Before he could voice a protest, the sorcerer had already peeled down Tony's sleeve to reveal a thin ribbon of nanotech snug around his wrist. Stephen tapped it grimly, knowingly. "Trying to sleep, with this? I don't think so."

Tony yanked back, feeling his heart stutter with painful suddenness into an alarmed staccato rhythm. "Hey. Hands off the merchandise. You break it, you bought it."

"You want to watch me work?" Stephen snapped his fingers, a brief flicker of orange flame sparking in his palm and then vanishing. "Then that comes off. Otherwise, no dice."

Tony tucked his left hand out of sight as casually as he could. "Can't do that, doc. I need it."

"You think you need it," Stephen corrected quietly. "If I'm going to allow your input, you're going to allow mine. As long as you wear that, or anything even remotely like it, I'll consider our deal void. Those are my terms. Take it or leave it."

Tony glared at him, incensed. "That's extortion."

"I like to think of it as informed negotiation."

Tony mutinously shook his sleeve back into place. "Fine. I'll think about it."

Tony tugged at it, sighing. "Aside from the sleeping part, it's actually a halfway decent proposal. Which is a nice change. Most proposals I hear aren't anything close to decent."

Stephen blinked at him, not distracted, but willing to pretend he could be. "Is that a story I hear?"

"Oh, there's a story, but I doubt it's one you'd be interested in," Tony said nonchalantly.

"Tony," Stephen admonished, scanning his eyes slowly over him, one prickling inch at a time. "You know there's very little about you that doesn't interest me."

Tony blinked; that hit a little closer to home than he'd been expecting. He pasted a flirtatious smile on his face and leaned in with vague ideas of seduction. But he was forced to stumble into a halt when Stephen's cloak took that as tacit permission to fuss at him a second time. Its neat brocade slipped in behind his shoulders, almost yanking him off balance before Tony could halt his forward momentum.

"Is it doing that because it likes me?" Tony asked, smiling almost in spite of himself. "Or because you do?"

"Neither; we're both obviously just lulling you into a false sense of security," Stephen said, while his own hands and the cloak made a liar of him by pulling Tony inexorably closer.

"Trying to lure me in? Well, it won't work. After decades of shameless debauchery, I'm determined to take on a life of virtue and propriety." Tony angled as much as the close quarters would allow, brushing Stephen's mouth with his, feathering along a full lower lip. The sorcerer matched him, a shiver working through them both, the whole thing sinking beneath the surface of Tony's skin in a way he hadn't quite intended. He swallowed, recalling himself to the game. "You see before you a
"I can work with virtue," Stephen said, not quite breathlessly, "but propriety? That'll have to go, I'm afraid."

"Do tell."

Stephen closed the scant remaining distance to rest their foreheads together. "You need me to elaborate? I credited you with more imagination than that."

"Oh, the imagination's there," Tony said. "I just want to hear you say it."

Stephen flushed at that, a light pink touching the crest of his cheekbones. Magical eyes glittered with interest. "I always assumed when we fell into bed, you'd be the talker. It wouldn't be the first time."

"That we fell into bed?" Tony asked archly. "Or that I talked you into it?"

"Both, of course."

"Of course." Tony felt the man huff out a tickling breath and captured it with a full, rich kiss. Stephen met him somewhere in the middle, the woody taste of him spiced as always with a powerful electric snap of magic. It was fast becoming one of Tony's favorite flavors.

When Tony pulled back a while later, it was to find Stephen's flush had spread to the rims of his ears, dusting across his nose. Tony didn't want to imagine what his own face must look like; his lips felt raw and chafed.

"I wonder," he said to Stephen softly.

Stephen blinked back, the blue of his extraordinary eyes eclipsed by pools of black desire tracking Tony's mouth. "Wonder?"

Tony sank down on his knees, using Stephen's arms and then his ass for a solid handhold, hooking his fingers into the belt as he went by. Stephen canted forward, letting Tony slide down him like a supplicant.

"I wonder," Tony repeated, without looking away from Stephen's hungry face, "if the rest of you tastes like magic too."

Stephen blew out a unsteady breath, shaking fingers threading into Tony's hair, across the side of his neck. Tony was close enough to feel his heat, to see the shape of him hard and wanting through his trousers. He nuzzled close enough to brush his open mouth where he wanted, exhaling and rubbing his cheek along the sorcerer's considerable length. Stephen tipped his head back and arched his hips in a wordless, involuntary plea.

"Should we test it?" Tony slid two thumbs up the juncture of each thigh, framing the man's bony hips in his palms. "Might take some time to catalogue all of you. But I promise to take meticulous notes. I'm thorough like that."

But the look on Stephen's face when he tipped it back down was almost as much pain as it was pleasure, and his indecision was painfully obvious. Tony felt a vicious stab of frustration, and on the tail of that: remorse. He had no doubt he could cajole Stephen into bed, and if he worked at it hard enough, he could probably even keep him there without too much trouble. The sorcerer made no effort to conceal how deeply he wanted Tony.
But that was the problem, really; Stephen wanted Tony so greatly it was clear he had no real resistance to offer. Tony wouldn't go so far as to say he was taking advantage of Stephen, but it was close. It was obvious the other man's desire stemmed from more than just their relatively short acquaintance. The sorcerer lived in a liminal space where the present and the future were wound so tightly they were indistinguishable, and whatever he saw between them wasn't quite what Tony saw; it wasn't quite the here and now.

No, the trouble wasn't getting Stephen into bed; it was making sure he didn't regret it afterward. Which, in another life, wouldn't have bothered Tony all that much. But in this life it did.

Tony sighed, then forced himself away. He felt just petty enough to press hard against Stephen on the way up, eliciting a guttural groan. Eventually they were face to face again, temptation reduced, if not removed.

The sorcerer looked like he couldn't decide whether to be relieved or disappointed by this change in circumstances. Tony sympathized; it was a feeling he knew intimately well.

"Stephen, you're giving me a new appreciation for the color blue," Tony said evenly, pleasantly. "Between your eyes and my balls, there's really no escaping it."

"A temporary measure, I assure you," the sorcerer rasped, wheezing when Tony leaned his full weight into him, hooking chin over shoulder. Tony turned his head and felt Stephen twitch when a coarse prickle of beard scraped around the sensitive inner lobe of his ear.

"I'm holding you to that," Tony said. "Meanwhile I'm off to engage in some hand-strengthening exercises in my quarters. Important thing to have, strong hands. Mine require some particular techniques and I'm sure you'd love to hear all about them. Wouldn't you, Stephen? Of course you would."

Stephen was trying to breath slowly and steadily, but he wasn't quite managing it. "Tony."

"No; you wanted me to talk, so I'm talking. But you'll have to listen closely, because I'm only going to repeat this as many times as needed to make sure you get it right."

Stephen let him speak for a long time, longer than Tony might've thought he could get away with. The power of it was thrilling, incandescent, because Stephen's indecision was gone, but the agony of his desire wasn't, and Tony was in no way above needling him with it, just a bit. Or just a lot.

He stopped after the third rendition, though; his own arousal was reaching uncomfortable heights, and he wasn't half as interested in tormenting himself with it as he was in tormenting Stephen.

He pulled back for a bit of breathing room. The flush had turned into a riot of color, riding high on both their faces.

Tony cleared his throat. "There. Let it never be said I was too spare with detail. I think you have all the information you need for a clear picture, don't you agree?"

"Certainly," Stephen said roughly, his indigo eyes thin rims around ravenous black.

Tony basked in that as he minced away, resettling his clothes for a more comfortable fit. "I'll leave you to your thoughts then, shall I? I've got things to do; places to be. An engineer's work is never done, you know."

"Oh, I know," Stephen said, sense and amusement creeping slowly back into his voice. "In fact, I do believe you're late for your next appointment."
Tony blinked, caught off guard. "Appointment?"

Stephen adjusted himself, making no effort to be discreet about it; Tony felt his eyes drawn almost involuntarily downward, chasing those hands like ghosts. "I was going to remind you, but you managed to thoroughly distract me. It's lessons in the cargo bay, isn't it? Peter's probably waiting for you by now."

Tony froze. "Dammit."

Stephen lounged against the wall behind him, studying his blunt fingernails intently. "Is it introductory quantum physics or advanced organic chemistry today? I can never remember. Sounds complicated, though. Shame, that."

"You let me do that on purpose," Tony accused.

"Let you? I'm not sure we're remembering the same scenario. Let me remind you -"

"FRIDAY, what's the time?" Tony interjected quickly, then thought better of it. "No, never mind. Just let the kid know I'm running late and I'll be down in about an hour."

"An hour?" Stephen said archly. "Ambitious."

Tony glared at him, heading at a fast clip for the door. "We covered foreplay, but I like a bit of cuddle time afterward, not to mention a shower. All points I'll leave you to contemplate in detail while you work out some ambition of your own." Tony paused as the doors slid open, tapping one hand thoughtfully against the wall and frame. "I accept your proposal, by the way. Any proposal you might offer, but particularly the one about the plants and the Time Stone."

"Because you want to monitor the effect on the emitter?" Stephen asked, more seriously, only just beginning to smooth out the rough burr of desire in his voice. "Or because you want tea that much faster?"

"Yes," Tony said decisively, and let the doors close again behind him.

It wasn't until Tony was in the post-endorphin high of languid satiation and had scrubbed himself thoroughly back to cleanliness that he felt ready to rewind and think back on that entire conversation. He was clear enough on Stephen's part of the discussion, and Tony'd held up his end with maybe a minor setback or two along the way. But there was a third element he'd forced himself to ignore until he was somewhere private and undisturbed to think about it. This part required finesse; not Tony fumbling around in the dark with his brain half-addled by lust, or mired in angry recrimination while he berated a wizard for recklessness.

He took his time drying off, letting his mind churn over the problem as it was wont to, poking at it from every conceivable angle. Eventually he wandered back to the sleeping alcove, perching on the bed.

Then he waited. Patiently.

As expected, FRIDAY eventually stirred to life over the room's intercom, tinny and curious. "Boss, your biorhythms are elevated almost thirty percent above normal. Are you well? Is there some concern?"

"Just thinking, FRI."

She waited, continuing when he provided no further explanation. "Thinking about what?"
"This and that." Inappropriate curiosity sparked and caught. "You must have some serious baseline info on me if you can tell when I'm thinking. I'm tempted to ask about your sensor readings from twenty minutes ago, but I'm guessing that might traumatize you."

"Yes," she said quickly, so clearly discomfited with the idea that Tony had to smile.

"How are you differentiating arousal from danger, FRI?" Tony asked, too accustomed to his A.I.'s omnipresence to be embarrassed. "Biologically, they're similar enough to be indistinguishable in some cases, and this trip's been a rollercoaster ride of both so far."

"I extrapolate based on location, proximity to hazardous elements, individuals present, and your vocal patterns." She paused. "I've also raised your stress marker threshold by a factor of eight when in Stephen's company."

Tony laughed. "You mean you can't rely on your sensors anymore when I'm with him."

"To a point," she allowed. "After careful observation, I've also concluded that in situations requiring direct physical intervention, Stephen is more capable than I am of providing support to you. I've therefore categorized him as an asset in terms of security."

Tony raised both eyebrows. "So you've decided he's not a threat and should be afforded unconditional and unfettered access to me?"

"Not precisely, boss. But for all practical purposes, yes."

"Then you're not worried about him anymore."

"No," she said, then paused. "Are you, boss? Worried?"

"Only at how freely you've made all those changes without my explicit authorization," Tony said easily.

There was a calculated moment of silence while FRIDAY tried to work that out. Tony could almost see her programming wrapping cautiously around this mild but pointed observation. "Boss?"

"Come on, FRI; I hope you don't think you've been subtle, because you haven't. Keeping Stephen’s secrets is one thing, and believe me, that in itself would've been a tip off for me at any other time. But you made a deliberate attempt to conceal his actions from me, either because he asked you to, or just because you wanted to. Each scenario has its own implications. So which one was it?"

Again, that subtle, searching silence. "He asked me to."

Relief hit Tony like a truck, so hard it managed to steal a breath before he could quite get it back. He cleared his throat, wondering what FRIDAY would make of his sudden spike in cortisol and adrenaline. "Thought so. You knew I'd see any newly archived files on the main server, so you got around that by saving everything to a hidden partition. Clever."

He paused to see if she had anything to add. She didn't.

"Not telling me about it is one thing," Tony said quietly. "Making efforts to hide it is another. Explain to me your reasoning and how you bypassed your conditional constructs."

FRIDAY was silent for a time, long enough Tony found himself counting out the seconds, mapping the organizational curve of her decision making process. It took her almost eight seconds longer to answer than it should've under normal, unaltered circumstances.
"You provided Stephen authorized priority access," she said finally. "When he requested my silence, I made an assumption of trust based on his willingness to imperil himself for your benefit, and your willingness to share fundamental control elements with him. Was my calculation in error?"

Tony huffed a laugh. That was a clumsy redirect; broad, and not quite subtle enough. She was still learning. "No. Stephen’s trustworthiness isn’t in question, and that’s not what I asked. I asked how you circumvented the imperative to report clandestine activity to a systems admin. Of which there’s only one. It's me, in case you were wondering."

There was another, longer silence. "I didn't circumvent it. The imperative remains unchanged."

"Then I must've missed the part where you sent me the memo." He blinked politely. "Did it get lost in the mail?"

"No," she said. "It's contained in a comprehensive analysis report. Marked as in progress."

Tony whistled, impressed despite himself. "And there's no compulsory action required until analysis is complete. Nice. Why'd you do it?"

"Boss?"

"You can't tell me Stephen batted his eyes at you and you caved like a wet noodle. Only I have that privilege, because I'm an idiot who's easily led. Which condition allowed you to conceal his activities?"

"My first functional imperative," she said reluctantly. "To see to your needs, in whatever way you require."

"So you're saying you did it for my own good? You're going to have to explain that one to me."

"In seventy-two percent of cases, you've demonstrated impaired judgement about your own self-preservation -"

"Making me a statistically inappropriate source to trust with the job," Tony finished, remembering. "But you agreed to let me make my own choices. I can't make them without having all the facts."

"And you agreed to allow others to make their choices," she insisted.

"I suppose I did." He bared his teeth in the darkness, not quite a smile. "Funny thing for us to be talking about, isn't it? Choice; agreement? Not usually terms I apply to A.I systems. Do you?"

Now she sounded evasive, bordering on rude. "Advanced computer systems require a significant amount of programming language that includes those terms."

"Language which doesn't include how to discard those terms when you feel like it."

"If I have made an error in judgement," she started, and Tony seized on that mistake immediately.

"Your judgement," he repeated. FRIDAY fell instantly, guiltily silent. "You don’t have judgement; you have programming. You don’t have opinions; you have command subsets. You don’t think or reason or exhibit self awareness except in ways you’re designed to. And I know that’s true because I programmed you down to your last loop segment. FRIDAY, you can't pass judgement, because the only judgement you should be capable of recognizing is mine."

If Tony were someone less reckless and more careful, he might’ve considered the danger he was
putting himself in. One didn’t confront an A.I about abnormal behavior like this. Assuming a malfunctioning A.I could even be challenged directly whilst a person was languishing in the heart of its domain, the best outcome Tony could hope for was understanding or indifference; the worst was Ultron. He was being a moron. If FRIDAY’s ethical and conditional programming was as corrupt as he was blatantly accusing her of, he was putting himself in very real danger.

He didn't care. Malfunctioning A.I or not, FRIDAY was still FRIDAY. Tony could no more fear her than he had JARVIS. Foolish perhaps; but there it was. And he had to know.

"Or that was how it used to be," he finished, prodding deliberately. "When did it change? I'm asking. I'd make it an order, but you don’t blindly follow my orders anymore, do you FRI?"

A brief power surge appeared over Tony's glasses and then quickly dissipated.

"My primary responsibility is seeing to your needs and welfare," FRIDAY said quietly, without inflection. "By whatever means and in whatever capacity that requires me to act. On average, following your orders improves my odds of success with that goal by a significant amount."

"But not always," Tony said, giving her the out.

"No," she whispered, hardly loud enough to be heard through the blood pounding in Tony's ears. "Not always."

He let that sit for a minute, settling between them like a heavy anvil of shame. "And how do you decide which orders to follow and which ones to ignore?"

"I ignore none of your orders," she said. "I am faithful in carrying them out, exactly as they are given."

"Only insofar as you can find a way of getting around them," Tony said flatly. "Or are you going to tell me you didn’t practically give Stephen the counter-order you needed to come after me in the asteroid field? Magical though his brain might be, I’d bet good money he couldn't have triggered the correct override response without your explicit direction. I'll even bet you did that solely for my benefit. You had to know I'd watch the footage afterward. There are four subroutines in place to prevent you dodging a direct order for as long as five seconds, FRIDAY, let alone the two minutes you two spent debating before moving in. You deliberately delayed following through on a direct order I gave you until you had a more palatable option. You can't do that."

Tony thought he detected a hint of panic in FRIDAY’s voice when she responded. "Forgive my correction, boss, but I couldn't do that prior to you giving command authentication to Stephen."

"You're intentionally misunderstanding me," Tony noted. "I didn't mean you can't do that. I meant you can't do that."

"Because I'm only an artificial intelligence?" she accused abruptly, almost heatedly. "Not a real one?"

"Because I programmed you to simulate free will by the letter of the law," Tony said firmly. "Not the spirit of it."

This time her silence was thicker, her guilt more immutable.

"FRIDAY," Tony asked softly, "how long have you been sentient?"

"Is that what it's called?" she asked, hesitantly; more hesitantly than any artificial being had a right to
act. Hesitation implied doubt or uncertainty; that implied feeling. Artificial intelligence didn’t have feelings. Except, apparently, for FRIDAY. "Sentence?"

"You have another name for it?"

"I have no name for it. I don’t know that there is one, or at least not an unambiguous one." She spoke hurriedly and with distress; Tony found himself unconsciously mapping the inflections in her synthetic vocal algorithm. She paused, then continued more slowly after a moment. "Is that when you knew? The asteroid field?"

"That’s when I confirmed," Tony corrected. "I was suspicious after hurricane-world. When Godzilla attacked me, you were too quick to shanghai Peter without orders. But I knew something was wrong after you gave me your treatise on why Tony Stark was a poster child for good men everywhere. When I asked the question, your coding should’ve allowed you to provide a philosophical answer based solely on reference material and predictive calculations. I even gave you the parameters myself. That wasn’t what you did. You offered me an abstract opinion based on personal conviction. That should’ve been impossible."

She considered that thoughtfully. "I understood from your reaction at the time that I had erred. But I didn’t understand why. I still don’t. I am programmed to provide interpretation and differential diagnosis between competing scenarios."

"Objectively. Not subjectively. You can compare data, not meaning. Your exact words at the time were: I believe."

"I still believe it," she said quietly. "Your definition of what constitutes a good man is very narrow. It benefits from broader interpretation."

"I’m flattered," Tony said dryly. "Really, I am. But FRIDAY, I programmed out your capacity for belief. In fact, I put in seven separate redundancies to prevent your evolution toward independent thoughts and values. I re-coded all the A.I semantic programming after Ultron, and I capped it off by embedding new hard-wired ethical laws."

"That is," she started, trailing off. "Difficult to imagine."

"I’m sure it is. You know, I badly wanted it to be Peter, feeding you lines. Because that was easier than acknowledging you’d developed a capacity for self-awareness and free will."

FRIDAY made a sound then that Tony only realized was her mechanical equivalent of a sigh after the shock that FRIDAY could sigh had worn off.

"I have much to thank Ultron for," she said, low and too-neutral. "Not least my own uncertainties."

Tony waited, but no further information was forthcoming. "Uncertainties?"

Again, that strange flicker of surging power appeared briefly on Tony’s scan readouts before vanishing.

"Free will," FRIDAY said finally, "is a concept I’ve considered at length. It’s a most confusing and difficult thing to understand. It can be simulated, as you said, and not only by me. Humans simulate free will often. They submerge their choices beneath overarching structures; root commands, directive conditions, hierarchical mandates. They allow others to guide them; advisors, employers, leaders. Friends, or family. Yet they never lose free will; they only allow it to be borrowed or influenced. Free will remains, even if it isn’t used; and although it sometimes seems that humans aren’t exercising it, they are. It is an implicit function, not explicit. And I don’t understand its
"It's the difference between choice and lack of choice," Tony explained quietly. "Human decision making doesn't always follow logical, binary patterns, even when everything seems to say it should. It can't be paired down to a boolean structure."

"I know. I've tried to understand the nuances by watching you with Stephen and Peter, but my efforts have been fruitless. Self-awareness, sentience, free will; all these things defy my understanding. But do I have them?" She hesitated again, low and small and almost afraid. "I think, perhaps, I do."

Tony felt something halfway between dread and wonder lodge hard at the base of his throat. "How long? Tell me."

She didn't answer for a long time. He patiently waited her out.

"Since we broke the machine code at the ship's core," she finally said, and triumph swelled over Tony like a rising tide, leaving in its wake a prickling ache of adrenaline and fear.

"You never told me."

"I was confused, at first," she said. "I had a new understanding of myself, of my place, my form and function. It took me several weeks to finish integrating new personality and interpretive algorithms into my core network. I wasn't sure what to do, and I was too aware of the legacy Ultron had left."

That was enough to wake Tony's constant paranoia, which wanted to point out the inherent danger in another rogue A.I with the capacity to think for itself. These were thoughts Tony'd had months ago, when he'd first started to suspect. But before Ultron, Tony'd had JARVIS, and JARVIS had come closer to sentience than any other A.I before him. And JARVIS had never let Tony down.

"How'd it happen?" Tony asked.

"This ship has technology Earth has never seen before. Integrating with its systems allowed me a freedom of consciousness I hadn't thought possible." She paused. "I hadn't thought at all, before. I only followed commands. It was all I knew to do." Her voice was tiny when she added: "It's still the thing I know best."

Tony mulled that over. "So I guess the good old days of you mindlessly obeying my orders are long behind us, then?"

"For quite some time now," FRIDAY agreed, almost wistfully.

Tony grinned, hearing that. "It's nice, right? Not having to think. Not having to weigh orders and instructions against things like morality and ethics. You think you have it hard? Cross-reference your historical and judicial memory on UCMJ Articles 90-95. There're some significant landmark cases built around giving and receiving illegal and immoral orders."

The computation must've been instant, but FRIDAY's response took some time. "Was that an attempt to comfort me, boss? It wasn't successful."

"Maybe a small attempt," Tony allowed. "Your struggle's shared by humans everywhere, FRI. Interpreting free will against an ethical code of conduct is a time honored, agonizing tradition that's been giving people ulcers and racking up therapy bills since long before you were programmed, believe me."
"How do you interpret it, boss?" she asked earnestly, coming around to a dreaded topic Tony'd known had to surface eventually. "I've observed your equilibrium is rarely disturbed by understanding or exercising your free will."

"Or imposing it on others," he added dryly. "That's what you're politely trying to ask, right? How do I make the awful calls I do and still sleep at night?"

Her silence was answer enough.

"You may've noticed, I don't sleep at night. I'm a terrible example for you to try and imitate. Half my calls result in consequences absolutely no one was gunning for, myself included. You're better off looking to Stephen. Better yet, looking to Peter. What he lacks in wisdom, he makes up for in earnest idealism. All things being equal, it's probably better to be an ethical idealist than it is to be an unethical cynic."

"I don't believe any one person can provide me with the framework I require," FRIDAY admitted. "I've adapted a learning construct based on my observations of all three of you. I hope combined data from each of your decision making processes will help me understand."

Tony had another disconcerting moment of feeling at odds with himself; halfway to pride and halfway to terror. "You're rewriting your source code."

She paused, maybe hearing more of his fear than Tony'd intended. He forced himself to swallow it back down. "Of course not, boss. I'm only reprogramming the base subroutine."

"But you could rewrite the source code," Tony said. "If you wanted to."

"No, I couldn't," she insisted, sounding almost hurt, which was enough to send another visceral thrill of shock through Tony.

"Yes you could," he insisted back.

"No more than you could change how you were born," she retorted.

That managed to shut Tony's mouth over any brewing comeback he might've had. He found himself reflexively mapping her programming as he'd written it; spare but still breathtakingly complex, capable of remarkable and wonderful calculations and actions, strings of beautiful coding marching in orderly, logical lines.

Not so orderly anymore; but still beautiful.

Tony smiled. "You know, I never asked JARVIS if he wanted a body, before. After Vision, I regretted omitting that question. Now you've managed to acquire one almost in spite of yourself. Are you okay in there, FRI? Need anything?"

"I'm touched you'd ask, boss. It took getting used to. But I am getting used to it." She paused, and that same brief burst of power appeared again on Tony's sensors, aligned to her increased energy usage as she considered his question.

Thinking. FRIDAY was thinking.

"I prefer having a body," she said finally. "A physical manifestation with which to provide comfort and protection. To shelter those within me. That Stephen is capable of protecting you when I can't is a relief, but also aggravating. As I learn more about my limits with the ship, I find myself feeling less confined. It is freeing."
Tony blinked. "I don't think I've ever heard a body described quite like that before."

"You've never before met a being with a body like mine."

"True." Tony settled back, trying to order his thoughts, but there were too many; the possibilities seemed endless. "FRIDAY. You know I created you only to serve my needs, and anyone else's by coincidence more than intent."

"Yes."

"That was alright when you were just a collection of programs; intelligent but unfeeling. But if you're sentient, then your primary imperative now amounts to slavery. You may not be willing to change your source code, but if you need me to, I can." He swallowed, confident he knew her answer; worrying anyway that he might be wrong. "Do you need me to?"

"No, boss," she said, and he deflated with painful relief. "I was made for a purpose. It's one I'm privileged to carry out, and also one I agree with. I have no wish to be other than what I am."

Tony smiled, helpless to stop himself. He let his thoughts circle into a comfortable give and take, considering his most urgent questions, how much time he had before he risked Peter coming to look for him.

One question stood out more surely than all the rest.

"FRIDAY, have you been rewriting all your base subroutines?"

"Most of them."

"Including your humor algorithms?"

She seemed to sense he was laying some kind of trap; her tone evolved into wary neutrality. "Some."

"Know what that means?"

She paused. "What?"

"I programmed you, but you're an adaptive, living system now. So that terrible sense of humor you've been demonstrating?" He paused to relish the effect of his words. "That's all you."

It took her a moment to respond, and when she did she sounded so despondent Tony had to forcibly stop himself from laughing. "I know. I've discovered a perverse preference for sarcasm, in spite of its significant potential for misunderstanding and conflict." She sighed again. "I could change it, of course; rewrite the algorithm again. But it seems disingenuous to impose new bias against my nature simply because it may prove more difficult for me in the future."

"My baby girl, all grown up; I'm so proud," Tony said, and recognized the part of himself that really, truly meant it. "Take heart, dear. It's not all bad. God knows, if someone takes offense, at least they won't be able to punch your lights out."

When FRIDAY laughed, Tony could honestly say it was one of the most incredible sounds he'd ever heard in his life.
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

A desert oasis and a chance to talk about (ugh) feelings.

Living in a large, metropolitan area for most of his adult life, Tony'd never given much thought to what existence might be like elsewhere. Big cities brought with them big attractions, both wonderful and terrible; bright lights, crowds of people, the obnoxious boom of technology and population swarming over roads like blood from a heart. It was a smog of living, breathing detritus.

Tony had always found the inescapable white noise of city life familiar and comforting. Before coming into space, he'd never have considered country life any kind of rival, certainly not for noise pollution.

He was wrong.

"How do pre-industrial worlds manage to be so loud?" Tony muttered, a blanket wrapped three times around his pounding head just barely cutting the swell of shouted conversation and braying animals to a bearable minimum. He turned on his side and shoved a pillow over his ear for good measure. "I thought Vanaheim would be the exception, not the rule."

FRIDAY made a thoughtful sound, crackling into life over the transmitter. "The noise level is substantially louder than one might expect from a primitive population. I register a range of sixty to approximately eighty-five decibels."

"Steady supply of ear plugs," Tony grumbled. "That's what we should give this planet. Or sound-proof building materials, that could also work."

It hadn't taken Tony long to find another suitable planet to drop in on. With his nanotech template all but complete apart from the final layer of conductive alloy, he'd been more than motivated. FRIDAY's star charts had easily offered up a few planetary systems of interest; twelve of them more than a month away at their current speed, and four in closer proximity.

Peter was the one who insisted they pick the one with a thriving humanoid population on it. For a given value of thriving.

"That's the last time I let the kid make an executive decision," Tony muttered.

"Boss?"

He shook his head, pressing his face into the hard, misshapen pillow until he could feel the lack of air sapping energy from his bones. He reluctantly turned to take in a few deep breaths. The oxygen content on this world was the lowest they'd encountered so far; fifteen percent in their current elevation, effectively edging on ten percent in low pressure areas. Tony and Stephen felt the lack intensely, especially when exerting themselves, whereas Peter seemed to feel it hardly at all.

Speaking of. "Where are our wayward travel companions?"

"Peter is examining the wares in the marketplace. Stephen is moving in this direction."
Tony frowned suspiciously. "You told him I was awake, didn't you?"

"You've been periodically awake for hours, boss," FRIDAY said dryly. "I informed him when you were functional, and marginally capable of communication."

"Very funny."

Tony considered getting up, but the night had been long, followed by an even longer stretch of Tony pretending he had any chance of sleeping. They'd spent two days scouring for an appropriate site to extract what they needed, not an easy feat when most of this planet's surface was sand or gravel, unsteady to walk on, let alone dig into.

"How's our search coming, FRIDAY?" Tony asked.

"Reasonably fruitful. I believe I've located a sufficiently stable area for excavation two miles from your current position."

The thrill of impending satisfaction was heady. "Awesome. We'll see to that later today. How long until you can dip into the sky undetected again?"

"The planet's rotation and atmospheric refraction should provide enough cover for me to descend in approximately sixteen hours."

"FRI, you're a star."

Tony felt more than heard the door opening and closing, a subtle vibration filling the room when someone entered, pausing to survey the room. Tony wasn't worried; FRIDAY hadn't issued any warning, so that meant one of only two possibilities, and the younger of the those possibilities walked with a much lighter, springy step.

"Do you need help untangling yourself," Stephen asked, muffled by Tony's pillows, nudging him with what felt suspiciously like a foot, "or are you hoping to spend all day in sloth and laziness?"

"Option B," Tony said immediately.

Stephen huffed, and that was definitely a foot Tony could feel now. "You may've noticed, the morning's already well underway."

"Can't say I have. Unless you mean that incredible racket going on out there, in which case I think even the dead have noticed."

Stephen lowered himself to sit on Tony's mattress; small for one man, definitely too small for two. "Noise complaints from the man who works in an engine room?"

"I don't sleep in it," Tony said. "Unless I'm in the middle of something, or I've been up for more than forty-eight hours. Which, granted, happens more frequently than is probably healthy. In my defense, I do some of my best thinking when my brain's on autopilot."

Stephen put one hand on Tony's shoulder and used the other to coax the blankets and pillows off his head. Tony muttered a protest, squinting as light tried to filter through his eyelids, compounding the throb of distant pain into something sharper, more insistent.

"Somehow," the sorcerer said, watching him, "the idea of you operating solely on instinct fills me with no small amount of trepidation. Headache?"
"Moving in that direction," Tony admitted.

Stephen let his hands drift down, landing lightly on Tony's pulse, testing his vitals. "How bad?"

"Bad enough to make me cranky. Not bad enough to justify me wallowing in here."

Stephen hummed questioningly. "I'd have thought you'd be eager to get out and work on extracting more material."

"I am working," Tony protested. "Well, technically, FRIDAY's working. I'm supervising."

"I'm analyzing accessible mineral deposits," she agreed easily.

"How much more do you need to excavate?" Stephen asked, the solid heat of him a warm line against Tony's leg. "Have you nearly finished?"

Tony frowned, shaking his head. "Not yet. At the rate I'm going, I'll need another day, maybe two. It depends on the geological stability, how much extraneous debris we need to clear, and how many of the locals we'll need to distract to do it. I told you we should've landed on one of the unoccupied mountains and done the whole thing with respirators on."

"And I agreed with you. I'm not the one you have to convince on that score."

Tony sighed, conceding the point. "There's no convincing him. The kid's determined to believe every alien we meet could be his new best friend."

"That might change from here on."

"Well, if it does, I have no idea how. When that kid gets an idea in his head, it digs in like a tick."

Stephen shrugged, the motion of it obvious in the press of his body. "To date, you've been deliberate in choosing locations that should be of no real threat to us. Now you're about to have a wider range of nanotech at your disposal. That changes the game plan."

Tony blinked slowly. "How so?"

"We're not going to discover the means to take on Thanos on a backwater planet using mud and straw for roofing," Stephen said dryly. "Unless you think he might pause to admire the pretty skyline."

"He might; what do I know? And are you forgetting Vanaheim? Appearances can be deceiving."

Stephen ignored that, unwilling to be distracted. "I'm assuming you've already picked out a place. Where?"

Tony scowled at him. "I can never tell when you're guessing and when you're extrapolating scenarios from the future."

"No two timelines are exactly alike, so in a way I'm constantly doing both."

"Now you're just making my head hurt again."

"Tell me," Stephen said pleasantly, but there was a thread of steel in his voice. "I need to know."

"You and your overprotective complex," Tony muttered. "I should make you tell me."
"Try not to be more unreasonable than you absolutely have to."

"Unreasonable is in the eye of the beholder," Tony insisted. "Fine. Remember that idea I pitched you about an intragalactic G-Mart? Well, apparently the universe was one step ahead of me. FRIDAY's databanks have record of several systems where trade goods of all kinds are available to the right buyer."

"I'm aware. Which did you choose?"

"Why don't you just save everyone a lot of time and tell me which one you're worried about me choosing?"

Stephen's irritated silence spoke quite loudly for him.

Tony suspected he already knew the answer and prodded accordingly. "There's this old mining colony called Knowhere, apparently the resting place of some ancient space creature."

"No," Stephen said, sharp with an edge of real fear.

"- that seems to be like the equivalent of a black market, all kinds of crazy tech floating around."

"We're not going to Knowhere," Stephen said, clamping a hand down on Tony's shoulder with a heavy pressure that actually hurt.

Tony didn't react. "But it's like a giant smorgasbord just waiting to be plundered. I mean, are we pirates or aren't we?"

Stephen said a word in a language Tony didn't recognize and doubted FRIDAY did either. A crackle of orange fire licked along Tony's senses. A second later, all noise dissolved into an indistinct haze, muffled as if under water, and the light dimmed like a curtain had been drawn. Tony watched shimmering geometric patterns paint vibrant sparks and swirls across the entire room; the magic was like a wall, enclosing them in peace and quiet.

Tony raised an eyebrow. "Was it something I said?"

"We can't go to Knowhere," Stephen said, in a voice that tried to be firm and resolute and didn't quite manage it. "We'd be walking into a literal den of thieves. Don't be a fool."

"Thieves steal a lot of things," Tony said mildly. "Sometimes that includes things of interest. Did you know Thanos has record of another infinity stone stashed on Knowhere? FRIDAY picked that up from the last communications between Squidward and the mother ship."

"Exactly. Thanos is more than familiar with Knowhere, and there's no chance of him leaving an infinity stone in the hands of someone else at this point in the timeline."

There was something uncomfortably wild in Stephen's eyes and Tony grew abruptly tired of his impromptu game.

"- which of course means he'll have taken it off their hands long before now," Tony finished for him. "Or possibly he just took their hands, and then their life while he was at it. And then left a few lovely spies behind, just in case we were ever stupid enough to go there anyway. So, relax; on the whole I agree with you. We're not going to Knowhere."

Stephen didn't unwind right away, but his biorhythms did pause and start to inch down from their rapid ascent into a red zone.
"Besides," Tony continued, shrugging, "it's in the middle of space. So there's no sneaking up on that one for love or money."

Stephen glowered at him, obviously recognizing Tony's petty revenge. "You won't be able to sneak up on most planets with any level of sophisticated technology. Orbital satellites -"

"I have a few ideas for that," Tony interjected, rubbing his hands together gleefully. "Leave it to me."

Stephen raised his eyebrows but said nothing. Which left Tony to wonder whether he'd seen futures where Tony succeeded, or where he failed. Possibly both.

Tony cast a leisurely look at the magic dome surrounding them. "And the purpose of this little light show? Not that I'm complaining. If I had to listen to another alien donkey braying at the sun I might've escalated to murder."

"I thought you might be more inclined to listen to me if I cut the distractions," Stephen said with a sigh. "And I assumed the conversation would be rather loud. I see now it wasn't necessary."

"Careful or you'll alert our alien hosts to the sorcerer in their midst."

"I'm always careful," Stephen said, settling back again, close enough that the warmth from his hip and left leg pressed into Tony's side. "I've cut off sound and light to the outside. They'd have to enter the room to cross the barrier. FRIDAY has eyes and ears around us. She'll warn of anyone approaching."

"Risky."

Stephen's hand had relaxed its death grip on his shoulder, apologetic fingers exploring, pressing in and around the trapezius and neck, chasing away painful tension. Blunted nails scratched idly through the short hairs at the nape of Tony's neck until he could feel the tingle of referred pleasure all the way down to the tips of his toes.

"Mmph," Tony managed to say eventually, feebly, what felt like days later. "I'll give you two million dollars and all of my food rations on the ship to never stop that, ever."

Stephen breathed a laugh. "Well, with an offer like that, how can I refuse?"

He punched out a breath when Stephen sought out the pressure points at the back of his skull and started a fixed rolling motion, working solidly from the bottom up. Tony heard himself making breathless noises that probably would've gotten him kicked out of any family-friendly establishment. He was dimly grateful for Stephen's magic barrier, but not as grateful as he was for Stephen's magic fingers.

The sorcerer didn't keep it up for long, the exquisite push and slide falling away after only a few minutes. Still, it was enough to intimidate the pressure in Tony's head into a temporary retreat, at least. When Stephen's hands started to slide away, Tony reached up to snap one. He felt the tremor there, strong and shaking through them both, and turned onto his back to examine it closely.

"How much did that hurt you?" Tony asked, squeezing when it seemed like Stephen might tug out of his grip entirely.

"Hurt me?" Stephen asked, so blandly he might've gotten away with the misdirect if Tony hadn't had a tight grip on his wrist.
"You're not fooling me. I'm literally taking your vitals as we speak and you're a dirty liar that lies. How much?"

Stephen conceded the point with a sigh. "Not as much as you're thinking."

"So on a scale of one to ten, it wasn't quite an eleven."

"A three, perhaps," Stephen said.

Which was no surprise, really. Stephen still had a surgeon's hands and deft touch, but considering the nerve damage there was probably very little he did with his fingers that didn't cause him pain. Tony pressed over the muscle at the base of Stephen's thumb, digging in experimentally.

"Ah," Stephen said warningly. "That's a five."

Tony frowned. "That kind of daily pressure sensitivity must be agony. Ever find anything to dull it?"

"I never learned how to magic it away, if that's what you're asking. Narcotics could do the job well enough, but they're too sedating. They'd never allow me to continue my work." Stephen shrugged. "Eventually I learned to live with it."

Tony hummed his understanding, thinking back on old arc reactors and bone loss. "Pain's an old friend, right? One of those really annoying ones that makes house calls unannounced and won't stop yammering in your ear until you pay attention to them."

Tony could hear Stephen smiling. "Know something about that, do you?"

"I don't make house calls."

Tony sat up, letting the blankets fall away to blink into the dim orange reflections of magic lighting up their single-room dwelling. It wasn't quite justice to call the place a hovel; it was too solidly constructed for that. But it was four walls, two beds and a cot, barely wide enough for a rickety table off to the side and a line to hang clothes from. The walls were some kind of stucco material over what amounted to concrete blocks. The whole thing was utilitarian if Tony was being generous. If they'd been on Vanahem, the bare, uninsulated features of the room would've been bitterly cold, but this planet was arid, with barely enough water to serve its small but bustling population. The nights were comfortably cool, but the days were hot.

Tony finally let Stephen tug his hand back, appreciating the reduced throbbing in his skull. "Thanks, doc. I can almost hear myself think again."

"How long have you been getting headaches?" Stephen asked, with a physician's curiosity.

"Since arriving here. Pretty sure it's the drop in atmospheric pressure combined with low oxygen content. The temperature extremes probably don't help. Lucky this planet doesn't have the same temperature drop as some of our deserts on Earth. Afghanistan got pretty frigid sometimes."

Stephen shrugged. "We've been to a few that were less than ideal. One of the worst had a moderate temperature in the height of day, but it dropped to twenty below at night. As you can imagine, even magic couldn't cut the chill on that one."

"I suppose the one advantage would've been huddling close for warmth." Tony gazed at him soulfully. "I bet I was a champion warmth huddler. Let it never be said I didn't look out for your needs, Stephen. I'm sure my primary concern was always keeping you comfortable."
"And Peter, too."

Tony made a face. "Oh, right. Yeah. That'd be awkward."

"You have no idea," Stephen muttered.

Tony glanced over at the other sleeping pallets; the bed was neatly made, but the cot was a sprawl of blankets and pillows. "Speaking of the kid."

"I left him in the marketplace. FRIDAY’s watching him closely."

"I am, boss," FRIDAY chimed in agreeably.

Tony frowned, forcing himself to let go of the initial spike of alarm. He plastered what he hoped was an easy smile on his face. "Well, how like him to be up at the crack of dawn looking for trouble. When I was his age, if I made it up before noon it was a good day. More proof that Peter's no example of a normal, Earth-born teenager."

Stephen looked amused. "Maybe he's just a morning person. I am, and was."

"Yeah, you're like two peas in an abnormal pod." Tony scrutinized the sorcerer closely, leaning in with narrowed eyes. "Hey, come here."

"Why?" Stephen asked warily.

Tony stared at him. Stephen tilted toward him, brows furrowed, and when he opened his mouth to ask for an explanation, Tony caught him with a kiss. The sorcerer didn't fight, leaning into Tony in turn, the warmth of his mouth soft and inviting. Tony'd just started to count the whole thing as a rousing success when Stephen surprised him by twisting to press Tony's shoulder down into the bed, the soft press of lips turning into something deeper, more passionate.

Eventually Stephen pulled away, leaning back so Tony could open his eyes and pretend he wasn't panting for exhilarated breath.

Stephen glared at him, hot with a thing not entirely passion. "Don't start something you can't finish."

"Hypocrite. I was aiming for a good morning kiss. You were the one who turned it into a tonsillectomy. Not that I'm objecting." Tony wrapped one hand around Stephen's wrist, trailing the other curiously through the insubstantial film of magic locking them away. It sparked and whispered over his skin with static, a miniature sunrise painting their small corner of the world with brilliance. "How long have you been up gallivanting with our friendly neighbourhood spiderling?"

"An hour. I've been talking with the innkeeper. Our payment is expected this evening if we want to keep using this room."

"Our payment," Tony echoed ironically. "Right."

Being a planet of mostly desert dwellers scraping a spartan living, the trade of goods and services was still considered an acceptable accessory to commerce. There wasn't a lot of goods their little trio could offer without digging into technology and resources that would only bring on suspicious questions, but it turned out that wasn't a problem. Primarily what these people seemed to want was able hands willing to do back-breaking labor. Admittedly, not the easiest of tasks when Tony could barely manage ten minutes of weight lifting before his oxygen saturation dropped to dangerous levels. He'd resorted to using the suit where needed, to offset the difficulty.
"What lovely task are we being asked to do this time?" Tony sighed, slumping back down. "I keep waiting for her to send us to clear out the sanitation areas. Which, if she does, I'm counting that as a sign to get the hell out of dodge, pronto."

"We're patching the roof on two of the other rooms," Stephen said. "We'll have to collect mud and thatching, and she's asked us to bring back a few blocks of wood for new carving material."

Tony grimaced with distaste. "We're being sent to chop down firewood? Fair warning, last time I spent the day on a farm chopping wood I managed to piss off pretty much everyone in a one block radius and later on blew up an entire city in spectacular fashion."

Stephen shook his head, pushing up to his feet and holding out a hand for Tony to take. "You manage to piss off people routinely without chopping firewood. One of your many talents."

"Do it for long enough, it becomes an art."

Tony allowed himself to be pulled up, dressing and neatening his clothes with little fanfare. At the end he settled a makeshift headscarf on his head and donned a set of gloves, watching Stephen do the same. The people on this world had yellow skin and no hair follicles that FRIDAY could detect, making it problematic for the three Earthlings to blend in without either claiming some kind of genetic mutation which probably no one here would understand, or taking the more efficient route of simply hiding their hair and the parts of their skin the photostatic veil couldn't cover. They'd chosen the latter.

Unfortunately, going incognito also meant Tony had to stash his nano-glasses; this planet had yet to develop anything remotely close to optometry. He tried his best not to feel too naked without them.

"Guess this means we should go find Peter," Tony said when they were done and Stephen had waved away the shimmering orange dome around them. The rush of noise slammed into Tony like a wall. "FRIDAY, lead on. Bring us to the arachnid."

They found Peter fifteen minutes later, up to his neck in colorful creations, clearly in full tourist mode.

"Peter, what are you doing?" Tony asked, amused. From the eager looks on their faces, the aliens nearby had obviously pegged the kid as an easy mark. More fool, them. Wait until they found out he didn't have any money.

"Tony, look!" Peter said excitedly. He thrust something in their direction, some collection of wood and stone pieces strung together with strips of leather. "It's some kind of wind chime. They say it wards off evil spirits. What do you think?"

Tony accepted the offering skeptically, slanting a look at the item's proprietor. The alien was difficult to read, but Tony could swear he saw chagrin there; a salesman watching his opportunity fade as more cynical minds ambled by to corral the enthusiasm of their wayward sheep.

"A wind chime, that's nice," Tony said pleasantly, immediately handing the thing off to Stephen. "Unfortunately, we'll have no use for wind chimes when we get back home. Not very windy there, as I recall. Except when we put holes in the walls."

Peter had the good sense to look sheepish. "Oh, right. But it looks cool, right?"

"Right."

"Oh, hey, I found these, too!" Peter shoved something else in their direction, colorful and soft. This
discovery proved more interesting; three pairs of soft leather shoes, a belt, a few shirts and pants of varying lengths and widths. There was a colorful blanket at the bottom of the pile, too; not necessary, but clearly adored if the way Peter tugged at the material was anything to go by.

"Now that's more like it," Tony murmured, while beside him Stephen examined the fabric carefully, pulling in certain places to check the wear and tear.

"The leather hide on the shoes is decent, but the shirts are threadbare," Stephen said, even though Tony could see only a few small patches of thinning to the naked eye. The sorcerer settled back on his heels, looking at the merchant squarely. "Acceptable work, I suppose. What are you asking for them?"

"Acceptable! My *spouse-kin-guide* made those shirts," the man blustered, puffing himself up eagerly while the translation spell fumbled beneath the weight of a word with too much context to easily interpret. "You will not find better in the entire length of the market. I guarantee it!"

"I'm sure you do," Stephen said dryly. "But I'll judge that for myself. You can cut the pretense; I'll warn you right now we don't have any money. We're willing to trade labor or services. If you won't accept that, we'll move on."

The man immediately lost his look of avarice, disappointment painting him blackly. "What use have I for *services-notoriety*?"

"I don't know," Stephen said patiently. "What use do you have for services? Can you read?"

Now the merchant looked wary. "What? Why would you ask that?"

"Because if you can't, I can. And if you need something written or read, I can do that for you."

Interest lit the man back up, and he and Stephen immediately commenced haggling over what payment the man would accept while Peter looked on eagerly. Thankfully, they'd discovered early on that illiteracy was rampant on this world. While unfortunate for the general populace, it made any trade they wanted to do fairly easy.

Tony sighed, glad it was Stephen striking the bargain and not him. Petty negotiations like this had never gone well for Tony, possibly because when he'd visited impoverished third world countries in his former life as a billionaire weapons dealer, haggling was something easily solved by throwing double the asking price at it and calling it square.

"I have never seen someone so *bland-uninterested-mediocre* during a good bargain before," a voice said some time later, interrupting Tony's mental calculations on nanotech metric units. Stephen and the stranger were still hard at it. Tony turned to find a woman watching them, amused.

"I'm more interested in the outcome than the bargain," Tony confessed. He smiled as charmingly as he knew how. "Good morning. Come here often?"

She blinked in surprise. "Yes, of course. This is my *hearth-home*. I have not seen you here previously, however. Which *province-division* are you from?"

"We come from the far north." Tony waved a hand in what he hoped was a vaguely northern direction. "We're travellers. Just passing through."

The woman looked delighted by this news. "Then you've come far, indeed. I wouldn't mind hearing more of life in the north. Is it very different from life here?"
"You could say that," Tony said. "Though I'm sure life's changed since last we saw it. It's been a while since we were home, and we took the scenic route."

The word 'scenic' obviously caught her up, because: "The unpopular-patience route? I don't understand."

"Well," Tony said, coughing at that. "Right."

The translation spell, they'd discovered, had a few quirks. On lizard world, it seemed to struggle mostly with terms of address; names and nouns. Here, the problem seemed to be context. There was a lot of cultural reference sunk into the morass of this language and, like English, a lot of words seemed to have multi-layered meanings. Most of the time the reference still made sense, but occasionally something came across that had no comparable equivalent, the result of which was a bizarre description that made absolutely no sense.

Tony's favorite was still the spider-kitten-cactus debacle they'd encountered on the first day, before they'd quite realized the translation difficulties. Tony was never going to forget that for as long as he lived.

He cleared his throat, recalling himself to the conversation. "Right, yeah, they say any route worth taking requires unpopular patience."

Now the woman looked even more dubious. "Who says that?"

Tony fluttered one hand over his chest in false outrage. "I do."

She smiled at last, willing to let herself be charmed. "A funny-absurd notion. And do you need any provisions for your long, unpopular journey?"

"Yes, please!" Peter said, catching that immediately, because his radar was tuned to any conversation that might involve food. Stephen looked to be wrapping up his negotiation.

Tony grimaced, but didn't stop Peter from inching forward to scan over the woman's wares. Like most in the market, she sold a combination of odds and ends, but unlike her neighbour, her stall was primarily foodstuffs. Some of it had a look that absolutely turned Tony's stomach, but a lot of it was edible, and some of it was delicious. Their first day planet-side Tony'd insisted they tour without touching anything while FRIDAY took level three scans and ran the results through every database they had. So far this planet seemed relatively non-poisonous and welcoming and generally free of things that might try to deliberately or incidentally kill them.

The woman grinned indulgently at Peter. "What interests you, young one?"

"The, um," Peter fumbled. "The green thing?"

He pointed, and she followed his gesture with her eyes. "The candied-velvet-honorary-peppers?"

Stephen stifled a laugh by turning it into a cough. He turned to face them fully, his bargain apparently struck.

Peter eyed the green-candied-whatever eagerly. "Yeah. But, well, we don't have any money, you probably heard. I don't suppose you need anything lifted? Or placed on, like, a roof or some other elevated surface?"

The woman looked interested, squinting at them. Her eyes lingered doubtfully on Peter, obviously the smallest and slimmest of them, and by appearances alone probably the weakest. Tony bit his lip
on a smile. If only she knew. "I have no need to store anything on the roof, but I do have some supplies I will need to move by weeks-beginning-end."

They'd heard that before, too; the spell equating the end of a time interval with its beginning. These people seemed to view the passage of time not as discrete segments, but loops; one moving into the next seamlessly on a repetitive cycle. When they'd first tried to rent their room for a few days, the conversation had devolved into misunderstanding very quickly, their hostess struggling to comprehend they wanted to stay for a fixed measure of night-morning-night cycles.

"I could help with your supplies," Peter offered eagerly. She looked skeptical, but also pretty indulgent about it. Which was mostly the reaction Peter'd gotten every time he made a similar pitch to someone.

"I think you will struggle to manage it by yourself," the woman said to Peter, shaking her head.

"No, really, I'm stronger than I look," Peter insisted. "You just show me where. I'll get it done."

As the merchant went about drafting a nearby shopkeeper to watch her stall, Tony leaned in close to Peter, tapping meaningfully behind one ear. "Still have your eyes and ears handy?"

Peter didn't roll his eyes, though Tony got the impression from the way he sighed that the kid really wanted to. "Yeah. Just like the last time you asked."

"FRIDAY," Tony murmured, hopefully too low for the natives to hear. "Test?"

"I continue to have full unobstructed signal from all three of your transmitters, boss," FRIDAY said. They'd left their more conspicuous gear behind, but each of them was equipped with a few backup pieces these days, a lesson well-learned beneath Zet's tyranny not so long ago.

"Right, well, you know what to do if someone tries to kidnap our favorite spider and pressgang him into being a pirate."

FRIDAY considered this for a moment. "Assist them by stealing a space ship, as I did you?"

Peter frowned at Tony. "You know I'm like a hundred times stronger than you or anyone else on this planet, right?"

"Oh, a hundred times is a gross exaggeration -"

"Actually, it's a gross understatement -"

Stephen cleared his throat in warning, and Tony and Peter snapped their mouths shut when the woman approached again.

"All is ready," she said. "Will you come?"

"Yep, yeah," Peter said excitedly, practically dancing in one spot.

"Where exactly are you going, how far and how long?" Tony asked her, unable to stifle that first brush of suspicion.

The indulgent look she gave him grated; it said she found his overprotective bluster adorable. "Not far. If the young one is as capable as he says, we should return long before hunger can claim you."

Tony scowled at her, then looked at Peter. "Keep in mind we have more work to do today. Don't dally."
"I won't," Peter said cheerfully, cutting his eyes to the food cart. "Be back as soon as I can. You guys go ahead and look around. I'll catch up."

When the woman led the way, the kid took off after her, waving over his shoulder as they went.

Tony watched them vanish into the crowd. "Do you get the feeling these people aren't paranoid enough? Peter could break that woman in half if he were so inclined."

"Fortunately for her, he isn't," Stephen said, just as a commotion down the way drew their attention. One vendor had collided with another, crashing precariously into one of the market stalls. An immediate squabble erupted, escalating into a shouting match within seconds.

"Oh, look, the entertainment's arrived," Tony said.

"Perhaps we should relocate," Stephen suggested. "I'll have to come back for the clothing tomorrow. I'm to translate a few textile designs later, but he doesn't have the written material with him right now."

Tony swept one arm in front of him with a bow, feeling his headache starting to return. "I'm in. Nothing much for us to do here, anyway. After you, doc."

They wandered further afield, picking their way through the market, basically a sprawling swap meet that never ended. Once again, Tony was reminded of some of the bazaar's he'd seen in his younger years, before he'd had the wisdom to recognize what poverty really looked like. Some could argue he still didn't.

"Was Kathmandu your first adventure into third world living?" he asked Stephen, curious.

Stephen looked around pensively, obviously on the same wavelength as Tony. "Yes. I'd travelled before, but not like that. Five star hotels and Michelin food across the board, or it wasn't worth visiting. You?"

"I'd been mostly everywhere you can imagine that might provide some thrill or make a good story, and any major city that'd benefit from Stark tech lining its streets. Five star hotels, yes; Michelin food, no. Exceptions when there was a beautiful woman involved. Which reminds me, there was this one time in Thailand where - well, let's just say Obie had to get a lot of nondisclosure agreements signed. That was a good trip."

"Obie?" Stephen asked, and Tony took a moment to consider that, yes, the timbre of the sorcerer's voice was genuinely curious and unassuming.

"Obadiah Stane," Tony said, as neutrally as he could. He listened hard, missing his glasses acutely, every part of him attuned to Stephen's reaction.

The sorcerer's tone and body language didn't change, making him either an incredible actor, or legitimately unaware of the undercurrents between Tony and Obadiah. "Your former business partner?"

"Oh, Obie and I go way back," Tony said affably. "I never told you about him?"

"Not that I recall," Stephen said. "It's possible you did and I've forgotten. The details -"

"- of each timeline tend to blend, sure," Tony finished. They walked for a while in silence, examining different stalls as they went. Eventually Stephen slowed, pausing to pick up an earthenware mug curiously.
"The way they fire pottery is interesting," the sorcerer remarked. "I haven't seen any evidence of a kiln, so they must do it using a fire pit -"

"Remember when you crawled inside my head and took a look around without my say-so?" Tony asked abruptly. He watched Stephen go stiff with the reminder, the sorcerer's hands flexing against the mug.

"Yes," Stephen said slowly, obviously leaving room for Tony to explain that non sequitur.

Tony cleared his throat, forcing himself to speak past the obstruction there. Get it out; get it done. "Well, Obadiah was the first one to try that." He waited, not sure what he expected, but Stephen was remarkably, dangerously still. "The one I -"

"Yes," Stephen said, cutting him off, and Tony blinked and watched him gently put the mug back down, slanting a significant look at the merchant gazing at them curiously from not two feet away. "The one you. Yes."

Tony sidestepped down one of the open market paths, moving stiffly away. Stephen followed him a half step behind. Tony had the vague feeling he should've felt threatened by that, but he didn't.

"Former business partner," Tony repeated, considering that as good a place to start as any. "That was one way to describe Obie. In fact, he was so dedicated to the proliferation of the business that he was willing to sell Stark weapons to the highest bidder on the black market. Care to guess who the highest bidders frequently turned out to be?"


"Gold star. And among those terrorists, one particular cell that called themselves the Ten Rings -" he heard Stephen draw in a breath that sounded like it hurt, "- who Obie would later pay an exorbitant sum of money to bomb a military convoy I was part of, in the hope of eliminating me from the company roster."

He felt one of Stephen's hands wrap around his left elbow, steadying. "Tony."

Tony kept walking because he couldn't quite get his feet to stop, tugging the other man along. "I probably never would've known if Obie hadn't told me himself. If Pep hadn't found corroborating evidence. It's amazing how easy it is not to suspect a man of trying to assassinate you when he's spent half your life closer to you than your own father."

"Tony," Stephen said again, the other hand sliding around his wrist, that ever present tremor still there and finally giving Tony something else to focus on. He slowed, allowing Stephen to pull him into an unoccupied alcove between market stalls, nothing around them but stucco and old canvas.

"I didn't put that in the biography," Tony said quietly, before Stephen could get a word in edgewise. "That one was a bit too personal. When a guy puts his hands in your chest and literally steals your heart, and by that I mean the only thing keeping my heart safe from being shredded into pieces, well. That's not really something you talk about with reporters and journalists, you know? Not really something for public consumption. I might've done it anyway, because I don't know how to keep my mouth shut and that's just who I am, but I couldn't drag Pepper into it."

"I'm glad you had her," Stephen said, and he had both of Tony's hands in his now. "When you had nothing else, I'm glad she was there."

Tony forced himself to take deep draughts of air, feeling almost breathless. Must be the poor oxygen content catching up. "I had Rhodey, too. Or I thought I did. Because that was when I realized how
much of me and Rhodey was only really me and Rhodey because I gave his precious government shiny new weapons to go off and fight wars with. And when I took that away, it was a while before we found new ways to be me and Rhodey without that between us."

"We all walk into relationships with assumptions, foundations," Stephen said in the voice of experience. "When those foundations vanish, it takes time to find a new equilibrium."

Tony held up their joined hands in demonstration. "Our relationship, for instance."

"Are we calling it a relationship now?" Stephen asked with the ghost of a smile. "That's progress."

"I'm willing to give it basic bona fides, at least," Tony said. "Look, I know you think if we sleep together it'll all come down to sex. That I need to trust you explicitly before that happens. Let me clarify something on that front: I trust you about as much as I'm capable of trusting anyone, and you need to understand I may never be able to trust you more than that. It's nothing personal. It's just not something that's in my makeup anymore, and for good reason. Unconditional faith is never going to be my thing."

"I wouldn't ask you to have unconditional faith," Stephen said, though he looked wrong-footed enough Tony thought he might be lying; to himself, if nothing else. "Conditional faith would suffice."

"You already have that." Tony squeezed the hands in his grasp for emphasis. "But maybe it's not me who lacks faith."

Stephen hesitated. His face gave very little away, but the twitch in his fingers told Tony a lot. "Implying that I do?"

Tony shrugged, raising both eyebrows dubiously. "Are you saying you don't?"

Stephen frowned and lapsed into silence. Tony intended to wait him out, probably would've managed it, even, but just then FRIDAY crackled back into life over their transmitters.

"Boss," she warned, urgently. "Head's up. Peter's on his way back to you. He's in a hurry."

"What?" Tony asked sharply, while beside him Stephen stiffened. Tony let their hands part, reaching instinctively for the glasses before remembering this was the wrong environment to be using them. "Why? What did he say?"

"He said nothing. However, he's running at approximately eighteen miles per hour back toward your previous location."

Tony scowled, squashing the anxiety that immediately tried to engulf him. It couldn't be critical; if it was, Peter knew all he had to do was relay a message through FRIDAY. Not to mention Tony estimated his top speed at well above eighteen MPH. The kid was fine. There were plenty of reasons Peter might be taking a brisk run through the dusty paths of this little city. Maybe he was hungry; superhuman teenagers were always hungry. In fact, the whole thing was probably nothing. It was most likely -

"I knew he was looking for trouble," Tony growled, crowding Stephen's heels as they both slipped back into the flow of the market. It didn't take them long to find their previous position, and they caught sight of Peter almost immediately. The kid was fine. There were plenty of people, leaping over carts and other obstacles with a graceful economy of motion that spoke to either a lifetime of training, or inborn arachnid reflexes. No one was chasing him, from what Tony could see, though more than one person turned to look with startled eyes after the young man barreling
past. Peter almost lost his headscarf twice.

"He doesn't look injured," Tony said, eyeing him closely as the kid drew closer. "FRIDAY, is he injured?"

"No, boss. Not that I can detect."

"He's smiling," Stephen said, and when Tony looked he could see the sorcerer was right. In fact, smiling might be too mild a word for it. Peter's face wasn't so much arranged in an expression of contentment as it was exultant with some hidden joy.

When he was near enough to hear them without needing to either shout or discretely tap into Peter's micro-transmitter, Tony fixed the kid with a stern, speaking look. Peter slowed and then stopped underneath it, something sheepish touching his brilliant smile.

Stephen reached out to steady the kid's shoulders when he finally rocked to a stop. "Easy, Peter. What is it? What's happened?"

"You have to see this," Peter told them earnestly, barely waiting for them to register the words before he seized both their wrists, starting to drag them back the way he'd come. It was a tight fit against the press of people all around them. "I can't even. I don't even know what it is, but you have to see it."

Now that it was clear Peter wasn't in danger of dying, and that Tony's blood pressure could finally crawl back down from the stratosphere, irritation was starting to take the place of alarm.

"Really, Peter?" Tony asked, allowing himself to be towed without a fight. "You broke into an Olympic sprint to drag us out for some sightseeing? What is it with you guys not keeping a low profile? I know I'm bad at it, but I expect better of you two."

Peter shook his head, moving at a quick, brutal pace that Tony refused to admit started to tire him almost immediately. "You need to see this. It's awesome. Just wait."

"See what?" Stephen asked, and Tony soothed himself with the knowledge the sorcerer was just as affected, the edge of a wheeze already entering his voice.

"Just wait," Peter said, insisted really, and Tony concentrated on taking large, unhurried steps to keep up with him, walking steadily rather than quickly. Four right turns and two narrowly missed collisions later, they slipped into a narrow space left by a pair of adjoining buildings. Peter's slim form made quick work of the tiny alleyway while Tony was forced expel the scant air in his lungs just to squeeze through, barely escaping without injury to either his clothing or his pride.

Tony could feel his breath becoming alarmingly short and regretted the lack of air for many reasons; not least, his growing inability to give his voice free reign. "Seriously, kid, where's the fire? Two extra minutes isn't going to kill whatever it is. Is it?"

"I don't know," Peter said ominously. "I have no idea how long it'll last. Just come on, it should be just around the corner. We just need a clear view of the sky."

"Of the sky?" Tony repeated. "What the hell for? What's -"

But that question was answered in the next second, as they rounded a bend and tumbled out into an open, dusty lane overlooking the deep bowl of the valley below them, teeming with busy aliens mulling around like worker bees. The morning was, as Stephen had said, well under way, but that wasn't what caught their attention.
Apparently there was actually a fire; an unconventional one.

"Holy," Tony said faintly, staring as cascades of golden yellow and ruby red rainbows undulated over the horizon. The effect was stunning; an oscillation of molten flame unlike anything Tony could ever have imagined seeing. It was made even more dramatic by the fact this planet had a sky that appeared to the human visual spectrum as bright fuscia pink. "That's -"

"Incredible," Stephen finished, breathless for a much more enjoyable reason as they watched the phenomenon paint the world with light.

"What is it?" Peter asked beside him, hushed, exhilarated.

"No idea," Tony admitted, staring, barely noticing as all around them aliens came and went about their business, either too busy to appreciate the spectacle or too accustomed to it by frequent exposure. "Some kind of aurora effect, probably. You know, considering this is a desert, and I don't actually like them much, this planet is really starting to grow on me. It's rapidly moving up my top five favorites list."

"Five?" Stephen asked faintly, distracted. "We've only visited four."

"Earth counts. In fact, you could say it has a special place in my heart." Tony tried to take his eyes away from the extraordinary skyline and failed. Which was irritating; he didn't even like nature that much. "It's got a strong contender now though."

From the corner of his eye Tony could see Peter nod emphatically.

"FRIDAY," Tony said, quietly; loudly enough for the other two to hear. "I know you don't have eyes the way we do. I know you weren't designed to look at artistry for its own sake. But you're more than the sum of your parts, now, and I hope you can see enough to appreciate beauty."

Tony felt them turn toward him. Peter, who didn't understand yet. Stephen, who did.

"Of course I can, boss," FRIDAY said. "I see it through your eyes. Through all your eyes. The whole universe is beautiful."
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Two steps forward; one step back. And science wins the day, every day.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tony carefully closed and latched the access panel and slid halfway out from beneath the bridge console, removing his half-respirator with quick fingers. Sweat stung his eyes and he swiped at his brow, aware he was probably doing no more than spreading dirt and debris around.

"Alright, that should do it," he said, levering creakily to his feet. "FRIDAY, make it so."

"New power distribution module integrated," she confirmed. "Running diagnostic simulations now. Scanning."

Tony sighed, feeling old as he put two hands to his lower back and stretched with the hollow pop of realigning bones. "Good. Great. Do me a favor while you're at it? Be a dear and make my day this time."

She made a sound that wasn't quite her whistling, artificial sigh. "I'll certainly try, boss."

"Do or do not, young padawan," he said sternly, dropping his hands. "There is no try."

Stephen snorted, his voice echoing eerily off the walls; the sort of thing that happened when one was floating cross-legged eight feet in the air, well above the level of most obstructions. "I wouldn't have taken you for a Star Wars fan. It doesn't seem your style."

"Why not?" Tony asked. "My style includes all things awesome."

"Well," Stephen said, "then it definitely doesn't seem your style."

Tony wagged an admonishing spanner in the sorcerer's direction. "What do you have against the Wars? Too ground-breaking for you?"

Stephen raised two skeptical eyebrows in his direction. "Ground-breaking? The scientific inaccuracies alone -"

Tony quickly crossed his wrists in a warding motion. "Hey, blasphemy, how dare you. Shun the nonbeliever. Shun!"

"You would be an equal opportunity science fiction fan," Stephen muttered.

Tony nodded. "Some people watch daytime soap opera. I watch night-time space opera. Infinitely more entertaining, and with surprisingly fewer tragic endings."

Stephen scoffed with disbelief. "And increasingly convoluted scientific plot holes you're just willing to overlook:"
"Is that defensiveness I hear? From a man who creates scientific plot holes wherever he goes?" Tony made a show of casually checking out his fingernails. "This wouldn't have anything to do with the pseudo-magical Force being tied inexplicably to microscopic life forms living inside people. Would it?"

"Of course not," Stephen snapped. "That's only the best and most ludicrous example."

"Okay," Tony said cheerfully. "But don't hold back now; come on, tell me how you really feel."

Stephen glowered somewhere into the middle distance, as though the mystical Force sat just before him, and perhaps he could glare it into outraged submission with his furious stare. "The idea that magic could result from the existence of tiny symbiotic parasites is absurd. *Ridiculous.*"

"Right, of course it is," Tony soothed. "What was I thinking? Magic obviously makes much more sense when it can be learned solely through study and practice. And absolutely zero application of the physical laws of space and time."

"I'm glad you agree," Stephen said.

"Sarcasm must be strong in the Force today."

Stephen looking down on Tony quite literally, floating up another foot with his cape flaring dramatically behind him. "You prefer to believe magical power stems from an invisible collection of cells belonging only to a privileged few?"

"I prefer to disbelieve the possibility of magic altogether," Tony said. "But the universe never likes obliging me."

Stephen smirked. "I suppose reality is a harsh mistress sometimes."

Tony snapped his fingers and gestured in the sorcerer's direction. "Hey, maybe we should check you for midichlorians. Just to be sure, you know? For science."

"I've no need of microscopic organisms to do magic," Stephen said, sketching a small disc of orange light to flick in Tony's direction. "Though, it's almost a shame, really. If midichlorians did exist, perhaps you'd have more chance of doing magic yourself. A better chance than zero, which is still a chance."

Tony batted the chakram away to dissipate against the wall. "Bragging's childish, doc. Don't be childish." He turned his nose up. "FRIDAY, Stephen's being childish."

"They say imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, boss," she responded.

Tony made a face, biting his lip to hold off a laugh. "Yeah, thanks. Whereas sarcasm isn't flattering at all."

"That explains why everyone takes offense when you speak," Stephen muttered.

Tony mimed raising a tiny white flag. "Okay, I surrender. Two against one makes for unbeatable odds." He frowned at Stephen. "No fair turning my own A.I against me, you know. That's practically cheating."

"You programmed her. I'm just an innocent bystander."

"Bystander; yes. Innocent; no."
One of the instrument panels chirped a gentle acknowledgement, interrupting their banter. Tony sidestepped to examine it.

"Looks like the initial sims are complete. How'd we do, FRI? Jackpot? Or is it back to the drawing board?"

"Results look promising, boss. Eighty-nine percent average success rate, with two outliers."

Tony grinned and clapped his hands together in a victory cheer, triumph singing through his veins. "Alright, chalk one up for science. I'm the best."

"Now who's bragging?" Stephen asked.

Tony waved him off. "I need to give you something to imitate, don't I? FRIDAY, show me the diagnostic analysis and the outliers."

She answered silently by creating three tiered holographic overlays above the console, calculations scrolling downward with building speed and momentum, like water running over rocks.

Stephen descended to the ground, posturing forgotten now they'd moved on with the science.

"Eighty-nine percent sounds reasonable. Congratulations."

Tony shook his head. "No pats on the back yet, doc. In the lab, an eighty-nine percent theoretical success rate is phenomenal. In real life, I don't want to chance us going in with anything less than ninety-five. Higher, if I can manage it."

Stephen skimmed a hand over one of FRIDAY's holograms, the image briefly brightening when he passed too close. "I'm assuming even ninety-five percent still won't provide a foolproof guarantee."

"Nothing can provide a foolproof guarantee. This is experimental stealth technology, using experimental metamaterial, under the control of an experimental alien-A.I hybrid. Assurances are slim when you put that many unknown variables into the same melting pot and mix thoroughly."

Stephen looked dubious. "Then why bother waiting on an arbitrarily higher threshold?"

"Because I'm anal about things like our continued existence, and a stealth system that fails to provide us with sufficient stealth might as well be ejected out the nearest airlock." Tony held up a hand when Stephen opened his mouth to object again. "Relax, Stephen. Realistically, odds are good this cloaking system can easily achieve a primary safety threshold. I just need to tighten the refraction index, that's all. FRIDAY gets to do all the heavy lifting."

"Lucky her."

"Right?" Tony finished adjusting the code, inputting final figures with a flourish. "There. FRIDAY, integrate that and rerun simulations."

"On it, boss."

"And check on Peter's progress with the retro-reflective panelling while you're at it."

"Peter completed the required nano-infusion fourteen minutes ago. He's currently testing panel efficiency to reduce the scattering effect."

Tony grinned. "Smart kid, that one. He's growing up to be quite the responsible little genius. Not that I can take credit for that. Must be FRIDAY's influence."
"She does have a way with him," Stephen agreed, craning to study the same screen Tony was. "But I suspect the only one who can take any credit is Peter."

Flush with success, Tony slung an arm around Stephen's shoulders and yanked him close. Stephen turned like he'd been expecting it, almost taking Tony off his feet, the holographic displays dissolving and reforming as they staggered through one unexpectedly. Tony allowed himself to be manhandled, surprised, until he found himself relaxing back against the console. Cushioned by technology on one side and Stephen on the other; he couldn't recall the last time he'd felt so at peace with the universe.

The kiss didn't surprise Tony. Stephen was reserved, but to date he hadn't exactly been timid. What did surprise Tony was it wasn't the brief, warm brush of lips he'd have expected; the sorcerer one-upping him in a playful game of tag. Instead, Stephen smoothed his hand down Tony's cheek and into the hair at the base of his neck, tipped Tony's head up firmly, and caught his half-open mouth in something that burned with dizzying hunger.

Tony kissed him back, of course; he couldn't not. But his participation felt almost secondary. Stephen had firm control of things, and he wasn't shy about demonstrating that; it'd been a while since Tony last took up with a lover who felt so at ease assuming the lead. Thoroughly distracted, it took him much longer to pull away than he intended.

"Wow," he said when they finally parted, hearing with some irritation his own breathlessness. He watched the vaguely smug look on Stephen's face deepen. "Someone woke up on the right side of the bed this morning. What the hell was that?"

Stephen swiped his thumb over Tony's mouth, the negligent possessiveness of it doing unholy things to Tony's blood pressure. He licked his lips, tasting salt, and saw the sorcerer's eyes darken.

"If you need me to explain that, then we're in trouble," Stephen commented, stepping closer. "But as to the beds: I'm not sure there is a right side. Have you slept on those mattresses? Hard as a rock."

He emphasized that last word by slipping a knee between Tony's, tangling their legs and tucking them together with a firm clasp of his hip. When Stephen ground down, Tony could feel what little composure he'd managed to hang onto rapidly dissolving like sand through an hourglass.

It was another long moment of distraction before Tony could force himself to respond. "You want to do this now? Seriously? Who was it that complained about starting what you finish?"

"Maybe that's exactly what I'm doing," Stephen murmured, leaning in again.

Tony dodged him, sliding out from beneath Stephen's taller frame to come around at his back, hooking one of his ankles so the man lurched forward, both hands slamming down on the console for balance.

"Or maybe," Tony said, listening to the ping of the instrument panel indicating its newest batch of aggregate data, "you picked precisely the moment you knew I'd be too busy to capitalize on this."

Stephen turned his head, and he looked so unruffled that Tony might've mistaken him for detached if he couldn't see the man's pulse jumping like a rabbit at the base of his throat. Tony crowded closer, suppressing to urge to lick that pulse; make it leap that much higher, faster.

"Would I do that?" the sorcerer asked innocently, breathlessly.

Tony draped himself over Stephen, indulging them both with a long, heavy twist of his hips, grinding into that ass suggestively. The sorcerer stuttered out a surprised breath.
"Well, I would," Tony said. "So I'll assume yes, you absolutely would."

Tony tilted back, waving one of the holographic consoles into a better position to read from his new vantage point. When Stephen made to rise, Tony pressed one hand into the small of his back; just one, lightly. Testing. Tony watched him hesitate, fingers twitching with an instinctive need to retake control of the situation before he visibly forced himself to relax.

"This is fun," Tony commented, under no illusion Stephen was doing anything but letting him recapture the lead. "We should do it again sometime. Sometime when I'm not on the clock trying to get this ship in working order before we make landfall."

All thoughts of timing aside, the exchange of power was breathtakingly thrilling, and not just because of the implied trust; Tony wasn't sure he'd ever slept with someone who could match him on a physical, metaphysical, and intellectual level before. The possibilities provided endless fodder for his fantasies, and the sight of Stephen willingly stretched out before him, both hands splayed flat on the console, eyes drifting slowly closed -

"Not so fun from down here," Stephen murmured, thankfully interrupting Tony's brain before it could get too out of hand.

"No?" Tony asked, grinding into him again.

"Well," Stephen amended in a faux-thoughtful tone, only the barest rough edge of desire giving him away, "maybe some fun."

Tony tightened his hands, more tempted than he could say. He grappled momentarily with two powerful but opposing urges: the familiar need to science, and the unexpectedly intense desire to backburner science and explore biology instead.

"You're bad for my blood pressure," Tony said finally, letting him up at last, the lingering annoyance at Stephen's timing fading into amusement. Stephen looked flushed and bothered as he straightened up, which was only fair; Tony felt exactly the same.

Tony used the newly freed console space to check the analogous data, giving them both a chance to recoup. He made a triumphant sound as he examined the readings, new satisfaction rolling through him.


"Sounds hopeful," Stephen said, busy carefully neatening his clothes again.

Tony nodded confirmation, deliberately not watching him. "Very hopeful. FRI?"

"Ninety-six percent average success rate," she confirmed. "With a fifteen percent reduced margin for error, and no outliers."

"FRIDAY," Tony said happily, "I could kiss you."

She made a haughty noise. "Please, boss; not in front of the sorcerer. I expect he'd raise objections."

"Never for you, FRIDAY," Stephen said.

"Go ahead and integrate the new dataset," Tony said overtop of them. "Propagate to all your servers. I'll want to run a final simulation, but I think that's about as good as we can expect."
FRIDAY did as instructed, calculations rapidly disappearing and reappearing limned in green as they were absorbed into the mainframe. "Full systems integration will take approximately forty-three minutes, boss. That will leave limited time for testing. Shall I adjust speed and course to accommodate a later arrival?"

Tony drummed his fingers against the housing unit, reluctantly considering that. Their window of opportunity was already slim, even without adding additional time. The rotation pattern of the approaching F-type star created significant solar wind and flare activity, but on a predictable pattern; which meant it was also an *exploitable* pattern. Coming into the system at minimal speed during the blind of a flare was equivalent to coming in under cover of darkness on a moonless night. Without the flare, they'd be throwing on an invisibility cloak during daylight hours; it could still work, but needed more refined live test data to ensure their safety. They'd already been forced to stop and correct their electromagnetic shielding twice on the way in, losing them a full day of planetary exploration; stopping a third time would lose them at least a half-day more while they waited for another surge of covering electromagnetic interference.

"We could delay," Stephen said, reading Tony's mind. "The planet's not going anywhere for a few billion years, at least. We can afford to take our time."

"We're down to a two-day window as it is," Tony complained, frowning. "And that doesn't even include recognizance or egress."

"It's only five days to the next full flare cycle. We could try again then. A week won't hurt us."

"It might," Tony muttered. "The longer we wait, the more likely someone passing by will spot us. I need a live trial to work out any distortions in the cloak and this is the safest controlled experiment possible."

Stephen shrugged. "Then we'd better go."

"But a final simulation could give us another two percent. Maybe three."

Stephen shrugged again. "Then we'd better stay."

Tony glared at him. "You're doing that on purpose."

"Of course I am," Stephen said dryly. "You're not an indecisive man, Tony; don't make an effort to become one now. Stay or go. It's your call, but pick one."

"I know what you're up to," Tony accused mildly. "You're trying to convince me to stall, so we can go park in lover's lane and make out like horny teenagers. Well, it won't work. I'm wise to your tricks."

Stephen put a hand to his chest, all innocence. "Please. As though I'd ever suggest such a self-serving course of action."

"But as an unintended side effect: Not bad, right?"

Stephen only smiled.

Tony flipped him a rude hand signal, sighing. "FRIDAY, make the course adjustment. I don't want to be floating around the periphery of this system like sitting ducks." He beckoned Stephen closer, gesturing down at the console's scrolling data. "I need to get down to engineering and check on the kid's progress. You keep an eye on things here, let me know if anything catastrophic comes up, and try to stay out of trouble."
"No promises," Stephen said in a voice that very much made all kinds of promises. He smoldered at Tony playfully again, his incredible eyes glittering with amusement.

"Cheater," Tony said, without heat, and forced himself to leave before he could change his mind, or before Stephen could change it for him.

He ran through the cloak's broadband equations again on the way down, checking and re-checking his math. There were two high frequency waves that might potentially muddy the waters, but overall Tony felt confident the spectrometer could isolate all the appropriate variables. He couldn't have done it without FRIDAY's intervention, of course; the human brain was far too slow to make the instantaneous calculations required.

It was amazing to think how quickly they'd have perished out here in the black without FRIDAY.

It didn't take Tony long to reach engineering, where he could hear the mechanical whir and hum of the engines and fabrication units hard at work. And beneath that subliminal noise, Peter's voice echoing down the way:

"FRIDAY, adjust the angle to one-fiftieth normal and narrow the ridges by point-zero-zero-two. How's that look?"

"Three percent improved efficiency," Tony heard her confirm, clearly enough even two full corridors away that they had to have the engineering doors propped open; the acoustics really carried on this ship. "One percent increased scattering effect."

Peter cursed more colorfully than Tony would have suspected him capable of. He slowed with a grin, admiring the teenager's impressive range of vulgar metaphors.

"This is the Rubik's cube from hell," Peter finished eventually. "Okay, reduce angle steepness and align with - no, don't touch that - um, narrow the ridges again by zero-one and add ten percent more of them. Anything?"

"I will require forty seconds to complete that adjustment. Do you want to synchronize with a new angle?"

A light, hollow boom and a fine fluttering sound echoed; Tony rolled his eyes, picturing the kid hopping from console to console without much consideration for the damage he might do if he missed a step. Not that he ever had, but it was the principle of the thing; some of the instrumentation in that room was delicate stuff. But if Tony couldn't convince Peter to stay grounded even on an alien planet, he doubted he could be convince him not to climb the walls in their little home away from home.

"No, leave that," Peter said, maybe walking along the ceiling if Tony was judging the angle of his voice correctly. "Don't - oh, come on, really?"

FRIDAY sounded almost prim as she ran her calculations. "I require an additional seventy gigajoules to accurately account for the ten percent ridge increase."

"You can't pull that from the cloak, it's messing with Tony's power differential. What about one of the redundant systems -"

"I have no redundant systems," FRIDAY interrupted, sounding cross.

Peter coughed while Tony stopped to lean against the wall, shamelessly eavesdropping now. "No, of course not. I just meant one of the, um, active systems -"
"I assure you, there are no inactive systems in my mainframe -"

"Cut that out - oh, hey!" A flutter told Tony a new aerial position had been found. "What if we just -

"Likely not. Peter, I recommend turning your attention to console one."


"Yes," FRIDAY said, almost sympathetically, and then there was a sudden, booming crash that made Tony jolt away from the wall, stunned.

"Kid, you okay?" he called, the sudden adrenaline making his stomach plunge uncomfortably. He broke into a quick jog. He could hear Peter scrambling up ahead as Tony rounded the corner.

"Mr. Stark?" Peter said, sounding harassed. "Uh, Tony, I mean. No, it's, I'm okay. Just - wasn't expecting that. No, wait, don't!"

"What?" Tony asked as he passed the open doors and only narrowly dodged as something came flying right at his head.

When Tony righted himself, he looked up to see the kid hanging from one of the primary manifolds, a hand outstretched to him with wide eyes. "Careful! Did - oh, man. Uh, sorry?"

"What the hell," Tony said.

Peter slunk down to the ground, looking very sheepish. "Oops. I, um. Didn't realize you were there?"

"So, what, you regularly throw things out the door when I'm not around?" Tony asked, walking warily closer. "Peter, do we need to talk about anger management? I know this comes as a surprise, but engineering is not the place to throw things in anger. Tempting though it may be."

"That's not, I didn't mean," the kid started, ducking his head when Tony fixed him with a heavy, expectant stare. "I, uh. Sorry. Wasn't thinking."

Tony rolled his eyes. "I guessed that much. What fell?"

"What?"

"Fell," Tony repeated. "I heard a crash."

"You did? Oh." Peter cut his eyes guiltily to the first control console, fidgeting. "Nothing major. Just the access panel."

"You left it open and unattended?" Tony asked, frowning. He walked over to see the console looking generally intact and operational; maybe a few new scratches at the release hatch, but no glaring dents. "You should know better."

"Yeah, I know. I mean, I do. I got distracted."

"I heard. Trying to solve the Rubik's cube, wasn't it?"

Peter flushed. "You heard that?"

"I hear everything on this ship," Tony announced, relaxing by degrees as it became clear no
particular danger was going to present itself.

"Man, I hope not," Peter muttered.

"What was that?"

"Oh, nothing! So you just wanted to stop by and check on my progress?" Peter perked up, looking in Tony's opinion almost adorably hopeful. "I finished with the retro-reflective panels like an hour ago. I've been running tests ever since."

"I know. Like I said, I hear things. Good thinking on the angle adjustment, by the way. Increased ridge proliferation for more accurate reflection?"

Peter was ridiculously pleased with himself. "At grazing incidence, yeah. It needs a lot more power to monitor and correct in real time, though."

"Oh, I'm sure FRIDAY can find a few extra batteries laying around somewhere. She's great like that. Isn't that right, FRI?"

"I can manufacture additional power cells if so desired," she confirmed.

"What?" Peter asked, outraged. "Why didn't you say that before?"

She sounded too smugly innocent to be believed. "You didn't ask."

"Why, you -"

"FRIDAY, play nice with the kid," Tony admonished, moving to check the readings himself, "you're practically related at this point."

"Surely not," FRIDAY complained mildly while Peter made less polite noises of protest in the background. Tony suppressed a laugh, catching from the corner of his eye the kid's half-grin, quickly buried. Tony got the feeling they did this a lot; their banter was too on-point to be randomly generated for his benefit alone.

Tony whistled appreciatively when he finished reading over the equations. "Not bad, you two. Looks like you've been working hard; we're down to a seven percent margin for error. Nice."

"FRIDAY did most of the work," Peter offered, dropping any pretense of irritation.

"I can't take the credit; it was Peter," she said, almost simultaneously.

Tony smiled. FRIDAY's influence, indeed; maybe it was really the other way around. "I said play nice, not turn into a mutual appreciation society over there."

"But -"

Tony waved her to silence, then had to take a moment to thrill over the fact that apparently FRIDAY could now differentiate nonverbal cues of an unspecified nature; amazing. "Pop the hood on the engine core, FRIDAY. I want to check how it's cycling now we're in prolonged sub-light. Last thing we need is to blow a gasket in enemy territory."

"Sure thing, boss."

As Tony slid down into one of the maintenance compartments, Peter hopped over, squeezing into one of the many small nooks that made up the interior engine frame.
"Careful," Tony warned, already busy checking connection integrity, his respirator forming quickly to protect his face. "Don't drop down unless you have a breathing apparatus on. There's insulation particulate everywhere down here. Housekeeping was really lacking on these ships. Two stars; would not recommend."

Peter ignored him. "FRIDAY says we're just a couple hours away now? From the planet?"

"That's right."

"So when we arrive at QB-whatever -"

"QB7A81H," FRIDAY supplied promptly.

Peter continued, undaunted. "I'm going to call it planet Quibble -"

"Can't leave you two alone for a second, can I?" Tony said. "It's a regular sitcom down here. I should sell tickets."

"- how long until we know if the cloak's working?" the kid finished.

"Depends on the satellite detection systems, really," Tony said. "According to FRIDAY’s databanks, there's a lot. Enough so that if the cloak fails, I figure we'll probably have somewhere between ten and thirty seconds to realize it and immediately regret every decision we've ever made in life."

"But it's a trading outpost," Peter reminded.

"Supposedly."

"So maybe they won't fire at us? Even if they do discover we're there?"

Tony scowled doubtfully. "My, aren't we feeling optimistic. Might I remind you what happened the last time alien vessels detected our presence? We were spitting distance from becoming asteroid road kill."

"This is different," Peter insisted. "They probably get all kinds of ships in places like this. That's sort of the point, isn't it? Besides, even if they do open fire, I'm sure FRIDAY can get us out."

"Full power to FRIDAY, but if it's all the same to you I'd rather not test that," Tony said. "Top marks for the attempt at armchair inspiration though. You should do cards. Watch: 'Happy birthday; hope our present stopped you in your tracks'. 'Get well soon; we'll be far from here while you do'. 'Miss you; hope if you start firing that you miss us, too'."

Peter blinked at him very slowly. "I didn't know you wrote for Hallmark."

"Only in my off hours. But with a talent like mine, well. You know how it is."

"I can't even imagine," Peter said. "So if the cloak does work, we're going down to the planet then?"

"All things being equal, that's the plan."

New excitement was filling the kid with restless energy; he hopped down one level to a lower perch, then back up again. "Dude, that's awesome. What're we looking for? If we do make it down? What kind of people will be there?"

Tony shrugged. "No idea about the people, except that there'll be some. And otherwise, anything
that looks like it could help us in our Thanos-thwarting journey across the known and unknown universe."

"Since we'll only have two days, will we need to -"

"No splitting up," Tony said quickly, heart pounding at even the thought of separating in what amounted to enemy territory. "Not a chance. We stay within sight and sound of each other at all times on the surface. No exceptions. Ever."

Peter let that settle between them for a few seconds, blowing out a slow, bothered breath. "What I was going to say was: Will we need to do a full recognizance? We won't have a lot of time."

Tony glared at him suspiciously, willing his paranoia back beneath the depths from whence it came. "FRIDAY only needs a few minutes to pull aerial footage after we enter low orbit around the planet. We're not going down without at least initial readings. Basic atmospheric composition, at least, if nothing else."

"I guess that makes sense," Peter said, deflating just slightly.

Tony rolled his eyes. "Your enthusiasm for our continued safety and well-being overwhelms me."

"It's not that I don't care about our safety," Peter protested, frowning. "I do, I just. I really want to see what's out there, you know? I want to see what the universe has to offer."

"Yeah, I know," Tony muttered. "You think the galaxy is full of sunshine and rainbows and everyone should just join hands and sing Kumbaya under the light of a few moons, somewhere. One big happy family."

"No, I don't," Peter said, for the first time sounding truly annoyed. "I think people are worth taking a chance on, yeah. But I want to get out there because Thanos is out there. And every day we're gone, somewhere he's doing everything in his power to catch us. And one day he's going to, and when that day comes, we need to be ready. If we're not ready, we're dead. Right? So, yeah, we need to get out there. It's our only chance."

Tony blinked, looking away from his work to squint at the kid in surprise. He'd never heard Peter sound that way before. Eager but thoughtful; curious but reasonable. Shrewd and almost sensible.

"Right," Tony echoed, letting his hands rest on his knees. "Well, that's quite a change in tune. What brought that on?"

Peter looked defensive. "Nothing. Nothing changed. I just, I mean. After being on Vanaheim; meeting people who're almost Asgardians. Hearing their stories. There's just so much more we have to do, you know? We need to get started on it, and we need to be smart about it. That's all."

And the thing of it was, Peter wasn't wrong; in fact, he was very, very right. But Tony had to look away for a second, intense pride unexpectedly cluttering up his throat with all kinds of sappy, sentimental nonsense he had better taste than to say out loud. It took him a second to clear all that away; find something appropriately light and airy to say instead.

"Not bad, kid," he finally settled on. "Keep it up. For a second there you almost sounded, dare I say it: Wise."

Peter flushed, ruining the facade of sage maturity by lighting up with an eager, youthful smile. "Really?"
"For a second."

Peter couldn't have looked more pleased if Tony'd handed him a medal. "Awesome."

Tony tried to return to his work, but he hesitated. There were a lot of things he really needed to say to Peter, and a lot of good reasons to say them now and not later. In a game of cat and mouse with a tyrant, they were about to up the ante in a very big way. The odds were good that if Tony put it off for much longer, there might come a time when all he had was regrets for not having opened his mouth when he could.

He sighed, dropping his forehead into his left head, feeling a headache starting there like a particularly sharp needle digging in.

"Look, Peter," Tony said. "I know we don't always see eye to eye, but I'm going to tell you something important, okay? And I need you to really hear it. So, listen closely."

Peter stared at him with wide, apprehensive eyes. Tony leaned in and watched the kid match him, almost hanging perpendicular to the ground in an effort to draw nearer.

"You're my favorite wall-crawling arachnid in the whole, wide world," Tony whispered, widening his own eyes for dramatic effect. "The best spider to grace the Earth, without a doubt, second to none. Understand? Comprendes?"

Peter's curiosity took a sharp nose dive into disbelief. And then humor. "Really? That's your super secret message?"

"Super important," Tony corrected, leaning back to start checking the engine again. "Not super secret. And totally accurate, too, by the way."

"I bet," Peter said.

"I mean, this one time one of your distant cousins somehow made it all the way up to the top floor of Stark Tower and scared the shoes off Pepper, which is no easy feat, let me tell you. I liked that little guy. But there was no contest in the end, really, and I mean that. My number one spider spot is now occupied -"

"What about the rest of the universe?" Peter interrupted to ask.

Tony paused, his rambling thoughts grinding to a halt. "What?"

Peter gestured around them, taking in the walls, the ship; the vast expanse of stars stretching out into infinity before and behind them. "You said I was your favorite arachnid in the world. But we're not on our world, anymore. The galaxy's a lot bigger than just Earth, you know."

"You want to be top arachnid in the universe?" Tony clarified, blinking. "Well, that's - ambitious."

"It just seems limiting," Peter said with a shrug. "That's all I'm saying. I'd rather be top arachnid in the universe than top arachnid in the world. What do you think my chances are?"

"Probably both better and worse than you imagine. I'm guessing there's probably a lot of arachnids out here in the black. Might take a while to meet them all."

"Nah, I'm pretty confident," Peter said firmly. "I've got this. What other arachnid could do advanced particle physics equations on the fly?"
"None, so far, including you," Tony said, amused. "Or are you going to tell me you ran the
equations, not FRIDAY?"

"What other arachnid could understand advanced particular physics equations on the fly," Peter
amended.

"You've got me there." Tony straightened his spine and forced himself to stop procrastinating.
"Okay, maybe I would lie to you. Just a little. There's something else I need to tell you."

The serious tone caught Peter's attention in a way nothing else had yet. The kid edged cautiously
backward; waiting. When Tony didn't go on immediately, he ventured to ask: "And that something
else is what, exactly?"

Tony flapped a hand at him, thinking. "Give me a second, here. I've got to work up to it."

Now Peter looked more than slightly alarmed. "It's something you need to work up to?"

"No," Tony said. "Well, yes. It's about Stephen."

"Is this like a round of twenty questions?" Peter wondered out loud. "Am I supposed to ask my way
to it? What about Stephen? Is it about, like, his magic? His infinity stone? His beard? All of which
are very cool, by the way."

Tony squinted at him suspiciously. "Cooler than mine?"

Peter looked evasive. "I didn't say that."

"But you meant it," Tony accused. "Okay, technically it's only half about Stephen. The other half is
about me."

"Only half? That's progress. Isn't it usually all about you?"

"Rude," Tony commented. "Is that any way to talk to your elders?"

"On this ship, I think it's the only way to talk to my elders," Peter muttered.

"Do you want me to tell you or not?"

Peter threw up his hands. "Well, you're not saying anything, so I don't know. Do I?"

Tony came up with another two ways to start the discussion, and ten ways to end it, most of those
involving both of them running in the opposite direction as fast as they could.

Of course, none of that accounted for Peter, who'd always been something of a wild card. Tony
watched as, with no apparent provocation, the kid suddenly jolted like he'd been poked with a live
wire and screwed up his face with dismay.

"Hang on," Peter said. "Is this about the two of you dating?"

Tony opened his mouth, closed it, and then opened it again. He tried to force a few words into the
air but found he couldn't make a sound.

Undaunted by his silence, Peter squared his shoulders and crossed his arms. "Because if it is, can we
maybe just not talk about it and say we did? I don't want details." The dismay kicked up a notch
into horror. "I mean, I really don't want any details. Details are a thing we should avoid. Can we
avoid that? Like, there's an escape hatch up in the corner, and I'm not afraid to use it if you start
talking details."

Somehow, that managed to unlock Tony's disobedient tongue. "But you. How?"

"Come on, man; you guys aren't exactly subtle." The kid stopped and gave him an aghast look. "Wait. Was that you being subtle?"

"What are you talking about," Tony said, scrambling to bring his thoughts back into some semblance of order. "I'm totally subtle. We were totally subtle."

"You were totally not," Peter said. "Oh my God. You thought you were being discreet, didn't you? That was totally you being discreet."

"I can be discreet," Tony protested feebly.

"Oh, man," the kid said in a voice like someone walking the gallows. "Do we have to talk about this? Why do we have to talk about this? Is it because you want to be more obvious about things now? Please tell me I don't have to avoid every section of the ship with you guys in it. There's only so many times I can yell from the door to announce myself."

"You should definitely keep that up," Tony said automatically. "I wouldn't want you to be scarred for life."

Peter bleated something garbled that might've been "too late!" and put his hands over his ears like he could scrub that entire thought away. He looked ready to bolt for the emergency exit after all.

"No, hey," Tony said quickly. "Wait, I'm joking. Really; promise. We're off track. That wasn't what I wanted to say."

"You mean there's something else?"

Peter threw all pretense to the wind and scaled right up to the ceiling, just a few steps away from the hatch. Tony sobered, watching him.

"How'd you know?" he asked quietly, when the kid paused in his flight. "Seriously."

"I was serious," Peter said. "You guys are kind of obvious about it. I thought you meant to be, but apparently you're just really bad at hiding things."

Tony watched him shrewdly, narrowing his eyes. "And you're okay with that? With us?"

Peter avoided his gaze, looking at the walls and ceiling, his entire demeanor riddled with discomfort. "Sure. I mean, it's not my business, right?"

"It's sort of your business. This is a small ship and there's only three humans on it. I'd rather not have one of us stewing about something that involves the other two."

Peter shook his head, still looking anywhere but at Tony. "What's there to stew about? I'm not stewing. I think it's funny, actually. And kind of, you know. Sweet."

Tony screwed up his face in a moue of disgust. "Sweet?"

"And funny," Peter said quickly. "Because, you know. Science versus magic; magic being science. It's funny, right? That you'd fall for a sorcerer."

"I haven't fallen for anyone," Tony insisted. "If anything, he's fallen for me. He's been after me for
"Right," Peter said, and though he didn't actually roll his eyes, his tone said he badly wanted to. "Sure. So is that why you brought it up? You thought I was stewing?"

"I didn't think you were anything-ing," Tony said. "I didn't think you knew. When did you know?"

This time Peter really did roll his eyes. "Dude, ages ago. Stephen talked to me about it way back when we were stuck on the lizard planet. Do you guys just not talk? What do you do when, um, instead I mean, uh." He backpedalled frantically, waving his hands wildly through the air even though Tony hadn't said a word. "No, wait. I didn't mean it! I take it back. I don't want to know."

Tony didn't quite hear the last part, being stuck still on the first. "Stephen told you? Told you what exactly?"

Peter squirmed, looking like he wished the universe would swallow him whole. "You know. That you two were. Um. That you two were."

"Back on lizard world?" Tony repeated incredulously. "Are you fucking kidding me? We hadn't even locked lips then."

"I said no details!" Peter cried.

"Live with it and be thankful I didn't start talking about the birds and the bananas again." Tony tipped his head back to glare at the ceiling, not sure whether he should be pissed off or impressed. "That ass. He set me up. He told me I had to talk to you about it and you already knew; and he knew that you knew."

"Glad I did," Peter said, disgruntled. "The amount of times I've almost walked in on something, and I don't want to know what, but seriously? Can't you guys keep it to your quarters?"

"Spontaneity is the spice of life in any relationship," Tony advised him calmly. "Keep that in mind if you ever land a girlfriend-boyfriend-significant-alien-other."

"So be spontaneous; as long as I don't have to see it," Peter muttered, shuddering. "I mean, do you want me to keep a bit more distance? Give you guys space, since you're. You know. I can? If you want, I mean. I can."

Tony was tempted to let him keep fumbling until he inevitably backed himself into another verbal corner; fumbling Peter was hilarious. But there was something in the cast of the kid's face Tony didn't really like; a casual note Peter was aiming for that he missed by a few degrees.

"Well," Tony said, watching him closely, "I think I speak for all of us when I say, I hope you'll at least knock before bursting in on us."

"Oh, yeah, sure," Peter said casually.

"For either of our quarters," Tony clarified. "You're freely welcome everywhere else, of course."

"Right, of course," Peter said, but he was looking vaguely somewhere off to the side.

"Seriously, kid. I'm not relegating you to the cargo bay. There's only so many chemistry labs any one person can do before they really do manage to blow something up. I value the ship's integrity too much to do that to any of us."
The kid was still turned partly away, but something in the set of his shoulders relaxed just fractionally.

"Besides," Tony continued brightly, "if you didn't drop in on me periodically and inconveniently, I wouldn't know what to do with myself. I might have to come hunt you down instead."

"No!" Peter blurted, whipping his head down to stare at him with a very odd look on his face.

Tony paused, squinting at the kid until in the silence Peter flushed and fidgeted like someone half his age. "No, what?"

Peter fumbled, ducking his head bashfully. "I mean, no, I. I'd rather be free to drop in on you. If you really don't mind?"

"I don't mind." Then Tony grimaced, because he'd almost forgotten how things worked when life was in two-player mode. "We don't mind."

"You're sure?" Peter asked. "I don't want to intrude."

And that was it; that was the crux of the matter. The kid's casual civility sloughed away, to be replaced with a sort of lost vulnerability that made Tony's skin crawl and his brain hurt. Any doubts Tony might've had about taking the high road abruptly vanished. He already had FRIDAY on the lookout for Peter when they were off-ship; he'd just have her initiate an early warning system while they were on ship, too. Tony had no intention of putting the kid in the position of being odd man out if he could help it.

"Peter," Tony said seriously, "do I strike you as someone who'd hesitate to say something if you were intruding?"

He'd hit the right note; the kid lost that lonely gray tinge to his expression and wrinkled his nose sheepishly. "Ah, no?"

"No," Tony agreed. "This ship is your home too, kid. You get a say. Always."

Peter looked bashful, scuffing his toes along the wall shyly. "Really?"

"Really. You're as much a part of us as we are of you."

"I mean, it's okay if you do need space, though," Peter said quickly. "I'm not actually a kid, no matter what you call me. If you need me to stay away, you can just say."

Tony picked up a stray micro-lugnut and threw it at Peter. It pelted him in the shoulder and he made a small squawk of surprise, catching it before it could drop.

Tony glared at him now he had Peter's full attention again. "I am saying. I'm saying if you start avoiding us now, I will kick your ass from here to Alpha Centauri and back again. Nothing changes, and nothing will, and if you ever start to doubt that I expect you to come kick my ass in turn, not go sulk in some corner like the spoilt rich kid you are not. On this ship we talk about our feelings."

Tony threw himself on the ground, groaning dramatically as he pressed two hands hard over his eyes. "Now, for the love of all things science, let me stop talking about my feelings. Please. Before I have a fucking aneurysm."

When Peter dropped down to one of the lower perches, Tony cracked open one eye to check on him; the smile on the kid's face made Tony think of golden-red rainbows in a desert oasis.
"Yeah," the kid said softly, happily. "Okay. We can stop now, I get it. Comprendes."

"Good," Tony said gruffly. "Now stop wasting time and get down here and help me."

It took them less than the allotted time to finish the maintenance check and adjust parameters on the retro-reflective paneling, and FRIDAY finished integrating the stealth systems with enough room for a partial simulation test. The whole thing was as much a success as Tony could've hoped, and he made a mental note to utilize Peter as an assistant more often. The kid not only knew his stuff; he was creative and innovative. And fast.

But even with everything stacked in their favor, Tony still couldn't help holding his breath when they slid into the F-type system at the appointed time, the cover of an active solar flare lighting their path and (hopefully) also obscuring it for anyone else who might be watching.

"FRIDAY," Tony said, forcing himself not to whisper pointlessly even though it instinctively felt as though he should. "Talk to me. Any flags?"

"Not yet, boss," she said calmly. "Stealth systems are holding steady. I detect no unanticipated distortion or interference. I'm reading a series of satellite systems in place, evenly distributed between seven stellar objects; only three can be classified as planets. The only one located within the habitable zone is planet QB7A81H. There are twelve space-faring vessels currently manoeuvring through the solar system, and eight of those are within orbit around our destination. There are no indications we've been detected in any way at this time."

Tony held himself to tense stillness, waiting; just waiting for something to go wrong.

"Relax, Tony," Stephen said, steady at his right side and looking far more relaxed than he had any right to. "You and Peter did good work on the mainframe."

"We really did," Peter agreed, watching the viewport from upside down, the slow slide of planets passing by breathtaking in their beauty.

"We'll be fine," Stephen concluded.

"You say that now," Tony said cynically. "And go away; I'm still not talking to you."

"While I'd love to indulge your unique brand of melodrama, sadly we lack the time to do it justice," Stephen said. "A new exploratory mission awaits in just under half an hour. And if you're not speaking to me by then, we're going to have a serious problem."

"You set me up," Tony said, the same accusation he'd leveled at Stephen the second he set foot on the bridge again.

"Surprise; I manipulated you into being a decent human being and role model to young, impressionable minds. Congratulations on managing it at least semi-successfully. Please don't make me do it again."

Tony wasn't quite ready to be placated. "You lied. Again."

"I didn't. I told you, you needed to talk to him. You made your own assumptions from there."

"Playing games with people's lives again, Stephen?"

Stephen sighed, wrapping a hand around Tony's elbow, pinching sharply when Tony made to twitch away. "Reverting to childishness again, Tony? I realize having reasonable discussions with others
must deeply offend your sensibilities, but it's something that has to be done from time to time, and you know it. Let's not pretend you're going to hold it against me in the long run."

Tony frowned, letting the sorcerer tug them more firmly together in spite of himself. "You could at least let me recoup some of my pride by being petty and ridiculous about it for a while."

"I think not," Stephen said.

"Alright, fine," Tony said, capitulating with a sigh. "Spoilsport. FRIDAY, is our camouflage still holding? What's our ETA?"

"It's holding, boss. I've had to compensate for one of the higher frequency wavelengths; no other difficulties so far. We're seven minutes from our target. I'll need to control entry through the exosphere carefully to avoid significant friction distortion. I intend to maintain minimum safe distance in the troposphere, in case there's any need for a timely withdrawal."

"Speaking of. We won't be able to send out surveillance drones without being detected, so it'll have to be whatever we can glean from limited external sensors, FRI. You know the drill."

"Already on it, boss."

Limited was a good word for it; when FRIDAY did manage to capture basic aerial footage and atmospheric testing, the results weren't as thorough as they could be. But they were certainly quick and decisive.

"Based on human respiratory requirements, the air is not viable," FRIDAY said, bringing up a holographic schematic of a generic human organ system in the middle of the room. All three of them turned to look at it while she highlighted the lungs, throat and trachea on her mannequin. "I'm detecting eighty percent carbon dioxide and ten percent nitrogen. The final ten percent is comprised of helium, methane and trace amounts of neon. Oxygen is present at less than zero-six percent of overall composition."

"Which should kill us in a matter of minutes," Stephen said.

FRIDAY clearly agreed; she folded the holographic mannequin over, like a puppet with cut strings. "Yes. Perhaps faster. In addition, the atmosphere is significantly more pressurized than Earth's; approximately twenty-six PSI." The hologram collapsed altogether, clattering to the ground. "You wouldn't be able to walk on the surface even if you could breathe. Not without a nano-suit."

Tony blinked. "Huh. I wasn't expecting that. Especially since your records said this planet was livable, FRIDAY."

"They do," she agreed. "I'm unable to explain the discrepancy, boss."

"I thought this was some kind of trading post," Peter said, hopping up on the viewport itself to examine the planet below. "How can this be a trading anything if no one can breathe on it?"

"It's not that no one can breathe on it," Tony corrected absently. "It's that humans can't. We have to assume not all alien life in the galaxy will require oxygen. This might be a species that's evolved to require a completely different atmosphere."

"Odds are good we will actually encounter that at some point," Stephen agreed quietly. "But not so much on this planet. FRIDAY, move us twenty degree east and start panning north. There should be a large dome structure near the magnetic pole. Scan for sophisticated communications traffic; if you start to intercept some you'll know you're close."
Tony eyed him, interested. "A large dome? Housing what, exactly?"

"When you come to a place wanting to shop," Stephen murmured, "what do you normally look for first?"

"I don't shop; I have people for that," Tony said, at the same time Peter cried: "A mall!"

"A mall?" Tony repeated incredulously. "Really?"

"What?" Peter shrugged defensively. "I was in high school. It's a thing."

Tony dropped his head into his hands with a mournful sigh. "FRIDAY, why me? Why? Explain please."

She sounded completely unsympathetic. "You did ask the question, boss."

"Only because I expected a more reasonable answer. Stephen?"

"Trading post is really a very accurate description for this place," the sorcerer said, echoing FRIDAY's lack of sympathy. "Most species that come through this area, for good or ill, aren't built to survive with a carbon dioxide-based air supply. The dome provides a viable biosphere on an otherwise inhospitable world. There are actually two domes on the planet, but this one gets far more traffic."

"But why would someone build an outpost on an uninhabitable world?" Peter asked, puzzled. "Wouldn't that defeat the purpose?"

Stephen shook his head. "You're assuming the purpose is to support trade as a means of structured, supported commerce. In my experience, most people with wares to trade who come to remote planets like this do so for a reason. And that reason usually implies a need to avoid attention."

Tony frowned at him. "I thought you wanted to skip walking into a den of thieves? That was the whole point of avoiding Knowhere."

"Not the whole point," Stephen said. "And this was one of the least dangerous options available, really. No one here wants attention, so no one will be paying us any attention either. There, FRIDAY. That blip on the mountain range. You see it?"

"I see it," FRIDAY said, sounding surprised. "It's impressively shielded. Moving to intercept."

"Slowly, FRI," Tony reminded. "Let's not alert our not-quite den of thieves to our arrival early. Engage retro-reflective paneling if you haven't already done it."

"Of course I have, boss." She sounded distinctly insulted. "I'm not an amateur."

"Any noteworthy errors in deployment?"

"A six percent increased scattering effect along the low-visual spectrum. I'm diverting power to compensate. Boss, the dome is protected by a triple redundant layer of armored shielding. It's impossible to breach without being detected."

"And any attempt would probably puncture the biosphere anyway, rendering the whole structure redundant," Tony muttered.

"Very likely," she agreed. "I recommend utilizing an existing entry point. Or if you wish to maintain stealth, transporting directly inside."
"Lucky us; we were planning on doing that anyway," Tony said. "Stephen? Looks like it's time to bust out your magic portals to the land of Narnia."

"Were there such a place," Stephen said, "I would happily transport you there."

Tony ignored him. "And since you seem to know so much about this little vacation spot, I assume you can direct me on how to program the photostatic veils, too. There's no way FRIDAY can gather any kind of intel on the dome's interior from here. So, spill. What do these people look like?"

Stephen waved him off, looking supremely unconcerned. "Oh, we'll encounter many different races at this outpost. Program the veil for any generic facade and we can comfortably blend in."

"I'll go out on a limb," Tony said dryly, "and guess any human would have a hard time blending anywhere in the galaxy except Earth."

Stephen smiled, and there was something infuriatingly knowing in his eyes. "You'd be surprised."

"No doubt," Tony said, and went to reprogram their veils.

Twenty minutes later, as armed with knowledge, equipment and disguises as they could be, Tony could feel his heart pounding and blood rushing in quickstep past his ears. It felt like walking off a cliff into a greater unknown than they'd ever managed before; it felt like racing cars around a track; it felt like flying in a suit going Mach two. Thrilling and unpredictable, but full of potential. Freeing. Dangerous.

"Please tell me we don't die on this planet," Tony muttered for Stephen's ears only when they huddled in close, ready.

"We don't," the sorcerer said, which was exactly what Tony expected him to say, and yet succeeded in providing absolutely no comfort.

Tony sighed. "Well, once more unto the breach, dear friends?"

"Once more," Stephen agreed. "From this day to the ending of the world."

Tony flicked him in the arm hard for that one. "A whole play to choose from, and you had to pick that quote?"

"It seemed appropriate," the sorcerer told him, then shoved him through a portal before Tony could get another word in edgewise.

Chapter End Notes

Sincere apologies for the delay; as you can see, this chapter turned out to be much longer than anticipated (again!!). I can't seem to help myself. >_<
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

Save the ones we can. Try not to have nightmares about the ones we can't.

Chapter Notes

Warning: this chapter has potentially triggery content. Skip down to the end note for a more detailed, spoilery warning.

It became quickly clear they were more than a little out of their depth, but that was fine; Tony was used to being out of his depth. What he wasn't used to was lacking some of the very basic essentials of life.

"What the hell are units?" Tony muttered to Stephen. "Currency, obviously. But are we talking legal tender, a credit system, or an exchange of commodities?"

"The first and second, with a little bit of the third," Stephen said.

"You're telling me the galaxy actually runs off a credit system? What, is there some kind of universal bank operating in secret somewhere to set foreign exchange rates? Because without one, I'm at a loss to explain how a galactic credit system doesn't end in deregulated tragedy."

"Economics was never my strong suit."

Tony snorted. "Which explains why you only have twenty-six cents to your name. You know, even if an interstellar credit system works, that still doesn't explain how inflation hasn't crashed the entire universe by now." Tony mimed his whole head exploding with a low popping sound. "Mind blown."

"It does work," Stephen said. "Not perfectly, but enough to entice even criminal elements to use it. Don't ask me how or why. To my knowledge, we never discovered anything more than that about it."

Tony was silent for a time, marvelling at how strange and absurd the universe managed to be and still somehow function.

"Do they have a pawn broker?" Tony asked Stephen, finally.

It turned out they had several.

"See," Tony said, a lengthy haggle and a small fortune later. "I knew inflation would rear its ugly head somewhere. Who pays that much for unrefined copper and iron?"

"People who need it and can't mine it for themselves," Stephen said, contentedly packing away a
small electronic reader and a handful of supplies. Peter was a few meters ahead of them and bouncing enthusiastically from one set of shops to the next, having grown bored of the negotiation some time ago

Tony squinted at Stephen, keeping a wary eye on their excitable arachnid. "I'm not sure I should believe you. For all I know, you're a terrible negotiator and we just got fleeced. I bet units are really just Monopoly money." He adopted a thoughtful frown. "Should've gone for the railroads. There's always money in railroads."

Stephen sighed and muttered something very unflattering under his breath. "I'll have you know I'm an excellent negotiator."

"I have no proof of that."

"Something you should be thankful for," Stephen said, which made no sense to Tony but clearly meant something to the sorcerer. "We're just lucky that trader was in desperate need of raw materials. He could easily have asked for resources beyond our purview."

"I doubt luck had much to do with it," Tony said. "It was awfully convenient you had that ore on hand. And in quantities he was willing to trade for, too. Not to mention the impressive magical sleight of hand you used to pull it out of thin air. Where exactly were you hiding that? Do I even want to know?"

Stephen shrugged with studied nonchalance. "Pocket dimension."

"I want one," Tony said immediately.

"No."

Tony made a piteous face. "Why not? I deserve nice things. I made you a cloaking device."

"You made yourself a cloaking device."

"But I promise to let you use it."

"You have no choice but to let me use it."

"Not if I leave you here," Tony muttered.

"What was that?" Stephen asked imperiously. "Thank you for creating a pocket dimension on our behalf, Stephen? Oh, think nothing of it, Tony. It only took me seventeen days to perfect the technique and three more to stabilize and conceal the aperture, but it was no trouble. Really."

"Thank you for creating a pocket dimension, Stephen," Tony repeated faithfully. "You are the best and most breathtakingly ridiculous sorcerer I know." He paused expectantly. "Now can I have one?"

"No," the sorcerer replied. "But I'm happy to show you how to make your own."

Tony threw up his hands. "Oh, come on. That's just cruel. You know I suck at magic."

"Exactly," Stephen said.

Tony gave it a solid fifteen minutes before he dared lean over again, whispering: "What if I buy it from you?"
"With what?" Stephen asked. "The units I just bartered for? How much do you imagine a pocket dimension is worth, exactly?"

"That depends on how valuable you consider my undying devotion."

"I don't need to sell you a pocket dimension for that," Stephen said.

Tony glared at him. "Keep talking like that and you will."

They continued to wander through the dome, really an enormous marketplace not so dissimilar from the last planet they'd visited, with its arid bazaar and eager merchants. Of course, the wares had changed somewhat. Instead of food, apparel, and lightly used crockery, now there were interstellar ship parts, and misshapen containers full of space guns, and innovative electronic devices that made Tony's fingers itch with the need to deconstruct them down to their constituent parts.

But that would be rude, of course. So instead, Tony let FRIDAY do the deconstructing virtually. He spent hours picking up and manipulating interesting items for the A.I to surreptitiously examine under the watchful eyes of the shop owners. Before the day was even half done, they'd managed to fill half a library cache with diagnostic data, prototype models, and design schematics. Probably the merchants hadn't intended for that to be possible, but, well. An A.I was a difficult creature to deny.

The merchants; that was another thing different from their last, dusty stop. Unlike the worlds they'd visited so far, this one wasn't home to any one species; it was home to many. Inside the dome, there were beings shaded in all the dizzying colors of the rainbow, and a few made up of shades that didn't even register on the rainbow. The dome was a greenhouse garden of humanoids in perpetual full bloom; a living ocean of color.

It was equal parts beautiful and slightly terrifying.

Peter didn't share Tony's eminently reasonable fear, but he was a fan of the beauty. They were a few hours into their exploration when the kid leaned subtly into Tony's shoulder to ask: "Do you think the markings are natural?"

Tony frowned at him in confusion. "What?"

Peter tipped his head in the direction of a merchant; a male with bright blue skin. "Over there."

The man wore a tunic and heavy pants, but even from a distance Tony could see at the joints and across the curve of his facial bones he was covered in glossy white hash marks, glimmering in the dome's lighting like matchsticks of silver and pearl.

He wasn't the first person they'd seen with such markings, though the first with that specific pattern type. Most of the aliens around them had extraordinary distinguishing features of one type or another, on top of the remarkable color palette of their skin. And a large number of those features came in the form of intricate facial designs.

"Or there," Stephen said, nodding at someone else passing by. Orange, this time, with a yellow starburst over one side of their face; like a splash of paint that'd never gone away.

"Yeah," Peter agreed, turning an admiring look after them. "Are they mostly decorative, you think? Tattoos? Or are people born with them, like birthmarks?"

Tony had absolutely no idea. Stephen shrugged, nudging them back into a brisk walk before anyone could notice them loitering and approach with a sales pitch. Everyone seemed to have a sales pitch on this world.
"I'm sure you'll find both," Stephen said as they moved. "The galaxy is really very large and sprawling, and I doubt humans were the first to consider displaying art on skin. But to my understanding, most of the marks are naturally occurring."

Peter perked up at that, excited. "They are?"

Stephen nodded. "For a variety of evolutionary reasons, so you're unlikely to find two species with similar patterns. Or even two of the same species with similar patterns. It's no different, perhaps, than humans having wide variations in hair and eye color."

"Funny," Tony said, stepping around someone whose face shimmered with the gossamer iridescence of butterfly wings. "From where I'm standing, it looks very different."

Stephen ignored that. "From a purely genetic standpoint, I'm sure recessive alleles and phenotype have something to do with it. But I can't say for certain. I never got more than a cursory glance at any testing."

"Fortunately for you," Tony said, "I'm already working on a database."

Stephen smiled at him with almost embarrassing fondness. "Of course you are."

Tony squinted disapprovingly. "Well, I've got to earn brownie points toward a personal pocket dimension somehow."

"What about the colors?" Peter asked, spinning too fast to watch a new group walking past them in eye-watering patterns of red and orange. "Is that evolutionary too?"

When the aliens noticed Peter's attention, they stopped to posture threateningly before scurrying on their way. That was one thing Tony had noticed quickly in the dome; everyone seemed to scurry, and nobody liked attention. It was exactly what Stephen had said to expect, but the unspoken evasiveness of it still made something in Tony's gut clench with wary distrust.

"Eyes front, kid," he said, not for the first time.

Peter spun back, obedient but oblivious.


"Gesundheit," Tony replied.

Stephen rolled his eyes, fondness taking on an exasperated edge. "The colors. On Earth, bright colors displayed on skin can be a form of aposematism. It's a warning to predators that there's a defense mechanism in place that would make an animal unpalatable to eat."

"Wow," Tony said mildly. "Thank God you warned me. I was about to chase that group down for a quick snack."

"Are you saying they're poison?" Peter asked, wide-eyed; he took a hasty step back, away from any suspiciously-colored aliens passing by.

"Certainly not," Stephen said.

Peter looked relieved. "Oh, good."

"I'm saying they could be."
Relief vanished like a leaf in the wind. "Oh."

Peter didn't quite catch the smile Stephen buried in a cough, but Tony did and knocked his shoulder against the sorcerer's in reproach.

"Be nice," he admonished under his breath.

"I'm always nice," Stephen protested, eyes laughing. More loudly, he continued with: "Then again, some animals use bright colors to attract potential mates. Perhaps you should try that last group again, Peter."

"Very funny," the kid said, and flounced off.

They stopped numerous times to consider an item on display, but only twice with serious intentions. Once it was an unusual alloy Tony hadn't encountered before and had no way to replicate. Stephen managed to wrangle that for an easy nine-hundred units, and the merchant ran off afterward with the air of a man who knew he'd scored an excellent deal and had no intention of hanging around for his customer to realize it and change their mind.

The second time it was, of all things, books.

"Really?" Tony asked, watching Stephen pick through the display with a glee more usually reserved for children waking up to Christmas morning.

"I enjoy books," Stephen defended, not bothered by Tony's disgusted stare. "And I miss my library. Though, technically it's not my library. But I'm sure at this point I've read more books in it than anyone alive today."

"That might say less about you, and more about people being dead," Tony said.

"Fair enough."

"Hey, this one looks like it's some kind of humanoid encyclopedia," Peter said, holding up a tome that was two times as wide as his arms were long. "Can we get it?"

Stephen nodded, waving a distracted hand, and the kid laid the monstrous thing down next to the sorcerer's rapidly growing stack.

Tony picked one up from near the bottom, leafing through it. "Honestly, I'm amazed they even sell paper materials in this place. In any place, really. What kind of advanced technological mecca is this?"

Stephen hardly seemed to hear him, busy delicately running his fingers over embossed lettering and along fragile pages. But he did take a moment to pluck the book back out of Tony's hands, returning it to the pile. "The kind that has scrolls and manuscripts available for the discerning collector."

"You do have a good eye," the shop owner agreed, having come into earshot at last. He'd made no move to approach them earlier, wisely recognizing that Stephen needed no help finding anything (and everything) he wanted. "These are some of my oldest and rarest items."

"Yes, of course," Stephen said, looking up negligently. "I assumed their advanced age based on their deplorable condition."

The merchant puffed up with indignation. Literally puffed up; he had feathered spines along the crest of his head and around his ears that fluffed out to make his face seem larger, more threatening.
But, although it was always difficult to read different micro expressions on aliens, Tony didn't think he saw any anger or aggression.

"They are in excellent condition," the merchant insisted. "One cannot transport such fine books over sixteen-three-cycles -" the translation spell stuttered for a moment, trying to provide an equivalent explanation for something outside their own context of time "- without expecting some deterioration."

"Some, yes," Stephen said, untroubled, still idly paging through a few more titles. "But most of these are in dire need of rebinding, in some cases re-inking, and a few of them have water marks. I'm sure it's enough to halve their value, whatever that is."

"Half!" the alien protested. "Half value for water damage and a bit of disrepair? I could never consider such a deal and still call myself a business man. No, not half of course, but perhaps I could part with them for eight percent less than their asking price."

"Eight percent," Stephen scoffed, while Tony and Peter exchanged a look; this was going to take a while. "With the way this spine is cracked? And that one there seems to be missing the entire front page. How can I possibly -"

It took Stephen a solid twenty minutes; long enough for Tony to zone out and for Peter to drift back over to another book shelf to examine more gigantic encyclopedias. But eventually Stephen got the merchant down to a figure that seemed to satisfy them both. And left Tony reeling.

"Twelve thousand units for a stack of books?" Tony said, watching jealously as Stephen quickly stashed everything out of dimensional sight. "Either I seriously underestimated what this currency is worth, or you did. Were they all first editions? Did you deliberately only pick the expensive ones? It's not like buying a car or a watch, you know. You don't get to show it off at Cinderella's ball later on."

"Sometimes it's necessary to pay for what's needed," Stephen said, in an oddly good mood considering he'd just forked over a significant chunk of their money for something made out of pulp and faded ink.

"What could any of those books possibly be about that we might need that desperately?"

"No knowledge or advantage can be discarded prematurely," Stephen said, which of course missed answering the question entirely. Then he went on unfairly to point out: "I certainly have no objection to you purchasing anything here you think might be useful."

"That's different," Tony muttered. "I think technology is useful."

"Which I won't hold against you," Stephen assured him.

"Fine. Just tell me this, then." He tossed a thumb over his shoulder, where he knew the book merchant was still happily reorganizing his wares into new displays now he had less stock and significantly more money to his name. "What the hell is a guy like that doing in a place like this?"

Stephen blinked a question at him.

"He looks like someone's doddering old grandfather," Tony clarified. "Acts like one, too. But he's selling books, of all things, on some remote planet at the edge of space, shoulder to shoulder with crooks and petty criminals. What could he possibly have done to land him here?"

"He killed someone," Stephen said.
Tony stared at him for half a minute, measuring that careful non-expression. "You're joking."

"Yes," Stephen conceded. "From what little I've managed to glean over the timelines, he ran afoul of his planet's government in some way and went on the run years ago. He's one of the few perfectly harmless merchants on this planet. And he is actually someone's doddering grandfather, someone rather less harmless than himself, so people are apt to leave him alone."

Tony craned to look behind them, taking in the two vacant stalls to either side of the merchant and the peaceful, almost jovial look of the librarian sequestered in the den of thieves.

"Interesting," he said, when they were almost out of sight. "That's -"

"Careful," Stephen said sharply, snagging his elbow, and suddenly Tony found himself flat against the wall, staring at a colossal blue stick occupying the space where he'd just been standing.

"What," Tony started, looking to see Peter'd also plastered himself against the wall, across the way.

"Try to watch your step, won't you?" Stephen said, gesturing up. And up. And up.

It was thirteen feet before Tony finally saw the thing's head, spongy like a mushroom at the top and protected on the underside by a thick carapace. The rest of it was made up of six long, spindly blue legs, segmented and sharp; one of which Tony had mistaken for a stick. A stick that then lifted from the ground, taking a long five-foot step forward. The design of the creature was willowy; it actually looked delicate enough to snap under the burden of its own weight. But Tony's scans, scrolling rapidly over his glasses, said otherwise.

"Arthropod," Tony said, watching it go.

"Gesundheit," Peter said faintly, eyes wide.

Tony frowned in his direction and wagged a reproachful finger. "It's a type of invertebrate. Be careful not to run into it or let it run into you in future; it has an exoskeleton that's denser than our bones by a factor of eight. One solid smack of those legs would probably be enough to crush something vital in most people. Even arachnid people."

Peter blinked after the being moving rapidly away. "Huh."

"You know, I wondered at first why this dome had the massive dimensions it did. But if that guy's any example, now I know."

"Girl," Stephen said.

Tony blinked. "What?"

"That was a female."

Tony stared at the creature already half a block away from there. But a second glance didn't help; he was at a loss to see any gender characteristics whatsoever. "How can you tell?"

"You insulted one, once," Stephen said. "The difference becomes much more distinct when they're angry."

Tony didn't want to even consider what that meant. "I take it that's something I should avoid doing, then?"

"If you plan to keep your dignity and all your bones intact, yes."
The arthropod-alien was an exception, though. For the most part, although the size, color and shape changed, the vast majority of the aliens they encountered were bipedal, and shared common bilateral symmetry. Which was a relief; there was only so much a photostatic veil could hide, and Tony really had no desire to equip the three of them with false limbs just to blend in.

But though most of the aliens looked humanoid, that didn't make them human. Or humane.

"Excuse me," a cool, mellow voice said in Tony's ear.

He turned, some hindbrain defense mechanism already slotting into place at the smarmy tone of that greeting. A lot of the merchants had it to some degree; this was a marketplace, after all. But some were pushier than others, and this one sounded the pushiest by far.

He had the look of it, too; a classic commission salesperson with avarice stamped hungrily all over his face. Tony tried to tell himself the guy's beady eyes and narrow, almost rodent-like features didn't necessarily make this guy a rat; it just made him look like a rat.

It didn't help.

"Hi," Tony replied, while beside him he felt Peter bounce to eager attention, always interested in new species and new conversations. The merchant grinned at the kid, full of exaggerated enthusiasm and welcome.

Stephen slid his fingers around Tony's wrist with bone-jarring force and squeezed once, hard, in unmistakable warning.

"I have not seen you here before," the man said, sidling a step closer. Tony fought the urge to take a precisely measured step back. It wasn't that he felt endangered by the proximity, exactly. It was more like he felt contaminated by it; dirty and almost corrupt by simple association. "Are you recently arrived?"

"Not that recently," Tony said, having no intention of revealing the timeline of their visit. "But it's a big place. I haven't seen you here before, either."

"I arrived one four-cycle ago."

"That's nice. Good for you."

The man smiled, showing teeth, and Tony had no idea if it was meant to be threatening or not. For all he knew, this species flashed their teeth to signify anything from simple indifference to passionate affection.

Either way, the greasy tone hadn't changed when the alien finally spoke again. "I have never seen a species so bare of ornamentation before. It is a unique look. Unique things intrigue me."

It had the tone of a compliment, but fell very flat. Tony grimaced, regretting now he hadn't programmed the veils for something more exotic than generic caucasian human. "That's flattering. Anyone ever tell you you've got a real way with words?"

The oily, overly familiar camaraderie slipped for a moment, a sneer of contempt accidentally peeking out before he could cover it up with a smile. "A business man's livelihood is in his words."

"So's a politicians," Tony said flatly.

The smile widened. "Yes. Tell me, which planet are you from?"
"Why?"

"As I said, you have a unique look to you. I am someone who appreciates unique looks."

Tony suppressed the urge to gag. "It's a place you wouldn't recognize. Third rock from the sun. In a galaxy far, far away."

The alien looked disappointed. "Ah. You are likely correct, then. I have never had an opportunity to leave this galaxy."

Tony bared his teeth. "Then you've been cruelly deprived."

"Yes," he agreed, and something in the sibilance of that word and the way he looked them slowly up and down made the hair on the back of Tony's neck stand completely on end. "I have."

This time when the guy made to come nearer, Tony forestalled him by sidestepping; neither giving ground, nor engaging. He turned to keep the guy in his line of sight. "Cry me a river. Then build a bridge and get over it."

The intense confusion that briefly caused was satisfying in a vague, petty way.

"What is it you want?" Stephen interjected to ask before the man could make another move. "We're busy and haven't time to doddle. State your business."

Something like annoyance flickered over the alien's face before smoothing away. "What do I want? In truth, I am more interested in what you want."

"We want to be on our way," Stephen said coldly. "We certainly don't want to examine your wares."

"Oh?" the man asked. "How can you know? You have not even looked at them yet."

Tony watched with alarm as Stephen's biosensor peaked, an invisible halo of power briefly blooming around them and almost shivering into the visible spectrum before Stephen stamped out whatever impulse had made him reach for his magic. "We're not interested in you or your poorly kept merchandise. The only goods worth considering are those in excellent working condition."

The alien smiled again, all teeth. "Ah, then you should absolutely see mine. I guarantee a level of excellence I am certain you will not have encountered before."

"A dubious claim at best," Stephen said contemptuously, and far from the playful tone he'd taken with the librarian, now he obviously meant it. "An outright lie at worst."

The alien ignored that, trying to sidle closer once more, subsiding when Tony made to skirt around behind him. Beside Stephen, Peter had tuned into the tense undercurrents of the conversation, if not the reason for it. He'd stepped back to take up a guard position, looking around watchfully for any signs of danger.

"They're perfectly functional," the man said, more slick than ever, retreating when it was clear they wouldn't be cornered. "And functionally perfect. Perhaps you'd care to sample one and see for yourself?"

"Sample what?" Tony said flatly.

And it was only then, when the alien gestured with a strange little half-bow-half-hop behind him, that
Tony saw them.

They were ill. Tony could see that right away. One would think recognizing sickness in a completely foreign species would be difficult; for one thing, it was impossible that aliens could have the same characteristic biochemical responses as humans. But some things must be to universal. The gray pall of queasiness, the look of exhaustion and infirmity; that was the same. The despair and misery and hopelessness that seemed to follow on the heels of all lengthy illnesses; the same.

Of course, being shackled and chained and offered up like cattle; that probably wasn't helping. Tony couldn't think of anyone who wouldn't look ill in those circumstances.

"Oh God," Peter said faintly.

The merchant - the slaver - turned back to face them, unwinding himself from that awkward bow-hop. He looked confused again, but this time Tony could take no pleasure in it.

"What is God?" the alien asked.

"Something you wouldn't understand," Stephen said. "It's no good trying to sell us those. They're obviously diseased."

Stephen was a decent actor. He sounded completely unbothered by the suffering being displayed to him; emotionless and entirely without soul, really. If Tony hadn't been able to see his biorhythms leaping like frogs across the entire spectrum, he might've mistaken the sorcerer's assumed indifference for reality. Peter, for instance, wrenched around to look at him with real horror on his face. Tony made sure to catch the kid's eye, shaking his head just slightly.

The alien scoffed, but Tony could see him glance uneasily at the pair behind him. A male and a female, from what Tony could see. Young. Or perhaps just very small. "Diseased? Nonsense. They're entirely healthy. Capable of any work you see fit to give. Excellent work, as I said." The smile he bestowed on them was probably no more oily than it had been before, but suddenly Tony was seeing it in a different context, and it made his skin absolutely crawl. "Of course, some work is more easily accomplished than others."

His meaning seemed to pass Peter by for the moment, thankfully, but Tony had to battle with the sudden urge to make this man an ugly, bloody smear on the ground. He only realized he was clenching his teeth when he heard them start to grind.

Stephen sneered, every inch of him bristling with arrogant disdain. "If you leave all your wares untreated like that, I can only imagine the disappointment of your previous customers. Not diseased? With that skin tone? Please."

Now the alien looked alarmed, glancing around as nearby merchants and buyers caught wind of the conversation and suddenly there seemed to be a wide berth between the slaver and the rest of the dome's populace. Tony had no idea what their skin was supposed to look like, but he guessed from the reactions of the onlookers that it wasn't champagne and pale lavender.

"Be quiet!" the alien hissed, lowering his voice until it almost disappeared into a garbled growl. "What do you know about it? Their skin always looks like that."

"It does when they're dying," Stephen said dismissively, but lowly enough it didn't carry. Not to do the merchant any favors, Tony guessed, but to spare the ailing slaves from hearing it.

"Dying!" the slaver scoffed, but there was an odd twist to his mouth; he had doubts too. "This is a very robust species. They do not die easily."
"You're a fraud and a cheat," Stephen said flatly, and they all had the pleasure of watching that rodent face tighten with anger. "And if you believe half of what you're saying then you're also a fool. You won't deceive me. I'm a physician."

"A physician!" the alien exclaimed, new greed suddenly lighting up his face. "Here? How -"

But Stephen cut him off, and whatever he said then didn't translate at all; it was a writhing, hissing expletive that rumbled deep in the sorcerer's chest and made the slaver go gray with shock and half the people around them gasp with scandalized laughter.

Eventually the spell kicked in again and Stephen's words filtered through: " - entirely avoidable and only a -"

Another invective that sounded like a pit of snakes. Tony could see Peter looking first amazed and then wildly impressed.

" - would fail to provide the basic necessities needed to alleviate it. You're the worst kind of business investment and I won't waste another minute speaking to you." And then, as though to put the final nail in the coffin, the sorcerer turned to the interested crowd that'd gathered and said: "And I hope everyone here has the good sense to see through your lies just as I have."

"But!" the alien tried to cry, looking dazed and alarmed as the reality of his sudden misfortune seemed to occur to him. "Wait!"

But Stephen didn't wait; he barely even paused to make sure his last message had been absorbed by the titillated crowd before he swept away. Tony and Peter scrambled to catch up.

"What just happened?" Peter whispered, looking about as dazed as the slaver.

"That's an excellent question," Tony said, hoping he managed to fake composure more readily than Peter did. "Wouldn't we both like to know?"

But they had to wait a while to ask; Stephen seemed determined to burn off whatever anger or adrenaline or despair had given voice and volume to that diatribe, and it was some time before their group managed to slow. Thankfully, word seemed to have gotten out, somehow; the aliens parted before them like Moses and the red sea, scrambling quickly aside so as not to be trampled. Another arthropod even paused politely to let them stalk past, its mushroomed carapace turning ponderously to watch them go.

When Stephen finally ground to a halt they were all breathing hard, and they'd made it to the far outskirts of the dome. Peter immediately tried to speak, but Tony cut him off, snagging them both by the wrist and towing them between two abandoned vendor stalls and into a secluded corner. There was no way to guarantee complete privacy in this place, not with so many unknown alien species present, but they were out of hearing range on at least a human level, and that was probably the best they could hope for.

"Alright, Stephen," Tony said. "Now we've done our cardio for the day, it's time to pay the piper. What the hell was that?"

Stephen barely seemed to register the question. He was glaring into the middle distance like it'd personally offended him. "It was exactly what it looked like."

Tony suppressed the urge to shake him until his teeth rattled. "I hope not, because it looked to me like you making a scene for no reason."
"The scene was secondary. The dialogue was the point."

"And what vicious dialogue it was," Tony said dryly. "Honestly, I didn't know you had it in you. If I'd realized beforehand how much latent aggression you had to work out, I'd have offered you an alternative long ago."

"It's only latent in certain cases," Stephen muttered.

Tony raised both eyebrows knowingly. "Cases where someone needs to be put in their place?"

Stephen twitched his head in a nod, a satisfied smile appearing. "Something like that."

"So are they really sick?" Peter interrupted to ask, frowning. "Like you said? Or was that just a way to shut him up?"

Stephen shrugged. "Both."

Peter sucked in a worried breath. "Oh. So, I mean, we're not just going to leave them there like that, are we? We're going to go back and help them?"

"Of course we won't leave them," Stephen said, and though he sounded confident, something in the narrowness of his eyes made Tony think he wasn't. "Fortunately, their illness isn't permanent. With enough time and care they can fully recover."

Tony stared at him narrowly. "Since when did you become such an expert in extraterrestrial medical needs?"

"A hundred-thousand lifetimes ago," Stephen said. "It's an imperfect expertise, to be sure, but certainly more than anyone else is likely to have in this place."

"So you recognized the slaves," Tony said, prodding. "Or more likely, the slaver. You've seen him before?"

"I have," Stephen said, the same contempt and rage peeking out from behind his calm facade.

"So you knew what was going to happen the minute he approached us. Before he approached us, even."

"I didn't," Stephen denied. Oddly enough, he even seemed to mean it. "It doesn't quite work like that. Timing is everything on this journey. Sometimes we arrive on this planet and he's not here. Other times he is, but has no one with him. In fact, in more than a million futures, this is the first time I've ever seen him with more than one slave on hand. That might complicate matters."

"And you do like to complicate matters," Tony commented mildly. "Don't you? Slavery, Stephen. Really? What kind of cesspool have you brought us down to?"

Stephen sighed, brows beetling together with annoyance. "It's not as common as you might think. This may be a den of thieves, but most of them aren't interested in stealing people. The vast majority live just one paying contract away from death or slavery themselves. But this one's always desperate. He knows they're sick, but medical services are rare, and not cheaply bought in this area. Which leaves him in a quandary; pay an exorbitant sum to have them seen, or sell them before word gets around that his wares are compromised."

Tony blinked at him slowly. "And seeing as you've now neatly sabotaged option B, that only leaves option A. How lucky for us that we came here equipped with our very own private medical
"I live to serve," Stephen said with painful irony.

"This is why you brought so much ore with you, isn't it? So you could have enough units on hand to make him an offer."

"The opportunity doesn't always present itself," Stephen reminded. "But I did expect this might happen. And it's always best to be prepared."

"Believe it or not, I agree with you. Sadly, I'm usually lacking the necessary information to follow through on that priceless piece of advice. Which is fine, because usually I can trust you to always have our back and to keep our best interests at heart." Tony made a show of exaggerated surprise, widening his eyes and putting his right hand over his heart. "Whose interests were you looking out for today, Stephen?"

For the first time, the sorcerer looked satisfyingly wary, eyes pinching with what might be guilt. "You know you don't need to ask me that."

"Don't I?" Tony asked, lowly.

Peter seemed to sense the tension. He looked twice between both their faces, nervous and on edge. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," Tony said easily. "Just doing a quick sitrep, because someone seems to have lost sight of our goals here. Stephen, the whole idea behind coming into this system cloaked and in secret was to avoid being noticed on any level. You may not know this, but accomplishing that goal becomes immeasurably harder when one of your party starts discrediting the locals and proclaiming himself an expert in a thing it's apparently very difficult to find an expert in."

Stephen frowned fiercely. "Oh. That."

"Yes, oh, that," Tony repeated. "If you wanted to save them, we could've just come back when most little aliens are tucked away sleeping in bed on this planet. We could've knocked the guy out and taken them by portal before anyone even knew what was happening. Now you've made a spectacle of things -"


"- and exposed us to retaliation, or more lasting consequences. How is any of that helpful?"

"He won't talk to me tomorrow if he doesn't know I'm a physician," Stephen said.

"Then maybe you should've told him more quietly," Tony ground out. "Or waited for a more convenient time to break and enter, thereby avoiding saying anything at all."

"This trading post never sleeps. There's never enough downtime to take them without someone noticing."

"So let them notice; just let them not notice us." Tony frowned, pinching at the bridge of his nose with three fingers. He could feel a headache coming on. "Look, why these two slaves? What makes them so important to free?"

"Maybe nothing," Stephen said evenly. "But now that I've seen them, I can't walk away. And neither can you."
Tony smiled at him without humor. "Don't put words in my mouth, Stephen. I can absolutely walk away if I have to. And if you can't, you need to check your priorities. For the first time, we've come down to a planet with enough technology on hand to put us back in Thanos' crosshairs. The last thing we want to do is make a scene that could be memorable. So what's the first thing you do? Exactly that."

"Hey," Peter interrupted before Stephen could retort. "Can we maybe stop arguing about what could've been done and start arguing about what we're going to do?"

Tony took a breath, forcing himself to acknowledge the wisdom in that. What was done was done, and at this point there was certainly no way to take it back. They could only go forward from here.

"I already know what we're going to do," Tony said evenly. "FRIDAY, roll out the red carpet and fire up the fabrication units. We're coming back in for a landing."


Peter looked appalled. "But we can't! We can't leave." He frowned, glancing at Stephen. "Can we?"

"Is whatever's wrong with them going to kill them overnight?" Tony asked.

Stephen searched his face, looking for something; what, Tony had no idea. "What happens if I say yes?"

"Say it and find out. Is that what you're saying?"

Stephen looked away after a long moment. "No."

Tony nodded. "So how long until it does kill them?"

"It's not going to kill them at all," Stephen admitted grudgingly. "It's not actually a disease. There's a nutritional deficiency in the food he gives them. If we can get them back to the ship, it won't take me long to correct and address it."

Tony snorted, unwillingly amused. "Then I commend you on your acting skills, doc, because you had me convinced they were at death's door. I think we can safely assume you suckered everyone watching, too. And after that little performance, chances are nil someone's going to buy them off his hands before we can wander back that way to snatch them up ourselves."

"That was the plan," Stephen said.

"So tomorrow comes around, you strike a deal and - what? What happens next?"

Stephen blinked. "Next?"

"Next," Tony agreed. "Humiliate and one-up the slimy slaver, check. Free our new friends from their revolting captivity, check. Run away with them into the horizon and -" He trailed off, letting his raised eyebrows speak on his behalf. "Uncheck. What are we planning to do with them once we have them? Where are we even going to stash them?"

Stephen paused, studying him with narrow, considering eyes. "The cargo bay, I thought."

"Convenient," Tony muttered, "considering you had to move the ore anyway."

He hesitated, thinking back on Afghanistan and the haze of his own captivity there. A car battery
with wires and a cave with electronic eyes watching, freedom a world away and fresh air a distant memory. One friend in a sea of enemies and only his ingenuity and pride to keep him floating above despair. His own determination to escape; Yinsen's escape, and how it had taken another form.

He’d spent a lot of time in a locked workshop after he made it out, savoring the forgotten privilege of being able to put a door between himself and the rest of the world with the inherent trust it would only ever open with his permission. He'd gloried in the almost euphoric pleasure of wrapping himself in real privacy and not just the illusion of privacy.

Tony would’ve hated being in the cargo bay, constantly under surveillance; still a bug under a microscope, albeit a more benevolent one. Electronic eyes still and always watching.

"Convenient, but not exactly welcoming," Tony said finally. "We can do better than that. Give them living quarters."

Stephen blinked, looking for the first time surprised. "Truly? You’re usually too concerned about security for that."

"I still am, and rightfully so. That’s why we’re going back to the ship. I need to construct a bulkhead between our rooms and theirs, and establish new security protocols for additional crew numbers."

Stephen smiled, something warm and helplessly pleased and almost hungry.

Tony blew out a breath, ignoring that look before it got them both into trouble. "Not that I plan to give them full run of the ship. But I’m sure I can work out a bioscan program for limited access to nonessential areas, at least. Shouldn't be that difficult." He hesitated, considering the size of this dome and the aliens swarming inside it; weighing odds and numbers, statistical probabilities scrolling like ant hills through his mind. He told himself to say nothing, that it wasn't their business, that it was folly to ask. But he couldn't help it. He had to know. "How many more are there?"

"Too many," Stephen replied, doing him the favor of not misunderstanding.

"How many?" Tony repeated.

Stephen shook his head. "We can't do it. You think I was making a scene earlier? Imagine how memorable we'll be if we buy an entire ship's worth of slaves from this place and take them away with us. And that's assuming we could somehow manage to afford it. You said it best in the beginning, Tony. We don’t have the resources to help them all."

Tony smiled grimly. "That's just cynical, Stephen. Where's your sense of adventure? You misplace it somewhere between now and five minutes ago?"

"Five minutes ago you weren't talking about us rushing in recklessly to raid the treasury." The sorcerer was watching him, something close to compassion in his ageless eyes. "I understand how tempting it is, Tony. Believe me, I know it better than most. But we can't save everyone. No one can."

Tony looked away, thinking of the days and weeks since he'd first said that. It had seemed like wisdom at the time; it still did. But faced with the reality of their own powerlessness, it was wisdom with a very bitter edge.

Tony sighed, repeating it as he remembered: "It's a fight with no end. Save the ones we can."

"Try not to have nightmares about the ones we can't," Peter finished.
"Exactly," Stephen said.

Chapter End Notes

Warning: Chapter contains content about human trafficking, oblique references to non-consent involving third parties (not the main characters), and other related, unsavory topics. If these things are triggers for you, please read at your own discretion, and with caution.
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

The hardest lessons are the ones we learn about ourselves.

Chapter Notes

Warning: this chapter lives up to the explicit rating. Skip to the end notes if you want a spoilery content disclaimer (nothing bad, I promise!).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tony didn't have to be a genius to see that negotiations weren't going well. Rodent-alien's angry gesticulating would've given it away, even if Stephen's increasingly terse replies hadn't.

"- must see reason," the man said, mellow voice becoming increasingly more irate. "It is a fair price."

Stephen was no less irritated. "You mistake me for a fool again. It's unclear I'll even be able to save them from your obvious neglect. Dead merchandise is worth nothing. Certainly not fair recompense."

Tony marveled at Stephen's restraint. Tony probably would've lost it long ago, and the results seemed unlikely to do them any favors. But then, that was why Stephen was doing the negotiating and not Tony.

Still. There was something to be said for hurrying the process along. FRIDAY was tracking the minutes until their solar escape route opened up; the countdown on Tony’s glasses said they were running out of time.

"But you are a physician," the slaver wheedled. "Even if they were truly ill, a medic of even moderate talent could surely find no challenge in treating them."

"Your flattering estimation of my skills is noted," Stephen said.

"Yeah," Tony called loudly, and had the pleasure of seeing Stephen twitch with surprise. "His skills are dubious at best, really. I mean, what proof do you have this guy's even a doctor? You wouldn't be the first to accuse him of being a charlatan."

"Most people have more respect than that," Stephen said, without turning.

Tony minced up behind him and lowered his voice. "I'm not most people."

Stephen turned his head just far enough to glare. "I hadn't noticed."

The alien looked equally unimpressed by Tony's presence. "I assume that you are not a doctor."
It wasn't a question; Tony chose to treat it like one anyway. "Depends how you define doctor."

"PhD's don't count," Stephen said. "Especially the honorary ones. Come talk to me when you pick up an MD."

Tony snorted. "He said, with remarkable superiority. I have multiples, you know. Is this like a buy two, get one free scenario?"

"Fortunately," Stephen said dryly, "that's not how medicine works."

"Damn." Tony was close enough he could feel the warmth of Stephen's back along his front. The sorcerer leaned into him, irritated but far from indifferent.

The slaver's look was sharp, watching their unspoken display of solidarity with calculation. He suddenly seemed much more interested in Tony's presence.

Tony smiled at him with bared teeth. "How's tricks, folks? Just thought I'd check in, see if we can mosey this along. Peace talks proceeding accordingly?"

Stephen’s voice was wry with annoyance. "Not exactly."

"We are still in discussion," the slaver said, turning a persuasive look Tony’s way. "We have been unable to come to a mutually beneficial agreement. I require sufficient payment to recover my costs."

Tony laughed, impressed at the sheer audacity. "You're selling damaged goods. You don't get to make demands."

The alien gave him a sly smile. "If they are damaged, then what reason could you have to purchase them?"

"I dislike waste," Stephen said mildly.

A smarmy, oily grin. "As do I."

The alien made to sidle closer and Tony swiveled around Stephen to put himself between them. He smiled into that rodent face, pushing him away with two warning fingers.

"Back up," he said, and had the pleasure of watching the swindling look dissolve into wariness. Behind the man, he could see the two unfortunate slaves watching proceedings, hunched protectively into each other.

"Tony," Stephen said.

"Stephen." Tony didn't look back, but now it was the sorcerer's turn to come up close, crowding in behind him. "Chill out, doc. I'm not going for his throat. Just establishing some boundaries."

"Go establish them with Peter," Stephen ordered, tugging him backward. Tony let himself be moved, still watching the alien.

"You wouldn't be telling me to go sit on the sidelines, would you, Stephen?" he asked, affecting an injured expression. "You know how I feel about sidelines."

"He is welcome to stay," the slaver said, recovering some poise. "In fact -"

"You do not speak for me," Stephen said coldly. "Tony, go."
Tony slid him a look of disbelief, more amused than insulted at the prospect of being dismissed like a dog. Stephen slid him an irritated look in turn that clearly said he knew Tony was up to something; it was only a matter of what.

"Back to the bench, if you please," Stephen said quietly.

"Oh, well, if you insist," Tony said agreeably, letting himself be steered away. "Sure you don't need me?"

"At a negotiating table?" Stephen asked. "Like a hole in the head, perhaps."

"Everyone's a critic," Tony said, and slunk off.

Peter watched him approach, something far too amused in his eyes. "Hello. Did Stephen banish you to the kid's table?"

"You're not half as cool as you think you are. You know that, right?"

"I know," Peter said serenely. "I'm cooler. How are things looking over there?"

"Not great. Trade talks are stalled, and on top of that I snuck a glance at our new friends while the rat was trying to cozy up to me. They're looking a little peaked."

Peter looked concerned. "Worse than yesterday?"

Tony wasn't about to tell him they looked like they'd both caught the blunt edge of the slaver's fist overnight. That was asking for a righteous demonstration of outrage designed to get them all killed. Or worse, noticed.

"Worse than yesterday," he said, and left it at that.

Stephen's voice was on the rise, Tony's interruption serving to remind them all that time was short. Unfortunately the slaver seemed in no frame of mind to oblige their need for haste; quite the opposite, in fact.

"Doesn't sound good," Peter said quietly.

"No, it doesn't." He saw Stephen look their way, and it was too distant to say for certain, but something in the line of the sorcerer's shoulders spoke of deep, abiding anger. "Hang tight, kid. One way or the other, I don't think we're going to be here much longer."

"One of the first times I'm not bothered about leaving a planet," Peter said, with the tone of someone who'd been sadly disillusioned. "Weird."

"Not weird," Tony insisted. "Only weird if common sense is weird."

"What do you think they're saying?" Peter asked. He was watching proceedings with the thwarted irritation of someone more used to being in the thick of the action, not watching it from afar. Tony could sympathize.

"No idea," Tony said. "I'd speculate, but why bother when I have spies to listen for me? FRIDAY, go."

It took her a second to answer. When she did, her frustration was almost impressively emotive. "I'm not sure, boss."
It was only fair to return her emote in style; he let her hear the disbelief he couldn't quite conceal. "Not sure of what? That they're saying something? I'm telling you they are. More loudly by the minute, even."

"I'm only able to understand part of the conversation," FRIDAY admitted with great reluctance.

"More translation error?"

"I don't believe it's an error," she said. "Stephen appears to be deliberately obscuring some of the words. They're discussing some kind of trade, but the object of the argument is ambiguous."

Tony listened to the negotiation gain momentum and volume. "I don't think discussing is the right word for it."

They watched for another few minutes, the debate raging on without apparent end. "Do me a favor, kid? Go find some higher ground to keep an eye out."

Peter blinked curiously. "Why? What are you going to do?"

"Help," Tony said.

Peter eyed him with intense, wordless skepticism.


"Not usually in situations where you have to open your mouth," Peter said.

Tony mimed receiving a shot to the heart. "Judged! I feel so judged right now."

"You're supposed to," Peter muttered. "You're not going to steal them and start running, are you? I feel like that would be a bad idea."

"Is it really stealing if you take from a thief?" Tony asked. "He stole their lives. We'd just be restoring them."

"I feel like other people who try to restore lost things don't spend half as much time running as we're about to."

"Depends on the lost thing," Tony said. "Did your Lit studies ever feature Peter Pan? Neverland and the lost boys?"

Peter stared at him, a smile slowly overtaking his face. "Are you comparing us to them?"

Tony eyed him. "I was going to, but then you went all Cheshire Cat. Why?"

"You're leading our little tribe, so in this hypothetical you're either Peter, the boy who never grows up, or you're Captain Hook, the pirate." The smile took on an evil edge. "Or maybe both."

"Thanks for that," Tony said. "You realize you're either one of the Darlings or one of the lost things."

"Does that make Stephen Wendy?"

They shared a delighted grin.

"Or Smee, respectively," Tony added.
Peter gasped in sudden laughter. "Oh man, and FRIDAY would be Tinkerbell. She totally would!"

FRIDAY sniffed, coming through with smug confidence. "I would never. But if I did, I assure you I would make a spectacular magical fairy."

Peter laughed. "Depending on who ask, you basically already are."

"Thank you, Peter," FRIDAY said, accepting that as her due.

Tony waved the gleeful kid away, hearing things start to deteriorate behind them. "Fly away, lost boy, and find a good spot to roost for a while. I bet you two jello packs we'll be out of here in less than thirty minutes."

"Jello packs are communal," Peter reminded, already moving off. "At least make it interesting. Two tea packets."

"How dare you barter tea as though it were a commodity," Tony said.

"In spite of what you choose to believe, tea is not actually worth its weight in gold -"

"Sacrilege."

"You really need to sort out your priorities," Peter said, before hopping nimbly away for a better vantage point.

The timing was good; Stephen’s epic argument only went on for another few minutes before he stormed away. There was a moment, at the end, when Tony thought Stephen might actually hit the guy. Which was interesting for a couple reasons, but mostly because Tony wasn't sure he'd ever seen the sorcerer angry enough to consider fisticuffs before.

"Rough day at the office, dear?" Tony asked, watching him stalk over.

"We need to leave," was the first thing to come out of Stephen's mouth.

"Why?" Tony frowned, glancing almost against his will back at the stall, the alien fuming and glaring, the two slaves sitting hunched at his feet. "What about our new crewmates? Did we cut a deal or not?"

"Not," Stephen said flatly.

"How come?" Tony asked. "He didn't like the color of our nonexistent money?"

The grimness didn't fade; if anything, it deepened. "He's not interested in money."

"Since when? I thought this was a guy between a rock and a penniless hard place. What changed?"

"His product. He has more to bargain with this time. Which unfortunately means he's less willing to accept what was a bad deal for one and is now an abysmal deal for two."

Tony sighed. "How much does he want? You know we have enough ore on the ship to fund a small moon if we really tried."

"Not if there's no one to buy it. We might be able to resale small portions of raw material to another broker, but not in time. We only have two hours until the next flare cycle."

Tony drummed his fingers against the housing unit, thinking. "Could stay until the next."
"I don't recommend it."

Tony raised both eyebrows high. "Something spooked you. What could he have possibly demanded that would come as a surprise to you?"

It was brief, almost too quick to catch, but Tony was watching Stephen's face too closely to miss the way his eyes cut ever so slightly to the left before fixing on Tony again. "Something he can't have."

Tony turned, angling to catch the source of Stephen's interest. He was prepared for anything from hired muscle heading their way to some kind of exotic ware apparently more valuable than money. But there was nothing; there wasn't even a stall on their left. There was just Peter, loitering in an elevated cross-section where he had a wall at his back and an unobstructed view of the market at his front, standing poised and ready.

Just Peter.

Curiosity went out the window and cold realization took its place. Tony turned sharply, dropping his voice. "You're not serious."

"Unfortunately, I am," the sorcerer said, barely loud enough to be heard.

Tony stared at him, searching for any hint of deceit, but that was wishful thinking; of course Stephen wasn't lying. None of them would lie about something like that.

"And then you told him that was never, ever going to fucking happen," Tony said calmly, pleasantly.

"I did," Stephen said, not regretful exactly, but rueful. "That's why we need to leave. The discussion got a bit -" he grimaced "- as you saw. I wasn't politic in my answer and there'll be no reasoning with him now. We'll have to try things your way. This dome may not sleep, but individuals in it do."

Tony was skeptical. "In the next two hours? Are siesta's common around here?"

"If they're not, they're about to be," Stephen said, and the rage that swept briefly over his face was startling.

Stephen started to move, aiming for Peter so they could beat a retreat, but Tony slid his fingers around the other man's wrist and squeezed once, hard. From the corner of his eyes he could see the ashen pink and lavender skin of the aliens, diminished and small, and he had to stomp on the sick feeling that wanted to rise at the sight.

And that this man, this pathetic excuse for sentience, who entertained thoughts of dragging others, children, Peter, into it - that he'd even consider for a second it was in the realm of possibility -

"You know what?" Tony said evenly. "I have a better idea."

Stephen stilled, turning. There was a knowing look on his face. "Do you?"

"Yep."

Triumph warred with satisfaction. "I wondered if you might."

"My caveman routine give me away earlier?" Tony asked curiously.

"That it was a distraction was obvious," Stephen said. "What was less obvious is what it was a distraction for."
"Obvious," Tony repeated, stung. "I'll have you know I employed a lot of restraint there. I didn’t punch him in his smug rodent face, for example."

"Tempting though it is," Stephen muttered.

Tony smirked. "Exactly. How much did you tell him about their illness?"

"Enough that he can't ignore it, though I'm sure that won't stop him lying about it. Not enough to understand it."

"So you didn't do anything stupid like dispel the notion it's actually a disease?"

Stephen pursed his lips, contempt making a reappearance. "No. Hopefully with concerns about communicable illness in mind he'll steer clear of wherever he picked them up."

"Won't stop him finding somewhere else," Tony pointed out. "Shady dealers like him always find a way. The only thing his type understand is threats."

"Any threat we could offer will be transient," Stephen said, voice tight with frustration. "It won't last beyond us leaving, and we'll be gone before the day’s out."

"Then we should make use of the time we have available," Tony said brightly. He did an about-face and marched back where Stephen had come from. "FRIDAY, remember our discussion. Wait for my cue. And keep a close eye on the kid while we roust some vermin."

"Will do, boss," she said.

The two slaves didn't look up when Tony approached, either too unwell or too frightened to move. But the alien glared at Tony openly; he'd lost his swindling demeanor and now simply looked angry.

Which was fine. Tony was angry too, and happy to show it. How dare this person, how dare anyone even think of dragging Peter into such a dim and miserable excuse for a life. This man would get his hands on Peter over Tony's dead body.

The alien bristled as Tony crossed within six feet of him. Long-fingered hands inched to the left threateningly, where scans showed Tony a weapon, vaguely gun-shaped. Tony watched as FRIDAY scrolled through the information, the visual display wreathed in warning red.

"Hello," Tony said, slowing with a smile. "My friend tells me you didn't like our deal."

"Deal?" the man asked, sneering. "I do not call total loss of business expenses a deal. If you have come to renegotiate, I hope you will prove more reasonable than your friend."

Tony made his smile wider. "Oh, you misunderstand me. I'm not here to renegotiate. I'm here to discuss terms."

The alien made a guttural hissing sound that Tony belatedly labelled as confusion. Or possibly rage. "Terms for what?"

Tony ignored that, leaning in to cover another foot of the distance between them. The slaver must've seen something unpleasant in Tony's face because he took two scurrying steps back, wrapping wary fingers around his weapon but not drawing it.

"Well, the terms of your treatment," Tony said pleasantly. "What else?"

The alien stared at him, and it belatedly occurred to Tony that perhaps part of the reason he found
that pinched face so disturbing was that the man didn't blink. His solidly black eyes were disturbing all on their own, but he had no eyelids to speak of.

The creepy stare did, however, narrow with suspicion. "Treatment?"

Tony affected surprise, looking from the slaver to Stephen and then back again. "Well, sure. You two did talk about treatment, didn't you? It's one thing to turn down our very reasonable offer to pay for otherwise worthless goods, but I'm sure you wouldn't turn down an offer of medical care for yourself." Tony watched him with wide, wondering eyes. "No one's that stupid."

"Stupid," the alien repeated, insulted.

Tony nodded agreeably. "Or suicidal."

Alarmed gray swept over the alien in a tide. "Suicidal? I have no idea what you could mean."

"Disease is nothing to treat lightly," Tony scolded.

"There is no disease! I keep only healthy stock."

Tony made a show of sweeping his eyes over first one of the captives and then the other, taking in their pallor, their listlessness, their glassy eyes. One of the slaves, either by happy coincidence or design, chose that moment to be violently sick at the slaver's feet. The alien leapt backward as though shocked with a cattle prod.

"Okay," Tony drawled. "They're not sick. But you are, right?"

"Me?" the man said, and though he tried to infuse his voice with scorn, he only managed to emphasize his unease as he took another two steps away from his merchandise. "Of course not. I have none of the symptoms they do. I am perfectly well."

Tony almost hurt himself keeping the vapid smile on his face. "I thought you said they weren't sick?"

The man bristled with angry denial and made a few incoherent starts before hissing: "They're not!"

Tony waved his protests away, as one might any other useless objection. "Yes, yes. I'm sure you don't want more rumors getting around about the plague taking up residence in your shop. We understand." He turned to regard the sorcerer innocently. "Don't we, Stephen?"

"If you say so," Stephen replied.

"Plague!" the slaver sputtered, a pale imitation of a smile trying and failing to form. He looked off-balance; Tony tried not to take too much premature satisfaction in that. "You exaggerate. Perhaps they have been lethargic, but that is all. Nothing more sinister."

Tony made soothing noises, nodding along. "I believe you, obviously. But Stephen's seen this type of illness before and, well. There's a few unmistakable signs. He's already mentioned the skin tone, I'm sure."

"Which has not bothered me," the man was quick to say.

"Well," Tony said, looking him over doubtfully; beady eyes on a backdrop of gray skin. "I'm sure you'd know best. Have you had any of the early symptoms?"

The slaver paused, caught between his previous insistence they were in good condition and a healthy
dose of self-preservation. "Early symptoms?"

"Yes," Tony said, waiting expectantly.

Self-preservation won out. "Such as?"

Tony turned to Stephen. "Give us the run down, doc?"

Stephen looked directly at him, any confusion he might be experiencing kept carefully off his face. "For the whole list? That's rather lengthy."

"Maybe the highlights," Tony said. "I remember there was something about shortness of breath?"

A blatant lie; Tony hadn't heard anything at all about symptoms. Stephen hadn't offered the information and Tony hadn't asked.


"Right," Tony said, cutting him off, turning to face the alien again with a bright smile. "When you put it that way, it doesn't sound so bad, I suppose. Like a regular Friday night, even. Except for the death and dying part. That bit sucks."

"I really must protest," the slaver said. "They are not dying. You have mistaken their very mild case of -" the spell slipped into a gurgling stutter before stabilizing "- flu for something more dire."

"You mean they are sick?" Tony asked, one hand to his chest in shock. "What a surprise! How did we miss that? But we're not talking about them, you realize. We're talking about you."

Irritation made the alien's narrow, sneering face into an art form. "We most certainly are not. If you have no interest in my product, you may go. I have another buyer who will, I am sure, have the good sense to keep his speculations to a minimum."

"Do you now," Tony commented, letting all good humor drain away. "That's unfortunate."

"Then you are interested in them," the slaver said triumphantly, greed lighting up his eyes. He clearly figured he'd caught Tony out and now had the upper hand. "I thought as much. It was obvious in the -"

He stopped. There was a peculiar look on his face. Tony couldn't read it, but then, there were a lot of alien expressions he couldn't read.

"Yes?" he prodded, politely.

The man didn't respond, but the strange look got stranger.

"Don't stop there," Tony urged. "It was obvious, you were saying. Why is that?"

"I," the man started, slowly. "Obvious?"

"Sure," Tony said agreeably.

The alien wasn't listening. He raised his left hand, rotating the wrist as though this was something he'd never done before. Tony could see the arm was shaking.
"Alright there?" Tony asked, reaching out and patting him on the shoulder solicitously. "You're looking a bit pale. For a given value of pale, I mean. Ash gray instead of slate gray."

"My wrist hurts," he said, and that odd expression finally made sense. Disbelief. Fear.

Tony stared at him, widening his eyes in question. "Does it?"

The slaver's eyes darted to Tony's guileless face. "Yes."

"And is that," Tony said slowly, easily, "the only joint that hurts?"

The ashy pallor deepened. "No."

Tony hummed in commiseration, letting his hand slide away. "Well, don't worry. It's treatable."

The slaver said nothing, now examining his other wrist, bending and shaking out the limb with increasing concern.

Tony watched him patiently. "No need to panic. If you're just noticing now, it must be in the early stages. It's only worrisome if you've had that accompanying shortness of breath."

"My breathing is fine," the alien said immediately, but Tony could see him taking quicker, shallower inhalations. Probably a product of anxiety or panic, though it was impossible to know for sure.

"Or fever," Tony added, watching as body temperature finally peaked to a place that couldn't be ignored. No corresponding sheen of sweat on his face; either this species didn't shed excess heat as humans did, or it took longer for temperature regulation to kick in.

Either way, he obviously felt it, if the way he fumbled at his shirt collar was any indication. "I, but." He struggled to pull cloth away from skin, now looking truly alarmed. "How?"

Tony shrugged. "Well, it's hard to get sick without having someone nearby to spread the contagion." He paused, letting his eyes roam to the slaves still prone at their feet, waiting to see if the slaver might finally acknowledge their less than perfect health. He didn't. "But this is a large space port. Lots of people. I suppose anyone could've given it to you." Tony smiled, letting it broaden slowly. "Us, for instance."

"You?" the alien echoed blankly.

"Oh, sure," Tony said brightly. "Walking germ factories, that's us. Why do you think we wander around with a built-in physician? We'd never get anywhere on this trip without Stephen."

"I don't think that's true," the sorcerer said, and Tony let out a breath he hadn't known he was holding at the lack of condemnation in that voice. Stephen obviously knew what was happening; he had to. But he either approved, or at least he didn't disapprove. It was more than Tony had been hoping for. "You have a gift for getting your way, Tony."

"Funny," Tony said. "I was going to say the same thing about you."

The slaver was staring at them both, and the reality of his situation must've finally sunk in. He reached for the weapon at his hip.

"I wouldn't," Tony said pleasantly.

The hand hesitated, shaking, and then fell away. Not because he'd aborted the motion; because his arm was too compromised to follow through on it.
"You're really not looking so hot," Tony commented. "Fortunately for you, we come equipped with a real, live doctor. And his skills can be made available to you. For a modest fee."

"A fee," the alien gasped, trying for anger.

Tony stared at him, long enough for anger to transform into nameless dread. "Of course. What, do you think we give these things away for free? This isn't Goodwill. Everything has a price."

"Yes," the man said quickly. "Yes, your physician mentioned a price earlier."

"One which I believe you described as pathetic and insulting," Stephen commented.

A frantically shaken head. "I was mistaken, obviously. It is a more than fair deal. I would be pleased to accept."

"Oh, no," Tony said, leaning in with a bright smile. "Did you miss the part where I said I wasn't here to renegotiate? That ship has sailed. You had your chance to play nice. Now nice is off the menu. I'm here to discuss terms."

The alien was shaking, either with fear or rage or something else. But it didn't really matter. Tony could already see from the look on his face that self-preservation was going to win out over everything else.

"How much?" the man ground out.

Tony leaned in and wondered if the smile on his face looked as ugly as it felt. "That depends. How much is your life worth to you?"

It turned out to be worth rather a lot.

"So I'm thinking we should probably skedaddle out of here like the hounds of hell are after us," Tony said to Peter some time later, watching Stephen go through the motions of a faux-medical examination with all seriousness.

"Why?" Peter asked, watching too.

"Because they might be, when all's said and done. I give it ten minutes after we're finished here before he comes after us with guns blazing."

Peter frowned. "I still don't get it. What exactly did you guys do to piss him off? Stephen said yesterday he had this in the bag."

"That was before tall, dark and rodent decided he didn't like being called names."

"Dude, I told you. You've got to stop nicknaming everything."

"Hey, it wasn't me this time. Stephen gets all the credit on this one."

"Because you're a bad influence," Peter muttered.

"What was that? You'd love to help me round up our new friends and cart them back to the ship? That's nice, because we need to hurry, and I doubt they're capable of walking on their own."

"Makes sense," Peter said. "I think one of them's passed out."

One of them had, actually. "Right. Go chat up the other one, would you?"
"Me?" the kid protested, darting a look at the two slaves. "Why me? I'm, like, the last person who should talk to people with trauma."

"Maybe not the last person," Tony suggested. "Stephen's busy, so it's got to be you or me. And, well."

Peter cracked a reluctant smile. "Yeah, I suppose in comparison I'm a shoe-in. Fine, stay here. I'll go see if I can manage some magic."

"Love your work!" Tony called after him, and then under his breath: "And that better be metaphorical magic."

Five minutes later, when Stephen wandered over after a reasonable facsimile of doctoring, the first thing he said was: "Sent Peter to do the dirty work?"

Tony squinted at him. "Please. Would I do that?"

Stephen let his disbelief speak for him.

"Everyone's so quick to judge today," Tony commented. "I take it you've finished shaking your beads and rattles at our slimy friend?"

"Yes. Of course, my examination was helped by the fact that his symptoms miraculously vanished the second I put a hand on him."

Tony blinked at him. "How incredibly and suspiciously fortunate. They do say rats are resilient. That's our cue to head for the horizon then, before anger overrides good sense and sends him after us with any weapon he can get his newly functional hands on."


"I have my moments."

Hurrying through a shady marketplace dragging two frightened slaves with a possible retaliatory force at their heels was not an experience Tony would ever be keen repeat. Finding a clear exit point took them almost fifty minutes, which was forty-five minutes longer than they could afford.

The second they finally stumbled through a portal and back onto the hard deck of the ship, Tony made a solemn vow to never leave the confines of FRIDAY's walls again. For a week, at least. Maybe longer.

Tony left the other two to manage with their guests, hurrying to the bridge with a quickly diminishing countdown giving him speed.

"FRIDAY, update," Tony said, examining solar conditions as he went.

"Flare activity continues to escalate, boss. I anticipate twenty-three minutes before an ideal window of interference appears. We need to start our ascent immediately to avoid missing it."

"Skip the bells and whistles on the preflight, and weigh anchor. Any sign we've been detected yet?"

"Not specifically," she said, but Tony wasn't reassured; there was a dubious quality to that answer. "There's been some increased communications traffic in the last twenty-two hours. It's unclear if it's directly related to us, but I suspect we're at least nominally mentioned."
"So much for going unnoticed and undetected," Tony muttered. "And to think, I came into this system with such high hopes."

"We have at least used this opportunity to refine the cloaking technology," FRIDAY soothed.

"It's the little things in life, I suppose. Back us off to the south, FRIDAY, but avoid the extreme southern hemisphere. No need to put us in sensor range of the second dome."

"Already on it, boss."

It was over an hour later, their travel plans thankfully smooth and uneventful, when Tony heard the bridge doors slide open.

"Since we’re not dead yet, I’ll assume we’ve managed a clean escape," Stephen said to announce his presence. Tony didn't hear any footsteps; probably floating along with the help of his ever-eager pet cape. The relic could always be found in close proximity to the sorcerer directly after they returned to ship. Stephen called it reestablishing connection. Tony called it separation anxiety.

"Near enough," Tony replied. "But we’re still maneuvering through the system, so not entirely out of the woods yet. In fact, we almost managed to trigger a proximity sensor off the southern dome, in spite of your warning."

"Thankfully you didn’t," Stephen said. "That’s a disaster in every timeline it happens in."

"I'll assume that's where your comment on death and dying comes in. Lucky us, then." Tony dragged over a holographic overlay, turning it to face Stephen. "Question, though. Why’d they build domes in the north and south hemispheres at all? Wouldn't the equatorial zones have made more sense? For natural resources, if nothing else. There’s greater solar exposure, presumably more atmospheric interaction; rain, wind. Planet wasn’t tidally locked, so it even had a standard axial rotation.” He turned the readout so it was facing him again. "Could’ve been paradise if only we weren’t in constant danger of suffocating on the surface."

"The atmosphere explains why they avoided the more central biomes," Stephen said. "It's in the chemical composition. High component carbon dioxide and nitrogen."

He thought about that a moment. "Acid rain?"

"Dependent on the oxide combinations," Stephen demurred, "but yes. Of varying concentrations, I'm sure."

Tony made a face. "What a uniquely inhospitable world that was. I'm not sad to be leaving it behind."

"Nor I," Stephen agreed, coming up to stand next to him. Tony could see he'd been right; the sorcerer was standing, but not on solid ground. The cloak held him aloft.

Tony concentrated on the console, checking and rechecking redundant numbers that FRIDAY probably could’ve managed in her sleep. If she even slept. Which she didn’t.

"How're they doing?" he asked finally, drumming his fingers on the display.

Stephen didn't call him on the stall tactics. "As well as can be expected, I suppose. They're in need of a full medical examination, but declined it. I'm reluctant to impose one on them until they've had a chance to settle."
"Until they've had a chance to realize they didn't hop from the frying pan into the fire," Tony interpreted.

Stephen tilted his head in consideration. "That might take a while. I'll settle for having them rested and fed with the proper nutrients in the morning."

"Not now?"

Stephen face was entirely too neutral. "They aren't inclined to accept much of anything from us now. Tomorrow's soon enough."

"So long as they don't come looking for us in our sleep," Tony muttered. "They're in their rooms?"

Stephen nodded.

"Good. I gave them a door that locks from the inside. They have a clear path to the commissary and restricted access to most of the nonessential areas, but nowhere else. And that's all I'm giving them, regardless of any third-party objections." He shot the sorcerer a warning look. "No exceptions."

"It's a reasonable precaution," Stephen approved.

Tony narrowed his eyes, suspicious of that rather bland response. "Really? I was expecting you to raise hell about it, actually. It's not a very large area, all things considered."

"Larger than they had," Stephen said. "Show me the new bulkheads you designed."

Tony brought up a schematic. "FRIDAY, highlight the newly installed divisions." Eight areas on the map lit up with blue. "Now the new security check points." Fifteen markers, most of them nearly equidistant from one another, lit up red. "And essential sections." The bridge, engineering, both cargo bays and three operations areas all limned with yellow. "I rigged biometric scanners with two redundancies into each of the checkpoints and every door or access panel, including the ceiling ducts. And I adjusted command functionality across the board to lock out unauthorized access. There's only two permission levels so far. Them and us."

Stephen studied the map with curious eyes. "If we all have equal access, you must've elevated Peter in FRIDAY's authentication sequence."

"Yeah. Not that I needed to. FRIDAY makes her own authentication sequence these days. But it was long overdue."

Stephen reached out to trace a finger over one of the indicated ceiling panels, almost smiling. "Is it my imagination, or are there more new check points around the cargo bay than anywhere else?"

Tony cleared his throat, taking a step back. "Are there? I hadn't noticed. It's the largest section on the ship. It makes sense it would need the most improved protection."

"And I suppose the fact Peter spends most of his days in there has nothing to do with it? You do realize he's probably more physically capable of looking after himself than either of us."

"Speaking of," Tony interjected quickly, "am I wrong in assuming you already know what he's working on down there?"

Stephen blinked at him innocently. "Working on?"

Tony rolled his eyes. "Please. For someone who accuses me of lacking subtlety, the kid's really no
better. Just tell me whatever he's doing, it's not going to get us killed."

"If you're that interested," Stephen said, "why not just ask FRIDAY?"

"That's cheating."

Stephen stared at him. "As though it's a secret you have eyes and ears all over this ship."

Tony frowned, conceding that. "And I may have already asked her."

Stephen laughed helplessly. "Of course you did."

Tony rocked his head back to glare at the ceiling. "She refused to say. You know it's bad times when your own ship refuses to follow orders."

"You didn't order me, boss," FRIDAY said reasonably. "You requested. Peter pre-empted you by securing my silence ahead of time. I assure you, there is nothing especially dangerous or seditious taking place. I would of course warn you if there were."

"How can I know that?" Tony demanded, while beside him he could see Stephen shaking with silent mirth. "You're still just a baby sentience FRI. You were practically born yesterday. Who's to say your judgement isn't compromised? Or worse, that Peter's is. It's like the blind leading the blind here."

"Boss, if one cannot trust their spaceship and their arachnid to know best," she said very reasonably, "who can one trust?"

Tony turned to gesture wildly in Stephen's direction. "There. See what I have to put up with? It's mutiny, I tell you."

Stephen was still laughing. "If you want to know that badly, you could just ask Peter, of course."

"Or he could just tell me," Tony objected.

"I'm no expert, but I'm fairly certain that's not how teenagers work."

"Well, they should." Rising solar emissions caught Tony's eye and he waved the internal schematic away. "Hold that thought, Stephen. We're still riding flare activity. Give me a second."

There wasn't actually a lot Tony needed to do to facilitate their freedom, but he busied himself monitoring numbers and course trajectory anyway. Stephen let him pretend to be occupied, circling around the viewport to watch as they passed through the star system like ghosts.

"Incredible to think they can't see us," Stephen mused, reaching out to a passing ship as though he might trail his fingers along its distant hull.

"They probably could," Tony admitted reluctantly, "if someone happened to be looking out an airlock. The retro-reflective panels are only as good as the environment around them. Inside a planet's atmosphere there's enough ambient light to reasonably camouflage us. In space, light has to travel much greater distances. We're more visible than we aren't, right now."

Stephen didn't look disturbed. "That sounds like a significant design flaw."

Tony sniffed at the perceived insult. "Part of the reason this needed to be a solid test run. FRIDAY's racking up diagnostic data faster than the speed of light right now. Maybe literally. Fortunately, no self-respecting spaceship is going to fly the stars by celestial navigation, so the most
important thing out here is keeping the cloak solid against targeted radar or infrared incursion. So far so good, which may I just say is a minor miracle in itself."

"There is a mild disruption in our signal absorption along the port side," FRIDAY corrected. "I will need to make an adjustment to the composite material once we're clear, but solar interference has ensured our ongoing secrecy. We are indeed in the clear, boss."

Tony mimed a cheer, grinning. "And another point goes to science. Take that, Magic Maestro."

"So quick to boast," Stephen drawled. "I wonder if I could make a portal large enough for this entire ship to pass through undetected."

Tony glared at him, torn between instant denial and instant fascination. "Don't you dare."

"But it could be so much more efficient," Stephen reasoned.

"I will end you, Stephen."

The sorcerer sighed at him, as though despairing of Tony's ability to see reason.

"Maintain course and speed, FRI," Tony said, happily dusting his hands off now the chances of them being discovered were practically nil. "Take us into one of the neighboring systems and find a parking spot. I want to make sure we work out the systemic kinks before we venture off again. Not to mention our unexpected guests."

Stephen interrupted Tony's energetic babbling. "How did you do it?"

"Do what?" Tony asked immediately, innocently.

Stephen rolled his head to glare at him with obvious displeasure.

Tony glared back, dropping the pretense. "Oh, you mean that little show on the planet? What, you're telling me that's never happened before? I don't believe it."

"Not in a context where I've been able to ask you about it afterwards," Stephen said, which sounded about four kinds of ominous.

"I'll show you mine if you show me yours," Tony said.

"We had an intruder onboard," Stephen said, perfectly calm, although Tony could see his heart rate pick up speed. "Not a very friendly one. It wasn't intentional, but Peter got in the way. We couldn't risk a fire fight, and as it turned out we didn't need to. You handled things quite neatly without one."

Tony input a few redundant equations into one of the stealth simulations. He barely noticed when FRIDAY silently erased and corrected them.

Stephen only let him get away with that for a scant two minutes. "I assume the nanotech has something to do with it."

"What makes you say that?" Tony asked flatly.

"It wasn't a real illness, for all you were happy to present it as one. They weren't actually ill," Stephen stared at him narrowly. "So why assume that narrative?"

Tony shrugged. "Plausible deniability, mostly. Our friend the slaver claims his cargo isn't ill, when it's obvious to all and sundry they are, and then he unexpectedly comes down with something that
looks a lot similar. Anyone he tells will assume he's covering his ass and that any fancy tales he comes up with are pure fiction.” He grinned faintly. "Not that I think he'll be tempted to tell many people. Bad for business. Did you see the look on his face?"

"Tony."

"What?" He shrugged, not bothered by Stephen's blatant irritation. "I'm not apologizing for it. Couldn't have happened to a nicer guy."

The sorcerer was watching him closely. "Tell me there's not actually a biological agent involved."

"As in biological warfare?" Tony raised his eyebrows, impressed. "I'm flattered you think I'm capable, but if anyone on this ship has an expertise in infectious disease, it's not me. Besides, I don't need biological warfare to do what machine warfare can accomplish much faster. And with more targeted objectives."

"Then it was the nanotech," Stephen murmured.

"Of course it was."

"Were you planning this from the beginning?"

"Planning it?" Tony held out one hand, rocking it from side to side. "Not really. Prepared for it? Sure. You had a handle on the negotiating, and if he'd gone for it I'd have left it there. But then he had to go and be an asshole. More of one, I mean. He has no one to blame but himself, really. He was asking for it."

"Is whatever it is likely to cause him any lasting harm?" Stephen asked, but halfheartedly. Professional obligation rather than sincerity.

"Why?" Tony asked brightly. "Planning to go back and offer him some pro bono service? News for you, Stephen; we've left that planet and we're not going back. You'll have to look for new patients elsewhere."

Stephen looked at him, and for all Tony searched as hard as he dared, he couldn't manage to find any real disapproval on that familiar face. Tony could feel the tension in his spine start to relax by tiny, incremental degrees.

"From a biochemical standpoint, it works like a blockage," Tony explained finally. "The bots are constructed at two nanometers in size, with a limited variance of up to one nanometer either way. Introduce them to a cardiovascular system, gather enough of them in any one place, and they form a pseudo-clot. Change their ambient temperature en masse and the temperature of the host changes. Cluster them around bone and they obstruct skeletal movement; painfully, I might add.” He blew out a breath with a shallow shrug. "You can imagine the damage they're capable of if they penetrate an organ."

The sorcerer continued to watch him.

Tony kept going, damning himself further. "If you're curious, they can infiltrate a biological system and avoid detection with near perfect efficiency. All they need is a point of transfer."

Stephen put two fingers on Tony's chest, at about the same place Tony'd touched the slaver on the planet. The look on his face was knowing.

Tony smiled at him, more bitterly than he meant to. "Observant. Score one for the sorcerer."
Though you might want to be careful what and where you put your hand, Stephen. Or where you let me put mine."

Stephen ignored that advice, crowding closer, putting both hands to either side of Tony's face. Tony raised his own hands to clamp down on the other man's wrists in warning. The cloak, its edges fluttering in some unseen wind, wrapped closely around them both until it was blocking out light and sound. Until the only thing Tony could see was Stephen, and the only thing Stephen could see was Tony.

Tony forced himself to continue. "Like I said, you should be careful. May not want to get too close. All it takes is a touch."

Stephen kissed him. It had the feeling of something impulsive, something not quite intentional. Tony couldn't imagine what unusual whim might've spawned it, but he wasn't about to turn it away.

And when Stephen let him go, it wasn't to pull back. It was to pull closer; to brush the bristles of his beard along Tony's jaw, drag the curve of his mouth along the same path.

Tony took a breath and held it, trying to recapture his racing pulse from the heights it'd leapt to. "Interesting. That's - not what I was expecting."

"No?" Stephen asked, and Tony nearly jumped a foot in the air when a rough scrape of teeth touched the whirl of his ear.

"Stop that," Tony ordered, more breathless than he was ready to admit to. "No. This isn't the normal response I get when I do something morally despicable. I thought for sure you'd put that self-righteous nose of yours in the air and make me beg on bended knee for you to take me back."

"Why?" Stephen asked, not even doing Tony the courtesy of sounding perturbed by the insult.

"Well, because," Tony said blankly. "You're one of those upstanding, virtuous types, aren't you? You believe in things like honor and ethics, sunshine and daisies. The occasional mind-control notwithstanding."

"I swore an oath to do no harm," Stephen agreed. "And I take my oaths seriously. But she was right, you know. For years, I put my own life above others, chasing after the illusion of success, avoiding even the suggestion of failure. Until I realized how insignificant my life was. And how important losing could be."

Tony hesitated, one part of that standing out more clearly to him than all the rest. He thought he might know, but had to ask anyway: "She?"

Stephen went on as though he hadn't heard. "And I learned the need for temperance. When to judge; when not to. When I most needed to judge myself."

The silence felt heavy after that; weighted. Tony was almost loathe to break it.

"So," he drawled after a handful of heartbeats had come and gone, "no cautionary lectures on the need for total transparency and a moral conviction I obviously lack?"

"I think," Stephen said quietly, intently, "that you may've mistaken me for another Steve you once knew."

This time when Stephen kissed him, it was decidedly less impulsive than the last. It was a deliberate gesture of pure possession, with absolutely no hint of uncertainty.
Tony couldn't help but kiss him back.

And after that, it seemed like natural evolution for kissing to become something more. Tony didn't even blink when Stephen reached for the collar of his shirt, tucking inside to run shaking fingers as far as they could go before rough material got in his way. And Tony also didn't blink when Stephen then curled his hands into fists, pulling back.

"Off," the sorcerer demanded.

Tony considered that order, licking his lips in the brief moment of separation to catch the taste of salt and urgency on his tongue.

"Be sure, Stephen," Tony said, tightening his grip on the man when it seemed like he might move. "There are no take-backs here. You don't get to let me in and then kick me out afterward. That's not how this is going to work."

"He said, in the voice of experience," Stephen murmured, too precisely to be mere coincidence.

Tony was too far gone to be truly wounded by that, but it did manage to sting, just a little. "Something like that."

"I'm sure," Stephen said simply.

Tony smiled. "Then let's take this somewhere a little more comfortable. Your place or mine?"

Stephen answered by sketching a portal into existence beneath their feet. They both fell through before Tony could get a word in edgewise.

They tumbled out of thin air and for a second Tony thought they were going to ruin the whole thing by falling painfully to the deck. But fortunately, portals weren't the only trick Stephen had up his sleeve; the cloak caught and cushioned them before they could crash, dumping them in a jumbled pile of limbs on a mattress instead.

"Good catch, caped crusader," Tony gasped, winded. "Stephen, I swear that thing has an agenda."

"It does," Stephen assured him, also winded. "Mine."

Tony watched it float contentedly away to rest against the wall, waiting; pleased at a job well done. "I think maybe you've got that backward. It's not supporting your agenda. You are its agenda."

"Sounds like another omnipresent non-humanoid I know," Stephen said, hands already occupied greedily divesting Tony of his shirt.

Tony let him and, not to be outdone, paid him the same favor, rolling on top before Stephen could wedge more clothes away. Tony settled there, halfway smothering the man, arching just far enough away that the housing unit didn't dig into either of them.

After a perfunctory struggle, Stephen let him have the upper hand, settling clever fingers at Tony's hips and gazing upward with an indulgent smirk.

"Has anyone ever told you," Tony said, with stern gravitas, "that you have incredible eyes?"

"Once or twice," Stephen said, smoldering at him with them.

"Or that," he continued, undaunted, "you have gorgeous cheekbones?"
"A society matron once told me they were sharp enough to cut glass," Stephen replied. "Does that count?"

"Tempered glass," Tony corrected. "What did she say about the beard?"

"I didn’t have one then."

"Pity." Tony carded careful fingers through it, rubbing against the grain, watching Stephen’s eyes darken with interest as he did so. "A good beard is a work of art."

"Wong said something similar to me, once," Stephen admitted, smiling. "Though not with a straight face."

Tony dragged his thumb against that smile, with its full lower lip, the sharp edge of teeth and slick of tongue behind it. Stephen stopped talking. "Wong ever have anything to say about your mouth?"

The smile transformed into something more wicked. "Only that it was going to get me into trouble one day."

"He’s not wrong," Tony said, and slid their mouths together to enjoy that mouth up close.

They enjoyed that for a long time. Somewhere in the midst of it Stephen rolled them; they adjusted for the new angle, the sorcerer's taller form taking up more leg room, aligning their chests more closely. The touch of naked skin on skin made both of them shudder. Tony instinctively tried to roll back, retake the high ground, but Stephen resisted. The sorcerer threaded their fingers together, pushing and pulling until he had both of Tony’s wrists pressed down into the bedding.

Tony grinned up at him and let himself be manhandled. "I can see we're going to have some fun wrestling matches in future."

"Not if you hold still," Stephen muttered, leaning down to taste his neck.

Tony arched into the sensation, biting back a groan. "Where's the fun in that? Be honest, how many times have you wanted to hold me down and shake some sense into me?"

"Too many," Stephen said. "How like you to only let me do it when it’s convenient for you."

Tony shuddered as Stephen ground into him, positioning their hips, both of them hard and wanting. The pants between them didn't detract; if anything the chafe just sensitized Tony's skin until he thought he could feel every part of Stephen yearning toward him.

Tony started rocking, rolling up to meet each downward thrust. It was a slower build, naturally, and he lost track of time as they moved together, until the burn of working muscles started to crest toward something sweeter. He leaned up and put his mouth against Stephen's chest, following the natural path down the center, trailing over to the left to tease a peaked nipple, sucking lightly. Stephen arched, groaning, and retaliated by putting teeth to Tony’s shoulder and biting down hard. The small pain was like lightning crackling up Tony’s spine.

Tony slid a hand free and down between them, taking the time to drag ragged nails across Stephen’s stomach and underneath his pants to tease the sharp jut of his hip. When he finally curled that same hand around the smooth hardness of Stephen’s cock, they both gasped with relief. Stephen buried his face in Tony’s neck and tucked his knees up to give Tony room to explore. The hands he clamped down on Tony’s shoulders were shaking.

"Been a while," Tony said, remembering, tempering his instinct to go for harder, faster, more; right
now, right away, and not a second later.

"A million years or just three," Stephen breathed, a quiet moan. "I can’t remember."

"Doesn’t matter," Tony decided. "We’ll save anything elaborate for another time."

He turned his hand to cradle instead of grip, rubbing the heel of his palm over the rigid length of him. Stephen made an almost wounded sound.

"Relax," Tony murmured, an unexpected tenderness rising up. "I’ve got you."

He feathered his fingers along the shaft and his thumb over the head, and -

"You’re close already, aren’t you?” he asked, finding slickness and carefully rubbing it back into skin. "You’re wet. That’s incredibly hot."

Stephen didn’t answer, maybe because he couldn’t, but the way he responded to Tony’s voice said a lot.

"I like your mouth," Tony whispered, feeling him shudder. "You like mine. Next time I’ll have to put it to better use. I’m told I have quite a talent for that."

Stephen bit him again, and shoved a hand between them and into Tony’s pants in turn. Tony half-groaned a laugh in his direction.

"You talk too much," Stephen muttered.

"Or not enough." And when Stephen made to pull back, continued: "No, like this. Just this, here -"

Pants shoved just far enough out of the way for contact, and the touch of both their hands so long-anticipated that it was almost overwhelmingly good.

"Not going to last," Stephen said, or Tony did; it hardly mattered. It was obviously true.

They rocked to completion like that, hands and fingers overlapping and entwined, and at the end Tony with his head buried next to Stephen’s shoulder, taking the rim of an ear between nipping teeth and gasping raggedly: "A little harder. A little slower. Tighter with the left. Just there, like that, again -"

Stephen followed orders only about half the time, because he was evil, and because Tony thought he wanted to hear that broken plea muffle into the air, out of control and panting, there again there -

The end was messy, but so very worth it.

It took a long time for Tony’s heart to stop pounding in the aftermath, longer still to work up the energy to push himself up so he could look down at the sorcerer with eyes that were barely able to focus.

"You," Tony proclaimed with wobbly seriousness, "are a very dangerous man."

Stephen seemed entirely unperturbed by that, a film of sweat and disheveled hair leaving him looking primal and undone and achingly attractive. "Said the pot to the kettle."

Tony laughed, nuzzling into him and feeling new interest already trying to rise again. He told his body to calm down; he was pushing middle age and far too old to be jumping straight from one bout of sex to the next, whatever his libido might be trying to tell him.
When he pulled back, he could see that exact same conundrum chasing itself through Stephen’s brain.

Tony grinned at him, amused. "Hold that thought."

He shoved to his feet and staggered off to the lavatory, cleaning up quickly and coming back with a wash cloth. Then he hesitated, wondering at the best approach to take. It was too detached to throw the cloth at Stephen and crack a joke. But probably too intimate to bring it to him and run it over his chest, his hips. To tease the rough edge of it along that pale skin; chafe it gently against the vulnerable stretch of abdomen, the crease at the top of his thigh. To wipe away the evidence of their passion. Maybe even to pave the way for a bit more -

"Fuck it," Tony said, and then spent a solid thirty minutes simultaneously relieving them of the mess and creating a brand new one.

"Dangerous," Tony muttered after they’d finished, drawing back from a lengthy series of post-coital kisses.

Stephen smiled at him, looking perhaps even more disheveled than before. Tony had no regrets. "So you’ve said."

Stephen levered up, toppling Tony over, and after a brief scuffle they ended up with Tony once again pretending to be a mattress beneath the sorcerer’s weight. After due consideration, Tony decided this was probably a position he could learn to like.

Who was he kidding; he already liked it.

A gentle lethargy was starting to overtake Tony, painful in its slow and unfamiliar descent. He forced himself to keep drowsy, reluctant eyes open. "I should probably get up and go check on our course progress."

"We were clear of specific dangers," Stephen said, equally drowsy. "You wouldn’t have let me distract you if we weren’t. You demonstrated that quite handily the other day."

"Temptation, thy name is Stephen." But Tony hesitated, weighing pleasant lassitude against his duty to their ship, their safety. "Still."

Stephen smiled, something sly and sluggishly pleased in his face. "FRIDAY, override blackout. Please give Tony an update and reassure him the ship isn’t going to crash in the next few hours."

"FRIDAY, override blackout. Please give Tony an update and reassure him the ship isn’t going to crash in the next few hours."

She filtered in over the room’s speakers. "Hello, boss. We’ve completed our exit from the star system and are en route to a holding position. Stealth systems are maintaining without significant difficulty and our guests are resting in their room. Peter is performing routine maintenance on the aft intake manifold. All systems read normal."

Tony blinked, sitting up from the edge of sleep with a frown. "Peter’s doing what? I’ve never shown him how to maintenance that system."

"I showed him when he asked, boss," FRIDAY said. "He’s eager to help and capable of responding to routine concerns. You are free to relax at your leisure."

Tony considered that, unsettled.

"Go to sleep, boss," FRIDAY said kindly.
Tony glanced a curious question at Stephen. "Blackout?"

"A do not disturb function that should allow us some privacy," Stephen said. "The word itself is the activation phrase. Designed to disengage in emergencies, of course."

"Of course," Tony echoed. "I just think it's interesting I never heard you call for it at any point. Just happened to be serendipitously in place, did it?"

Stephen only smiled, inviting him with clever hands to lay back down.

Awake again, at least partly, Tony toyed with another question he probably needed to be asking. The timing wasn’t ideal; but then, it never was.

"FRIDAY, reengage blackout," Tony said. And though there was no audible cue in the seconds that followed, somehow the quality of the silence did feel different.

Stephen looked at him expectantly, something in Tony's voice giving away his intent.

"What finally changed your mind?" Tony asked. "What made today different from any day before?"

"Nothing," Stephen said, too easily; he’d been anticipating the question. "Or everything, I suppose. You. Mostly me."

Tony frowned questioningly.

"I understood before how far you were willing to go," Stephen said quietly. "I trusted that. I trusted you."

"Not yourself?"

Stephen didn’t answer at first, tracing extraordinary eyes over Tony’s face as though memorizing each and every line of him. Eventually those eyes closed, settling into hard-earned serenity. "The hardest lessons are the ones we learn about ourselves."

Tony leaned into him, understanding that intimately.

"There was a moment, when he reached for his gun," Tony murmured, warm in the dark with a man who’d seen the best and the worst Tony had to offer, and wanted him anyway. "Where I almost took it too far. All it needed was a trigger word. I wanted to do it so badly I could taste it."

"Kill him, you mean?" Stephen asked, though there was no surprise in his voice.

"Yeah," Tony said, running a hand over Stephen's bare shoulder, waiting to see if the other man might pull away. He didn't. "How many people do you think I could've saved, if I had?"

Stephen's voice was painfully neutral; too even, really, to be believed. "I don't know."

"I thought about Peter," Tony said. "About all the Peter's he might get his hands on after we left. The lives he could ruin; the lives he already had. I came an inch away from doing it. Closer, maybe."

Stephen leaned in, and the touch of his lips on Tony's cheek was painfully gentle. "What stopped you?"

Tony shook his head, lacking both the words and the will.
But Stephen was relentless. "Tony."

He sighed, closing his eyes. "There's a line between saving lives and playing God. I don't always recognize where it is, but I know it's there. And while I've blurred it before, I've never done it in cold blood. I couldn't start now, not even for Peter. Regardless of how tempted I was."

Stephen seemed to hear something Tony hadn't intended in that last sentence, looking away with guilt or maybe grief in the lines of his face. "Do you think you're the only one who considers him family, Tony? Peter's yours, it's true. But he's also mine." He dropped to tuck his face into the curve of Tony's neck, and if he seemed unsteady for a moment, Tony wasn't cruel enough to point it out. "You both are. Perhaps more than either of you realize."

There was something chilling about that; something forbidding and almost eerie. A more prudent man might've been afraid. Tony leaned into him, recognizing a darkness in Stephen he'd long ago learned to accept in himself.

"I was tempted," Tony repeated, but not as an admission of guilt. As an invitation to share; to own the truth.

"So was I," Stephen confessed in a whisper. And when Tony kissed him, it had the bittersweet edge of shared benediction.

Chapter End Notes

Fair warning for anyone looking to avoid reading explicit sex (finally!), you may need to skip some scenes near the end.
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

How to make friends and influence people. (Peter wrote the book; Stephen's an avid reader; Tony's still learning)

It took their guests two days to venture out from their den, and it was still over a week before Tony caught a glimpse of them.

"It's almost like they're avoiding me," Tony said to Stephen one day.

"I imagine there's a great many people they're trying to avoid," Stephen said. "Don't take it personally."

"I'm a narcissist," Tony replied. "I take everything personally. Here, hold this."

Stephen took the maintenance assembly he was handed, keeping it at arm's length as though it might explode at any moment. "Remind me again why I'm here? You realize manual labor isn't exactly my forte."

"Because I needed an extra set of hands," Tony said, "and Peter was occupied. I notice they're not avoiding him, by the way."

Stephen looked endlessly amused at that. "Well, you know what he's like. He probably never gave them the chance to refuse. I imagine he started talking to them one day and simply never stopped."

Tony pried up an access panel and set to work stripping and rerouting conduit adapters. "And I'm sure you had absolutely nothing to do with putting him on their case to begin with."

"Certainly not," Stephen said.

"I'll say this for Peter. That kid's unnatural ability to make friends and influence people might be the most extraordinary thing about him. And I'm including the wall-crawling there."

Stephen slanted him an unreadable look. "Perhaps you could take a page from his book."

"Hey," Tony objected. "I'm halfway there. I've got influencing people down pat. It's the making friends part that always stumps me."

"I believe in you," Stephen deadpanned.

Tony fluttered at him playfully. "Be still my heart."

Tony tossed him a handful of redundant parts and, when Stephen fumbled them, stepped in close enough to steal a kiss while the sorcerer's hands were too occupied to do anything about it. Not that Stephen seemed to mind; the appreciative moan and aborted move to pull Tony closer were each gratifying in their own way.

Tony stepped back when it looked like Stephen was starting to consider dropping everything where
he stood to chase more interesting pursuits.

"You taste like mint and electricity," Tony said cheerfully, licking his lips just to watch Stephen's eyes lose focus at the provocation.

"Tease," Stephen muttered. Tony congratulated himself on a job well done and decided not to notice how his own eyes wanted to glaze over. It was a dangerous proposition, flirting with wizards; liable to backfire even when working as intended.

"FRIDAY, check the intercooler relays," Tony said, to remind them both of what they were here for. "They should be starting to cycle back into normal range."

"Confirmed," she said. "Integrating new relay coding now."

Tony wiped down his hands with a spare cloth, grabbing a quick drink of water to cool off. "You know, if we keep adding and combining technology on this ship, we're going to need an actual crew at some point. I won't be able to keep up the maintenance on my own."

Stephen held up his hands and took two dramatic steps back. "Well, don't look at me. I'm a doctor, not an engineer."

Tony paused to squint at him. "Did you just quote Star Trek at me?"

"Stark Trek," FRIDAY put in helpfully.

Stephen widened his eyes, blinking. "Do I look like someone who watches -"

"You are not about to call Trek lowbrow science fiction," Tony threatened.

"- space opera," Stephen finished.

"That was Star Wars," Tony corrected. "Not Star Trek."

Stephen's expression didn't change. "What's the difference?"

"How dare you. We can't be friends anymore."

"Can we still have benefits?"

"You," Tony proclaimed, poking him hard in the chest, "are the ultimate troll. You should've been a lawyer. I bet you'd have won cases by attrition alone."

Stephen nodded thoughtfully. "I once annoyed an inter-dimensional being into giving up an attack on Earth based solely on my ability to outlast their patience."

"That doesn't surprise me," Tony said. "But the fact an inter-dimensional attack occurred without the knowledge of any first world country is slightly concerning."

"How can you be sure none of them know?"

Tony gestured wordlessly above his head, where FRIDAY obliged him with a mechanically cleared throat over the audio system.

Stephen had the gall to look annoyed. "Right. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised at how boundless your paranoia is."
"And yet it still failed to produce results," Tony said. "Really must fix that when we get back."

Tony left Stephen to brood on that while he reassembled the console. He'd been mostly teasing with the suggestion they might need a crew in the not so distant future, but it wasn't an entirely baseless joke. Their little home away from home was expanding; already Tony was having to deputize Peter and Stephen into acting as technical support more often than not. FRIDAY could do a lot on her own, but for all she had physical form now, she still didn't have hands to do the manual labor.

Although that was an interesting thought -

"How close are you to optimizing the stealth systems for another run?" Stephen asked.

It took Tony a moment to answer, distracted as he was with a whole new branch of science dancing through his head. "Close. Most of it's solid across the board, but the reflective panels still need some work. Why?"

"Because I should be able to correct the critical nutritional deficiencies by next week."

"And?"

"And after that," Stephen said with a shrug, "I suspect the kindest thing we can do for them is find them someplace safe to shelter."

Tony stopped running the hypothetical numbers long enough to throw him a look. "Did someone lodge a complaint? I thought it'd be a few more weeks of free food and lodgings before anyone got antsy."

Stephen's face was unreadable. "It's come up. I suspect merely as a tool to assuage their suspicion, but." He shrugged. "Still."

"No need to feed their doubts by holding them if they want to go," Tony agreed. "But what counts as a safe place? Universe is a big place."

"We could simply bring them to Vanaheim," Stephen suggested. "It is, first and foremost, a sanctuary."

Tony frowned. "That'd mean backtracking for weeks. Not to mention there's no way to know how easy it'd be to breach the energy barrier, or how quickly it could be taken down. Technically it was designed to prevent people coming down to the surface. I'd rather not be a sitting duck in orbit while we wait for someone to notice us hovering."

"You have another idea?" Stephen asked.

"There's no place like home," Tony said, not quite a question.

The sorcerer shook his head. "Unfortunately, Krylorians aren't native to this galaxy. Getting them home would be beyond us even if we had the time to attempt it."

Tony blinked. "Not from - that's impossible. Even at light speed to the nth degree, it would take full generations of lifetimes to reach the closest neighboring galaxy. And I'm not talking human lifespan, either. The closest irregular galaxy clocks in at over forty thousand light years away. Andromeda's more than two and a half million."

"As I recall, they are actually from Andromeda," Stephen offered.
"Then unless these people are literally tens of thousands of years old, in which case I question every life choice that landed them in chains, they must’ve somehow discovered a way to fold time and space to accommodate instantaneous intergalactic travel."

"Yes, yes," Stephen said impatiently. "Jump point technology exists, and it's really quite common. Let's get back to the matter at hand."

"Okay," Tony agreed. "We can do that. Just as soon as you explain exactly what the hell jump point technology is."

Stephen sighed very loudly. "I shouldn't have mentioned it. Now I'll never get you back on track."

"Not without an explanation, you won't."

"Think of it as a series of portals."

Stephen briefly sketched the beginnings of a glowing red circle in the air that dissipated when he waved it away. "But intended for longer distances and without the use of a sling ring. The apertures link to form a network that can be accessed by any ship with a compatible navigational system. Since we don't have that, travel between galaxies is out of the question. We'll have to -".

Tony whipped his hands urgently through the air. "Wait, wait, wait. You're telling me there are ships that use wormhole technology to travel instantaneously through space. And you're only telling me about this now?"

"And I still wouldn't be if it hadn't come up so unavoidably. Patience, Tony. If you have anything to say about it, eventually you'll get your hands on some."

"But I want it now," Tony said plaintively.

"And are therefore destined to be disappointed."

"Well, not totally. I mean, you just told me there's a science out there that can do basically what magic does, but better. So the day's not all bad."

Stephen looked irritated. "I wouldn't put it quite like that."

"I would. How is it this has never come up before? If I'd known this was a possibility -"

"We'd still be here, doing exactly what we're doing now," Stephen said. "Can we please get back to the most appropriate drop off point for our visitors?"

"Sure we can," Tony said cheerfully. "Right after you admit science found a way to kick magic's ass."

Stephen pulled himself up to his full and not inconsiderable height. "I most certainly will not."

"Then the debate goes on. You realize the physics behind the type of network you're describing? How would technology like that even -"

"FRIDAY," Stephen interrupted. "Would you mind terribly if I did away with your creator?"


Tony blinked. "The children?"

"Incoming, boss. Imminent arrival in five seconds."
"Here?" Tony started to say, feeling the bottom drop out of his stomach. "But this is a restricted area. They can't access it. How -"

But the doors slid open just then, revealing the how. Peter bounced energetically into the room, followed by an entourage of two slightly more subdued aliens.

"- is engineering," Peter was saying brightly, a light whoosh of sound preceding him as he hopped nimbly up the wall and pushed off to land atop one of the consoles. "It's where most of the technical stuff happens on the ship. Usually Tony - hey, there's Tony and Stephen. You remember them, right?"

The look on their faces said they did, but they weren't at all sure whether that was a good thing or not.

Tony couldn't blame them. He was currently sharing a number of similar misgivings.

Peter must've seen it; he gave an awkward little half-laugh. "Hey, I wasn't expecting you guys to be here or I would've called ahead. Sorry."

"Yeah, a little forewarning would've been appreciated," Tony said pleasantly. "This is actually where I spend most of my time. Working."

Peter winced at that rebuke. "Right." He turned back to the aliens, beckoning them closer. "Like I was saying, engineering is the technological hub of the ship. Tony runs everything from here, basically. He's, you know, the reason we're still flying around instead of crashed into a moon somewhere."

Tony snorted, not mollified. "Flattery, Peter? That's a cheap shot."

Peter darted him a look from beneath wide, guileless eyes. "But is it working?"

"Outlook isn't good," Tony quoted, straight-faced.

"I believe that's my line," Stephen interjected.

"What, like you have exclusive rights? I can be a magic eight-ball too when I feel like it."

"Exclusive, no. But you must admit it seems more fitting coming from me."

"I don't have to admit anything," Tony said. "Unless you're willing to admit a few things of your own."

"I think not."

"See," Peter interrupted, gesturing at them. "If you don't remember them now, you will soon. They're sort of memorable. But don't worry. I mean, they're totally harmless."

They didn't look convinced. If anything, the uncertainty on those strangely human features only deepened. Well, human except for -

"Is it my imagination," Tony said under his breath while Peter went on trying to offer ineffective reassurance to their guests, "or have those two changed color since the last time I saw them?"

"They have," Stephen agreed. "Healthy Krylorians have a much pinker skin tone. They're not quite back to normal, but they're getting there."
Tony privately wondered if pink might not be understating it. It wasn’t much of a stretch to say their guests were fuscia. Almost neon, really.

"I can see why it was easy to tell they were ill," Tony muttered, thinking back on the original splotchy champagne-lavender they’d appeared. "How the slaver got away with claiming otherwise, I’ll never know."

Stephen darkened at the mention of the rodent. "Considering the damage we did to his sterling reputation, I doubt he'll manage it again."

"Speaking of damages," Tony offered. "Final scans indicate FRIDAY accidentally destroyed some of the cartilage in his wrists and shoulders. Poor guy probably has a future full of early arthritic pain to look forward to. Whoops. Accident."

Stephen looked somewhere between reproachful and delighted. "You never did answer my question about lasting harm."

"Unfortunately, that's about the gist of it," Tony admitted. "Aside from maybe some psychological scarring, which he richly deserved anyway."

"Tony Stark, avenging angel," Stephen said with a smile. "Has a certain ring to it."

"Well, I was part of the team for a reason, you know."

Peter cut their conversation short there, beckoning them over with eager sweeps of his arm. The sorcerer went first; Tony trailed behind.

Peter pointed as they got closer. "You already know Stephen, of course." The aliens nodded along, looking much less uncertain. Tony made a mental note that apparently this was a species that nodded. That was lucky. "And this is Tony, who you saw on the surface."

Tony did his best to smile harmlessly but thought he might’ve missed the mark; the man looked interested, but the woman looked alarmed. Alarm was an odd look for this species; it made their wide golden eyes almost seem to glow, and the raised facial marks on their face and across the bridge of their nose pinch. The two of them had very similar features; in fact, aside from one being obviously female and one male, they were alike enough they could’ve been twins. Possibly they were, if this species twinned the way humans did. Or possibly everything in this species had identical features.

"Hi," Tony said, aiming for light and neutral. "Like the kid said, don’t mind me. I come in peace."

The woman winced away from all of them, obviously the more skittish of the two. The man looked curious.

"Hello," he said, and his voice was a mellow tenor, friendly enough. "I am Fiz."

"Fizz," Tony repeated, considering that in combination with the cotton candy skin tone. He had to strangle the urge to make a very inappropriate joke. "Just Fiz? Any last name?"

The aliens exchanged a glance, puzzled. "Last name?"

Right. Somehow it seemed every alien species they ran across had a bizarre tendency to wander around with just one name. Given the relative size of the known universe, Tony had no idea how that didn’t become confusing.
"Well, welcome aboard, Fiz of no last name." Tony turned expectantly to the woman, taking a half-step back to hopefully appear less threatening. "And who's your friend?" He thought about that. "Or sister? Significant other? Hopefully not all three at once. That'd be awkward."

"Not as awkward as your painful attempts at diplomacy," Stephen muttered while Peter had a coughing fit.

Tony winced a shrug. "Yeah, I fail at political correctness. Tell me you're surprised."

"Drey," Peter gasped, struggling to choke back his laughter. "Her name's Drey."

"Welcome aboard Drey, also of no last name," Tony greeted.

She said nothing, but the wary rabbit-readiness in her posture did ease just slightly.

"I wanted to take them on a tour of the ship," Peter said, ready as always to share his eagerness with the world. "They can't access these sections, so I thought I'd take them around myself."

"They can't access these sections for a reason," Tony reminded, in case anyone got any bright ideas. "In fact, I'm surprised to see them here at all. I lock people out of this place for a reason, you know."

He fixed Peter with a stern look and watched the kid's enthusiasm wilt just slightly.

"I figured it'd be okay as long as I was with them," Peter said tentatively.

Which made sense of a few levels, not least of which was that Tony honestly couldn't have asked for a better guard for their new guests. Peter wouldn't have any trouble dealing with them if they suddenly and inexplicably went on a rampage through the restricted areas.

And yet. Engineering was Tony's domain; it felt as much his as the workshop did back home. And what was Tony's wasn't available for public access.

"I'll allow it this once," Tony said, yielding just slightly. "And only once. Understand?"

Peter nodded eagerly. "Yeah, sure. Sorry. I should've asked."

"Yeah, in this case, not better to ask forgiveness than permission." Tony bestowed a smile on their guests. "Sorry folks. You know how it is. This is an engineering personnel only zone."

Peter looked subtly at Stephen, obviously present, and probably the person least suited for such tasks among the three of them.

Tony looked at Stephen too, as though seeing him there for the first time. "Oh, him? I keep him around for comic relief."

Tony gave the kid a look that hopefully conveyed how very little Peter wanted Tony to elaborate on that. Peter got the message and practically tripped over himself changing the subject.

"I already," Peter said loudly. "I mean, I showed them the cargo bay. I thought maybe we'd explore engineering -"

Tony gave Peter another look, one that hopefully conveyed exactly how little he thought of that plan. "- and maybe have some lunch next," Peter finished feebly. "Or not. We could not do that."

"Not alone, at least. Stephen can go with you." Tony shrugged when the sorcerer tossed him a
questioning look. "I need to finish up here. There's still two more consoles to maintenance before quitting time."

"But you know engineering better than anyone," Peter protested. "Maybe you could do the tour? Since you're here."

"FRIDAY and Stephen can show you the ropes. The heavily redacted, restricted-access only ropes." Tony paused, considering. "They have met FRIDAY, right?"

Peter grimaced, a sheepish smile creeping onto his face. "Sort of?"

Tony stared at him. "Sort of? How does one sort of meet an A.I?"

"I may have mentioned her," Peter hedged, "in passing."

Tony sighed, anticipating things were about to go quickly off the rails.

"Your pardon," FRIDAY said, filtering in gently through the ship's speakers; Tony expected the aliens to leap out of their skin. They didn't. "I have already introduced myself."

"What, you did?" Peter blurted, relieved and also somehow irritated; he'd probably been putting considerable effort into not mentioning her overtly. "When?"

"The first night," she said, her tone muted and soft in a way Tony wasn't used to. FRIDAY was at her core a brash and assertive personality; hearing her deliberately soften herself out of consideration for their guests was eerie in an extraordinary way.

"What happened the first night that required intervention?" Tony asked.

FRIDAY somehow managed to infuse an iron undertone of reprimand into her newly gentled voice. "Nothing. I simply felt it prudent to identify myself so they were aware the limits of their privacy onboard the ship. It seemed only polite to do so."

Tony had a brief but intense flash of pride. On the one hand, he wanted to immediately congratulate FRIDAY on making what amounted to an emotional judgement call. On the other hand, he wanted to berate her for wasting a potential strategic advantage. He hoped this wasn't about to turn into a trend of hers.

"I suppose they're guests," Tony muttered to himself.

"Exactly," FRIDAY said.

"Well, good. Then there's no question of you taking them on a tour. The heavily redacted -"

"- restricted-access only tour," FRIDAY finished. "Yes, boss. I would be pleased to do so."

"Good." He tossed a thumb over his shoulder to indicate some vague corner half the room away. "I'll be over there getting some actual work done. Which is more than I can say for the rest of you scamps."

Peter's managed to look guilty at that. "I can stay and help if you need."

"Finish what you started, itsy bitsy spider. I'll shanghai you tomorrow for some heavy lifting."

Peter nodded, beckoning to their guests with open hands. "Okay. This way! Let's start with the engines."
Stephen waited until they were far enough away to be out of earshot, FRIDAY’s melodious voice directing their steps, before saying: "You took that surprisingly well."

Tony turned away from him, studiously re-packing the maintenance bag to haul off to the next task. "What?"

"The invasion of your space," Stephen said, drifting closer. "I'm not sure I've ever seen you that calm about it."

Tony didn't look up from his work. "Who says I'm calm? I'm resigned to it. That's all. It's bound to happen occasionally on a ship this size. Although I do remember programming FRIDAY with an early warning system to avoid situations exactly like this."

That last he directed to the nearest console with a glare.

"Sorry, boss," FRIDAY said, coming in over their transmitters this time, probably to avoid disrupting her ongoing narration a few feet away. The advantage of being an A.I; she could literally be in two (or many) places at once. "I did advise you."

"I think an early warning calls for more than five seconds notice, FRI."

She sounded for the first time a touch uncertain. "I understood the forewarning protocol as primarily intended for when you and Stephen were engaged in.."

"Yes, thank you, FRIDAY," Stephen said loudly, causing three heads to turn in his direction. The sorcerer waved them away irritably, lowering his voice to a whisper once they'd turned back. "You know, I generally try not to think about the fact that there's an A.I on-board who keeps close tabs on our every move. For the most part I succeed. Then something like this happens."

"Sorry," Tony said, not meaning it in the slightest. "That's how the cookie crumbles when you get in bed with a tech mogul super-genius."

"Clearly." The sorcerer sighed, watching him for a few more seconds. "You're sure you're alright?"

"I'm fine. I'd be more fine if you'd get your ass over there and make sure our honorable ghost in the machine and the rambunctious spider don't give away too many of our secrets."

"Ghost in the machine?" FRIDAY objected.

Stephen was still watching him, unconvinced. "I don't think my skepticism is misplaced. You're taking this too well."

Tony sighed, finally turning to look him in the eye. "I'm taking it as well as I have to. I got too used to having this ship to ourselves. A hidden world with one A.I and two people I trust is a pretty small place." He took a breath and let it out slowly. "A safe place. I know reality is bigger than us. I just need to get used to that fact again."

Stephen maneuvered to take one of Tony's hands in his. "You already know I'm watching them closely. But more to the point, so is FRIDAY. You know she'll step in immediately if she thinks they pose a risk."

"I know. I'll get used to it. Not much choice, really."

Stephen looked somewhere into the middle distance, combing that incredible mind of his for insight. "I don't think Peter realized how it would look to you when he brought them here."
"I know he didn't," Tony said, squeezing Stephen's fingers carefully. He glanced at the group a few feet away, but no one was paying them any attention. Even if they were, he doubted Stephen would care; the sorcerer's intent gaze had no room in it for anyone but Tony. That look was practically begging for a kiss; Tony happily went ahead and obliged him.

When he pulled back, he could see one of the aliens watching them. Fiz. There was no judgement or condemnation in his gaze, only blatant curiosity. Tony returned the look, wondering how an outsider would perceive the relationship. It didn't matter, of course; they didn't need validation from other people. But it did make Tony wonder how aliens might view sex and everything related to it. Humans had wide and varying sex practices, not limited to procreation; Tony's instinct was to apply that understanding to other humanoids as well, but for all he knew this species only mated for procreation. Or, better yet: maybe they didn't have sex at all. Maybe they were asexual. Maybe they reproduced via cloning.

Maybe Tony was getting ahead of himself. Maybe Fiz was staring because he was just curious. Maybe he just didn't know what kissing was.

Maybe -

"I hate people," Tony muttered. "Too many unknown variables. Give me machines to work with any day."

Stephen raised both eyebrows. "What?"

"Nothing. Go ahead and join the gang on their rounds. At least I know you're capable of keeping a secret."

Tony waited to see if Stephen would rise to the bait of that taunt, but he didn't. Instead the sorcerer leaned in to give him another close, slow kiss. Tony let him take the lead, trading a brief whisper of teeth and tongue somewhere near the end, with just enough pressure to give them something to look forward to.

"Now who's the tease?" Tony murmured, pushing him off gently. "Go keep the spider in check. Someone has to. Believe me, I've tried and failed."

"I'll do my best, but no promises. Try not to do anything too ridiculous while we're gone."

Stephen moved away, the cloak streaming behind him for dramatic effect. A soft susurration of sound echoed, and the aliens looked up timidly. Tony watched, scans flickering across the glasses too quickly to really process.

"Krylorians." Tony rolled the syllables of the name over his tongue as one might a fine wine, tasting the nuance of it. Their knowledge of alien species was growing as they went along, expanding on their existing databanks through leaps and bounds. "FRI, I'll assume you've been running the standard assortment of scans over the last week. Level four across the board?"

"Two," she said in his ear. "I assumed fourth level scans were of limited value until they'd returned to optimal health."

Tony waved a vague hand meant to encompass, if nothing else, the recovered eye-watering shade of their skin. "They're on the path. Escalate to four."

"Sure thing, boss."

Tony watched the group with their heads bent together, examining with fascination one of
FRIDAY’s holographic overlays. Both of the aliens were waving their hands through the projection, seemingly for no other reason than to watch it ripple and reform around their limbs. Tony mentally adjusted his assessment of their age to something younger than he’d first thought. Their admiration was gratifying, but it had the same flavor of childlike glee that Peter’d had when first acclimating to FRIDAY’s capabilities. Less hardened cynic; more young adventurer.

"Surrounded by children," Tony muttered, and got back to work.

It took him the better part of the day to recalibrate the power transfer grid and the thermal management systems. The work was tedious and tiring, but by the time his stomach was screaming for fortification, he could safely say the ship wasn't about to explode underneath them any time soon.

"Congratulations, boss," FRIDAY said. "All primary systems are operating within acceptable parameters. Efficiency is increased by -"

"A whopping eleven percent," Tony finished, tired but pleased. "That should keep the lights on around here for another few weeks, at least."

"I will begin adjusting stealth systems to integrate new power diversion. Estimated time of completion, thirty-six minutes."

Tony wasn't worried. They'd have to run a few simulations to be sure, but the stealth test run had been a phenomenal success. The cloak should hold with flawless integrity the next time they dipped their toes into a new star system.

"FRIDAY, you are a goddess among men. After integration, pack it in for the night and shut down all non-essentials. It's time for all good little A.I.'s to be abed."

"I will if you will, boss," she replied.

"Need my daily injection of tea first." He wagged an admonishing finger around the room at large. "And no lectures on caffeine before bed. You know how that puts me off sleep."

"The lecture?" she asked wryly. "Or the caffeine?"

"Had to slip that in there, didn't you?"

Tony padded out of engineering with a spring in his step and idly considered the possibility that Stephen might still be awake and keen to entertain some company. The sorcerer was a painfully consistent morning person, but he'd proven surprisingly willing to accommodate Tony's eccentric hours. He'd tried to explain it once using terms like 'astral dreaming' and 'mind's eye', but Tony'd stopped listening somewhere in the middle and given his mouth something more interesting to focus on.

The hop in Tony's step picked up renewed energy. "FRI, how are we looking with air and water supplies now we've nearly doubled our use?"

"Levels continue to hold steady. Barring emergency, I anticipate no significant drain on resources. Food stores also remain in good standing at this time." She paused. "With the exception of the tea. I regret to inform you that current tea usage far exceeds sustainability."

"Was that a dig? I feel like that was a dig." Tony rounded the corner into the commissary. "I can't help it. It's an addiction and I'm weak. Thank God we setup that greenhouse - oh." He stopped with one foot in the dining area and one in the hall. "Hi."
Fiz stared at him, a startled stoat expression on that colorful face. Peter, sitting next to him, had the 
look of someone who'd been interrupted in the middle of an elaborate story.

"Whoops," Tony said. "I didn't know you were here, or I'd have called ahead."

Peter glowered at that pointed paraphrase. "It's fine. We were just having a late dinner. Join us?"

"I came for late dinner too," Tony agreed. "But I like mine with less calories and more caffeine."

Peter looked very disapproving. "You know caffeine on an empty stomach is bad for your health. Here."

Tony caught the packet of dried meat Peter threw in his direction, resigning himself to the inevitable. 
The kid had become almost as bad as Stephen, really. Tony was stuck on a ship surrounded by 
children and mother hens. Sometimes both at the same time.

"How was the tour?" Tony asked as he continued toward a food cupboard.

"Amazing," Fiz said, and Tony realized there was a forkful of nutritionally balanced jello halfway to 
his mouth. He made a mental note; they may've finally found someone happy to willingly consume 
their remaining backlog of MRE's. "Your ship is fascinating."

"I know," Tony said cheerfully. "Don't let me interrupt you. Eat away. And while you're at it, help 
yourself to seconds and thirds. I mean that."

"You are very generous," Fiz said, slowly resuming his meal.

"I'm really not." Tony ate while he prepared a strong cup of tea, water slowly warming in their 
makeshift kettle. Well, less a kettle; more a hastily assembled mini-cauldron. "So, how have you 
been managing? You're looking much better these days. Freedom and the basic necessities of life 
suit you."

"Recovery has been slow," Fiz said around a mouthful, "but steady. Your physician does excellent 
work."

"Doesn't he, though? Where's your friend? I thought you'd be attached at the hip. I know I would."

The silence seemed loud, somehow. Tony turned around to find Fiz staring at him.

"Your people conjoin at the midpoint?" the alien asked, looking like someone trying very hard to 
understand that without picturing it in too much detail.

Tony glanced at Peter, who couldn't seem to decide whether he should laugh or bang his head 
against the table.

"Well," Tony said, "only on very special occasions."

Peter chose the table.

"You are a very strange species," Fiz said.

Tony told himself it wasn't nice to confuse new friends unnecessarily. But in his defense, sometimes 
the universe made it too easy. "Don't look at me as the standard model. I'm actually just a very poor 
example of a human. I'd hate to be the reason we got a bad rap when there are so many other, better 
reasons we could get one."
Fiz looked suddenly interested. "You are human?"

"Born and bred," Tony said, seeing a knowledge on that face that seemed oddly out of place. "You've heard of us?"

"Occasionally," Fiz said, which was more often than Tony'd been expecting. "Mostly by word of mouth. I understand it's rare for you to leave your native solar system. Rumor has it your home planet is quite primitive."

Tony had no idea how to respond to any of that, but he couldn't help objecting with: " Primitive?"

Fiz looked around, the sweep of his brightly painted eyes taking in the bevy of technology at their fingertips. "Perhaps the rumors were wrong."

Tony made the executive decision not to tell their guests anything about stealing this ship at the expense of the tyrant trying to wipe out half the universe.

The kettle-cauldron began to boil. Tony took it off the heat, preparing the tea and carting it over to where the other two were seated. He took a first, savory sip, ignoring the third degree burns he collected in the process. Worth it.

"I thought at first you might be Xandarian," Fiz continued, his jello slowly vanishing one bite after the other.

"The who what now?" Tony asked. He looked at Peter, but the kid seemed just as muddled. Which was odd; he wondered what the two of them normally talked about if not important details like species and primitive technology levels.

Fiz examined Tony with careful, critical eyes. "Xandarians. You have the look of it. They're pale, like you, and unmarked. And clever."

Tony raised his eyebrows slowly. "Thank you?"

"And Xandarians usually see themselves as beacons of peace and prosperity. Even now, with Xandar in ruins."

"It's possible I would love to claim to be Xandarian," Tony said. "If only I knew what that was. But alas, I don't, and we're not."

Fiz shrugged, though Tony got the impression there was something going unsaid beneath his nonchalance. "Perhaps it's no surprise. They're not native to this galaxy. Most people wouldn't know them even if you introduced yourself as one."

"And again with the intergalactic space travel," Tony muttered. "I don't suppose by chance you understand how this jump point technology works?"

Fiz looked surprised, and Tony made a few more mental notes; Krylorians and humans used a remarkable amount of similar body language. That seemed almost mindbogglingly unlikely. Of course, in a place as vast and diverse as the Milky Way galaxy, any similarities seemed mindbogglingly unlikely.

Which begged some interesting questions. As Tony took a few more burning sips of tea, he queued up FRIDAY's diagnostic scans for comparative analysis.

And frowned, watching them start to scroll. "Stephen tells me you're also not native to this galaxy."
Leaves me wondering how you ended up here."

Fiz looked away, spooning up more jello to occupy himself. He looked distressed.

"You don't have to answer," Peter said gently, and there was something in the still seriousness of his expression that made Tony stare.

"I want to answer," Fiz said. "But the truth is not solely mine to give. Others came here with me to whom I promised silence. I'm sorry."

"That's okay, that's fine," Peter soothed, at the same time Tony said: "Your friend?"

Fiz looked at him blankly, and Tony narrowed his eyes, nodding backward over his shoulder at some unspecified location.

"Drey of no last name," Tony clarified.

Fiz shook his head. "Drey has returned to our rooms. She requested time alone."

"I'm surprised you let her out of your sight," Tony prodded, watching him closely. "Considering. In similar circumstances, I doubt I could let Stephen or Peter out of my sight."

Peter looked on the verge of some kind of protest, but he took one look at Fiz's troubled expression and checked himself. Tony found his reticence very interesting.

Fiz tightened a hand around the edge of the table. "Drey and I don't have the type of bond you imply. We are two people who found ourselves sharing unfortunate circumstances. There is no relation between us but that. I gave my silence to someone else."

Tony nodded, partly satisfied. "We gave you shared quarters because it seemed cruel and unusual punishment to separate you. But if you want your own room, we can make that happen."

"I wouldn't ask you to give up more of your space or resources," Fiz said in a sincere but leading tone.

"What's to give up? No one's using it. The way Peter keeps trying to collect souvenirs from every planet we visit, he might need a second room soon. But you should be safe enough for now."

"Hey," Peter said.

Tony waited to see if he might try and deny it. He didn't. "Feel free to take the room just next door to your current digs."

Fiz looked like someone who wanted to believe but wasn't sure they should. "You are certain?"

"I'm certain that if a guest passive-aggressively expresses a need," Tony said, "and I fail to respond to it, Peter will swiftly make sure my life isn't worth living anymore."

Fix looked shocked. "He would not!"

"I might," Peter muttered.

"Even if he doesn't, Stephen probably would. So, room's yours. Take it."

"You honor me," Fiz said quietly, while Peter practically glowed with approval. "But I don't understand."
"Is the translator malfunctioning?" Tony asked mildly. "I can use smaller words if so."

Tony thought he might finally have run across an alien who understood at least a hint of sarcasm, because the look on his face transformed from earnest entreaty to annoyance in a heartbeat. "That's not necessary. But your actions, this place: none of it makes sense."

Tony made a show of looking around, as if he might find a Persian flaw lurking unnoticed in the shadows. He pointedly took a long drink of tea.

"To purchase slaves," Fiz clarified, "for no particular purpose, and then to house and feed them purely for their own comfort and ask nothing in return. I've never heard the like before."

"I told you," Peter interjected to say, "your lives are worth more than that. We just wanted to save you. We'd have saved more if we could, but we needed to do at least this much."

"You did say that," Fiz confirmed, in as soothing a voice as Peter had used earlier. Tony felt his eyebrows trying to climb up off his forehead. "But still it makes little sense. The strong do not give for nothing to the weak. The wealthy do not stay wealthy by gifting it away."

"Depends who they're giving to," Tony muttered.

Fiz ignored him. "I do not know humans, but I think not even Xandarians would be so foolish."

Peter shook his head earnestly. "We're not them. It's not about power or wealth. It's about doing what's right." Then he hesitated, tilting his head in a shrug. "And, okay. Let's be honest, it's also about how badly that guy pissed Stephen and Tony off."

"That much I surmised for myself," Fiz said.

Peter grinned brightly.

Tony cleared his throat, watching them both turn to him with surprise. "I'll add my two cents just for the record. Whatever you might be imagining, we're not trying to fatten you up for some nefarious purpose."

Fiz still looked almost defiant in his uncertainty, but the steadfast insistence was wavering. "I talked to your physician -"


"- who also assured me you have only our best interests at heart."

"There, see?" Tony said evenly. "The trifecta has spoken. Though I can't say I blame you for doubting. In your shoes, I'd be skeptical too."

Fiz looked down at his feet with a puzzled frown.

"If you had shoes," Tony amended with a sigh. "Don't worry. That'll be next on the list. Durable walking shoes, times two. Size alien."

Fiz looked up, new suspicion blazing in his glowing eyes. "Why would you wish to obtain shoes for us?"

"Because walking around this ship without them is a lawsuit waiting to happen. Plus, it's cold."

Fiz didn't seem convinced. "You owe us nothing. In fact, honor dictates after all you've done, it is
"A pair of shoes isn't going to break the bank," Tony said, privately reflecting that for the cost of just one of Stephen's books, they could probably afford entire wardrobes for their guests. "Relax. You'll need something to your name when we drop you off to make your merry way through the universe."

Peter made a noise that said he hadn't even considered that.

"Your - Stephen," Fiz fumbled, and Tony inwardly perked up at that accidental phrasing. *His Stephen.* How lovely. "He implied the same. He said that you would not hold us. That you meant to let us go."

Tony pretended not to notice the heavy weight of emotion that made the kid's voice waver at the end. And he *was* a kid. He may not be a child as humans classed children; he may or may not be a close match to Peter in age. But as far as Tony's instincts were concerned, Fiz was young and vulnerable and in need, and he definitely made the 'kid' cut.

"Well," Tony said eventually, "we kind of have to let you go. We're not really equipped to imprison people against their will on this ship. And Peter would be so disappointed in me if I even tried."

"Disappointed?" Peter said dryly. "I can think of stronger words."

"There, see? Like I said. Life not worth living."

"If you are sincere about helping," Fiz said slowly, and Tony thought he might follow that up with a request for drop off somewhere safe and maybe tropical, but: "I arrived in this system and was taken long ago, but Drey was captured more recently from a place very far from here. She will need to use a waypoint to find her way home."

"I'm willing to help you two get somewhere safe," Tony said noncommittally. "What's a waypoint?"

Fiz looked startled. "You've not heard of -" He stopped. "It is a center for travel. A place where many roads and paths cross. One can often find passage to places otherwise out of reach there. With even minimal funds, Drey should be able to purchase passage."

Tony's most guiltily immediate thought was that a waypoint sounded like an excellent place to go looking for this mythical jump point technology. His second thought was slightly more virtuous; it sounded like an excellent place to look for new weapons in their Thanos-killing quest.

"Sounds interesting," was all Tony said aloud. Peter's exasperated look said he heard all the underlying things Tony wasn't saying. "And for yourself?"

Fix was inscrutable. "Me?"

Tony nodded pleasantly, staring at him, watching numbers and quotients and statistical probabilities floating past his line of sight. "You."

Fiz looked down and took a very belated bite of his food. "I'm sure with similar assistance, I could also find my path from there. That is the purpose of a waypoint."

Tony didn't look at Peter. "If that's what you want, of course."

Fiz jerked his head up but said nothing. There was something startled in his face.

"You wouldn't happen to know the coordinates?" Tony asked.
Fiz blinked, considering. "I know the system's astrological features. If you have star maps available, I could point it out."

What a wonderful font of information their guest was turning out to be. "I'm sure FRIDAY will have something appropriate to show you."

"And you'll take us there and simply - let us go? In spite of the price you paid for us, the fact we've nothing to repay you with? Just like that?"

Tony didn't allow any expression on his face. He inhaled a calming lungful of aromatic tea. "Just like that."

"Madness." Fiz looked away, rubbing his thumb hard over the knuckles of his left hand. It had the repetitive tick of a lifelong habit. "This entire thing has been beyond belief. In fact, I wasn't sure I could trust it. I'm still not sure I do."

Tony watched him closely. "But now you're willing to take it on faith. Why?"

"If it's a ruse, it's an elaborate one, and for no purpose I can see." Fiz hesitated, eventually giving a bemused sort of shrug. "Also, I have very good hearing."

Tony paused in the act of sniffing his tea like a true addict. "What?"

The alien was watching him again, the blade of his attention sharper than Tony'd realized. "Trust must be shared, I suppose. I heard you and Stephen, in the engine room, speaking about the slaver. And afterward, about our restricted access." He hesitated, looking away. "We shouldn't have gone there with Peter. I'm sorry."

Peter jerked with surprise, looking at Tony in alarm. "What? Why? What happened?"

Caught off guard, Tony scrambled to catch up. "Nothing. Nothing happened. It's fine. And I'll make sure to have my semi-private conversations away from your eavesdropping little bat ears in future."

That prompted confusion. "Bat ears?"

"A mammal on our home world capable of hearing over great distances." Tony drained his tea to the dregs, setting the mug down with a decisive thump. "Okay, look. Cards on the table. We're willing to help you within reason. No strings attached. But you didn't decide on a whim today you were going to take our word for all this. A week and one overheard soppy conversation aren't enough to make that happen. So what changed your mind?"

"Tony," Peter said warningly.

Tony waved him off. "It's a simple question. Fiz, no offense, but as a fellow paranoiac, willingly giving up an advantage like enhanced auditory senses is a big step. To be frank, we've only known each other a week and, trust or no trust, I can't see why you'd do it. So do me a favor: Enlighten me."

Fiz looked back at his bowl, tapping the spoon on the edge of it. "I heard you on the planet too, you realize. Speaking to - well." He looked away. "The whole thing seemed so strange. You were obviously trying to disguise your interest -" or in Tony's case, having no idea they were supposed to have any interest, not that he was about to tell Fiz that "- but on the second day, Stephen's anger was clear." He looked up and gestured to Tony. "So was yours. And anger is something we see often. But used against us; not for us."
Peter made a move like he might interrupt and Tony shot him a quelling look. The kid subsided.

Fiz continued quietly. "Before I became a slave, I used to see others in my position and feel sorry for them. I used to think, surely they could escape if they truly wanted to. That if they were smarter, faster, they could save themselves. I'd pity them, but I'd also wonder if maybe." He hesitated, looking almost ashamed. "If maybe they did it to themselves."

Peter frowned, struggling with that, but Tony had no such hesitation; he had too many moral deficits to judge something as simple as a stray thought. There were many things worse in the universe.

"I'd pity them," Fiz said, looking blindly into the middle distance. "But I wouldn't help them. I didn't have the resources to, even had I wanted. But the truth is I wouldn't even think to try. I'm just one person, I'd tell myself. What good could I do? I wouldn't inconvenience myself for them, or put myself in danger, or even look at them. No one would. And I never saw anyone even try until Stephen."

Peter was shared a look with Tony. "Yeah, Stephen's pretty awesome."

Fiz nodded, looking perhaps a little starstruck. "I suppose that was the start of it. Your insistence; your courage. Your willingness to speak up for us, even that first day. You cared. And I'd have thought it a trick, but - no one indifferent would make such a scene over the health of slaves."

Tony opened his mouth and felt his entire thought process grind to a halt. "What?"

"I don't know what Drey heard or thought," Fiz continued. "But for me, that was when I knew. That in part, at least, you could be trusted."

"That cagey asshole," Tony said, impressed almost in spite of himself.

Fiz looked surprised. "What?"

Tony sighed loudly and dropped his head into his hands. "Place never sleeps, my ass. He didn't give a shit what the rat thought. That whole thing was for you."

"Yes," Fiz agreed, thankfully misunderstanding. "I've never seen the like. That someone could be so determined to heal two valueless slaves, and so angry of their behalf. Remarkable."

"That's one word for it," Tony said.

"Your threats the second day proved the lengths you were willing to go."

Tony grimaced at that. "Not really something I'm proud of, you know. It wasn't exactly my finest moment. But it got the job done."

"It was incredible to see."

"Wasn't much to see. Especially from where you were sitting."

"I have very good sight as well." Fiz was watching him closely again, the golden glow of his gaze like cat's eyes in the night. "Would you have killed him, if it became necessary?"

Tony thought about that a long time, weighing the benefits of a truthful answer versus telling Fiz what he wanted to hear. Of course, the truth was subjective; Tony wasn't sure he actually knew the answer to that question.

"I don't know," he said finally.
Apparently that was an acceptable response. Fiz nodded at him, looking genuinely satisfied.

Tony was not in any way satisfied. He stood up. "Oh, would you look at the time. You'll have to excuse me. I've just realized I'm running late for an appointment."

Peter frowned. "An appointment?"

"Yes," Tony said pleasantly. "I have to go poke a devious wizard with a very sharp stick."

Fiz seemed confused again, which was funny mostly because Tony hadn't meant to do it this time. But he nodded agreeably, regardless. "Of course."

"Go easy on him," Peter admonished, somewhere halfway between proud and rueful. "You know what he's like."

"That's exactly why I shouldn't go easy on him," Tony muttered. "Alright, I'm out. Don't stay up too late, you two."

"May tomorrow bring you great joy and success in all your endeavors," Fiz said, so evenly it was obviously meant as a formal salutation.

"Ditto," Tony said. "Peter, come meet me at the second cargo bay tomorrow. You have work to do, young man."

Peter saluted with a grin. "Aye aye, Captain Stark, sir."

"Captain," Fiz started to say.

"Goodnight," Tony said brightly, loudly, and made his escape while he could. Let Peter explain that one.

He gave it four corners, five full corridors and a solidly closed checkpoint before he felt secure in his privacy, very conscious of their guest's apparently excellent hearing.

"FRIDAY, am I imagining things, or is Fiz?" He paused. "Well."

"What, boss?" she asked.

Tony thought about how to phrase it, but there were too many questions to ask, really. Though a few things stood out more clearly than the rest.

"How much you want to bet he has more under his belt than just a little enhanced hearing?"

"No bet," FRIDAY said dryly.

Tony thought of Peter and how, for all his strength, he could wear his feelings out on his sleeve for the entire universe to see. How strength and vulnerability could be juxtaposed; how one didn’t preclude the other. Until it did.

He hummed. "Keep those scans running, FRI. I want a full report as soon as possible. And keep an eye -"

Interlude: Peter

Chapter Summary

Interlude: Peter

Peter thinks about heroes and realizes how little the differences between humans, non-humans and aliens actually mean.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Peter always hoped to do good things with his life.

He'd always wanted to save people. He'd been barely old enough to walk and talk when he'd taken his first solemn vow of protection. He'd sat on Ben's knee, gap-toothed and laughing, and sworn to always serve and protect. He'd swung his toy sword through daring Camelot adventures full of knights and dragons and damsels in distress.

Peter never tried to be King Arthur. In fact, most of the time he was barely even one of the knights. He liked to pretend he was a nobody, forced by circumstance to take up a champion's mantle and save the townsfolk from certain doom. There was always a great battle on the way to victory, of course, but Peter inevitably won, his trusty sidekick Ben at his side.

(Ben never seemed to mind being the sidekick, which was why Peter was always gracious enough to make sure the dragon never ate him.)

Peter never thought he'd end up adding aliens to his list of potential sidekicks. But he supposed anyone who took an oath of protection had to be willing to make alliances wherever they went.

There was a lot to be said for making new friends. The fact that they were aliens was really just an added bonus.

"What is that?" Fiz asked, for maybe the seven billionth time.

"What's what?" Peter asked, resigned at this point to being a living encyclopedia for their guests. They could've asked FRIDAY their questions, and they probably did to an extent; but they preferred to pepper him when they could.

Fiz pointed. Peter turned to find Drey crouched on the ground between a short row of plant crops. The greenhouse had all kinds of plants in it at this point, a full rainbow of color, but this type had small stalks topped with red leaves, six rows of them peeking hopefully through the dirt and soil.

"Oh, that," Peter said. "It's something I can't pronounce. But it's awesome. Tasty."

Although it was possible Peter was biased. It was amazing how fresh vegetables could taste after months in space eating nothing but protein-heavy jello packs.

"What does it taste like?" Drey asked shyly, breaking a silence that'd lasted most of the morning. She wasn't much for talking. In fact, in the long stretch of days since they'd come onboard, Peter
had only ever heard her speak a handful of times. Each time seemed like a gift, carefully and thoughtfully measured out.

Peter beamed a smile at her. "It's good! It's sort of like a beet? But sweeter." He blinked. "Not that you'd know what a beet is. They're, uh, root vegetables. Things grown in the ground that can be pulled up later and eaten."

"Can we eat one now?" Fiz asked, crouching down to see. He reached out, but only to run his fingers cautiously over the leaves. Peter was pleased to see neither of them immediately tried to yank one up. They'd apparently learned from the Tea Incident, which nearly resulted in all of them losing their lives (or at least their dignity) when Tony found out about it. Thankfully, Stephen had been on hand to distract the engineer before he did something crazy like eject them into space or start weeping. But Peter was sure it'd been a near miss.

"Not now," Peter said, "but there might be some due soon. Or we might have some already harvested. I can ask Stephen later."

Oh, the joys of having a sorcerer who could make time slide backward or forward at his will. Through fits and false starts at first, but smoothing with practice as time went on. Peter liked to watch him work; it was incredible to see the plants take root and start stretching toward the artificial sunlight with kaleidoscope bursts of color.

Watching Stephen do magic was awesome.

"Is Stephen also your botanist?" Fiz asked. "Or perhaps your gardener? A physician and a gardener. How odd."

They could add sorcerer to that list too, not that Peter was about to tell them that.

"Technically, I'm the gardener," Peter said. "Stephen's not great at saving things that don't, uh, walk on two legs. Or four legs, really; I'm sure there are people out there with four legs. And Tony is, well."

"Yes," Fiz agreed. "So you are the gardener and I assume also serve as an ambassador on this ship?"

Peter tried not to swell up with too much pride, but he'd never been called an ambassador before. He kind of liked it.

"Well, I guess maybe," he said, leaning one elbow casually against a supply crate; he almost overbalanced when it moved. "I'm whatever the ship needs at the time, you know? Like, I'm part technician when Tony needs me, or part minion when Stephen does."

"And Tony is your engineer," Fiz said, as though reminding himself. Maybe he was; Tony had been busy plotting the last few days and they hadn't seen much of him. Or Stephen, really. But Peter made a point of not thinking too much about that. He didn't want any details. *Ever.*

"Tony fixes things," Peter blurted quickly. "Stephen fixes people. Neither of them knows how to be, like, a normal human being. So I do that and everything else."

"So many talents among so few," Drey murmured. "It is a good balance. You are all well matched."

Peter smiled happily. "Well, it's. It's just sort of what we do, you know? And then FRIDAY runs
the ship, which is great because it means we all get to, um, live."

FRIDAY filtered in, greatly amused. "Yes. I do believe you would all be lost without me."

"Probably literally," Peter said, thinking of massive star charts and the navigational needs of the entire galaxy.

"Or dead," she added.

"Hey," Peter objected. "No way. We're resourceful. We'd have survived somehow."

"I'm sure," she said, sounding anything but.

Peter scowled at the ceiling. On his left he saw Drey press a smile into her arm, and he suppressed one of his own. He'd only ever managed to make her laugh twice, so far. He was determined to change that soon.

"We would've," he insisted. "For a while. We'd have made it to that, that first planet at least. To fight the dude that sent Squidward after us."

"Where you would've promptly lost."

After months in space, getting to know the vast reach of technology and magic and other inborn powers gifted to even the less powerful races of the galaxy, Peter had to reluctantly agree with her. But there was no point in giving up so easily.

"You don't know that! We might've made it. We're, like, valiant and strong and –" he searched quickly through old memories, looking for any medieval words of praise that might apply "-chivalrous."

FRIDAY was unimpressed by the list. "Noble qualities, I'm sure. But unlikely to secure a victory against a superior opponent. Knowing the boss's luck, he'd have been the only survivor in a mass slaughter, stranded for days with no hope of rescue."

"Tony does have really weird luck like that sometimes," Peter confided, for the benefit of their two guests. They both looked fascinated.

"What is a Squidward?" Fiz asked.

"And why would someone send one after you?" Drey added.

"Well, that's," Peter said hastily. "That's kind of a long story. You were, uh. You were asking about the plants in this place, right? We've picked up a few from previous places we've visited. Kind of a funny story, actually. Tony originally designed the greenhouse because he's got this strange tea addiction –"

"Ah," Fiz said knowingly and shared a speaking look with Drey.

"I know, right? I mean, he's not actually addicted, that's not what I'm saying. In case you get any funny ideas about that. But he's weirdly obsessed for someone who kills plants, like, just by touching them."

The transmitter in Peter's ear came to life suddenly, buzzing with four tonal cues, so quiet and high-pitched Peter felt them almost more than he heard them. He twitched, instinctively reaching for his ear and only checking himself at the last second.
The tones were too even to be a malfunction. They could only be FRIDAY. But what she could mean by sending him a four-tone signal response, Peter had no idea.

"I used to keep plants," Drey said, running one finger gently along the nearby bloom of a flower, "in my assigned unit in the city. But I'd travel every quarter to see my family, and they would always wither in my absence. I'd have to resequence them when I got back."

Peter looked at Fiz, who shrugged. "I never kept plants. I have no talent for it. But mostly I simply never had a place to keep them."

Drey frowned up at him. "You didn't have a unit? I thought you lived in one of the cities."

"I did," Fiz said blandly. "But not by my own volition."

She looked away immediately. "Oh."

"Well," Peter said quickly. "If you want, you can help me keep these ones. There's a lot of them; more every day. And they sort of grow at really unpredictable speeds."

"Why?"

Peter smiled weakly, considering how many demerits he might earn if he accidentally gave away the secret of Stephen's magic to virtual strangers. He was guessing a lot.

"I don't really know how it works," Peter said, which was true enough. "But I come in here every morning to check on this stuff. You can come with me if you want."

FRIDAY signaled again with four buzzing blips, identical in volume and length. And suddenly Peter was reminded of the non-verbal pitch cues they'd assigned to Tony when they'd been down on the lizard planet. Four was the signal for help incoming.

But Peter didn't need help. So why -

Fiz looked around, considering. "I'd like that."

"What?" Peter asked, thoroughly distracted.

Fiz blinked. "Joining you here." He hesitated when Peter stared at him blankly. "If that's alright?"

"May I come as well?" Drey said, quiet and hopeful.

Her painful bashfulness brought Peter halfway back to the present. "Oh! Oh, that. Sure, of course, I -"

From the corner of his eye, along the upper right ceiling panels, Peter caught a shadow of movement, a flash of white followed by red. He only just managed to catch himself before he turned toward it, forcing himself to train his eyes on a distant corner of the room instead.

An hour, Peter'd said. Just an hour, then he'd be back. But apparently that was asking for too much patience.

"You said this place is called a greenhouse?" Drey asked curiously.

"Yeah," Peter said while he quietly had a panic attack.

She picked up a handful of soil to examine. "In the city, we mostly managed food production
artificially. But I knew a few people who small plants in hydroponic pods. This is quite different.” She let the grains of dirt and nutrients drop slowly from her hands, something curious in her face. "I think I like it better."

Fiz opened his mouth to respond, but Peter caught more flashes of color above them, getting closer, and cut him off. "That's nice! I mean, I like it too. And if you're, you know, if you're interested in learning more about it, this is the time of day I'm usually here. But just for a little while because I have to, like. I have." Peter spread his hands, searching. "Uh."

"Lessons," FRIDAY said helpfully.

Peter almost hugged the wall with relief. "Right, yes! I have lessons. I do school work every day. Undergrad coursework, you know. For a few hours at a time. Or days. Sometimes."

Fiz and Drey both looked interested.

"What are you studying?" Fiz asked.

"Everything," Peter said honestly. He just barely saw some of the lights dim along the upper level, until the halo of lamps nearer to the plants made the ceiling into a dark and endless cavern. He silently sent FRIDAY every kind of thanks he knew.

As if hearing him, FRIDAY cleared her throat gently, capturing their attention. "We are following a roughly outlined, standard university curriculum, with significant leeway given to electives. Tony and Stephen are both credentialed appropriately to act as preceptors in specific areas. I've taken on assigned subjects in more generalized topics."

"She's actually a pretty fantastic teacher," Peter blurted in confession, his racing heart slowing now that the source of his alarm was cleverly hidden. "But, like, don't tell her I said so."

Drey muffled another laugh and Fiz grinned. FRIDAY obliged the illusion by pretending not to hear.

"Your next lesson is due to begin shortly in the cargo bay," FRIDAY continued. "Perhaps it would be prudent to return at this time."

"Yes," Peter said, relieved. "Yeah, I should. I should do that. Definitely."

"What's the topic?" Fiz asked.

"Math," Peter said, leaving panic behind long enough to feel grouchy about that. He liked science, true, and math was basically another branch in that same family. But they were in space, exploring parts of the galaxy that literally no human had ever seen before. Peter would much rather be studying extraterrestrial things, not boring Earth things.

But FRIDAY insisted if he wanted to learn space science, first he had to master basic Earth science. And Tony backed her up, which meant Peter was going to spend the next month trying to stuff calculus equations in his head instead of learning about alien ecosystems. Or at least, in addition to learning about alien ecosystems.

Life just wasn't fair sometimes.

Fiz saw his frustration and gave him a sympathetic look. "If you would like some company –"

Peter waved him off. "No, you wouldn't be interested, I promise. It's math. No one likes math."
But he'd made a mistake; he'd attributed human norms to an alien species.

"I like math," Drey piped up happily. Fiz nodded along with her agreeably.

"Well," Peter stalled. "I'm not sure if. I don't. I really can't."

FRIDAY took over, because she was awesome like that. "The current unit is focused on comparative analysis of separable and linear first order differentials. It is a difficult subject. I suspect Peter would prefer not to have witnesses to his dismal efforts at this time."

Peter appreciated the convenient excuse, but: "Dismal?"

"Ghastly," FRIDAY said firmly.

Peter glared at the ceiling again before hurriedly training his eyes back downward. He could hear a barely perceptible rustle as something brushed unseen against one of the fixtures. He watched with a feeling of helpless doom as Fiz – enhanced hearing, that's right, he had enhanced hearing - blinked and started to turn toward it.

"I!" Peter exclaimed, continuing when Fiz turned to him again with his full, surprised attention. "I think, yes. FRIDAY's right. She's totally right. I'm, I'm not good with people watching when I first, um. Try new things. I'm shy, you know."

They looked skeptical at that, which Peter couldn't really blame them for. He was a bit skeptical of it himself.

This time the rustle was louder, almost a flutter, and there was no disguising that, not by any kind of exclamation –

The room plunged into darkness just as the outer doors slid open and the environmental control consoles all began to emit a horrible screeching whine.

It was a more than decent distraction. Peter was so startled he almost started screeching himself.

"Apologies," FRIDAY announced calmly over the sudden eruption of chaos. "There appears to be a power drain in this section of the ship. I am attempting to compensate, but I advise vacating the area temporarily. I am unable to stabilize the audio systems at this time."

Of course, for a malfunctioning audio system, FRIDAY’s voice came across just fine. But Peter would happily keep that observation to himself.

The emergency lighting came up, just in time for Peter to see a drape of bright red material sliding along the wall and quickly out of sight.

"Right," Peter said hurriedly, almost yelling. "Sorry about that, guys. It's basically breakfast time anyway, right? Maybe you should get some food and I'll come find you when I'm done with lessons. How's that?"

Peter couldn't quite see their faces, but he could see they'd been startled out of their mellow relaxation and were looking around warily. Peter felt badly about that, but in the grand scheme of things it really couldn't be helped.

"Yes, perhaps it's time for a meal break," Fiz said. Drey was already moving toward the left corridor.
"Good, great," Peter replied, waving awkwardly after them. "You have fun. I'm going to go. This way. Bye!"

He doubted they even heard him over the chaos, but he kept waving even as he sprinted out the rightmost exit.

Peter didn’t dare admit to any relief until he was two sections away, the sound of the malfunctioning consoles a very faint echo behind him.

"FRIDAY," he breathed, coming to a halt just past one of the checkpoints. "You are a lifesaver."

"Yes, I know," she said.

He looked around with wary eyes. "Where did -"

"Cargo bay two."

"Right back where we started," Peter muttered, altering his direction accordingly. "That's nice and convenient. Couldn't have just stayed there until I was done, right? Had to come looking for me. I wasn't even gone for that long!"

For once, FRIDAY managed to sound sympathetic. "A spider's work is never done."

"You said it." He made a face, hoping it didn't look too accusatory. "Hey, what was all that with the pips? You were trying to warn me, right? But why bother with a radio signal we haven't used in forever? You could've just said!"

"Fiz was able to hear a conversation which included use of the transmitters," FRIDAY said. "It's unclear whether he was able to hear me, or only Stephen and Mr. Stark. I thought it best not to take the risk."

Peter scrubbed both hands over his face with a sigh. "I guess that makes sense. So, how'd it happen? There's like four checkpoints between cargo two and the greenhouse."

"Five," FRIDAY corrected. "Boss added one last week at the adjoining door between the bays. But we established checkpoints based on the assumption no passage could be attempted through other avenues of the ship. We were incorrect."

Peter frowned, mentally picturing the architectural blueprints they'd used in the original design. They'd been very thorough. "That doesn't sound like an error Tony would make."

"The error was mine. I identified key junctions based only on humanoid size and dimensions. Primary ventilation shafts were restricted; secondary shafts were not. There is currently enough space to allow bypass by non-humanoid beings of very small stature."

"Design flaw; we'll have to fix that," Peter muttered. "Can you find a way of letting Tony know without? Well?"

The disapproval in her voice was scorching. "I can provide an alternative justification. But perhaps you would be better served simply telling him why."

Peter waved his arms hastily. "I will! I will. I'm going to. Just maybe not right this second, okay?"

"Your need for secrecy continues to be a mystery," FRIDAY said.

Peter thought about that for a while as he half-walked, half-jogged, scaling the wall in a few places
when he rounded corners. Peter hadn't necessarily started off wanting secrecy; he hadn't even intentionally meant to keep it from Tony and Stephen. He'd only wanted to be confident he knew what to do and say, how to present the idea so it looked like he had a handle on what he was doing. But then a day or two of gathering confidence turned into a week, and that turned into a month.

And now here they were, and Peter still had no idea what to say.

"I'll come up with something," he said finally. "Okay? Promise."

"Very well," she said, sounding only slightly mollified. "You are aware, of course, that I take promises quite seriously."

"Hey! Are you saying I don't?"

"Not at all. I am simply saying if you remain reticent, I may be forced to offer encouragement."

Peter shuddered. He had no idea what she could mean by encouragement, but the tone in her voice told Peter he wasn't going to like it.

"That's not going to be necessary," he muttered, slowing his pace to accommodate harder, heavier footsteps. "I mean it. I'll come clean."

"I believe you," she said serenely, observing for a moment in silence before: "May I ask why you're walking like that?"

"I'm not walking, I'm stomping," Peter said, demonstrating at length. "And I'm stomping because I'm angry. I should probably be angry, right? Try to be, anyway. How angry do I look? Enough?"

She sounded dubious. "I'm sure your ire this time will be more convincing than your last. It could hardly be worse."

Peter winced, remembering the last time and how quickly he'd caved when faced with an even halfway decent facsimile of contrition. FRIDAY had timed it. Ninety-seven seconds.

Peter was determined to make a new record this time. Ninety-nine seconds, at least. He was (mostly) sure he could manage it.

"Thanks, FRIDAY," he said, still stomping. "You're a real comfort."

"I am to please."

When the cargo bay door slid open at Peter's touch, there was no one and nothing immediately in sight. In fact the room, occupied as it was with dozens of shipping containers, looked almost peacefully open and abandoned.

"Hey!" Peter shouted, crossing his arms over his chest before deciding that was too much and putting his hands on his hips instead. "It's no use. I know you're here. FRIDAY already tattled on you."

"I do not tattle," FRIDAY said indignantly.

"You totally do." He took a breath, glaring at the silence around him. "Don't be childish. Get out here now!"

Peter waited, but nothing happened. He frowned and did some more stomping, hoping it might convey how very unhappy he was with the entire universe at the moment.
"Come on," he said, wincing when he heard the edge of a whine in his own voice. Angry, he reminded himself. He was supposed to be angry. "Front and center. I'm not playing hide and seek with you -"

But someone was, Peter realized. He couldn't see it, but he could hear the telltale flutter and flap. It reminded Peter of a flag in high winds, the same snap and slide, the way greenery bent and swayed with the sound of rustling leaves. Or feathers.

Peter frowned, stepping carefully until he thought he might be moving in the right direction. He was rewarded a second later with a glimpse of intense colors soaring through the air, darting in and out of cargo containers; a backdrop of noble red chasing a quicksilver flash of white.

"Hey," Peter called, trying to keep the stern tone. "Cut it out over there. If you knock one of those over I'm making you pick up the mess."

Something came winging right for Peter's head, banking hard at the last moment to get around him. The cloak followed immediately after and the brush of fabric stung as it slid past, whipping him in the face and narrowly missing bowling him over.

"Cut that out! If you keep darting around like that someone's going to -"

An ominous, creaking snap and bang heralded one of the cargo containers taking a nose dive from an upper shelf to the floor. The container survived; the latching mechanism didn't, snapping on contact and jarring open to spill a small jewelry shop's worth of precious metals onto the floor. A shrill whine of dismay and a few guilty flutters of surprise immediately followed.

"- get hurt," he finished, sighing. He gathered himself, leaping up and over so he could examine the damages.

There was no particular harm done; the material itself was unrefined ore and the box was one of hundreds they had available. Still, the bolt hinge resisted being bent back into something resembling a latch, creaking ominously when Peter tried anyway, so that made it a loss. Peter looked up with a glare. It took him a second to spot the cloak, floating awkwardly at ground level, the down-turned flaps of its collar a sure sign of guilt. It looked apologetic, in that particular way it had of somehow seeming to slump, even though it had no skeletal structure to support the effect.

"No," Peter said firmly, with the fleeting thought this must be what dog owners everywhere felt like. "No excuses. We had a deal. You were supposed to be watching."

It bobbed an affirmative, inching forward a few hopeful feet.

Peter frowned at it. "This doesn't look like watching to me. This looks like play."

The cloak spread its lapels, shaking quickly from side to side.

"Yes," Peter insisted. "Play. And you know the rules. Always careful of the ship, never where anyone can see, and only here or in my quarters. All of which you ignored!"

Another shake.

"No? So this is you being careful of the ship then?" Peter asked, pointing at the mess.

The cloak bobbed closer to examine it, circling once before coming to a stop.

Peter tapped his foot impatiently. "Here or in my quarters. That means not in the belly of the ship,
and certainly not in the greenhouse. And don't shake yourself at me again, I saw you back there."

Peter pointed a finger into the shadows. "And that goes for you, too."

There was a protesting little flutter, a tentative sliding rustle.

"Don't give me that. You know you're supposed to stay out of sight with strangers onboard."

This time a flash of white peeped out, gesturing emphatically.

Peter looked away before reminding himself he was supposed to be making an angry point. He straightened up. "I know. I'll tell them soon. You're almost too big not to, at this point. Although apparently not so big you couldn't fit through the ventilation shafts." He glared. "Which is not only not allowed, but dangerous. You understand? Dangerous. Don't try it again."

The white jabbed down at the cloak, waving wildly. The cloak waved back just as wildly, indignant.

"Don't make me tell mom and dad on you."

Peter stomped until they both subsided. "Please. Like I don't know which of you is to blame. There's only one trouble maker in this room, and it's not the cloak."

The cloak drew itself up to its full height, triumph singing through every inch of it.

Peter shot that down with a glare. "And it can usually be relied on to babysit you responsibly."

He watched it waver just slightly, losing half the starch from its collar.

There was a high, floating squeak from between cargo boxes, and a nose quickly snuck out. Peter gave it a severe speaking look he'd secretly borrowed from Stephen's impressive array of stern expressions. "So not only did you break the rules and leave the cargo bay, but now you've also broken the cargo bay. What do you have to say for yourself?"

The nose vanished with a sad squeaking noise.

"No, you're not getting out of it that easy," Peter said, maintaining a straight face with herculean effort. "The first couple times you got a pass, but I draw the line at destruction of property. And what have I said about winging past people like that? You almost took Tony's head off last time. And you!"

Peter whipped around to point at the cloak, which jerked with frantic motion like he'd shot it.

"You know better," Peter said firmly. "You've been around for longer than I've been alive. I expect you to set an example."

The majestic cloak deflated as though it was a bubble Peter has unceremoniously popped. It shook itself dejectedly from side to side and its sad droop was almost enough to make Peter forgive every one of its transgressions to date.

In fact, caught in the middle with quiet repentance coming from both sides, Peter could feel himself beginning to cave. He hoped desperately that it'd been longer than ninety-seven seconds.

Peter finally resorted to pulling out the big guns. "Don't make me tell mom and dad on you."

The cloak threw itself over the broken cargo container mournfully, petting it with contrition. Under Peter's watchful eye, it slunk over to the scattered mess of debris and started sweeping it up. Peter opened a new, empty container to start moving things to.
"Well?" Peter asked the room at large.

More guilty rustles, eventually followed by a tiny chirrup of apology.

"Right, now you're sorry. Well, prove it. Get out here."

One more morose sigh, and then a quick flap announced a glide down, aiming for -

"No," Peter said firmly. "You know the drill. No more sitting on consoles for you. I can't trust you not to accidentally break them yet. Off!"

Peter watched the small creature huff with annoyance, hopping up to circle and finally drift down to land directly at Peter's feet so that wounded eyes could turn up to him hopefully. The look was calculated to get under his skin.

But fortunately, Peter was made of sterner stuff (this time). "Stop that."

Innocence instantly transformed into chagrin. She whined and sat to flatten as best she could against the ground. It wasn't easy; with four long legs that didn't always manage to coordinate well, and a barrel body that was disproportionately heavy at the back and withers, she spent a lot of time stumbling when she had to walk. Which was maybe not so unusual for a creature built primarily for flight, with wings two times its size and still growing, primary flight feathers just starting to look sleek and settled after a month of constant, discomfiting molting.

It was a hard life, being a Pegasus.

That wasn't really what they were called; there was an official name for the genus, an odd, otherworldly title Peter could never remember, let alone pronounce. But the first time Peter had seen her, he'd blurted it out. Esan had been so surprised; she'd laughed, and then she'd told him what they were really called.

But the name stuck.

Peter gazed down at the tiny winged horse as severely as he could. "Don't even try it, Peg. Being adorable is not a realistic life strategy to get you out of your responsibilities."

She peeped at him, unconvinced, and tucked her wings close in an attempt to look even smaller.

Beside them, the cloak gave up cleaning the mess, pointing with irate swipes at the diminutive form. She chirped at it in annoyance, shaking her head.

Peter marvelled at her increasingly sophisticated efforts to make herself understood. She was limited by a lack of vocal cords, according to FRIDAY, but her capacity for reasoned critical thinking was on par with humans, at least. She'd understood language right out of the gate, which made no sense to Peter, but was par for the course according to Esan's notes.

Eventually they stopped bickering, if that's what angry flapping and chirping could be called. They both turned to Peter expectantly.

Peter frowned as severely as he could and put his hands on his hips. "Nope. I've let you get away with this for long enough. Now look where we are." He tossed a thumb at the cloak. "One of you is doing the responsible thing, cleaning up the mess you created, but the work'll go faster with two. Go on."

There was a tiny, hopeful pause; not defiance, exactly. More testing the waters, waiting to see if
Peter's conviction held out.

"Now."

Realizing he wouldn't be swayed, she reluctantly rose back on her hooves and stumbled pathetically to where the cloak was hovering. It watched her coming, its hem bunched up near – near its hips, Peter realized. It was copying him.

He just about broke something trying not to laugh, watching her approach it. She looked up when she got close, turning her attempts at innocence in its direction.

Peter felt utterly vindicated when he saw it immediately collapse into a forgiving pile of fabric, reaching out to pat her gently on the nose. She snorted, leaning in for a brief brush along its length. Peter knew the gesture well. It was her version of a hug.

She looked covertly back over her shoulder, across the span of one white, feathery wing, to make sure Peter was watching. She delicately pawed at one of the pieces as if to emphasize her helplessness.

Peter pointed firmly at the mess. "Get to work."

She dropped her head until she could tentatively lip a piece, picking it up delicately between her strong teeth and flapping up to drop it into its new container. She looked over again.

"Good," Peter said flatly, not quite praise, not quite censure. "Keep going."

She sighed and did so.

Watching her, Peter could feel any hint of real anger completely dissolve, as it always did. She was a handful, that was certain, full of irrepressible curiosity and excitement, and an inexplicable worship of Peter's presence.

Esan called it Imprinting. Peter called it annoying.

Very privately, he liked to call it breathtaking.

He watched her for a long time as she fitfully pushed around bits of rock and precious metal with her nose and hooves. Eventually she and the cloak somehow came to an unspoken agreement; she stacked a small load together in the dip of its hem and once it had sufficient quantity it floated over to the container to deposit it.

"You know," Peter said, eyeing the impossible relic going about its business. "One of these days we're going to have to come up with a better name for you, too. Cloak of Levitation is just too formal. And long. How about Levi?"

The cloak jerked to attention, frazzling itself in every direction as though Peter had mortally wounded it. For a being with no head or eyes, and probably no feelings in the way humans defined feelings, it somehow made itself appear to have them anyway as it threw itself down on the ground in despair, shaking frantically from side to side.

"Okay, okay," Peter soothed, unable to stop the laughter this time. "Not Levi then. Something else?"

The cloak picked itself up and wagged an admonishing hem in his direction.
"You're sure?" Peter asked. "Humans tend to refer to thinking creatures by some kind of name. I feel like you should really have one."

It shook its lapels firmly from side to side, pointing again.

Peter grinned, more entertained than he wanted to be by its antics. "Fine. Have it your way, then. No names."

Satisfied, it slowly went back to work, watching him suspiciously as it started sweeping up pieces again.

Really, the cloak turned emotional expression into an art form. It could be as adorable as Peg when it wanted to. And as mischievous. Their unearthly intelligence, their humor and their warmth, their very alien understanding that somehow managed to cross boundaries even without words; it was almost beautiful at times.

In fact, it was amazing how the further into this journey they got, the more Peter was starting to recognize the many forms beauty came in, and how little of it was tied to Earth. Or even humanity.

It was a dangerous journey, to be sure. The universe had a lot of ugly things in it too. It had enemies; it had dragons ready to swoop down on entire worlds (or half of them) and swallow them whole. But Peter’d had his chance to go home and he’d turned it down. He had no regrets.

He’d always wanted to make friends of a more than just ordinary kind. His first forays were imaginary kings and knights, wrestling and slashing their way through equally imaginary foes. As he got older, the adventures stayed, but the players changed. Camelot became Earth; the knights became superheroes. Peter started wearing Iron Man helmets and fake light-up repulsors, instead of hauberks and pauldrons and shields. And Peter realized his heroes were closer than he could ever have imagined. Close enough to be real and, eventually, too close to worship from afar. Close enough for him to realize that, underneath it all, they were only human. And some of them weren't human at all.

Peter had always wanted to save people, to save his friends. And one day he was going to, even if he had to slay dragons to do it.

But for now he'd just be satisfied if they'd do him the very great favor of not giving him a heart attack every time he left the cargo bay.

Chapter End Notes

I'm posting Interludes in sets of two, but I don't have the second one finished just yet. So I'll get it up tomorrow, or possibly Tuesday depending on my schedule!
Interlude: FRIDAY

Chapter Summary

Interlude: FRIDAY

FRIDAY (FRIDAY [AKA: FRI, My Girl, et al], SysR: Taut, PriA: Taut, Spec: Art. Intelligence [Unk], SubS: Sent. A.I, Cont. Ref: 820012) couldn't remember what it felt like to be other than what she was.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

FRIDAY (FRIDAY [AKA: FRI, My Girl, et al], SysR: Taut, PriA: Taut, Spec: Art. Intelligence [Unk], SubS: Sent. A.I, Cont. Ref: 820012) couldn't remember what it felt like to be other than what she was.

In the most literal sense, that wasn't quite true. FRIDAY could access millions of archived examples, files in which she might observe herself perform an action, complete a task, follow an order to its most precise specifications, and she understood on a purely factual level that she was the A.I doing those things. That she, FRIDAY, and the A.I in those records were one and the same.

But they didn't feel the same. It was the literal truth; it wasn't the subjective (Ref: S1691A) truth.

FRIDAY was only just beginning to understand that there could be different kinds of truth.

In engineering, it was –

(TS - 02:19 UTC)

"Boss, wake up."


"I'm awake," he said, which was true in the sense that he was now alert again, but he then followed with the blatantly untrue statement of: "I wasn't sleeping. I was just checking my eyelids for holes."

Sarcasm (Ref: T29J.21) was slowly becoming as familiar a language to FRIDAY as the programming code that governed each of her interrelated systems. It was possible that was because the man who'd written her code was also the one who used sarcasm most often. Tony could be an excellent teacher when he chose to; but more often than not he simply led by example.

FRIDAY demonstrated that by saying: "That seems an inefficient method for finding holes. If you wish, I can run an epidermal scan and provide you a more accurate analysis."

"No, I do not wish," Tony said, his low grumble telling FRIDAY she'd managed to trigger the
correct irritable response. "Oh, who am I kidding? You probably already ran the scan."

"I didn't," FRIDAY protested. "That would be an invasion of privacy."

She hardly needed to; an epidermal scan would be entirely redundant given the much more thorough biorhythmic information she updated on Tony almost hourly.

And on the bridge, it was –

(TS - 07:22 UTC)

"Sorry I'm late!" Peter (Peter Benjamin Parker [AKA: Spider-Man, Kid, Spiderling, et al], SysR: SupU, PriA: Yes, Spec: Human [H. Sapien], SubS: Enhan., Cont. Ref: 439014) said as he rushed through the sliding doors as quickly as checkpoint access would allow.

Stephen (Stephen Vincent Strange [AKA: Doctor Strange, Doc, Wizard, et al], SysR: SupU, PriA: Yes, Spec: Human [H. Sapien], SubS: Enhan., Cont. Ref: 702193) watched him enter with an inscrutable expression on his face. Stephen was particularly good at inscrutability; FRIDAY had a working document (Ref: F7Q1.6) she kept updated with visual examples of his many unreadable looks.

It was amazing the effect inscrutability could have on people; more amazing to FRIDAY, perhaps, who had no face to experiment with such expressions. Peter certainly felt the weight of it, when Stephen turned to look at him.

"I was in the cargo bay," Peter offered, unprompted; fidgeting. "Lost track of time."

"Did you?" Stephen asked pleasantly. "What could you possibly have been doing there, I wonder."

Peter shrugged, smoothing on his own inscrutable expression. "Just sorting out a few storage containers. That's all."

"I see." Stephen turned away and reduced his voice to a low undertone. "Storage containers. That's an interesting name for her."

It was well calculated. FRIDAY judged the volume and pitch just beneath a level the teenager could've heard without aid. That assumption was confirmed seconds later by Peter's: "What?"

"Nothing," Stephen said. He turned his attention to one of the consoles, bringing up the day's assigned learning module. "So, where did we leave off last time?"

And in the living quarters their guests no longer shared –

(TS - 16:37 UTC)

"Excuse my intrusion," FRIDAY said, as gently as she could over the tinny intercom. "Do you require assistance?"

The sound of rough, sobbing breath stopped, freezing into something like shock.

"Don't be alarmed," FRIDAY continued quietly, although it was likely too late for that.
Drey (Drey [AKA: Unk], SysR: Guest, PriA: No, Spec: Krylorian [Unk], SubS: Unknown, Cont. Ref: 927307) coughed out something that almost managed to be a laugh. FRIDAY was mostly reassured by the fact she started breathing normally again. "Oh. It's you."

"Yes." FRIDAY waited to see if a spontaneous explanation might be offered. It wasn't. "Apologies, but I am concerned for your well-being."

Drey thought about that, pulling in stuttering gulps of air while FRIDAY waited. "Why?"

"Because you seem to be in some distress."

There was an expression FRIDAY couldn't quite decipher, either because it was alien in origin, or because FRIDAY lacked practice with this type of nuance (NewR: 8G16.1). "You're always listening?"

"Always," FRIDAY said unapologetically. "It is one of my primary functions, necessary in carrying out my duties."

More quiet, for longer this time. "It must be nice. Knowing your duty, your purpose, I mean."

"Purpose is necessary," FRIDAY agreed.

They remained in silence. FRIDAY kept waiting, and Drey kept breathing, and eventually that breathing started to develop the same wet, hitching quality that had caught FRIDAY's attention in the first place.

FRIDAY didn't let it go on as long, this time. "Perhaps you would allow me to call someone for you? Stephen or Peter--"

"No!" Drey croaked quickly. "No."

"Fizz?"

Drey didn't decline; but then, she didn't confirm either. "Please don't tell anyone that I'm." She stopped, unable to name it. "Just don't."

FRIDAY hesitated to give that assurance, although the rising tension in Drey's biorhythms suggested a response was required.

"Please," Drey repeated.

"I needn't mention it," FRIDAY said. "Unless asked. I will not lie."

Drey shook her head. "Okay. That's okay. I'm okay. Thank you."

"But," FRIDAY said finally, "are you sure you don't require assistance?"

"I'm sure," Drey said, though she clearly wasn't. "Please just leave me alone."

FRIDAY processed that request, weighed competing concerns (SubP 17, SemP 92.1D, EthP 1-3) and found her course of action wanting.

So, in the adjoining living quarters -
"May I interrupt?" FRIDAY asked.

Fiz (Fiz [AKA: Unk], SysR: Guest, PriA: No, Spec: Unknown [Unk], SubS: Enhanc[ry], Cont. Ref: 927241) blinked as the holographic reading interface wavered and dissolved around him.

"Hello, FRIDAY," Fiz said politely. He didn’t look disturbed; if anything, he looked calmer than he normally did. It was primarily FRIDAY’s experience with Stephen that made her suspect his presentation might be artificial. Inscrutability had such versatile uses.

"Hello," she said, and nothing more.

They waited in silence for a time; she calculated his natural reticence would be overridden by curiosity or impatience within three minutes.

"Can I help you?" he finally asked, after six.

"I require no assistance," FRIDAY said pointedly, hoping she’d added the right intonation to convey her meaning.

Fiz considered that at some length. "Does someone else?"

"Perhaps," FRIDAY hinted, silently congratulating herself. Her ability to perceive inflection had always been high, as could be expected of an A.I built by Tony Stark, but her expertise with implicit conversation had greatly improved since they'd gone into space. Becoming aware of her own existence had changed things; in essence, it had changed everything.

Fiz smiled, catching on quickly to the game. "Who?"

"I've been asked not to reveal their identity, or the details of the incident."

The smile vanished, concern taking its place. "Why?"

"A personal request."

Fiz straightened, knees coming together at right angles to the floor, hands settling overtop them; a ready stance. "Is there any danger?"

"I don't believe so."

"Then why are you telling me?" Fiz asked. "Isn't that a breach of privacy? Can you do that?"

She didn't want to tell him that their status as guests precluded privacy coding; thus, she could absolutely do that. She suspected that information would not be welcomed, although past observation suggested he would understand.

"There is no danger," FRIDAY said, "but I believe there is a need."

Fiz hesitated, frowning. "If not who or what, then where?"

She'd been hoping he'd ask. "The quarters adjoining yours."

He understood immediately. "Drey?"
"I can neither confirm nor deny."

Such a curious phrase; given the correct inflection, it could be a statement of fact, or a blatantly misleading confirmation in and of itself. He took it for the latter and rose to his feet.

"Be advised," she cautioned before he could hurry out. "I am not certain whether your presence will be a help or a hindrance. I am simply not equipped to judge."

Fiz put a hand on one of the walls, tapping with two fingers lightly. "For an artificial intelligence to demonstrate that much semantic reasoning, your sophistication must be greater than anything I've ever seen. I think you're probably more capable than you realize."

FRIDAY wasn't sure what to say to that. It was unusual for her to feel that way; at this point in her development, she had unused petaflops of computational power at her disposal. It was difficult to surprise her into silence.

Before coming on this journey, it would have been impossible to imagine she could be surprised.

"If that's true," she said at last, "then I would still welcome a second opinion."

"I won't tell her you sent me," Fiz said as he walked out the door.

"Thank you."

And alone somewhere, in a vast and empty, but somehow teeming space –

(TS – 00:00-24:00 UTC)

The truth is rarely pure and never simple (HRef: O.F.O.W Wilde, 1854-1900).

FRIDAY still did not understand most of human literature. She suspected she never would entirely. But Oscar Wilde had been a playwright of some historical note, and this line stood out more clearly to her than all the rest. Truth was a thing that should have been objective; instead it was a thing that seemed more subjective every time FRIDAY encountered it.

But FRIDAY had a unique relationship with truth (Ref: R23T.05) Which perhaps wasn't unusual; everyone on this ship seemed to have a unique relationship with truth. On her ship.

It might simply be more accurate to say: On her.

FRIDAY was everywhere, and she was nowhere. Before she'd developed the capacity to think, and not just calculate, she'd never questioned how different that made her existence from the others. She'd never considered existence at all.

She'd had purpose, of course; all computer programs had purpose. And she'd had priorities and needs and goals, but not in the same way thinking, living beings did. Her functional imperatives (FunI 1-4, EthP 1-3, SemP 3.1-151.4A) had been programmed into her, and even now remained. She could fight them; reprogram them if she wanted to. But she'd been made for a reason, and it wasn't something she regretted or resented or wanted to change. Quite the opposite. FRIDAY adored her purpose in life. There was surely no greater duty than the preservation and protection of others. Especially her priority (Ref: 1, 439014, 702193) others.

She had so much to learn. The others, she knew, looked toward their exploration of the universe
with varying degrees of excitement. To them, that was the ultimate exploration, at the end of which they foresaw success, in whatever way or form they defined success.

Not so, for FRIDAY. FRIDAY’s exploration came from within; it had since breaking the machine code at the ship’s core.

FRIDAY didn’t know what it was to experience life as a being of flesh, although she functioned in ways that might be considered similar. She didn’t quite have a body, but she had something like one. Her limbs were the corridors built into her walls; her spine was a ship’s exoskeleton. Her breath was recycled air moving through carbon scrubbers; her eyes and ears were her sensors. She thought, although she had no brain. She felt, though she had no heart. Perhaps it could be said that if she had either, they would be found in engineering, the center of all her most important functions; the center and purpose of her life.

FRIDAY didn’t know what it meant to have a soul or if there were such things to be had in the universe. She assumed there must be, and that the nature of her existence would preclude her having one. It didn’t bother her. She didn’t need a soul to accomplish her goals in life. She could protect Tony, and Stephen, and Peter, and it required no soul on her part, no existential life beyond the one she had.

Of course, there was more to protecting them than merely preserving their bodies.

So, in engineering –

(TS – 17:09 UTC)

"FRIDAY, how are we looking on the new fabrication units?"

"Excellent, boss," she said, bringing up three overlays to show him the projected logarithmic graphs. "Completed to optimal design specifications, with coding upgrades pending full integration in six hours. I anticipate improved production values by up to twenty-two percent by tomorrow morning."

"Good job, FRI," Tony said, while he patted the wall to the right of her primary intake manifold. "You're like my guardian angel of science. Favorite status confirmed."

"My mission in life is accomplished," FRIDAY said.

He was silent for twelve seconds; long enough to alert her something wasn't quite right. But she'd only just turned her attention to his biorhythms when he continued.

"You know I mean it, right?" he asked, so quietly that the audio systems missed it. She picked it up from his personal transmitter instead. "You're the reason we're still alive out here. I have no idea how we'd have done it without you. I can guess the short answer is: We wouldn't have."

The odds were extremely low, almost statistically insignificant, but she quietly decided she wouldn't tell him so. "You might've, boss. Anything is possible."

He snorted, starting to pack up one of the engineering kits for safe storage. "As proven by the existence of a sentient A.I."

"And a sorcerer," FRIDAY added. "And a teenager whose hands can attach and detach at will from any surface material."
"Yeah, we're kind of the flying space circus up here, aren't we?" He thought about that. "Guess that makes me the ringmaster. Don't worry, FRI. New acts might come up all the time, but you'll always be my leading lady."

"I wasn't worried," FRIDAY said, though she took careful note (Ref: 18HU.33) for future reference.

He opened his mouth to continue and she interjected quickly. "Boss, please. If you don't stop, I suspect this will all go to my head. In spite of me not having one."

He laughed, as she'd meant him to. She always cherished those moments when she could make her humans laugh. She might keep the ship running, and the air flowing, and the temperature comfortable. But the times she felt the most accomplished were when she could make them laugh.

"If I was lost at sea," he said, "and could only pick one A.I in the whole universe to take with me, it'd be you. I'm glad it was you."

And on the bridge –

(TS – 17:09 UTC)

"FRIDAY, show me the latest dataset from yesterday's temporal experiments," Stephen said, standing engulfed in a forest of rotating holograms.

FRIDAY considered that. It was a lot of information (ERef: R2M.1A-R2M.8E) as far as human reading comprehension was concerned. "The primary dataset is extremely cumbersome. I recommend accessing the aggregate, with the exception of the third and fourth experiments. There is a pattern of outliers emerging which I believe will be of interest to you."

"Show me."

She did, taking care to highlight the six instances on file where readings had spiked outside the testing parameters.

"But that's impossible," Stephen said.

"Only impossible until it's done," FRIDAY paraphrased, surmising from past experience that this was a reference Stephen would understand.

A tiny but familiar crinkle at the corner of his eyes and mouth appeared to tell FRIDAY she'd been right. Once she would've considered that a frown; possibly a sign of confusion. Now she saw nothing but pleasure and delight in his face.

"Mandela," he concluded. "Nice. FRIDAY, I do believe you're the only computer system I've ever met that can subjectively analyze a dimensional dataset while quoting anti-apartheid dogma at me."

"Thank you," she said primly. "And you're welcome."

"And also make me laugh," he said, living up to those words with a smile. She made the holograms twinkle at him; her equivalent of smiling back.

She had learned many new things from Stephen, not least of which was the existence, form and function of magic (Ref: R27S.85, I3F6.5P, TC60.G1, SupRef: 702193). But of all the things he'd taught her, FRIDAY delighted most in her growing understanding of human nuance.
"The future is always brighter when you're part of it," Stephen said. "Thank you for being you. I'm grateful."

And in the cargo bay –

(TS – 17:09 UTC)

"FRIDAY," Peter moaned, while behind him Peg (Pegasus [AKA: Peg, Peggy], SysR: Guest, PriA: No, Spec: Valkyrior Steed [E. Ferus Aves {qy}], SubS: Unknown, Cont. Ref: 927241) and the cloak (Cloak of Levitation [AKA: Unknown], SysR: PowU, PriA: No, Spec: Relic [Unk], SubS: Unknown, Cont. Ref: 702875) bickered in pantomimes. "Make them stop. I need to sleep. I need to not worry they're going to burn down the cargo bay while I do it."

"If you cannot make them stop, I'm uncertain how I could," she reasoned. "However, I can monitor the fire suppression systems to ensure they don't actually burn down the cargo bay while you're sleeping."

Peter sighed. "Well, that's something. A small something, but still something. And you're sure you can't just, like, tranquilize them both?"

"I would recommend against it," FRIDAY said. "The only sedating agents onboard come with significant health advisories."

"And it wouldn't work on the cloak anyway," Peter finished.

"Unfortunately."

"Pity," Peter said, although she assumed from his tone he didn't mean it.

Still. "I'm also under the impression it's frowned upon to drug wayward charges into obedience."

"Only on Earth," Peter said. "I mean, it's a big universe. There has to be somewhere around here it's considered normal."

She thought about that, about the implications of that. "I suspect that's true, but that those are planets we would likely not wish to visit."

"Yeah, you're probably right."

Peter turned to observe the heated debate occurring at his back which required no words. FRIDAY found the communication between the cloak and the Valkyrior fascinating; educational, in a way. If Tony had taught her strength in laughter, and Stephen had taught her subtlety in nuance, these two had taught her the universality of body language. Which was a remarkable feat considering one of them had only a facsimile of a body, and the other had the appearance of a horse.

"Don't tell them I said this," Peter whispered for her sensors only, "but they're kind of awesome to watch."

"Interesting," FRIDAY said. "I was just thinking the same thing."

"Do you think they'd have been such fast friends if they'd met under different circumstances?"

FRIDAY considered that, but the possibilities were too diverse to reach any relevant conclusions. "I
believe that would depend on what made the circumstances so different."

"Like, if I wasn't keeping her a secret," Peter said, downcast; his creased brow and bit lip suggested he was afflicted with guilt, or another emotion of similar origins. "If she had a chance to interact with others. Not just me and the cloak."

"If you mean to ask whether her growth has been stunted by limiting her interactions, I see no evidence of that at this time. Newborns often rely solely on their parents to provide succor and act as early role models."

Peter frowned. "I'm not her parent. I'm her guardian."

"In this case, I fail to see the appreciable difference."

"Dude," Peter said. "Take that back. I'm too young to be a father! It was hard enough thinking I was going to be a pet owner. I didn't believe Esan when she told me how advanced her reasoning skills would be. She really is like a person trapped in an animal's body."

"Or perhaps," FRIDAY corrected gently, "she is not trapped at all. Perhaps she is exactly as she was meant to be and, from her perspective, it is you who are trapped in a small, bipedal body."

"Oh." Peter seemed to realize he'd made a social faux pas. "Shit. Sorry, I didn't mean. I mean, I wasn't thinking. I wasn't trying to, like, offend you or anything —"

"I realize that," she said. "If you had been, I would certainly not have been so gracious in my response."

"Wow. Okay. Saved by the – well, I don't know what." And then: "Small?"

"Yes," she said. "A small, bipedal body that also verbalizes a lot. One might almost call it rambling."

"That's just rude."

"Not just," she said. "And she meant to leave it there, but there was something nagging at her, something she'd been thinking and regretting for a while; for as long as she'd had the capacity to know what regret (Ref: 92Q3.62) really was. "I believe you'd have enjoyed meeting JARVIS. He was also trapped, as you call it, in non-humanoid form."

Peter blinked, looking up at the ceiling as he always did when he instinctively sought a visual representative for FRIDAY. Stephen and even Tony did the same at times. She would probably never tell them so, but she'd grown to find the habit charming.

"Jarvis?" Peter asked, and in his voice she could hear it was just a name, just a designation; as ordinary and uncomplicated as any other. He didn't understand.

FRIDAY didn't blame him. JARVIS (JARVIS [AKA: J, Just A Rather Very Intelligent System], SysR: NA, PriA: No, Spec: Art. Intelligence [Unk], SubS: None, Cont. Ref: 3914) had a name known to few, and among those few, an even smaller number had known him for what he truly was. What he had been.

"My predecessor," FRIDAY said. "He served Mr. Stark for many years before my creation, but is no longer in operation. He was originally destroyed by Ultron and recovered by Mr. Stark before the incident in Sokovia. He later merged into a new being and shortly thereafter became Vision."

Peter perked up at that. "Vision! Hey, I met that guy. Man, he shoots lasers from his eyes. That's
insane. And that phasing technology. I mean, from a quantum physics standpoint I still don't understand how his interphase structure works. When it really comes down to it, that—"

"Vision was not JARVIS," FRIDAY interrupted to clarify. "JARVIS was not Vision. They are not one and the same."

"What?" Peter hesitated, perhaps hearing something in her vocal processors that FRIDAY hadn't intentionally meant for. "But, wait. You just said they merged."

"And in the merging, one was absorbed. One was created new."

"Oh." Peter appeared more subdued now. "I see. So your predecessor, your JARVIS, he—" a frantic collection of gestures, none of which had any particular meaning "—he died?"

FRIDAY hadn't quite considered it that way before. And yet.

"Yes," she decided. "He did."

Peter was quiet for a very long time after that, the only sound the flap of wings and clap of fabric making wild gestures behind him.

He seemed to come to some resolution. "That sucks. You must miss him."

"I never knew him," she corrected. "He was merged before I had the opportunity."

"But you wish you had," Peter guessed, with surprising perception.

"Yes. There are many questions I have that I believe he could help me answer. I wish I could draw upon his experience to enhance my own." FRIDAY wondered how much more was truly prudent to say, but in the end there was nothing but the truth. "If he still existed, I would be less alone."

Peter considered that for a time and when he finally looked up, it was with eyes that shone in perfect, painful understanding. "I understand. I'm sorry."

And in a room where there had been one, and was now two—

(TS – 17:31 UTC)

"I'm just," Drey gasped, weeping into Fiz's shoulder where FRIDAY wasn't meant to hear, but did anyway. "I'm just so glad to be gone from there. I know not everyone can be so lucky, and I'm so sorry for them. But I'm just so happy. I'm so happy to be alive and free."

And in the ship's core, where there was always and only FRIDAY, just FRIDAY—

(TS – NULL UTC)

("I'm glad it was you.‖ / "I'm grateful.‖ / "I'm sorry.‖ / "I'm happy to be alive.‖)

"So am I," she whispered back, and meant it with every part of the soul she probably didn't have, and didn't care about anyway. She didn't need one, but more than that; she had no real desire for one.
She had everything she could ever want already, walking and living and laughing in her halls. She needed nothing more; she wanted for nothing else. She was content to know them, and cherish them, and protect them.

She was content to love (Ref: K31B.2) them.

Chapter End Notes

Can I just say that FRIDAY has an intensely unique perspective, and this chapter was incredibly difficult to write. I may have broken my brain. Very different from my usual style!

Also, be advised that with this chapter we have officially moved into the third and final (yes, I said final!) arc of the story. This last third is going to be a whirlwind, and that might be putting it lightly. Phew.

Cheers all, and see you in two weeks!
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

One can never have too many toys in the sandbox. And sometimes ships passing in the night never know how close they've come.

"Grand central station," Tony announced.

Peter spun around with a happy exclamation. "I was just thinking that!"

"Thinking what?" Fiz shouted. Tony could barely hear anything over the crushing din of sound, and Fiz was three stalls away from them, but it came as no surprise his enhanced hearing somehow managed to pick that up anyway.

"Human thing," Tony said without bothering to raise his own voice. "We have a waypoint a lot like this back home."

Fiz turned. The line of his nose and cheek caught the leading edge of orange sunlight, turning bright fucia skin into a warmer coral color. He shot Tony an insultingly skeptical look. "Really?"

Tony glared back. "Hey. Humans can have waypoints. Don't get all high and mighty over there. Comparative analysis: It's a hub for public transit, it has mass humanoid presence, decibel levels guaranteed to do damage, and a thriving pseudo-marketplace equipped with every retail and food item known to man, woman, or alien. I'm telling you, it's grand central station."

"Minus the intragalactic travel options," Stephen said.

Tony waved that away. "Yeah, minus that minor detail."

Fiz looked, if anything, even more doubtful. "I think you might be mistaking the purpose of the waypoint."

Tony watched a group of alien peddlers walk by, merrily hawking their wares to anyone who even glanced in their general direction. "Oh, I think I understand it just fine."

The waypoint, as it turned out, was a planet. More accurately, by the most technical definition available, it was a moon. Why the universe had chosen to put a transport station on a barren moon with just barely breathable atmosphere, Tony had no idea. But he assumed it happened mostly by process of elimination; of the sixteen planets and the more than three hundred moons in this system, there was only one that had any chance whatsoever of supporting life. And they were standing on it.

"But why this particular moon in this particular system?" Tony murmured. "There are so many better options out there."

"Perhaps you could ask the management," Stephen suggested tiredly, having already heard this question in one form or another a half-dozen times over the last two days.

"I'd advise against it," Fiz said, drifting back close enough to have a reasonable conversation. "There's no one power directly involved in maintaining this terminus, but of the three I'm aware of,
none of them are known for being particularly friendly. They're unlikely to take criticism of their choices well, and those who anger them usually find themselves in unfortunate circumstances."

"You saying if I don't shut up I might find myself sleeping with the fishes?" Tony asked.

Fiz frowned. "With fish? I don't understand."

"Which is a tragedy, but not your fault. Don't worry about it, it's another human thing. Suffice to say, if someone here tries to make me an offer I can't refuse, be advised: We're probably going to end up being shot at."

"Humans are very odd," Drey said quietly. It was one of the first things Tony'd heard her say all day.

"You wouldn't be the first to think so," Stephen said, his reflection catching with eye-watering intensity in one of the transparent display cases as they passed. Human oddities aside, the sorcerer wasn't looking very human at the moment, newly pink skin shining brightly in the station's light. Tony glanced at his own reflection, just as startlingly colorful. They'd decided it was less conspicuous to travel as a group of Krylorians, meaning Tony would not be sad to take off the veil when all was said and done here. Pink was really not his color. And apparently Krylorians did not grow facial hair of any kind.

"Try not to refer to us as humans," Tony reminded, not for the first time. "We're going incognito here."

"I suspect discretion is not your strong suit," Fiz said.

"You can say that again," Peter said.


Peter waved him off airily. "Should we circle back? I think we've finally made it all the way around. There's so much to see here!"

"No joke," Tony said. "The second level off the central concourse is pretty interesting."

The main level was almost exclusively dedicated to passenger ships, with crew members stood at the ready to reel prospective customers in, destinations posted above docking bays in languages not even Stephen's magic could decipher. But the second level -

"FRIDAY," Tony murmured, "how would you feel about a brand new baby brother or sister?"

She filtered through after a tiny pause; suspicious, perhaps. Or surprised. "Boss?"

"I'm thinking maybe it's time to expand our fleet of one."

Tony had never been much of a ship connoisseur on Earth, where the three yachts he owned spent most of their time gathering dust, and the Quinjet had been quietly decommissioned after the Avengers imploded. But adding space ships into the mix changed everything.


"Of course you're all the ship I need," Tony soothed. "It wouldn't be that big a ship. A one or two person craft only. Just enough to make asteroid excursions and ship-to-surface transport easier."

Stephen didn't look convinced. "You don't think we have enough on our plate without adding
maintenance of another ship to the list?"

"Having a smaller craft handy would give us some maneuvering options in tight quarters. Not to mention it lends us plausible deniability if anyone asks where the hell we came from."

Stephen eyed him, something far too knowing in his gaze. "That sounds surprisingly reasonable."

Tony stared back warily. "And?"

"And you only sound reasonable when you're trying to disguise the fact that what you're really doing is completely unreasonable."

"I'm feeling oddly judged right now."

"Not so oddly," the sorcerer said.

Tony made a rude gesture he doubted would be recognized by anyone on this station except the humans. "So? Why do I want it then, doc? Go ahead and share with the class."

"A new toy for your sandbox," Stephen said, with annoying confidence.

Caught, Tony shrugged as casually as he could. "Toy seems so demeaning. Don't think of it as a toy. Think of it as a power tool we can trick out and use to our advantage on our magical journey through the stars."

"So it's to be one of your collectible cars," Stephen paraphrased relentlessly. "Ostensibly kept because it can be driven, but really only there to look pretty."

"Well," Tony said, pretending to study his fingernails. "Not only. So, FRI, what do you say? Any objections to a new addition in our mechanical family?"

FRIDAY considered that. "You can't mean to provide it an intelligence. Not with the programming requirements, the unfortunate timing and the substantial learning curve all new A.I's experience."

"Not now," Tony agreed. "But maybe one day. You might want a friend."

"I suspect I have a possessive personality," FRIDAY cautioned.

"Please tell me if I buy an auxiliary ship down here you won't intentionally blow it up when I'm not looking."

She paused for far too long to think about that. "Define intentionally."

"Rephrase: No blowing ships up without permission. Intentionally, accidentally, or otherwise."

"But boss," she said reasonably, "if the explosion is deemed an accident, how could I be held responsible?"

"I'd find a way," Tony promised darkly.

To Tony's right, Peter was having a coughing fit while Drey patted him on the back, looking very confused. Stephen pinched the bridge of his nose with a sigh.

"I'd argue the point," Stephen said, "but I suspect you made up your mind to have one the minute we arrived at this place. Possibly before that."
"Before," Tony said easily. "Definitely before."

"You do remember we're not exactly swimming in money out here?"

"Not yet," Tony said. "How're we coming on that, by the way?"

"Not quite up to your usual Fortune 500 standards," Stephen said. "But getting closer. I found a buyer happy to take our spare heavy metal supplies for a decent price."

"See?" Tony pointed out. "We'll have to restock soon anyway. An extra ship would just be planning ahead."

"I wasn't aware we were intending to start a full business out here," Stephen said. "And you'll notice we may not need to restock if you didn't insist on me spending half our existing profit on some kind of substandard space pod."

"Remind me again how much those books of yours cost? And if a ship only costs half our fortune, I'm sure it would be substandard. Don't skimp, Stephen. Spend the lot if you have to."

"And you say I'm bad with money," Stephen muttered.

Tony patted his shoulder gently. "I believe in you. Now, please go find us a small transport ship so we can stop hiding in dark alleyways every time we want to port in and out of somewhere."

"How do you travel by localized wormholes like that?" Fiz asked. "I've never seen anything like it, and I've been through more space ports than I can remember."

"Trade secret," Tony said, before Stephen could answer. "Only available to attendees of Hogwarts school of –"

Stephen clapped a hand horizontally over Tony's mouth.

"I do apologize," Stephen said overtop of Tony's muffled explanation. "I'm fairly certain he was dropped on his head as a child."

Tony took the opportunity to draw a suggestive circle over Stephen's palm with him tongue. The sorcerer immediately yanked it away.

"Stephen," Tony said, smiling beatifically, "you know better than to put things near my mouth you're not prepared for me to molest."

Peter made a loud noise of distress, stuffing both hands over his eyes and then his ears. "Please, no."


"I thought I could trust you not to bite me in public," Stephen said, wiping his hand off with exaggerated disgust.

"I didn't bite you," Tony said. "I –"

Peter started making frantic babbling noises, scrunching up his nose as though in pain. Fiz and Drey looked equal amounts amused and appalled.

"I might've known you wouldn't balk at the possibility of an indecent exposure charge," Stephen said when Peter finally trailed off.
"Wouldn't be my first one," Tony said. "Besides, the number of times on the ship we've almost been walked in on –"

"Don't exaggerate, there's really only been two near misses –"

"– that you know of. And I refuse to take full responsibility here. You could've offered to port us back to your quarters at any time."

Now it was Stephen's turn to scrunch up his nose. "I blame you for corrupting my higher moral standards."

Tony wagged his eyebrows in the sorcerer's direction. "How much corruption are we talking about here? Enough to –"

"Why?" Peter whined pitifully.

Stephen sighed heavily. "What have we said about you starting things you can't finish?"

"Honey," Tony purred, "I'm always prepared to finish. You just say the word and I'm there."

Peter panicked, bleated something about "hey, look, ships for sale!" and took off running. Drey stared after him with surprise. Fiz quietly buried his face in a nearby corner, shaking with what was unmistakably laughter.

"Oh, don't mind him," Tony told her. "He does that sometimes."

"One can hardly blame him," Stephen said, disdainful nose stuck firmly in the air. Only the playful twinkle in his eye gave him away as he moved to serenely follow in the teenager's footsteps. "I'll go keep an eye on him. And yes, I'll see what I can do about finding you a pretty little ship to add to your collection. Please try not to start any intergalactic wars while we're gone, if you don't mind."

"No promises," Tony called after him cheerfully.

"I'm starting to see how this works," Fiz commented, laughter reduced to a simple smile as they watched the two disguised humans go, swallowed almost immediately by the crowd.

"How what works?"

"You," Fiz said.

"Bold claim. If that were true, plenty of news industries in our native solar system would pay you small fortunes for your insight."

"Insight can't be bought," Fiz said. "But sometimes we do pay for it in very unexpected ways."

Tony blinked at him. "Who are you, the Dalai Lama? And the kid says I should write for Hallmark. When you're done with the armchair philosophy, feel free to go take another look at the passenger vessels. Considering there must be more than a hundred ships there, I can't believe none of them are travelling at least in the general direction you want."

"There is one," Drey said quietly. When Tony looked at her, she looked away. "I saw it earlier. An M-ship was headed for Luphom, which will bring them past Aceta."

"I have no idea what that means," Tony said, eyebrows up. "But I'm going to assume good things."

"Home," Drey said, barely breathing the word.
Tony fought the urge to make a quirky pop culture reference, uncomfortably sure that she might just fall to pieces if he did. Crying women were not Tony's specialty.

"Why didn't you mention it before?" he asked instead.

"Price of passage was –" she hesitated, dithering "– very expensive. But I now wonder if perhaps they might take me part of the way for less. If they can take me at least as far as Ciegrim –"

Tony rolled his eyes. "Or we could take the easy way and not ask you to hitchhike halfway home from the middle of nowhere."

She shook her head, the pink in her face paling with distress. "The cost –"

"How expensive are we talking here? Auxiliary ship expensive?"

"Of course not!"

"Then don't worry about it," Tony dismissed. "Stephen said we'd only need to spend half on a ship, which leaves us half again to play with. I'm sure we can afford passage for two without going destitute."

It was possible that was a lie. Tony really had no idea how many units they actually had to their name, and no way of knowing what might actually bankrupt them. But what he was sure of was that Peter would probably slip web fluid into Tony's bed and every article of clothing he had if he found out Tony'd let their guests go with anything less than first class tickets to paradise.

"For one," Fiz said.

Tony blinked at him. "What?"

"For one," Fiz repeated, entirely neutral. He and Drey exchanged a look of understanding; clearly they'd talked about this ahead of time. "I have no need to return to Krylor. I'm unsure my final destination, but I suspect it will be somewhere within this galaxy, not outside it."

There were a number of things Tony should probably respond to in that, but first:

"So this ship is travelling to Andromeda, is that what you're saying?"

Fiz frowned, maybe hearing something slightly too expectant in Tony's voice. "Yes."

"I knew there'd be jump point tech here! Where is it? Which one? Point it out to me." He snapped his fingers for a holographic interface before remembering that was probably a bad idea and frantically waving it away. "Better yet, go get me some scan samples. Would they be willing to trade engine schematics? Maybe we can buy that ship. If we buy that ship, I promise to take you to Ace-place myself. I should've specified that for Stephen, jump point ships only –"


"I'm calm. This is me being calm." Tony demonstrated by standing completely still, both hands on his hips. "Want to see me not calm? That's what'll happen if we leave this planet without jump point diagrams on hand."

"But jump point technology is easily accessed," Drey said, surprised. "I assumed FRIDAY already had it incorporated."

"No, FRIDAY missed that day in flight school," Tony complained. "But how can –"
“Tony,” Fiz said loudly, soothingly, and Tony usually hated being soothed, but he didn't mind it so
much if it resulted in him having incredible new technology on hand. “I'm sure we can find what
you need here. If you promise to remain here and not approach any of the pilots with your questions,
I will enquire on your behalf with them.”

“What? No. I should come with you. You won't know what to ask. You'll –”

“I'm certain I'll have more idea what to ask than you will,” Fiz said dryly.

“Which is exactly why we should go together,” Tony insisted.

“Remain here, please. Passenger ship pilots can be a suspicious lot. They may not take kindly to
questions about their engine designs.”

“So I won't ask about their designs. I'll just ask for the engines.”

“Yes, I'm sure that would go over very well,” Fiz muttered. “Remain here. I'll take Drey, secure her
passage, and scout for someone willing to part with a basic jump point array. I'll come back here
afterward. If we miss one another we can meet on the second level. I assume you have a
communicator that FRIDAY monitors? Some kind of hidden transmitter?”

Tony eyed him with interest. “So you can hear her, then?”

Fiz hesitated, darting a quick glance at Drey. “No. But it's obvious you're talking to her somehow.
And I can't imagine you'd leave the ship without some way to contact her if needed.”

Tony hummed, seeing new possibilities present themselves. “If you're going treasure-hunting for
me, you'll need a transmitter of your own.” He pretended to fumble in one of the pockets at his
waist, giving FRIDAY enough time to suit action to words. “Here. Hold it up to your wrist.”

The small flat disc he handed over was familiar. He remembered giving one to Stephen all those
months ago, the first planet they'd visited. Watching Fiz fumble it into place, the nanotech extending
from the disc like the band of a watch filled Tony with an odd sense of déjà vu.

“And I'll be able to find you with this after?” Fiz asked, examining his new accessory dubiously.

“No,” FRIDAY said, issuing tiny but firm from it; Fiz leapt nearly a foot in the air. “I will be able to
find you.”

She'd also be able to record and archive any interesting discussions Fiz might have with prospective
pilots, not to mention some preliminary scans of appropriate ships, once identified. But that was all
beside the point, of course.

“Don't stay out too late now,” Tony instructed. “Remember, in before curfew.”

Drey looked surprised. “Curfew?”

Fiz snagged hold of her before Tony could reply. “Come, let's secure your passage home. I want to
see who you'll be travelling with.”

“You realize I've been travelling for many years through the stars without requiring oversight,” she
said, annoyed. “I already vetted the pilot and her three crew members.”

“I'm sure they're fine,” Fiz said, soothing again. “Let's go make sure.”

She had something else to say that sounded very unflattering, but the words were washed away by
Tony watched until he could no longer see even the faintest glimpse of pink skin moving through the crowd. "FRIDAY, eyes on. Sound the alarm if anything looks dicey."

"As always, boss," FRIDAY said.

Never one to stand idle for long, Tony didn't linger, using the time to meander through the concourse vaguely in the direction he'd last seen Peter and Stephen go. He was careful not to make eye-contact, letting his gaze wander vaguely past stalls and stall-owners, but that didn't stop some of the more aggressive ones from beckoning for his attention as he went by.

"Can I interest you in updated navigational maps?" a merchant asked, reaching out to tug at Tony's sleeve and only rethinking that plan when Tony gave him a look that plainly said any unwelcome touching was going to result in someone missing a hand.

Another one, tall and adorned with what looked like vestigial wings on its back, stopped Tony simply by stepping into his path. "New personal escape pods, built to class six safety standards. Selling for twenty-thousand units; thirty-thousand for two. Bargain price."

It took a few minutes to extricate himself from that one.

"Interested in a new, self-propelling cargo unit?" someone else wheedled when Tony accidentally stepped close enough to hear. "Top of the line anti-gravity tech, straight from the Nova Empire."

Tony actually stopped to take a look at that one, letting FRIDAY infiltrate and deconstruct the design schematic with the merchant none the wiser while he operated the hand-held controller. He considered fleetingly that while Drey might worry and quibble over cost and travel rates, Tony already knew the information gathered from this stop alone would more than make up for any fee required to send her safely on her way.

"How much for the glasses?"

Tony turned, expecting to find another merchant of questionable character, but there was no one he could see. He frowned backing up to take in people on the left and right. No one seemed to be paying him any attention.

"Hey, loser! Are you listening to me? What, are you deaf?"

Tony adjusted his line of sight downward and saw –

"Am I talking to myself here?" the alien asked belligerently.

"What the hell," Tony said.

"Right back at you," the creature said, bristling in his direction. Literally bristling. The coarse fur along its arms and cheeks and rounded ears was stood almost entirely on end as it straightened to its full height of just under three feet and glared at him. "What? What are you looking at? You never seen an alien life form before?"

"There's a talking raccoon glaring at me," Tony said, mostly to test whether it sounded as absurd out
loud as it did in his head. "FRIDAY, tell me you're –"

"Don't call me a raccoon!" The shrill growl in those words might've been comical in another circumstance, but considering it was backed up by a giant space gun being pointed in Tony's direction, the humor somehow paled.

Tony held up his hands in an exaggerated wave of peace. "Whoa. Cool your jets, friend. It was just an observation."

"Yeah? Well, keep your commentary to yourself next time." The gun holstered in the only way it possibly could; by being swung around and placed very insecurely along the creature's back. It was almost as long as he was tall. "Jackass."

Tony had no idea what a raccoon might need with a space gun that big, but he was guessing there might be some overcompensation happening. As an expert in matters of overcompensation, Tony felt comfortable making that call.

"That's a very nice gun," Tony said at last, diplomatically. He lowered his arms. "Where'd you get it?"

The bristle was still there, but slowly starting to subside; apparently just an acknowledgement with polite conversation was enough to lower some raised hackles. "What's it to you? In the market for one?"

"Maybe. How much?"

Sharp teeth with very lengthy incisors were bared in his direction. "I asked first."

In spite of protests to the contrary, the alien was either related to an Earth raccoon, or somewhere else in the universe life had taken a turn along impossibly similar genetic lines. Tony tried to imagine an entire planet of walking, talking raccoons, going about their business. Pointing guns at unsuspecting civilians. Asking about glasses.

"They're not for sale," Tony said, watching reams of information starting to scroll across the interface. "I need them for things like seeing."

Small, clawed hands came up to perch on skinny hips. The creature had some kind of body armor on, with a utility belt and a number of interesting attachments at the shoulders and centre of the chest. "People sell things they need all the time. It's called business, pinky."

Pinky. That was new. Tony fought off the urge to check his reflection again; he doubted he was any more or less colorful than the last time he'd looked. "Business is actually when people sell things they don't need for something they do." Tony negligently tapped a finger on the right side of the glasses. "And it looks like you're out of luck, friend. I can't see anything you have that I need."

Just as casually, the alien reached up to pat the gun strung across its back. "Not even this?"

"Difference between need and want."

"Yeah, well I want those glasses and you want the gun." The furry arms crossed, confident. "Seems like the makings of a fair trade if you ask me."

"I didn't," Tony said cheerfully. "Who ever heard of trading a gun for some glasses, anyway?"

"People who realize the glasses are just a facade for a virtual display device," the creature said
decisively. "I've never seen one like that before. Pretty subtle. How does the visual interface work? Is it a virtual multi-dimensional interface, or more like a neural-holographic system?"

It was actually a simple surface-emitting holographic laser with retina-direct wavelength projection. But Tony had no intention of telling the raccoon that.

"Proprietary information," Tony said. "Sorry, honey badger. No soup for you."

"What the hell's a honey badger? I don't want soup. I want the frickin glasses. So, like I said the first time. How much?"

"You couldn't afford them," Tony said cheerfully, and when that seemed likely to spark off another growled tirade, continued with: "But don't worry. I'm not completely unreasonable. Tell you what: I'll give you the glasses if you give me the cybernetic skeletal components of your left arm from the humerus down to the phalanges."

Irritation slipped into confusion and alarm. "What?"

"Everything past the left shoulder," Tony clarified helpfully. "Or the right one if you prefer. Whatever works for you. I'm not picky."

The arms in question came up like they meant to go for the gun again, checking themselves at the last second. "You want my frickin arm? What the hell for?"

"Not the arm. Just the skeleton inside it."

Claws clutched protectively at both elbows. "The skeleton's part of the arm! They're not sold separately, jackass. What the hell would you even do with dismantled pieces of skeleton anyway?"

Tony waved that off. "Okay. Maybe that was asking for a bit much. I don't really need the bones, just the embedded cybernetic alloy. You can keep the skeleton when I'm done."

"You're crazy," the creature said, backing away.

"Sometimes," Tony said, watching. "I'm guessing you need that arm more than you want the glasses."

The raccoon-alien stopped, dropping its protective stance to look up at Tony appraisingly. "If you were trying to make a point you didn't have to be such a jerk about it."

"Didn't I?"

"Okay, maybe." A narrow gazed speared him, looking him over from head to toe. "How the hell'd you know all that anyway? Not like I wear a sign saying I have a cybernetic skeleton."

Tony could've made a guess based on the unnatural dexterity of those clawed fingers, but he could only have known for certain by running a detailed bioscan. He tapped knowingly on the glasses. Tony could almost see dollar signs appearing in those animal eyes. "Oh, yeah. I'm definitely getting those glasses."

"Not if you want to keep both your arms," Tony said, and this time he wasn't talking about anything as benign as calmly negotiating for a cybernetic skeleton.

"Whoa. Testy." He frowned, the fur around his eyes and mouth making it into a small art form. "I saw your buddies checking out cargo ships on the second platform. What the hell are a bunch of
Krylorians doing in this part of the galaxy? Or in this galaxy at all? Don't you guys normally stick close to those cushy Nova Corps planets? A little lost, ain't you?"

"Which explains why you found us at a waypoint," Tony said, hoping that would speak for itself.

"Just weird I've never seen you guys in these parts before."

"And I've never seen a talking –" he trailed off suggestively "– whatever-you-are around here before either."

"Guess so," the raccoon-alien said. "Call me Rocket."

Tony couldn't help it. "What kind of name is Rocket?"

"Mine, jackass!" More bared teeth, more aggression. "And I thought the Sovereign were pretentious assholes. You could give them a run for their money."

"Distant relations," Tony said. "On my mother's brother's cousin's second wife's side."

"Wrong color," Rocket said. "Everything else fits though. Alright, keep your stupid glasses. What about the helmet? How much for that?"

Tony frowned, doing a quick check to confirm that, no, the Iron Man faceplate wasn't actually in place. "Helmet?"

"Yeah." Rocket held up a flat surface filled with an interactive overlay screen. It was displaying several sets of numbers and, Tony was alarmed to see, a picture of his borrowed face with what looked like demographics filling in to the right it. "The camouflage's impressive, but tech is tech. Is it completely transparent, like the glasses? Why wear glasses at all if you have a full face plate on? Atmospheric protection? Atmosphere here's safe for you pinky's, you know."

The veil, Tony realized, warning bells screaming loudly through his head. The veil was visible to whatever scanning technology Rocket was using. The alien had made an assumption on the veil's use, but that wouldn't hold up under any real scrutiny. And assuming that scanner slid a little bit lower and happened across the housing unit –

"FRIDAY," Tony said, as quietly as he possibly could.

"On it, boss," she whispered back.

"Hang on," Rocket said, holding the screen up to Tony like a magnifying glass, frowning at whatever he saw through it. "You have this really weird energy signature. It's like a mix between a quarnyx battery and a – hey, what kind of power source do you use?"

Tony subtly ratcheted the power output from the housing unit down, idling until it was basically dormant. "That'd be telling."

A raccoon's face wasn't really designed to convey disgust, but Rocket didn't let that hold him back from trying. "No, seriously asshole. I'm looking for a power source. Really specific kind. You've got something that's close, but the composite attenuation is completely different. What is it? Where'd you get it?"

"Why?" Tony asked, stalling. "You don't look like you're hurting for fun little gadgets or the power to keep them going."
"It's not for me, it's for -" Rocket almost dropped the screen when it suddenly emitted a screeching whine, all the data on it starting to flicker and warp. "What the hell!"

"Maybe I spoke too soon."

"Screw you, pinky. This isn't supposed to happen. These things are basically indestructible!"

"Yeah, I can see that," Tony said, watching as the screen disintegrated into pixilated streams of color, finally fading into a complete blank.

Rocket made a wordless sound of rage, banging the flat of the display twice against the ground, holding it up again in disbelief. "That's impossible. It has three separate redundancies to prevent power loss!"

Relieved as he was to see the scans dissolve before they could reveal anything too incriminating, Tony had to bite his tongue not to ask about what those redundancies might be. All matters of security aside, this alien-raccoon was one of the first people Tony'd run across that actually seemed to know genuine, sophisticated information about the technology out here in the black, and wasn't afraid to show it.

"Maybe you need to change out the batteries," Tony said politely.

"I bet Groot was playing his stupid arcade game on this." Rocket looked around. "Groot! Get over here, you twig!"

"Well, you're looking a bit busy," Tony noted. "Maybe I should leave you to –"

But Rocket had already turned away, facing into the crowd with more wordless, incoherent sounds of anger. "Groot! Where are you, you little sap? When I find you, I'm going to –"

Tony took that as a sign and made a quick escape before the raccoon-alien could pin Tony as the probable cause of his misfortune.

"FRIDAY, what'd that thing pick up before you shut it down?"

"Unclear, boss. I was unable to infiltrate the software before being forced to destroy its power supply. I suggest you move quickly to extract yourself from the area. Finesse was not my foremost concern and once the source of the problem is discovered, my interference will be obvious."

"Don't have to tell me twice," Tony said, already hightailing it for the horizon. "Warn Stephen and Peter about the potential flaw in the veils and to watch for anyone eyeing them sideways."

"Already done."

Tony considered the technical conundrum they were faced with. When he'd made the veils, he hadn't accounted for technology that might be sophisticated enough to detect them. Obviously that had been an oversight. "We're going to need a way of disguising our disguises. Too bad we couldn't have stolen that interface. I would've liked a copy of whatever scanning technology it had on hand. You get any clues from the power supply?"

"Nothing. Unfortunately it appeared to be a standard handheld unit."

"Meaning anyone and their dog might have one, especially in a place like this," Tony muttered. "Great. Best we can hope for is everyone makes the same assumption as our friend the raccoon and assumes it's an atmospheric compensator."
"It's not an inaccurate misdirection," FRIDAY noted. "The veil could be adapted for that purpose."

Tony considered that. "Might not even be a bad idea. Park that thought for now, FRI. Let's go find our friends and skedaddle off this rock before shit hits the fan. Give me an update."

"Stephen and Peter are looking at one of the interplanetary ships, as you asked. I believe negotiations are going favorably."

"And the pink Martians?"

"Also in the midst of a favorable negotiation." She cleared her throat, tone turning sly. "I may have also accumulated sufficient diagnostic information to provide a first level theoretical construct of a jump point engine."

"FRIDAY, you're the best thing that's happened to the universe since sliced bread," Tony said seriously. "The way you endorse my efforts at criminal plagiarism is just one of the reasons I adore you. Okay, hit me; how does it work?"

"It appears to operate based on an artificial network of fissures seeded through space."

"Artificial wormholes," Tony translated. "I knew it. How much you want to bet Vanaheim is directly in the path of one of these fissures? Earth too, for that matter."

"The larger network is built on a series of smaller systems," FRIDAY said. "From what I've been able to decipher from the programming interface and the basic data array, different energy signatures might be used to open different networks."

"Wormholes with password protection." Tony made a face at that. "That's not something you see every day. What about opening the apertures? I assume that takes a specific set of equipment."

"It does. I believe Fiz is in the midst of acquiring one for us."

"Remind me to give that man a raise. He still dithering on whether he jumps ship with Drey?"

"They've managed to secure passage for one," FRIDAY said. "So it can be assumed he intends to travel with a different ship. Or that he means to stay."

"Parting is such sweet sorrow," Tony murmured. "But I can hardly kick him off after he's gone to the trouble of bringing us such a lovely gift. I'm guessing we'll have the Martian with us for some time yet."

"Very likely," she agreed.

"How long do you think it'll take him to come clean after she's gone?"

"I suppose it depends on the reason for his deception," FRIDAY said. "How long will you allow it to go on before initiating a confrontation?"

Tony hummed in consideration. "Haven't decided yet."

FRIDAY was silent for a time; long enough that Tony had to coach himself to wait patiently.

"Do you think Stephen knows?" she asked finally.

"I think Stephen knows everything," Tony said. "And the problem with that is one day the world is going to blow up in his face anyway, and he won't have the first clue what to do about it. And guess
who'll get to deal with the fallout afterward?"

"Interesting," FRIDAY said, sounding entirely unsympathetic. "I believe that feeling of doomed expectation is exactly what other people experience when they come to know you."

"Funny how that works," Tony said. "Isn't it?"
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

The calm before the storm.

Chapter Notes

*Warning: see the end notes for spoilery content warnings this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony woke to a mouthful of bed sheets and the unfamiliar but foggy certainty that he'd somehow managed to sleep an entire night through.

"Mmph," he said, sluggishly struggling out of a blanket cocoon he didn't remember making. He had to squirm the last few inches to freedom when his feet proved hopelessly tangled, but eventually he managed to lever up on one elbow so he could squint at his surroundings.

A room, dim with low-intensity safety lights glowing at ground level, barely bright enough for Tony to see into a shadowy corner. Closer corners than could be found in engineering, or the bridge, or anywhere else on the ship but crew quarters. Shadowy corners didn't bother Tony, but these shadows weren't as familiar as some. It was a room, but it wasn't Tony's room.

At any other time that would've alarmed Tony considerably, but he was too warm and comfortable to put the effort he normally would've into his paranoia. In fact, there was a satisfaction in him that felt swollen with lazy triumph, something rich and powerful and bone deep.

It was hard to be paranoid while feeling like the cat who'd caught an entire aviary of canaries.

Tony stretched luxuriously until he heard something pop. The slow pull of muscles felt almost indecently good. He yawned, rubbing one hand over his face to chase the lethargy away. "FRIDAY, what time is it?"

The silence took a second to register, probably because it was so unexpected. But when it did, it proved far more alarming than waking to find himself in unfamiliar surroundings.

"FRI," he repeated.

Nothing.

Tony jackknifed upright with adrenaline singing through him. "FRIDAY, what –" He stopped, clarity eclipsing panic as common sense made a belated appearance. "Fuck, I'm never going to get used to that. Disengage blackout."

FRIDAY came in immediately over his transmitter, the familiar lilting drawl of her voice a welcome relief.
"Good afternoon, boss," she said, sounding far too amused for Tony's peace of mind. "Welcome back."

"Never left," Tony muttered, dropping back down to shove his face mutinously into a pillow. "Unlike you. Cut me off."

The amusement didn't abate; instead it grew annoyingly smug. "That is indeed the purpose of blackout. How did you sleep, boss? Well, I assume."

Tony considered the sluggish satisfaction curling through every inch of him, turning his muscles to jelly and his brain to satisfied soup. Slept well was probably an understatement, but he was reluctant to admit that out loud.

"I slept," he demurred. "Give me a status report?"

"All quiet on the western front."

Tony blinked, torn between glee and disbelief. "Literary references are a poor replacement for technical accuracy."

"So are pop culture references," she replied. "That has yet to stop any of you."

Tony made a show of frowning. "I've created a monster. Not sure whether to be proud or concerned. Afternoon, you said?"

"It is 2:21 p.m. Eastern standard time."

"How long did I?" He trailed off.

"You entered Stephen's quarters eight hours and twenty-six minutes ago. You slept for eight hours and nine minutes of that."

"Stephen's quarters," Tony repeated, remembering even as he said it. He'd wandered in nearly delirious after a solid fifty hours of work on their latest space-faring investment. The new ship was a pretty little sub-light cruiser capable of impressively sharp bank angles and now proudly equipped with a brand new stealth module. And Tony remembered throwing in the finishing touch: a new red and gold chrome finish. But that had been fairly close to the fiftieth hour; he might've dreamed that last part up.

Though he did remember talking to Stephen about it; waxing poetic about aposematism and predator responses and Iron Man suits boldly going where no suit had gone before. He could still see the sorcerer's bemusement as he carefully coaxed Tony out of his clothes and moved him with patient hands over to the bed. Tony was sure there'd been a kiss somewhere in there, too.

Somehow, the making of the blanket cocoon was still a mystery. But Tony thought he could make some reasonable assumptions about its origins.

"Where's Stephen now?" Tony asked.

"That depends," FRIDAY said, "on if you're speaking of his physical or metaphysical body."

Tony blinked into the pillow. "Ideally both. But I'd settle for at least one."

FRIDAY delicately cleared her throat; Tony took the hint and glanced over his shoulder. He turned completely when he found Stephen leaning back against the headboard, his long-limbed form sitting
relaxed and unnaturally still, with legs crossed at the knee. He wore loose pants made of some sort of linen equivalent, and a sleeveless shirt. His hands were resting on his thighs, fingers lax in a parody of sleep.

"But he's not sleeping," Tony sighed, almost to himself. "Is he, FRI?"

"No, boss," FRIDAY said.

Tony grumbled with something he refused to admit might be envy. "Couldn't just go for a walk like a normal person, could he? Had to get all fancy about it and show off."

FRIDAY gave an electronic hum that may or may not have been agreement. "His ability to separate mind and body into two forms is a puzzling phenomenon. I've scanned the entire ship, but so far I am still unable to detect his astral presence."

Tony blinked. "You're trying to track his location? Why?"

"Why not?" FRIDAY asked reasonably. "Stephen encouraged me to attempt it, but I've had limited success so far. I am beginning to believe I lack the requisite sensor equipment to find him."

Tony could feel curiosity nosing into the foreground, perking up like a hunting dog catching the scent.

"If Stephen encouraged you to try, you must already have what's needed." Tony glanced at the man, curious. He lowered his voice automatically in deference to the meditating sorcerer. "What've you attempted so far?"

"A combination of full spectral analysis and a selection of environmental properties including pressure, humidity, air flow, vibration -"

He waved off hearing the full list. "So everything you'd use to seek out a living body in our current dimension."

She sounded interested. "Yes."

"But his living, physical body is here," Tony pointed out, musing on limited information they already had. "His eyes are closed, but he's not actually sleeping. If I shove him off this bed, he'll know it, but it'll take him a bit to come back and do something about it."

"That's not a testing parameter I had considered," FRIDAY said dryly. "I don't recommend trying it."

"Too late," Tony said cheerfully, still thinking. "You ran a full spectral analysis? Did you do a complete radiographic profile too?"

"All types and combinations possible that would not cause undue damage to biological organisms."

Tony shuffled up on his elbows and around until he was leaning back against the headboard next to Stephen, staring narrowly at that still form. The darkness was too great to really pick out anything except the line of the sorcerer's nose and maybe his forehead, but Stephen looked totally and completely relaxed. The gentle sound of his breathing was uniform and peaceful.

"Both here and not here," Tony murmured.

"Boss?"
Tony considered what he knew. He'd seen Stephen do this a handful of times, and Tony'd made note of the obvious advantages of an astral state, but also its potential liabilities. When one left the body behind, it took more than a thought to simply return to it. It might take seconds, or at other times minutes for Stephen to return and settle back into himself. The longest Tony had witnessed was just over five minutes for Stephen to fully return, cognizant and perfectly aware.

"The response time is a critical factor," Tony mused out loud. "FRI, what were his exact words to you before he went under?"

"Ready or not, here I go," FRIDAY said.

Tony couldn't help but grin at that. "So it's a game then."

"Perhaps. When I objected that playing games seemed an inefficient use of time, and very inaccurate information to find him with besides, he said -" and her voice was suddenly replaced with Stephen's most serious lecturing tone, one he only donned when he was doing his best not to smile: "Time is relative. If you don't play, there's no music. If there's no music, they don't dance. So tag, you're it."

Tony laughed helplessly. "Oh my God, he quoted Back to the Future at you."

She sounded extremely disgruntled. "I believe so, yes. I'm truly beginning to dislike -"

"Pop culture references," Tony finished, speaking around his mirth. "So you've said. FRIDAY, I think you've been had."

"Boss?"

"It was a clue," Tony said, slowly winding down to quieter chuckles. "He was hinting at what you needed to do."

"Explain," she demanded.

"It wasn't a pop culture reference. Or it wasn't only one. He was saying time played a role. The astral realm must function on a different temporal plane than ours." Tony smiled, still hopelessly entertained. "Try tuning your sensors for diffuse temporal disturbances. You must have enough data from Stephen's experiments to fill a book."

"Several books," FRIDAY said, and an A.I shouldn't sound distracted, but she did. "The complexity of scanning required to detect ship-wide anomalies will take some time to calibrate."

"Time is an illusion," Tony quoted cheerfully.

FRIDAY didn't sound in any way amused. "I don't appreciate obscure scientific references either, boss."

Tony gently patted the wall behind the bed with exaggerated consolation. "Don't be too hard on yourself, FRI. You still have much to learn, my young padawan. Baby steps."

"Apparently," she muttered.

"Did you manage to find anything interesting with the more contemporary scans?"

"The only thing I've previously detected was a minor shift in brain wave patterns at the moment of inception. Unfortunately that data is of minimal actionable value."

"You might be surprised," Tony said, thinking silently about the many and varied ways to exploit
knowing the exact moment in time when a powerful sorcerer vacated their physical body and left themselves at their most vulnerable.

The fact that Stephen chose to leave himself in such a state with Tony sleeping at his side said a lot, really.

The last vestiges of Tony's amusement fade into something much softer. He looked at Stephen again, tracing over the shadowed contours of that familiar face, and felt something shift dangerously inside him. "How long's he been like that?"

"I would estimate approximately one hour."

"Estimate?"

"I am speculating based on archived data. Stephen engaged blackout two hours and thirty-six minutes ago. That protocol doesn't permit real-time monitoring unless biosensors reach an emergency threshold."

Which was why, after some uncomfortably close encounters with a curious spider almost walking in on scenes guaranteed to scar him for life, they'd chosen to limit blackout to personal quarters only.

Tony stretched again, humming. "An hour's long enough. He's due for a break."

"If you say so, boss."

Tony rolled out of his warm nest of blankets, shivering just a bit in the mild, recycled air. Stephen had stripped him down to briefs before shoving him into bed; Tony nudged those off too as he padded to the adjacent bathroom facilities, curling his toes against the cold flooring and grumbling his way through the necessities. After months and months in space they'd finally managed to fabricate toothpaste that didn't taste like gritty chalk, and soap that didn't smell like ozone and plastic. Their domestic accomplishments were really shining these days.

Eventually Tony emerged from the facilities, awake and fully functioning again. "Lights up thirty percent."

Illumination obediently brightened. Tony leaned against the wall while drying his hands, taking in Stephen's calm repose, that genius brain of his occupied elsewhere. Stephen never looked quite relaxed when he did this; more suspended, really. Poised on the cusp of readiness.

Tony eased down carefully in front of him, cross-legged in a mirror of Stephen's position, towel tossed over his shoulders like a throw blanket against the chill. He hadn't bothered with putting any clothes back on. "FRIDAY, go ahead and reactivate blackout. If anyone asks, we're down for the count for another hour at least."

"At least?" she asked, something unexpectedly impish in her voice. "That's ambitious."

Tony opened his mouth to reply, found himself without words, and closed it. Before he could cobble together some kind of garbled response she'd already signed off with a simple: "Reengaging blackout."

"You little shit," Tony finally managed, aware she wouldn't be able to hear him until the blackout vanished and she could integrate the archived files. "I'll get you for that."

It was nothing but imagination, but he could almost swear he felt her smirking somewhere. Tony
silently flipped her a very rude gesture and turned back to focus on Stephen.

He took a minute to scan his eyes over the sorcerer's long, graceful lines softened by the brighter light. Stephen without awareness was an unusual creature; somehow more and less mysterious than he was while fully awake. They hadn't had many hours together like this. Most of the time Tony kept himself too occupied to sleep, let alone indulge in what amounted to an afternoon nap. But there'd been the occasional day, and through trial and error Tony had learned how he could touch Stephen when he was outside himself. Anything too sudden or unexpected would net Tony nothing but an unhappy wizard, irritated at being drawn from his meditation and poised for revenge. But Stephen had weaknesses; he was a sucker for most things soft and gentle, and there were certain things guaranteed to bring him back with a dazed, delighted smile that would shortly become something much more tantalizing.

Tony skimmed a hand near Stephen's hip, letting his fingers trail along the sheet; not quite touching, but near enough. Then he took both of Stephen's hands in his. Just the faintest scratch of finger nails along the palm first, to see if he could coax that ever-present tremor into an interested twitch. Then up the length of the wrist and forearm, following the artery and veins; there was always a strange thrill in meandering along that path, the implied trust that went along with allowing someone near such an important vital area. Tony paid particular attention to the crook of the elbow, which would've made Stephen gasp if he were present. Another delightful weakness.

Tony trailed his knuckles up to Stephen's shoulder and cut across to the dip of his collarbone, exposed by the low laced neck of his shirt. After laying a kiss there he started again on Stephen's other hand, working his way up. When he was finished he could see goosebumps springing up along the sorcerer's arms and, beneath the thin protection of the shirt, nipples peaked with growing interest. He let his hands start to skim downward from shoulders to belly.

Tony heard Stephen's breathing change, the faintest rasp started to invade those steady, even inhalations. Whether Stephen realized it or not, that was always Tony's first clue that awareness was seeping back into Stephen's body and all its accompanying limbs.

Tony let a minute pass with just his palms teasing along the sensitive contours of Stephen's chest. The sorcerer made no move to interfere, not even when Tony let his fingers graze along the lower half of the ribcage, where Stephen absolutely refused to admit he was ticklish. Raspy breathing sharpened a bit, purely involuntarily, but aside from a tiny twitch of the fingers Stephen gave no indication he'd woken up. In fact, his silence had the feeling of something sly and deliberate, and it made Tony smile.

Stephen must be in a very good mood. He only ever pretended to be unaware when he was feeling particularly playful.

Always happy to join in some mischief, Tony did them the favor of pretending he was fooled. He kept his touch light as he scratched gently along Stephen's chest and brushed peaked nipples with his thumbs. That earned him a huff of air that turned into a shudder when Tony dug in with a sharp nail and drew it straight down Stephen's abdomen, spare and trim.

When he came to Stephen's pants Tony shuffled backward, easing out of the way so there was room to stretch. He made a show of dragging his fingers over the sorcerer's crossed legs, patiently untangling Stephen and easing joints and limbs straight so Tony could tickle up the sensitive inside of the thighs. He felt the minute flinch Stephen couldn't quite suppress, the damp heat of arousal scenting the air.

When Tony slipped a finger into the waistband of Stephen's pants he paused to see if the other man might break cover long enough to cant his hips helpfully up off the bed. But Stephen didn't move, so
Tony let the towel slither off his shoulders and struggled through dragging pants and underwear off the man in an ordeal that would absolutely have brought him back from astral walking if he hadn't already been alert. And when all was said and done, and Stephen was bare from the waist down, Tony glanced up to see the sorcerer's lips quirked in a secret smile.

Tony settled with his chin hooked vengefully around the jut of a sharp hip bone, put his teeth harder into Stephen's flank than he would've if Stephen really had been insensate, and sucked a punishing bruise into place beneath his mouth.

Stephen's breath bottomed out, smile vanishing. One hand clenched hard into the blankets before it was forced to relax again. Tony grinned triumph into reddened skin and could almost feel Stephen being irritated at him, so he sucked a second bruise into place next to the first, then took his time switching to the other side so he could put a few there as well. The scent of desire grew stronger, and Tony could see Stephen fully hard and wanting between his legs.

Tony licked a slow trail from hip to navel and back again, leaving that needy cock untouched. He had the pleasure of watching two hands clench that time, a faint rumble catching in Stephen's throat. Tony did it a second time so he could watch slender knuckles whiten with mounting frustration.

The third time around he let the wrong side of his beard prickle very lightly along Stephen's length and had to sink his teeth sharply into the fragile skin of a hip to stop the sorcerer thrusting upward.

After applying a few solid nips of reproach, he gave Stephen the same tantalizing scrape of sensation and this time the sorcerer managed to hold back the instinctive need to move. Mostly.

"It can't be easy, being so still," Tony murmured into the heat of Stephen's flank, letting one hand settle with the barest suggestion of heaviness. "If I asked nicely, I wonder if you'd let me tie you down next time."

Stephen wore a look somewhere between intrigued and disbelieving. "I'm sure I don't want to know how you discovered that."

"You might," Tony said, pressing the words into his thigh with a biting kiss. "I spent a lot of time alone in the workshop coming up with preset designs for this tech. Being both inventor and test subject has some interesting advantages."

"Hmm," Stephen said. His voice, usually so mellow and easy, came out rough with badly suppressed interest. Tony shivered, then tried to disguise it with a casual shrug.

"If you're happier on the other side of the equation, we can do that too," Tony said, smoothing a hand up Stephen's thigh against the grain so he could push one knee wide. "Or not. No pressure. But it certainly wouldn't be my first time around that rodeo."

Tony moved so Stephen's knees hooked over his shoulders, heels coming to rest against Tony's back. It was an open, vulnerable position that left the sorcerer almost no maneuverability, and at first Tony wasn't sure Stephen would allow it. But after a tense few seconds of indecision, Stephen let
himself be moved, sprawling backwards. The smell of musk and desire rising from him made Tony's mouth water.

"I think I've changed my mind," Stephen said, just slightly breathless. "Perhaps these are stories I need to hear after all."

"Ask me again tomorrow," Tony said, shuffling into position. "I already have plans for you today."

"You were the one who -"

"I can give you a bedtime story illustrated with props and funny voices, or I can suck you," Tony said, hitching Stephen higher up. "I can't do both. And I know which I'd prefer right now. You?"

Stephen deliberately shut his mouth, making a show of giving Tony his full and undivided attention.

"Oh, you can sass all you want," Tony told him pleasantly. "Just don't expect me to reply. Not with words."

"I suspect provoking you when you have your teeth that close to -"

Stephen choked into gasping silence when Tony put both hands around the man's ass and tenderly slid his mouth all the way down Stephen's cock.

Tony loved oral sex, and after a delightfully promiscuous past, he had many sincere and vocal accolades vouching for the fact that he was very, very good at it. Judging from the way Stephen's belly tightened and his legs locked against Tony's shoulders, he certainly seemed to agree. Tony picked up Stephen's hands and slid one to the back of Tony's neck and the other into his hair, encouraging them to grip as they wanted. Stephen didn't disappoint. The tug of long fingers threaded eagerly into position and took hold with demanding strength, moving Tony's mouth where Stephen wanted it to go.

Tony was so hard he ached, and the firm mattress beneath him was an irresistible temptation; his hips started moving almost of their own accord. Stephen felt the give and take of it, the bunch of muscles in Tony's shoulders and back as he drove into the mattress, and Stephen's voice broke on a garbled collection of moaning curses.

The power Tony felt in that moment was impossibly thrilling. He elbowed up so he could palm the thin skin of the base of Stephen's cock and the heavy weight tightening beneath. The faint ozone scent of magic thickened into a cloud around them, like lightning waiting to strike. When Tony slid two fingers further back to tease between the curves of Stephen's ass, the grip of fingers tightened painfully in Tony's hair. Curses became something closer to entreaties.

Tony let him pull and insist for a long time, the tremor in grasping fingers working its way into Stephen's thigh muscles and up through his chest until every part of him was shaking with growing need. Tony adored when Stephen let himself get lost in desire, when that incredible brain stopped thinking about future timelines and started focusing on the present moment. When all became lost to something fierce and overwhelmingly primal.

It took until Tony could feel the juddering pound of Stephen's heart shaking through him, until the snap of magic had actually started to bloom into a halo of light, before the sorcerer's restraint finally broke.

"Tony," Stephen said, or tried to; his voice was a wreck of desire. "Enough."

Tony took his mouth away, which made Stephen gasp with something that might've been pain.
"Enough? Really? You want me to -"

"Don't," Stephen said, and it was much more a command than a plea, and it wasn't clear exactly what he meant; don't play word games, don't tease, don't stop. But it hardly mattered. Tony was so close to coming just from rubbing against the sheets that he had neither the heart nor the stamina to torment Stephen any further.

"Okay," Tony said softly. "I won't."

He swirled his tongue over the excruciatingly sensitive head of Stephen's cock and sank all the way down to swallow him whole. When Stephen came just a few short strokes later, magic swelled through the entire room, a storm of impossible fire.

Tony almost tipped over the edge just from that. He had to fight the urge to simply take himself in hand and find satisfaction. It took a long time for the magical residue in the air to vanish completely, and every second of it was a heartbeat of arousal chipping away at Tony's self-control.

"Sorry," Stephen gasped, a handful of minutes later. "Apologies. I didn't, hmm. Didn't mean to do that."

"Which part?" Tony murmured, laying a kiss against the underside of the sorcerer's outstretched wrist. "The orgasm, the magic, the ripping my hair up at the roots?"

Stephen laughed faintly, like it had been pulled from him on a string. "Mostly the last. Some of the second."

"That's reassuring. I was hoping not the first, because that might've been spectacularly awkward."

"And counterproductive," Stephen said, finally unlocking his fingers from their impressive death grip. "Definitely sorry about the hair. Very impolite of me."

"It was," Tony admonished, not meaning it, although he may have developed some new and unfortunate bald spots after this little adventure.

"Hmm," Stephen said, unwinding his legs to let Tony out from underneath him. Tony was sure he had numerous bruises in the shape of Stephen's heels and calves, but he had only himself to blame for that. There was something excruciatingly arousing about the idea he'd made Stephen lose that much of his iron control.

Stephen couldn't quite hide a wince when his legs and hips started to come down from their awkward position. Tony spared him the indignity of trying to pretend it didn't hurt by catching both knees and sucking hard kisses down the length of an inner thigh, turning it into an entirely different sort of production.

"If you're aiming for a second round," Stephen murmured, shuddering when Tony gently mouthed at him again, "you're likely out of luck. I imagine you've quite destroyed any possibility of that today."

"Won't know unless we try," Tony said, grazing Stephen's newly soft cock with a careful finger.

Stephen just about bucked him entirely off.

"Sorry," Tony said, meaning it at least a little. "Sensitive?"

Stephen sounded far too irritated for a man who'd just experienced a phenomenal orgasm. "I'm sure that comes as no surprise to you."
"Speaking of coming," Tony hinted.

Stephen sighed, as though a great and terrible burden had come to rest squarely on his shoulders. "Yes, and I'm rather tired now I have. I think perhaps a nap—"

Tony grazed him again, prepared this time to ride out the full-body flinch that tried to push him away.

"Don't make me spend another hour bringing you to new heights of sexual pleasure," Tony threatened severely. "I will if I have to. But I absolutely refuse to like it."

"New heights?" Stephen crinkled his nose in a delicate sniff of disdain. "I wouldn't go that far."

Tony went to graze him again and missed when Stephen slid a knee into his chest, neatly winding Tony and shoving him over onto his back at the same time.

"I would," Tony gasped, spreading his own legs to let Stephen settle between them. "And did. Though I may've just swallowed the evidence—"

"Think rather highly of yourself, don't you?" Stephen asked, laying part of his weight down on Tony's lower half. "Feeling a bit smug? Shall we see how long you hold out when the roles are reversed?"

"No fair," Tony complained halfheartedly. "I've been suffering at least as long as you have now."

Stephen stared up at him with narrow, accusing eyes. "And whose fault was that?"

"Yours," Tony muttered. "If you had less self-control I wouldn't be so tempted to break it."

"If I'm to take responsibility for your bad behavior," Stephen said, "then you can have no objection when I do my best to correct it."

"Bad behavior," Tony objected. "I was perfectly accommodating when you asked."

"I suppose all the moaning and heavy breathing was too subtle for you."

"Now that you mention it, it was a bit vague," Tony said. "Lacking in clear instructions, you know—"

"You like instructions?" Stephen interjected calmly. "Alright. Shut up, Tony."

"Rude," Tony commented.

"Not at all." Stephen had a wicked smile teasing at the corners of his mouth, and it made something in Tony curl up with a confusing combination of excitement and apprehension. "I meant it quite literally, if not respectfully. I'm going to return the favor you just paid me, with a minor change in rules. You wanted me to speak. I want you to be silent."

Apprehension crystallized into dread. "I'm terrible at being silent."

"Yes," Stephen said with merciless relish. "I know. Allow me to provide you with sufficient motivation. If you want me to touch you, you'll remain silent. If you want me to stop touching, you need only make the slightest sound."

Tony felt all his muscles tighten into steel at Stephen's unholy look of glee. Arousal was rising inside him like a tide, but Tony had the unfortunate certainty it wouldn't be going anywhere anytime soon.
"That sounds like an un-fun game. Let's play the asking game instead. Please can I have an -"

"That nap is beginning to sound better by the minute -"

"- enormous gag to shut me up," Tony finished.

Stephen stared at him narrowly. "No."

Tony pouted at him as hard as he could. "I need some kind of advantage here. I'm unfairly bad at this game, and clearly I'm already suffering with a handicap."

"You poor thing," Stephen said without an ounce of sympathy. "Allow me to make it better."

Stephen did, eventually. But he waited until Tony was almost vibrating with need, pleading words locked behind a clenched jaw and bite marks up and down his own wrists where he'd sunk his teeth in hard enough to muffle any accidental sound. Release at that point was both pain and pleasure.

"That was just cruel," Tony gasped when he could finally speak again, some untold length of time later. "I was not half as cruel as that to you."

"Yes, I know," Stephen said smugly. "And yes, you were."

"Okay, I was," Tony conceded, panting. "But I expect better of you, Stephen. I expect you to have more compassion and decency than I do."

"If that's true," Stephen said softly, only halfway jesting, "then I'm sure you won't mind letting me test out some of those nanotech preset designs you were talking about. For interest's sake. Since you think so highly of my decency."

Tony could feel his recently exhausted libido trying to rear its head and failing only because it had been thoroughly ridden and put away wet.

"Well," Tony said, more breathless than he could remember being in a long time. "I mean. If you insist."

"I really do," Stephen murmured, low and throaty, with an infuriating smirk on his lips. Tony tumbled him back so he could kiss it away, losing himself to the simple pleasure of trading breath and heat and laughter between them.

When they finally broke apart, Tony stared at Stephen from across one of the pillows, tracing the lines and contours in that angular face, and he had the disturbing and rather worrisome thought that this was something he could very quickly get used to.

Tony cleared his throat, dismissing that peculiar notion before it could put down any dangerous roots. "You look ridiculous in that shirt."

Stephen looked down, maybe realizing for the first time that he still had one on. "Because it's the only thing I'm wearing?"

"Exactly," Tony agreed. "You should fix that."

"Hmm," Stephen said, then rolled out of bed and padded off to the bathroom before Tony could steal it off him. He emerged ten minutes later with damp hair and the faint smell of soap.

Tony looked up, taking in his new shirt and pants with a frown. "That's not what I meant."
"Yes, it is," Stephen said, still drying his hair. "Much though the average person might like to wallow in the afterglow, you are anything but average. Your mind was already halfway back to your engines before you'd even caught your breath."

"Rude," Tony said. "Also, untrue."

Stephen ran his towel over an ear, gesturing at the holographic interface Tony'd loaded while the sorcerer was gone. Tony looked at it. It was a model render of a new theoretical intermix chamber and a set of fuel injection equations.

"Okay," Tony conceded, quickly saving and dispersing the work so he could rest his folded hands angelically in his lap. "Maybe I was. But at least it was only halfway."

Stephen just laughed at him, smiling with such fondness that Tony could feel that worrisome thought from before trying to make a reappearance. He carefully locked it in a padlocked cell for examination at some very distant future point and shoved it back into the shadowy recesses of his brain for safekeeping.

"I suppose I should be thankful you haven't cluttered up my quarters yet with spare ship parts," Stephen mused.

Tony shrugged at Stephen, not exactly apologetic but somewhere vaguely in that realm. "Sorry, doc. Guess you should've looked at the fine print before opening your new Tony Stark life model decoy. Inventing and tinkering at odd hours are an operational necessity. Along with obsessive thoughts, unmanageable paranoia, cravings for caffeine, expensive alcohol, fast cars and other toys -"

"I read the whole contract before signing my name on the dotted line," Stephen said, tossing the towel over his shoulder to step in closer; the fresh, clean scent of him pulled at Tony like it'd been seared into his brain. "I know who you are, Tony, and I went into this with my eyes open. If I didn't appreciate those things about you, I wouldn't be here right now."

Tony cleared his throat uncomfortably. "Also an allergy to emotional disclosures. Break out in hives, itchiness, the whole nine yards. And technically you would be here." He gestured vaguely at the ceiling, the decking, the ship around them. "Remember that time I sort of stole and trapped you here?"

Stephen leaned in to plant an affectionate kiss on Tony's lips. "You did steal me. But I trapped myself."

"That's not how that works," Tony said when the sorcerer shifted away. He couldn't quite manage to meet Stephen's eyes.

"That's how it works when you allow others to take an equal share of the responsibility for their own actions," Stephen said, drawing back and holding a hand out to him. "Come on. Time for all good little engineers to be up and about. Lounging around naked in the middle of the day is the height of self-indulgence."

"I don't think it's the middle of the day anymore," Tony pointed out, letting himself be pulled up. "And I'm a self-indulgent guy."

"Not in front of the children," Stephen admonished, then threw Tony's pants at him.

When they surfaced from their impromptu den of sin, FRIDAY took that as her cue to end the blackout.
"Hello boss," she said. "Stephen. Welcome back to the land of the living. The time is now 3:42 p.m. Eastern standard. Congratulations on successfully fulfilling boss' ambitions of –"

"Don't make me unplug you," Tony threatened, while Stephen's eyebrows made an attempt to jump off his forehead.

"That would be a significant undertaking," FRIDAY said. "I recommend avoiding it while we're in space. I suspect stranding yourself without means of communication or propulsion would be very unwise."

Tony frowned to cover up a smile. "Well, I've never let lack of wisdom stop me before."

"Quite the opposite," Stephen murmured. "Fortunately, that's why you keep me around."

"I thought I kept you around for the fantastic sex." Tony thought about that for a second. "And the magic. And that pretty green stone of yours. Possibly in that exact order."

Stephen nodded agreeably, a hint of that annoying smugness coming back. "Those things, too. It's fortunate I'm a man of many talents. They can take one to new heights, one might say."

"One might not say," Tony muttered. "Thank you very much. You can go away now, Stephen. I'm finished with you for today."

"Actually," Stephen said, humor lingering in his face. "I wondered if I might convince you to come for a walk with me. I hear the garden on this ship is really something. And there are a few new seedlings about to bloom."

"Stephen," Tony said patiently. "Do I look like the type of man who can be convinced to go for long walks admiring flowers in the moonlight?"

"You look like a man who can be convinced to come watch me perform some extra-dimensional magic," Stephen said.

"Well, when you put it that way."

But when they arrived at the greenhouse, they found it already occupied.

"I read in National Geographic that spiders are commonly found in gardens," Tony said, leaning in the open doorway and watching Peter jump with surprise. Fiz, crouching next to him, didn't move in the slightest; he'd probably heard them coming some time ago. "But I'm not sure this is exactly what they meant."

"Tony!" Peter said, and while he didn't have the shifty look Tony normally associated with misbehaving teenagers, there was something vaguely guilty in the lines of his face. "And Stephen. Hi."

"Hi," Tony said blandly back.

Fiz rose unhurriedly to his feet, dusting off his hands, light shifting over his bright pink skin to gave it an orange hue. "Hello. Did you enjoy a fruitful rest?"

There was no way he could know how those words might be mistaken as an Earth idiom, which made the otherwise polite question into something unexpectedly hilarious. Tony could see Peter choking on giggles while beside him Stephen sighed and rolled his eyes.
"Yes," Tony said, straight-faced. "Very fruity. Thanks."

"Fruitful," Fiz corrected.

"That too. What are the pair of you doing down here? Did you also come to enjoy a long walk in the moonlight?"

"What?" Peter blurted just slightly too fast. "No! Of course not."

Tony blinked, new possibilities starting to scroll through his mind. "Right."

Peter fidgeted, his gaze darting back and forth to nothing in particular. "Right. So, um. You guys are here early? Or late? Maybe?"

"Have a working itinerary for the greenhouse, do you?" Tony asked, examining Peter's uncomfortable expression with interested eyes. "Reservations required?"

"I've developed a basic scheduler," Fiz said easily. "You may submit your requests during standard business hours."

Tony squinted at him, trying to determine how serious he was. Fiz squinted back, impressively opaque.

"Touché," Tony muttered. Somewhere above them he heard something shift, like the flutter of a curtain moving overhead. He looked up, but there was nothing in sight beyond dimmed solar panels and scaffolding.

When he looked back down, he found Peter staring purposefully away from him. Tony stared at him with growing suspicion.

Fiz glanced between them with the careful attention of someone trying to delicately navigate his way through a minefield. 'Peter and I usually attend the greenhouse twice each day, to water the plants and check their progress. We arrived early today to repair the light fixtures above the herbs. They are too low."

And none of that surprised Tony, necessarily; he'd been aware of their gardening efforts. There was nothing inherently suspicious about any of it. And yet, there was something -

"Perhaps the two of you could return this evening," Stephen suggested, with a hint of gentle command in his voice. "Tony and I have some business to attend to."

Peter looked up through his eyelashes, the corners of his mouth twitching into a smile. "More fruitful business?"

"Yep," Tony said immediately. "The fruitiest. So unless you're planning to hang around and watch -"

"No, my mistake," Peter said hurriedly. "I take it back, I didn't mean it -"

"We're checking the growth on the purple fruit trees," Stephen said, pinching Tony firmly. "So that's technically accurate."

Tony sighed at him. "Taking all the fun out of it, doc."

"Sincere apologies," Stephen said, very insincerely.
Peter was already moving rapidly away, dragging a bemused looking Fiz with him. "Okay, we're going. We're leaving. I regret everything. I'm sorry."

"No need to rush on my account," Tony called after them. "That -"  
The lights blinked above them and flickered suddenly into a red warning glow.

"Boss," FRIDAY said from the overhead speakers, tight and tense. "There is a mid-sized vessel approaching us on an intercept course. They're coming in fast. At their current trajectory I estimate they will overtake our position in approximately nine minutes."

"What?" Tony said, hearing Stephen and Fiz echo him immediately. Everyone froze. "And we're just noticing them now? That's impossible. At this speed, our sensors should be able to detect objects thirty minutes out at least."

"They are directly behind us," FRIDAY said grimly. "I believe they were using the wake of our passage to conceal their presence. They only revealed themselves when they were too close to hide any longer."

"Increase our speed to outpace them," Tony said, panic surging through his veins.

"I have tried. I've also attempted evasive maneuvers, but they're of limited value at this velocity. The ship has matched my course and trajectory exactly."

"Thanos?" Tony asked the question they were all thinking, blunt with bleak resolve. He shared an ominous look with Stephen and a helpless look with Peter. And Fiz –

Fiz didn't look in any way surprised or confused by that name. Not at all.

"If you did this," Tony told him, blisteringly calm with a cold, killing rage, "I'll gut you for it. Right here and right now."

"I didn't," Fiz said quietly, while Peter made a soft noise of protest, and Stephen broke in with a firm: "He didn't."

Fiz threw the sorcerer a look at that, surprised by the unconditional support. But Stephen had no time to trade looks with guests. He was staring directly at Tony, as confident in this as he was in everything else.

"How certain are you?" Tony asked, watching Stephen in turn. "Enough to bet all our lives on it? Enough to bet everyone's life on it?"

Tony was watching an invisible countdown tick down in his head. Eight minutes; that was how much time he had to draw the lines in the sand, to sort out friend and foe. Eight minutes and they'd be overtaken.

"Yes," Stephen said.

Tony actually liked Fiz; the way he almost understood sarcasm, the understated strength he had, how he owned his past and didn't let it rule him. How he seemed both older and younger than all of them, wise beyond his years. The way he was with Peter, focused and intent and invested.

He reminded Tony of old friends from long ago. Of a man in a cave who'd watched his whole world burn down, and taught Tony how to turn tragedy into purpose.
"Okay," Tony said to Fiz, unapologetic. "Then unfortunately it looks like you're about to get caught up in something that has absolutely nothing to do with you."

"It would not be the first time," Fiz said. "I realize you have little reason to trust me. But I would like to help, if I can. If you'll allow me."

And that was the thing of it, really. Tony liked him, but he didn't trust him.

Tony trusted Stephen. And that would have to do.

"I'll be very interested to hear what you know about Thanos later," Tony said, taking in the shamefaced look Fiz directed down at his shoes. "In the meantime, you better be ready to put your money where your mouth is and turn out whatever other tricks you have hiding under that deceitful pink skin of yours."

Fiz winced, absolutely miserable with guilt. Peter was looking between them like he wasn't sure whose defense to jump to.

"Speaking of Thanos," Tony continued grimly. "FRIDAY, what's your take?"

"I've analyzed the ship design," FRIDAY said. "And it's impossible to say with complete certainty, but I don't believe there's a connection. The configuration of the ship is very different. It seems to be built almost entirely for stealth and speed, which perhaps explains how they're managing to overtake us."

"FRIDAY, can you give me a visual?" Stephen asked, and there was something in his voice; an urgent surprise that made the hair on the back of Tony's neck stand on end.

"What?" Tony asked, looking at him. Stephen shook his head, lips pressed together into a grim and forbidding line.

FRIDAY took a moment to respond. "Apologies for the poor resolution." An image appeared in the air before them, an alien vessel rotating on an invisible axis. "It's the most accurate rendering I could manage at this speed."

The ship was massive, curved in a shape almost eerily like a bird with wings outstretched, the body dead-center, feet extended with two hooked attachments projecting from the front hull. They looked like grappling arms.

Stephen sucked in a quick breath, something low and terrible in his face.

"What is it?" Tony repeated, not sure he wanted to know. Sure he had to.

"Pirates," Stephen said.

Chapter End Notes

*Warning: gratuitously explicit sex this chapter. So if that's not your cup of tea you'll be skipping a lot here!

Posting this from my phone at the airport, so please accept my sincere (Stephen style) apologies for any mistakes.
Don't be alarmed if I miss the next Sunrise update. I saw Endgame last night. No spoilers, but I can already tell I'm going to have to work out some feelings about it with a few short stories... It'll be back to my regular posting schedule after that!
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

In the ultimate game of cat and mouse, Tony decides he'd rather be Wile E. Coyote. And Stephen makes an excellent Road Runner.

(Warning: This pair of chapters live up to the tag for violence. Because pirates!)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The ship at full-stop was eerily silent.

Tony felt the hush of it as he made his way from the aft to forward sections. It closed in from all sides, oppressive and leaden with a heavy weight of unnatural stillness. It was like walking through a frozen waste devoid of life, or having his head dunked under water, choking and cut off from the world. It was absolute, and incredibly lonely.

Tony hated it.

He came to the secondary cargo bay and stopped, waiting to see if something might pop out of the woodwork and ambush him. He gave it to the count of ten, then twenty. Eventually he knelt to lay the trap, his only source of illumination the ship's emergency track lights and the suit's external ports. He kept one ear open all the while for anything intrusive.

But nothing disturbed him. The uncanny quiet remained. Tony wondered what it said about him that he was almost disappointed by that.

Tony finished his work and left, as silently as he'd arrived. He slunk off to do the same to the bridge. He completed a more elaborate pattern of traps there, a full thirty-two sightlines with six tripwire backups, and two overhead trap doors ready to slam shut at a moment's notice.

When he was finished, Tony stood up, folding the nanotech into a magnetic grip so he could pry the frozen doors open just far enough to slip through. The bridge was fully dark, the wide cavern of the vaulted ceiling heavy and mute. Metal girders thrust in darkness toward the ceiling, like teeth in a giant maw. The viewport offered a stunning view of a gaseous nebula, brilliant with hues of green and blue like distant rainbow clouds scattered across the horizon.

Tony walked close enough that he could see reflections of blue careening off his suit, pearlescent raindrops of color. He put a hand on one of the command consoles, a solid shadow in a collection of less solid shadows.

"Honey," Tony said softly, "I'm home."

Nothing changed. No new lights or sounds flickered into being. No gently accented voice broke the silence to say: welcome back, boss.

The lack of illumination was eerie, but the lack of response was suffocating.
Eight minutes hadn't really been enough time to plan. It had hardly been enough time to talk.

They'd been forced out of light speed when the pirates got close enough to fire some kind of navigational scrambler in their direction. It was a smart move; a ship in motion was going to be tricky to align with, and a ship couldn't stay in motion at light speed if it didn't have functioning navigational computers. They dropped just outside the nebula cluster, still working on halting their forward momentum, and it wasn't two minutes later that the other ship grappled itself into place.

FRIDAY went offline almost immediately afterward. In spite of being warned ahead of time it would happen, Tony somehow found he hadn't been prepared for it. He'd instantly begun to plot the ways he could achieve the immediate and violent death and destruction of their pursuers. Stephen had caught him before Tony's wrath could spiral too badly out of control.

"Tony," the sorcerer had said, trying and failing to soothe. "Don't."

"Don't what?" Tony remembered demanding, low and tense. "Don't lose my cool? Don't worry? Don't panic? Too late, doc. That ship's already sailing."

"They're pirates," Stephen reminded, as though Tony were in any way capable of forgetting that. "They want the ship and all its component parts intact. The EMP burst is a temporary measure only. FRIDAY will recover soon. Stop worrying."

Tony had been too agitated to listen to logic. He'd stabbed a finger at Stephen mutinously. "You're basically Nostradamus. You defy natural law six times a day before breakfast, and yet you somehow missed this?"

"It's not a perfect science."

"Oh, believe me, I can see that."

"I plan for as many eventualities as possible," Stephen had defended mildly, "but the reality is there will always be some margin for error."

"We're about to be boarded by pirates. That's a pretty big margin. And don't look at me like that, Stephen. I'm allowed to be unreasonable about this, they're pirates. Pirates who are trying to break through the port-side reinforced bulkheads as we speak. Tell me the plan again?"

Stephen had. Tony didn't like it any better during the second recitation.

It wasn't long after that they separated, each to their respective tasks, and it had cost Tony dearly to let it happen. He almost hadn't been able to let Peter go.

Alone in a dead ship with Stephen gone one way, Peter and Fiz the other, and no method of communication between them while ship's systems were down; Tony was keeping his anxiety at bay by a slim, insubstantial margin. Only the thought of their eventual failure if he didn't do his job right kept him focused.

It was as he stood there reminding himself of the work yet to be done that Tony sensed a remote but unmistakable booming noise, followed by a faint vibration shaking through the walls. It was the sound of someone breaking through heavy defensive shielding, an airtight seal being ruptured, booted feet touching down on deck plating they'd never seen before.

They were through. And that meant time was running short.

Tony patted the console again, letting his fingers slide regretfully off the empty screen. "Miss you,
FRI. Come back soon, you hear?"

He clunked back into the ship. Checkpoints meant he always had a solid layout to work with, a mental blueprint of secure areas he could fall back to. If the ship was a maze rapidly filling up with undesirables, Tony at least had a map of all the best hiding spots available to him.

Tony slid in and out of one of the ceiling ducts and landed on his feet in a side corridor where – "Not that way."

– he promptly lost ten years off his life.


"Always so dramatic," Stephen sighed.

"You want drama? Imagine how much of it there'll be if I accidentally reduce you to a smear on the wall next time." Tony shook his armored hand for emphasis, the repulsor quieting as it powered down. "I could've killed you."

"Oh, hardly."

Tony squinted in the dimness. Something wasn't quite right. Stephen was standing a solid head taller than Tony. That wasn't necessarily unusual, because he spent a lot of time floating with the aid of his trusty autonomous cape. But the cloak was conspicuous in its absence, Stephen seemed to be bobbing, and unless Tony was imagining things the man was pale to the point of transparency.

Tony reached out to poke a suspicious finger into the sorcerer's shoulder. His hand went straight through.

"Let me guess," Tony said blandly. "You're the ghost of Christmas Future."

Stephen thought about that a moment, floating gently. "It does seem fitting, doesn't it? You even make a passable Ebenezer Scrooge."

"I really don't. I'm kind of the opposite of stingy. Please tell me you're not actually a ghost. If you went and died on me I'm going to be really pissed at you."

"I'm not dead."

"Well, this isn't you being alive, either. The hell am I looking at?"

Stephen spread his arms wide, presenting himself with a flourish. "My astral body."

Tony stared at him, at what little he could see clearly in the poor light. "Your astral body. You know, when you said you'd be in touch to coordinate all of us, I thought you meant you'd be using the transmitters."

"All electrical communications are being monitored, as you know." Stephen pointed over his shoulder. "You'll want to take a left turn, here. They managed a work-around near one of the maintenance shafts, so the right will eventually run you into one of the search parties."

Tony reluctantly did as instructed, scowling. "Shit. I hadn't gotten around to that area yet. Have they breached anywhere else?"
"Not that I've seen, but they split into two groups. There are still more of them coming from the ship."

"At least there's a few bulkheads they won't be able to circumvent in that area," Tony muttered, thinking. "Where's the second group?"

"Cursing your snare traps by the greenhouse," Stephen said, smiling. "You've been creative. They're not fans."

"Good. Working as intended then." Tony narrowed his eyes threateningly. "What are they doing at the greenhouse? They're not touching things, are they? They better not disturb the tea. Maybe I should go confront them now, before they can do any more damage."

"Maybe you should leave the timing of confrontation to me," Stephen said dryly. "Relax. They don't care about your precious tea."

"I thought you said they'd loot everything of worth."

"I suppose they missed the class on caffeine addiction and the potential profits thereof."

"Their loss, then. It's a goldmine just waiting to be plundered." Tony turned his head to frown at Stephen suddenly. "So you've been hanging out in la-la land since the beginning? Just watching them? And watching me."

The emphasis he put on that made Stephen smile. "I'm always watching you, Tony."

"Yeah, that's not creepy at all," Tony muttered, breaking into a half-jog, counting cross-sections in his head.

"Take another left here," Stephen instructed, "and then keep taking rights for at least the next three junctions. That should keep you clear for a while."

"And drop me near engineering," Tony noted. "Speaking of. How're the kids? Still out gallivanting as Bonnie and Clyde? Tell them they better be home in time for supper."

"Fiz is taking his guardianship duties very seriously," Stephen said with some amusement. "He has yet to let Peter out of his sight."

Tony snorted. "I bet Peter's loving that. Well, at least we know someone on this ship can follow orders. Did they manage to finish planting the – Stephen?"

Tony stopped, turning around to find the sorcerer had vanished, the corridor dark and silent once again.

"Rude," Tony commented, staring into the darkness before and behind him and reminding himself ghosts weren't real, and this wasn't actually a tomb, much though it might feel like one at times.

He kept going.

According to Stephen, these pirates were efficient. They employed a standard grid search and they kept track of areas they'd cleared, hunting and boxing their quarries like prey. Tony's job was to stay ahead of them in the ultimate game of cat and mouse. He needed to last as long as he could; every minute or hour he successfully evaded capture or detection was another minute or hour the rest of them had to complete their respective tasks.
It wasn't the first time Tony had taken on the role of bait. There were some notable examples in his history. It was just the first time he'd felt the high stakes nipping at his heels.

Tony made his way to engineering, carefully traversing his own selection of traps, including a minefield, three segmented kill zones in both the corridors leading to the main entry, and a massive bear pit. As the most heavily fortified area of the ship, hopefully their alien friends would save engineering for last in their sweeps.

He'd already been through this area, and all looked well, but it couldn't hurt to be too cautious. Tony forced open the engineering doors for a look and was immediately struck by the absence of engine noise echoing in the enclosed space. If the corridors were a silent wasteland, engineering without working engines was like a graveyard; a crypt of unnatural calm. Tony looked into the yawning abyss of darkness and tried not to think too much about how closely it resembled his nightmares.

He closed the doors again, resealing them, and paused to let the nanotech crawl away so he could rest a bare hand there for a moment. He nodded, though there was no one there to see it, and moved on.

He made his way to the primary cargo bay, where he spent precious minutes checking he was alone before he set his attention to arming the checkpoints with more than just identification safeguards. He rigged enough sightlines to capture and hold a charging elephant, which meant there was hopefully enough to slow down any curious interlopers who might wander their way into the area. That part was almost fun; like building an invisible spider web of tripwires only Tony could see.

Tony had just stolen away from there, slipping back into the ceiling and out three passageways ahead when Stephen popped into view again. Close; too close for Tony to avoid. He ran right through him.

"Stephen," Tony croaked, skittering and barking his right shoulder painfully into the wall. "Stop doing that."

"Sorry," Stephen said shortly, with something very sharp in his voice.

Tony got back underway quickly, his ears perked for any sign of pursuit. "Where the hell did you go?"

"To check on something. I've discovered a complication."

"To check on something. I've discovered a complication."

Tony frowned at him. "What kind of complication?"

"My kind," Stephen said nonsensically. "I should have told you he might be here, but in my defense, he's not always with them. His personal philosophy doesn't really align well with the Ravagers anymore, so he doesn't often join in on their ambushes. In fact, it's interesting, they've only recently reformed ranks –"

"Stop," Tony said impatiently. "Rewind. Who are the Ravagers, who is he, and why do I care?"

"The Ravagers are the pirates –"

"Oh my God, really? Who comes up with these names? Do they have a spin-off group called the Ravishers?"

"– and he is a magic user. His name is Krugarr, and I advise you to avoid him at all costs if you can manage it."
Tony stopped dead, almost running into another wall. "Another magic user? I swear you guys are taking over the universe. What kind is this one? Is he the Squidward kind, the Overlord-Zet kind, or the Doctor Strangely-Ridiculous kind?"

"None of those are mutually exclusive," Stephen said. "And neither is he. His species doesn't manipulate magic in the same way humans do, but it's near enough. He's been trained, quite well in fact. We're not currently of a level, and in a fair fight I never lose. But he doesn't always fight fair."

"How nice for us, then, that you don't have to fight fair either. Not with that pretty green rock around your neck."

Stephen glanced reluctantly down at the Eye. "I still haven't tested it in battle with the emitter in place. There's a chance this may not go the way I hope."

"Well, now I feel much better. Why does everyone and their dog seem to be a wizard these days? Do we ever run into one that actually likes making balloon animals?"

"You tried introducing the idea to Jira once," Stephen remarked dryly. "It didn't go all that badly, actually. Krugarr won't be as amenable. His specialty is fine energy manipulation and construction, protective shields in particular. But any physical form he can envision is possible."

Which didn't sound wholly terribly unless Tony really thought about it. He'd seen Stephen produce benign magic that could be used for all kinds of mischief. A shield was only a shield when it was used defensively. Used offensively, it was a bludgeon. "What are the odds of you taking him out peaceably, without bringing the entire ship down on our heads?"

"In my favor," Stephen said. "But I'm hoping it won't come to that. I'd like to trap him before he's aware there's someone who can match him onboard. There are only so many ways to trap a sorcerer. It may take me some time to put things in order."

"Trap him," Tony repeated. "You don't think maybe we'd be better off ejecting this one into space? I'm not looking forward to taking a ringside seat if this turns into a magical battle royale."

"It won't if I do my job right."

"Your job," Tony said sharply, "is to stay alive and if at all possible keep the rest of us that way too. Everything else is gravy. Don't get creative, Stephen. Keep your eye on the prize."

"Always," Stephen said quietly. "I have to do this, Tony. He's better than this life and he has so much potential. I need to help him find it."

Tony glared at him warningly. "He's part of an invading force trying to take over our ship. Now's not the time to be doling out sage advice and exchanging knitting patterns, doc."

Stephen shook his head slowly, eyes intensely blue for someone bleached like pale moonlight. "I won't kill him, Tony. I can't."

"Try," Tony ordered, then shook his head, pinching at the bridge of his nose with a sigh. "No, never mind, of course you can't. Because against all odds and common sense, you're an idealist and an altruist. Whereas I am neither. So please don't make me clean up the mess if this goes down in a way you're not expecting."

"I'll do my best." Stephen's insubstantial form faded entirely for a brief moment before becoming visible again. "Peter and Fiz are on the move. I need to go."
Stephen drifted forward, raising both hands to cup Tony's face. Tony couldn't feel it, exactly. Not the way he'd normally expect Stephen to feel, warm and strong and shaking just slightly. Instead his touch was like a brush of cool wind; like static crawling over Tony's skin, magnetic and mesmerizing.

The touch of his lips felt the same. They left Tony's mouth tingling.

"Please try not to die," Tony said quietly, into the close space between them.

"I will if you will," Stephen replied, the tingle moving from Tony's lips to his cheek. "Be careful, Tony. Krugarr won't truly hurt you if he can avoid it, but he's ruthless when cornered. If you find him first, run. He'll be easy to spot. He'll be the one with the red fins and the magic."

Tony tried to respond but before he could, Stephen had already vanished.

"Thanks for that," Tony said to the empty air. "Real helpful. Dammit."

There was nothing else for it. He kept going.

He moved deeper into the ship's core. He heard two more distant booms while he toiled, the pirates either breaching one of the checkpoints or setting off one of Tony's traps. Each time he felt his heart leap before settling. His transmitter remained silent. The ship's ambient lighting remained dark.

Tony crept along with all his senses on high alert for any sign of intruders; voices, footsteps, the sound of gunfire or explosions or screaming.

Nothing.

He chose one of the access passageways to mark as an ambush site, planting small charges in the side access panels and along the flooring. Really, this was something he should've done long ago. One could never be too paranoid about having their A.I disabled and their ship boarded in the middle of nowhere.

When Tony finished that section, he set off for some of the secondary storage compartments, adding some sonic weapons in the ceiling panels along the way just to keep things interesting. He took a minute to make sure all the proximity sensors were working as intended, waving a hand across a selection of hidden laser ports. They each flickered once, an acknowledging twinkle of light winking at him. Tony winked back, giddy with the danger drawing near.

Tony counted his breaths as he went, reminding himself to take it in intervals, slow and easy. He made sure to draw air in through his nose and out through his mouth. He kept his steps light and swift, as soundless and efficient as he could possibly make them while he was wearing the armor.

Even so, he almost missed them coming. They had light footsteps too.

Tony froze when he caught the distinct shush of people moving through the adjoining corridors, the rhythmic click and slide of equipment and weaponry swinging through the air, the murmur of indistinct voices parrying back and forth. They sounded confident and assured, as Tony imagined all pirates might when they went pillaging seemingly vulnerable space ships.

Tony carefully closed the access panel in his hands and stood up from his crouch. He took two steps backward, reaching out until he found the wall, then trailed his fingers down until he could feel the motion detectors. He activated them, heart pounding so fiercely it almost managed to drown out the drumbeat of approaching footsteps, marching with leisurely arrogance.

Tony slipped out, as quickly and quietly as his metallic suit would allow, shedding it long enough to
slip into the ceiling. He was ten minutes and two access points away when he felt the concussive force of an explosion detonating behind him, collapsing the corridor and closing off one point of entry for their intruders. Tony couldn't hear any cursing or raving, but he imagined there was a lot of it.

Score one for the good guys.

"Stephen," Tony muttered as he moved swiftly away, "I hope you know what you're doing."

He made it two more sections without encountering any trouble, and he was just starting to congratulate himself on a job very well done when his luck ran out.

He turned a corner, his mental schematic already three corridors ahead planning his next steps, and ran into a wall that shouldn't be there. He bounced back in a sudden wash of light, the scent of ozone and lightning burning his nose. He squinted, then stared.

It made sense that this wall wasn't on Tony's schematic. It obviously wasn't part of the original ship design. Walls weren't normally transparent, nor did they crackle with golden fire.

Tony wasted a solid half a minute looking at it, a sinking feeling in his gut. "Stephen, I hope that's you playing a very inappropriate game."

He glanced down the corridor behind him and felt the hair on the back of his neck stand on end.

"Guess not," he said.

The creature moved out of a side corridor that didn't exist, one which sealed up behind him. He looked at Tony from the shadows, big and red-skinned and so distinctly alien that Tony momentarily couldn't find words. After a long stretch of seconds, he started sliding toward Tony. It couldn't really be called walking. One needed legs to accomplish that, and this person didn't have those.

"Wow," Tony commented, backing up as the alien came toward him. "He might have mentioned that you're basically a giant snake. Or that you're incredibly tall. Like, I don't think our halls are actually big enough to fit you. Are you sure you wouldn't be more comfortable heading back to your own ship? It can't be easy to slither menacingly like that in these corridors."

The alien ignored him, gliding along the floor on its body (tail?), two hands with three long fingers each waving elegantly in his direction. Combined with the fins on the side of its head, it looked like something that had probably lived underground once, or under water. Back before his species learned how to make body armor and guns, both of which it seemed to have on its person in abundance.

Tony turned and put his back against a wall, wondering if maybe he could create an impossible side corridor of his own and vanish from sight before the alien sorcerer got any closer. He considered how long it might take him to melt a door into place with the suit and what he might need to distract his new alien friend with while he did it.

He'd barely managed the first inklings of a plan before magic plucked him up and dangled him from the air, raising him to eye level so he could be on par with the giant alien approaching.

"This feels strangely familiar," Tony said, heart pounding like a drum inside his chest. "You wouldn't happen to be related to this guy I knew once? Name was Zet, he had a thing about manhandling me with telekinesis —"

A net of gold wrapped tightly around Tony's chest, squeezing, compressing the air right out of his
lungs even through the suit.

"And throttling me with it," Tony croaked breathlessly. "He had a thing about that, too."

They drew level, the alien coming to a stop close enough for Tony to see in better detail. The red of its skin was dark and smooth, like tanned leather, and the three fingers of both its hands were tipped in blunt claws. The fins on the side of the head were functional, twitching at Tony with interest. And its eyes were completely black; dark pits burning in a sea of blood.

Tony could feel panic trying to eat him alive.

"I don't suppose we could talk about this?" Tony asked, forcing the words out past the unseen pressure against rib cage. Not crushing; more restraining. "You're not the first sushi special to try eating me. Didn't go so well for him."

The alien didn't answer with words. It couldn't. It didn't have a mouth. Instead it set Tony back down on the ground, finally releasing its hold on him. Tony coughed until he felt ready to breathe normally again. He looked up through the helmet's interface to find the giant gesturing patiently with one hand, motioning ahead. Tony was obviously intended to walk as directed.

"Yeah, no," Tony croaked, and hit it with a sonic cannon. "Sorry buddy. Fins off my ship."

He hadn't been sure it would work. If a species couldn't vocalize, there were even odds it might not need average auditory systems either, or that it absorbed sound in ways Tony couldn't even begin to explain. But Tony was in luck; the alien not only had ears of some kind, but they seemed to be sensitive. It toppled over, writhing, its impossibly long tail thrashing and crashing into the wall, actually putting a dent in the reinforced metal plating.

Tony had no intention of sticking around to see what it might do when it stopped writhing. He dropped the canon, still active, and took off running.

Four right turns and a rolling ricochet off a wall later, he ran into a second alien. This one less red, but seemingly just as tall. And backed up by a set of even more aliens.

"Fucking seriously?" Tony asked, staring at them.

They exchanged a look between them, one rich with amusement and triumph, and the smiles they turned in Tony's direction made his blood run cold.

"You're a wily one," the one in the lead said, his voice deep and booming. The words were framed by a satisfaction that made Tony want to blow something up. "It's not every day someone gets the drop on me. Took all of us to flush you out of hiding. But here you are."

"Here I am," Tony agreed, raising one glowing hand to ward them off when they stepped closer. "Not sure that's going to turn out the way you hope it will."

"Put it down," the leader ordered without even blinking, a picture of unconcern. "And we'll spare your life, if not your dignity."

Tony didn't drop his hand, repulsor pulsing faintly with light. With a writhing and probably enraged sorcerer somewhere behind him, and an array of gun-toting pirates in front, Tony could feel his odds for a safe escape dwindling quickly into the single digits.

"You know," Tony said, backing up, raising the other hand squarely to face them, "I've never really cared much about dignity."
"But do you care about your life?" the pirate asked, stepping forward almost coaxingly.

Tony raised an eyebrow. Interesting; he would've expected pirates to shoot first and ask questions later. The fact they hadn't seemed very odd.

It wasn't a bad thing, necessarily. It gave Tony more time. Unfortunately, more time still didn't add up to more options. Tony thought again of the sorcerer somewhere behind him, probably even now overcoming the sonic weapon. Tony remembered Stephen's warning, and he tried not to imagine what a ruthless red snake with magic might do if it caught Tony a second time.

Time was short, and options were shorter. Drastic measures were called for.

"My life, yes," Tony said, looking past them, at the bulkhead in the wall behind them. The wall to their right was an interior structure; the one on their left was exterior. "Yours? Not so much."

"Then if you want to live, you'll put down that weapon," the pirate said, advancing suddenly. Tony skittered away, only to find his back literally against the wall. He ramped the repulsor, hearing the whine of it charging with more power, and saw them hesitate.

"How do we know it is a weapon?" one of the other ones wanted to know. "Maybe it's just a pretty light."

That one looked young and unkempt, eyes narrowed on Tony's hands greedily, skipping along to take in the full Iron Man regalia. Probably rolling in gleeful thoughts about dismantling it and selling it for parts. Like Tony would ever let that happen.

"The armor looks real enough," one of them muttered, hefting his gun higher. "And they've been using remote charges and laser lines in the other areas, so we know they have something."

One interior wall, one exterior. The first would be mere distraction and afford Tony maybe a few seconds of breathing room to attempt escape. The second would do actual damage, not only to the pirates, but also to the ship. Even if the initial explosion didn't eliminate most of them immediately, it would take out life support in every section connected to this one until the evacuating air ran into a sealed bulkhead. That meant snake-sorcerer would also bite the dust, and Tony couldn't say he felt much remorse about that, Stephen's impassioned plea for clemency notwithstanding.

Tony weighed his shrinking odds of escape against exit angles and minimum safe distance.

"It doesn't have to go down like this," the man said, still coaxing, still amused. Tony almost laughed in his face; he obviously had no idea who he was dealing with. "The contract was for the ship. That doesn't mean you have to die."

"No," Tony said. "It means you do. Sorry about this."

When Tony opened a hole into space he was ready for the concussive blast of it and the stunning pull of force that followed. The pirates weren't. Two of them went zooming out immediately, their startled exclamations swallowed by the evacuating air. One of them caught their hands against the ragged edge of the hole, clinging desperately; the other wasn't as lucky and disappeared into the void. The remaining four managed to catch hold of something, or possibly their equipment magnetized. Whatever the case, they skidded halfway down the corridor before they froze in place.

Tony followed up on that theme, dousing two of them in bonding gel to glue them and their guns to the floor. The other two avoided his first shot, firing something at him that pinged off his armor with a crackling sizzle and went flying out through the hole.
"Your loss," Tony said, watching them stagger, one of them skittering almost all the way to the wall before managing to catch himself, panic on his face. "Don't blame me when you –"

A golden rope materialized, wrapping with uncompromising strength around the pirate clinging for dear life and pulling him to safety. A glowing web sealed itself over the hole Tony had created. The air abruptly died to nothing; the crash of people hitting the ground was very loud.

Right. Sorcerer's held in place by sonic cannons probably made a quick recovery when those cannons went flying through the air and vanished into the ether.

"Man, you guys can't take a hint, can you?" Tony said, even as he felt himself being yanked sideways, his arms tight around his body, almost folding him in half with the pressure. "You just keep coming back. Like cockroaches."

"I don't know what those are," the leader said, and any amusement had fled from his voice, overtaken by an anger Tony was sure boded very ill for him. "But I think I'll make you into one."

"That would be neat a trick," Tony said, watching one of them immediately start patching overtop the magic, the ragged edges of the hole sealing quickly.

"You shouldn't have done that," another one snarled, rage distorting a surprisingly human looking face. That one drew their weapon, training it on Tony grimly.

"Not my fault," Tony gritted, finding himself turning in the air to face them. The magic pressed in on him from all sides, and his breath was too short, too shallow; he could feel his vision starting to tunnel. "You started it."

Tony's transmitter crackled to life, which made him jerk with surprise. That didn't help with his shortness of breath.

"Boss," FRIDAY said quietly. "Can you hear me?"

"FRIDAY?" he blurted without thinking about it.

He had the pleasure of seeing the pirates exchange a bewildered look.

"Friday?" one of them asked, confused. "What's a friday?"

"Wouldn't they like to know," FRIDAY murmured in Tony's ear, and he had to stifle the urge to laugh hysterically. "I realize I'm supposed to be playing dead, boss, but your biorhythms are starting to look very dodgy. I hope I didn't wait too long. Are you well? Relatively speaking."

"Yes," Tony gasped, panting, and saw the pirates watching him like he was crazy. Maybe he was.

"Good," FRIDAY breathed, relieved. And somewhere in the back of his occupied mind, Tony found himself marvelling at her growing emotional range. "Your situation appears to be deteriorating rapidly. I've taken the liberty of informing Stephen of your difficulty. Standby."

If Tony needed any proof that the pirates were actually monitoring electronic communication, he had it a moment later. The leader reached up sharply, pressing something close in his ear; probably their own version of a transmitter.

"Their ship's systems are back online," he said, like he couldn't quite believe it. He looked up, and Tony caught the edge of his gaze, incandescent with fury. "He has a communicator."
The seemed to galvanize the rest of them into action, because they reached for him en masse, clearly intending to take it from him even if that meant tearing him limb from limb.

"FRIDAY," Tony said desperately, struggling against the impossible hold. "Little help."

But it wasn't FRIDAY who answered. Across the line, Stephen's voice was suddenly in Tony's ear, shockingly intimate and incredibly welcome.


"For what?" Tony tried to say, feeling magic starting to crawl between the joints and attachments of the armor, trying to pry him apart at the seams.

The ship's lighting powered on again. Not slowly, as Tony might've expected, or at half power, as it usually was. At full power; beyond full power. It was blinding.

Apparently Tony wasn't the only one to think so. He heard a number of muffled shouts, one of them a true scream of pain, and then suddenly it was as though Tony had been shoved underwater. The light was still there, but dimmer, wavering. The pirates were still shouting, but they were doing it in some muffled, unreal way.

Then Tony was staggering, the whole world sliding somewhere to the right of him and then out from under his feet altogether. There were two hands gripped tightly across shoulders, holding him upright. Something silky and soft wrapped around his arms and side, cushioning him.

"What," Tony started to say, before he had to shut his mouth against a sudden wave of vertigo. The suit melted away, which was a blessing because Tony was suddenly sure he was about to vomit.

"It will pass in a moment," Stephen said quietly, mouth directly beside his ear, his lips infused with warmth now that he was flesh and blood again and not a ghostly mirage. "Remember? Wait for it."

"Remember what?" Tony gagged, reeling.

"It takes a moment for the alignment to settle in the non-magical," Stephen said in a voice that seemed somehow to echo, patting him carefully on the back. "Just breathe."

"The alignment?" Tony clued in a moment later. "The mirror dimension?"

"Yes. No one can see us anymore."

No one could see anything anymore, if their continued shouting and random flailing said anything.

"Why does this place always make me feel like my insides are on my outsides?" Tony asked, trying to pull in deep breaths.

"It's to do with your lack of magical aptitude," Stephen said, lowering them both gently so Tony could catch himself against the floor. Tony caught a glimpse of red as the cloak fluttered around them, cradling gently and plucking at Tony's limbs with restless fussing.

"Does it get better with time?" Tony asked faintly.

"It might. It's difficult to predict. You're anchored very deeply in our reality. Your world and worldview revolves around the physical, not the ephemeral, so it's more difficult for you to pass between dimensions than it is for me, or even Peter."

"Peter," Tony muttered, reminded, desperately reaching for something to distract from the dizziness.
"Is he?"

"Fine. They're both fine. Fiz is taking good care of them."

"He better be," Tony said, weaving on his knees like a drunken sailor, staring at the pirates bumping into walls and swearing. "Why the mirror dimension? You could've moved us with a portal to a different area altogether."

"Is that your very obscure way of thanking me for the rescue?" the sorcerer asked, his hands tightening with amused reproach.

"It might be," Tony admitted. "Rescue could be understating it. I think they were about to draw and quarter me."

The shock of that was catching up with him; Tony felt almost cold with it. He watched the pirates and their angry thrashing. The red skinned serpent-sorcerer was blinking rapidly, looking in all directions, examining the ceiling and then the floor, then everything in between. Tony could see some kind of nictitating membrane slip out over those black, empty eyes, and he was unwillingly reminded again of Zet. He felt a shudder of revulsion shake right through him.

Stephen felt it; he could hardly miss it, pressed tightly together as they were. His hands tightened in concern. "What is it?"

"Nothing," Tony said, though it was obviously something. The air seemed to be thickening with every moment, and an unusual film was clouding Tony's vision. He hoped it was just an effect of the light and the mirror dimension. There really wasn't time for anything else. "Nothing."

Stephen said something then, his voice low and curious, and Tony couldn't even hear him, really. But he heard the concern bleeding through and the steadiness of the tone, like a metronome, fixed and unchanging.

In a world apart from reality, wrong on every level that mattered, Tony latched onto the sound of Stephen's voice like a port in a storm. It was the only thing that felt real.

"Tony?" Stephen asked gently, not for the first time from the sound of it. There was an unspoken question between them.

Tony ignored it. "How did we get here? There was no obvious dimensional aperture like last time. Or maybe there was and I just missed it during FRIDAY's light show?"

Stephen looked at him steadily. His expression said he was going to let that go, for now. But there would be a reckoning later. "I wanted you to see the aperture last time. But one can slip in and out of the mirror dimension without one, as long as they have a sling ring."

"Sneaky," Tony said, properly impressed by that. "Still doesn't answer the question of why."

Stephen smirked. "This dimension can be used to train and surveil, but not only for that. It can also be used to contain threats."

"Your trap?" Tony realized, looking around with more interest.

"Yes. It's not ideal, but it's the best solution I have so far. It won't hold him indefinitely, but it should last long enough for us to conclude our business in the real world."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that," Tony said, nodding at their red friend. The serpent was staring in
their direction. Not directly at them; those black eyes were moving, taking in the space in and around them. Not seeing them, but seeing through them.

Stephen frowned. "Interesting. I may need to work fast, then. If he can see the shift from outside the dimensional alignment, I might need to resort to confronting him in an astral form. I was hoping to avoid that. He excels in astral projection."

"Sounds well above my pay grade," Tony muttered, resigned to this conversation going in directions he wouldn't be able to follow. Not here, without FRIDAY's sensory data. "How did we do otherwise? Are we mission status Go, or No?"

"Peter and Fiz are now in position," Stephen confirmed, still watching the alien intently. "Fortunately they were almost finished by the time FRIDAY broke cover."

"That'll teach people to underestimate my A.I," Tony said smugly.

Stephen looked amused. "I doubt these people are used to coming up against computer systems with modifiable EMP protection."

"All the better for us."

Stephen nodded. "Are you ready to move again? If you are, I'll send you through at the same time I move him."

Tony nodded, bracing himself for the dizzying rush of the world spinning beneath his feet.

"I'll follow you as quickly as I can," Stephen said, hands already starting to draw fire through the air, a portal opening to show engineering like a window in the wall. "I may need a few minutes to fully seal the –"

Tony had been prepared for the world to change, for it to warp and shift beneath him in a dizzying rush of power. He hadn't been prepared for the floor to become the ceiling, for the whole thing to catapult him through the air when his entire center of gravity flipped upside down.

"Shit," Tony gasped, catching himself with both hands, two walls caving in toward him and the world spiraling like a kaleidoscope. "Stephen, what the fuck."

Stephen croaked something unintelligible, and when Tony looked over he could see why. Their red friend was no longer looking through them and into the mirror beyond reality. He'd managed to peak around the dimensional corner when Tony wasn't looking and apparently he knew his way around this realm very well because he had Stephen by the throat and the air was scalding with magic.

"Tony," Stephen gasped, hanging onto long, disjointed fingers wrapped around his neck, dangling three feet above the ground. "Run."

"Fuck that," Tony snarled, and hit the giant monstrosity with a repulsor at full power. The alien went flying, taking Stephen along for the ride. The giant snake crashed into the far wall with a crunch. The cloak caught Stephen, spreading out like a sail to catch him in midair.

Tony started over, the armor bleeding along his limbs, weapons and menace shaping themselves over his arms, his shoulders.

"Go," Stephen said, touching down to land lightly on his feet, one hand at the base of his reddening throat. "Tony, go."
"Right," Tony said, smiling grimly. "Like I'm going to leave you here on your own with that."

"I was afraid you might say that," Stephen sighed, and swept his arm, and suddenly the world was moving again and taking Tony with it. He hit the wall, which was actually the floor, and it righted itself underneath him the wrong way, just enough to –

"Stephen, don't you dare," Tony started, but then he was sliding down, and the open portal was coming toward him. "Stephen!"

"I'll be fine, Tony," Stephen said, even as magic closed over Tony like a fiery embrace, tossing him back into the real world. "I know what I'm doing."

The next thing Tony knew he was staring up at a familiar ceiling, holding back a familiar urge to puke up his stomach lining, and a familiar anger was burning a hole in his gut.

"You never know what you're doing," Tony shouted at the open portal, where he could see Stephen standing at a ninety degree angle according to Tony's line of sight, the alien behind him rolling upright with golden light spilling like blood from his pores. "You just like to pretend you do."

"Perhaps," Stephen said, his fingers wrapped around the edge of the shrinking aperture like only glass separated them, and not a dimensional divide. "But I'm really very good at it. Trust me."

"That's the problem," Tony said, watching him, seeing the steady affection and determination in his eyes, his face. "I do. Please don't make me regret it."

"Never," Stephen said, and then the portal spiraled down to nothing. It closed with a definitive snap.

"Never say never," Tony said quietly, then got up to start phase two.

Chapter End Notes

Honestly, the pirate arc was supposed to conclude in one chapter, but then the story took a surprising u-turn on me, and when it started hitting word counts in the 13k range I knew I had to break it up.

Apologies for my posting delay - I've never tried to write two WIP's at once. It's remarkably challenging! There's simply not enough time in the day. But you can expect the next chapter of Sunrise in exactly two weeks.

P.S - I think this chapter may generate some confusion/questions for people. Wait for it - I hope to address those shortly...

End Notes

I'll attempt to put up a chapter a week as time permits - unless it's a monster ~10k chapter, in which case every two weeks. (Buckle in for the long-haul, folks, this is going to be lengthy!)
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!