## To Have My Time Again...

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### Summary

It's been two years since Siberia, and Tony Stark is still dealing with the fallout - personal and political. Life is quite complicated enough, without Bruce falling through a wizard’s roof yelling that Thanos is coming.

Thor and Loki are stalling, but time is running out. The fate of the universe is at stake. Steve Rogers is back in the picture. Really, the last thing Tony needs is for their plan to go horribly wrong and bring Howard Stark forward in time.

But his Dad *is* standing in his office, whether he likes it or not.

So, it looks like Tony will have to fix that mess too.
This work was written for the Marvel Trumps Hate challenge. I am still amazed and humbled that anyone bid on me, so I really hope that my bidder likes this - as well as everyone else, of course :-)}
Chapter 1

Hulk watches from the shadows as Thanos picks his way through the human debris of the Stateman.

Thanos’ eyes drift over the scattered bodies with callous interest, his gaze lingering a little longer on the bloodied form of Thor. Then, in his own time, Thanos looks up to acknowledge Loki. Hulk sees Loki mask his fear and anger in an instant, his face calm and disinterested by the time he meets Thanos’ eye. And then, over the gurgling wounds and anguished gasps, Hulk hears Thanos’ start to speak.

“I know what it feels like to lose…”

Hulk hears the words but doesn’t analyse them. He is not distracted by their true significance – Hulk is just waiting for his cue.

“The Tesseract or your brothers head. I assume you have a preference?”

Hulk watches as Thor convulses, green flesh twitching against the instinct to intervene. But he has been told not to intervene. Not until he hears his cue.

“As much as I am enjoying this…” Loki speaks calmly, ignoring his brothers continuing agony, “…Neither of us can ever find the Tesseract without him.”

Thanos stops then. Thor’s body slumps, hanging like meat from Thanos’ huge fist. Thanos’ narrows his eyes at Loki.

“And, as noble as it would be to sacrifice myself so that you would never find it – it just isn’t in my nature.” Loki smiled thinly “I could care less what you do with the lesser Son of Odin. And perhaps the Tesseract is better lost forever than in your hands. But it does seem such a tragic waste.”

Thanos’ fingers flex against Thor’s skull with a sickening crack. Loki doesn’t blink.

“You’ll tell me where it is, or I will kill you both” He tells Loki simply.
“If I tell you where it is, you will kill us both. For as long as I don’t tell you, you’ll let us live. Or any hope you have of finding the Tesseract dies with us.” Loki cocks his head, and smiles

“Your optimism is misplaced, Asgardian”

“Well, for one thing, I’m not Asgardian.” Loki corrects him “And for another... we have a Hulk.”

That’s his cue.

It’s the last thing that makes sense. After that, there’s the shock of being thrown to the floor so easily, a sudden shift in his very understanding of physics…the flash of metal, the cracking of bone… the world on its side, as Thanos towers above him, as fast as that…. Hulk watches as Thanos snatches Thor again, pulling him off of his feet as though he were weightless. He sees Thanos speak to Loki, close, too close for Hulk to hear the words…And then the colours. So many colours.

When Bruce wakes up on the floor of 177A Bleecker Street his very first thought is that he’s losing time.

He tries to talk. Before he even opens his eyes, before he thinks of where he is or who he might be talking to, he remembers that desperate need to warn someone. Thanos has Thor. Thanos is collecting infinity stones. Thanos is coming. But his throat is raw and his whole body hurts and there are so many words in his head. And panic, the high-pitched alarm of panic, that only grows louder the longer it takes him to get himself together.

He tries to explain what happened and realises he doesn’t even know. He doesn’t know where Thanos took Thor and Loki, or why. He has no idea what Loki’s plan was, or whose side he was on. Thanos whole plan doesn’t mean anything to Bruce. The two men that have found him, Dr Something and a name Bruce didn’t hear, have started firing questions at him. He can’t answer any of them. For a moment, Bruce can only think of everything he doesn’t know, and the sheer amount of it threatens to suffocate him. Then he stops himself. He puts his palms up, and stops the men from talking at him. He tries to think – what does he know? What can he be sure of?

“Tony Stark. I need to get in contact with Tony Stark.”

* 

Tony was actually having quite a good day.
Of course, that meant something different, these days. Everything is relative. There was a time when any one of his morning meetings would have been enough to ruin his whole week. A time when that dull ache in his chest would have been abnormal. A time when being completely numb to the world would have been cause for concern. But things were different now, weren’t they? And these days, an argument with Ross actually reaching a conclusion made it a good day. There being no stabbing pains in his heart made it a good day.

And he wasn’t thinking about Steve right now. That made it a very good day.

Because, however much pain and stress Tony had accepted as part of his life, there was a time when things had been much, much worse. A time when he spent every meeting in a state of rage or anxiety, barely able to keep up with all the demands. A time when his heart had felt as though it was in the process of being torn out of his chest, all day, every day. A time when he spent every second hating Steve or missing Steve, or thinking this wouldn’t be such a mess if Steve hadn’t left – which was really just a weird mix of the two. Now, there were minutes, hours, even whole afternoons when Tony didn’t think about Steve. There were even times when he didn’t worry about the future of The Avengers, or dream about how things should have been, or expect a full-scale alien invasion. Whole days when he didn’t really think at all. And he knew that didn’t mean he was over it. Pleasant numbness, while infinitely better than constant pain, was not recovery. He still had so far to go… but even that was a progressive thought, really. Better than not being able to imagine it ever ending…

But he wasn’t thinking about that. Or anything. Because he was having a good day.

Tony even had time to leave the office to get lunch. Not that he had any intention of getting food – it was the quiet he wanted. A few minutes away from the questions and the reminders and that uneasy awareness that someone was about to come around the corner with another problem. He felt less edgy, away from the office. At least until the anxiety of what he was going to walk back into kicked in. That gave him twenty minutes or so to just be.

On a whim, he decided to walk through the park. Usually, he chose to walk through the city, more relaxed around the structure and design of the urban landscape than he was the random offerings of nature. But today was a not-thinking day, and Tony was just following his feet. He walked passed happy blonde couples, jogging side-by-side. He sidestepped scruffy young men, absorbed with their phones. He went by young mothers with strollers, and old men walking dogs, and teenagers on skateboards. It was like walking through a screensaver. He felt pleasantly distant from all of them, barely aware of what he was looking at –

Until the air opened up in front of him.

“Tony Stark.” It didn’t surprise Tony that this apparition knew his name. All universal catastrophes were for him; if anything, it seemed fitting that one should finally speak to him directly. And, for
now, he was too busy trying to make sense of the shimmering lights and shifting settings that were appearing right before his eyes. A man he’d never seen before, in clothes that didn’t fit the circumstances, standing in a place that wasn’t the park, but was in the park- “I’m Doctor Stephen Strange. I need you to come with me.”

Well, turned out it was going to be a thinking day after all.

“I’m sorry. You giving out tickets to something?” Tony heard himself speak, pulling something from his emergency store of backchat while he tried to catalogue the situation. Responding to a crisis was instinct now, and procedure popped into his head like a computer command. Is this man the threat? Is this man alone? What abilities does this man have? Who is the target, and how can Tony get him away from them?

“We need your help” The magical doctor told him, gravely “It’s not overselling it to say that the fate of the universe is at stake.”

Tony filtered through this information the way FRIDAY interpreted vocal prompts – “we need your help” = ally = DO NOT FIGHT YET. “Fate of the universe” = alien = stand by for conflict.

Call Steve = Invalid command.

More information required.

“And who’s ‘we’?” Tony demanded, poised to critically analyse whatever answer Doctor Strange gave him.

And then he saw Bruce.

That face was so familiar to Tony that he very nearly smiled. There was a swell of comfort and joy – immediately punctured when he realised what a state Bruce was in. The critical analysis was washed away by a wave of sympathy, and there was a panic of a different kind. Not the ordered, professional panic he’d become desensitised to; the heartfelt fear for a friend.

“Bruce” Tony spoke, already walking over to him.

“Tony. You have to come with us. We need your help-”
“Yeah, of course” Tony waved him quiet, “Obviously.”

* 

Steve was always thinking about Tony.

Even when Steve wasn’t thinking about Tony directly, it always came back to him. Steve’s whole life now, and the lives of his team, were all down to what happened between him and Tony. Everything he wished was different would’ve been different, if it weren’t for what happened with Tony. Even thinking about Bucky, that achingly familiar regret that predated Tony being born, even that lead to Tony, now.

Some days were worse than others, though. This was a particularly bad day.

It didn’t help that they were on their way to collect Wanda after one of her secret meetings with Vision. Steve did his best to smile along with the others, to convince himself that young love was nice and it was simple as that – but he hated it. And he hated himself for hating it, he would have much rather just been happy for them, but there it was. Everything about Wanda and Vision’s little rendezvous made him think of Tony, directly. Knowing that Tony would have been involved in arranging it, that he was at least allowing it. It was enough to make Steve picture him, enough to make Steve miss him, enough to trigger another pointless conversation in his own head.

And then there was the fact that Tony was making a meeting possible for someone that wasn’t them.

The fact that Tony had enabled Wanda and Vision to bridge the divide, but, after two long years, Tony had never once called him. That pressed against a specific little splinter of pain, and Steve knew it was unreasonable, and unjustified, and downright embarrassing.

But that didn’t mean it wasn’t there.

Steve sighed, and look another long look out of the side window of the Quin Jet. Another reason Steve hated it when Wanda and Vision met up – it always involved a lengthy trip on the Jet. Steve disliked being on the jet more and more as time went on. It felt increasingly claustrophobic. It made it obvious when he was pacing.
“You look worried.” Nat spoke from the cockpit, her eyes fixed on the horizon.

“No more than usual” Steve answered easily. He was practiced at knocking observations like that aside. Unfortunately, Nat was practised at persevering.

“Yes, you do.” She corrected him, coolly. Steve exhaled slowly. He didn’t want to have a conversation right now. He was embedded in his own head, constantly being called back from the real world by his thoughts. Everything felt like an irritating distraction, today. And he thought about saying if you say so, but he knew it wouldn’t help. If anything, it would fan the flames, convince her there was something worth digging for. And there wasn’t, really. He was just having a bad day.

“I’m always worried when Wanda goes to meet Vision” He settled on a half-truth.

“If anyone can handle herself, it’s Wanda.”

“Yeah, I just hope she doesn’t end up having to handle herself.” Steve sighed. He’d passed a lot of his endless nights planning for the inevitable upending of his world, however it happened this time. Whatever new life came after the Fugitive Avengers period, whether it was waking up in the year 2056, or on another planet, or to discover that Sam and Natasha were actually both Loki in disguise, or whatever. He’d considered being caught, on his own or with the team, all the places they might get sent, all the choices he might be faced with as a result. All the ways it might happen. That really was another reason he hated it when Wanda went to meet Vision. There really was the chance she’d get caught, and then the Fugitive Avengers would be over, and then Steve would have to become a whole new person – again.

“If you’d rather she didn’t go-”

“Of course I don’t not want her to go” Steve lied.

I just wish I could go too.

But he couldn’t admit that he’d thought that – because then he’d have to think about all the reasons he couldn’t go. All the reasons he could never go home.

And then, belatedly, he realised he’d picked up something in her tone, too.

“Why, what’re you worried about?” He asked. He saw her press her lips together, caught out. Like maybe she almost smiled.

“I’m just waiting for Wanda to message back” She said, as though it was nothing. Steve set his teeth.

“From this morning, you mean?”

“I’m not worried.” Nat assured him, finally turning to look at him “If she was in trouble, she would have messaged back. Like I say – she can handle herself.”
Steve knew he should be worried – but mainly, he was annoyed. He was annoyed at Wanda for not following the plan, for not doing what she promised she would, for not thinking about the impact her actions had on everyone else. They’d been through all this with her last time. He was annoyed at her if she wasn’t in trouble, if she was just lying in bed with Vision and ignoring her phone. And, loathed though he was to admit it, he was even annoyed at her if she was in trouble, because if she was in trouble, they were all in trouble, and it was all because she had to have this thing that Steve couldn’t have… Oops. He hadn’t meant to think that.

If Wanda was in trouble she’d have messaged back. If Tony wanted you, he would have called.

Or that.

Steve had to stop himself there, because if he didn’t he’d tumble into all the other things he really shouldn’t think. He’d start thinking about calling Tony, which would just be hours of remembering all the reasons that he couldn’t. He’d done it enough times to know. And he never called Tony, so.

Steve didn’t like himself much right now. That was happening more and more often these days, too.

* 

When Bruce, Dr Strange and Wong had finished their presentation on the situation, Tony’s first thought was this isn’t fair. For a few long seconds, it was his only thought.

The idea of ‘Infinity Stones’ was surely something any person would need a few minutes with. Just that. The scale of the threat was beyond the realm of human understanding, clearly, much less human intervention – how were they expecting him to handle this one? How could anyone handle this one? With Wong, a shell-shocked Bruce and a tool in a velvet cape to help him? This was an impossible task, a puzzle with no answer –

But then Tony remembered. Fair had nothing to do with it. If life had taught him one lesson, repeatedly, it was that one. There was no one he could complain to. No one he could run to.

Call Steve Rogers.

And with that, Tony realised he was reacting to this far too emotionally.
“Tell me his name again” He said, as a sign post that he was starting over – it certainly wasn’t because he’d forgotten it.

“Thanos.” Bruce told him earnestly. “He’s a plague, Tony. He invades planets. He takes what he wants. He wipes out half the population. He sent Loki. The attack on New York, that’s him. This is it.”

He sent Loki

Tony felt a drop of sudden, bottomless fear, like staring into the face of death. In that second, Tony felt like he understood that he’d just reached the crisis point of his whole life’s story. That everything he was, everything he’d been through, everything he’d ever done, had all been leading to this. It wasn’t just the fear of an enemy he couldn’t beat, or even the consequences of losing – it was a primal, spiritual terror. This is the end of my story.

He shook it away, decisively.

“What’s our timeline?”

“No telling. He has the Power Stone, which might already make him the strongest creature in the whole universe, and if Loki is taking him to the Space Stone—”

“If?” Tony clarified.

“I don’t know if he even has it, Tony – for all I know, it burned on Asgard, and Loki was just trying to save his own skin.”

“But if it burned on Asgard, doesn’t that solve our problem?” Tony tried.

“If it did, maybe—”

“Not really.” Doctor Strange interrupted “Even if it stops him pursuing his original plan, controlling five infinity stones would allow him to destroy life on a scale hitherto undreamt of.”

“Did you seriously just say—”

“-And we don’t know that the Tesseract is destroyed” Bruce cut in. “This is Loki we’re talking about. There’s at least a chance he did hide it somewhere, and that he’s leading Thanos to it, right now.”

“We know where this one is” Tony gestured to the Time Stone “Why don’t we just stick this one down a garbage disposal?”

“No can do.” Doctor Strange answered gravely

“We swore an oath to protect the Time Stone with our lives.”
“Yeah, well, I swore off dairy—”

“Tony, Loki potentially has an Infinity Stone.” Bruce stepped in “Thanos definitely has one. This—” He gestured vaguely to Strange “-is not the stone we need to worry about right now. We know where this one is. Vision is out there somewhere with the Mind Stone, and we need to find him now.”

Tony’s stomach twitched. This really wasn’t fair.

“Yeah. That’s the thing…” Tony started, but really, it was so many things. He hated that Vision even went to see Wanda, he was still hurt and embarrassed that Vision hadn’t come back – he knew full well what he’d have to do to find him.

“What do you mean?”

“Two weeks ago, Vision turned off his transponder.” Tony admitted “He’s off-line”

“Tony, you lost another super-bot?” Bruce asked, aghast.

“I didn’t lose him” Tony straightened his shoulders defensively. “He’s more than that. He’s evolving.”

“Who could find Vision then?”

There was a conflict in the very core of Tony then, a sudden awareness that he was standing between two realities. The reality of the whole universe, in which Thanos was the threat and there was obviously nothing more important than stopping him – and the reality of him personally, in which there was nothing bigger than the issue of calling Steve, nothing that wasn’t viewed through the prism of that. It was like an unstoppable force hitting an immovable object. The two things that were ultimately important, according to two entirely different sets of criteria, neither immediately more important that the other.

“Probably Steve Rogers” Tony surrendered. He was oddly vindicated to hear Strange and Wong cursing behind him, pleased that someone appeared to appreciate the gravity of the situation. Bruce clearly didn’t.

“Call him.”

“It’s not that easy…” Tony began, already thinking of how far back he had to go to fill Bruce in. “…God, we haven’t caught up in a spell, have we?”

It wasn’t that Tony couldn’t think of how to explain it. It was that Tony could think of too many ways of explaining it. He had too much detail, context and background on every single point. Tony had been thinking about this for two years. 741 days working on the thesis of how things happened between them, and why Tony had done what he did at every turn, and all the ways in which Steve
had hurt him. How to explain all that, quickly?

“The Avengers broke up” Tony summarised “We’re toast.”

“Broke up? Like a band?” Bruce gasped “Like…like the Beatles?”

No, like Steve lied to me for years, turned everyone against me and then ran his Shield through my heart. Like Steve turned all the Avengers into criminals in order to keep his friend out of trouble, while pretending it was to stop a threat that never existed. Like half of them are on the run, Rhodey is paralysed, Vision chose Wanda and now there’s just me.

“Cap and I fell out hard” Tony went for the understatement of the century “We’re not on speaking terms.”

“Tony, listen to me. Thanos already has Thor, assuming he hasn’t killed him. Any minute now he could get his hands on the Tesseract and head straight to earth. It doesn’t matter who you’re talking to or not.”

Well, of course it doesn’t

Tony already knew that his feeling didn’t matter. If only he could stop feeling them.

Taking the flip phone out of his pocket, the sheer intensity of his emotions threatened to overwhelm him – how could that be, if they didn’t even matter? He opened it and found Steve’s number without looking, without even thinking about it. Muscle memory. He’d opened this phone and scrolled to this number so many times, mostly just daydreaming but occasionally with his thumb hovering over the dial button. Sometimes just reading Steve’s name. He actually knew the number off by heart now, but he opened it anyway. He just looked at it, for a moment.

...destroy life on a scale hitherto undreamt of...

...If you need us, if you need me, I’ll be there...

...You could have saved us. Why didn’t you do more?

He pressed the dial button.
What were the chances that Tony would call when Steve had that phone in his hands?

Pretty high, actually.

Steve had fallen into the habit of just looking at it when he was thinking, like he might have clutched a photograph or a keepsake, if he’d had one. Tonight, when Steve had found a quiet corner of the Quin Jet to hide in, he’d realised he was already holding it. He couldn’t even remember taking it out of his pocket. And Steve stopped thinking about using it a long time ago. Any hope he’d had that it might ring had melted into a sadness that it never would. But still, he held onto it, a totem of all his hurt and regret.

And then, that night, it came to life.

Steve flipped it open before it could finish the first ring, like it was something he was trained for. He’d not even recognised what was happening before he had the phone up against his ear. And then he heard that breath on the other end, and every part of him remembered.

Tony…

“We need your help” Tony began, in a voice that sucked all the hope out of Steve’s chest. A cold dread rushed to fill the void. Tony was in trouble. And, although that should have been obvious from very fact of him calling, it was only when he heard him that Steve realised what it meant.

Tony is in trouble

“We’re on our way—”

“Wait.” Tony spoke like he was gritting his teeth. Steve felt his words lodge in his throat like a pill he couldn’t swallow. Please don’t tell me not to come. “We need to find Vision, too.”

“Vision?”

“He’s off line, and – I can explain when you get here, but we really need to find him.”

When you get here.
Steve’s next breath trembled with the effort of containing his relief. But, instinctively, he knew he had to contain it. He had to be Captain America right now. He had to think of what to do, rather than feel anything about it.

“Wanda was just with him.” Steve thought out loud.

“I know.” And that edge of sarcasm, the one that used to irritate Steve so much, was so achingly familiar that it brought a lump to Steve’s throat. “But I don’t know where- wait, was?”

“We just picked her up – we can find Vision. She can find Vision” Steve assured quickly, thinking he was being efficient, feeling desperate to hold on to Tony however he could. “We can bring him with us.”

“Where are you?”

“Over Europe – they were in Edinburgh, in Scotland.”

“Right, okay. Then I need you to get Vision, and I need you to come here. To the Avengers Facility in New York.”

Home.

“Tony, what’s going on?”

“…hold on a second.” There was a soft scuffle on the other end, a low murmur of voices in the background.

“…Hello? Captain Rogers?” An unfamiliar voice jarred against his ear.

“Who is this?” Steve demanded in his Captain America voice, already picturing scenarios in which Tony had just been attacked.

“My name is Doctor Stephen Strange, Tony Stark has asked me to explain…”

Tony has passed you over to someone else

There was a childish little kick in his head, an impulse to sulk. To tell Stephen Strange, whoever he was, to butt out, to shut up, to put Tony back on the phone or Steve wasn’t playing. Steve had been thinking about this phone call for two years. He was, first and foremost, hurt and baffled to find that Tony had immediately handed it off. He had to tell himself, very firmly, to grow up and pay attention – still only getting the basic outline of what was going on.
“Right, okay, fine, we’ll be there as soon as we can” Steve told Doctor Strange on auto pilot, because that was the bit he was sure he was sure about. And then he thought about all the bits he wasn’t sure about… Thanos and Infinity Stones and Loki and… wait, going home? Finally, Captain America stepped up, and started putting things into the right order. “Are we going to be arrested as soon as we get there?” Steve heard Doctor Strange repeat his question, and strained to make out Tony’s response. Captain America pointedly ignored any irritation Steve felt at this stupid message passing game.

“No.” Obviously wasn’t what Tony had said, not verbatim. But Captain America was firmly in place now, and wasn’t prepared to indulge Steve’s tantrums. So, rather than demand to know exactly what Tony had just told him, Steve told Doctor Strange,

“Tell him we’re on our way” and closed the phone.

There was a sudden stab of regret that Steve hissed through like a burn. He should have asked more questions. He should have given more details.

*He shouldn’t have severed the only link he’d had to Tony, however indirect it was.*

But he’d done it now. He had to think what he was going to do, now.

“Hey Cap” Sam appeared in a doorway, obviously alerted by the tone of Steve’s voice. Steve could see he was already standing in combat mode, subconsciously checking his weapons. “What’s going down?” Steve thought about all ways he could start, all the things this crisis was objectively about – how to explain why this was so important.

*There are these things called Infinity Stones…*

*There’s a warlord called Thanos…*

*The whole universe is at risk…*

“That was Tony. We’re going home.”
Chapter 2

“...I think he hung up on me.”

Doctor Strange was still looking at the flip phone with a bemused squint. Tony, who’d so far only felt a defensive irritation toward Stephen Strange, had a sudden pang of connection. Yes, he wanted to say he’s incomprehensible, isn’t he?

“Don’t take it personally, Liberace” Tony sighed, “It’s not you he’s hanging up on.”

“Seriously, what happened between you two?” Bruce asked, incredulously “Why would Steve get arrested?” Tony just huffed a little laugh.

“Have you thought about how you’re going to avoid him being arrested?” Stephen carried on, ignoring Bruce’s question. And, first, Tony thought, Shit. No. I haven’t. He’d just said it, just panicked and asked Steve to come away – as though he’d been wanting to for two years...

And then he remembered.

“Yeah, I’ve got it covered.” Tony replied tersely, thinking about all the nights he’d spent picturing scenarios that could never happen.

Steve isn’t going to call...but, if he did call...

Steve would never really say he was sorry... but if he did...

Steve would never turn up here, never come home...

But...If he did...

Several nights thinking, purely hypothetically, about all the problems that would create and all the ways you could overcome them... He’d not done that for a while, actually. But he still remembered it all.

“And that means I have a lot of phone calls to make” And a lot of security systems to tamper with, and a lot of people to distract... “Bruce, you’re coming with me, right?”

“We’re all coming with you.” Stephen told him decisively, and Tony felt every muscle in his body
tense. He went to say, *and who invited you?* And then, at that exact moment, a little voice in his head reminded him, *Steve is coming home. Today.*

“Fine, whatever, I don’t care.” Tony shrugged. “The facility is full of people I don’t like anyway, what’s one more?” Over Stephens shoulder, Tony saw Wong smile smugly, and decided that he liked him.

“What about the others?” Bruce asked, and for the first time his voice sounded something other than panicked.

“Nat is with Cap” Tony answered the real question. He smiled at first, thinking of it purely as a friend asking about the girl he liked… then he remembered which ‘girl’ they were talking about. Nat was coming home, too… “…And Wanda, and Sam.” Oh, this was going to be all sorts of awkward.

“What about Clint?”

“Clint is under house arrest” Tony sighed, and Bruce’s mouth fell open again.

“Hardly a great obstacle.” Stephen shrugged dismissively. Tony shot him a sharp look. “Stark, we can’t afford to turn down *any* help against an enemy like Thanos.”

“I don’t know, if it means we don’t have to take on the US government, I’m thinking maybe we can do without bow and arrow guy.” Tony replied sarcastically “There is *some* hope that they won’t know the others are here – but, believe me, they’ll know if Clint leaves his house. *And,* if you’re thinking we can hide him at the facility – I’ve tried it. He and Wanda took *serious* offence.”

“Tony, what the hell are you talking about?” Bruce tried again, exasperated, and Tony threw his hands up.

“Alright, you know what? If we need all the help we can get, then I need to get back to the facility – otherwise, we’re going to have to break all the help we can get out of jail, first. We can argue about Robin Hood when we get there.” He announced to the room in general. Then he focussed on Bruce, and spoke more softly “And then I’ll explain everything, okay?”

“Yeah, okay.” Bruce accepted. Tony nodded, and then looked back at Stephen.

“So, can you do anything useful with that sparkle lasso, like get me back to my office?” He asked, “Or do I have to call Bruce a cab?”

And then the floor disappeared beneath him.

*Thor and Loki were being held in a tiny cell on the bottom floor of Thanos’ warship.*
Thor had tried yelling, pleading, reasoning, but no matter how many times he asked Loki would not tell him what was going on. He hadn’t said a word. Just stared through Thor, his eyes vacant, his expression unreadable.

Perhaps Loki couldn’t risk giving anything away, when Thanos might be watching.

Perhaps Loki was just leading Thanos to the Tesseract, sacrificing half the universe in the hope of saving himself.

Perhaps Loki had another plan entirely; to sell out the universe or take out Thanos, or maybe just to stall. Thor really had no way to tell.

But a few weeks ago he would have been completely sure it was the second one, so that was progress of a sort.

And then, about a foot in front of Thor’s face, a little flicker of light fizzed into life. It bloomed into a circle, a physical gap in the air… Thor had seen this before… And then, as quickly as it had opened, the portal began to shrink – the little black object falling though at the very last second. Thor felt it drop gently into his lap, and glanced down at it. A phone, like the ones that Steve and Tony had used back at the tower…

He looked up at Loki. For the first time since they left the Statesman, Loki looked back at him. Thor didn’t break his gaze as he slowly closed his fist around the phone; as subtly as he could, and slid it into a hidden pocket at his waist. He saw Loki give him the tiniest nod, and he returned it.

And then Loki went back to staring at the wall.

*\

The few hours since Bruce had reappeared had been the most stressful of Tony’s life – and that was up against some serious competition.

At first, it had felt like spinning plates. Come up with a plan for defending the earth from invasion, try to work out how to stop Thanos, cover the fact that the four most wanted people in the world were about to turn up at the world law enforcement agency, figure out how to communicate with Thor – all things he had to do first, and all at once, and without anyone finding out.
And then, very quickly, Tony had realised it was actually far more complicated than that. All of these issues were interconnected. It was more like trying to rearrange cogs. Any plan for stopping Thanos came back to what Thor might tell him, any plan to contact Thor risked alerting the attention of the authorities, every precaution he took to stay hidden made it harder to plan things properly. All the while there was the constant internal debate about which was more important, whether it was a ridiculous waste of time to try to keep Steve out of prison or foolish to risk losing their most valuable asset. He couldn’t say whether the time was running out far too quickly or whether the worst day of his life had felt about a month long.

And he did wonder what the point of planning was, when there was always the chance that Steve would turn up and run roughshod over everything. Because Steve was like that sometimes.

“Stark.” Strange spoke from the doorway of Tony’s workshop, snapping him out of another mental loop.

“Yes?” Tony answered irritably – he’d still not forgiven Stephen for dropping him into his office from a great height.

“I’m pretty sure we’ve just managed to get a phone to Thor.”

“A phone?” Tony frowned. “Why, what is – hang on, how did that even happen?”

“Sling ring portal.”

“I thought you said that wasn’t working?”

“It wasn’t. But then it did.” Stephen sighed, patronisingly. Tony set his teeth.

“I don’t suppose the phone magically worked when you rang it?”

“No, we can’t get through to it.” Strange admitted “But having any potentially link has to be better than nothing.”

No, because now – on top of everything else – I have to work out how to make a phone call to hallway across the universe.

“Fine. Okay.” Tony bit out, already thinking of where that fit in the plan. Maybe that should be the priority. Everything else might hinge on what Thor could tell them. On the other hand, he didn’t have the first clue how to begin with that, and there was every chance it was a total dead end that would distract him from the important stuff.

There wasn’t an obvious solution in what he’d been given. He didn’t like any of the choices he was being offered. So, he did what he always did in those situations – he made up his own.
“King T’Challa, Wakanda? He has a sister, Shuri. She’s got more chance of working out how to call him than I have.”

“I thought we couldn’t contact T’Challa?” Strange asked, wanting Tony to know that he’d been listening to everything. Tony responded with a smirk.

“Everyone thinks T’Challa is currently on a call with me, because that means no one from Ross’s office will wonder why I’m unavailable.” He delighted in informing Stephen “T’Challa knows everything, he’s already getting his forces together.”

“Everything?” Strange clarified, narrowing his eyes. “So you trust T’Challa?”

“As much as I trust anyone we’re asking for help” Tony answered bitterly. He’d almost said ‘as much as I trust Clint’, but Jesus Christ he did not want to start the ‘do we call Clint?’ argument again.

“I mean, to not report any of the other people you don’t trust to the authorities.”

Tony exhaled slowly, and wondered how much Strange thought he knew about what happened. He thought about telling Stephen that T’Challa had sheltered Steve and the team when they first went on the run. That T’Challa had been the one to come to his aid when Steve left him bleeding on the floor of a bunker in Siberia. But he didn’t feel like explaining himself to Doctor Strange, especially not about any of that, so instead he just said,

“Yes.”

And then, in a flash of inspiration, Tony realised he had a plan. Not just for contacting Thor, but, potentially, for fixing this whole thing. Suddenly he remembered a handful of what had seemed like unrelated facts. What Strange had said about the Time Stone, what Bruce had suggested about Vision… Shuri. Tony pulled his phone out of pocket and went to call T’Challa before anything else could-

“Tony!”

Shit. Too late.

Tony looked up to see Bruce, breathless and still too pale, resting his head on the doorframe.

“The Quin Jet just touched down. They’ll be here in ten minutes.”
For most of the flight back to New York Steve really had been thinking about Thanos.

The enormity of the threat had really hit him as he was explaining it to the rest of his team. There was something sobering about answering questions with ‘infinite power’ or ‘all life in the universe’. Everyone had been suitably distracted by the global crisis element.

At least until they were touching down.

The thought was already sitting at the edge of Steve’s thoughts, like a fidgeting toddler that’d been told to be patient. Can we think about being home now, can we, can we? And then, as he was trying to fight it, Sam met his eye.

“You okay?” He asked simply. Kindly.

“Other than the imminent global catastrophe, you mean?” Steve sighed.

“Yeah, other than that. The thing that is other than that.” Sam pressed “Do you know how you want to play the other thing?” And then, suddenly, everyone was giving Steve the same meaningful look.

He knew he should be pleased that his team were prepared to follow his lead on his. Touched, even, that they considered his feelings a priority. But really, it just made him feel lonely. They were putting him in charge of the group vote, and he didn’t know how to decline. He wanted to tell them they could decide for themselves how to play it, but it sounded so petulant. And he knew why people came to him to ask, what would Captain America do? It was a philosophical question, really. People asked it the way they asked the Lincoln Statue what they should do, or an image of Christ. Captain America was an idea of bravery and morality and goodness. And who else would people ask, if not him?

So, what was the Captain America thing to do here?

“However we have to play this to beat this thing.”

Yeah, that sounded right.

Steve tried to focus on that as they landed. He took what he hoped was the right route to the new facility – he only had a few blunt text messages from Tony to go on…
Tony

He just couldn’t resist it. He knew there were more important things to worry about, and he knew so many people were relying on him, and he knew that Captain America wouldn’t get distracted by personal issues –

But he was home.

That would have been hard enough to ignore if it had been simple. But the moment Steve slipped into thinking about it, he tumbled right into thinking about all of it. How complicated and frustrating and painful it all was, even now.

He would have liked so much to just apologise. He would have loved to have just fallen to his knees and told Tony all the reasons he really was sorry, all the things he really was sorry for. Even if Tony had blanked him completely, Steve would still have liked to do it. He felt all that guilt and grief so genuinely, he wanted so much to do something, anything about it. It would have been easier, to just be sorry. There was far more chance of that working, maybe.

But Steve wasn’t just sorry. He couldn’t just be sorry, even for the sake of an easy life. Maybe he could have swallowed the sense of injustice he still felt over some of it, ignored all the arguments he still had with the Tony in his head. He could bury his own feelings, when he had to. But it wasn’t just that. Steve couldn’t spend the rest of his life pretending he regretted helping Bucky, he couldn’t sit there and listen to Tony insult Bucky for a crime he hadn’t committed, he couldn’t go along with The Accords because he was pretending to be sorry he hadn’t before. Even if he would have really liked to, sometimes.

As they slipped through a side door in the building, Steve was giving himself an actual pep talk. *The universe is at stake and that’s all you need to think about. This is not the time to think about anything that happened.* Of course, there was no stopping the thinking about it. But he could at least act as though he wasn’t thinking about it, and do what Captain America would do.

At last, they made it to the basement meeting room that the final text had specified.

Tony

And Bruce, and two men Steve had never met before – he assumed one of them was Doctor Strange.
He knew he should ask them who they were. But... *Just give me a second, yeah?* Just a moment to be the person that played this part, the human being underneath all these good intentions. Just a second to feel all that pain and love and hope and loss that made a human life worth something. Steve had sacrificed so much so that strangers could keep on living their lives. So that they could keep seeing those familiar faces, so they didn’t lose the love they took for granted, so they could keep working on their relationships. Steve didn’t get to have any of that for himself. But just for a second, he could see what it looked like. He could see the thing that would have mattered to him, if he was allowed it.

But he wasn’t. That was that.

“So, what’re we looking at?” Steve heard himself say it. He saw Tony let go of a breath, saw a flash of feeling in those big dark eyes... Tony had always managed to stay human. Steve had always seen that raw feeling, under his skin. Steve may not have understood it, but he was drawn to that thing in Tony... He shouldn’t be. Not now.

“Thanos is collecting Infinity Stones, that would be bad, Loki is doing something, after which Thanos is probably headed straight for earth.” Tony short handed “I take it you got the long hand version of all that before?” He gestured to Doctor Strange to reference the earlier summary. Steve, thinking he understood it as much as he was going to, just nodded. “Well, we’re up to realising that we can’t destroy any of the Infinity Stones, and there’s probably nowhere in the universe we can hide them. Although anywhere we can put them is probably better than Visions forehead...”

Steve felt everyone behind him straighten up slightly. They’d been over this in the jet. The fact that Vision now had a target on him, the question of how much they could risk to keep Vision safe. Vision was stoic about it, Wanda was upset, Sam was worried and Steve never knew what Nat was thinking – as usual, the casting vote was Steve’s. Steve had already decided, for everyone, that they didn’t trade lives. He’d committed to saying it, now.

“But as we’ve already put one in Visions forehead, we have to think about where he is going to be safest until we have this thing in hand.” He declared, and Tony raised his eyes skywards. Steve felt a little internal kick, and he wasn’t sure if it was a good feeling or not. Somewhere between *I miss that and I remember why I hated that.*

“Or, there is the option of removing the Mind Stone from Visions forehead.”

“...You can do that?” Steve asked, sceptically.

“Me? Probably not. But I know someone. And, with me and Bruce to help her, yeah, I think it’s a possibility.”

“Who?” Nat queried

“Shuri. T’Challa’s sister.”
Steve felt a little frisson of discomfort at that. He hadn’t spoken to T’Challa since the team left Wakanda. He’d had a few brief conversations with Shuri since then, all about Bucky and his recovery. There was no reason he should know who either of them talked to, or think they were on anyone’s side. But it had surprised him that Tony talked to them, and not in a good way.

“You know Shuri?” Steve asked in an unnatural voice.

“I know T’Challa. He helped me out when I got hurt in Siberia that one time.” Tony answered snidely. Steve felt inside of his lungs burn. Wow. He just came out and said that.

“And you think Shuri can separate Vision from the Mind Stone without killing him?”

“I think it’s worth asking her. It’ll definitely be easier to hide the damn thing when Vision isn’t attached to it.”

“I thought you said there wasn’t anywhere we can hide them?” Sam asked.

“Ah, well, not anywhere, no. But we have the possible option of any when.” Tony flashed an ironic smile. “Thanks to the Time Stone, and Ming the Merciless here” He gestured to Doctor Strange “We possibly have the option of putting all the other stones into pockets in time – maybe Thanos doesn’t find them there.”

“So what do we do until Shuri gets here?” Nat asked professionally. “Do we have anything other than get the Mind Stone and hide it?” Steve saw Tony press his lips together.

“Well, in the meantime.” He began with forced patience. “Rhodey is upstairs distracting the global defence network so that no one knows you’re here – but, to be honest, I think we’re going to want to tell the global defence network about this pretty soon, so you all have to get to somewhere safe until we can convince them not to arrest you.”

“You want us to leave?” Steve hadn’t meant to sound so hurt.

“No, I want us all to go for lunch together in the canteen.” Tony told him, sarcastically. “But, unfortunately, you went on a three day crime spree, so I guess we’ll have to go with this.” And then Tony took a breath and collected himself “I’ve arranged somewhere nearby for tonight. As soon as we can, we should all relocate there. Right now, there’s some stuff I can only do from here. But you should all get clear of here as soon as we’ve given you what we can.”

Steve felt an inch of relief. We should all relocate there. If they were all going, it was still home.

“Because, as well as all that” Tony went on, sounding exasperated “I also have to see if we can get a message to Thor, and balance a political mine field, and try and prepare a defence in case this doesn’t work and Thanos turns up anyway.”

Steve realised then just how tired Tony looked. There was a soft response to it that didn’t fit the
circumstances, that he had to contain suddenly, in the way you sometimes have to stop yourself from crying. He wanted to say that he could help. He wanted that to be true. But it wasn’t – all he could do now was leave.

“We’ve written down as much as we can” Tony’s tone was final now, making it clear he was wrapping it up. “And we’ve put some supplies together – it’s all at the safe house already. We’ll get there when we can.”

Steve wanted so much to hold onto him. To find a way to drag this out, to steal just a few more minutes. He didn’t even know what he wanted them for; but he knew he couldn’t have them.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Bruce handing directions to the safe house to Nat. He glanced up just in time to see the smile they exchanged, the inaudible promise of later, when they had the time.

All Steve could think was that the whole thing was miserable.
Chapter 3

Tony knew he was being childish.

He was at the wheel of a hastily commandeered minibus, finally taking everyone over to meet Steve’s team at the safe house. Shuri was in the seat beside him, working quietly on a tablet computer and generally making Tony feel even more immature. She, at the age of sixteen, was the only person in the van that wasn’t sulking or anxious. Bruce, sitting just behind her, was still visibly shell-shocked – whether from what had happened with Thanos, or from hearing about everything that’d happened since Sokovia, Tony couldn’t say. Strange had taken a short break from criticising everything to glare at the back of Tony’s head, and Wong seemed to know better than to try and break the tension. And Tony, rather than do some useful last-minute planning, had spent the whole drive thinking how unfair everything was.

Thinking about it, maybe teenager-ish was a better description. There was a petulant, angsty edge to his current mood that felt particularly adolescent. He’d heard it in his own tone several times as the afternoon had progressed.

He’d been unnecessarily combative when he finally spoke to Ross, and he knew it. Tony had told Ross the parts he was confident he could share – which wasn’t much about an issue he didn’t know much about anyway. Mostly, it was Tony saying ‘I don’t know’, like a challenge. It felt like an argument he would have had with his father. Suffice to say, it had been of very limited use. All Tony had really done was ensure that a lot of underqualified people were now rushing to stick their oar in…. But hey, no one could say he should have told them sooner. It wasn’t like he’d hidden a problem they could’ve helped with, and if they couldn’t fix this without him, then it was their failing, not his – they weren’t entitled to Tony’s talents, just because they didn’t have any of their own-

Was exactly the sort of self-important bullshit Tony used to think when he was a teenager.

But Tony didn’t care about Ross. Tony was actually more concerned that he hadn’t been entirely fair to Bruce…. He had tried. When he eventually got time to explain everything that had happened in Siberia, Tony had firmly warned himself not to be an ass about it. Not to burden Bruce with all the personal issues, not to put Bruce in a difficult position with Nat, to try and be fair about everything…

But, in Tony’s defence – Steve did lie to Tony, for years, about what happened to his parents. That was a pretty key part of the story. Steve had gone after a group of super soldiers, without telling Tony, and those super soldiers hadn’t existed. That was literally what happened. And Tony had tried not to make Steve sound like a total dick… But now he was worried he’d slipped into ranting. That maybe, at the time, Tony had kinda enjoyed the horrified look on Bruce’s face.
Tony knew it wouldn’t last. It never did. In a few minutes they’d arrive at the safehouse, and Steve would give an empty sermon and Nat would mutter a snide cliché and Wanda would just look at Tony like it should be perfectly obvious why she hated him, and suddenly it would dawn on Bruce that he had to side with Steve. Bruce would be able to magically see the rationale in Steve’s morality, like everyone always did, and Tony would go back to thinking it must be him that was the problem. So, for just a brief moment, it had been nice to have someone as shocked and outraged by Steve’s behaviour as he was. To talk to someone who wasn’t constantly trying to interrupt him with Steve’s point of view.

He felt bad for it now, obviously.

But then, as they’d just reached the safehouse, Tony was feeling pretty bad generally. And he even knew, part of the agony was the part of him that wanted to be here. The part of him that was delighted, or excited, or something embarrassing and inconvenient like that. If this had been his monthly heart examination, or one of his reports to Ross, or any of the things Tony just uncomplicatedly hated, then Tony could have simply gritted his teeth and counted down the minutes and not really cared about anything but getting out of there. But damn this little part of him that cared how it went, that tiny, pathetic part of him that hoped in spite of there being literally nothing he could hope for. The part of him that would be crushed by this, again.

Still better than being nothing though, isn’t it?

Tony shook that thought away as he climbed out of the van. He reminded himself that there were a million things better than being nothing, and Tony could still be any of them, if he kept working at it-

There aren’t a million things better than being with Steve though, are there? That’s what you want.

And he shook that thought away too, because he knew it wasn’t real. There weren’t a million things better than being with the Steve in his head – there was nothing better than being with the Steve in his head. But the Steve in real life didn’t love him, wasn’t good for him, didn’t trust him and had hurt him time and time again. Tony had to keep reminding himself of that, even if he still didn’t want to hear it.

He hung back just a little, just enough to make sure it would be someone else that had to knock on the door.
Tony was being very grown up and professional.

He’d nodded the same perfunctory hello to everyone at the safehouse before slipping effortlessly into leading a team meeting. He’d started outlining the situation before his team were even in their seats, explaining what he’d told Ross and how little progress they’d made in contacting Thor and briefly introducing what Shuri was going to be talking about.

It hurt Steve’s feelings.

It was a deep, childlike sadness, an urge to tell Tony this wasn’t how he was supposed to be. And Steve knew he had no right to expect Tony to be the same with him – but he wanted it anyway. And he knew that cool professionalism should’ve been better than uncontrolled anger – but it wasn’t. Steve hadn’t realised until right now that he wanted Tony to care, that maybe he’d taken for granted that Tony still cared… but he was acting as though Steve was nothing more than an inconvenience to be dealt with. Like he would have preferred for Steve never to have come back – which, somehow, was worse than Tony being desperate to avoid him. Steve had spent two years thinking, *if I could just see his face again.* Two years planning letters he never sent and phone calls he never made, two years of nightmares and daydreams, two years of wishing and wondering –

And Tony had moved on.

It hit Steve and he very nearly groaned, it hurt so much. He hadn’t even thought to prepare for that, it hadn’t even *occurred* to him – how humiliating was that? Steve just *assuming* that Tony still gave a shit, and Tony not even thinking about what Steve had assumed. And why would he? It made it so much worse that Steve should have guessed that. That he should never have expected anything else.

It was hurt, plain and simple, that pushed him to speak when he did. Because Tony asked if anyone had any questions before he handed over to Shuri, and Steve hadn’t wanted to be handed over to anyone else today.

“Do the Accords let you do any of this?”

Steve felt *everyone* glare at him then, and he kicked himself. He knew immediately how stupid and spiteful that had been – he knew exactly what he’d been doing, that time. He had been trying to get one up on Tony because he felt like Tony had one up on him. He wanted to prove to Tony that he wasn’t right about everything, as though Tony had been standing there saying he was. He’d wanted a chance to prove to someone, anyone, that had been right about something. And the first petulant, ridiculous argument that had come to mind was *I thought you were all about accountability and rules these days?* And now he didn’t know how to get out of it. He heard Nat inhale slowly, like she was
trying to keep her temper, and Bruce actually threw his arms open in a why did you say that? gesture. Even Doctor Strange was frowning at him incredulously.

But Tony just sighed softly, like Steve had seen him do in board meetings and press conferences.

“Why, are we planning on entering another sovereign nation, breaking any national laws or engaging in a potentially dangerous conflict around civilians?”

“So the Accords don’t say anything about this?” Steve spoke in a level tone, trying to think of an argument as he was talking, still telling himself to shut up the whole time.

“Again, the Accords do not make anything we ever did illegal” Tony answered, a bit more heated “They do not include a whole list of new rules, they do not regulate anything we do in our own time. What they do is make things that we used to do legal. They give us a set of guidelines for when we can enter a sovereign country – as opposed to what we used to do, which was enter illegally and hope we got away with it. They do not stop us learning magic, or researching infinity stones, or anything else we chose to do that doesn’t clearly endanger civilians, no. And if this get’s as far as a conflict with Thanos, then I’ve already told Ross, and he’s already agreed it, and he’s already getting various armies together to support us.”

Steve felt the hot panic of being lost for an answer. Picking through everything Tony had just said and thinking… he’s right. In another situation, that may have been the foundation for a new understanding between them – but Steve was hurt, and angry. And he wasn’t angry because of the argument he was making; he was arguing because he was angry. Tony’s points were all about the facts, they did nothing to change Steve’s feelings. So Steve kept arguing. He looked for any point he could throw back.

“Again?” He challenged “When did you ever make that point, when we were talking about the Accords?”

“No, you’re right.” Tony shot back “I really did mean to have a proper debate about all this, but then a mate of mine got into some legal trouble, so I put the whole discussion on hold and got everyone to sort that out for me-”

“We didn’t stop discussing the Accords because of Bucky” Steve reminded him, feeling a little spike in his chest that he might actually have liked, “The Accords were already signed when Bucky got involved – it was the ratification of the Accords that Zemo bombed. The discussion of the Accords got delayed once because Peggy died-”

“My point is, it wasn’t me that stopped debating it.” Tony cut in, and – as Steve had intended – the mention of Peggy’s death had taken some of the fire out of his delivery.

-and once because you detained Wanda in the compound

But Steve just about swallowed it before he said it. He forced himself to take a breath, and ask
himself what the hell he was doing. Tony took advantage of the pause to try and gather the meeting back together again. The professional façade had barely wobbled before it was back up again.

“So, no, in answer to your question, I have worked very hard and made sure to keep us all on the right side of the law. So, are there any other questions?” And, obviously, no one said a word. “Right, Shuri.”

“Well, the good news is, I believe I can remove the Mind Stone safely.” Shuri began, with an ease that didn’t fit the room “The bad news is that in order to do it I will have to correctly sever over two trillion neurons, and one misalignment could cause a cascade of circuit failures. So it isn’t something that can be rushed.”

“Wait.” Wanda spoke up, and Shuri paused politely “Before we decide how you’re going to do this, are we sure you should?” She looked directly at Vision “Do we know what will happen to you, without it?”

“Thanos threatens half the universe” Vision answered stoically “Once life shouldn’t stand in the way of defeating him.”

“But it should” Steve spoke gravely, almost daring Tony to argue. Wanting Tony to argue.

“But it doesn’t have to” Bruce stepped in. “Vision, your mind is made up of a complex construct of overlays. Jarvis, Ultron, Tony, me, the stone. All of them mixed together, all of them learning from one another.”

“You’re saying Vision isn’t just the stone?” Wanda clarified

“I’m saying, if we take out the stone, there’s still a whole lot of Vision left – perhaps the best parts” Bruce assured her. They all took a moment to consider this.

“So, how much time do you need?” Steve asked eventually, feeling defeated.

“I really couldn’t say, at this stage – as much time as you can give me” Shuri told him, apologetically. “But I think it’s important we start right away.”

“And what do we do until then?” Sam asked the room in general “If Thanos is coming, now, and this could take days, weeks, God knows how long?”

“Over to you.” Tony sighed, looking at Strange.

Steve felt that little frisson of hurt again, watching the way Tony’s little team fit together. It was obvious that Tony didn’t like Strange, or know Wong, but still they’d come into some sort of structure, friction and all. Just like before-

And Captain America stepped in.
It’s like a mental break, every time it happens. Like an error message that flashes up whenever things simply wouldn’t fit. It feels like an out of body experience, like he’s listening to himself speak, hearing someone else’s thoughts and not thinking anything of his own about them… But it isn’t bad. It isn’t anything. It stops what would have been – the jealousy, the regret, the embarrassment, all the things that would get in the way. Captain America wasn’t feeling too much of anything to listen to what Strange had to say.

“Creating a pocket in time is no simple task, especially if you’re intending to fill it with something like an Infinity Stone. And the better we want these things hidden, the more complicated the spell.”

“Spell?” Sam repeated, and Strange just rolled his eyes.

“So, while Shuri is getting the Mind Stone freed,” Strange continued as if Sam hadn’t spoken “I’m going to be finding a hiding place for it, and the Tesseract. And you could all be very helpful in that.”

“So, what do you need us to do?” Captain America asked.

“You have a strong, personal connection to both the Mind Stone and the Space Stone” Strange told Team Cap “Which means, in your personal timelines, there will be spaces where I can potentially hide the stones in their own timeline-”

“But what do you actually need us to do?” Steve interrupted, knowing that the technical details were of no use to him.

“I’m going to start working in Wakanda.” Strange explained. “I just need you to come with me.”

“Why Wakanda?”

“Because I need you to come with me.” Strange repeated, squinting at Steve in pretend confusion at his ignorance “And we thought it probably wasn’t a good idea to have you intimately involved in a project happening in New York?”

“Bruce is going with you” Tony added, “Shuri and I will keep him updated with our progress on Vision, so he can feed back any technical details you need. He’s also your cover – Ross knows he’s back, he thinks that Shuri’s recovery programme is treating him for trauma… or something.”

Steve would probably have been upset to be shipped out to Wakanda. But Captain America knew to evaluate the situation objectively, and objectively speaking, it was a fair plan. He nodded.

“You still have the jet?” Tony asked, and Steve just nodded again “Good, less of a trail if you get yourself to Wakanda in that.”

“So, we’re not going to talk about what happens if Thanos turns up tomorrow?” Nat tried one last time, an edge of incredulity on her voice. Tony bit his bottom lip.

“The world’s global defences are working on that.” He told her, his voice tight.
“And what good will that be against Thanos?” Nat challenged, and Tony just huffed out a laugh.

“Okay, you know what? You guys all thought that the world was better defended by you, without all the interference and such. So, why don’t you should me how well you can defend the world, eh? You four come up with a plan, show everyone else how it’s done.” He was standing up as he talked. “And I’ll just waste my time trying to co-ordinate all the different military forces and writing evacuations plans anyway, and we’ll see how much easier you find it. We’re done.”

Steve would probably have been perversely pleased that Tony was beginning to lose his temper. Captain America chose to ignore it. Captain America ignored any desire to keep Tony here and thought about whether there really was a reason. No, they knew everything they needed to know.

So he just let Tony leave.

*

T’Challa already had a room set aside for them by the time they arrived. Strange and Wong had gone to work immediately, but Steve’s team weren’t going to be of any use until after they finished the preliminary stuff. It was early morning in Wakanda, which made it the middle of the night in New York, which meant Steve couldn’t work out how many straight days it was since he went to bed. He thought he was delighted when Strange said their team might as well get some rest. He assumed he would fall straight into a deep sleep.

Obviously, he didn’t. He was too tired to sleep by then, too nauseous and headache – too wound up about everything that had happened.

Instead, he wasted hours rehashing every little detail of his time with Tony, trying to remember the exact words and tone. He planned answers to everything Tony had said, and everything he hadn’t said. He thought about The Accords, and The Avengers, and Bucky – again. Eventually, he drifted into a sort of dizzy waking rest. His usual nightmares were corrupted and confused by the noises he could still hear in the hallway.

After a few hours Steve got up, more exhausted that he’d been when he went to bed. Too tired to sit there doing nothing. He walked back down to the ‘magic room’ expecting to see Strange and Wong still working, hoping they might have even gone to bed themselves by now…
But, as luck would have it, he turned up just as they were finishing.

“Ah, Captain Rogers, excellent timing” Strange announced, pointing to a line that he’d chalked onto the floor. It was one of many overlapping symbols marked out on the marble, which was apparently what they’d spend the last few hours doing – the room was otherwise completely bare. “If you wouldn’t mind?”

His tone was impatient and entitled and it irritated Steve, but he was too tired to do anything about it. Instead, he just did as he was told.

“Okay, so this is just a little test run, to check we have our initial elements in place….,” Strange’s voice seemed far away, and floaty. It washed through Steve like a background noise. He picked out what he hoped were the key points. They weren’t even trying to create time pockets yet, they were just making sure that they could find them… or something… Whatever it was, it all sounded very precautionary and procedural, and not very important in the grand scheme of things. “…So, what we need you to” Strange pulled him back in, and Steve made himself pay closer attention. “Is we’re just going to have you think about specific points in your life – and, since we’re going to be focussing on the Infinity Stones eventually, it makes sense to think about them now.”

“So, think about the infinity stones?” Steve frowned.

“…Think about any time in your life when you’ve interacted with them” Strange spoke as though he’d just explained all that “Tell you what, make it easier – just think about all the times you actually saw the Tesseract, okay?” He gave Steve a disdainful look.

“Fine.” Steve huffed.

“And, if I can pinpoint some of those moments in time, that means our set up works, and maybe we can later use them to make time pockets.” Strange sounded outright patronising now.

“Fine.” Steve warned him, and Strange took the hint.

“Okay, whenever you’re ready.”

Steve’s primary memory of the Tesseract was still the first time he saw it. He tried to picture it now, tried to remember the exact shade of blue, the particular pattern on its surface. He thought about the room he’d been in, the particular colours and smells…the forties.

He didn’t even feel his mind drifting. He just wasn’t paying enough attention. He thought he was thinking about the Tesseract, but really, he was thinking about Howard. He thought of Howard searching the oceans for it, imagining the moment that he found it, wondering what he would have made of it. He thought about the fact that Howard had handled an actual Infinity Stone, and he wouldn’t even have known…. He used to think that Tony was so like Howard, but the longer he’d known Tony, the more differences Steve had found. He knew that Tony would have wanted to know what the Tesseract was more than how he could use it. Tony had such a genuine wonder
about the world, something Howard had never had – Howard was all cold, hard utility. Steve had wished so many times that his first meeting with Tony had gone differently. He wondered how much else would have changed, if he could have just changed that. If he’d just talked to Tony, instead of looking for his dad… Steve would never see Howard Starks face again. That had the same aching sadness about it as anything he’d never get to see again – the world of his youth, which had died. It wasn’t the same as thinking he’d never see Tony’s face again. That wasn’t an ache. It was a hot, sharp pain that would never get any better…

He’d spent all night trying to decide whether Tony still cared or not. It didn’t stop him going back over it all now. He’d been so distant last night – or was it the night before? He’d sent Steve off to Wakanda so quickly, when Steve would’ve done anything to prolong that meeting, at least until Captain America overruled him…. But then, Tony had sounded hurt when he said ‘He helped me out when I got hurt in Siberia that one time’. Or was that the same sharpness that Tony used with everyone? Was Tony actually being any harder on Steve than he would Doctor Strange? Jesus Christ, did Steve want him to be? Did he want Tony to be mean to him, to still be miserable…? He didn’t let himself answer that question.

By the time Strange waved at him to stop, Steve wasn’t thinking about the Tesseract at all anymore. He gave his head a little shake, recognising his lack of focus, resolving to try harder when Strange inevitably told him off for blowing it and demanded he tried again.

But Strange didn’t say anything. He just looked at the floor in front of him, a concerned little crease in his forehead.

“Okay…Not entirely sure what that did…” Strange began, in a tone that set alarm bells ringing in Steve’s head.

“What do you mean-“ But before Steve could finish, he saw the air in front of him begin to shimmer, like the floor was giving off heat. Steve took a step back, instinctively. He opened his mouth to speak, not sure what was going to come out, but he was silenced by the sound of a sudden crack, like a gun shot. Steve, Strange and Wong all instinctively fell into combat stance as the shimmering exploded into sparks, watching as they glowed brighter and began to form a circle…a portal…

Steve could make out a figure on the other side, just a shadow at first, obscured by the light. Then he made out a shock of grey hair. Then the light died as suddenly as it had flared up, leaving a deafening quiet and a floating purple shadow…

And a man.

A tall, older man, standing with his back to Steve, looking around the room in alarm. Already, Steve felt like he knew him. Like he recognised the way he was standing.
“I am Doctor Stephen Strange, and you are a guest in-”

“You’re who?” The stranger demanded like an irate army captain, not the slightest trace of fear to dilute the natural authority of his voice.

And, oh God, Steve knew that voice.
Chapter 4

Steve just left the room.

It wasn’t the most heroic thing he’d ever done, but he didn’t have time to think of anything else. He just knew he had to get out of there before Howard turned around and saw him. And then he’d already done it, and he was standing in the hallway listening to Howard Stark berate Doctor Strange from the other side of the door.

Howard.

Oh God, what had he done? How had he done that? Oh Christ – Tony. What the fuck was he going to say to Tony? And... Oh, what would Tony say to Howard? If Tony told Howard about Bucky...

What the fuck would that mean?

“Steve?”

Steve’s head snapped up. It took him a second to recognise Bruce. Some small part of his brain chose right then to wonder where Bruce had been for the last two years…. The rest of his brain told it to shut up. Really not the time.

Except, it really wasn’t the time for Howard Stark to be turning up, was it? The rest of his brain should have been focused on Thanos, and Infinity Stones… Thor being in danger at that very moment, Vision probably already on an operating table, Tony waiting on an update from someone at some point… What the hell am I going to say to Tony?

“Are you okay?” Bruce frowned, and Steve took a breath.

“Not really” He admitted, instinctively trying to stall. Which was ridiculous – but he just couldn’t bring himself to say it.

“Yeah, stupid question” Bruce nodded, with a sad smile.

“Doctor Strange is, uh, setting something up with… time magic…” Steve started in a robotic voice, his heart suddenly pounding in his throat. He felt like he was a kid again, trying to get up the nerve to tell his mom he’d done something bad...
“Yeah, that whole thing is… weird” Bruce agreed, in his good-natured way “And that’s coming from the big green rage monster.”

Steve just swallowed hard. He tried practising it in his head, *I think I just brought Tony’s dad back from the dead.* He just couldn’t force the words over his tongue. He wondered, vaguely, if there was any hope that Doctor Strange was undoing his mistake at that very moment, if maybe Howard wasn’t even in that room any more-

And, how about that. Steve didn’t like that idea.

Or, at the very least, the first reaction was an urgent disappointment, an instinct to reach out for something you know is about to be snatched away. *No, wait, before you send him back* – what? Did Steve want Howard to see him? To talk to him? Well… yes, as it turned out… but it was still ridiculous. And as soon as he remembered all the many, many reasons it was ridiculous, Steve went back to wishing the problem could just disappear. But it wouldn’t. He knew it wouldn’t.

When Steve didn’t say anything Bruce softened his shoulders, dropped his eyes. Did that little intake of breath that came before a whole new topic of conversation. Steve knew he should stop him before he moved on, but he didn’t want to. He was dying for there to be something more important to talk about.

“So, about what happened in Siberia…”

Oh. Except maybe that.

“I take it Tony told you…” Steve’s voice was barely above a whisper. *Seriously, Bruce, do we have to do this now?* *Now?*

“He told me… back when we made Ultron, and you were so upset that we hadn’t told you what we were doing…” Bruce spoke in a soft, kind tone that did nothing to prepare Steve for the bomb he was about it drop. “…You were already looking for Bucky. Is that true?”

...*What?*

“What?”

“When you were telling us we shouldn’t keep things from the team” Bruce repeated, patiently “You were *already* working on your own secret project. With an outsider. To try to find the man you
already knew had killed Tony’s parents.” He met Steve’s eye “You aren’t telling me that you didn’t think that might have ramifications on the team, at the time?”

And, even with everything that was already going on, Steve was completely thrown by that question. He’d never even considered that one. There had been so many points, on all sides, so many things Steve had done wrong or disagreed with Tony over or wished he could explain – why that one? Was that the reason Tony had given Bruce for the whole thing?

…Was that the reason Tony was angry?

Because Steve had been keeping a secret…while he’d been…telling…Tony…not to….

Wow, he had done exactly that, hadn’t he?

“I…”

And then the door behind him exploded open. Steve and Bruce both leapt back just in time for Steve to come face to face with Howard Stark.

“Steve?” Howard gasped, the blind outrage melting immediately into a blank amazement. Beside him, Steve felt Bruce recoil in shock.

“Howard.” Steve sighed, as calmly as he could manage.

“Howard Stark?” Bruce squeaked.

“And who the hell are you?” Howard demanded, but Bruce just looked right at Steve.

“What did you do?”

*

Tony had been annoyed at Vision. Well, he’d been hurt and anxious when he realised Vision – one third of the current Avengers – had decided to abandon him, like everyone else. He hadn’t actually worked out whether he blamed Vision for it… And, in any case, it didn’t matter now. Vision was sitting on an operating table, waiting patiently for Shuri to surgically remove a chunk of his very being. This wasn’t the time for grudges.
“Hey.” Tony smiled from the doorway of his lab. Both Vision and Shuri looked up to greet him. “Everything set up?” He spoke to Shuri first.

“I believe so. The system is a little more rudimentary than what I’m used to…” She teased, and Tony wondered again whether it would have been better to do all of this in Wakanda. Shuri guessed. “But you’re right, it would have been reckless to have everything happen in the one place. Too obvious a target.” Tony smiled a thank you at her. Tried to reassure himself that that had been at least part of the reason he’d sent Steve away so readily… Then he turned his attention to Vision

“And how’re you feeling?”

“I don’t know” Vision answered honestly. “But then, I’ve never really known the answer to that question.”

“None of us do.” Tony sighed. Tony had never been more confused about how he was feeling. He didn’t even know what to be confused about feeling first. He was sure he should be terrified about the imminent invasion of earth – more than he was. Enough to not be thinking about Steve. Wondering what he was doing right now, what he was thinking, if Tony regretted sending him off like that. All the things Tony might have said, was glad he hadn’t said, didn’t know if he’d ever get the chance to say now… Tony wondered, if Shuri could have surgically removed Steve from his head, would he want her to?

No.

Well. That was easy. Stupid. Counter intuitive. But easy.

“Are you scared?” Tony asked, simply.

“This entire concept makes me uneasy” Vision admitted “But perhaps not for the reasons you would think.”

“And what reasons would I think?” Tony smiled kindly, walking closer to him.

“I’m not worried that this will kill me. And I’m not worried that this will change me.”

“No?”

“No. I suppose I’ll be as attached to the person I become as I am the person I am.” Vision shrugged.

“Very logical way to look at it” Tony answered, with a meaningful look.

“Well, that’s the way I was programmed” Vision smiled.

“Not entirely.” Tony corrected him lightly “Even the parts of you that were ‘programmed’ were never designed to be completely logical. Jarvis, and even Ultron, were supposed to at least understand the inconsistencies of the human condition.”

“Ah, well, in that case I can’t say how successful you were” Vision told him, an almost teasing tone in his voice “As one example, I can’t begin to work out why you didn’t talk to Captain Rogers before he left.”
Tony did a little double take. He raised his eyebrows at Vision incredulously, but Vision held his ground.

“I’m at least well programmed enough to recognise how dearly you both want to.” Vision pressed, a little more cautiously. And Tony couldn’t help but smile. If anyone else had said that… but it was hard to take Vision personally, for some reason. Tony never could say mad at him.

“I didn’t program you to talk back like that, that’s for sure” But there was no heat in it. And Vision simply returned the smile.

“Well, who knows, perhaps that element of my character is about to be amputated” He suggested. And Tony thought, well, at least you’re well programmed enough to known when to drop it.

“I hope not” He answered, genuinely, and then turned to Shuri before Vision could thrown any more curve balls at him.

“When are you starting?”

“Right now.” Shuri told him with a little intake of breath. “Give me… an hour, maybe? And I’ll be able to give you some idea of how long this whole thing should take.”

“Right.” Tony breathed, already thinking about what he had to do next. Again, Shuri read his mind. “In the meantime…” She leant over and gathered up a raft of papers from one of the work desks to her left “I’ve been thinking about how to contact your friend in space.”

“Oh?” Tony questioned, wondering when she’d found the time.

“Well, it’s only a few initial theories at this stage.” She told him apologetically, putting the papers on the table in front of him. “But it’s something to be working on.” Tony picked the papers up.

There’s always something to be working on.

But Thor was out there somewhere, and the best possible outcome was that he was still being held captive by Thanos. However long it’d been, Thor was still a team mate, and a team mate in trouble was always a priority…

Well, I’m not… Not to most of the team, at least. But this was hardly the time to be bitter.

Tony leafed through Shuri’s notes, and started replanning his day – again. If nothing else, if he could contact Thor then Thor would know they were looking for him. That mattered. That had to matter more than anything else he should be doing, now that Vision was in Shuri’s hands and Steve was…
well. The only thing Tony considered was calling Bruce first, to check in; but he didn’t have anything to tell him.

And it wasn’t like they’d had time to do anything in Wakanda, yet.

For want of a better plan, Steve had decided to lock Howard in a room in the basement of the palace.

Steve had only managed to talk him down there because Howard was so shocked to find him, alive and unaged and talking in his Captain America voice. Steve knew it wouldn’t last; Stark men were never thrown for long. And they weren’t especially patient. It would be a few minutes, maximum, before Howard started screaming blue murder again… But Steve would just have to let him.

Bruce had run to wake the rest of the team immediately, and when Steve made it back up from the basement they had already gathered in the hallway outside Doctor Strange’s magic room. They were all wearing robes or sleep clothes, their eyes still bleary and their faces creased in the same confusion.

“What’s going on now?” Nat demanded, before Steve had come to a complete stop. He shot her an injured look, and then turned his attention to Doctor Strange.

“I don’t know – what is going on?”

“Well, obviously that isn’t what was meant to happen” Strange sighed.

“I thought you said nothing was meant to happen, yet?” Steve challenged.

“It wasn’t.” Strange shot back defensively “But this is very complicated, highly sophisticated use of the dark arts – something you don’t understand the first thing about, by the way – so yeah, something went wrong.”

“You brought Howard Stark back from the dead!” Bruce yelled, and Steve felt his guts clench.

“No, we haven’t” Strange corrected, impatiently “We’ve brought Howard Stark forward in time – as far as he knows, he isn’t dead at all.”

“Is that better then?” Bruce asked with exaggerated exasperation.

“No, it’s much worse” The cold dread in Steve’s voice brought everyone to a stop. They all looked at him for a follow up, but his mind was racing ahead of him. All the reasons this might be so much worse.

“Steve?” Sam prompted, eventually.
“Brought forward from when?” Steve asked, suddenly “Did he say what year it was?”

“1988” Wong informed them.

“1988?”

“We think that may have been the last time he handled the tesseract” Wong explained, in an apologetic tone “But we weren’t able to get much sense out of him”

No, with him in that mood, you wouldn’t have gotten any answers out of him.

Again, the oddest impulse to smile. The temptation to think about the fact that it was Howard standing downstairs, right now. Steve knew Howard, so well. Howard had known Steve, before any the world had happened to him. Before he became whatever he was now… Steve would have liked to think about that.

But there is Thanos

And Thor is still out there

And we still have to find a way to hide these infinity stones

But, no, more important than all of that. More awful than all of that.

“And what happens if we can’t send him back?” Steve asked Doctor Strange directly “Or, if he gets killed while he’s here, or… What happens if this changes something?” He felt a little ripple in the group behind him, as everyone began to understand. Doctor Strange might not have known the personal issues, but he seemed to appreciate the significance.

“Normally, it wouldn’t matter greatly. Most changes in a persons timeline are insignificant, self-correcting in the face of paradox… and, normally, even if there are major changes, it would create an alternative timeline…” He spoke carefully, like he was thinking aloud.

“Normally?” Steve pressed. Doctor Strange looked at Wong.

“But we are attempting to hide things within their own timeline.” Wong told him with a sigh.

“What does that mean?” Steve sounded increasingly irritable.

“It means, that … maybe sending Howard Stark back to the past could impact this future.” Strange conceded. “If he goes back and does something… significant… And I don’t honestly know what happens here, if…”

“You don’t know?” Steve asked, incredulous.

“No, Captain Rogers, again, this is a cutting edge—”
“You playing around with something you don’t understand?”

“I explained all the risks and realities of this, and just because you don’t understand them, or you weren’t listening—”

“Guys!” Bruce intervened, desperately. They both stopped and stared at him. “So, in addition to Thanos, who is still coming, by the way, we’ve now got Howard Stark poised to destroy our entire reality?” Steve looked at Strange accusingly, and Strange just stared him down “Then we have to get him send back now, before anything can happen to him, or we make something different happen to him, or… whatever”

“Yeah, we are working on it” Strange informed him, acidly.

“Where did you put him?” Bruce asked suddenly.

“A room in the basement” Steve answered with a frown.

“Was there any tech down there Steve?” Bruce asked urgently.

“You’re worried he’ll break out?”

“I’m worried he’ll see it” Bruce explained, as though it should have been obvious “Steve, if you send Howard Stark back to 1988 having seen Wakanda… then he’ll have seen it. Whatever we tell him about not using what he knows, he’ll know”

Oh, God, that was a valid point too, wasn’t it? It would change the entire course of human technological advancement, if Howard went back to the 1980s with even an idea of Wakandan technology. If he knew about Wakanda at all, if he went back all told the world about what was really here – this could change everything.

Steve still couldn’t help thinking that it wasn’t the real issue, though.

“Do we call Tony?” Steve heard himself say it. Like his voice had come from somewhere else entirely, like the words had never been in his mouth… but everyone was looked at him, so he must have said it…

“Of course not.” Strange answered bluntly. Steve just stared at him darkly

“Woah, hang on…” Bruce toned down the panic in his voice.

“What could Tony Stark possibly do with that information?” Strange asked.

“…That’s his dad. Who he thinks is dead. We can’t just send him back without Tony even knowing” But Bruce didn’t sound at all sure. Steve was just glad that someone was saying this side of things – because he knew he couldn’t. He wanted to. He wished that Tony would ever get to know that he did think all these things… But Steve knew where this was going. “…He might want to…”
“What? See him? Say a few things to him?” Strange finished for him, bluntly “He can’t do any of that. It’ll make his dad go back and treat him differently.”

“Tony’s dad has always been...a factor” Nat added, in her devil’s advocate voice. “If, for some reason, Howard does go back and make his peace with Tony…That might change more about the future than we realise.”

It sounded so cruel. Watching himself have this callous conversation, deciding that Tony’s traumatic relationship with his father was too narratively important to risk changing – from a tactical perspective. Steve hated himself. But that didn’t make any of it less true. It didn’t stop him from having to say-

“And if Tony tells Howard how he died, then that won’t happen.” Steve finally said it. The thing that still seemed more important than the rest of human history combined, the thing that made this so specifically awful. He felt everyone’s eyes on him then. He forced himself to look up and meet them “And that would definitely change the future.”

There was a long, heavy silence. Steve felt his skin trying to crawl away from his body, his bones curling in on themselves, like every part of him was just trying to disappear. He was scared of what would happen when he didn’t. When he was forced to go on existing, with yet another secret to keep from Tony – an even bigger secret. About the same damn thing. When he had to make the same mistake, again, with the same list of pathetic sounding reasons about saving the world and keeping Tony safe.

It was all about to happen again. There was nothing he could do about it.

“…But Tony wouldn’t…” Bruce started uncertainly.

“-He might.” Nat cut him off, her voice sad rather than cold. “Even if he didn’t mean to…”

“So, that’s a no, then.” Steve concluded, for everyone. Bruce continued to look conflicted, but everyone else just looked resigned. Steve let go of a heavy breath. “Okay. How long do you think it’ll take you to fix this?” He looked directly at Strange.

“I don’t know.” Strange answered, petulantly. “I’m out here, arguing about this.”

“Right. Then you need to get back in there and work on that.” Steve warned him, gesturing at the magic room. Strange shrunk back, just a little. Then Steve looked at the rest of the group “You might as well go and get dressed. I’m going to find T’Challa and see how many places in Wakanda are safe for Howard to see….”

Everyone else moved quickly, obviously keen to be as far away from that awkward issue as possible – but Bruce hung back. Steve waited, knowing Bruce was waiting. And then, when everyone was
finally out of earshot,

“Steve-”

“Bruce.” Steve cut him off, authoritatively. Bruce stopped – but Steve didn’t know what to follow it up with. He couldn’t outright say please, just don’t say it, like he wanted to. He couldn’t demand that Bruce take responsibility for this one, that anyone else take responsibility for this one – but, God, he wanted to. He wanted so much to just be a person, with an opinion, like everyone else. For there to be someone else he could have defended Tony to, someone else to turn those honest sentiments into a workable plan. To just be able to love Tony Stark, and want the best for him, and for someone else to worry about the stuff in between…

But he had nothing.

“What do I say when he calls?” Bruce surrendered. Steve sighed.

“Everything except the Howard Stark bit.” He answered.

Then he left.

Tony so nearly had this.

It had been frustrating going at first. Tony had always preferred working with hardware to software, and most of Shuri’s workings had been based in coding, and theoretical physics. Paper and pen stuff. Not that he had any difficulty in those areas, but the progress was always less satisfying than when he could build something with his own two hands. And then, as he’d been working through Shuri’s calculations again, he’d realised – he could build something to fix this. That the answer wasn’t in boosting a phone signal, or anything like it. It was building a new phone. A new kind of transmitter entirely, one designed to handle all the little quirks that Shuri thought of as hurdles… And now, he knew he was close. He could feel it, a special engineer’s sense just under his fingers. Like his body knew to expect the click as everything slotted into place.

Tony didn’t realise he’d found a happy little bubble in the chaos of his current world. If he had realised, it wouldn’t have been a happy little bubble. A little space where his fears and frustrations had been set aside, so much so that he’d forgotten to be relieved they weren’t there. He was just working.

And then the message flashed up on his screen.
There had been no notification from FRIDAY, there was no name attached, and when Tony closed the message it would disappear forever. The lengths he and Shuri were going to so that no one would find out what they were doing – at least until after they’d done it. Which, according to Shuri, would be two days.

Wow. Two days. Was that a really long time, or no time at all?

He glanced down at the components laid out on his desk; the new age space phone. And he thought of the little flip phone, which was still in his inside pocket. He knew he should call Bruce now. That was the next thing.

But.

Tony sighed as he took the flip phone out. He looked at it for a moment. He wondered why it should suddenly seem so natural to phone Steve, when just yesterday he’d sent him away… Or, really, he was wondering why he’d sent Steve away. Why that had seemed so natural, then. If it had seemed natural, then. Tony was never sure what he was thinking, these days. Nothing felt certain, or consistent.

But he did just keep coming back to these same themes, didn’t he?

He kept coming back to this idea that he still loved Steve, and he just couldn’t have him. And, yeah, he couldn’t stop himself questioning it – why did he love Steve? Did he even know Steve to love him? Didn’t he also hate Steve, so how could he love him? But it always brought him back here. He didn’t know why he loved Steve. He didn’t understand why it didn’t feel like love. He didn’t know what he’d do with Steve if he had him… but he wanted him anyway. And he couldn’t have him. For… two years worth of carefully catalogued reasons.

So, he’d done the other thing. He’d gotten over him. He’d pointedly and deliberately gotten over Steve Rogers, and God it had been hard. It was still hard. And Tony had always known he would never manage it if he didn’t commit to it completely. If he let himself think of how sad and inadequate his new future was, he’d have no future at all. Steve had done most of the hard work for him, really. He’d not given Tony the option of clinging to this unhealthy relationship anymore – Steve had just left him. Tony doubted he would ever have been strong enough to walk away otherwise. But it had happened now, Tony had made it this far. If he looked back now…
But he wanted to. He still wanted to. The prospect of a future with Steve – any future that included him – was still better than the so-called life goal of a future without him. And even more than that… It was like being with The Avengers, again. If he closed his eyes and ignored the background noise, it was all of them together again, working to find Thor and defend the world… It could have been 2012. And, for all the PTSD that New York had left him with, that had still been the best time in Tony’s life. The closest he’d ever come to a real family, infuriating and dysfunctional though it may have been… Oh, he’d tried everything to hold on to that. He’d clung to the fragments of that crumbling team for years, poured everything into it. And it had fallen apart anyway.

And now there was this little voice in his head, like some well-intentioned, out of touch guidance councillor,

*Look how much progress you’ve made! Think how many times you told yourself you were better of without him, that he doesn’t deserve you – you were right then, you know you were. You’ve tried so hard to free yourself from this, and you’re so nearly there. If you throw it all away and start thinking about him again, you’ll just have to start all over again. You did the right thing. You stood your ground. You showed him you’re not waiting around for him and you don’t need him and actually life is better when he leaves you the hell alone. Don’t fold now.*

But then, Tony had never listened to his guidance councillors.

He flipped open the phone. As it was ringing, he realised, he was playing. He was doing this for the sake of a few minutes of make believe. A little reminder of what things had been like, once…

“Hey.”

*No, that wasn’t right.*

That wasn’t Steve’s voice, in 2012 or at any time. That voice was cold, and … frightened?

“What’s wrong?” Tony asked immediately.

“Just everything that’s wrong.” Steve answered too quickly, and Tony didn’t believe him. There was a little stab of hurt, like a knife right between the ribs. *As fast as that.* Steve was lying to him. Steve was cutting him down. Tony had actually called him, after *everything*, and Steve was still talking to him like he was a total inconvenience. Tony was suddenly as hurt and as humiliated as he had been in Siberia. It was like the last two years had never happened.

*See. I told you so.*
“Shuri says two days.” Tony forced his tone to match Steve’s. He heard the little intake of breath on the other end.

“Two days.” Steve repeated, his voice level. Tony felt an achingly familiar rush of irritation.

“That’s how long Strange has got, until we’re all waiting on him.”

“Right. I’ll tell him.” Steve spoke, sounding almost distracted now. Tony frowned.

“What is going on?”

“I… don’t know. I don’t understand this… magic stuff.” Steve sighed, and Tony felt his heart rate kick up.

“Steve-”

“Can you, um…” Steve cut him off. Tony stopped, and there was a moment of silence.

“Steve?”

“Sorry, can you give me a few minutes?” Steve asked, suddenly “Or… I’ll tell Strange, and Bruce, and I’ll get someone to call you back, okay?”

You’ll get someone to call me back?

“Call me back to say what?” Tony asked, darkly.

“What? No, I just meant-”

“Look, the update is two days, if you can tell the others.” Tony huffed. “If something else happens, get someone to call me.”

And Tony snapped the phone shut.

By now his heart was pounding in his ears. His mouth was full of a bitter, metallic taste. He could not believe he’d just handed Steve an opportunity to brush him off, again-

Okay, I know you don’t want to hear this right now, but I’m saying it for your own good. This is why you shouldn’t do these things. I know it’s hard, and I know a life without him isn’t what you wanted – but is this better? Do you really prefer fighting with him, and being hurt by him, and constantly trying with him, to no avail? Is this neurosis and anxiety really better than him just not being here?

Yes.
Well, that was easy. Stupid. Counter intuitive. But easy. As angry as he was right now, as much as he wanted to cry right now, he also almost wanted to smile. He was still glad he’d done that, even though it had obviously been wrong. Which made no sense, of course…

*Screw it,* he thought, looking back down at the project on his desk. *I’ll call Thor and pretend it’s 2012.*
Tony turned up at Rhodey’s office just as Rhodey was hanging up on someone annoying. Tony could tell, because Rhodey was being so determinedly polite. Tony smiled.

“Hey.”

“Oh, hey.” Rhodey sighed, the tension leaving his shoulders “You get anywhere with calling Thor?”

“Not really. I keep thinking I’m close…” But then I keep thinking about Steve “…but it just escapes me at the moment. So I figured I’d see what needs doing up here.”

“Oh, a hundred things. Literally a thousand really important things you could be doing up here.” Rhodey told him, with just a trace of sarcasm at this point “And it would serve you right if I actually asked you to do one of them right now, seeing as we both know that’s not why you’re here…” And he fixed Tony with a meaningful look, and Tony just melted.

He walked further into the room and dropped into the chair on the other side of Rhodey’s desk. Really, he was just there to be with someone else. Someone he trusted. Little did Rhodey know, Tony really wouldn’t have minded if Rhodey had just given him something else to do. Somewhere else to do it… But, as Rhodey was offering – and Tony knew, Rhodey was offering – yeah, what Tony wanted to do was talk about Steve. Which was absolutely, irrefutably, a bad use of time at this critical point in human history. And Tony knew he should say that.

“I called Steve…” He said instead, hesitating when he saw Rhodey bite back a little smile. He raised an eyebrow at him, what?

“Why?” Rhodey asked him, seriously.

“To tell him that Shuri said two days…”?

“I thought you were supposed to be calling Bruce with that information?” Rhodey reminded him, and Tony shrunk back slightly.

“Yeah, well… I called Steve.” He surrendered, throwing his arms open “What can I tell you? I’m an
idiot.”

“Went well then?”

“You know what the definition of madness is? It’s doing the same thing, repeatedly, and expecting a different outcome.”

“That’s not the definition of madness.” Rhodey sighed, kindly. “That’s the definition of a lot of things. That’s the definition of American Foreign policy for the whole of the seventies. That’s the definition of being a Cleveland Browns fan. That’s the definition of love.” Tony just shot him a look.

“Those are all perfectly reasonable definitions of madness.”

“No, they aren’t.” Rhodey shook his head, refusing to let Tony deflect this one. “So, what exactly did Steve say?” Tony took a deep breath.

“I have two conflicting thoughts in my head here” He started, begrudgingly. “The first of which is that Steve is an ass, and I am an idiot for continuously expecting otherwise, and it’s an act of self-harm to do anything besides cut him out of my life completely and leave him to the mess that he has undeniably, repeatedly, made for himself.”

“Oh-huh. And the other thought?”

“I think there is a chance that Steve wasn’t just being an ass, that he might actually be in some sort of trouble, and now I’m worried about him.”

“So now you need to figure out how to work out if Steve is in trouble?” Rhodey guessed, without missing a beat. Without a trace of judgement, or mockery, or even exasperation at the ridiculousness of this ill-timed intervention. Tony had to smile at that.

“I don’t know. Maybe I want to do that” Tony conceded “I definitely want to kick him in the face.”

“Ah, but maybe he’s not being an ass. Maybe he is in trouble.” Rhodey suggested, like he was playing devils advocate.

“Let’s be clear here – Steve is definitely an ass. The question is, is he an ass who is also in trouble, right now?” And why do I care? And what the hell am I going to do about it?

“Well, what makes you think he might be in trouble?”

Tony looked for a way of phrasing it that wasn’t humiliating. Because he couldn’t say Because I know him. Because he knew the way Steve talked – all the ways Steve talked. He could always hear it when there was a little bit of anger hidden in his coldest tone, or a hint of embarrassment in the most natural conversation…

Or, he’d thought he had.

But then, as it had turned out, Steve had lied to him so many times. So naturally, so effortlessly, that
even now Tony struggled to reconcile his memories with what he’d since learned. What Steve must have known all along. How could he claim to know Steve, after that? How could he tell Rhodey that was the reason he was worried?

Why was he worried, anyway?

“I don’t really know” Tony sighed, eventually “Because I’m being paranoid. Hearing things he hasn’t said, again.”

“Not hearing things he is saying?” Rhodey asked, in a teasing tone. Tony pointedly ignored it.

“Getting everything wrong, as usual.” There was a long pause

“You know the problem with some people is that they just don’t speak the same language” Rhodey went on, eventually “But that isn’t your problem with Steve.”

“No?” Tony almost laughed

“No, your problem is that you think you and Steve don’t speak the same language. You spend all your time trying to translate everything you mean into something he’ll get, and translating everything he says back to what he might mean – when maybe you two actually could just talk?”

“All evidence to the contrary…” Tony mused….

But there was another idea in his head, now.

Just a little flash of an idea at first, like a light at the corner of his vision. A thought that left an echo, like a call back

*If you don’t know you’re talking two different languages*

> And you don’t try to translate from one system to the other…

“What are you thinking about now?” Rhodey asked patiently, when it became clear that Tony’s mind had completely wandered.

“I think I might have just figured out how to make Thor’s phone work” Tony answered, realising it as he said it. Rhodey just smiled.

“Go” He waved, and Tony sprang to his feet, suddenly enthusiastic to test his new idea.
Rhodey knew him so well.

Steve had been given his official reasons for going to see Howard, like being handed a counterfeit passport by his boss. Everyone agreed it was dangerous to leave Howard Stark unattended for too long, even in a locked room, and there was no chance that anyone else would be able to keep him calm. Steve wasn’t convinced he’d be able to keep Howard calm either, but it didn’t matter. He was just using that reason, grateful that everyone had given him a pass to do what he’d wanted to do anyway.

And, strangely, he wanted to do it even more after that disastrous conversation with Tony—

_I’ll get someone to call you back? What were you thinking?_

Well, he hadn’t been thinking. He’d panicked. He’d _never_ expected Tony to call him, especially after the last time they spoke… Steve shouldn’t have answered him. He should have just let the phone ring. He couldn’t just let the phone ring. He’d not even thought about just letting the phone ring. He’d been listening out for that damn phone for two years, he felt the spike of excitement on instinct, he just flipped it open…and then screwed it up. Of course he had – there had never been an alternative to screwing it up.

He didn’t necessarily have to screw it up quite that badly… but still.

And now, in spite of the fact that Howard was the source of this new anxiety, in spite of the complex list of rules he had to stick to and lies he had to tell, Steve quite _wanted_ to hide in a locked room with someone he hadn’t spoken to since 1945.

Steve opened the door as quietly as he could, just hoping he didn’t have to tackle Howard to the ground or something equally awkward. But then Steve saw him, standing proud and resolute in the centre of that empty room, like he was the emperor of the basement… why had he ever expected anything else?

“Howard.” Steve spoke, swallowing what might have been a surge of emotion if he’d let it.

“Steve.” Howard nodded back, and there was no way to tell what he was thinking. There was a long moment of silence, and they just looked at each other.
Steve remembered all the times he’d thought *if I could just see his face again*, about so many people – plenty ahead of Howard Stark, but still, he was one of them. One of so many people that had defined a different age completely, a time that could never come again. And now that he was looking at Howard Stark’s face again, Steve realised – it would never be enough. That his sadness had never been quite the thing he thought it was. Even if Howard was older than Steve remembered him, he was still so very Howard, and it still did nothing to ease that ache to have him here. Maybe stepping back into 1945 wouldn’t have eased that ache in him…

But it wasn’t the time for introspection right now, was it?

“I thought you were dead.” Howard spoke in a level tone.

“I might be, here, apparently.” Steve read from the script he’d been given.

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning that apparently we’re both here from some parallel reality, where everything worked out differently” Steve shrugged “Which I’m guessing you understand better than I do.” Howard huffed out a soft laugh at that.

“So…you just found yourself here, same as I did?” Howard went on after a beat, considering Steve carefully as he spoke.

“Pretty much.”

“From when?”

“1950” Was about when it would have been, if this much time had passed without him being frozen…wasn’t it?

“You were dead by then.”

“Thanks for that.” Steve dead panned, covering an internal panic that Howard wasn’t buying any of this. That he was already running away with theories based on clues Steve didn’t even know he’d given. “When was it for you then?”

“1988” Howard told him, and Steve did his best to widen his eyes as though he was surprised. He tried to think of how futuristic dates like that would have seemed to him once… funny, how it already seemed so dated to him, now.

“Flying cars yet?”

“Ha, no, no flying cars” Howard smiled, clearly still thinking of other things. Then he focused on Steve again.

“And you’re planning to, what, just wait here until someone comes to get us?” He asked, sceptically. Steve sighed, and tried to think of what he would have said, if any of this had been real.
“Why, what were you planning on doing?”

“Getting the hell out of here and getting some answers” Howard suggested, forcefully. Steve set his teeth.

“Bit short sighted, don’t you think? Given that we have no idea what the hell is out there – other than a bunch of wizards, apparently.”

And, out of nowhere, Steve suddenly remembered the night he first met Tony. He could just see it, as clearly as if he’d been standing there. The quin jet in the seconds after Thor snatched Loki, the back of the jet still hanging open, the wind howling in the space around him.

*Stark, we need a plan of attack!*

*I have a plan. Attack.*

Jesus Christ, Steve could see Tony in him then. He remembered how clearly he’d seen Howard in Tony, that night. And he couldn’t help wondering how he’d learned to manage Tony. If there was any insight he’d gleaned in the last five years that could help him manage Howard now…

But, the more he thought about it, the more Steve realised that, actually, it had never been as difficult to work with Tony as he thought it would be. As he thought it *had* been, until he was trying to think of a specific example… they really hadn’t fought that much. And, when they had, Tony hadn’t been as unreasonable as Howard would have been. Steve knew he couldn’t have any of the conversations with Howard that he’d had with Tony…

Looking at Howard now, Steve could remember him so much better. And seeing it there, being able to make the direct comparison… was Tony anything like his father? They’d looked *so* alike from a distance, and now that he was looking up close… he couldn’t find the similarities right now. Not a single one.

And that didn’t just mean Steve was at a loss as to how to placate Howard Stark. It meant there was a chance that Steve had once made a terrible mistake… or maybe a series of terrible mistakes… or even that his entire perspective on this whole thing was based on a mistake…

But, as this *wasn’t* the time for introspection.

“The fact is, if they’d wanted to kill us, they’d have done it outright – whoever they are, they don’t want us dead until we give them a reason.”
“Or they’re plotting something right now, and we’re letting them.” Howard shot back “The fact is, we’re just guessing until we get out there and see for ourselves.”

Why did Fury call us, why now? Why not before? What isn’t he telling us? I can’t do the equation unless I have all the variables

But, even though he was really trying now, Steve couldn’t make it fit. He couldn’t make what Howard was doing look like what Tony had done, even thought that had seemed so Howard at the time… and it was because he knew Tony so much better now. Because he’d learned that, however flippant Tony Stark may appear, he’d always thought about what he was doing. He always had a plan, and a back up plan in case the first plan didn’t work. Which wasn’t to say that those plans hadn’t occasionally blown up in his face anyway – but it was so obviously different to Howard, who really had never thought at all. Who would have decided to hack into SHIELDS system on a whim when he got there, as opposed to writing a specific programme before he even set out. And, if Tony was here, he probably would have wanted to break out and have a look around too. But he would at least have known what he was looking for, and how he was going to find it. As opposed to Howard, who would just have broken out and gotten shot…

And would Tony have broken out, if he were here now? Five years ago, maybe, but these days…

Jesus, not time for introspection, Rogers.

“Do you have a plan for what you do when you get out there?” Steve asked anyway. “Or are you just planning on walking out and getting shot?”

“And your plan was?”

“…Wait here for someone to come and get us” Steve answered, cold now “At least wait until someone gives me something to go on, before I act.”

Howard just looked at Steve for a few long minutes, and Steve was sure he hadn’t convinced him. He was just hoping that he had managed to stall him. Failing that, he’d just have to physically stop him…

“So, what happened to you then?” Howard asked with a different sort of interest. “Married, kids?” The sudden change of approach surprised Steve, and he should probably have wondered what Howard was playing at… But, mainly, he was just pleased by the reprieve.

“No, not yet.” Steve smiled sadly. He’d considered lying about that, just for the fun of it – but it seemed silly to give himself extra details to remember. “Still working for SHIELD”
“Hm” Howard smiled “Peggy won’t wait behind your career forever, you know.”

“What makes you think she’s waiting behind my career?” Steve asked with a raised eyebrow, and Howard laughed.

“A good point well made.” He murmured.

“You?” Steve spoke over the taste of bile, wishing he could avoid this whole topic but knowing it would be weird if he just never asked. Better to ask early. Casually. Just listen along when Howard invariably started waxing lyrical about his protégé son, maybe try to glaze over …

“Yeah, I got married – Maria. We have a son, Tony, he’s nearly eighteen.”

And… that was it? That’s all Howard wanted to tell him?

“You have an eighteen-year-old son?” Steve teased. Prompted, really, in spite of all his earlier instincts.

“It’s exactly as much fun as it sounds.” Howard sighed, dismissively.

“Sounds fun to me.” Steve answered in a strange voice, not sure what he was aiming for. Trying to remind himself that he had no loyalties to Howards son… but still thinking that might have just sounded horrible to him anyway.

“Okay, it’s a lot less fun than it sounds” Howard answered, amused, and didn’t look up to catch the distaste on Steve’s face “Or, I don’t know – yours would probably be well behaved.”

“Yours takes after you then.”

“Ha.” Howard looked at him then. “As far as causing trouble goes, I’m not in his league. If you’re thinking I got what I deserved, believe me, I didn’t deserve this.” And Steve so nearly said it out loud.

No, you didn’t.

* 

It was getting dark in New York – not that Tony knew that. He was deep into his work by this point, his entire world existing in the area of his work desk.

And this time, he really was close.
This time, he knew he had the components in the right place. He knew the hardware was sound. He knew exactly how this programme was meant to work, the exact series of events that would need to happen for them to make contact… and they could happen, he had almost made them happen… Any one of these tests could do it.

And then, suddenly, a burst of static over the workshop speakers. Tony actually yelled in delight, all alone in his workshop. He’d done it. They had a channel. Now, all he had to do was make the call… He entered the lengthy code that included the handset phone number, vaguely amused that the other side of the universe had such a long area code… well, it would do, wouldn’t it?

Wow, he was about to call the other side of the universe…

The world had done a lot to Tony Stark. He was burdened with the knowledge of great evil and great cruelty, forever altered by the pain he’d been through, weighed down by the trauma he carried. But for everything he’d seen and endured and learned, nothing had ever stripped him of his pure wonder at the potential of the human experience. The joy he felt at what was possible, what existed beyond his understanding.

No matter what, Tony Stark would always be fascinated by the prospect of making a phone call to the other side of the universe-

And the phone was ringing, by the way. That was a dial tone and everything.

And then the dial tone stopped. And then just silence. No voice, no breathing, no background noise. Nothing.


Still nothing.

“Thor? Anyone? Can anyone hear me?”

Still nothing. Tony fought a little pang of disappointment, pointedly ignored the taste of fear.
“Hello? Can anyone-”

“Hello? Hello? Who is this please?”

.

Tony yelled again. He couldn’t help himself. That was Thor. A little tinny, but otherwise perfectly clear – from the other side of the universe!

“Thor! It’s me.”

“Stark? Is that you?”

“Yes! Yes, it’s me! Jesu-”

“Yes, it’s me, I can hear you, yes – can you-“ Thor cut him off, and then cut himself off, and then stuttered on “Hello? Yes! Tony, I can – yes, yes, I know it’s you…”

A delay. There’s a delay on the line.

Okay. That was annoying. And awkward. But that was okay, he could work with that. Tony tried to think what part of the conversation Thor was up to… Right, he had to start speaking now, or else there would be a huge gap at Thor’s end, and he didn’t know what Thor would do with that. So, against every instinct, Tony pointedly ignored Thor’s voice on the speakers, and began to talk very deliberately.

“Okay, Thor, I know you can hear me, and I can hear you, but there is a delay on the line, so I am just going to keep talking now, and I hope by now you have stopped answering the last thing I said and you are just listening to me. Remember, I’m not hearing your responses yet, so don’t bother, just listen to me until the end. Bruce told us that Thanos destroyed your ship, and that he has taken you and Loki to find the Tesseract, and that he is collecting Infinity Stones. We are working on hiding the infinity stones now, but we don’t know what else to do. So, we have things we need to know. We need to know if you’re okay. We need to know how far away you are – how long would it take Thanos to reach us, from there? How much time have we got? Can we help you, from here? What else can you tell us about Thanos, his plan, anything we can use? And does Loki have the Tesseract? Is he leading Thanos to it? Okay, those are the questions, so I’m just going to shut up now and wait to hear your answers.”

Thor had stopped talking halfway into Tony’s speech, so he had to assume Thor had understood his instructions. Now he just waited, and waited, for what seemed such a long time. Fighting the temptation to talk again, until it became almost overwhelming – and then.

“We’re prisoners on Thanos ship, so I cannot speak freely. I can tell you it would take any ship a full
seven days to reach you from where we are – assuming they had no unearthly power at their disposal. *If* Thanos gets his hands on the Tesseract, I think all distance in space will be immaterial to him. And I cannot say if that’s a possibility – no one will tell *me*” Tony could feel Thor glaring at Loki, from all the way across the universe…. “And, unfortunately, I cannot tell you anything more about Thanos. Um. End message.”

Tony couldn’t help smiling.

“But are you okay?”

And he waited, and waited.

“We’re alive, and so far unharmed. End message”

“Okay, Thor, I think you should get off this phone now, before anyone catches you with it – I’ll try my best to call you as little as possible. But if you press the last call button, it *should* get you back through to me, I hope – just remember it’ll take a minute or two before you hear a response. But if you need us, you can call us, and we’ll do whatever we can.”

And he waited.

“Just keep the Infinity Stones safe from Thanos, and keep the earth safe.” Thor told him, solemnly.

“Will do.” Tony responded cheerfully, knowing that there was no way it got through to Thor before he hung up.

*I just called the other side of the universe!*

But Tony couldn’t allow himself to get too carried away with that, because Tony still had work to do. Having bested the challenge of the interstellar phone call, Tony had a thousand other things to be getting on with – not least, doing something with the information that Thor had just given him. He had to call…

Bruce. This time, he was going to call Bruce.
Steve had been locked in a room with Howard Stark for a few hours. It seemed much longer to Bruce.

In the meantime, Strange and Wong had argued and experimented and seemingly made very little progress on either hiding the Infinity Stones or sending Howard Stark home. Bruce had observed for a while, but the anxiety that he was about to see another magical experiment go horribly wrong had been too much for him. He was worried he’d hulk out if he kept watching them.

Then, after he’d left, he realised he had nothing to do but fret. There was nothing he could be doing in the meantime, other than worry about what would happen if Howard changed the future, or if Thanos got his hands on the Infinity Stones…

What Tony would think, when he found out Bruce had lied to him too.

He was doing yet another mindless circuit of the palace, trying to imagine just what a tiny piece of shit he’d feel when Tony was looking at him, *et tu, Bruce?* When Nat stepped into his field of vision and snapped him out of his thoughts.

*Oh, the things that might have been…*

But he already knew, it wasn’t just what might have been if he’d never wound up in Sakaar, or if Ultron had never happened… it was what might have been if he’d never been The Hulk. If Nat had never been so terribly damaged. Another life entirely – a world in which they probably would never have met at all. Just a nice idea, really. But, right now, that would do.

“Hey.” He smiled, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Have we heard anything...about anything.”

“I don’t think Strange is anywhere yet” She sighed, almost apologetically. “T’Challa has just taken Howard to a secure suite.”


“A large room, with no modern technology in it, that T’Challa is sure even Howard Stark couldn’t break out of” Natasha placated, “Because there is only so long we could leave him in a bolt locked basement with Steve.”

“And he just went along with that?”
“Apparently, no, not really” Nat answered with a shrug “But I think Strange and Wanda gave him a vague demonstration of their powers – the point is, he’s in the room now. It’s probably the least damage he could do.”

“Yeah. Right.” Bruce sighed. “So, where’s Steve?”

“Well, I know they locked him in his room in front of Howard – maintaining the cover story and all. They should probably have let him out by now.”

“Right. Whatever.” Bruce spoke like he was talking to himself, which he might have been. He didn’t know who he should be arguing with any more.

And then his phone rang.

And, oh God, it was Tony.

Bruce threw Nat a helpless look, but she just gestured to the phone well, answer it then. And what choice did he have?

“Hi Tony” He squeaked, and then he winced, knowing how strange he’d sounded. He could feel Tony and Nat giving him the same what the hell was that? look.

“Okay, what is going on?” Tony demanded, and Bruce felt his bowels twitch. How the hell had he worked it out that quickly?

“The Thanos thing, or the wizard thing, or the it turns out Wakanda is a technological wonderland thing?” He tried to joke.

“The one of those things is making you talk weird thing” Tony told him outright.

“That would probably be the wizard thing, at this stage.” Bruce lied “At this stage it’s all very strange – and I don’t suppose we have any more idea of when we’ll have an Infinity Stone to actually hide, do you? That might help…” Oh, he was talking too fast…

“…Shuri said two days – did Steve not tell you that?”

“…No. Did Steve know that?”

“Yeah, I told him, and he said he’d tell you-”

“Ah, well, I haven’t actually seen Steve.” Steve’s been locked in a room with your dad “He’s been trying to help wizards perform time magic to find the tesseract, I think.”

“…Right. Okay. In that case, first thing – Shuri says two days. Second thing, I just called Thor.”

“You just…” Bruce was about to remind Tony that Thor was half way across the universe, when he realised that was where Tony had called him. Which was, briefly, a more interesting idea than the time travelling Stark they had locked in a bedroom. “How? Wait, what did he say?”

“He’s still a prisoner on Thanos ship, unharmed so far – which probably means that Thanos is going
with Loki’s plan, whatever it is. Thor doesn’t know. Loki won’t tell him.”

“So we don’t know if Loki has the Tesseract?”

“Nope.” Tony sighed. “Only that, if he does, and Thanos finds it, he can basically use it to get straight back here. If he doesn’t, it’ll take Thanos at least a week to earth, once he’s killed Loki and Thor for tricking him.”

“Great.”

“…Also, I know something is wrong, Bruce.”

“Lots of things are wrong.” Bruce managed, his heart blocking his throat. He might have been able to do this, if he’d really believed he had to. If he was as sure as everyone else seemed to be that Tony really couldn’t know… But everyone else was so sure…

“But I know there is something you aren’t telling me. Like there was something Steve wasn’t telling me-”

“I promise, there isn’t.” Bruce heard himself say it. Hated himself for saying it. But he’d just run out of time to think of something else. And now it felt as though the conversation was running away from him, like a treadmill he couldn’t keep up with. He knew he’d stumbled, and if he did it again, he wouldn’t be able to right himself. He’d gone too far with it now. He had to get off. “I swear, it’s just that I’m seriously messed up by everything that has happened, and is happening – including a magical thing that is happening behind me right now, in case you’re wondering…” Bruce just threw it out there, not sure where it had even come from.

“…A magical thing is happening-”

“And I think I might actually have to go and deal with it. Sorry. I’ll call you back.”

And he hung up.

For a few breathless seconds, Bruce just stared at his phone in his hand, amazed he wasn’t turning green. Then he looked at Nat, who was looking back at him, sympathetically. It had gone as badly as he thought it had, then.

“Oh, God.”

“It’s okay, Bruce.” Nat tried, and Bruce looked at her incredulously. She sighed. “What else could you have said.” Bruce took a deep breath, and nodded.

“Not to Tony, no.” He agreed, quietly.

But there was someone else he should be saying something to.
Tony knew he should be heartbroken. Maybe he would be heart broken, when it hit him. Right now, he was just so tired of it all.

It wasn’t that Tony hadn’t been surprised. Perhaps he should have been expecting it – but he hadn’t been. He hadn’t really thought that Bruce would instantly turn on him, and side with Steve, even if he’d bitterly thought those same exact words… he hadn’t meant it. He was surprised at Bruce, like he had been a little bit surprised by Vision, like he’d been surprised by Nat’s sudden change of heart, like he’d been shocked to his core by Steve. Like he’d been shocked by SHIELD, and Peirce. Like he’d been shocked by Obadiah.

He was tired of it. He just didn’t have the energy to feel betrayed all over again. He was bored of it, now.

Bruce was keeping something from him. Steve was keeping something from him. Probably something important – most likely something they were wrong about, if they would only run it past him. So, since he was dispensing with any emotional response for the time being, what to do about that?

_How about screw the lot of them, hand it over to Ross, retire to a private island and never speak to another human being again._

But, as the hurt and rage and embarrassment hadn’t kicked in, neither had the ridiculous tangents. He knew he couldn’t screw the lot of them without screwing the whole world, and he just wasn’t up to being that unreasonable yet. He didn’t have the energy to waste time plotting emotional revenge. For the time being, there were just the logical questions. What did he need to know? How could he find that out? Who could he trust? That last one was a tricky one, wasn’t it? Given that no one was who they said they were, and the people he’d trusted most were always the ones that cut him deepest…

Expect, that wasn’t quite true, was it?

And, even though his personal history _should_ probably have made him distrust all people… It didn’t. No matter how many times the world was pulled from beneath his feet, there were some people he knew he could trust. People who could make him feel safe even now, when he was barely able to feel anything.

He pulled his phone out of his pocket.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Merry Christmas!

Steve had stayed in his ‘secure suite’ long after they’d unlocked the door.

He’d been trapped in a room with Howard for over an hour before anyone came to rescue him, and he’d spent the whole time wishing he could just run away and hide somewhere quiet. Think about everything that was suddenly occurring to him…

For a start, talking to someone from his past wasn’t anything like he’d imagined – and he was only just realising how often he’d imagined it. All those throw-away hypotheticals, those brief moments of wondering what the Howling Commandos would make of modern technology, what Mr Johnson at the local deli would have made of the first black president, what Howard would have thought about Tony now…

It hadn’t panned out how he’d always imagined it, that was for sure.

And there would have been a sense of cold disappointment, however Howard had reacted. Steve was sure that he was already disillusioned, before Howard said a word. In an instant, he recognised that a day with The Howling Commandos would feel awkward, that seeing Mr Johnson again wouldn’t have eased his sadness at the passage of time – that looking at Howard now was no more meaningful to him than looking at a photograph.

Maybe it would have been different, if Howard were really back. If Steve had woken up in the future to find that Howard, like Peggy, was still alive, maybe he could have taken some comfort in that. Maybe he could start wishing that everyone he ever knew could just be resurrected, or everyone he’d met in the future could somehow go back with him… But the harmless little comfort of ‘just one day’ was suddenly gone forever.

If Steve had the chance to spend another day with Peggy now, it wouldn’t change the fact that she was gone. It wouldn’t make him miss her any less, if he could see her face again just once. And Steve couldn’t understand how that realisation could feel so sad, when he was never going to see her face again anyway. Why trading one ridiculous daydream for a more ridiculous daydream was such a loss. Why it felt too ludicrous to wish that everyone he loved could come back to life, when wanting to see the dead for a day had seemed quite reasonable… In amongst everything else, Steve
had already been experiencing a whole new understanding of his own loss. Yet another layer to the trauma that kept on giving, another day in which he recognised something else he'd never have again. Today he'd realised that even his 'if I only had one day…' fantasies were empty, and hopeless. If he'd ever been gifted one day, it wouldn't have changed a thing –

At least, not for the better.

Because even though people from his past couldn't console him anymore, it turned out they could still make everything worse. At least, if they'd turned into enough of an angry, callous old bastard since Steve last saw them.

Steve would have liked to simply tell himself that Howard had changed, and that was a shame, and leave it at that. Comfort himself with the idea that terrible things may have happened to Howard, or magic or HYRDRA brainwashing or anything that worked as a short-term excuse. This wasn't his Howard… But, the problem was, it was. At least, so clearly a version of Steve’s Howard, that the most likely explanation was that this was the person his Howard had naturally aged into. That brilliant ambition had hardened into a bitter dissatisfaction with everything. That easy charm had been abandoned as soon as Howard became established enough to outright bully his way into everything. Any trace of kindness had seemingly dried up, any wonder he'd had in the world around him had apparently been expended. Even when Steve tried to find some redeeming element of his one-time friend, even with Steve offering him opportunities to be a little less unlikable, every minute with him had been unpleasant.

So, it was sad to think that the great Howard Stark had withered into a nasty, scowling husk of a man. There was that. But there was also everything else it made him think… How promising people can become something else over time. How believable it was that a person could become jaded and stubborn and close-minded. How good intentions sour. Steve knew Howard had no idea he was thinking any of this. It would never occur to Howard that he was anything other than the dashing founder of SHIELD he'd considered himself to be for forty years…

Is that what’s happening to me?

And Steve knew it still wasn’t the time for introspection. There were a thousand things he should be doing, or at least worrying about, right now. When Thanos turned up, or the world collapsed into paradox, or Strange pulled something else out of a magic portal, Steve had to be ready. No one would be impressed if, after it all went horribly wrong, Steve had at least had the chance to have a good hard look at himself. But Steve had liked himself less and less for years. That nagging, unclean feeling that had started right around the time he learned the truth about Tony’s parents. It just got worse, and more complicated, as time went on. An ever growing list of things he wasn’t sure he should have done, but could never think about, because it was never the time for introspection.
Was that how it happened to Howard?

And, as if there weren’t enough things he wasn’t meant to be thinking about right now, there were all these thoughts about Tony. So many thoughts about Tony, jumping out at him in no particular order, too fast for Steve to thread together.

That didn’t happen to Tony.

Tony was such a perfect parallel to his father that it felt like the universe was rubbing Steve’s face in it. While Howard had apparently grown more defensive of his own world view, Tony had spent the last ten years trying to be more accountable. While Howard had clearly cut people out of his life when he no longer needed them, Tony had opened himself up to the people that needed him. Howard had defended his mistakes where Tony had learned from them. Tony had grown into a man nothing like his father.

Tony was never anything like his father.

Steve screwed his face up, and forced himself to take a deep breath. Of all the things he could be wasting time with right now, he was thinking about how he fucked it up five years ago. And he thought he’d already thought about how he fucked it up five years ago. He thought he’d acknowledged that he misjudged Tony at the beginning, that he was defensive and combative the first time they met, that he probably shouldn’t have said some of those things… But now he was wondering if he’d gotten even that wrong. If he’d even misjudged how much he’d misjudged things. If he’d actually been far more unfair, far more cruel, to Tony than he’d ever realised…

And maybe not just that first meeting…

Jesus Christ. Vision was still being operated on – and, shit, he’d never told anyone about Tony’s message… oh God, that awful phone call… and who knew what Strange or Wong were doing, or if anyone was keeping an eye on Howard, or if there even were any plans for a potential invasion that he should have been helping with-

What if you’ve got everything wrong?

You don’t have time to think about everything now-

But what if this is how I become Howard? What if this is how it happens-
Steve actually groaned, all alone in his ‘secure suite’. Suddenly, everything hurt. He knew if he tugged on this thread then everything would unravel, that it would take years to untangle the fragments of himself, that he just didn’t have time – but he couldn’t unthink it.

And now you have to ask yourself-

And then the door burst open.

It slammed into the wall with such force that Steve was almost surprised that Bruce wasn’t green when he stormed through it. Steve had instinctively leapt to his feet at the bang, and Bruce marched up until he was a foot away from Steve’s face.

“You’re still here then?” Bruce demanded, accusingly. Steve immediately felt about two inches tall; it was a concerted effort not to shrink away from him. Instead, he squared his shoulders and tried to stand as upright as he could.

“I.”

“I don’t care, Steve.” Bruce snapped, and stared him right in the eye. “We need to talk.”

Shuri, Pepper and Rhodey had all received the same text.

I know how busy you all are. But I need you to be in my workshop in ten minutes.

And, even though Rhodey was trying to co-ordinate several armies, and even though Pepper had been in the middle of a stakeholder meeting, and even though Shuri had just finished eighteen hours of surgery, they all turned up exactly when they’d been asked to.

Just like Tony knew they would.

They’d all walked in with the same concerned expression, with no scepticism or irritation. And there were plenty of times that Rhodey and Pepper had walked into his workshop with a resigned sigh or an impatient glare – but they both knew Tony well enough to know when it wasn’t one of his random interventions or manic episodes. They trusted him now, before he’d said a word. And Shuri,
who was visibly worn by her efforts that day, had just taken a seat by his work bench and waited to see what else she could do. Looking at the three of them now, Tony felt vindicated. His faith in people, his hope for the future, his belief that he could still make things right was all there in that room. Whatever others had done to him couldn’t diminish what these people were.

These people were proof that he was right to keep trying.

“Tony, what’s going on?” Pepper asked, when Rhodey had finally gotten himself settled in the chair. Tony was about to answer, when he felt his phone vibrate in his pocket. He read the text, and smiled.

“Hold that thought, we have one more person about to arrive.” He told them. Shuri frowned at him questioningly. Pepper and Rhodey might have already guessed.

And then, thirty seconds later, the workshop doors slid open to reveal a weary looking Happy escorting a wide eyed Peter Parker.

"Don't touch anything." Happy warned him sternly, pointing to Tony's desk.

"Nonsense, touch what you like." Tony corrected cheerfully, presenting the lab with a wide wave of his arm "Touch everything, you work here now." Happy rolled his eyes as he left them to it, while Peter did an endearing little double take.

"Wait, I - what?"

"Well, at least for a few days. Sit down."

Peter did as he was told without blinking.

"You mean on the...Infinity Stone...Thanos, thing?" He clarified, his voice just a bit higher. Tony could see him thinking through their earlier, admittedly rather hurried conversation.

"Yes, on that thing. Well - I assume" Tony finished with a joyless little laugh. He had considered that Steve might be up to something else entirely. That there might be another stupid 'super soldier' style side-scheme, that Steve might really have gone running off down some unrelated rabbit hole even now...

Especially if it involved Bucky...

But there was literally nothing that Tony could do with that little instinct. He couldn't consider what he couldn't know. And he there was plenty that he did know that required his attention - and he
couldn't rely on Steve, or even Bruce, to help him with it, apparently. But that didn’t mean he couldn’t get this done.

“Right, so, first off, Peter, meet Shuri, she’s a super genius slash ultimate fighter Princess from Wakanda. Shuri, meet Peter, he’s a super genius spider-powered super hero slash high school student from New York” Tony short handed, gesturing between the two of them.

“I, uh, I’m not really a genius or anything” Peter smiled shyly, offering her his hand.

“That’s not the part I found most intriguing” She informed him, taking it.

“Oh. Well, I’m not really a super hero either.”

“But you do go to high school?” Shuri deadpanned.

“So, now you all know each other-” Tony interrupted, somewhat regretfully. “Yes, I need you all to help with the Infinity Stone, Thanos thing.”

“Has something happened?” Rhodey asked, an edge of urgency on his voice.

“…I don’t actually know.” Tony sighed. “But I do know that Steve, and Bruce, and the team in Wakanda is keeping something from us. I know they’re lying to me.” He saw Rhodey and Pepper exchange a glance.

“You know that?” Pepper clarified.

“I am absolutely sure. We are not working on the plan we all think we’re working on – something else, or something bigger, is definitely going on.”

“And you need our help to find out what it is?” Peter guessed.

“Well, I need you, specifically, to help me find out what that is” Tony told Peter with a grin.

Tony had taken a second, before he even called Peter, to ask if he really cared what Steve was keeping from him. If he could convince himself he was beyond all that, that he’d moved on from Steve and any interest in what he was doing. That had lasted about two seconds. Because, firstly, this crisis was more important than his feelings about Steve. As Steve’s stupid-ass plan could ultimately fuck the entire world, Tony had no choice by to take an interest. And, secondly – Tony wasn’t beyond all that, he hadn’t moved on from Steve, and he did care what Steve was keeping from him this time. So.

“I need – we all need to know what is really going on in Wakanda, whether Steve knows something about Thanos that he isn’t telling us, if something has happened… I don’t know. But I don’t know anyone else smart enough to find out – at least not anyone I can trust” He fixed Peter with a meaningful look, and Peter nodded earnestly.

“Okay, so… do you… I mean, where do I start?”
“Don’t know” Tony shrugged, with a little grin “But we’ll work it out together kid. Don’t worry, I’ll help you – and this little project is all done from here, okay? No actual combat this time.”

“Okay…”

“Shuri, basically, I just need you to keep doing what you’re doing” Tony turned to her deliberately. “I figure whatever Steve is up to, as long as Thanos really is collecting Infinity Stones, it’s better that there isn’t one in Visions head.”

“Okay…” Shuri frowned, clearly wondering what she was there for, in that case.

“I just wanted to make sure everyone on my team knew everything that was going on. If you’re going to be part of this thing, I don’t want you being blindsided by something I could have prepared you for, okay?” Tony told her, and she nodded her understanding. “And I know you’re exhausted, and you’ve got hours more surgery to do, so feel free to go and get that sleep any time you like.”

“I will” She assured him with a smile, and she didn’t move.

“Rhodey, you might have a few more unknowns to work into the military planning…” Tony sighed apologetically. “And I think you’re going to have to have another conversation with T’Challa.”

“T’Challa?” Rhodey questioned, and Shuri sat up a little straighter.

“You’re co-ordinating with him on possible defence plans, right?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“Well, maybe you have to look a little closer at those plans, see if there are any clues about what’s going on their end – or maybe T’Challa just doesn’t know what Steve is up to…. But either way, those plans aren’t what we think they are. There’s something else going on there. And T’Challa is the only military actor with any idea what’s really going on, the only one close to Steve…. So, yeah, until I have something better, I think you need to talk to T’Challa again.”

“Okay.” Rhodey agreed.

“Wait” Shuri interrupted “Shouldn’t I call my brother to ask about this?”

“I don’t want you in that position.” Tony told her straight. “If there is something going on, I don’t want him to have to lie to you, or you to have to lie to us…”

Tony felt that specific headache, that bitter sickness that symbolised all of his past mistakes. All the lies and the secrets and the repressed emotions, the violent way it had all come to a head, the mess it had left behind. It was a very basic instinct – he didn’t want to be a part of all that anymore. He didn’t want to involve anyone else in it.

“It’s just… no good comes of it, trust me. It’s better if it’s a military conversation…. And, anyway, you’re busy.” He reminded her. She didn’t look entirely convinced, but she didn’t argue with him again. He looked back at Rhodey. “I think the point is, until I have anything better, I need to give
you the heads up. Check all the plans again, we’ll factor in what little we do know…” Tony trailed off into a thoughtful little pause.

“And me?” Pepper pressed eventually. Tony looked up at her, and she smiled at him kindly.

“I always need your help, Pep.” He smiled back. “And, honestly, I don’t even know what I need you to help with yet – but I know you need to be in on this.”

And he waited. Because he knew at least one of the things he needed Pepper for was this.

“Tony, are you really sure that there is something going on?” She asked him, just like he knew she would. Like he always needed her to. They both knew that there was no hope of a healthy, romantic relationship between them – they’d tried it and everything. And, funny enough, one of the reasons it could never work was this very thing. The fact that Pepper would always question his motivations, his perspective – his competence, when it needed questioning. The fact that Pepper would always act as his conscience and his safeguard. The fact that Tony just couldn’t stop giving her stupid plans to question. It had worn them both down, coming from a supposed partner. The person you share your entire life with can’t always be working against you like that. But that didn’t mean Tony didn’t need someone to do it. The qualities that meant Pepper could never be his wife made her invaluable as a friend. “No one would blame you if you were a bit over sensitive when it comes to Steve.”

“I am, absolutely, one hundred per cent, very over sensitive when it comes to Steve” Tony agreed, readily. “But this isn’t that. And it’s Bruce as well.”

“And did you try just asking Bruce if something is going on?”

“I tried asking both of them” Tony told her, just a little bit smug at his own maturity.

“And?”

“And Steve said he was just freaked out by the magic stuff – and then basically hung up on me. Like, he could not have got me off the phone any faster. And he said he’d get someone to call me back…” Okay, maybe his emotions were colouring this just a tad. But that didn’t mean he was wrong “And Bruce said the most unconvincing ‘nothing’s wrong’ that you’ve ever heard in your life, and then said he had to go because ‘a magic thing was happening’.” Pepper considered this a moment, and glanced at Rhodey. And then she nodded.

“Okay. However I can help.”

* *

Bruce had spent more time thinking about his emotional responses than anyone else on earth. He knew, in neurological, psychological and societal terms, exactly how his own anger worked. When he looked back on his exchange with Steve later, he would see quite clearly how it had happened.
His phone call with Tony had panicked him, kick started that basic fight-or-flight reflex that floods your body with adrenaline. The point at which a human being will stop having feelings based on their thoughts and start having thoughts based on their feelings. Bruce had been embarrassed and guilty after his conversation with Tony, and he’d already been beyond putting those responses into context. It all ended up as rage. And Bruce had wanted to take that rage out on Steve, and he’d barely bothered to come up with a reason.

He hadn’t even known what he was going to say before he got there. And then it all just came out in a rush.

“Tell me again why it is we can’t tell Tony about his dad” He demanded, staring Steve down. Bruce saw Steve throw a nervous glance over his shoulder, and he knew Nat was standing in the doorway throwing nervous glances back. Bruce didn’t look back at her.

“I’m sorry, Bruce. Whatever you think about me right now, I hate lying to him too-”

“So why are we?”

“…Because it just isn’t that simple.”

“Oh really?” Bruce challenged “I don’t remember you thinking of things that way when Tony and I were working on Ultron. I remember, then, that it was all very simple. Team mates don’t keep things from one another, and you were just mad.” And, really, it wasn’t relevant. It was just an argument that Bruce had to hand, something to back up his overall frustration and disappointment in everything, a way to focus it on Steve.

“You’re right.” Steve conceded, too readily. “And I am sorry about how I acted over Ultron-”

“Why, because that’s the argument that suits you right now?” Bruce snapped, and Steve just stopped, dumbfounded. “Tell me Steve, what exactly is the difference between ‘going with your gut’ and just doing whatever the hell works for you right now?”

Steve blinked. That was a more philosophical question than he’d been expecting.

“…I’m not just going with my gut here, Bruce-”

“Oh really?”

“No, Bruce, I have thought about this-”

“You’re going with your head then?”

“…Yes.”

“Your head.” Bruce threw back. “Your perspective, your opinion – what you think is going to happen, what you think people are going to do or what they should know. You, you, you. And
you’ve decided that Tony can’t know about this, *he* doesn’t get a vote on that, or anything that comes after it. And, you know what, Steve? If Vision had said he made that call for the greater good I’d believe him. Because Vision does the same thing every time, talks the same way, thinks the same things are important – I’d still think he was wrong, but at least I’d know he wasn’t just picking the option that suits him. But you don’t, Steve. You yell at people for keeping secrets when you want to know and then you keep secrets when you think you will. You tell people to follow orders when you’re in charge and then you disobey whatever orders don’t suit you. You haven’t even considered the option of getting the authorities involved in this thing, whether it would help or not, because you’ve just naturally worked your own interests into the plan – but Tony can’t do that, you’ve decided for him that we have to think of the big picture, when it comes to Tony. So yeah, you don’t get to stand there like ‘I’m Steve’ and expect that to be the end of it. So what? What makes you any different from the rest of us? Why do you get to do whatever feels right, or whatever you’ve decided is best, while the rest of us mere mortals have to think about everything and work it out as a team. You *tell* me, Steve – Why. Can’t. We. Tell. Tony.”

For a long moment Steve just looked at him helplessly. This time, Bruce didn’t race to bite his head off – because he was enjoying watching the effect he’d had. He’d realise that later. Like he’d recognise the automatic way Steve put himself together, the fact that Steve had been visibly shocked and obviously looking for anything to say. But, of course, he didn’t see any of that at the time.

“If we *do* tell Tony” Steve began in a strange, robotic voice. Like a hostage trying to bargain with their own abductor; like he was either trying to keep Bruce from snapping, or himself. “And he *does* go and talk to his dad-”

“Why, when does *he* do that, Steve?” Bruce barked. “When has *Tony* ever put *his* friend, or *his* relationship, or what *he* wants over global security, hm?” And he fixed Steve with a look as intimidating as the Hulk had ever been. He watched the words die in Steve’s chest and he knew that Steve couldn’t answer him. Still, he left Steve to suffer a full minute of that accusatory silence before he went on.

“This is *me* telling you, Steve. *I’ve* decided. I’m not lying to Tony again. The next time he calls I am going to tell him about his dad. So, you can call him first, if you’d rather it came from you, or you can *try* to stop me, or you can stay locked here in this room pretending that none of this is happening – I really don’t care. I’m done.”

And with that, Bruce turned on his heel and stormed out of the room. Nat, who had been hovering on the doorway the entire time, knew to stand out of his way. She wasn’t sure he’d even seen her as he went by, he was in such a rage. But she let him go. She could tell, there would be no talking to him right now.

Steve on the other hand…
Steve looked very in need of someone to talk to. Steve looked like a man trying not to cry.

“He doesn’t understand.” She started, softly. Steve looked up at her, his expression still just blank and lost. “He has no idea how much he takes for granted. He has never really wondered whether everyone is conspiring against him, or if his whole world is real, not like we have. Like people take for granted that they’re sane, that they’re really seeing what they’re seeing. They don’t know what it’s like to realise that everything was a lie. They’re so hurt when we don’t have that… inherent trust in people – in them. They never think that I felt that way about the KGB, once. They have no idea just how much you had to question, how many people you had to rethink, when you woke up in a whole new century. They don’t think that the whole SHIELD thing would have mattered more to them, if SHIELD had been their whole life. Bruce doesn’t know what it’s like when your gut is literally all you have to go with.”

Nat had no idea if Steve was even listening to her. He was just looking at her, his face still unreadable. Nat sighed, and walked into the room.

“Bruce is upset right now. It’s not just this. It’s Thanos, the last two years… everything.” She tried to reassure him. “And he hated having to lie to Tony-”

“I know” Steve cut in suddenly, his voice cold. Determined.

 “…But that doesn’t mean he is actually going to tell him.” She appeased. “I’ll talk to him-”

“No.” Steve stopped her. She raised her eyebrows, questioning, and Steve exhaled slowly. Then he reached into his pocket and took out the flip phone, and just looked at it for a few seconds.

“No. Don’t bother.”
Chapter 7

It was still early enough to be considered the middle of the night by normal people.

Tony had tried staring at his bedroom ceiling for a few hours, hoping that fatigue would win out over anxiety and he might actually get some sleep. Instead, he’d already run through the last two days a hundred times in his head, always sure he was missing vital details. He’d tried telling himself to stop thinking about it, and when that didn’t work, he’d tried making himself think about it in some sort of order. Eventually, he gave up and got out of bed.

He didn’t really think about where he was going to go, other than sort of assuming it was his lab – where else do you go when you can’t sleep?

Steve’s room

Tony flinched, halfway through pulling his T-Shirt over his head. He had the oddest urge to tell his own brain to shh. I haven’t done that in months. And that was a secret. Tony had never gone to Steve’s room in the middle of the night when Steve actually lived in it – God, what would he have said? Yeah, he’d stayed up a few nights talking to Steve, but only ever in one of the break rooms, or on the roof, or in his lab. He’d never even been in Steve’s room after dark… Until Steve left. After that, a few nights – like, one or two, okay? – he’d wandered down to Steve’s room when he couldn’t sleep. The nights when he’d spent so long trying to organise his argument to Steve and just wanted to say it out loud to him somehow. The nights when he felt particularly bad about the way he handled things, and wanted to explain himself. The nights he missed Steve so much that he just wanted to be closer to him…

He sure as hell didn’t feel going to Steve’s room today though. So, the lab it was.

Tony hadn’t expected to find anyone there, other than Vision lying peacefully on the gurney. But when the doors slid open there was Shuri, almost done setting up for the day.

“You’re up early” He commented brightly, delighted to see her.

“I have promised to finish this procedure by the end of the day. I haven’t the time to be sleeping right now.” She smiled, “What’s your excuse?”

“Couldn’t sleep” He shrugged, walking into the lab. He glanced down at Vision, not sure what he was expecting to see. But he just looked like Vision, still. “How’s it going, anyway?”

“Well, I think.” Shuri answered with a thoughtful frown. “Obviously, this has never been attempted before, but so far it’s what I was expecting to see.”
“That’ll do for me.” Tony grinned, finding a seat a little way back from her, so that he wouldn’t disturb her.

For a while Tony just watched her work. He couldn’t help but think of how much potential she had – he thought of everything that way. Raw materials that could be made into wonderful things, wonderful things that could be made better, amazing people that had all the time and all the opportunity to be more than he was. He allowed himself to get carried along with that train of thought, glad to any reprieve from thinking about Thanos and Infinity Stones and Steve. He thought of how quickly Peter had found his way in that lab, how eager he’d been to find solutions before they’d even worked out what the problem was. His face so bright and eager in spite of the obvious tension and incredible odds. Whenever Peter had a suggestion that didn’t pan out, he would immediately bounce back with ‘Okay, cool, well, how about…’ Every time. Tony hadn’t recognised that little tic before, but thinking about it now made him smile. Peters approach to the ‘Steve is doing something’ plan was to think about everything, and Tony had no idea what rabbit hole he’d rushed off down last… but he trusted him. Thinking that made him smile, too.

“Did Colonel Rhodes get in touch with my brother yet…?” Shuri asked, without looking up from her monitor. The slight edge on her voice brought Tony back down to earth with a bump. He hated getting in the way of personal loyalties…

“They had a brief conversation before Rhodey went to bed, apparently.” Tony sighed, “They’ve set up a formal call for tomorrow morning… this morning… in a few hours…”

“So he thinks there is something to discuss then…?”

“Rhodey thinks your brother was basically saying that he might not be at liberty to tell us everything, and he says that as a world leader.” Tony answered carefully “Which I am not taking as confirmation that there is something going on…. But if I had to guess…” He trailed off with a shrug. Shuri took a deep breath.

“I know it must seem like he’s taken Captain Rogers side…”

“Actually, no.” Tony interrupted her, kindly “Actually… I kind of appreciate T’Challa being straight with me about not being able to be straight with me… if that makes any kind of sense.” He took a deep breath of his own, while he tried to work out what he meant. And, if he was honest with himself, while he tried to think of a way to explain it that didn’t involve Steve.

He knew he used Steve to explain way too many things. His mind went to Steve far too readily, finding a Steve story or metaphor or analogy for everything. He knew it made him look obsessed – more so than he actually was. He didn’t want to be constantly talking about it.

But.

T’Challa was a perfect parallel to Steve in Tony’s head. If there was a Wakandan version of Captain America, then surely T’Challa was it. The stoic, courageous, ‘good’ leader, bound by loyalty and
principles. And T’Challa had been faced with as many real-world problems as Steve had, he had personal friends and complicated problems and all the shit that makes it so hard to be the glowing hero in an imperfect world. And he wasn’t perfect. But, unlike Steve, he didn’t seem hellbent on pretending he was. He took difficult decisions with regret, and maybe sometimes with doubt, but he never pretended they weren’t difficult. He never acted as though God had told him the Correct Answer in a dream, and whatever devastation he caused in pursuit of it was therefore holy. Whatever T’Challa had said to Rhodey, it wouldn’t have been speech on why they should all trust in his inherent goodness without need for details. It wouldn't have been an outright falsehood – he wouldn’t have been pretending there was ‘something magic happening behind him’. Tony was sure of it.

*If Steve had just called and said, ‘there is something I can’t tell you’ that would have been better.*

*I would have trusted him*

*Or…. Okay, I would have trusted him before.*

*But it still would have been better. If he just hadn’t lied, again, it would have been better…*

“Look, I’m not entitled to know everything T’Challa knows, I even get the whole world leader thing… I guess if someone was stupid enough to put me in charge of a country, I’d try to be careful who I told what, and I’m sure he has good reasons…” Tony babbled, then stopped himself. He took another breath. “I *don’t* think T’Challa has taken anyone’s side, because I don’t have any reason to think that yet. I don’t have *any* reason to think T’Challa isn’t doing what he thinks is best… I just have to do what I think is best too. I need to find out as much as I can.” He looked to Shuri for a reaction, and was relieved to see she was smiling.

“I understand.” She nodded.

“And I *am* sorry to put you in this position—”

“You are in no position to put me into *any* position, Mr Stark.” She warned him, her usual self-confidence fully restored. He laughed.

“Well, I’m still trying to put you in the position of head of R&D at Stark Industries”

“You can’t afford me.” She reminded him. And he smiled, because for once that was actually true. And he might have carried on smiling, and talking aimlessly, for a few more minutes before he remembered the rest of the world.

But then his phone rang.

Tony was beginning to develop a nervous twitch about his phone ringing – although, at least this time it wasn’t the damned flip phone. He pulled it out of his pocket quickly, his face already set for an argument with Ross or a negotiation with The White House. But then he saw Peter’s picture flashing up on the display, and his shoulders relaxed.
“Hey kid, you okay?” Tony answered on a downward breath.

“Okay, I’m fine…” Peter tried to reassure Tony from the beginning, and of course it had the opposite effect. Tony had leapt to his feet as soon as he heard the tone of Peters voice.

“What’s happened?” He demanded, and Shuri looked over at him with alarmed eyes.

“Nothing’s happened, I am okay, really, I, uh, I found something-”

“Where are you?”

“…Bleecker Street.”

“Bleecker Street?” Tony repeated, bewildered. “Doctor Strange’s place? What are you doing at Bleecker Street at…” He checked his watch “Five forty five?”

“Well, I was thinking about what you said about energy signatures-”

“Yeah, good point, never mind” Tony interrupted “What do you mean, you’ve found something?”

“Well, I’ve found someone, actually.” Peter corrected. “And, uh, I think she’s seriously hurt. And I’m not sure she’s human…”

Tony took a moment to think through all of that, at first trying to think about where it might fit in. And then he realised, it didn’t. It was yet another thing to deal with. Of course it was. And, anyway, it didn’t matter right now. Right now, his answer was going to be the same regardless.

“Stay there, stay safe, I am coming to get you right now.”

* *

Steve was watching the little digital clock on the flip phone. No matter where he was in the world, that little clock was always set to New York time – and it was New York Time that was moving too slowly.

Nearly six. Was that too early?

Steve sighed, irritably. He’d been asking himself that same question every ten minutes since Bruce’s outburst – which had happened at roughly eleven pm, in New York. Steve should have just called Tony right away. He shouldn’t have let Natasha talk him out of it…

Okay, fine, but do you have to call him right now? Do you even know what you want to say to him?
I’m just saying, before anyone else makes a truly awkward phone call that they’ll regret forever, do you maybe just want to take a few minutes to think what you’re actually going to say?

Which was all well and good, save for the fact that there was no right way to word it. Hours of thinking about it had just made it too late to call. Well, it probably wasn’t. Unless Tony had changed that much since Steve last saw him, he’d almost certainly been awake all night… Steve had thought about just doing it anyway. At 2am New York Time, 3am, 4am… But then he’d thought, what if Tony was asleep? Steve was going to wake him up with this? He’d known about Howard Stark for the whole day, and he chose to drop that bombshell in the middle of the night?

Steve wanted so much to do the right thing. He’d only ever wanted to do the right thing – he just never knew what it was, anymore. Well, truthfully, he’d never been sure. Even back when he was Captain of a simpler America, Steve was always spotting the victims of any chosen approach. He was always anxious that he’d chosen the wrong course, always aware than not choosing a course put just as many consequences on his shoulders. That little voice in his head had only gotten more frightened and neurotic as the myth of Captain America got bigger. The more sure Steve had to be, he less sure he felt – the more sure he pretended to be, to compensate.

And then it turned out that nothing was real. All that time Steve had spent wondering how best to meet that American ideal, only to wake up in a new world that asked him why he’d never questioned those values in the first place. All those nights spent worrying that SHIELD had made a mistake, only to discover that he should have asked whether they were doing it on purpose. Should he be asking himself if Doctor Strange secretly worked for Thanos? Whether Bruce had been mind-controlled into talking Steve into this – hey, maybe Bruce had worked for Hydra all along. Who knew?

And you just can’t question everything-

That’s how you got yourself into this mess in the first place.

The really tragic thing was that Steve had never questioned Tony. Not even in the hypothetical way he’d just questioned Doctor Strange and Bruce. Even when he used to lie awake at night deliberately tormenting himself with all the things that could be a lie, it could never be Tony. He could imagine what it would be like to discover that Nat was still working for the KGB, or Nick Fury had been killed by a shape-shifter years ago, or maybe The Avengers was actually just a reality show on an alien planet and everyone was an actor except Steve… And Tony. Steve couldn’t even imagine Tony not being Tony. He was just too complete and complex a character to be made up. He felt too much, too openly, for him to have been thinking something else.

More than anything, Steve hated that Tony thought he didn’t trust him.
When, really, not telling Tony about his parents and not telling Tony about Zemo had nothing to do with not trusting him – that was all because Steve hadn’t liked what Tony would do. What he’d known Tony would do. Tony would have questioned him, when Steve was panicking and just didn’t want any more hurdles. Tony would have wanted to plan it properly, when Steve just wanted to fix everything now. Steve hadn’t wanted Tony’s interventions – but he’d always had complete faith in them. Steve hadn’t phoned Tony when he should have because he knew him, because he trusted him to be Tony, at all times. It had never been because he thought Tony might secretly be working against him, or chose something else over doing the right thing, or chicken out at the last minute. In that respect, Steve had never once doubted him.

Tony was probably the only person Steve ever had completely trusted in the 21st Century, because Steve trusted, completely, that Tony was real. Which had been the most important thing in the world, and Steve had never even told Tony that, and now it was lost to him forever.

*Should I tell him that now?*

*Jesus Rogers, just tell him about his fucking dad. He won’t care how you’re feeling.*

*Especially now.*

Steve glanced down at the flip phone again. Ten past six. He resolved to wait until six thirty – mainly because if he’d set a more reasonable time, like eight or nine, he might literally have died of the tension. The truth was, he wanted to tell Tony about his dad. Steve had wanted to call Tony the second he’d heard Howards voice booming through the magical haze. He just wasn’t allowed to, before now. And he knew, none of his previous fears had been addressed, none of the bad outcomes were any less likely, and he was actually no less of a bastard than he had been before Bruce yelled at him – however much of a bastard that was. But none of that mattered anymore because, whatever he did now, Steve knew he couldn’t stop Bruce telling Tony. Bruce had taken the decision out of his hands. And, dear God, that was all Steve had ever wanted.

He still didn’t know what he was going to say, though.

He thought back to the time he’d spent with Howard. He didn’t want to tell Tony about any of that, although he knew he had to – Tony would want to know everything, and there was no way Steve could tell a single lie or leave a single omission. Not now. So, if Tony asked whether he’d spoken to Howard, Steve would have to say yes. If Tony asked what they’d talked about, Steve would have to say…

*Well, not you.*

When Steve had finally gotten Howards attention away from escape plans, Howard had plenty to say
for himself. He’d told Steve all about how SHIELD developed, how technology changed, how much his company had grown in size and influence… He’d barely mentioned Tony, and when he had, it had been with an impatient sort of air that made Steve want to hit him. And, while Howard seemed very keen to work out what year it was and start investigating what tech was out there, he’d shown no interest in finding out how old his son was now, or what he was up to…

_I wonder if I should tell him I think Howard was a terrible father…_

_Are you insane? Why on earth would you say that._

He looked down at the phone again. Six fifteen.

_Screw it. I’m calling him now._

Tony was at the Sanctum Sanctorum within four minutes of Peter hanging up.

He’d gone in the suit, because his primary thought was getting there quickly and being able to protect Peter when he arrived. It was only when he got there that he realised – the suit wasn’t much use in transporting an injured woman. Which, rather than an alien invasion, was actually what Peter had told him to expect…

Oh well. Better to be over protective than under protective.

The woman, whoever she was, was lying unconscious at the bottom of the main staircase with an anxious looking Peter kneeling over her. Tony took one look at her – or rather, at her outfit – and thought, _Asgardian_. Shamefully, his first response was relief that this might actually be related to his current problem, and not another alien threat entirely. Then he remembered to be worried she was dead.

“Did she say anything to you?” Tony asked Peter by way of greeting, the suit already scanning her body for vital signs.

“She said Loki sent her, and she has a… Tessa Act?” Peter winced, unsure. Tony’s head snapped back towards him.

“The Tesseract?” He clarified, gravely, and Peters eyes lit up.
“Yeah, that was it… why, is that… bad?” He asked, as Tony scanned the woman’s body with his own eyes this time.

“It’s an infinity stone. The space stone.” Tony answered perfunctorily, still looking for where she may have hidden it. Peters eyes widened as he understood the significance.

Tony dissolved the suit completely before he knelt down beside her, not wanting her to get too much of a shock if she woke up. She was breathing, and her heart beat was strong – although, truthfully, Tony didn’t know what the Asgardian heartrate was meant to be. And whatever her vital signs said, she clearly needed medical attention. But first.

Thinking the pouch on her waist was the most likely place for her to have hidden it, Tony gingerly reached out a hand-

The grip that suddenly enclosed his wrist was impossibly fast, and impossibly strong.

“Woah-”

“Who the hell are you?” The woman demanded, her eyes suddenly alight.

“I’m Tony Stark” Tony answered placatingly, making no effort to move his hand away.

“Tony Stark?” She repeated, her tone less aggressive now – but she didn’t let him go. Instead, she considered him carefully. “…I thought you’d be taller.” She added, after a moment.

“I get that a lot.” He assured her with a smile. “What’s your name?”

“I’m a Valkyrie, of Asguard-” She began, but now that the adrenaline of potential combat had passed, she looked like she was having trouble staying awake again.

“Okay – Valkyrie? Was that it?”

“…Sure.” She answered, like it was such a lot of effort.

“Okay, Valkyrie, you’re obviously hurt, so we’re going to get you some help, but first I need you to tell me who sent you”

“Loki…said to give you this…” She wheezed, reaching into the pouch to retrieve it.

The Tesseract.

The symbol of the battle of New York. The symbol of Ultron. And now the symbol of Thanos’ invasion, too. Tony felt sick just looking at it. He felt like if he stared at that blue cube for long enough, he’d see his own death played out in its murky depths. But he reached out at took it anyway.
“He said if I can’t find Bruce, then you…” Valkyrie continued on into sleep. Tony just looked at her for a moment.

Okay, think. Get Valkyrie some help. Get the Tesseract somewhere safe… or, wait, other way around? And then he’d have to tell… Steve’s team? What were they in the middle of thinking about Steve’s team again?

“Okay…” He said, and Peter looked at him expectantly. “I can fly her and the Tesseract back to the facility, maybe Shuri…” No, wait, Shuri was busy with Vision… “No, it’ll have to be me. But that’s fine, if I can get her back to the facility… with the Tesseract… yeah, that’s it.”

“Yeah?” Peter clarified.

“Yeah – we’ll work out what we’re going to do after that… after that.” Tony thought aloud. “You going to be okay to follow me on?”

“Yeah, no problem Mr Stark.” Peter assured, as Tony’s suit reappeared and he picked Valkyrie up.

“And kid, just so you now, this was really good work.” Tony told him, sincerely “I have no idea how you did this, but we wouldn’t have found her if it weren’t for you.”

And he flew off before Peter could answer him.

* 

As they were fast running out of places to hide things, Tony ended up putting Valkyrie in his own bed and the Tesseract in his bedside table. Just for now. And then, just as he was beginning to wonder what medical attention you did give an Asgardian-

The flip phone rang.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake-” He hissed, pulling it out of his pocket. There was a genuine urge to just throw the thing against a wall. And then he saw Steve’s name flashing up, like a swear word, over and over...

Go away.
He didn’t want to talk to Steve. He was still mad at himself for talking to Steve the first time, still mad at Steve for everything – and he didn’t trust him. Not anymore. So, how could Tony tell Steve that he had the Tesseract, when he didn’t know what Steve was up to? How could he answer this call and not mention that, when he didn’t know Steve was up to anything? How about he just didn’t answer it, hm? Why give Steve another opportunity to lie to him-

Oh, who was he kidding.

“What?” He snapped. He heard Steve’s shocked intake of breath at the other end, and his stupid, foolish heart gave a little kick. Oh, he hated himself, he hated his life, he hated Steve. God, he wanted to tear his own eyeballs out-

“Your father is here.”

Wrong voice again.

Was honestly the only thing Tony thought for a second. And then he went through the individual words… my father is there? What the fuck does that mean?

“What are you talking about?” He demanded, still frowning at Valkyrie, now sleeping peacefully on his bed.

“Your father is here.” Steve said, again. His voice was artificially calm… like when he’d been trying to talk to Tony in those horrible few seconds before he completely lost it in that bunker…

“My father is there?” Tony repeated. He was still trying to remember what ‘father’ meant, what reference he’d forgotten, what joke he wasn’t in on. The only ‘father’ he knew was… “What, Howard?” And he said it in a mocking tone. He said it to point out how stupid what Steve was saying sounded…

“Yes.”

No, Steve just wasn’t getting this.

“My dead father, Howard Stark, is there?” Think how ridiculous you’re being Steve

“Yes, he’s here Tony.”
And maybe it was just that that was the right voice. But hearing Steve say his name like that, in that sad and sympathetic tone of his, Tony realised…

*My dad is there?*

Suddenly, Tony remembered his father’s face. *Dad.* And he felt…

Nothing.

“How did that happen?” Tony heard himself asking, like he was floating above the room.

“…I don’t know exactly, but it was a… an accident, when Doctor Strange was trying to find somewhere to hide the Tesseract. He… magically, brought him here from 1988”

“1988” Tony repeated, numb.

“…Tony?”

“When did this happen?” Tony asked in that same dead tone.

“…yesterday morning.”

“Is that what you’ve been hiding?” He asked as though he didn’t mind, one way or the other.

“I’m so sorry Tony, it’s just…” He heard Steve take a deep breath “…apparently, when we send Howard back to his own time, he goes back to *our* timeline, and that means if he changes anything, then it’s really bad…”

“Right.”

“And we just… Panicked, really. We just locked him in a room and hoped if he didn’t see anything or talk to anyone—”

“Why don’t you just erase his memory?”

“We – what?”

“Why don’t you just get Shuri to erase his memory before you send him back? Then it won’t matter.” Tony suggested, efficiently. He didn’t register the defeated way Steve sighed at that.

“We… didn’t think of that.” Steve said, sounding utterly ashamed of himself. That didn’t register either.

“We have the Tesseract now.” Tony said, out of nowhere. He heard the baffled pause Steve left.
“What?”

“What?” Tony frowned…. But his tone was a bit more animated now. Irritable. His brain was finally starting to reboot – and, wouldn’t you know it, Steve was on the phone for it. Oh good…

“If you want to see what’s going on – If you want to see your dad – Strange can bring you right here-”

“If you want to see what’s going on – If you want to see your dad – Strange can bring you right here-”

“My dad is there…

And, oh God, there was a specific pain he hadn’t felt in forever. Jesus, that was retro. But he remembered it so clearly – the urge to run to his father when he was frightened, that all children are born with, immediately crushed by the disappointment that only the children of bad fathers know. He actually thought, just for one second, maybe my dad could help with the Thanos thing. Like he’d dared to hope, back when his dad was still alive, that he might help him with so many things… only to remember that he wouldn’t. To remember all of the nasty qualities, the ones that would make everything worse. He hadn’t felt this in so long… It was just like his dad was still alive-

Fuck, his dad was alive.

His phone rang again. He just answered it.

“And he probably had heard Steve calling his name when he did it, but it hadn’t meant anything. In fact, standing in the buzzing silence of his bedroom, nothing meant anything. Without Steve to distract him from it, his own numbness was alarming. He could feel it, like a film over his skin. Like a dream he couldn’t wake up from. He tried to make himself feel it, tried to bludgeon some understanding into his skull…”

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Fuck, his dad was alive.
“I meant – I don’t know, I just meant, if you want to-”

“Oh, I can see my dad now, can I? The group has given me permission to see my dad, now that I’ve told you that it was never a fucking problem in the first place-”

And it was like something in him had just burst. All of a sudden, he couldn’t shout loud enough for how angry he was, he couldn’t say enough words quickly enough to get it all out.

“You bossy, selfish, stupid idiot – you’ve taken this decision for me, again, even though you know you don’t know anything about it – what on earth made you think you could make this call ahead of me? You’ve never made a single call that wasn’t a total fuck up. If it were up to you, we’d have killed Vision before we made him, you’d have made every one of us give up everything to chase a made up army of super soldiers – Jesus Fuck! You wouldn’t tell me about my dad because you couldn’t think of a solution – when do you ever think of a solution? What the fuck would you know about it? And, not that you’d know it, because you don’t know anything about me, but no, I don’t want to see my dad. I hated my dad, and my dad hated me – must be because we’re so fucking alike, eh? Cos you’d know that, wouldn’t you…”

“Tony-” Later on, Tony would realise that Steve had been crying.

“Shut up Steve. I’ve spent years listening to you sermonise, and I don’t care, Steve. I don’t want to see my dad and I don’t want to see you ever again – I don’t like you. And you don’t like me.

“Tony, please, that isn’t-”

“Oh, Bullshit – would you have told Bucky that his dead dad was back? I assume the greatest global crisis on earth wouldn’t have stopped you standing by Bucky – it didn’t the first time. But me? You wouldn’t even go out of your way for me. Wanda destroyed my whole fucking life when she created Ultron and you never even called her out for it once, you didn’t care. No, you were prepared to stand up to me for her. Nothing I have ever done has ever been right for you. Every time I tried to be what you wanted, you changed what you wanted to whatever someone else was being. Natasha knew how my parents died, you told Sam, but you never told me. Because you don’t trust me, or you didn’t care enough about me, whatever. I don’t care anymore Steve. I don’t want to listen to you explain why you did it all, because I don’t care – it’s not about what you did. It’s about who you are. And who you are is an arrogant, short sighted, selfish bully, and all you do is lie to me and put me down and criticise me – and decide that I can be the one to suffer, because ‘what else can you do’ – when it’s fucking me.” He took a deep cleansing breath, preparing for the big finish. “And I’m busy here, doing my job, so no, I can’t take a trip to Wakanda right now – but I want you to know, I really wouldn’t if I could. Because I don’t want to. We’re done.”

And, with that, he did actually smash the phone into the floor. It exploded into a hundred tiny components. Tony looked at them for a second.

Then he sank to his knees and cried.
Tony ran out of tears before he finished crying.

Within a few minutes he was reduced to kneeling on the floor, desperately trying to drag sharp, shaky breaths into his lungs. His head was pounding, and everything burned. His emotional pain was briefly pushed aside by how much his body hurt – and then a sudden, irrational fear that he wouldn’t survive it. An immediate, physical panic, like a shock… he couldn’t breathe.

But then, just as his fear of an anxiety attack was about to push him into one, he heard Pepper call his name.

He looked up at her just as she was kneeling down beside him. She had learned not to panic when he did. It was another reason they were better as friends that they’d ever been as lovers, another reason that two people who respected and cared for each other couldn’t blend their life into one. There was a time when Pepper thought she had to ‘fix him’ and he felt obliged to be ‘fixed’ for her – which had just meant that he kept things from her, and she over reacted when she found out. But things were different now. Pepper couldn’t live with this anxiety, it was just how it was – but she could still help him with it. These days Pepper just tried to be there for him in the moment, like a friend. And now, Tony felt as though he could struggle in front of her without losing her forever. Which meant he struggled a lot less.

“It’s alright, just breathe.” She told him, calmly. So he took a slow breath, in through the nose, out through the mouth… “Just take a minute, and then we’ll start from the top”

Ah, Pepper. Everything in order, everything in a little box. Tony couldn’t live with that either, as it had turned out – but he still needed it sometimes.

“Oh, God, I don’t know where to begin…” Tony groaned, knowing Pepper would help him start. Pepper couldn’t fix this, but she could help him put it into an order.

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“Oh, Shit, I was supposed to be getting her medical help – Oh, Shit-

“I told Peter to follow after me – did he get back okay?”
“Of course – that’s why I’m here.” She smiled. “He was waiting for you in the lab and got worried, I said I’d check on you.”

Tony felt his lungs give, a wave of relief rolling from his stomach to his shoulders. At first, because Peter was home safely. And then, because Peter had worried about him, and Pepper had come. The simple comfort of knowing that someone would notice if he died.

“Oh, I’m okay – her.” He remembered again, looking at the bed “I think her name is Valkyrie, she’s an Asgardian like Thor, and I think she’s hurt. But I have no idea how to treat an Asgardian, and Shuri is busy so there is no one else, and I have no idea where to put her-”

“Well, what about the medical bay at Stark Industries?” Pepper suggested, before Tony could start babbling “That’s got to be as well equipped as anything here, and I’m responsible for the security of that building.” Tony forced himself to think about it. Yeah. That could work.

“Yeah, okay…oh, but hang on, that’s not all there is-”

“Oh, but can we do that first?” Pepper interrupted firmly. Tony looked at her for a moment.

“…Yeah.” He nodded. He realised that his heart wasn’t racing anymore.

“Okay.” Pepper smiled at him, and helped him to his feet.

Tony’s head swam a little at the sudden motion, but he steadied himself quickly. He took a few normal breaths, just to make sure. He was okay. And it had taken him a long, long time to be okay with being just being okay, to stop berating himself and judging himself for stumbling in the first place. Tony used to count up all his of his emotional breaks, thinking of each one as another stain on his record, another failure to atone for. But he didn’t think about it like that now. Now, every stumble just felt like another challenge – and he was getting better at besting them. He could recover quicker, work though more, damage less in the meantime. Sometimes he could even allow himself a little bit of pride at managing it. He’d stopped trying to be someone who didn’t have anxiety attacks, but he still thought he could learn to dance between them the way he could bullets.

At least, with the right support.

“Thank you” He told Pepper seriously, his voice his own. She just nodded, and then gestured towards the bed.

“Right, come on, let’s get this done.”

“Oh, wait, hang on…” Tony thought aloud, looking at his bedside table.

*I can’t just leave it in a drawer.*
“I have to take something else with me, for safekeeping…” He explained, retrieving the Tesseract. Pepper's eyes had barely had time to widen, when Rhodey walked in.

Rhodey looked at the Tesseract first, then at Tony, then at Valkyrie, then at Pepper, then at Tony again, his expression growing more and more baffled. Then he squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head. *Never mind.*

“Okay, well, all well as whatever the hell this is” He gestured vaguely to the scene in front of him. “I just got a call from T’Challa.”

“Already?” Tony asked.

“Yeah, he would like *you* to call him as soon as you get the chance.” Rhodey answered, and Tony let go of an exasperated sigh.

“We will do this first.” Pepper reassured him, and Tony managed a little smile before he turned back to Rhodey.

“Did he say what he wanted?”

“Well…” Rhodey began, looking more confused than he had a moment ago. “He seems to think you’ll understand this weird-ass message, but he says to tell you that ‘Steve Rogers just punched your father in the face’?”

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*There is* a difference between doing what you feel is right and just going with your gut, as it turns out.

Steve had really *felt* that it would have been so wrong to turn his back on Bucky, after everything they’d been through. He’d *felt* sure that he had to bring SHIELD down. He’d *felt* that he couldn’t sign up to a government doctrine that legitimised internment, that Tony should have told him about Ultron, that if he could just stop that army of super soldiers everything would be okay… And now he realised that it had always been more complicated than that. That he’d been right about some of it, and wrong about some of it, and gone about the right things all the wrong way. That he should have *thought* about it a lot more. But that didn’t mean he hadn’t thought about it at all – he really had been trying to do the right thing, all those times.

But he just punched Howard Stark because he wanted to. *That’s* going with your gut.

Steve really had been doing alright until he actually saw Howard. He’d been holding it together, at least. He’d managed to stop himself from crying far quicker than he’d expected, he’d made himself
stand up and find Doctor Strange, he’d forced himself to relay Tony’s memory-wipe solution. Strange had looked just a little sheepish when he agreed, they obviously could let Howard out of his room. Steve had controlled the urge to take his anger out on Strange, and he’d even remembered to run a limited version of events past the others – although he wasn’t really paying attention to their reaction. Really, he’d been ticking a box, tell the team, and then, tell T’Challa. Making that last effort to do the right thing before he could excuse himself and have a proper mental breakdown, the one that was still burning just under the surface. He’d have managed it, too.

But Howard just had to keep talking.

It was mid-afternoon by the time Steve and T’Challa arrived to release him from his suite. When they opened the door Howard was just standing there, like he might have been standing century all day. Just looking at his angry, entitled expression put Steve’s teeth on edge.

“And who the hell is this?” Howard asked Steve, not even bothering to look at T’Challa. Steve had his first urge to hit him then. Instead, he took a slow breath. He told himself to answer properly, out of habit now. Running on auto pilot.

“This is King T’Challa, of Wakanda.” Steve began, his voice pulled tight.

“So, I’ve been kidnapped by the leader of a third world nation?” Howard guessed before Steve could continue, his tone aggrieved and impatient. Steve felt his shoulders tense at that, and instinctively looked at T’Challa to apologise. But T’Challa was wearing the same benevolent expression as always, his posture open and relaxed.

“I assure you, this was through no design of ours” T’Challa soothed “I am simply the leader of the nation in which you have ended up.”

“From a parallel universe?” Howard asked in a mocking tone.

“No, from the past.” Steve sighed, and Howard looked back at him. “It’s 2018, you’ve just been brought forward thirty years, that’s all.”

“2018?” Howard repeated. It was the first indication, however brief, of any surprise from the man.

“And how did that happen?”

“An accident while we were trying to fix another problem.” Steve shorthanded, irritably. “You were brought here by magic, basically.”

Somewhere, maybe Steve was trying to needle a response from Howard. He could feel that he was being petulant. But he was just too full of self-loathing to even attempt personable, and there was too much trauma in his head to sort through right now, no way to tell which impulses were legitimate and which weren’t. He’d settled on just trying to contain his anger until he could work though it – which was becoming harder the longer this took. There was a growing urge to take it out on Howard, to rub Howard’s face in how little he knew or force Howard to accept an authority he didn’t recognise, or anything that would piss him off. Steve knew he was being childish. He told himself to get a grip.
I don’t like you. And you don’t like me

Oh, God, it wasn’t true. It was so completely and totally wrong that surely he could explain it, if he could just talk to Tony-

Why? You’ve known him for five years, and he doesn’t think you like him. Because you never acted like you did.

Oh, his heart. He couldn’t think about this now. Not yet. He just had to get through this first.

“Magic?” Howard clarified, not nearly as thrown as Steve had been hoping for.

“There’s a wizard downstairs, he was trying to do something else entirely, and we ended up with you” Steve told him “And now he’s working on sending you back-”

“And you?” Howard cut him off, looking Steve up and down. “Were you brought here by magic?”

“No, I was here anyway.” Steve said, simply. He watched Howard think a thousand questions before he settled on

“And how did you come to be here then? From when?”

“It doesn’t matter” Steve huffed. “It’s not relevant to this, to… you.” He saw a little flicker of response behind Howards eyes at that.

“Who are you to decide what’s relevant to me? How-”

Steve’s head snapped up, the look in his eyes so cold and primal that it stopped Howard dead. Even T’Challa shifted on his feet, aware of the sudden threat in the air. But this was Howard Stark. He wasn’t going to be put in his place by anyone for long. Even if he’d known the nerve he had just touched, he probably would have carried on.

“Who in Wakanda is supposedly more qualified to look into this than me then?” Howard forced himself “What wizard?” And Steve didn’t even realise he’d already curled both of his hands into fists.

“Why, what do you know about magic?” He snapped.

“What do you know about what I know?” Howard snapped back. “What makes you think anyone knows more than I do?”
What on earth made you think you could make this call ahead of me? You’ve never made a single call that wasn’t a total fuck up.

Steve flinched, remembering the anger in Tony’s voice when he said it. But Tony and Howard making such similar sounding demands was just another reminder of how different they really were. Tony had earned the trust that Howard immediately felt entitled to. Tony had waited until Steve fucked it up, repeatedly, before he’d questioned his judgement. Tony had asked why Steve should know more than he did, not whether anyone could. Tony got to say that to him now. Howard didn’t.

“Your son would.” Steve shot back, hot and dark.

“My son?” Howard screwed his face up, completely baffled, and then clarified “What, Tony?” as though it were the most ridiculous idea in the world. Steve’s immediate reaction must’ve been clear on his face, because T’Challa chose that moment to intervene.

“Your son is grown now, Mr Stark.” T’Challa began, softly. “And Tony Stark is one of the greatest minds on earth, and one of earth’s greatest defenders.” And Howard actually laughed, derisorily. T’Challa blinked, and let whatever he was about to say die in his throat. Clearly, he’d not prepared for so cold a reaction.

“No offence, your Highness,” Howard continued when T’Challa couldn’t “But they told me he was a genius and a natural leader at prep school – and then he nearly burned it down.” And then he looked back at Steve “And I don’t know how well you think you know my son, but if he’s the person you’re trusting instead of me then we’re all screwed.”

So, Steve hit him.

He was just so sure in the moment that it was exactly what Howard deserved, no amount of ‘using his words’ would have cut it. And he was just so angry, so painfully and physically furious. There were no words. He just took all of that rage, along with all of his guilt and misery and regret, and punched Howard square in the jaw. Not as hard as he could have – he wasn’t quite far gone enough to flat out murder Howard. But it was hard enough. It knocked Howard off of his feet completely, throwing him onto his back with a thud. Howard made one dizzy attempt to look up at Steve before his eyes fell shut and he slipped into unconsciousness.

For a few seconds Steve just stood over him, his fists still clenched. Then he felt T’Challa step up beside him.

“You deal with him.” Steve sighed, before T’Challa could say anything. And then he left the King of Wakanda with the man he’d just knocked out, and went up to his room.
Secretly transferring an alien from world security central to the biggest tech conglomerate on earth was actually a lot easier than Tony thought it would be – thanks, mainly, to Rhodey and Pepper.

It was Rhodey that organised a safe transfer in a very private ambulance, while Pepper made the subtle security changes that would get them into the building unnoticed. Both of them had decided to go with the plan of just doing this first, which Tony was grateful for. He felt as though he was sobering up, still coming out of his earlier rage, and he just wanted a few minutes to think before he did anything else.

By now he knew he’d already done something…significant… possibly terrible… but he didn’t want to think about what he’d said to Steve. It felt as though it would be awful to think about, when he got around to it – right now, he had plenty of things to put it off with. For once he let Happy drive, while he sat in the back of the ambulance with Pepper and Rhodey and silently considered his next steps. Run the standard tests on Valkyrie, that was obvious. No point thinking about what else to do for her until those results were back. Call Thor, that was another easy one. That might give him some insight into the whole Valkyrie situation… and that wasn’t complicated by his clusterfuck of a relationship with Steve.

You probably shouldn’t have said he fucked up everything he ever did. That was a bit unfair…

No. He’d think about all of that later. For now, there was the practical side of it. The fact that they still had to work together on this… or Tony had to think of an alternative, one or the other. But the very idea of trying to cut Steve’s whole team out of this - not to mention T’Challa and Strange and maybe even Bruce, he couldn’t remember who he was mad at right now – gave him an immediate headache. He just knew that would mean rethinking everything, coming up with a whole new plan, having fewer resources to rely on while he did it. On the other hand, the thought of trying to work with Steve now was unbearable…

You made him cry, you realise that, don’t you? You heard him crying at the end there.

No. Not a useful observation. A more pressing problem was the fact that he’d smashed the flip phone to pieces anyway….

But, by then they’d arrived at the loading bay of Stark Industries, and Tony had practical tasks to distract him. Wheeling Valkyries gurney though the back corridors and getting her set up in a hospital bed. Attaching an ECG, drawing blood, starting up the body scanner. Frowning thoughtfully at the results, and concluding that Valkyrie really did just seem to be sleeping very deeply… By then nearly an hour had passed since Tony last said a word.
Rhodey decided it was time.

“So…” He started, sidling up to Tony at Valkyries bedside. Tony glanced away from Valkyries heart monitor, and raised his eyebrows. “Steve Rogers punched your father in the face?” A little giggle bubbled over Tony’s lips – it just sounded so silly. The whole thing was surreal. “…What does that mean?” Rhodey pushed.

“I think it means Steve punched my father in the face…” Tony answered, not sure why he was still smiling. And then he thought about those individual words, and found himself picturing what they meant… wait, Steve had punched his dad in the face? “Hang on, what did T’Challa actually say?” But Rhodey just kept that sardonic stare fixed on him.

“No, really, you first.” He deadpanned. And heaven help him, Tony’s grin got bigger. He didn’t know why.

“Yeah. Good point. Well, apparently, something Strange did went horribly wrong, and they ended up bringing my dad forward in time from 1988.” Tony watched Rhodey’s eyes widen in shock, heard the leg braces whir softly as he took a step back to steady himself “That’s what they’ve been keeping from us – my dad is in Wakanda right now.”

“Shit.” Rhodey exhaled softly. “Jesus, Tony, are you alright?”

“No.” Tony laughed. “Really, no – but honestly, I have no idea if it’s even about my dad.”

“But that’s got to be a…. thing, right?”

“I don’t know” Tony shrugged helplessly. “I didn’t even… to be honest, I was just so annoyed that Steve lied to me again…”

And there it was. That conversation. Suddenly, Tony could remember it all far too clearly.

“Which is fair enough” Rhodey said seriously, but Tony just shook his head.

“Not… I don’t know if I was…” God, he’d felt so justified at the time. Now he just felt miserable and dirty.

“You don’t know if you were…?” Rhodey prompted, and Tony considered him for a moment, and smiled. He had no idea if he was going to be able to explain this, but at least he knew he could trust Rhodey enough to try.

“I don’t know if I was fair, when Steve called to tell me. I mean, I’m sure I could’ve been fair. I’m sure I had so many points and they could’ve been devastating… but actually, I think I might just have been an ass… I don’t know…” He took a deep breath. “The thing is, I feel terrible right now. But I don’t know if that’s actually because I said anything wrong… or maybe if it’s just that everything I said was right, if maybe that’s what I feel bad about…”

“So, what did you actually say?” Rhodey asked, kindly. Tony felt his stomach tighten at the thought
– but if he couldn’t tell Rhodey, who could he tell?

“Oh, lots of things… I said that I never wanted to see him again because I don’t like him anymore – and I said that I knew he’d never liked me, and I was fed up of trying to make him… or something.” Tony saw Rhodey bite back a little smile at that; he could tell that Rhodey had an answer for him. But Rhodey didn’t jump in with his opinion. He just looked at Tony to finish what he was saying, first. “And… now I wonder if I’m actually just sad because he doesn’t like me, rather than because I was wrong to say it… But… I don’t know. Maybe I wonder if I’m actually just mad that Steve doesn’t love me. Maybe I do have all these legitimate other reasons to be mad, but maybe I’m not mad over that… maybe the thing I’m mad over really isn’t Steve’s fault…”

Well, there, he’d said it now.

Rhodey waited until he was sure that Tony had trailed off for good before he answered him. “So, your question is, is it actually true that you two don’t like each other?” He outright grinned.

“Not exactly…” Tony sighed. “It’s more… Okay, I know my feelings towards Steve are full out batshit. I really don’t know whether I love or hate him, at any given moment, but that’s its own separate thing. I know that Steve is never going to… care about me. I just meant… is that why I’m angry?”

“I don’t know, you might be that stupid.” Rhodey delivered it straight.

“Meaning?”

“Meaning… look, Tony, if you’re asking whether you have a right to be mad at Steve – hell yes. But if you’re mad at him because you think he doesn’t care about you-”

“Oh, don’t do that.” Tony cut him off, his face creased in distaste. Rhodey just raised his eyebrows, don’t do what? “Look, I’ve done all that once today, and it was horrible. I don’t need to go through a long list of all the people Steve put ahead of me, and all the times Steve didn’t give me a second thought, and all the times – plural – that Steve has physically attacked me for something that it later turned out I was right about. And never apologised for…” Well, at least he was feeling more justified about his phone call now. “…Just don’t try to convince me that he likes me, okay? I can’t do that right now.”

Rhodey just smiled at him for a moment.

“Okay, I’m never going to hear the end of this, I know, but… I don’t think you realise what it’s like not to be as brilliant as you.”

“Did we get that on tape, FRIDAY?” Tony asked the air.

“No, Tony, I’m serious.” Rhodey made Tony make eye contact with him, just to make the point “Okay, if someone tried to make you choose between me and Peter, who would you go with?”
“I’d save both—”

“...both of us, right” Rhodey finished with him “I know you would. Every time. But what if you couldn’t? What if you weren’t that smart, Tony? What if those ideas didn’t pop into that brilliant brain out of nowhere? what if there were no genius connections happening – what if you could only save one of us?” He watched Tony wince at the idea “Would it mean you didn’t love the other one?”

“But it wasn’t like that with Steve—”

“I’m not saying it was, I’m just saying... Maybe you’re thinking about what you would have done in Steve’s position. I’m saying, maybe the reason Steve didn’t do that isn’t because he doesn’t care as much. Maybe he just didn’t think of it. Maybe he just panicked. That’s all I’m saying.”

“But it isn’t just what happened in Siberia...” Tony pushed, wanting Rhodey to keep talking him out of it more than he wanted to make his own point.

“Look, I’m not saying Steve always treated you right. But people do treat the people they love badly sometimes. I know you’ve had to take an aptitude test before you did anything, but they don’t make you take one for love. Maybe Steve’s just bad at this. Maybe Steve’s an ass. But that doesn’t mean he doesn’t love you.”

“He took Wanda’s side...”

“Or, he was just against the accords, and Wanda happened to be on his side.”

“He always took Wanda’s side. Do you know how many conversations we had about Ultron? And he never once called her out for what she did to me.”

“Or, he was never close enough to Wanda to have those sorts of talks with her, or, he thought it was some act of heroism to forgive her – or, he did call her out about it, and you just never knew.” Rhodey suggested. Tony shot Rhodey a sceptical look, and pointedly ignored the fact that he might like that idea... “The thing is – I don’t remember Steve sitting on the roof all night talking to Wanda.” Tony didn’t answer for a good few minutes, and Rhodey didn’t interrupt his thinking.

“What if I just don’t like Steve?” He asked, eventually.

“What if you just don’t like Steve?” Rhodey repeated in an obviously teasing tone.

“I made him cry today, you know.”

“When he called you?”

“Yeah. I don’t think I knew he was crying at the time, I was just so mad... but he was.” Tony sighed. “And... I always thought I just wanted Steve to be sorry. I thought, if Steve was just really sorry for what he’d done to me, then I’d be happy. And now I think, maybe he just was... and I’m not.” He looked Rhodey in the eye again. “I actually don’t want that to be true. I know it’s stupid, but the idea of really being over Steve kinda makes me sad... but then I’m telling him how much he hurt me, and he’s actually crying, and I still just feel sad. Maybe it’s just too little too late.”

“...or...” Rhodey suggested, after a pause “Maybe you just didn’t enjoy making Steve cry?”

“Maybe there’s just no making me happy” Tony half joked, thinking he was running out of energy with this conversation now. Then he saw a thought occur to Rhodey. “What?”
“So, hang on… Did Steve literally punch you dad, then?” Rhodey asked with a frown, and Tony snapped to attention again.

“Well, I don’t know – what exactly did T’Challa say to you?”

“He said could I get you to call him at your earliest convenience, and to let you know that Steve Rogers has just physically struck your father in the face.” Rhodey answered, suddenly sounding like he was back at MIT asking Tony about a piece of campus gossip.

“That was it?” And there was that smile again. This time, Rhodey returned it.

“Dude, call T’Challa right now.”

* 

“Mr Stark, I am so pleased to hear from you”

T’Challa sounded pleased to hear from Tony. He sounded a bit like an over worked parent, trying to maintain a cheerful disposition whilst begging you to watch their kids for an hour.

“You sound stressed, your highness.” Tony commented, lightly. T’Challa responded with a self-deprecating laugh.

“You might say that.”

“Well, I understand my father is currently staying with you, so that’s understandable…” Tony answered in a loaded tone. He could picture the diplomatic expression that came over T’Challa’s face.

“I’m sorry that you weren’t the first to know about that. In an ideal world, you would have been.” T’Challa told him, sincerely. “And, perhaps, when in possession of the full facts, you’ll still disagree with the choices I made. But I would like you to know that it was always my intention to tell you, and that it was only concern for Wakanda and the world as a whole that lead to the delay.”

“And what are the full facts?”

“Simply that this took all of us by surprise, and that I had no idea what the repercussions would be of telling anyone. Before I took responsibility for doing anything, I wanted to know what the consequences might be. I don’t know what personal promises are in play elsewhere, so I won’t pass comment on your quarrels with others. I can only speak for myself. And for myself, I wanted to make sure that any decision I took on behalf on my nation was informed. I only hope you can understand that.”
"Okay." Tony answered, graciously. "So, in that case, there’s a few questions. The first being – did Steve actually punch my dad in the face?"

"…Yes." T’Challa sighed. "Things are… rather fraught here, at the moment."

"Okay, so – why? How did that even happen?"

"We had been keeping your father in a secure suite, until we worked out the facts of the situation. And then, after Captain Rogers passed on your suggestion about wiping his memory, everyone concluded that there was no need. But when we went to release him, he and Captain Rogers ended up in an altercation."

"And then Steve hit him?" Tony couldn’t stop the hint of glee from bleeding into his words. He had no idea why the idea of Steve punching his dad was so amusing, whether it was because it was so unlike Steve or something to do with his relationship with his father – but it seemed to get funnier the more convinced Tony became that it had actually happened.

"Yes – I think it had something to do with you."

Well, that wiped the smile off of Tony’s face.

"Me? Why would it have anything to do with me?"

"I may be speaking out of turn." T’Challa clarified, carefully. "The conversation was tense before anyone even mentioned you – it’s quite possible it would have ended up the same way regardless."

"But why did anyone mention me at all?"

"…Your father seemed to think he should be taking charge of the project to send him home-"

T’Challa paused when Tony snorted a laugh.

"Yeah, sounds right – carry on."

"And Captain Rogers objected, and your father wanted to know who was more qualified, and Captain Rogers suggested that you were… and then your father mentioned that you’d once burned down a prep school-"

"-almost burned down." Tony corrected.

"…And then Captain Rogers hit him" T’Challa sighed, clearly regretting mentioning the details.

"Right." Tony muttered, pleased that T’Challa couldn’t see him. He had no idea why he was blushing all of a sudden, or why the inexplicable smile was back.

"But, of course, I’ve not asked you to call me simply so that I can relay that story."
“No?” It sounded like a good reason to Tony.

“Well, only insofar as that story illustrates the situation we now find ourselves in…”

“Yeah, I don’t know what help you want from me on that.” Tony told him. “I mean, if your problem is that it’s all a bit tense there, believe me, I can only make that worse.”

“Well, I don’t know that that’s true.” T’Challa smiled. “But improving the atmosphere in the palace is the least of my concerns at the moment.”

“So, what do you want my help with?”

“From the scant details I was able to get from Captain Rogers, I take it you are in possession of another infinity stone?”

“I am…”

“And, if things are still going according to plan with you, my sister will soon have freed the Mind Stone.”

“So she tells me – although ‘going to plan’ might be a bit charitable, from our end…”

“Oh?”

“Well, we also have a potentially injured Asgardian to look after now – that wasn’t in any plan.” Tony reminded him. He heard T’Challa take a breath.

“It seems to me, we now have two priorities – to get your father back home, before his being here can destroy the universe, and to hide the infinity stones before Thanos can get them.” T’Challa began, talking in the manner of a military general now.

“Right.” Tony conceded, in the same professional tone.

“And it also seems to me that attempting to communicate across teams has only gone badly.”

“…Right.” Tony agreed a bit more sombrely.

“And now that you know all of the facts, and once Shuri has finished with her work, there is far less reason to keep two teams in separate places.” T’Challa concluded.

Tony took a moment to think about it. He distinctly remembered deciding that it was better to have them work separately… too obvious a target, was that what he had said? That didn’t seem like a very good excuse, now. Especially if Shuri and Vision weren’t going to be trapped in an operating theatre anymore. And he already knew his personal issues with Steve didn’t constitute a reason… maybe they never should have…

“You’re asking me to come to Wakanda?” Tony clarified. He didn’t want to go to Wakanda. Did he want to go to Wakanda?

“…I am.” T’Challa confirmed. Tony lost a breath there.
Steve is in Wakanda.

My father is in Wakanda...

“...Okay.” Tony agreed, heavily. “But you’ll have to wait until after Shuri has finished... And you’ll have to arrange something for an injured Asgardian. Possibly a hospital bed.”

“Done.” T’Challa conceded readily. And then, just before he went to hang up, Tony thought of one more thing.

“And I’ll be bringing some other people with me.”
Steve reached his room, and the emotional break down happened just as he’d planned. The only problem was, he didn’t actually know what to do with it now that it was here.

He felt full. Like his stomach was full of air, his muscles were full of unspent tension, his heart was filled to bursting with every beat. He felt like he might buckle under the weight of it, or tear at the seams, or just suffocate in it. But he couldn’t get it out. There were no tears any more, he couldn’t bring himself to scream or break something – he knew none of it would help. It would be like blowing on a first-degree burn. This pain was going nowhere.

Because he’d already broken it. Steve had already broken his own damn heart, already done more damage than could ever be fixed. He’d permanently scarred himself, and now every breath was just going to be agony, he’d have to live with this for the rest of his life…

*It’s not about what you did. It’s about who you are. And who you are is an arrogant, short sighted, selfish bully.*

Tony had called him a bully.

And Steve would have liked to defend himself against that charge. There was still an instinct to reject that label outright, just because it shocked him so much to hear it. Just because he disliked it so very much. But he couldn’t even get as far as denial and defensiveness, because he couldn’t get over the hurt in Tony’s voice when he said it. The *specific* tone of injury and injustice and wounded pride that he’d heard from so many victims of bullies. He knew Tony hadn’t just picked that word to hurt him. Tony had looked for a word to describe the outrage and personal pain that Steve caused, a way to explain how Steve had always made him feel – and he’d found bully, and it had fit. *Tony* thought Steve was a bully. Tony had clearly always felt bullied by him.

And Steve had had no idea.

And what made it worse was that Steve thought he *had*. He thought he’d felt bad about the way he’d treated Tony, even before Siberia. He thought he’d been too quick to judge him, that he’d put his foot in it around him a lot, that he probably hadn’t given him enough credit… but he’d never stung those observations into a complete story like that. He’d never taken all those individual mistakes and looked at the over all picture they formed. He never thought that he’d hurt Tony like *that*.
Steve had always hated it when Tony hurt. Whether it was physical or emotional, Tony had a unique way of carrying his pain both openly and bravely. It always made Steve want to scoop him up and protect him, at the same time as scaring him out of ever trying. The unbeatable, indominable quality in Tony Stark had always been overwhelming. Standing up close to it had intimidated and impressed and terrified Steve. It had filled him with so many conflicting impulses; the desire to protect Tony, the urge to scream at him for being reckless, the pride at his bravery, the fear of losing him. Always the desire to kiss him, whether Steve was angry at him or not. That fierce, sad look in Tony’s eye at moments like that – what was that? Look how bravely I suffer, why don’t you help me? Or was that, look how bravely I suffer, what makes you think I need your help?

And in the end Steve had never helped, because he’d never known how to. Because he couldn’t throw his arms around Tony, he couldn’t protect Tony from himself, he certainly couldn’t kiss him. Because he didn’t even know how to talk to someone as bold and bright and brilliant as Tony about things like that, he didn’t know how to get past that armour or ignore the distractions or not fall for the charm. He couldn’t keep up with a mind like Tony’s, not when it came to this. And he’d been scared of trying. No use lying to himself now; he had. He’d been scared of Tony rejecting him, scared of not knowing what Tony would say, scared of getting into the middle of that conversation and blowing it completely. He knew he’d never been of much help to Tony, even before Siberia –

But how could Tony think Steve didn’t care? How could he have come away with the impression that Steve didn’t like him-

He still didn’t believe that Tony cared whether Steve liked him.

Wanda destroyed my whole fucking life when she created Ultron and you never even called her out for it once, you didn’t care

And Steve was still so shocked to think that Tony cared about that – that he’d even noticed. Even now, Steve couldn’t imagine Tony the Brave wanting him, of all people, to stand up for him. It still felt as though Tony would be offended by that… surely, Tony would have told Steve he could fight his own battles, asked what gave Steve the right to speak on his behalf? Even after what Tony had literally just said, Steve struggled to imagine it any other way.

Was Steve meant to have said something to Wanda? Steve would happily have said something to Wanda, on any number of occasions… But he’d kept his temper, of course he had. Surely, he still knew that one? Everything wasn’t so fundamentally changed that behaving professionally with the new recruits was wrong… was it? Tony had behaved professionally around her – Tony had gone out of his way to make Wanda secure and welcome in the facility…

Oh Tony.
If Steve had thought for one second that Tony would actually care if Steve stood up for him, that it would have meant something….

Steve had always known that Tony would never want him, that he would never be able to do anything with that desperate yearning Tony could inspire in him – and that had always been fine. Well, not fine, but… he’d accepted it. Captain America didn’t get involved in messy, human things like that anyway, especially not with confusing, exciting, infuriating people like Tony Stark. Everyone must want to sleep with Tony Stark, at least sometimes… Steve had learned to live with that. And he’d also learned to live with the idea that he would never really matter to Tony, the way people like Rhodey and Pepper did. He knew he would never share a special bond with him or be his equal in this crazy world, that it would never really be his place to help Tony, or to presume that he could.

But he’d really thought he’d made it as far as friend. He’d really thought that he and Tony had had… something. After all those years fighting along side each other, all those moments that must’ve been more than just small talk between team mates… Which was worse? The idea that they’d never been friends, that Steve had been deluded the whole time … or the idea that they were, and Steve just threw it away?

It wasn’t just that Tony had called him horrible things. It wasn’t just how angry Tony had been over what Steve had done, this time. It was how exasperated he sounded, how quickly those particular insults had come to Tony, how clearly Steve could now see himself as the perpetual irritant in Tony’s life. Tony hadn’t been talking about Siberia – Tony had been talking about their whole relationship from a different perspective, one Steve couldn’t unsee. Now it was just a film of Steve lying to him and putting him down and criticising him, and Tony rolling his eyes and holding his temper and making allowances, over and over... Although he still couldn’t imagine Tony being hurt by that, he could still only picture Tony putting up with it… Maybe Steve had always just been a substandard person to Tony, someone whose mistakes Tony had to fix and whose rudeness Tony had been big enough to ignore. Maybe Tony was angry just because he was angry, because that ass-hole had fucked his life up again. Well, obviously.

But no, amazingly, that wasn’t worse.

What was worse was the idea that Steve really could have had that friendship with Tony – and that he was the one that ruined it. Along with everything else that made Tony special – along with all the other amazing qualities Steve had just thrown away – Tony had actually always been looking for the best in him. Tony had tried to like him. They might at least have had a friendship, if Steve hadn’t repeatedly fucked it up. Even though he’d been more of a bastard than he’d ever realised, he still might have had more than he’d ever thought possible. If he’d just stopped to think, if he hadn’t acted so badly, if he hadn’t taken Tony for granted…
And I don’t want to see you ever again – I don’t like you. And you don’t like me.

This was all Steve’s own fault. He’d been doing this to himself this whole time.

Out of nowhere Steve remembered something he’d read about a Shakespeare play… Titus Andronicus… the only thing he remembered about it was that someone had given someone else a pie made out of their dead parents, as an act of revenge… or maybe it was their dead children… It had made Steve feel sick, either way. And it made him sick to think about it now, picturing himself doing something so horrible, and being so disgustingly oblivious. He knew exactly how he’d made that mental leap. Except it wasn’t exactly an apt analogy, was it? For one, in his story, Tony would have to be standing behind him yelling ‘that is a pie full of dead people’ while Steve remained oblivious… or, no, maybe Tony would be the pie expert in this story that Steve had just decided to hide the pie from, for no reason…

He’d clearly run out of energy with this breakdown.

And now that his thoughts had turned to existential mush, he still felt awful. Worse, actually. Like whatever he was full of had solidified inside him, like he was heavy and frozen and entirely done.

Except he couldn’t be done, could he?

This would never stop hurting, but at some point, that would have to stop mattering. Steve had walked across a battlefield on two broken legs once. This would have to be no different. Eventually, when he could bare it – and he would have to bare it, there was no option – Steve would have to stand up and walk through this pain. Thanos was still coming, and Doctor Strange was still useless, and he’d just punched Howard Stark in the face – and he’d spent far too long moping in bedrooms already.

He’d go and find T’Challa. He’d see what he could do to help.

As soon as he could bare it.

Tony knew he should have told T’Challa they were running ahead of schedule.
His official excuses so far had been Pepper and Shuri. Pepper, because it wasn’t easy for the CEO of a multinational company to take a sudden leave of absence without attracting questions. As she was only doing it to help him, Tony felt obliged to focus on her to do list first. Then, after he was finished lying to board members, and covertly altering online diaries, and providing conflicting cover stories to people he was just hoping didn’t talk to one another, there was Shuri. They were only running ahead of schedule because Shuri had worked so damn hard to finish Visions surgery – an overwhelming feat of pure science for which she expected no fanfare. If there were ever a few moments when the whole world wasn’t falling to shit, Tony vowed he would take the time to tell her how truly amazing that achievement was. Today, he knew the best thing he could do for her was have everyone ready and waiting on the jet when she was done closing down her lab. He had to get going before he told anyone they were coming, because Shuri wouldn’t be able to go to sleep until she was on the plane.

So, Tony had been legitimately distracted from the moment Shuri had updated the project run-time until the jet reached 40,000 feet.

But things were quiet now.

Valkyrie was still sleeping soundly, although perhaps a little less deeply than before. Every so often she stirred and shifted on the reclined seat they’d gently placed her in, the little heart monitor on her wrist banging against the arm rest. Shuri was fast asleep in another seat, her forehead creased as though she was thinking, even now. Vision was doing that strange waking rest thing he did, on a hospital gurney they’d set up on the dance floor, or what had been a dancefloor, in another life. Both Pepper and Rhodey were trying to concentrate on their tablets, but their eyes were dark and heavy and Tony assumed that soon they’d both be asleep, too. Peter seemed as awake and enthusiastic as ever, but for the time being all of his energy was focused on a game on his phone.

Tony could have called T’Challa now…

But he didn’t want to. He didn’t even know why he didn’t want to; there was just a physical resistance to it, like the fear you have of jumping off the high dive as a kid. Maybe it was just that every time he used a phone these days it threw his whole life into chaos… Well, a conventional phone, at least…

Hm. There was one more legitimate excuse he could use.

Tony turned his attention to the ugly jumble of circuit boards and wires he had hastily spread out on his table. He began smoothing out the components, and laying the wires out flat-
He felt it get Peters attention.

He looked up, smiling, knowing he’d find Peter’s wide, curious eyes looking right back at him.

“Want to see?” He offered, warmly.

“What is it?” Peter asked, already walking over.

“This is an interstellar telephone system” Tony explained. And then, when Peter raised an eyebrow
“It’s so I can phone Thor, wherever he is in the universe.”

“Seriously?” Peter grinned, slipping into the seat opposite Tony. “You can call outer space on that
thing?”

“Well, I hope so” Tony sighed “This is actually the interstellar telephone system, mark II”

Because, if the armour had taught him anything, it was that the first one is always the hardest. Once
you’ve got the concept, once you understand the basic principles, the real work is done. Making it a
thousand times better takes nowhere near as much effort as making it in the first place. It hadn’t even
been difficult for Tony to find time for these improvements – he hadn’t found time, as a matter of
fact. The ideas were there now, developing on their own, just waiting to be welded. He saw it now.
He couldn’t unsee it. If he’d had a few months to work on it, he was sure he could design a cell
phone he could market to astronauts. As it was.

“So, I don’t even know if this one works – I didn’t get a chance to test it.” Tony went on, making
adjustments as he spoke “But, hopefully, this one won’t have such a delay-” There was a sudden
crackle of static that made both of them jump. The mark II had a tiny little speaker wired in –
gracelessly ripped from one of the entertainment systems in Tony’s lab – and, apparently, it worked.
“Well, that’s a good start” Tony sighed.

Peters eyes widened as Tony dialled the lengthy code again. Tony could see him holding his breath
as the dial tone sounded. Two long, low notes – and then silence.

“Hello, Thor?” Tony tried, leaning into the ‘phone’.

Nothing.

Maybe Tony hadn’t fixed the delay. Maybe the phone hadn’t connected when he spoke.
“Hello, Thor? Can you hear me?” This time the response came back quickly.

“Stark? I can hear you.”

Tony looked up at Peter, grinning manically, and Peter beamed back.

“Hey!” Tony answered, a bit too loudly “Are you okay?”

“Hello. Yes.” Thor spoke in a hoarse whisper, and Tony instantly reeled in his enthusiasm, remembering where Thor was. “Can you hear me?”

“Yes, I can hear you” Tony assured, more soberly.

“Hello. Yes. We’re unharmed.” Thor confirmed again. Tony could tell it was either difficult or dangerous for Thor to talk where he was, and started planning his questions accordingly.

“Right, Valkyries here-”

“Yes, I know.” Thor seemed to cut him off. Right, keep this quick.

“Right, okay, well, she’s okay, she’s alive-”

“She is?”

Wrong voice

There was an edge of urgency in Thor’s baffled enquiry. Thor sounded surprised that Valkyrie was alive – like maybe Valkyrie shouldn’t be alive…

“Yeah, she’s waking up, I think-”

“How did that happen?” Thor demanded, and Tony felt his guts turn to slime. There was a nameless realisation that he – and everyone he cared about – was currently trapped on a plane with an unknown entity…

“Um, slowly?” Tony answered, still trying to make sense of the question.

“Well, that’s good at least…” And now there was an edge of relief on Thor’s voice. Jesus Christ, Tony was stuck on a plane with something that Thor thought should be dead, and Thor was relieved that she was still partially incapacitated...

“Why, is she dangerous?” Tony asked more urgently, already glancing between Valkyrie and everyone else.

“…We-llll…thaaaaat’s…gooood…aaaat…leeeeast…?” Thor answered – slowly- and with a totally different type of bafflement now. Tony frowned at Peter-
Who was grinning.

“It’s good that she’s dangerous?” Tony repeated, gesturing to Peter now, what?

“No.” Thor answered, immediately. But before Tony could run away with that response, Peter waved him quiet.

“There is a delay” Peter tried to keep a straight face “He’s answering the question before the one you just asked.”

Tony looked at him for a moment. And then right on cue, Thor answered again.

“No, of course not. She isn’t dangerous, she’s an ally”

And Tony relaxed his shoulders, as frustrated as he was with the miscommunication. At least he wasn’t trapped on a plane with a monster.

“Right, Thor, is this Valkyrie person on our side or not?”

“Hello? Stark?” No, don’t answer that yet. Wait for him to hear the question. “Wha- yes, yes Valkyrie is on our side, absolutely. And she’s okay?”

“Yes, I think so, she was sleeping-”

“Stark?”

Tony stopped, and took a slow breath through his teeth.

“-Sleeping?”

He thought about trying to explain the miscommunication to Thor, but he wasn’t sure how to word it. And he wasn’t sure Thor had time to leave three minutes between every answer.
Oh, this was going to be interesting.

“Right, Peter, I need you to note down every question and every answer” Tony spoke softly, “We’ll have to work out who was saying what later.” And Peter blinked, obviously not completely sure what he was being asked to do – but he got his phone out anyway, poised to take notes.

“Stark?”

“Right, is Valkyrie Asgardian?” Tony began, forcefully. Then he pointedly counted a few seconds, and carried on. “Did Loki send her? Has he said anything?”

“Yes, she’s one of the royal guard.” Thor answered, and Tony told himself not to listen. Don’t get distracted by Thor’s responses, they aren’t the right responses – just keep asking questions.

“Do you know why she’s sleeping?”

“No, but he doesn’t seem surprised that I’m talking about her”

“Do you know how he sent her?”

“If he’s done what I think he has, it’s a spell, to protect her. She should just wake up-”

“You know Doctor Strange, right?”

“I think so. I think it’s a sort of … Magic tool.”

Okay, very hard not to laugh at that. But Tony forced himself to focus.

“He’s working on a way to hide the infinity stones-”

“Yes, I’ve met him”

“Although, mainly he’s just fucking it up so far-”

“Good.”

“…But I’m on my way there now, so we’re going to fix this-”

“What do you mean?”

But Tony had decided this conversation needed a reset. He left a pause for Thor to catch up with him.

“We have The Mind Stone, and The Time Stone – and we have what Valkyrie sent.” Tony spoke seriously, and this time he waited for Thor to hear the question. To realise what it meant.
“Then you have at least two weeks, and that time is getting more and more. Without…it, Thanos will have to take the slow route back.” And Thor said it so stoically, so very like Thor, that it made Tony’s chest tighten.

“And you?” He asked, ominously. Because they both knew what this meant. If Valkyrie had the Tesseract, it meant Loki didn’t – and sooner or later, Thanos was going to realise. Thor was trapped in deepest Space with the great terror of the known universe, just waiting until his time ran out…

“I’m trusting The Avengers to use the time I’m giving you. You have a chance now to save everyone, and I know you’ll do it.”

Oh Thor, there are no Avengers any more…

Except, of course, there were to Thor. The rest of them might have given up on being team-players and living legends years ago – but Thor had never got the memo. He’d been out there the whole time, believing in the dream of heroes, still thinking he was part of something bigger, better than himself. While the rest of them had been fighting each other and nursing their own hurt feelings, Thor had been out there being an Avenger. Tony felt a sudden surge of emotion that he had to rush to speak over.

“We haven’t forgotten about you, Thor. I swear, as soon as we can, we’re going to do whatever we can to find you – to help you. Just, stay alive, okay?”

Which was a stupid thing to say, wasn’t it? Completely meaningless…

“Thank you, Stark” Thor answered after a moment, sounding just like Thor.

And then the line went dead.

For a few minutes, the air in the jet felt thin. Tony could feel Pepper and Rhodey looking at him now, he could feel the helpless expression on Peters face before he even glanced up.

We haven’t forgotten you, Thor.

But that wasn’t true, was it? Not really. Tony had done everything he could for Thor – but he hadn’t been thinking about him. His team mate, his friend, had already been trapped in a living hell for days, and Tony had spent the whole time obsessing over Steve…
And Tony suddenly had the horrible realisation that, if Steve had been that dismissive of Tony’s suffering, he’d have been so hurt. Worse than that, Tony realised he wouldn’t have been hurt if it had been Thor that hadn’t worried about him, or Clint or Nat. He probably wouldn’t have noticed, from anyone else. But if it had been Tony on that warship, and Steve had done to Tony what Tony had just done to Thor… if Steve had put Tony in a queue of priories, if Steve had been content to simply ‘do what he could, under the circumstances’, if Steve had spent the whole time worrying about Bucky rather than thinking about his team mate, held hostage by Thanos…

*What if I’m just angry because he doesn’t love me? What if that really is what I’m so mad about?*

Of course, Tony still knew he had so many points. He’d spent too many nights running through them and analysing them and putting them into order to forget all of them now. He even knew he was still in the right. But at the moment, it didn’t matter.

“Mr Stark?” Peter asked, nervously. Tony snapped out of his thoughts, and hoped his internal despair hadn’t been completely clear on his face. “I, uh, think I’ve got all the questions and answers in order…” And, in spite of everything, Tony smiled. He looked at Peter, and vowed to be at least that mature and focussed for the duration of the crisis.

“Brilliant, thank you. But give me a minute.” And he pulled his real phone out of his pocket “I have to give T’Challa a call first, to let him know we’re coming.”

*Steve hadn’t been able to find T’Challa.*

Well, he probably *could* have found T’Challa, if he’d really been trying. But he just kept asking helpful palace officials, who would inform him that T’Challa was busy, but they would happily call him anyway, if Captain Rogers would just tell them what it was regarding…? And, of course, it wasn’t really regarding anything. And Steve had lost all confidence in himself as a human being, he didn’t know what he was thinking or trust what he was feeling or dare to guess how he came across to other people. He just didn’t feel like he had the authority to call T’Challa away from anything. So he just kept saying it was fine, he’d ask later, and then moping about the palace for a while until he found a different official so the whole thing could cycle through again…

He wasn’t even sure how long he’d been doing it, when he bumped into Doctor Strange in a corridor.
“Ah, Captain Rogers!” Strange greeted him with a sense of urgency, and Steve felt his stomach sink. For all his aimless searching for something to do, he didn’t really want to do anything – especially not for Stephen Strange. But apparently Strange had been looking for him, so it looked as though he was just going to have to be Captain America for a while.

“Strange.” Steve answered formally, coming to a stop.

“We’ve been looking for you – we think we may have worked out what went wrong with that first ritual”

“Oh?”

“Well, possibly. But I needed to ask you – did you have a particular emotional connection to Howard Stark?”

Steve just looked at him for a moment. His initial reaction was that it was a very blunt way to ask a very personal question…. But he just didn’t have the energy for it. His earlier conversation with Tony was still looping in his head, like it had been all day, and it was as much as Steve could do to play along with the real world – he wasn’t up to caring about it.

“I knew him from before I went into the ice” Steve sighed “I don’t know how emotional my connection was back then, but yeah, he was a friend. Why?”

“Wong seems to think the nature of the spell was more personal than we realised – essentially, we thought that the subject would merely act as a starting point, and in fact you may have been more deeply connected than that.”

“…What?”

“We might have worked out how to send Howard Stark back home.” Strange exhaled, as though he was trying to be patient.

“Right.” Steve bit out. “So, when are you doing that?”

“…You were close to him, then?” Strange mocked. Steve just started him down. “…Well, we’re setting that up. But it might well involve you.”

“Me?”

“Possibly – that’s why I was looking for you, actually.” Strange explained “Do you remember if you were thinking about Howard Stark during the ritual, before?” And, of course, Steve knew he had been. But he still hesitated before he admitted it.

“…Maybe.”

“Maybe?”

“I think I remember thinking that he would have been the one to find the Tesseract…”

“And you didn’t think that after you saw him?” Strange clarified.

“…no.”
“Right…” Doctor Strange considered him for a moment before he went on. “Well, in that case, we probably can send him home, once we’ve worked out the details. If you’re willing to take part in the process.”

“Take part how?” Steve asked in a measured tone. He didn’t particularly want to take part in anything anymore.

“No more than you did before” Strange answered, dismissively, like he was getting bored of the conversation now that he had what he came for. “Once we’ve worked out what we’re doing with the Infinity Stones, we’ll go back to that-”

“Wait, hang on – you’re back to hiding infinity stones, now?” Steve frowned “I thought you were supposed to be sending Howard home?”

“…We were, yes.” Strange informed him “But since we’re now going to wipe Starks memory, it’s not quite so urgent we sent him back before he see’s anything. And as Tony Stark is on his way with the Tesseract, which will mean three infinity stones in the same place, T’Challa seemed to think that we should work on getting them out of here sooner rather than later. And I agree – don’t you agree?” But for a second, Steve could only look at him.

“Tony stark is on his way here, with the Tesseract?” He repeated, his voice numb. Strange blinked at him.

“Uh…yeah. Well, that’s what T’Challa said-”

“When?”

“Like, an hour ago?” Strange told him, squinting in either confusion or distain – Steve didn’t care.

“And he said what?”

“…That apparently Tony Stark is bringing the Tesseract with him”

“So he is coming, then?” Steve clarified, and Strange’s frown deepened.

“I thought you called him this morning?”

I did. He said he wouldn’t come.

And then Steve realised what had happened. Tony had told him no. Tony had told T’Challa he would come… There was a hot stab of what was undeniably, embarrassingly, jealousy. That was swallowed up by a churning of shame and remorse… and then, a sudden visceral panic –

Tony is coming here?

He looked up at Doctor Strange, and there was the immediate instinct to cover all of that.
“And he has the Tesseract?” He asked for the sake of something, anything, to say. That probably should have been the first question, shouldn’t it?

“…That’s what T’Challa said. Apparently Tony found someone Loki sent with it – you should probably just ask Stark. T’Challa made it sound like he’d be arriving soon.”

Steve actually screamed in his own head.

He had absolutely no idea what to do with that information, to the point where he felt as though he might literally shut down and reboot if he tried to process it… He couldn’t bare the thought of seeing Tony, he couldn’t face Tony now – he was still as desperate to see Tony as he’d ever been.

And he thought back to when he’d seen Tony in New York, what seemed like a life-time ago. Less than three days, however you worked the time differences… and Steve felt like a completely different person. He remembered the disproportionate amount of optimism he felt back then, how even his guilt and anxiety had still been spiked with hostility – just how completely differently he’d seen the whole thing. How he’d still dared to hope for some reconciliation, whether or not he realised it at the time. How he’d actually had the gall to be upset that Tony Stark was over him. He’d picked an argument over The Accords, for fucks sake. And even though he remembered all of it, he still couldn’t empathise with that stubborn, argumentative idiot. He couldn’t understand how he’d been so wrong about everything… And he specifically remembered wishing that he could just be sorry, he remembered wishing for that so many times in the last two years, as though that wasn’t a completely ridiculous thing to think. Well, he was just sorry now. He was nothing but sorry, he was sorry to exist –

You still aren’t sorry you helped Bucky though, are you?

You still wouldn’t sign The Accords though, would you?

Was he? Would he? Could he throw himself at Tony’s feet and pretend he was, anyway? Was that the sort of person Steve was? The only thing he was sure of anymore was how much he wanted to make this better – more than Howard being stuck in the future, more than Thanos, more than anything. That, and the fact that he’d never be able to make this better-

“Captain Rogers?”

Oh. And he was sure that he didn’t want to talk to Stephen Strange right now. There was also that.

“Can you excuse me a moment?” Steve asked, walking off before he’d even finished the question.
Tony had never actually been inside the dome.

He’d wanted to go to Wakanda ever since T’Challa first told him about it – after T’Challa rescued Tony from a Siberian bunker and brought him home to New York. Tony had said, at the time, that he’d have sooner T’Challa took him to his sisters lab, and T’Challa had just laughed and called him an ingrate and not meant it. But he had promised to invite Tony to the palace, as soon as his heart was healed.

Maybe that’s why he’d not managed the trip, in the last two years.

And he couldn’t take much joy in finally getting to see Wakanda now, given the circumstances. As much as he would have liked to gaze at the wonders of the city, he also knew that this was his last chance to be in control of his domain. The moment his team stepped off of that plane, he was back at the mercy of chaos and circumstance. From then on, everything could be upended by one of Strange’s spells, or one of Steve’s random plans –

Or, Jesus Christ, his father…

Tony couldn’t begin factoring that in. ‘My father is in Wakanda’ was still just a sentence in his head. He still felt more deeply about the fact that Steve had kept it from him than he did about his dad. He assumed that would change when he actually saw his father… so there was no point in thinking about that now. What Tony had to think about now was what he was going to say to his team, before it stopped mattering what he said.

“Okay, team huddle, come on” He announced, as he finished entering the landing settings into the jet computer. Peter, Pepper and Rhodey all stopped gawping at the skyline and came away from the windows. Vision simply looked up and waited, like Vision would. So far they couldn’t see that removing the Mind Stone had had any affect on Vision, although they had no scientific data to base that on. Only the fact that he still seemed to talk the same way – he still seemed like Vision. Valkyrie was still drowsy, but awake enough to understand a rough explanation of what was going on…. Or still too sleepy to really question it… either way, she’d looked up when Vision did, and Tony would take that. And of course Shuri was already paying attention. “Right, before we walk into… whatever we’re about to walk into… I just want to make sure everyone is up to speed. So, firstly, just so everyone is aware, Steve and I had a massive argument…” Because he’d thought about it, and he’d decided it was unfair for everyone to walk into that situation blind. He had no idea how Steve was going to react when he saw him – he had no idea how he was going to react, when he saw Steve. But he was so done with secrets and surprises. As uncomfortable as this was, he knew he had to do
“…You mean another one…?” Peter asked, very carefully. Tony almost laughed.

“Ah, Touché. Good point, yes, for Valkyrie’s benefit – Steve and I had one massive fight, about two years ago, and we hadn’t actually spoken since then.”

“…Okay?” Valkyrie answered sardonically, her face adding and I care why? Tony decided he liked her.

“And, yes, last night we had another massive fight.” Tony sighed, trying not to blush. “Which actually doesn’t have anything to do with anything – it doesn’t change what we’re here to do, it doesn’t change what the right thing to do is, and I’m not saying I won’t work with him or anything like that. I just thought you should be aware…”

“Why, what did you fight over?” Pepper frowned.

“Because my dad had been in Wakanda for, like, a day, and he kept it from me.” Tony shrugged, expecting he’d have to explain himself further-

But every single person on the jet, even Valkyrie, and just nodded, fair enough.

Well, wasn’t that nice?

Tony actually took a moment to enjoy that, before he stepped back into a world where it literally never happened. In a few minutes he’d be back with Steve, and Nat and Wanda and Sam, and even Bruce… Back to being in the wrong by default, deemed untrustworthy from the outset, dismissed as arrogant or deluded before he’d even opened his mouth… For one minute, it was nice to think of this as normal.

Well, that was that done with.

“Also, just to warn you – I have no idea how things are going to go with my dad. There are issues.” Was all Tony could think to say about that, and no one pushed for more details.

“So, how do you want to play this?” Rhodey asked instead, after a pause “With your dad, or… anything?”

Tony had been asking himself that question for hours, even though he knew it wouldn’t matter. No amount of planning ever had any impact on how Tony reacted when it came to it – especially when it came to Steve. But he’d gone through the motions anyway, and he’d come to a few conclusions. Firstly, that Steve had treated him terribly, and he had every right to be mad as hell, even if that wasn’t the reason he was mad as hell. Secondly, that for whatever reason he did still love Steve, even if he also hated him. Thirdly, that Steve didn’t care about him, at least no more than any other co-
worker, and that probably was why Tony was so hurt – but it was definitely why this whole thing was so toxic. And finally, that because this whole thing was so toxic, he absolutely, without question, had to get out of it. Even though it would kill him to do it. All of which led him to the overall plan of trying not to take his unfair rage out on Steve, not bothering with any of his justified rage, and getting the whole thing done as quickly as possible.

As for his dad…

“As for my dad, I think I’m going to do what I always did, and just wing it.” He surrendered “As for everything else… I’m just going to try and ignore all the personal shit, and do what I have to do – and when that doesn’t work I guess I’ll come crying to you.” He finished with a shrug.

“Sounds about right.” Rhodey sighed, and then he smiled.

So, having said everything he had to say, Tony took his seat just in time for touch down. And at that moment it occurred to him – it finally, actually hit him – I’m going to see my dad.

…Shit.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

So, just so that people are aware, there is a casual derogatory comment made about homosexuality in this chapter (no prizes for guessing who by) which appears to go unremarked... I hope the reasons it goes unremarked at this stage are at least partly explained.... anyway, the point it, I just wanted to reassure people that this DOES come up again in later chapters, and will not be accepted by any of our favourites as an okay attitude to express...

Also, thank you all so much for continuing to read! Hope you enjoy it :-) 

Steve ended up going to see Howard on a horrible whim.

He couldn’t be sure how long he’d been walking nowhere in a panic, when one especially nasty thought shouted over the rest of the noise in his head. He realised that he hadn’t heard anything about Howard since he punched him in the face. And, suddenly, he couldn’t be sure of how hard he had hit him. He could only remember being so angry… God, could he have really hurt Howard? How old was Howard, in 1988?

*Hey Tony, you know how last time it was Bucky who punched your dad in the face until he died…?*

And then Steve was looking for Howard, or anyone that could tell him anything about Howard. Not really because that was the most important thing, but because it was suddenly the only thing he could think about, the only thing he could think to do. Steve had no idea if his fear was rational, but the idea was so horrible that disproving it had to be a priority anyway.

Then one of the lab techs informed him that Mr Stark Sr. was still in the medical bay – which panicked Steve even more. He had no idea how much time had passed since the incident, but he knew it was far longer than Howard should have required medical attention. By the time Steve reached the right floor he was at a full out run. But when he finally burst through the door, red-faced and breathless, he immediately saw that Howard wasn’t in need of medical attention.

Clearly, the staff just couldn’t get him to leave.

Steve recognised one of the senior technicians, a young woman named Isioma who’d been there when Bucky was cryogenically frozen. She shot Steve a bewildered, imploring look while he
struggled to catch his breath, then she gestured at Howard. Steve was initially still just pleased
Howard wasn’t seriously injured. Then he looked again at Isioma, who was holding that pointed
stare, and he finally recognised it as do you want to help us out here? And then he asked himself
what the hell Howard was doing.

And, whatever Howard was doing, he was obviously being an ass.

He was standing with two other techs, clearly closer than they were comfortable with, leaning over
their work to the point of interfering with it. Steve realised that they were as confused and frustrated
by this intrusion as Isioma was, and they too were looking at him to help with it. He wondered,
briefly, why they hadn’t just asked Howard to leave… and then he realised, they probably had.
Several times, using various different approaches – all of which Howard would have simply fronted
out.

Steve almost smiled.

Not because there was anything pleasant about that particular recollection. Simply because it was
one. Because he remembered that peculiar hard-nosed rudeness that had belonged only to Howard,
that way he had of dropping the charm like a heavy coat when it became a hindrance. At another
time, Steve might have smiled just because he remembered something – some small part of him still
remembered that it would have been nice, if were possible for anything to be nice any more.

But Steve felt as though he would never smile again.

And Steve had thought that before. He remembered thinking those exact words, the day after he
watched Bucky fall from a speeding train. He had sat in a dingy bar, and tried to get drunk, and
thought he’d never really smile again. And he hadn’t. From that moment in 1945, all the way
through his introduction to the future, from his last interactions with the Howling Commandos to his
first with The Avengers, Steve had never managed a smile that reached his eyes. Never anything
more than politeness or social anxiety.

Until Tony.

He’d watched Tony Stark carry a nuclear warhead through a wormhole. He’d seen all that brilliance
and bravery, caught his first glimpse of that dazzling, different quality that Tony had. And then, just
as Steve was beginning to realise what a terrible loss Tony Stark really was, Tony had opened those
beautiful brown eyes and made some terrible joke about kissing, and Steve had smiled. A smile he
didn’t have to try to find, a smile he couldn’t have stopped, a smile he could feel in his chest. Tony
had mattered, in a way Steve thought nothing would ever matter again. Steve cared about Tony
then, felt about Tony. And he hadn’t understood it at all at the time, he hadn’t known what he felt or why he felt it, but once it was there Tony could just make Steve smile. Steve smiled around Tony because Tony had shown him something amazing, because Tony had made him feel safe, because Tony had done something so very, specifically Tony. And then, slowly, Steve found himself smiling because he knew what Tony meant, because Steve had been there for that story, because he really got the reference Tony was making – because it was their joke. Steve only started smiling around other people after that. After Tony had taught him how to smile again.

And now you’ve ruined everything...

Steve took a sharp breath as subtly as he could, bracing though the pain of that thought. This was just going to keep happening, for the rest of his life… this was all he could do about it.

All he could do now was try to stop Howard bothering people. That was literally the only distraction he could find at this exact moment – and he needed something to do right now. So.

“What are you doing?” He asked, somewhere between weary and irritated. Howard barely looked up.

“Recovering from a broken jaw.” He answered coolly, and Steve felt a little flutter in his stomach.

“I broke your jaw?”

“In two places.” Howard looked at him then. Checking to see if that detail had landed as intended.

“I’m sorry.” Steve knew he hadn’t sounded particularly sorry.

“Well, I suppose you know that it isn’t broken anymore…” Howard went on, finally stepping away from his unwelcome observations. One of the lab techs let go of an audible sigh of relief, which Howard ignored. “Took them twenty minutes, and it was like it had never happened.”

“Yeah, well I can see you’ve already had a good look around.” Steve frowned “So I guess you don’t need me to tell you how Wakanda works.”

“You wouldn’t tell me anything if I asked you” Howard observed, casually. And there was something strangely familiar about Howards tone, just then. Something Steve hadn’t heard in such a long time…

Howard was just talking to him, like he would talk to anyone else.

No one did that to Steve anymore. Not even Tony. Sure, Tony had never been afraid to call Steve out or take him on because of who he was – but he’d always been making a point of that. Steve knew that Tony squared his shoulders before he stood up to him, that Tony didn’t have the same defiant look in his eyes when he argued with Rhodey. Steve could always hear it, even when Tony
didn’t say it out loud – you might be Captain America, but… Tony could have casual disagreements with other people, little disappointments or minor victories, but it had always been all or nothing with Steve. Somehow, Steve knew that even Tony wouldn’t have criticised him in such an entitled, dismissive way. Steve could always tell, Tony either really thought about it before he said something like that, or he’d gotten so angry that he was beyond thinking about the actual words at all. Either way, Tony was always invested. And people like Nat and Sam still approached him with criticisms rather than just making them, and of course most other people didn’t criticise him at all. He couldn’t quite find words for it, but he knew. People didn’t talk to him like this anymore.

He quite liked it.

“That depends what you asked.”

“Well, I don’t know – which questions are going to get me punched in the face?” Howard needled, and Steve knew he was milking it. But still.

“I am sorry about that…” He managed a more genuine tone, now. Because he was sorry. In amongst the rest of his internal conflict, and aside from the sudden, irrational panic that he’d actually killed Howard, he was aware that it had been an impulsive, unreasonable thing to do. Okay, maybe he didn’t really feel all that bad about it, but that was only because he didn’t have any bad feelings left over. “I’m just… having a very bad day.”

“Hm.” Howard huffed, unimpressed with the answer –

But that was it.

Steve actually saw Howards attention drift back to the work desk. Scoring a few points from the incident was apparently all Howard had been interested in – he really wasn’t going to ask what moral principle had allowed it, or demand to know how Captain America could have done it, or remind Steve of all the times he’d told other people not to punch faces… He really wasn’t thinking any of that. He didn’t care…

Huh.

“Your son is on his way.” Steve said, in spite of himself. As much as he was still scared to death of the topic, even though he still couldn’t bring himself to say Tony’s name… he couldn’t think of anything else to talk about. He’d expected to have to explain himself for longer. He’d expected to have to answer or deflect a thousand questions on everything else. Howards complete indifference had caught him off guard. “He’ll be here soon.”

“So they tell me.” Howard exhaled – and for the first time Steve caught the slightest hint of any feeling about the meeting.
“I didn’t think you cared?” He pressed. Howard breathed out a condescending little laugh.

“So you really don’t have kids then? That part wasn’t a lie?” He teased. Steve just frowned in confusion “If you had them, you’d know…”

“Know what?”

“Look, Steve, I don’t know how emotional you’re expecting me to get about the very concept of my son existing.” He shrugged. “I think you’re forgetting, I saw my son last week – and he was drunk, at four in the afternoon, by the way. So, no, simply hearing his name doesn’t overwhelm me. And if you had kids, you’d realise that your kids are the most important thing in the world, and not the most important thing in the world, and that does make perfect sense. One day someone will hand you your son, and he will be a miracle, and knowing you, you’ll probably cry – but you’ll still go to work the next day, saving the world will still be important, school plays will still be dull. And it won’t make you well up to hear his name after six days. And, if yours is anything like Tony, you’ll still know that he’s innately irresponsible. Just because you love your kids more than anything, doesn’t mean you spend your entire life focussed on them, that every moment with them is perfect joy, or that you think they’re good at everything. And for all of that – you’ll still care.”

*I was right. I don’t want to talk to Howard about Tony*

“You’re right, I don’t know the first thing about having kids.”

“But do you know the first thing about my son, Steve?” Howard asked, his tone suddenly serious, his eyes fixed on Steve. He couldn’t have missed the way Steve flinched.

“Meaning?”

“Meaning, you seem quite keen to bring him up.” Howard challenged “And you seem especially interested in whether I’m interested in him. So either you’ve just taken issue with my parenting – which, since you’ve always been a self-righteous bastard, is possible. Or else you know Tony. More than you’ve just heard of him. So, which is it?”

“It can be both, you know.” Steve stalled as best he could. Trying in vain to steer the conversation away from his relationship with Tony.

“So you do know him then.” Howard persevered.

“We worked together.” The words felt rough in Steve’s throat. They tasted like a betrayal.

“Hm.” Howard considered him for a moment. “Did you ever feel the need to punch him in the face?”

And suddenly, Steve remembered that horrible moment so clearly. He could feel the crumpled metal of Tony’s suit under his other hand, he could smell the mix of blood and mould in the freezing air of that bunker. He could see it more clearly now than he’d been able to at the time. Yes, he’d punched Tony in the face. He’d hit Tony over, and over, as hard as he could.
Hey, you know how last time it was Tony’s Dad who got punched in the face until he died…?

Steve hadn’t killed Tony that day. Like he hadn’t killed Howard today.

But what if you had?

And then, just as Steve was trying to decide whether he should panic about answering Howard or panic about what he’d done to Tony, Isioma interrupted them.

“Gentlemen, I’m told Tony Stark just arrived.”

* 

Tony felt like he was arriving with an entourage.

He walked into the main hall of the palace with Shuri at his side. Pepper, Peter, Rhodey, Vision and Valkyrie had all fallen into step just behind him. As he stopped to take in the grandness of his surroundings, Tony became even more aware of his team, of how nice it was to be part of something bigger. And he couldn’t help remembering what it had been like, before the Avengers was just him and Rhodey, and Vision-when-he-felt-like-it. How it had felt like a family...

It was all based on a lie, you know.

Yeah, but it had been nice at the time.

Then Tony heard the sound of footsteps echoing around the hall, and instinctively set his shoulders. Wondering who he was bracing for. Who he was hoping for. As it turned out, it was Bruce who arrived first.

For a few long seconds Bruce just looked at him, his body curled in on itself and his face just soaked in guilt. He looked like a little kid who really believed that Santa wasn’t coming now that he’d broken that window… Tony fixed him with a level stare.

“There’s a magic ‘thing’ happening just behind me?” He said, acerbically. Bruce just crumbled into
his own embarrassment.

“I know, I’m so sorry Tony – I panicked” He explained, walking over to the group. Tony saw his eyes catch on Valkyrie just briefly.

“Yeah, I’m hearing a lot of that.” Tony observed.

“I know, I know I should have just told you – but everyone was talking about paradoxes and universal destruction, and everyone seemed really sure, and, you just – you called before I even had a chance to think about it…” He threw his arms open in a gesture of surrender, and exhaled slowly, and collected himself. “But I swear, I did want to tell you the whole time, and the second I hung up on you I went to find Steve and I told him I wasn’t going to lie to you any more.”

Tony felt it like a dull little ache he’d known to brace for. Not that he’d been expecting that particular revelation – but he’d been prepared for the whole thing to be awful. He’d finally recognised that Steve’s lack of care was just going to keep hurting him, at least for a while. So, Steve didn’t even make that call because he decided to do the right thing. He called me because Bruce made him. Well, that figured.

“And if he hadn’t told you, I would have-” Bruce tried to continue, but Tony waved him quiet with a smile.

“It’s fine. I get it, we’re good.” He assured him, and Bruce visibly relaxed. Tony’s smile broadened.

“But, Tony, really I am sorry-”

“I know.” Tony stopped him, again. And then he looked over his shoulder. “Hey, Peter, C’mere.”

Peter leapt forward, failing to completely contain his smile.

“Peter, this is my good friend Dr Bruce Banner-”

“It’s an honour to meet you Dr Banner.” Peter breathed, his hand springing up as though he wasn’t quite in control of it. Bruce shook it warmly.

“-And this is Peter Parker.” Tony finished. “One of histories great minds-in-waiting, and also Spider Man.”

“Spi- there’s a Spider Man?” Bruce enquired, glancing between Peter and Tony.

“Yeah, well, it’s more a little, neighbourhood thing…” Peter explained.

“And I take it you know everyone else?” Tony checked, glancing back towards Valkyrie.

“Yeah… Hi.” Bruce spoke to her directly, “Are you okay?”

“Yeah – sleepy, still” Valkyrie smiled “Are you?”

“Yeah, yeah – well, I’m not hurt” Bruce answered in that endearingly apologetic way of his.
“Right” Tony grinned, putting his hand on Bruce’s shoulder “We’re going to get ourselves set up in a lab before anything can derail us.” He met Bruce’s eye. “I’ll check in with T’Challa and… everyone, after that.”

“I’m coming with you” Bruce agreed, before Tony could ask the question. Tony gave Bruce’s shoulder a friendly slap.

“Good man.” And then he gestured to Shuri to lead the way. He deliberately waited until everyone else was just ahead of them to follow on, so that he and Bruce were following at a slight distance. As they were walking, he leaned in so that only Bruce would hear him whisper.

“Explain to me how I’ve got the reputation as the player in the team..?”

Steve went straight to the lab anyway. It never occurred to him that he’d find Tony anywhere else.

He knew he had to find Tony. He hadn’t worked out what he was going to do after that, but even if he turned on his heel and left immediately, Steve still had to see him. He couldn’t stand to be avoiding him, he was too embarrassed in front of himself to sulk around the palace and pretend Tony wasn’t there. And… he just had to see him. It was like a compulsion, like an addiction. He wanted to see him, even though he didn’t.

And then, when he reached the lab, Steve really didn’t want to leave. In the few moments before anyone saw him, Steve stood at the top of the stairs and looked down on Tony’s little domain, and he so wanted to be a part of it.

His eyes went to Tony first; they always did. Standing with a kid Steve didn’t recognise, both of them leaning over the same computer, occasionally pointing at the screen. Shuri was standing at the podium behind them, scrolling through holograms that Steve couldn’t make out from where he was. A woman Steve didn’t know was sitting upright on one of the medical beds, talking to Bruce as he glanced between her and a tablet computer. Pepper was pacing, her thumb moving constantly on her phone screen, and Rhodey was sitting with Vision at one of the work desks. Steve couldn’t help wondering how Tony even knew what to do – how he knew enough about what was going on to give all of these people something to do.

And he couldn’t help feeling left out.

It was the sort of childish impulse he’d have felt ashamed of anyway, even if it weren’t obscene
under the circumstances. What was the old joke? The guy who kills his parents and then asks for special consideration because he’s an orphan? But just watching them talk across the lab, feeling their shared understanding of this problem, knowing they’d each taken their own part of it and trusted everyone else with the rest… how could he help it if he missed that? How could he stop himself from wanting it? And then, with a feeling of cold dread, Steve remembered-

Tony had lost all this once.

Did you ever think maybe Tony felt left out when every one of his friends turned on him, one by one?

And then Tony looked right at him. Steve felt his heart freeze in his chest.

Oh, Tony...

He felt everyone else see him, like a ripple though the room, but he couldn’t look away. He saw Tony say something to the boy next to him, rubbing his shoulder reassuringly before he stepped back. Steve couldn’t move. He felt pathetic, just standing there waiting – but his legs didn’t work. It was like he was rooted to the spot, just watching Tony make his way up the stairs to meet him, stopping a bit too far away. Steve didn’t know how long it had been since he’d last taken a breath.

“Tony, I’m sorry…” That part was easy. Those three words had been cycling through his head for hours now. But, God, how to tell Tony how sorry he was, all the things he was sorry for. How to even start. And he knew that the middle of the crisis – at the top of the stairs – was not the time or place to apologise for the last five years. He knew he had so much more to say than they could possibly go into here. But he had to say sorry right now, he had to do better than that-

“I know.” Tony sighed, in a sad, resigned tone that made Steve feel immediately tearful. “I’m sorry too.” Steve’s heart dropped right down through his body. No, Tony, don’t- “I probably shouldn’t have said that you fucked up everything you ever did. That is provably untrue.”

“Tony-”

“And I’m sorry I lost my temper.” Tony pressed. “Whatever you’re about to say – I shouldn’t have done that. That’s never a good thing to do… And, yeah, since we’re on that topic… I am sorry for what I did in Siberia.”

Steve felt his ribs seized in shock. Oh, God, are we doing this now? And somewhere there was the instinct that he just couldn’t let Tony apologise first, like he just couldn’t be that much in the wrong, he couldn’t stand by while Tony put him ever more to shame-
“Please, don’t—”

“I don’t expect you to forgive me for it.” Tony interrupted again. *Oh God, I didn’t mean that.* “But I just want you to know that *I am* aware. I could’ve seriously hurt two people, and I didn’t have the right to do that... however mad I was. And I wish I hadn’t done it, and I’m sorry I did it. So. There’s that.”

“Tony…” Steve said it like a place holder. Some sort of signal that he really was going to say something, that he was frantically looking for *anything*…

“It’s okay.” Tony told him, not quite meeting his eye. And it wasn’t, *it’s okay, it’s alright now.* It was, *it’s okay, it doesn’t matter anymore.* Steve felt the panic rising in him like a tide that threatened to drown him, watching this moment slip away from him – he knew exactly when he’d last felt like this. He remembered standing in a Siberian bunker, watching Tony fall apart right in front of him, willing himself to say something, *anything.* “I know why you didn’t tell me about my dad. Everyone’s already told me. We can drop that now.”

*Tony, no—*

And then he saw Tony’s eyes snap to just above his shoulder. Steve knew. There was a fresh wave of despair as he realised it was over. Tony had just drawn a line under everything, Steve hadn’t said anything, and now his moment had passed.

“Hey Dad.” Tony breezed, nonchalantly.

Steve turned toward the door, toward Howard, as he shuffled aside. He saw Howard look Tony up and down, the vaguest hint of thought on his face.

“You look like a homosexual.” Howard commented, lightly.

Steve’s mouth fell open. He would have literally demanded, *what did you just say?*, but the utter awfulness of that greeting had dragged all the air from his lungs. And then he felt Tony’s shoulders start to shake. He looked over just in time to see Tony throw his head back and laugh.

“Oh, that was just *perfect*” Tony giggled, as soon as he was able. He looked at his father “Just out of interest, is that a reference to the fine Italian tailoring, or the sassy countenance?”

“The Cuban heels, specifically.” Howard answered, looking directly at Tony’s shoes. By now Steve had set his teeth so hard that his jaw ached, but if Tony was at all disappointed by this meeting, he was covering it spectacularly.

“Good to have you back, dad.” He smiled, with a little shake of his head. Then he took a breath and
gathered himself.

“Come on. You probably want to know what’s going on, right?”


Tony’s heart had been in his throat for the whole conversation.

It had been pounding anyway, even before Tony had spotted Steve. He’d been on edge since the moment he arrived at the palace. His head might have decided, finally, that he shouldn’t worry about any of this, but there was just no telling his body that. He’d been stuck in fight or flight mode, still looking everywhere for the people he’d told himself not to care about. Tony knew the difference between healthy anxiety and an attack – although, it had taken him a while to accept that ‘healthy anxiety’ wasn’t a contradiction in terms. Now he understood that there were times when it was perfectly normal, even necessary, to feel that rush of adrenaline. That being human in the face of a crisis didn’t constitute a failure, in and of itself. He’d been reminding himself of that, telling himself that he wasn’t defined by his feelings, only what he did about them-

And then he actually saw Steve. And, yeah, his feelings got a moment just then.

Steve looked smaller somehow – but still wearing that lost-yet-stoic expression that only he could pull off. Tony still felt that little instinct to reach out to him, the instinct that had persevered no matter how many times Steve had lashed out or pushed him away. Because he did love him. Even now, after everything that had happened and everything he’d told himself, that feeling was still there. And, even now, Tony could have listed a hundred completely genuine reasons to love him, a thousand astounding, adorable, admirable things that Steve really had done… But none of that explained it. Tony knew he was cherry picking the good qualities about the man he loved, rather than really loving Steve for those qualities. He knew he’d be able to write a list just as long about anyone in the Palace… most people in the palace… and very few of those people had hurt him the way Steve had. And yet.

You already know you love him. It’s even okay that you love him. But it doesn’t matter that you love him. You know he doesn’t love you, and that isn’t anyone’s fault, but it makes you angry, and it makes you unhappy, and it disappoints you over and over. There is no point in making your valid arguments, because if you’re really walking away, then it doesn’t matter what he thinks. You have to accept that it really doesn’t matter what he thinks, and there really is no point in sharing how you feel – that if you’re going to walk away from this, all that matters is the person you are

And this time, Tony had actually listened to his internal guidance counsellor. It had been anxious,
and it had been uncomfortable, and he’d been talking over his heart the whole time, but as it went on he had a growing feeling that he was managing it. Like a man walking a tightrope, not wanting to get distracted by the rapidly approaching finish line, secretly delighted that he hadn’t wobbled yet. He didn’t look down. Tony ignored the part of him that was still aggrieved that he should be apologising first, and the part of him that was still waiting for Steve to say something back. He let that little voice talk over it.

You are saying sorry because those are the things you have decided you are sorry for. You are going to behave professionally because you think that’s the right thing to do. You are not going to let Steve define who you are, you are not going to define yourself by his reactions. And at the end of this, you won’t have convinced him, or made him like you, or grown any closer to him – because that is never going to happen. But at the end of this conversation, for once, you are going to be alright with you.

He felt like he was forcing the words out of his mouth at gunpoint. But he did it. He actually said the things, and only the things, he’d intended to say. And for a fleeting second there was maybe even a little feeling of… Pride? Liberation? Not quite. But…something good, for once…

And then, of course, his dad had turned up. And fucking hell, how many blows can one imaginary guidance counsellor handle?

But then, there would have been no way to prepare himself for his reaction, because it was so completely, bafflingly unexpected-

Jesus Christ, he really loved his dad.

And disliked him, yes. Still. And hated him, sometimes – sometimes pretty intensely. Tony hadn’t forgotten any of that. It was just that, now, Tony remembered the other things as well. He remembered the fact that, for everything, this was still his dad. The only one he’d ever had. The same person he’d called dad at fifteen, and seven, and eighteen months old. His dad had died, and now here he was, looking right at him. And the bit Tony couldn’t have prepared himself for, the only bit he’d forgotten about until that very second, was that he actually had loved his dad.

Tony was so completely shocked at himself. He felt as though he’d just walked up to a podium and been overwhelmed with stage fright – me? This reaction is happening to me? This had never even occurred to him.

And then, of course, Howard had said something dreadful – and Tony’s laugh was genuine. He knew that had been an awful thing to say, he even knew that was exactly the sort of comment that drove him to literal tears of rage as a kid. Maybe that’s why it was so funny now. It was such a
tangible memory for Tony. He felt a bit like he’d suddenly been magicked back into the eighties, like he wanted to seek out and point at and laugh at all the little period details, even though he’d never been particularly delighted by the Wheaties Box or the VHS machine at the time. And, God, that comment was just so eighties, so specifically his dad in the eighties...

Tony then had what could have been a truly disastrous mental break. His internal guidance counsellor had fucked right off, and Tony had used all his emotional maturity dealing with Steve, and he’d just been completely blindsided by his own brain –

And he almost fucking did it all again.

It was as though the last thirty years just evaporated. In one instant all of Tony’s self-reflection and life experience were just missing from his head, he’d never run a company or become Iron Man or been an Avenger. He was standing there, the exact same kid as the one Howard had seen a week ago, asking his dad if he wanted to see his lab in exactly the same way. He’d forgotten, just like he always used to forget, that his dad never showed the slightest interest. He’d been hoping, as vainly as he always had, that his dad would react a certain way. Tony had damn-near sleepwalked into the greatest personal regression in the history of man-

And then he saw Peter. And that changed everything.

As they reached the bottom of the stairs he saw Peter shuffle away from his work desk, so keen to be polite but not quite sure how to… My dad would have destroyed you. Howard would have taken that inherent sweetness in Peter and used it against him; all the things that made Peter better than Tony would have just made him an easier target, for Howard. And, just like that, Tony became aware of Howard as a threat at his back, the same primal instinct that drives tigers to protect their cubs… If he says one word to Peter-

One glance at Peters eager, slightly nervous expression had done for Tony what a life time of therapists – be they human, artificial intelligence or imaginary people in his head – had failed to do. It stopped Howard Stark being his father; it stopped Howard from being the legend, or the childhood trauma, or the metaphor for something greater. Nope, when it came to defending Peter, Howard was the same as anything else. Suddenly, his dad wasn’t special. For the first time in his life, it really didn’t matter what his dad thought, or what he felt about his dad. Not because he was denying it, not because he was talking himself out of it, not because he was managing it – the mattering just wasn’t there anymore. And now Tony remembered that his dad wouldn’t take an interest, that he would be dismissive and rude and even cruel, but he remembered in an entirely different way. There was no crushing disappointment, no bitter self-recrimination, not right now. Now, he didn’t care if his dad was an ass. All he was thinking about was protecting Peter from him. For the first time in his whole life, Tony really wasn’t ‘Howard Starks’ Son.’ He finally had something infinitely more important to be, instead.
The whole room was looking at them expectantly when they finally came to a stop. Tony, who had so nearly started waxing lyrical about his team and his tech, was now thinking of the most efficient way to do this.

“So, over here we have Team Asgardian Resistance” He gestured to Valkyrie and Bruce “Valkyrie and Bruce are working on finding Thor, maybe explaining why Strange’s portals aren’t working-” a sudden movement behind his caught his attention. Everyone looked up as Tony did, and found T’Challa and Okoye making their way down the stairs, Nat, Sam and Wanda trailing just behind them.

“You waste no time in making yourself at home.” T’Challa said, warmly, from halfway down the staircase.

“And may I say, you’re an excellent host.” Tony grinned back, walking over to meet him. T’Challa embraced him confidently, slapping Tony’s back companionably before he leant back to take his hand.

“Always a pleasure to see you, Mr Stark.”

“Please, Mr Stark’s my father.” Tony joked, and T’Challa smiled.

“I don’t believe you’ve met Okoye, head of Wakanda’s armed forces.”

“A pleasure” Okoye smiled professionally, taking Tony’s hand.

“Likewise.”

“Doctor Strange and Wong are on their way to meet us.” T’Challa explained, and Tony let go of a heavy sigh. No point in explaining anything until they got here – which left something of an awkward interlude…

Tony took a moment to think through his plan, more to take up the time than because he wasn’t sure of it. As well as Team Asgardian Resistance, there was also Team Wakandan Defence – at this stage just Rhodey, but Tony hoped that T’Challa or maybe Okoye would have some input. First priory, securing the site with the three infinity stones on it. Then it was contingencies, just in case Thanos did turn up. With any luck, Bruce and Valkyrie could give them a clearer idea of time scales, maybe even likely routes of attack… Then there was Pepper, who had flatly refused a cool team name, currently making sure they all stayed the right side of the law without alerting the law. And, as best she could, trying to prepare the world for a catastrophe without letting on that there was one. If anyone on Steve’s team wanted to help her with that, at least Tony could be sure that Pepper would have none of their bullshit. No amount of grand standing would convince Pepper to lie to him. Then there was team Plan-one-is-going-badly (name subject to change) in which Vision, with his superior knowledge of Infinity Stones, and Shuri, with her superior knowledge of everything, either helped Strange with his plan or came up with a new one. Which, Tony hoped, would leave Strange free to work on sending his dad home.

Tony allowed himself a quick glance around the room. He caught Bruce, exchanging looks with
Nat. Valkyrie, possibly checking Nat out. T’Challa, smiling warmly at his sister. His dad, looking impatient, still standing too close to Peter for Tony’s liking… Steve, standing with his arms folded tightly across his chest, looking about as miserable as he’d ever seen a person look…

Tony never imagined he’d be wishing this hard to see Stephen Strange.
章節 11

章節注記

首先，我對這次更新有些遲到，而在著手準備下一次更新時，我還不能預期會有比較快的進展。現在我媽得了肺炎，目前情況還蠻好的，但我們得花很多時間在醫院裡照料她。另外，這篇更新有些長，因為我沒方法在短時間內寫完。

但，反正還是要跟大家見面。:-/

Tony 今天早上應該是處在一個較好狀態，是比較好的一天。-客观的說。

他知道他的團隊站得很穩，用他們是這最好一群人來執行這最好計劃。至少，他們是這個最佳計劃。它已經不像是騙人惡搞，也不再是溝通困難。現在成了一種專業運作。還不是什麼完美，但已經好很多。

其實，Tony 本來可以專注於這件事。

或者他終於對他爸作出正確反應。這個錯誤，他覺得自己永遠也不會再犯。應該會成為他最重要的時刻。不會是盲目的反應，但至少不會有不必要的失態。應該得更多於現在。再想想。

Tony 也知道他對Steve 道歉是好事。當然，這小把戲真的讓他好點... 但說抱歉總有幫助。其他的因素讓他的名聲遭受不公平的評價。他無法改變自己的想法，或者接受自己的錯誤。至少，在他公開道歉，承認軍火工業是一次錯誤，並且，你知道，改變他的想法... 大約在那時，Tony 便知道承認錯誤是唯一能讓自己擺脫事態的方法。一旦
he’d seen that he was wrong, there was never any pain in saying so. That, actually, saying sorry was
the only way to distance yourself from it, the only way to stop being whatever you wish you hadn’t
been. And maybe there was still a little bit of that liberation. Every time he remembered that he’d
actually done it, there was the same little flutter of satisfaction as when you remember that an
appointment you were dreading had been and gone. So, maybe he should just ignore whatever other
doubts and regrets there might be, and just focus on that…

He accepted that he’d apologised more for himself than he had for Steve. Maybe entirely for himself.
Because, if he was walking away from this, he wanted to walk away as right as he could be. To have
ticked as many boxes as possible, to be clean and uncomplicated in his own telling of the story, at
least. To be able to say he’d done all he could do. It was always meant to be a means to an end, and
in that respect, it had been successful. And he had done all he could do. He knew that. He knew his
recent insights into their dynamic were fair and relevant, that he’d been right when he realised that
Steve would never love him and that would never stop making him angry… so he knew he had to
walk away. And that meant, on paper, he was in a better place now than he’d ever been. He had
finally started acting like he was going to walk away. He’d taken a step without getting emotional
and blowing it. And he’d even felt a little bit better for apologising, like he always did…

So why did he feel so…flat, walking into the lab this morning?

He should have been optimistic and energetic, shouldn’t he? He should have felt lighter – he should
at least be rested. After all those nights wasted on arguments with Steve, and years more nights
wasted on arguments with his father, surely he should have slept better last night than he ever had in
his life. And yet, rather than bouncing down the stairs like a man free of his burdens, he’d trudged in
like he was subjected to more gravity than anyone else. He didn’t even know what he’d been up all-
night thinking about. He didn’t have any more questions about Steve to torture himself with, he
didn’t have an embarrassing encounter to relive, he didn’t care what his dad thought of his lab or his
plan or him.

But then, last night he hadn’t been kept awake by thinking, for once. Last night it was just a cold,
uncomfortable feeling that had stopped him from sleeping. An anxiety, or a regret… something he
couldn’t talk himself out of, because it had never been rational in the first place.

Maybe it was just that he didn’t want to be over Steve. He understood that reaction well enough not
be completely thrown by it – he’d been having that reaction for days, maybe years now. He’d tried
thinking of it as an addiction. Something that was provably bad for him, however much Tony wished
it weren’t. And that analogy had led him back to a memory, of an alcoholic ex-soldier he’d once met
in a club. Tyrone, from Chicago; Tony would always remember him. Tyrone was sitting at the bar,
knocking back shots after walking out of a rehab program. And Tony, being young and naive and
privileged, had asked him how a drink could really be worth everything he was giving up. And
Tyrone had flashed a sad, condescending smile, and said something that had stayed with Tony for,
what was it, nearly twenty years now…
“It’s not the one drink, kid. I’m having this one drink because I’m scared to death I’ll never have one drink again. Because the truth is, I don’t want to get better – I want to want to get better, and it turns out that’s not enough. I want to be the sort of guy that is happy in a 9-5 job and has a great family and doesn’t even want to drink. But all I’m thinking the whole time they’re describing that life is, if I don’t break out of here and get that one drink, I’ll really be doing this. I can go without this one drink. But never drinking again? Turns out, what I’m scared of it getting better.”

It was a memory that resonated especially strongly right now. And Tony just had to keep reminding himself – he did want to want to get better. Maybe that just meant it would take a bit of work. Maybe this was just the first step toward a better life he was happy in. Or maybe he only ever got as far as a better life he was unhappy in. That still had to be better than an unhealthy life that made him miserable…

Really? That’s better, is it?

Yeah, that was the internal voice Tony was ignoring from now on. And that little voice probably was the reason he didn’t feel as liberated or as content as he’d hoped he would, if he ever got this far… in which case, he had to start ignoring it and living like it wasn’t there.

Right now, Tony had to focus on his job.

Tony and Peter were now Team Generally Being Awesome (name not subject to change). This meant floating between all the other teams to offer assistance, and make sure everyone was communicating. The first stop on the tour was Shuri’s lab, and Team Asgardian Defence, and yet another phone call to deepest, darkest space…

Bruce already had the Space Phone, now Mark 3, set up and waiting on the desk. Valkyrie was sitting beside it on the table, legs swinging nonchalantly, looking very different in an over sized t-shirt and a pair of black leggings. Peter, who’d obviously had a better night’s sleep than Tony, beat him over to them by half the length of the workshop. Tony saw Bruce greet Peter familiarly, and the way Peters eyes widened at the compliment of being accepted as a team mate. See, that made him feel better…

“Hey.” Tony greeted, as warmly as he could at his state of fatigue. Bruce just smiled, and Tony turned to Valkyrie “How are you feeling now?”

“I’m good.” She nodded, a little air of defiance about her, even then. Even swinging her legs under a work desk like a schoolkid, Valkyrie sat with her back completely upright and her shoulders totally straight. It made it hard to say whether she seemed casual or combative… But Tony definitely liked her.
“You know what happened to you?”

“I know why I was sleeping, how I survived – that part’s a spell.” She sighed, like it was a detail of little consequence.

“Doesn’t tell you anything about what Loki is up to then?” Tony guessed. Valkyrie had been too tired to explain much on the jet, but she had got as far as telling everyone that she had no idea what was going on. Loki had just thrust the Tesseract into her hands the moment The Statesman had been boarded, hissed a few details at her and then put her to sleep – she hadn’t even known what happened to her people, until Bruce explained it last night.

“I don’t even know how he got me here.” She said, not for the first time. “That spell will protect you, up to a point – but I can’t have floated my way through space to get here…”

“We were thinking maybe it had something to do with the Bifrost-”

“Yeah, but then why’d I turn up a whole day after you?” Valkyrie frowned.

“And Loki would have to have known that was going to happen.” Tony reminded him “Otherwise he was just throwing Valkyrie out into space without a plan.”

“Well, he might’ve…” Valkyrie mused allowed.

“But why would he?” Tony asked “In that case, he might as well have thrown the Tesseract out of an airlock. And anyway, he knew where he was sending you. He told you to ask for me. From what you said, he knew Bruce would already be here” Tony still wished Valkyrie’s memories of that last conversation weren’t such a muddle, but he knew better than to put that onto her.

“Unless he was just taking the gamble you’d be rescued…” Bruce guessed.

“By someone who happened to be on their way to earth?” Valkyrie mocked. Tony felt another little wave of exhaustion roll through him, and waited for the room to move out of and into focus again before he held his hand up to stop them. He was far too tired to get bogged down in what they didn’t know.

“So, hang on, lets do this in order – the first priority is working out where they are, right?” Tony reminded them, and they both nodded, right “So, honest answer, I really can’t remember if I’ve outright asked him that or not… but he hasn’t said. All he’s said so far is how far away he is from earth. So, before we even call him, we have to consider the possibility that he doesn’t know where he is, or he can’t say, for some reason…”

“Loki won’t have told him where they’re going.” Valkyrie chipped in.

“Right, so what clues could he give us? We have to know what we’re asking before we call him...”

But as he was talking, a thought occurred to Tony. Because Thor had told him, in both calls, how far away they were from earth...

“Wait – the first time I called him, they were seven days away from earth. The second time, he said two weeks – and he pointedly said that they were getting further away all the time.” He saw Valkyrie, specifically, thinking about it “So how can Thanos get somewhere in a day and not be able
to get back for a week?” The crease in Valkyrie’s forehead deepened.

“You know where they are?” Bruce asked, gently.

“I know a story.” Valkyrie clarified, gingerly “Like, a childhood fairy tale story…”

“But those are always true!” Peter told her, earnestly “Those always turn out to be the right answer…”

“No harm in hearing it out.” Tony grinned, and Valkyrie sighed pre-emptively at the silliness of what she was about to say.

“When we were children, they used to tell us stories about celestial lily pads, these magical gateways at the very edges of all the realms, and if you find one, it will send you great distances over the last of space, and if you follow them you can reach the edge of all existence – they’re supposed to be the only way you can reach the edge of existence. But the point is, they only work one way – there are all these stories about people who reached the edge of existence and couldn’t make it back, or people who got lost in the middle – there’s supposed to be this whole mythical world out there among them…” She shook the end of her sentence away, like it had left a bad taste in her mouth.

“So, these… celestial lily pads, if they were based on a real idea, might let you travel faster in one direction than the other…” Tony said

“Like those bumper things in the old sonic games?” Peter suggested, and then when everyone looked at him sceptically “There were these bumpers, and if you ran into them they’d just throw you really fast in one direction, and if you just kept hitting them you just kept going…. Ned and I have a SNEZ” He explained.

“Well, kind of, maybe…” Valkyrie frowned “I mean, I have no idea what you’re talking about – but that does kind of sound like what I mean…”

“Do you know where they’re meant to be?” Tony asked

“…Just the edge of existence” Valkyrie shrugged. “Like I say, they were a fairy story…”

“Hm.” But as Tony was considering it, a movement caught the corner of his eye.

He looked up to see his father walking confidently down the stairs.

Instinctively, Tony took a little step back, putting himself in front of Peter in his fathers’ line of vision. As his dad walked closer, Tony felt himself step away from the desk – subconsciously trying to keep him at a slight distance. And, before he could stop himself, he thought, I wish getting over Steve was as simple as this.

Tony flinched slightly at that. It had occurred to him last night that there were a few parallels between his relationship with Steve and his relationship with his dad – probably more than a few, if the idea hadn’t been so instantly creepy that he had to shut it down completely. But not before he’d had the unfortunate realisation that there were literally two people in his entire life that he’d ever chased approval from…
And they do say you look for your parents in your chosen partner…

And now here he was, going right to that comparison again. Wondering why getting over his dad felt like a completely different thing to getting over Steve – when it was, in fact, a completely different thing. This time, strangely enough, telling himself that he’d get over Steve quickly enough if Steve were ever cruel to Peter-

But you would never for a second, even now, worry that Steve would be cruel to Peter.

That was part of what made the whole thing so confusing. Part of the reason Tony was still thinking about Steve, after all the progress he’d made – and with his dead dad right there in the room.

Right. Time to focus.

“I think Doctor Strange and his team are waiting for you” Tony began without preamble. Howard didn’t miss a beat.

“That keen to get rid of me?” He said, unambiguously a challenge rather than an expression of hurt feelings. And Tony actually softened his shoulders. For the first time in his life, there was something more important than scoring a point against his father. There was no response cutting enough to justify keeping him here longer than necessary. The first time he’d seen the big picture when his dad was in it. Tony made a note of that one to feel later, along with everything else.

“Don’t take it personally, dad” He answered in a customer services voice; soft but professional. “It’s an avoiding-the-end-of-the-world thing, you know how it is.”

And Howard just… looked at him.

Just for a second, there was the strangest expression on his fathers face… or, maybe an absence of an expression. A softness, or an openness, or a blankness, even… Some little change in his features that Tony couldn’t put his finger on…

And then it was gone.

The defensive frown was back as he glanced over Tony’s shoulder.
“That always used to mean you were doing something you didn’t want me to see.” He reminded Tony snidely. And Tony took a slow breath, and thought about how best to deal with this.

He’d known, even as a teenager, that the best defense he had against his dad was to rise above it. That the ultimate revenge he could have on his father was to be the bigger man. The trouble was, back when he really felt it all, that was completely beyond him. For as long as he wanted to get back at his dad, he’d never been able to keep his temper long enough to do it. But now that he didn’t care, or for at least as long as he had something to care far more about, it all seemed very simple.

He smiled, the indulgent smile he’d give a toddler, as though his father had done something amusingly quaint. He saw a little flicker of irritation behind his dad’s eyes, and he ignored it – for once, that wasn’t the point. It was merely a means to an end.

“I think we’re a bit beyond that now.” His tone was deliberately more affectionate than snarky. “But, if you’re interested, I promise I’ll show you everything – but we really should do Doctor Strange’s preliminary work first. Save holding everyone up while you’re looking at whatever…”

Because he knew there was no way his dad would let Tony out-mature him, of all things. Howard’s pride was a more powerful motivator than even the fate of the universe. Tony hadn’t given him anything to push back against, no way to argue without being the petulant one.

“I’m not interested.” Howard huffed, and Tony fought back a little smile.

“Well, in that case?” He gestured towards the door. He all but put his hand to the small of his fathers’ back as he pointedly walked them both towards the stairs again.

See, if you were a bit more like this with Steve-


“Don’t wait for me. Call Thor. You got this.” Tony called back.

* *

All the way up the stairs, Tony had been preoccupied with the mission of getting his dad out of the lab. It was only when he heard the echo of their footsteps when they reached the corridor that he realised –
He was alone with his father.

Shit.

Weirdly, it was a social panic that hit him first. What do you say? Small talk was obviously ridiculous, and the big stuff was clearly off limits… It seemed ludicrous to say anything before they’d acknowledged the gravity of their situation – and Tony really didn’t want to acknowledge the gravity of their situation.

Then came a strangely spiritual panic – the wordless knowledge that he should feel something right now, whether he did or not. The concern that he might feel something about this, when it was too late to do anything about it. That anxiety that comes with being handed an impossible opportunity that you’re not sure you want, the pressure to take advantage of it anyway. The simple fact that he was talking to a dead person, whoever it was, seemed like something he should be more affected by – something he should do more with, somehow. This was his only chance.

Did he want it?

“So, you fly around the place solving crimes in a rocket suit now?” It was Howard that broke the silence in the end – sounding vaguely irritated by the sheer strangeness of his son’s life. Tony had a split second to decide. He’d wondered so many times, what would his dad have thought about Iron Man? He remembered that he’d always known his father’s response would disappoint him. And he was sure he remembered the tiniest flicker of truly pathetic hope that it wouldn’t… He really couldn’t see where he’d gotten that from, now that he thought back with different feelings. So, was he going to bother explaining that whole thing? Or…

“Not so much now, no” He dismissed instead, settling on evading his father for as long as it took to get where they were going.

“Bored of that already?” Howard asked, sarcastically, and Tony laughed in spite of himself.

“Getting too old for it.”

“See, now that’s sad.”

“Better than the alternative.” Tony said, to fill the gap. He could see the door to Strange’s ‘magic room’ like a finish line in the distance.

“So, why is Steve here?”

*See, that’s the sort of thing I meant by ‘disappointing’.*
But Tony more noted that it was disappointing, rather than really feeling anything much. That was apparently as much interest as Howard was going to show in the entire Iron Man concept. A bit of small talk before he asked about Captain America. That was so predictable it was almost amusing; it sounded like the sort of thing Tony would have yelled at him as a kid. *I could literally engineer myself into a superhero, and you’d still be more interested in finding Captain America!* But then, back then, Tony would have been *hurt* by that. He would have felt that Howard should naturally have fought his resistance to talk about it – he was the parent in this situation, after all. But now… he more just recognised that it was a let-down. Apparently, Howards interest wasn’t enough to overcome a mild deflection. Well, Tony had never expected it to.

“Turns out when he crashed into the ice, he was frozen, not killed” Tony shorthanded. “They found him and thawed him out seventy years later.” Tony felt his dad’s step stutter just slightly next to him, and he knew if he’d bothered to look up he’d have seen a thousand calculations flashing behind his eyes. But Tony didn’t bother to look up, because he already knew where this was going. “So yeah, he’s still out there, if you’re thinking of starting the search again.”

*If you hadn’t given up looking for him so quickly the first time…*

But Tony was well beyond that one now. It was funny really. When Tony was a kid, hearing that his dad had spent *four years* committed to that search had seemed excessive to the point of madness. It seemed like such a long time to him then, and ‘Captain America’ had just been an abstract concept. But then, when Tony got to meet Steve, and realised that his father had *known* Steve… He could not *believe* his dad had given up after so short a time. That thought had been enough to make Tony question how much Howards endless eulogising of Steve had really been worth, how much he could really have cared. Because Tony didn’t feel the need to sing Steve’s praises at every opportunity, but he already knew that if Steve had just gone missing like that, he would *never* have given up looking for him-

*Even now? Would you spend your life looking for him now?*

Jesus Christ, imaginary guidance counsellor – where the fuck had that come from? How was *that* question supposed to help him? No. The point was that he didn’t care about devastating his father with that observation, as he once would have. The *point* was that he had no place feeling defensive of Steve anyway. The point was that he wasn’t going to say it.

He’d got his father to the fucking magic room. That was the point.

Tony had already raised his hand to push the door when his father carried on,
“Hm. Wonder if he’d like you quite so much if he’d met you when you were eighteen…” And Tony actually paused with his hand in mid-air. He turned and looked at his father, suddenly uncomfortably aware of what he was doing with his face.

“I hate to be the one to break this to you, dad, but I don’t think him punching you in the face is actually him saying he likes you, whatever you thought was going on earlier.” He answered, very carefully, and his dad grinned.

“So he has punched you in the face then?”

“Several times.” Tony was surprised himself by how dark his tone was, but of course it washed right over his father.

“Hm.” His dad glanced at the door. It had already occurred to Tony that Steve might already be here – Strange had been looking for both of them this morning. And Tony hadn’t much been looking forward to seeing him anyway, but suddenly it seemed like one headfuck too many. So, instead of walking his dad in, Tony just gestured to the door, go on then. And, of course, Howard wasn’t remotely interested in whether Tony was coming in with him or not – especially not now that he had a new detail to needle Steve with. Tony heard him start before the door had even swung shut behind him.

“So you have been beating my son, then?” Said as a taunt. It was quite something, to be able to come out with that particular sentence and still make it clear that you weren’t remotely interested in your son-

“Why, you think that’s your job?”

Tony snapped his attention back to the door, now settling back into its frame and cutting off the conversation on the other side. Tony almost pushed it open again.

He could not believe Steve had just said that.

And in such a… human voice. An angry, defensive tone, an almost… off hand delivery. He’d sounded almost like Tony had, throwing barbs like that at Howard as a teenager.

Tony was absolutely stunned. He didn’t even know how he felt about that, other than stunned. He hadn’t worked out why yet, but he knew that was just the most unlikely thing for Steve to say – about him, of all people…

Well.

How about that.
By the time Steve and Howard had finished bickering and taken their places, Strange and Wong already had everything set up and ready to go. Strange explained the mornings activity in a speedy, almost impatient patter.

“Right, we’re working on a rota now, apparently, so first task this morning setting up the spell that will send Howard Stark home-”

“So, we’re not focussing on hiding the infinity stones now?” Steve sighed, exhausted with the whole thing.

“Yes.” Strange answered, with more forced patience “That’s what we’ll be working on for the rest of the day – but, like I say, rota. And the reason we’re doing this first is that this particular spell might take a little while to develop. We want to get it up and running and doing that while we’re doing everything else – if that’s okay with you?” Strange looked at Steve pointedly, and Steve just dropped his shoulders. He didn’t know why he’d said anything in the first place.

“Is that your plan, or my son’s?” Howard demanded. Steve shot him a sharp look, which Howard didn’t even look over to see.

“Shuri’s, actually, and as she is clearly the most competent person in the building, we’ve all seen fit to go with that – haven’t we?” He switched to glancing between Steve and Howard now. Steve nodded, sadly. Howard just stood there petulantly. “Right then.”

Strange waved his arms in a wide arc, and the chalk markings on the floor started to glow like the powder was hot. They shimmered briefly, and then cooled back to exactly what they had been. There was a second of silence, and Steve and Howard shared a bemused look. Then, just as Howard was gearing up to demand an explanation, Strange began his instructions.

“Okay, this is what is known as an empathic spell – and that means all you have to do is think about what I’m telling you to think about.” His tone was stern. Steve felt a little churning of guilt, thinking about how his mind had wandered, the first time. Maybe if he’d just focussed more that first time, none of them would be in this mess… “So, before we try for anything too specific, I’d just like you both to think back to when you first met each other. Just the general time when you knew each other before. Try to put yourself back there as much as you can.”

So, apparently it was finally the time for introspection.

It occurred to Steve, briefly, that this was ominously fitting. That, after all these years of running from himself or looking for himself or whatever it had been, he should finally be forced to stand still
and think. It should be today, really. But he couldn’t allow himself to get carried away with the symbolism of his current situation, because he’d just been told to focus on the past. And this time he wasn’t going to blow it.

That meant he forced himself to carry on with it, even when he felt that instinct to flinch away. Because thinking of himself in the forties was… uncomfortable. And he knew he wasn’t supposed to be thinking about why it was uncomfortable – it wasn’t the time for introspection like that. But he just had this feeling that, if he kept thinking about these uncomfortable things, it would occur to him anyway.

Steve tried to think of objective things, places and foods and music. Smells and sounds and general feelings. He tried to limit himself to generic memories, average weekdays and standard workdays… but there was nothing unremarkable about any of it, anymore. He couldn’t think of an average weekend with Bucky without his heart aching. He couldn’t remember an unspectacular Tuesday with the Howling Commandos without feeling lost. He couldn’t think of all the things he used to take for granted without making them significant.

And he couldn’t help thinking about the man he used to be.

And he couldn’t even run from that one, because that was what Strange had just asked him to do. He had to think about the person he used to be, the way he used to think, the things he used to do without even thinking. Steve had to try to remember the skinny, sickly boy that had taken the serum…or, maybe even before that…

When did he begin, really?

It seemed obvious that he wasn’t him when he was two. That he didn’t have to answer to anything he did as a toddler, that he wasn’t even conscious of himself as person, then. What about at five? What about when he was twelve, and thought he knew everything? Or sixteen, which was considered a grown man, back then? He knew at some point he’d just been. He’d cried because he was hungry, he’d tantrumed because he was mad, he’d played stupid games and got carried away with childish ideas – of course he had, he’d been a child. There was a time where it was perfectly obvious that he wasn’t a moral authority, or a role model, or a symbol of anything. And then, at some point, he’d stopped just being. At some point, he’d taken on a role, or become a thing… he’d always vaguely assumed it was when he became ‘Captain America’, but maybe it was something separate to that. At some point, he’d started to think about what he would do. He’d started to refer everything back to this preconceived idea of himself, he’d felt like everything he did or thought had to fit…

And he’d never managed it. He saw that now.
For all his efforts, there had still been times that Steve had just been. Times when he’d lost his temper, been upset, gotten carried away with himself. He still thought things he was sure he shouldn’t think, still did things that he knew he wouldn’t have done. He’d denied himself that as much as possible, fought it as hard as he could, but for all of that there had still been times when it just didn’t fit. But he’d never thought about that before, because every time that happened, he’d gone back and made it fit. Of course he had; it was all so obvious now. He’d always so resented everyone else doing that to him, and now he saw that he’d done it to himself. That, maybe, he’d started it. He’d been so determined to maintain that idea, so scared of slipping, that he’d just denied and ignored and changed the bits he couldn’t explain. To himself. To everyone.

To Tony.

Steve had looked so hard for a narrative with Tony. He’d so much wanted to thread it into a story, to find an overall meaning, to give it a label. To make it fit. And yet, the second he stopped doing that, it all became clearer. He saw that he’d never really treated Tony like a person; that he’d always taken for granted that it was enough that he saw Tony like that. He’d never noticed that he’d treated Tony like a mechanism in his own story. That he’d been so busy trying to put everything into boxes — to convince himself that he still fit in that box, however he’d acted around Tony — that he hadn’t listened to Tony. And, more than that, he hadn’t been a person around Tony. He had always been more concerned with what he would say than what he was really thinking. And now he recognised just how fucking annoying that must’ve been. The way he used to recognise these things, back when he was just a person in the forties….

Shit, was this what he was supposed to be thinking about?

“Okay, good. That’s good.” Doctor Strange reassured at exactly the right moment. Steve allowed himself a little exhalation of relief, and resolved to keep his thoughts about Tony out of this. The last thing anyone needed was a younger version of Tony Stark to show up, or something. “Okay, now I’d like you both to think about a specific memory from the time when you knew each other, before. Doesn’t have to be the same one, obviously, and it doesn’t have to be anything particular — just a single, specific memory.”

Steve scanned though his memories with Howard, assuming that was ultimately the point. Several vague images flashed though his head before he settled on one. An afternoon spent in Howards workshop, listening to him explain the Howling Commando’s latest weapons arsenal. Not really anything like Tony would have, now that he thought about it…. But he wasn’t thinking about that. He was focusing on that one grey afternoon in May, the smell of motor oil and the flicker of artificial lighting on the edges of the machinery. Howard strutting around the lab like a peacock, pretending to be efficient and professional and humble while he took every opportunity to sing his own praises. No real wonder at his actual achievements, only at himself for achieving them. Steve tried to remember that it hadn’t been so grating, at the time. That, without the background of his current situation, Howards affectations hadn’t irritated him so deeply. There might even have been a bit of affection for them, just for the fact that they were so very Howard, back when he didn’t deeply dislike the man. Back then, he didn’t have Tony to compare him to. Tony, who was always so genuinely
excited by the science of what he’d done. Tony, who was always as amazed by the achievements of other people. Tony, who had actually always pretended to be more arrogant than he actually was-

*Stop thinking about Tony*

He made himself think of that one afternoon. He listed as many of the details as he could remember. He repeated the dialogue over in his head, trying to remember as much of it as he could. He pointedly ignored the fact that everything he was looking at reminded him of Tony.

“Okay, good, that’s good…” Strange sounded genuinely pleased. He glanced over at Wong, who was looking equally optimistic, and the two of them exchanged a few words too softly for Steve to make out. He shifted uncomfortably on his feet, wondering what he was supposed to be thinking about now…

A memory opened up in his head, whole and contained and perfectly clear. Almost as though he’d fought the temptation to think about Tony so hard that he couldn’t help but take advantage of these few seconds now. A strange instinct to do it while he had the chance, as though he’d regret it if he didn’t. As though it would make it any easier not to think about Tony later if he let himself now.

Before he could talk himself out of it, there it was – that meeting, just a few months after they’d met, when Tony got the giggles. Steve could see him, how alive and enticing and pretty Tony was, he could so clearly remember every feeling that had surged though him then. That urge to laugh, the strange pleasure of trying to fight it, that feeling of connection and attraction and a deep desire to possess, to touch. Steve had ignored it, of course. He’d put it in a little box along with everything that didn’t fit, and carried on acting as though it hadn’t happened. Even though, thinking back, moments like that used to happen all the time…

Steve would greatly have preferred a nice, clean epiphany. A symbolic event, a moment of enlightenment, a point at which he could begin again. Really, he would have liked a new set of labels and rules to replace whatever he had been, to be able to give a time and a place and a solid reason that he changed from one to the other. He still wanted everything to make sense. He was still terrified by the idea of simply being, even as he recognised how many times he’d done it… which meant this wasn’t a nice, clean epiphany, didn’t it? He wasn’t going to get the answer, there wasn’t going to be a simple explanation to all of this. Just years of complicated thinking, and moments of inspiration that contradicted each other, and a messy, impermanent impression of himself that he was never quite sure of…

But maybe recognising that was a start. Maybe it was just one thing – but maybe it was a thing…

And, maybe, recognising that could help him work out some other things.
Because for so long, Steve had been thinking of his whole life as a single story. One puzzle, with one answer and one meaning. He’d never been able to work anything out for as long as he thought he had to work everything out. He’d always assumed that he was one thing, that the answer to ‘who am I’ would have to be simple, and consistent… But if his life was actually a collection of thousands of separate puzzles, if he as a person was built of a million different elements – if it was literally possible for those things not to hang together…

If he could work part of it out, without having to make every part of it work…

Maybe he understood more than he thought he had. Maybe more of it made sense than he’d realised. There were certainly things he knew, in isolation, that he’d discounted when he couldn’t make them work in context.

He knew he loved Tony Stark. He knew he was madly in love with Tony Stark, actually, and he knew this wasn’t the moment he worked that out. He may never have let himself think those actual words before, because he couldn’t make that idea fit with everything else… because he couldn’t work out how it could be true that he was in love with someone he didn’t always like, or that it could feel spikey and combative and angry at times, or that it wouldn’t magically make his priorities simple or his actions right… but he’d always known it. He’d actually convinced himself that he couldn’t know it, because he couldn’t make it into the storybook narrative, I met him, I loved him, I was immediately sure of how to do right by him. When it had been right there in front of his eyes…

He’d convinced himself it didn’t matter how he felt about Tony because he could never have him. As though feelings have no inherent value of their own. As though Tony weren’t a real person outside of where he fit into Steve’s story. Steve still didn’t understand how he could have loved someone so much and still taken them for granted, how Tony could have consumed his thoughts while he’d still been so thoughtless… it didn’t make sense. But there it was.

And he’d convinced himself that it didn’t matter whether Tony knew Steve loved him, because Tony wouldn’t care if he did. He was still sure that it wasn’t the opinion of Captain America that mattered to Tony, per se. He still knew that Tony knew his own worth better than that, that Tony had never considered himself less important than Steve – it was one of the things Steve had loved him for. The fact that he wouldn’t be intimidated by anyone, that he’d never consider that anyone was a more valuable person than him. And Steve still knew that he had, at most, only ever been a friend to Tony. Not like Pepper and Rhodey and people like that. Just like everyone else that Tony made welcome, and went out of his way for, and would help if he could. Steve knew that his opinion of Tony was probably no more important to him than Natasha’s opinion, or Sam’s, or Wanda’s. That he’d be no more affected by a compliment from Steve than he’d been devastated by any of Steve’s insults – and he still knew that hadn’t been much.

But maybe that wasn’t the point. Maybe there wasn’t just ‘one point’ here, one perspective. One priority. Maybe he should have been more honest with Tony anyway. Maybe it mattered more than
just for Tony’s feelings at the time…

He realised now – he owed Tony more, as a person. And he was embarrassed in front of himself that he, Captain America, Hero of the Little Guy and protector or the vulnerable, should actually be having to tell himself that Tony Stark was a person. He still had an instinct that that one observation changed everything he was. That instinct to convince himself that he hadn’t treated Tony that badly, because that wasn’t who he was… But this time he fought it. This time he tried to think that, maybe, he had to start dealing with these things one at a time.

He had treated Tony badly. He knew that. Even if he couldn’t answer all the subsequent questions, even though he couldn’t be sure how it changed everything else, he still knew it. And not only in Siberia. He had realised – not in a flash of inspiration, but slowly, painfully, over the course of days and years – that he’d always had things wrong. And he’d been so concerned with finding the perfect, complete, pure answers to everything, that in the end he hadn’t said anything at all. And now he saw that he couldn’t wait until he’d worked out the meaning of life to start fixing things.

That he didn’t actually have to work out whether he was sorry for everything before he apologised for the things he was sorry for.

That he owed that to Tony, regardless of whether Tony cared. Even though it couldn’t change anything.

And Steve knew he couldn’t change anything, not now. He knew he might as well discount anything that could be considered ‘working on their relationship’, because there wasn’t one anymore. That part was tragically simple, still. And that was all on him. He’d feel that later – he had to feel that later, he knew. He would have to find the time to experience that, and mourn that, and feel all the guilt and regret and shame that he’d been running from. In a weird sort of way, he recognised that he owed that to Tony a little bit, as well as himself.

But he still didn’t think that Tony would really care about his personal revelations. This wasn’t about him. This was about the things he had to say to Tony, for Tony. And he still didn’t think that Tony would want to hear all about his motivations and his confusion and his panic and his reasons – none of them were excuses. Maybe he wished he’d explained all that before. He definitely wished that he’d been more honest and real with Tony right from the start. He knew if he’d done that, things would always have been better… but he hadn’t done that, and this wasn’t about ‘making things better’. Not between them, not any more. There was no reason for Tony to have to listen to his self-indulgent explanations, no excuse for putting that on Tony now.

And he knew it didn’t matter anymore whether there were bits he couldn’t be sorry for. Perhaps, if there’d been any chance of a friendship between them, it would have been important to work that out. Now… Tony didn’t need to hear that Steve still cared about Bucky, or that Steve still had his
doubts about The Accords. What Tony needed to hear had nothing to do with any of that, and Steve couldn’t keep putting it off until he worked everything else out.

Steve had always assumed, somehow, that loving Tony was enough. He’d just assumed that he wasn’t taking Tony for granted, that he hadn’t done anything hurtful, he’d always been so sure he just wouldn’t – he’d never stopped to check.

He should tell Tony all of this.

“Okay, gentlemen.” Strange announced, finally. “I think that’s actually all we need, right now…”

“Yeah?” Steve clarified, because Strange had sounded rather surprised himself.

“…Yeah, pretty sure…” Doctor Strange glanced over at Wong, who had the same bemused optimism on his face. “…If not, we’ll call you back.” Steve heard Howard huff indignantly at that, but he really didn’t care.

He had to go and find Tony.
**Chapter Notes**

Many thanks to those of you that are still reading, and have waited patiently for this update :-)
1. My nan is doing well and should be discharged soon, so I should have more time in the near future (also pleased for my nan, obviously...)
2. Apologies for techno babble! I don't know why I keep doing it... but please do let me know if none of this makes sense!

Tony got back to the lab just as Team Asgardian Defence were finally making the phone call.

As he walked across the workshop he saw Bruce hold his hand up in a warning gesture: approach with caution, science happening. Tony could hear the dial tone sounding over the lab speakers, and as he finally reached the desk he could see a list of questions waiting on the screen of a tablet computer. Valkyrie was leaning over the phone expectantly, and Peter was bouncing on the balls of his feet with excitement.

The dial tone stopped. Bruce had been advised to speak immediately.

“Thor? It’s Bruce, can you hear me?” A second of silence. Bruce shot Peter a questioning look, and Peter reassured him, *wait.*

“Hello?” Thor spoke in a low whisper. Bruce’s eyes lit up, but before he could answer Peter had raised a hand, still *wait.* “Hello- Bruce! You’re alive! Yes, yes I can hear you.”

“Okay, you know there’s a delay on the line, right?”

“Hello?” Thor asked again, but by now Bruce had figured out *wait* for himself “Oh, yes, right.”

“Right, Thor, do you know where you are?”

“I think we have just passed through the Puluchi System, although I don’t know how that’s possible, and no one will explain.”

“…Because it’s so far away from where you were?” Bruce prompted.

“Because the only explanation I’ve been given is no explanation at all, and makes no sense at all” Thor was clearly saying that bit for Loki’s benefit “but there again, the reality of our situation makes no sense at all. I think we have passed through The Scarlett System and the Alison Gateway- but those three points are all great distances apart, and it makes no sense that we should travel through them in that order.” The whole time Thor was talking Bruce was frowning at Valkyrie, looking for any sign that she recognised these words. She just frowned at him, thoroughly confused.

“So, sorry, what order did you go through them?”
“The Scarlet System, then the Alison Gateway – and the Puluchi System.” Thor confirmed. Valkyries frown deepened.

“Okay, apparently this is a weird question, but have you ever heard about *celestial lily pads*…?” Bruce winced.

“Hang on.” Thor spoke with a sudden urgency, too quickly to have been answering Bruce. Everyone in the lab froze, like animals hearing a twig snap. “We’re safe, but I have to go. I’ll try to talk to you later.”

And with that the line went dead.

There was a sudden chill in the room, as everyone looked at everyone else in a silent plea for reassurance. It was only when Peter caught Tony’s eye that Tony remembered – he had to take responsibility for this situation. He had to be the reassuring one.

“He says he’s safe.” He spoke to Peter first, then he looked at Bruce. “And maybe we got something there?”

“Do you know where any of those places are?” Bruce asked Valkyrie.

“Yeah – but he’s right. That’s an impossible route – and a stupid one.”

“So, how far away is the Puluchi system then?” Tony asked.

“About as far away as the Alison Gateway.” Valkyrie spoke like she was thinking aloud.

“So they aren’t getting any further away from earth anymore.”

“It’s like they’ve completely changed direction – if you were heading towards the Puluchi System from where we were – or, even, from the Scarlet System… there’s no way you’d go *via* The Alison Gateway…

“Assuming they’re still travelling in a linear, spatial way…” Tony began, thinking he’d try tackling the problem from a theoretical physics angle-

But then he caught sight of Steve, hovering at top of the stairs.

He could tell Steve needed to talk – to him, specifically, and about something important. Or he thought he could tell…

But he always had to second guess those things now, didn’t he? Maybe it just meant Steve had yet another secret, or was about to drop yet another bombshell – those had always come when Tony thought he knew what was going on.
Tony stepped away from the desk, gesturing to the others, *give me a minute*, before he went over to meet Steve. Wanting to put a distance between Steve and his team too – although, to be completely fair, it was nothing like the way he’d done it with his father. Even now, he didn’t think Steve was something his team needed to be protected from. It was the drama of Steve, the volatile thing between the two of them, that Tony was trying to keep at a distance. Because he didn’t know if Steve wanted to talk to him, he didn’t know how he felt about that, and he didn’t know what he was going to do about it. He didn’t want to work all of that out in front of an audience.

“Everything go okay?” Tony asked cautiously, mainly to break the tension as he finally reached the landing.

“Yeah, I think so.” Steve spoke like he was holding his breath. Tony tried not to do the same as he waited for the reason Steve was really there.

*Just remember to keep your temper this time. You always regret it when you don’t.*

“So…?” Tony tried not to sound combative, tried to ignore the pounding of his heart.

“I’m sorry, I just…” Steve took a deep breath. “I just wanted to tell you that I’m sorry.”

Right voice.

Such a sincere, human voice. Tony felt himself react, bodily and immediately – he thought it was rage. Possibly panic. Something hot, and painful, something that urged him to end this now.

“It’s fine.” Tony snapped – immediately regretting that choice of words. “It doesn’t matter.”

“I’m not asking you to forgive me, and I’m not expecting it to change anything, I just… I think it *does* matter. And I *am* sorry Tony, and I think I do have to say that.”

Tony felt his spine straighten from underneath him, his teeth suddenly on edge. He still hadn’t processed the *need* to stop Steve from speaking, the desperate search for any way out of this. But he couldn’t find one. He couldn’t just tell Steve to shut up, not if he was supposed to be all mature and over it and such….

“I am so sorry I didn’t tell you about your dad. It was stupid, and short sighted, and… *wrong*, and… I’m sorry.”
Tony’s head was suddenly full of unhelpful, unconnected phrases – none of those things are reasons, you’re still just talking about you, if you aren’t expecting this to change anything then why are you doing this – none of which he could say, as he was being all mature and over it, and such.

“And I am so sorry for everything that happened in Siberia, and before that. I’m sorry I didn’t call and tell you everything right at the beginning – and I am so sorry I didn’t tell you about your parents.”

That’s all you have to say about that? You aren’t even going to say why you did that, or why you’re sorry – why are you telling me this now?

“And… even before that… I am sorry for the way I’ve treated you. And I know you probably don’t… I know it’s not important what I think of you, I just… if you really came away from everything thinking I didn’t like you, then I must’ve got things really wrong… And, I don’t know, maybe you do think I’m out there, thinking I’m in the right over everything, that I don’t regret… I just wanted you to know, I am genuinely so sorry, Tony. That’s all.”

Tony recognised that his body was completely frozen. He still thought this was probably fury. He just wished so much that Steve hadn’t said any of that, that he wasn’t even standing here, that the floor would open up and swallow him completely... Yeah, this was fury.

Tony was furious.

The same cold, disillusioned anger that had gripped him when he’d read that fucking letter. The same impotent phrases jumping to the tip of his tongue –

How dare you presume...

Are you going to address the hurt you’ve caused?

What about all the things you haven’t mentioned?

Backing Wanda and turning the team against me and telling me I tore the Avengers apart when I signed the Accords, tearing a strip off me for keeping Ultron a secret while you were keeping secrets yourself – not sorry for any of that?

Is that it?

And suddenly he was back to being angry at I don’t like the idea of you rattling around a mansion by yourself, along with everything else. This was the exact tone of voice Tony had always read that letter in…and he’d read it a few times, back then. Always in the tone of a Camp Counsellor, trying to get a kid to talk about their emotions while still remaining a bit superior to them. And Tony was back
to feeling like a kid, wanting to scream that Steve just didn’t get it, not wanting to give Steve the satisfaction… I’m sorry you came away with the idea that I didn’t like you? What the fuck does that mean?

And Tony was furious at himself, every bit as much as he was at Steve. He was angry, and embarrassed, and so disappointed in himself – because he still wanted to ask Steve what he meant. He still cared. He still wanted to answer all of that, to ask all the questions suddenly crowding into his head, to demand more of an explanation. He wanted to argue.

But he couldn’t.

In the white hot haze of his head right now, the one thing Tony could remember was that he was walking away from this. He had decided that. He’d warned himself not to lose his temper. And he hated Steve right now for putting him in this position – because he didn’t want to accept this apology. He didn’t want to have to say it was fine. It wasn’t fine. Steve had behaved terribly, he’d been stubborn and selfish and cruel. He’d been a liar and a hypocrite and he’d hurt Tony so much… and Tony couldn’t say any of it. Because Tony shouldn’t care about saying any of it. Because Tony couldn’t have that argument right now, in front of Peter and his whole team. Because he was supposed to be walking away from the argument all together.

So, he didn’t have a choice.

“Thank you” Tony somehow managed cool and detached. He saw Steve deflate just slightly, like maybe he’d been about to say something else… Tony so nearly asked him, what? He reminded himself, on auto pilot now, that it didn’t matter what Steve was going to say. That no good ever came of talking to Steve – that he hated that Steve was even talking to him now. He glanced away, briefly, mainly because he couldn’t bare looking at Steve-

And he saw his father, walking up to Peter.

The spike of adrenaline was immediate and overwhelming. Steve disappeared from Tony’s head completely – Tony couldn’t even see Steve, any more.

“Hey!” Tony shouted, so violently and at such volume that even Captain America leapt back in alarm. Tony missed it entirely. Maybe there was a trace of Steve left in the additional anger of Tony’s reaction. Maybe Tony wouldn’t have gone quite so over the top if he’d been calmer in the first place – but he was well beyond connecting things back to Steve now. He certainly wasn’t interested in what Steve was doing at the moment.
Tony didn’t even remember getting down the stairs. But, suddenly, there he was, right in front of his dad, physically pushing him aside before he’d thought what he was doing-

Well, that was… surprising.

Apparently, Tony had been expecting more resistance that that...

Howards abuse of Tony had been mainly phycological. Constant criticism, covert control, an unpredictable battery of emotional outbursts. He had threatened violence, both directly and insidiously, on a regular basis – and followed though on only a few occasions. They had been enough. Tony had learned the power of his father’s fists at an early age, well enough to cower from the threat of them from then on. Always just taking that knowledge as a given. A fact unexamined and therefore unchanged since he’d accepted it, aged four. A fact reinforced on a daily basis through fear and insinuation alone. Tony had always thought of his father as such a big, strong figure…

But he was old.

He had been old when Tony was eighteen. And lighter than Tony realised, and frailer than he’d imagined. It had been so easy to throw him aside…

And in that instant Tony realised – Tony could have hit him back, even then. Tony had flinched at, and run from, and tried to pre-empt, the mood swings of an elderly man. It had never even occurred to him to question it, to weigh up their relative strengths and weaknesses at the time. He’d just been afraid of his father… because, what? Because he’d been scared of him when he was a little boy? Because there had been a time when his father had been bigger and stronger than him, a time when Tony obviously couldn’t have hit him back? Because of all those other sinister methods Howards had to control him, all the other ways he still had power over him…

But he didn’t any more, did he?

Looking at Howard, Tony realised: He could out run, out smart or outbid his father on anything, now. He didn’t depend on his father for anything he had, or anything he wanted. And he could, quite obviously, kick his fathers ass. No suit required.

It was an oddly sobering thought, actually.
“What do you want?” Tony demanded, his voice cold and contained now. Howard was still scowling incredulously at Tony’s outburst, and pointedly took a second to compose himself before he answered.

“I was about to ask your intern if he might make a phone call for me.” Howard glared, sarcastically. “Is that unreasonable? Do they not do that anymore…?”

“He is not my intern” Tony snapped. “His name is Peter Parker, and he is already one of the leading scientific minds on earth, and he has been personally selected to help us save the world from catastrophe – he does not make phone calls for you. You want to call someone, you call them yourself.”

“Uh, why?” Bruce intervened nervously. “Who’re you, uh… who do you want to call?”

Tony looked back at Bruce, at first just objecting to the interruption. But it quickly occurred to him… Bruce was right. Those were questions he probably should take more of an interest in, from a practical perspective.

He looked back at his dad, a defiant look in his eyes. Now that his immediate temper had passed, he saw that Doctor Strange was also in the lab – that he’d probably arrived with Howard, and had therefore been there, unnoticed, the whole time. Steve had followed Tony down the stairs at some point and was now hovering awkwardly at the edge of the conflict. Valkyrie had jumped down from the work desk and was now standing in combat stance just behind Tony’s left shoulder. He hadn’t seen her move.

“Well?” Tony barked, surprised by how reassuring a personal Asgardian Guard actually was. Howard straightened his shoulders, deliberately taking his own time in replying.

“Hank Pym.”

Tony snorted a derisory laugh.

“Wow. You must be pretty desperate to get involved in this thing, to dig that fucking deep for a personal contact” He threw that barb before he thought to stop himself. But he knew he was right. His dad just couldn’t help but get involved in everything, he just had to find some way to take control of proceedings. Even if, thinking about it, Howard hadn’t fallen out with Hank yet… Tony still knew he was right.

“Actually, the Wizard seems to think it might help if your infinity gems were physically smaller.” Howard corrected, smugly. “So I think my personal contact is relevant – and, anyway, why wouldn’t I call Hank?” Tony shot Strange a questioning look, ignoring his father’s question completely, and Strange let go of a defeated sigh before he answered.

“…It might make things easier. If we’re investigating all possible theories, at this stage.” Stephen conceded, “Assuming we can find him…” He glanced at Howard.

“Why, is everyone on the run in the future?” Howard asked, exasperated.
But Tony just smiled.

Tony had developed a taste for knowing things other people didn’t. He hadn’t had it before. In fact, if anything, he’d always wanted to share everything he learned with anyone who’d listen. But since his whole world had been pulled from underneath him – specifically, since he’d learned that almost everyone he knew had lied to him, or was prepared to – he’d started taking a certain satisfaction in the things no one knew but him.

Or, maybe, he just liked surprising people.

“I know where Hank Pym is.” Tony tried not to sound smug. He tried not to notice the shocked double take from Steve.

“I thought he was on the Governments most wanted list?” Strange queried, earnestly.

“Yes, well… Just cos you think there should be a law, doesn’t mean you always turn everyone in.” Tony shrugged, wishing he didn’t care whether that point had landed with Steve.

“Fine, tell me where he is, and I’ll call him” Howard demanded petulantly, as though it was some great concession on his part.

“If we know where he is, we can just go there” Strange suggested, briefly bringing a sling ring portal into existence to demonstrate. Howard didn’t blink.

“Hang on” Tony put both his palms in the air, attempting to call the whole world to a stop. He had the awful feeling that the world had run away from him this morning – but all he had to do was right himself.

“Let’s get everyone together on this, before we get carried away with ourselves and drop in on some felons, for no reason.”

Steve knew he should feel better for finally saying something.

He kept telling himself that saying anything was better than saying nothing, that it was right that he’d apologised, that he was glad it was something he’d said, rather than something he still had to say-
It wasn’t working. Steve was still miserable.

If anything, he actually felt worse now. He had a headache, now. And… he just knew it had gone badly. He hadn’t said half of what he’d wanted to, and it had all come out in the wrong voice, and Tony had been staring at him with such outright disdain the whole time. Now, as well as that cold, heavy sadness, there was also an irritating discomfort just under his skin. The frustration of not having unpacked it all yet, of not really knowing why he felt so bad about it … He really would have thought about it, this time. Steve might finally have started the process of thinking about it-

But there really was a lot going on, today.

First, there was the hasty gathering of their expanding team, and an even quicker surveying of opinions. Of course, everyone agreed immediately that it was worth exploring the theory – and with that, Steve had felt his first inconvenient frisson of bitterness. He’d thought that level of bureaucracy was ridiculous. It was obvious that everyone was going to say yes; there had been no need to drag them all to the lab. And then he thought that Tony was doing it to make a point, and then he couldn’t unthink any of it. He couldn’t help connecting it back to his original fears about The Accords, unreasonable though it was. And then he felt terrible, because he was supposed to be sorry. Because he’d just started atoning for his mistakes, and it felt as though he was stumbling right out of the gate. So he’d tried to stamp that reaction down, tried to go along with Tony’s plan and do this Tony’s way.

Which had, all too quickly, lead to Steve, Tony, Howard, Strange and Shuri dropping unannounced into the living room of a very surprised – and very pissed – Hank Pym.

There had been a few minutes of shouting and swearing and threatening to shoot people. Hope, Janet and Scott running in to the increasingly crowded space, confused and alarmed and irate. Hank angrily asserting that Howard was dead, Howard asserting that Janet was dead, everyone asking questions on top of one another.

Tony had waited until there was, finally, a gap in all the shouting. Then he’d taken a little step forward, flashed that smile right at Janet and Hope, and said,

“Hi, I don’t think we’ve met – I’m Tony Stark” As though nothing unreasonable was happening. And Steve had to ignore another uncomfortable creeping feeling, then. He had to stop himself from thinking about the first time Tony had smiled at him. He had to try not to wonder if it really did have the same effect on everybody. Neither Janet nor Hope reacted… but then, neither had he. Steve knew he’d managed a blank expression the first time Tony smiled at him like that; didn’t mean it hadn’t turned his legs to water.

“They know who you are” Scott had informed Tony darkly, glancing at Steve. And Steve’s stomach had twitched, thinking of Scott looking to Steve to back him up on this. There was so much that felt wrong about that…
“And I know who they are.” Tony had continued, cheerfully. “I’m a big fan of your work, actually.”

“Are you here to have us arrested?” Hope had asked, her face still entirely unmoving. Tony, in contrast, had given the full dramatic performance when he told her, no, of course not. As though he really was shocked by the question, as though he couldn’t imagine why Hope would think that...

Steve knew exactly what Tony had been doing.

He’d been acting, for a start. That much was obvious, barely even concealed – he can’t have been expecting the Van Dynes to take that earnest an expression at face value. Tony was playing a part, making a point, and everyone in the room thought they knew it-

But no one knew it like Steve did.

Steve knew that every part of this performance was considered and practised to perfection. He knew that this role was one of thousands Tony had in his armoury, the way he had hundreds of suits lined up in his workshop. Steve knew Tony had chosen this one specifically, that he was executing it exactly, and Steve even knew why. He knew it would work.

Tony had explained – as though he were mortified at the very suggestion – that he had no problem with Hank. He couldn’t think why anyone would think he did. That he had no interest in ruining Hanks life – why would he? That he’d known where Hank and Hope were since they stopped in New Mexico last summer. Tony had even given a little run down of their movements since then, to prove his point. He’d finished by asking why he’d bother to have anyone arrested now, when he hadn’t before…?

Steve knew this tactic. Steve had fallen foul of this tactic on more than one occasion. He knew that Tony knew; if he directly challenged anyone’s ideas, they would defend them. But if Tony pretended not to understand people’s prejudices, then they had to explain them. Even when they knew he was acting, even though it was clear that his innocence was a put on, it still laid out the challenge. could you answer this perfectly reasonable question, though? Especially in light of all the confusing, conflicting information Tony always had to hand, the endless examples of things that didn’t match your expectation – whatever it might have been. Steve had seen Hope and Janet exchange a little glance, and he knew the exact conflict that was happening in their heads. That wordless understanding that something about Tony just didn’t fit.

“Yeah, no offence” Scott had chipped in, at some point “But Stark’s aren’t exactly known for being trust worthy” And Steve had felt that same twitch in his stomach, the same confusion over whether he could tell Scott to butt out… If Scott were to say to him, you’re the one that got me to fight him in the first place… He’d be right. Steve had asked Scott to stand alongside him while he said far worse things to Tony – how could he yell at Scott for still doing it, just because he had changed his mind?
But didn’t that mean he was just standing here while someone insulted Tony, again, refusing to call out an obvious wrong just because he’d been wrong, once?

Jesus, he would have liked a day in a dark room to just think about all of this…

But Tony, who’d apparently always been hurt that Steve didn’t stick up for him, had shown no signs of needing defending then, either. He’d just dialled the acting up to eleven, and informed the room,

“Oh! Sorry, I know what’s happened here – happens all the time – but, no, this” He gestured theatrically to his father “is Howard Stark. And, not a lot of people know this, but we are in fact two completely different people” And then he focussed his attention right back on Hope again. “Actually, I think Howard Stark is an ass, too.”

Steve felt the first ripple of change happen in the room then. The way Hank began to subtly re-evaluate Tony as a potential ally or weapon against Howard. The little flash of defensive panic in Scott’s eyes. The fact that Hope felt the need to reply at all.

“Yeah?”

“Oh, Hope, you’ve no idea – he was a nightmare to live with. And then I’ve spent years being punished for the fact that he’s an ass, even though he was mostly an ass to me.” He sighed – and there was the first flicker of a smile from Hope. Janet’s face softened, and Hank just shot Howard a smug look.

“So why have you brought him here?” Hope asked, straightening her lips again.

“I haven’t – actually, he’s here because this Wizard” Tony pointed to Strange “had a problem with a spell he was casting to try and save the world from an intergalactic warlord – which is what we need your help with.”

“What?” Hank demanded.

“It’s a long story.” Tony smiled, “But basically, we need your help to save the universe, and we were hoping that you had a few minutes to hear us out. I can make my dad wait outside if it helps – really.”

“I’m not waiting outside.” Howard informed no one in particular, while Hanks team considered what Tony had just said.

“The last time I saw you, you were attacking me at an airport” Scott had reminded him, cautiously, like he wasn’t sure he believed it himself.

“I seem to remember you handing my ass to me at that airport” Tony corrected, even though it wasn’t true. Baiting a trap.

“Well, yeah.” Scott fell into it, flashing a faux-humble look at Hope.

“You see.” Tony told Hope in mock exasperation “The last time he met me he beat me up. And he didn’t even know me – honestly, I am much maligned by the world”
And there it was. A real smile – first from Hope, and then from Janet. And before anyone could
derail him, Tony had sealed the deal.

“All we’re asking is for you to hear us out.”

And Steve would really have like to have thought about a lot of things, then.

He would have liked to have thought about the surge of jealousy he’d always felt, watching Tony do
that. He might finally have addressed that weakness he’d felt since long before he took the serum,
acknowledged that he coveted this skill of Tony’s above anything else. To know how people think,
to understand how people were going to feel … God, he envied that. Steve might have thought about
why he envied that, about the anxiety he’d always felt around other people, his complete inability to
do what Tony had just done – the defensive pain it had always caused him.

Or, he could have thought about the wide variety of other surges of jealousy he’d suffered through
since that morning. The sudden wash of shame he’d felt watching Tony defend Peter, only deepened
by his own inability to defend Tony, even now. It had come so easily to Tony. It had been
immediate, and instinctive. The right words had apparently just come into his head, the sort of thing
no one had ever said about Tony… the sort of thing Howard should have been saying about his son,
but clearly never had. Steve might have understood Tony’s pain a little bit better now, if he had the
chance to think about it. And Steve might have thought about the fact that he was no better, that he’d
shied away from defending Tony to Scott, even after Tony had shown him how it was done. That
he’d felt no more able to defend Tony than Howard had, that he was nowhere near as brave or as
confident as Tony had been. Steve might have thought about how simple it seemed when Tony did
it, why it was so confusing when he tried to do it himself….

Or even the fact that he was jealous of Hope. Or irritated by the way Tony treated her, or aggrieved
at the lack of fairness, or something. Because Steve knew Tony hadn’t been making nearly as much
effort during their first meeting. Tony hadn’t bothered thinking of a role, pre-empting Steve’s
reaction, managing Steve’s emotional responses – Tony had just stood there and took it all, when it
was Steve. And Steve knew it was wrong to blame Tony for that. He knew he was the one who got it
wrong, that it wasn’t Tony’s place to fix that for him, that he was supposed to just be sorry right
now… But he also knew that if Tony had made half this much effort with him, he would never have
gotten it so wrong. He wouldn’t have come to all the wrong conclusions, and built up all the wrong
assumptions, if Tony had taken him by the hand and guided him through it like this. If Tony had just
been as forgiving of Steve’s original mindset as he was of Hope’s…

But he couldn’t think about any of it, because – as usual – the world was racing ahead without him.
Tony’s master manipulation had everyone settling down to a brainstorming session before Steve could even think about what he wanted to think about. All his revelations got bulldozed to the side, along with all the other details still occurring to him, while he tried to focus on what was actually happening.

He couldn’t be distracted by that left-out feeling he recognised from so many times before. That yearning sadness that always flooded him when he saw Tony sharing things with others that he could never share with Steve. When Tony talked about MIT with Rhodey, when he talked about science with Bruce – or, now, with Hank and Shuri and Strange and Hope… Whenever Steve had been forced to acknowledge that he and Tony didn’t really have anything special. That, actually, whatever they might’ve had would always be stunted by just how much more Tony knew. Things other people knew, and understood, and could talk to Tony about. Not Steve. Steve would never be bright and different and imaginative enough for a mind like Tony’s.

He couldn’t be distracted by Tony’s mind, right now. He couldn’t drift into just watching Tony think and hypothesise and solve, as he’d so often wanted to. He couldn’t let himself think that sometimes Tony really was just… beautiful. He couldn’t stop to think how extraordinary Tony was because, as ever, Steve was too busy trying to keep up with him.

Until, at last, it had overwhelmed him. The noise in his head, the increasing pace and volume in the room, the way everything just kept pushing forward. And suddenly Steve had looked around him and realised that he didn’t know what the hell anyone was talking about any more.

Steve wasn’t stupid. He’d followed up to a point. He’d followed enough to know that they’d suddenly stopped talking about shrinking infinity stones at all. Of course he’d seen the way Tony’s eyes lit up when some entirely new theory had occurred to him. He recognised that something else, something different was in play… But fucked if he knew what it was.

That was another familiar pain that he couldn’t think about now. Having to interrupt five world class scientists, the founder of Stark Industries and a fucking wizard and say-

“Right, sorry, what are we doing now?”

And of course everyone stopped their important work to look at him. And Steve knew he wasn’t stupid – but he always felt it, at times like these.

“Yeah, you all lost me somewhere around non-parallel time lines” Scott added – which didn’t make Steve feel any better, at all. Steve just set his spine defensively, like he always did at moments like this, and waited for Tony to react. It was always Tony’s reaction he had braced for.
And, every so often, Tony still managed to catch him off guard.

“Okay, so, this morning we managed to call Thor, and from what he said, Thanos is somehow jumping across vast distances in space, and in all the wrong order…” Tony explained-

Perfectly reasonably.

Not making a point, not concealing a joke, not even rolling his eyes. Like he’d forgotten who he was speaking to. He just answered the question, properly. Kindly, even.

But then, Tony did that sometimes.

Suddenly, Steve remembered being on the Helicarrier in the moments after Loki attacked it. He could even remember the engine control panel that had made literally no sense to him, at the time. He could definitely remember the embarrassment and the panic as he set his jaw, and tried to front it out, it seems to run on some form of electricity. How he’d braced for the rebuke. And then Tony had just answered, soft and understanding, well, you’re not wrong.

It was the same voice Tony was using now, and Steve didn’t understand why.

“…And, as well as just being able to make things really small and really big, these guys have been doing all this research into the quantum realm, where, apparently, time moves differently.”

“So, to clarify, we’re not shrinking infinity stones anymore?” Steve sighed. He wished they could just pick a plan and stick with it.

“Well, it’s an idea for the pile” Tony suggested, glancing around the room for confirmation “But, to be honest, this random idea is far more interesting than the random idea we came here for.”

“Right, sorry, and this random idea is…?"”

“Well, we’re working on it – but I think, maybe, we have the answer to several problems with this one thing.” Tony announced, and now at least everyone was looking at him sceptically.

“Several problems?” Hank asked, still somewhat suspicious of Tony.

“Okay, so hear me out…” Tony began. “Hank and Shuri think maybe Thor is moving within a different realm, with entirely different rules of time – like another quantum realm, but not the
quantum realm, or whatever. And that maybe that explains why they can’t go back the way they came – that part might actually be true, because technically they’re moving through time rather than space. And that explains why your portals aren’t working?” Tony glanced over at Strange

“It might tell me how to make them work” Strange nodded. “It might even explain why the phone got through when it did – if they’re literally hopping from one fixed point in time to the next, then maybe we just caught them at the right time. If we know what we’re looking for – if we time it right – we can do that again.”

“So, okay, we think we can maybe save Thor – that’s one problem” Tony pressed on. “But, from what you’re saying, Thanos’ ship is essentially outside of time when it makes these jumps...?”

“Yes…” Strange raised an eyebrow at him.

“And if you timed it, you could create a portal from this physical place to that physical place, in the brief moments they were still inside time?”

“…..Yeah?”

“So, what if you kept that portal open after that ship jumped?”

“You’d… have a doorway to a place that didn’t physically exist… that was outside of any time line…” Strange focused on Tony. “It would probably be the best hiding place for an infinity stone in the universe.”

“So.” Tony announced, triumphantly. “If you guys don’t mind helping us out a bit with this whole ‘quantum realm’ thing” He smiled at Hank and his family. “We could, potentially, have a way of getting Thor back safely, and getting rid of these fucking infinity stones at the same time?”

And then, somehow, they were getting ready to leave, exchanging contact details and files and promises not to talk to the authorities. Steve found himself shaking hands and offering empty pleasantries on auto pilot, not feeling like he was really there. Not sure if he believed any of this had happened to him, even though he’d just seen it. Trying to think through the last few days suddenly felt like trying to hold onto a dream. Too many conflicting threads to make sense of, too many fundamental questions – too much for it to have only been a few days, surely? And Steve was suddenly just so tired.

Tony seemed to know what he was doing. That would have to be enough.

Tony didn’t really have any idea what he was doing.

His theory was patched together from the expertise of at least four different people, none of whom really knew what would happen, each of whom was trusting the others. This was experimental,
notional, abstract science… but, on paper, it did seem to work. A few hours of explaining it by committee, running the standard scientific tests and fine tuning the details had left them with – dare he say it? A feeling of hope.

This really could work.

They would track Thanos using the phone link to Thor. When they were sure Thanos’ ship was in their physical timeline, Strange would use the time stone to open a portal – through which Thor could escape and, if they were lucky, they’d later be able to throw at least two infinity stones, never to be seen again. All going well, that would just leave his dead father and his fucked up relationship with Steve to deal with.

After the week he’d had so far, that sounded positively relaxing.

Galvanised by his newfound optimism, and the promise of an actual fucking finish line, Tony had managed to focus for the rest of the day. He’d briefed everyone, helped Rhodey update his security plans and even managed to distract Ross – although really, he had no idea what Ross thought he was doing, at this stage. And then, as the evening drew on, Tony’s fatigue caught up with him. He found himself, an hour after sundown, staring at the same sentence he’d just read three times.

Coffee. He needed coffee.

Tony put his tablet down and headed to the break room, rubbing his eyes and stretching his neck as he walked. For the moment, his mind was entirely blank, just too tired to process whatever he was supposed to be worried about. It was fine. He’d have some coffee and it would all come back to him…

And then he pushed open the door of the break room – and there was Steve.

The voice he’d decided to call his internal guidance counsellor spoke up, out of nowhere. The name he’d given to a part of himself that he couldn’t reconcile himself with.

Okay, you’re tired and you’re emotional right now… but, what you’re thinking about doing?

You really shouldn’t, you know.
Chapter 13

There was a special sort of tired that only Tony Stark could look.

There was a way he had of holding himself, even when his body was visibly burdened by the weight of his exhaustion. The fact that the light in his eyes still burned bravely above such dark shadows. The fact that he still managed to look so lovely even when he looked like shit. It was that same mix of vulnerability and dauntlessness that had always made Steve feel weak. That thing that had always confused his head and his heart and every one of his senses, that thing that made Steve want to hide behind him and throw his arms around him all at once. Steve had never known what to do with this feeling anyway.

He was floored by this feeling, now.

In that first instant, Steve’s head was full of words – none of which he could say. And he knew he couldn’t just stay silent. So…

“Hey.” He managed, softly, not quite meeting Tony’s eye. Even so, he saw the way Tony tensed. Steve knew he’d gotten it wrong, already. And maybe there was just the slightest hint of irritation in him then, for all of his overwhelming guilt and shame. A little ripple of injustice at the world, at the very fact that there was nothing he could have done…

All your own fault, though. This is just how it is, now.

He felt his own body tense as Tony stalked by him to the coffee pot, like there was a static field around both of them – would that repel, or attract? Even from the middle of it, Steve couldn’t tell what this was.

Everything about Tony said don’t talk to me.

Every fibre of Steve’s being urged him to speak.

He was scared to death of speaking.

In the end, it was probably blind chance which of those conflicting impulses won out.
“You look tired.” It came out too quietly. Like he hadn’t fully decided between saying it and not when it just fell out of his mouth. But he knew Tony heard it. He saw the way Tony flinched, the way the coffee pot stuttered slightly in his hand, mid-pour. Tony finished filling his mug before he answered.

“I am tired.” He sounded cold and impatient. Steve felt it like ice sliding down his throat, pooling in his stomach, drowning all the words. And then Tony looked up at him. He caught Steve’s gaze like he was snaring him in a trap, like he was daring him to say something else. Steve floundered.

“I don’t know what to say”

Tony made a low, bitter noise. Not a laugh, exactly. Steve winced.

“No, me either.” Tony bit out. There was a loaded pause, just a second too long, while Steve waited for Tony to storm off and Tony simply didn’t move. And then Tony put his mug down. “Turns out, I don’t really know you.”

Steve was embarrassed by the hurt little noise he made as that took his breath away.

“That isn’t true.” He whispered, shaking his head. Tony bit his bottom lip.

“You just say these things, don’t you? What, you’d just rather that wasn’t true?”

“No, I…”

But this was the problem Steve had been struggling with the whole time. He wanted to remind Tony of all those conversations they’d had, before. All the moments they’d shared. He wanted to list all the things that Tony knew about him that no one else did, the things that might’ve seemed inconsequential but that had mattered so much… How could he? After everything he’d done, asking Tony to find it in his heart to remember the good times? He could already think of a million things Tony could say to that. It wasn’t a reason, it wasn’t an excuse, it was all about him, again. Steve just didn’t have the front, he couldn’t think of how to explain it.

Steve couldn’t think of a way to explain his remorse without saying how hurt he was, and he couldn’t bare to talk about how hurt he was, right now. He couldn’t argue with Tony, he couldn’t possibly defend himself while he was saying he was overwhelmingly sorry – but he couldn’t just accept that Tony had never known him, he couldn’t pretend to agree. He couldn’t ask Tony how he was feeling, because he’d lost that right, and he knew exactly how Tony would respond-

He was doing it again.
He was just standing there, watching Tony crumble. Not saying anything.

What can I say?

And Steve then watched those big, beautiful eyes fill up with feeling, even as Tony was looking at him with such proud disdain. It was like a push, like it suddenly didn’t matter that he was scared to speak because he was speaking anyway. Because if he didn’t, Tony would walk out right now, and he just couldn’t, Steve just had to... something.

“You did know me – you do know me, Tony. I...”

“No, because the person I knew would never have done any of that shit.” Tony informed him, his voice dark. “The person I cared about didn’t lie. The person I cared about was kinder than that.”

Steve felt it like a knife through the scar tissue that surrounded his heart. It was searingly painful, sharp and immediate and deep enough to scare even him. But there was also something perversely liberating about it. It hurt so much, in such a naked, human way, that it cut through all the issues and confusion and trauma that always restricted him. He spoke then in the same way he’d have screamed if someone stabbed him. For the first time in a long time, the next words out of his mouth were just a reaction.

“I never meant to hurt you, Tony. I hate that I hurt you, I never did any of that to be cruel-”

“No, you just didn’t give me a thought” Tony snapped.

“That isn’t true” Steve answered, firmer now that his heart was overruling his head. “I hated hurting you then, and I really never thought you’d get hurt like this, I never thought-”

“Exactly - you never thought.” Tony interrupted him. “You thought if you called me, when Bucky first escaped, I wouldn’t go along with your plan – and that didn’t suit you. You wanted to control that situation, that’s all you thought about. And the reason you never imagined it would go wrong is because you never took a second to think about what might happen, because it didn’t matter-”

“No, Tony-” But Steve saw Tony throw his arms down petulantly at that interruption, presumably exasperated that Steve still wasn’t accepting his mistakes. Steve remembered himself, briefly, and tried again. “No, I know, you’re right” There was a flash of shock in Tony’s eyes, what might have been hurt – this was another thing Steve had been afraid of. Not how awful all of his apologies sounded, but how badly they might make Tony feel. The times when admitting his own selfishness and carelessness might’ve given a completely false impression of Tony’s worth to him. But, at least this time, he could clarify “I mean, you’re right that I didn’t stop to think what might happen. You’re right that I just... got that idea into my head and ran with it, and I know that was reckless and wrong – but none of that was because you didn’t matter. It wasn’t because I didn’t care. I just... panicked, and-”
But Tony just snorted, sceptically, cutting Steve off. He shot Steve a derisory look as Steve failed to find the end of his sentence. And Steve felt a wave of desperation then, knowing he was losing him.

He felt a hot rush of shame, knowing exactly how pathetic he sounded.

And he felt a little prickle of anger, because Tony presumed to know what Steve was thinking. An unfortunate and instinctive response to Tony asserting Steve’s motives for him. And Tony was wrong. This time, Steve was being entirely honest. It hurt to have Tony dismiss that, whether it was fair or not.

“And, what, you were in a panic for the whole two years you didn’t tell me about my parents?”
Tony sneered, and Steve answered before he could talk himself out of it.

“Yes!” And then, when he saw Tony’s incredulous look, he reigned it in a bit “I mean – I mean, yes. I panicked about that from the moment I found out, I was scared of keeping it from you, I was scared of you finding out-”

“And you chose lying.” Tony reminded him. “You actually sat on the roof with me and just listened while I talked about my parents dying – how that’s why I don’t let other people drive me – and the whole time you already knew that I was talking about something that never happened. You just let me pour my heart out, thinking you were actually listening and caring and getting it…”

And that was undeniably, horribly, true.

Steve knew which night Tony was talking about. He’d thought back to it often, during the many nights he’d laid awake, counting his regrets. He remembered wanting to eat himself, he was so uncomfortable in his own skin. Steve remembered telling himself, with every sentence Tony uttered, that he couldn’t just sit there and listen to him. That he couldn’t refuse to listen to him, he couldn’t shut Tony down the first time he tried to talk about something this important. That, even if he did rethink his decision to hide the truth, he could hardly blurt it out right then. Steve remembered knowing that he had to stop that conversation, that he couldn’t stop that conversation, that he didn’t know how to stop that conversation… that he didn’t want to stop that conversation. Steve had hated himself that night, and he hated himself now, remembering it…

But he had really been listening. He had understood what Tony was saying – and he was still so pleased that Tony had opened up and told him. As much as he hated having to listen to it, he’d loved that Tony was saying it.

He’d liked being party to that trust he hadn’t earned.
And now, hearing Tony take it back, Steve felt completely and utterly ashamed. He felt ashamed for accepting and enjoying that trust in the first place. He felt ashamed for losing it. He felt ashamed for daring to want it, still.

“And the thing is, I never would have guessed.” Tony went on. Twisting the knife “I still can’t think of how many little lies you must have told me – hiding the truth about my parents, the whole search for Bucky, everything… The whole time I was there thinking, Steve doesn’t lie, turns out you were really damn good at it… So no, Steve, I don’t know you. I guess I liked who you were pretending to be.”

Whatever space Steve stepped into then, he hadn’t been there in a very long time.

Not since before he woke up all alone in an alien future, with the whole world already relying on him.

Not since before Erskine got shot, leaving Steve the one and only example of his work, the only Super Soldier America had.

Not since before his mother started coughing up blood, with no husband to help her and no other children to rely on – only Steve.

At every other crisis point in Steve’s life, Steve already had to be something – even as it was happening. He’d had to know what it meant to be Captain America in the very second he found out that he’d been working for Hydra. He’d had to remember what Captain America was there for, even while he was watching Bucky fall from a train. The fight in Siberia, from the moment that security tape rolled to the moment Steve walked away, had been a desperate and ultimately fruitless scramble to think what the hell Captain America would do with this.

But now, Steve was just dying.

And maybe he did still have to think what Captain America would do. Maybe he should have been panicking about Thanos and Thor and Howard and fuck knew what else at this point – but he wasn’t. Steve wasn’t thinking about anything. Steve was just feelings, now.

For the first time in a very long time, Steve just answered as Steve. He wasn’t pushed by some emotional panic, he wasn’t even reacting any more. He just was.
“I never pretended to be any of that. I never pretended to be anything – I never once said I was the great moral compass of our age, I never said I would never tell a lie no matter how scared or confused I was, I never claimed I knew everything. I just said what I thought, like everyone else gets to. I said I thought it was important we were honest and good, because I didn’t know I had to be infallible to say it – everyone else gets to say it.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, when Clint came out of retirement to attack Vision, did you say, hang on Clint, I’m just doing my thing here, I’m not sure – or did you say, suit up, follow me, we have to do what’s right? When he destroyed the compound – our home – to spring Wanda, did you say, hang on Clint – she’s just a kid? Did you tell her, I’m not leading some great crusade here? Or did you tell her you were.”

“I told them – all of them – that I thought there was an army of super soldiers about a day away from bringing the whole world down – because I thought that was true. And I am so sorry that I believed something that wasn’t true – but I believed it, and that’s why I said it. You’re right, I didn’t tell Clint or Wanda to go home – I didn’t tell them to do anything. I just said what I thought, and everyone else said, Oh, well, if Captain America thinks it, it must be true. And I am sorry if it was Captain America that you cared about, but don’t say I promised you that-”

“No, you’re right, you never said you wouldn’t lie to me for years, I guess I did just take that for granted” Tony spat, sarcastically. “But don’t you dare say it was only Captain America that I cared about, because I was stupid enough to think that you might be my friend. Because I thought you were the sort of person who wouldn’t do that to me – Jesus Christ, you can’t just be sorry, can you?”

“I am sorry!”

“No, you wish things had worked out differently – that is not the same thing.” Tony corrected “You wish this would all just go away – you don’t like the idea of me rattling around a mansion on my own, you wish I wasn’t hurt now that I know the truth. That is not being sorry for what you did-”

“But I am sorry for what I did!” Steve pleaded, desperation rather than anger “I am so sorry, for so many things – I don’t know how to tell you how sorry I am, for how stupid I was, for everything I did. Every time I try it just sounds like I’m making excuses, and I’m really not, I don’t mean that, I just… I’m not walking around thinking I’m right all the time, I don’t think this was some great moral victory or the result of a righteous stand – I know this whole thing was a fuck up. My fuck up. And I know I can’t make it right and I don’t know what to say – but that doesn’t mean I’m not sorry. And then you just stand there and assert that I’m not sorry, and if I argue with you…” Steve let go of a frustrated breath “But you’re wrong about that. I am sorry for what I did – you can’t tell me that I’m not”

“But if you never say it – if you never do anything about it – then you aren’t sorry!” Tony shot back, raising his voice for the first time. “Just feeling sorry is of no use to me – Jesus, if only my feelings had been half that valuable to you. I wish I could’ve just felt really sorry about my weapons manufacturing business, would’ve saved me all the time and money and risk of closing it down. Wish I could’ve just felt really sorry about Ultron and Sokovia – would’ve saved a lot of political trouble, as it turns out. But me? I had to say I was sorry – I didn’t know what to say either, and I hated it, but I had to say it, and then I had to fucking do something.” And then Tony’s breath caught, and he pulled the volume of his voice down. “If you don’t even manage to say you’re sorry, that
isn’t being sorry-"

“I’m trying to say-”

“I don’t even mean now.” Tony hissed. “I mean always. I mean you never saying, sorry I said you only fought for yourself, that was my bad. I mean you never saying, I’m sorry I said you were all about style, turns out I’d only known you for three minutes. I mean you never saying, I’m sorry I blamed you for Ultron while I gave Wanda a tour of the fucking building, I’m sorry I just assumed you’d sold weapons to Klaue after knowing you for two years, I’m sorry I just stood there while Thor throttled you. I mean the fact that you sent me a letter that included the line we all need family, maybe the Avengers are your family, you sanctimonious- but it didn’t say anything about being sorry that Rhodey is paralysed, that you left me personally responsible for global security, that you got the whole thing fucking wrong in the first place!” Tony’s voice kicked up again, “And if you were secretly sorry for everything that whole time, well, who would’ve guessed? You’d’ve thought you’d’ve stopped doing it, really, but hey, maybe it was all to conceal the big fucking secret of how sorry you were – and that is pretending to be someone else, Steve! Then you really can’t blame me for telling you this now, because you spent five years consistently ‘pretending’ not to be fucking sorry!”

“I wasn’t pretending not to be sorry – I didn’t know how to say any of that!” Steve answered back, a little bit louder now, too. “And before you roll your eyes and imply I’m a total idiot for that – you don’t even know what I mean! You don’t even know that it’s alright for you, that you got to stand up as the head of a company in a world you understood better than anyone, and say you were sorry about one thing and then go back to a life. You got to talk to Pepper and Rhodey about it, you understood exactly what you were sorry for – you knew what you could say without offending someone or talking about something that didn’t exist anymore or putting your foot in it. I just woke up in a world under attack, knowing I’d be letting everyone down if I let something slip by me, not even knowing what I was looking for. And the whole time I already had to be Captain America, I was already a role model and an ambassador and an example, and if I’d gotten an apology wrong or if I was apologising for the wrong thing I was literally letting little kids down and - you have no idea how ridiculous the future is! How much you take for granted. You laugh at my quaint little assumptions and then you can’t believe I didn’t assume other things, you don’t even know – I didn’t even know what was normal, I didn’t even have anyone I could ask”

“You could’ve asked me!” Tony exclaimed.

“No, I couldn’t – I didn’t know you.” Steve corrected “You’re so hurt I didn’t just trust you immediately – but, obviously, it’s wrong that I wasn’t critical of other people, it’s just-” He huffed out a breath, attempting to control his voice “How could I know, then? You were a stranger to me, then, the whole world was-”

“And after that?” Tony demanded “What, you’re saying I was always a stranger to you, that you could never apologise to me, because I was, what, always just another inscrutable future person-”

“No, of course not.” Steve cut him off, exasperated. “I’m saying…”

“I tried to reach out to you so many times” Tony informed him, before he could finish “I tried talking to you, I tried giving you space, I built the whole compound to try and make you comfortable, I tried – everything. And if you really still came away thinking, after all that, that you couldn’t talk to me, that you couldn’t be confused or wrong in front of me… then I don’t think that is on me, or anyone
“Do I want to get over myself?” Steve challenged, stopping Tony in his tracks “You’re the one who thinks my every mistake says something about how I feel about you. Like I don’t really make mistakes, like everything I do must be deliberate and meaningful and represent the very concept of justice – like if I cared about someone, obviously I would do everything perfectly. Like I just magically can. You never think that maybe I just didn’t know it, got it wrong, lost my temper with someone else entirely. Like maybe it wasn’t always about you.” He saw Tony recoil, and raced to carry on before Tony interrupt him. “You were irresponsible for the first thirty-five years of your life! You told me about all the times you made mistakes, hurt people you cared about – but it never meant you didn’t care about them. Not even at the time – you told me that. And they forgave you. You got to change - but it’s not like that with me! I am here trying to explain mistakes I made five years ago, I’m still trying to say I’m sorry – and you’re telling me that it’s changed who I am. You’re saying you don’t believe I could be sorry, because it doesn’t fit what you thought you knew” Steve felt a sudden stress headache, right behind his eyes, as he realised his own train of argument had run away from him. “Do you not think that’s an impossible standard? That I-”

“You’re held to an impossible standard!” Tony was outright shouting, now “Seriously? Oh, to be the person who no one believes could possibly be wrong – do you want to try being the person that can’t possibly be right? Oh, no one makes you feel completely comfortable while you apologise – tell you what, why don’t you try apologising, repeatedly, for the things you did without knowing, the things you only tried to do for the best, and having everyone call you a narcissist anyway? Why don’t you try pouring all your resources and time and energy into making the world a better place – actually doing the hard, confusing, conflicting conversations – losing everything over and over again, without everyone calling you a role model or a hero. Why don’t you think about what would happen if you stopped whining about how hard it all is, did it anyway – if you had actually been right about the super soldiers thing – and if, after all of that, everyone had still said it was all about your ego and fucked off!”

“I never said it was about your ego – that was Natasha” Steve reminded him. “I never thought any of that. And I never said you were a narcissist, not after the first week I knew you, I never said any of that stuff-”

“But you acted like it, Steve!” Tony cut in “You treated me like I was always a step behind everyone else, like I could never quite earn the same trust they had, like you were always waiting for me to do a Tony – and I wasn’t even sure what that was! Bruce pulls up a picture of Ulysses Klaue and you give me a dirty look, you throw a tantrum when I approach you about signing the accords and getting Wanda out of the confinement that I never put her in-” Tony had to stop himself to catch his breath. “You told me sometimes my team don’t tell me things about Ultron, because apparently I need to be accountable, then you told me you tore the avengers apart when you signed about the accords, because that wasn’t right – nothing I did was right!” And there was a crack in Tony’s voice then, the very earliest threat of tears, that stopped Steve from leaping in while Tony centred himself again. “And I still don’t get why you thought I wouldn’t help you if you told me! I don’t get why you thought I’d turn you in, why I wouldn’t have helped Bucky if you’d just told me the truth from the start – I went there to help you at the end! I still went to that bunker, after everything – I would always have come! I had always come, before that. But you still didn’t trust me, you still didn’t think
“But it wasn’t all about that!” Steve yelled, totally lost in himself now. “That’s what I mean, that’s what I’m trying to say! It wasn’t because I didn’t think enough of you, it couldn’t be that, I think the world of you-”

“Oh, all evidence to the contrary-”

“No, that’s you taking all evidence to the contrary, and that wasn’t what it was – you want to know why I didn’t tell you everything? So many reasons, Tony. Because I was trying to protect you – and I know-” Steve cut Tony down before the snide look could turn into an interruption “I know you don’t believe that, I know it sounds like an excuse, I know it was completely stupid – that’s why I don’t say it. Why I can’t bare to say it, even though it’s true. Because, yes, I knew I was throwing everything to the wind to help Bucky – I did know that, I’m not saying I didn’t. I know if it was just the super soldiers thing – of course I’d have told you! But I knew I’d have to break laws and take risks and make choices to keep him out of it, things I wouldn’t have done for anyone else, and that’s my choice – I didn’t want you to have to! I swear, that’s true. I swear, the thought of how much it would hurt you to hear about your parents just – stopped my heart, and I just kept picturing scenarios where you asked me why I’d told you that – and I’m not saying that’s it…” Steve exhaled, like he was running out of everything “I’m not saying it wasn’t also that I was, just, desperate for everything to be over, that there weren’t recklessly selfish reasons, that I didn’t… But it wasn’t because I didn’t think enough of you – it could never have been that, any of those times. I didn’t let Thor throttle you – I just shouted at him too late, and honestly, it was mainly because I was expecting you to kick him in the balls… And if you want to know what I was actually thinking when I saw that picture of Klaue – I can tell you exactly what that was about, I remember that one. You said he operated off of the African Coast, and we’d literally just been talking about how he’d been branded, and this was three weeks after you first told me about what they really did to you in Afghanistan, and I just thought – my first thought was that he’d hurt you. That he’d tortured you, or something… and then my very next thought was that it was probably racist of me to think that – because, I know, everyone just expects me to have woken up from nineteen forty-five and just understand all this stuff, but… I just, had three very quick panics over the course of exactly one second before you were just assuming that I thought…”

“Am I supposed to be a mind reader, then?” Tony asked – in a different voice entirely, although Steve was way beyond processing it. He didn’t recognise that Tony was probably about to say something else…

“Am I?” Steve shot back, immediately “I don’t even know what you’re yelling at me for right now. Is it that I didn’t say what I was thinking before – because you seem pretty pissed that I’m saying it now. Staying silent is wrong, saying anything is wrong-”

“No, sometimes you just have to get yelled at, Steve!” Tony was back to shouting again “Just because I don’t immediately fawn and start making you feel better, doesn’t mean the apology was wrong – I have a right to be upset! If you don’t get that, you aren’t sorry, and if you do get that…do you get that, Steve? Do you actually understand why I’m upset, what you did.”

“I-”

“No, Steve, listen” Tony barked. “You just asked if you had to be a mind reader to work out the right thing to say – like that’s how everyone else does it? You think that’s how I did it – the right
answer just, poof, magically into my head? You think I’ve never been yelled at for saying the wrong thing – you think I would’ve given up, except that everyone must’ve accepted everything I said, first time?” He fixed Steve with a challenging look, but didn’t let him answer “What happens, Steve, is you talk to the people who care about you – if you care about them – and if you’re sorry, you accept that they’re angry, and you listen, and you change. But you… You do pretend to be infallible. You never said you were sorry before…” If Tony sounded at all unsure at this stage, Steve missed it “You’re literally here saying that the reason you don’t apologise is that people aren’t nice to you when you do…”

“That isn’t what I’m saying.” Steve answered, his own voice heavy with hurt now.

“Yes it is.” Tony snapped back “And that was always the problem – you were never real with me, no matter what I… You always had this… if I pretend to be perfect, thing, and no matter what I did I could never convince you that you didn’t have to be – that was all in your head. If you just decided you had to be perfect, if you thought you couldn’t say anything wrong… you never talked to me like… this… You never said anything unless you were completely sure it was – you never said anything. You never… You always came to me like Captain America-”

“What, you wanted me to lose my temper?” Steve cut in “This, this is what I mean! What is this now – now I was, what, too perfect, or-”

“I’m just saying I tried!” Tony cried “I did everything so you could talk to me, and-”

“And I still couldn’t, and I’m sorry.” Steve spat “I’m sorry I couldn’t recover for you, I’m sorry I still found it so hard even though you were trying so hard – it wasn’t to spite you, Jesus, you don’t think I wanted to – and it’s not a slight on you that it wasn’t enough, that I’m just that damn broken – it was never what you thought it was!”

“Because you never said-”

“Fine, you want me to say?” Steve outright yelled now, his whole body alive with the sheer force of it “You think it’d be better if I just said what I was thinking, really? Fine – I’m still scared to death of the accords. I watched the rise of Nazi Germany, I sleepwalked through the Hydra occupation of SHIELD, I listened when Bruce told me exactly what Ross is really like – and then he tried to intern Wanda for an accident she couldn’t have prevented, whatever you did to soften that blow, whatever you think of her – and I know you think it’s just because I’m arrogant, that I don’t want to answer to anyone, but it isn’t! It’s just – I can’t just answer to just anyone, and I still don’t understand everything anyway-”

“But this was never about the accords-”

“And I still love Bucky!” Steve shouted, “And that doesn’t mean I don’t just ache for the pain that the Winter Soldier and Hydra caused you, and God I wish I could just listen to that, I wish I could listen to you hate Bucky and not care that it’s irrational, because I know you’re entitled to that but – that’s my best friend!” Steve’s voice was wet with tears now, too. “Even before he was all I had left, even before he was the only person on earth who remembered when we were kids – that’s Bucky. Like Pepper, or Rhodey, or Peter, or any of the people you’d move heaven and earth to protect – that’s all it was. I don’t know what anyone else made of it, but, I just, I can’t-”

“But I never-“
“-go along with your pain even thought I feel it” Steve just carried on, not registering Tony’s intervention “I know how much Hydra hurt you, but I can’t pretend they didn’t hurt him too, I can’t not feel all the things they did to him – and are you honestly telling me that this is helping? Or are you about to yell at me for not getting it—”

“This might have helped before though, mightn’t it?” Tony cut in more forcefully now. “And, yeah, we’d have probably argued, and we’d probably both have said things we regretted or changed our minds over – and what, you didn’t do that because you thought it’d be hard? And what, now I have to feel sorry for you for that?” Tony sounded more bitter as he went along. “You know what, Steve? I don’t hate Bucky either. I did mean it when I said I was sorry for going after both of you in that bunker – I don’t mind saying I snapped, that I’m sorry, that I changed my mind. And you know what, I did something about it – I actually made Bucky’s case, in front of Ross.”

Even at the height of his temper, Steve’s body registered a shock at that.

“You – wait, you did what?”

“Well, I made the case that there should be mind control provisions, and I made sure that they’d apply to Barnes – if he decides he wants to re-enter society, and if he’s not above the legal proceedings as a fucking concept, at least he has a defence…” A little caution had crept into Tony’s voice, as though he was as wrongfooted by where the conversation had gone as Steve was.

“When were you going to mention that?” Steve demanded, and the defiant mask was back on Tony’s face immediately.

“I don’t have to tell you anything.” Tony reminded him “You’re not his fucking legal counsel, and we’re not friends – and you don’t get to tell me shit about keeping secrets anyway.”

Steve felt himself swallow, hard. There was a shiny new reaction in his head, entirely separate from everything else that was going on.

Tony gave Bucky a legal defence?

...Tony doesn’t hate Bucky?

His response to that just didn’t fit. He didn’t know how to be moved or grateful or overwhelmed right now, not without stopping everything else he was being. And he hadn’t stopped being everything else.

Suddenly, Steve wasn’t sure what he was.
But it wasn’t the same insecurity he’d been running from for so many years now. It wasn’t being unsure what he was supposed to be. It didn’t occur to Steve that he couldn’t be angry and grateful and hurt and moved and confused and Captain America all at once – because he was. He didn’t know what to call his reaction, he couldn’t label it or explain it… But he had it anyway.

He just kept talking.

“…You have to be a mind reader?” Steve challenged, his voice high and slightly breathless.

“Are you really going to go after me for not keeping you updated with that?” Tony demanded, and Steve answered immediately.

“No.”

“No?” Tony stuttered just slightly at Steve’s change of tone.

“No, that’s not what I mean. I don’t mean this thing with Bucky, I mean this thing you do. I mean you pretending to be someone else – I mean you pretending to be selfish or irresponsible or a narcissist-”

“That was still Natasha.” Tony cut in, with more passion than he had so far in the conversation-

More defensive when Steve was about to say something nice than when he’d been arguing with him.

That’s what Steve meant, and suddenly Steve knew it. He knew exactly what he was trying to say, and for once, he didn’t stop to talk himself out of it.

“No, I’m talking about when you do it. I’m talking about how you leap in with reminders of your flaws and your past mistakes when no one else was talking about it. I’m talking about how you only start acting like a cocky asshole when you think someone else might say something nice. I’m talking about how you do shit like that and never fucking mention it – you designed the whole compound to make me comfortable, did you? When were you going to mention that, hm? All those times you reached out to me – all those times you couldn’t sleep you mean? All those times you just happened to order too much take out, or just happened to be on my floor – all those times you mean?”

“I-”

“Oh, it’s alright Tony – I’m not trying to be nice about you, don’t fucking panic. You can relax, I am calling you out – this is me saying that you spent all your time not being real. Did you expect me to just get all that, or were you trying to make me think you didn’t really care all that much?”

“What the fuck- okay… fine, so I didn’t outright knock on your door and say ‘hello stranger, I’ve
cleared my evening for you’ – *because I didn’t think that would help…* And… okay, maybe I could’ve… maybe I didn’t realise how much I take for granted, maybe I *thought* that was clearer than it was… But that doesn’t mean I was acting like I *didn’t* care – that *was* me acting like I cared, and you *did* get it, didn’t you? You *did* know I was reaching out, and you didn’t…”

“I *didn’t* know you were reaching out, not at the time.” Steve informed him “I thought you *might* have been reaching out, you *might* really have ordered too much take out, you *might* be giving me the universally acknowledged 21st Century signal for Stop Talking To Me, like ‘do you want a cup of coffee’ apparently became another way of asking for sex and *its complicated* is a relationship status everyone understands… and everyone is supposed to know these things… how the fuck did I *know* that’s what that meant, just because I’ve figured it out now?”

“I thought-”

“And I don’t buy this ‘I thought that was clearer’ thing – you were *pretending* to be an asshole. You *do* that, you’re the only person I’ve ever met who’s trying to look *worse* than they are. And Christ, God help me if I ever *was* trying to be nice to you.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“It means you always made that so hard, Tony – especially for me. Specifically for me.” Steve told him accusatorily. “If I ever tried to give you a compliment, you’d get defensive and snippy and make some joke at my expense, and I never knew if I’d just committed some awful social crime. If I said I was worried about you, you called me bossy and told me to mind my own business. If I tried to do something nice for you, you never accepted it. You make it so easy for everyone else, you know how to talk to the press and politicians and Hank Pym, how to put them at ease and help them to talk-”

“Because I’m not being real with *them!*” Tony all but screamed, with a heat that seemed to have flared from nowhere. “Because *that’s* the act, that’s the job, that’s what I do when I’m on. The mess you had to deal with? That’s *me*. Being insecure, not knowing how to take a compliment, being self-destructive and defensive, that’s *me*! I *did* show you that – and I’m sorry if you felt short changed because you didn’t get the full performance.”

“That is *not* what I’m saying.” Steve spoke over him, his voice dark and authoritative now. For the first time since Tony came in the room, he managed to move – he *didn’t* realise he was moving, actually, subconsciously stepping closer to Tony to tell him “This is me telling you I loved you anyway. I saw *all* of that, and I still loved you, and I’m sorry for how wrong I got it, but I never stopped trying, no matter how hard you made it-”

“How hard *I* made it?” Tony squeaked, sounding almost panicked now “You- Seriously, you’re going to stand there and say – after everything you did to me, this is about how hard *I* made it to be nice to me?”

“No, Tony, this is me trying to say I’m *sorry*” Steve exhaled, “This is me trying to say that I *tried*, that I *care* – and I understand why you hate me, and I’m not expecting you to forgive me, and I don’t know what the fuck I’m expecting you to do with this information either – I don’t know what to do. And I’m *sorry* I don’t know what to do, I’m sorry I’m not better at this…”

“You can’t just say you’re not good at this.” Tony told him, bitterly. “You can’t just- You haven’t
even… Do you have any idea how much you hurt me? Do you even care~”

“Yes Tony I care!” Steve implored “I don’t know how to tell you I care~”

“If Bucky was in trouble, would you care?” Tony taunted, a nasty edge on his voice that hadn’t been there before.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake Tony.” Steve hissed, jerking his head away angrily. Then he looked right back at Tony “Seriously, is that my penance, then? I must sacrifice my childhood friend – my abused and tortured childhood friend. You want me to prove my loyalty, is that it?”

“That was never it!” Tony spat, “You never had to choose between us – I would’ve helped you both! But you chose him anyway. I don’t care what it was you thought you could ruin my whole life over~”

“But I didn’t choose that!” Steve shouted, stepping closer still “I never thought I would ruin your life, and if I had thought that, I wouldn’t have done it~”

“Bullshit~”

“I wouldn’t.” Steve lowered his voice then, and spoke with such burning intensity that Tony actually shut up. “I swear to God, if I had to choose between you and Bucky… I couldn’t. And you have no idea what it means when I say that… and why would you care – But I swear to you, if I’d thought for a second that any of this would happen, I wouldn’t have done it. I couldn’t have. I thought I was choosing between listening to Bucky, or handing him over to the people who’d already triggered him once – I didn’t think your life would be ruined one way or the other. I thought I’d stop an army of super soldiers, and then I’d explain everything and just hope you understood. And yeah, I thought there was a chance I’d lose you – but I didn’t think you’d be hurt by that. I knew I’d be hurt by that, I was so scared of it happening, that was the biggest thing I could possibly have put on the line for someone I cared about. But I never would have chosen to hurt you. Hurting you was the only thing that was ever worse than losing you.” Steve took another subtle step closer, his eyes locked on Tony’s now “I never thought anyone else would turn up to help me, I never thought Natasha would– but when they did, I still thought I had an emergency to deal with, I still thought it would all be okay once I fixed everything – and I knew that was stupid and arrogant, but it wasn’t me not choosing you.” He took another step closer. “And, for what it’s worth, if it had been the other way around – if Bucky had been the head of SHIELD, and you’d needed me… yeah, I’d have lied to him, and just hoped he understood. I wouldn’t have destroyed his life either – but I really didn’t think I was destroying yours.”

“You lied to me about my parents, you lied to me about looking for Bucky…” Tony whispered, his voice getting quieter as he spoke. Somewhere, Steve vaguely registered how close they were standing now – Tony backed right up to the counter by now, Steve standing maybe a foot away.

“And I am so, so sorry for that~”

“You sent me a stupid fucking letter and a phone you never rang~”

“I know.” Steve winced, his voice full of shame and regret “I just… I didn’t tell you about your parents because I didn’t want to lose you. That was most of it, there I said it.” He sighed. “Because I love you, because you were all I had, because you were the only person I could talk to, because I
knew how hurt you’d be and I knew I wouldn’t be able to… God, if it hadn’t been Bucky…”

Oh God…

“You’re right.” Steve nodded, sadly “If some unknown assassin had killed your parents, I would have told you, even though I’d have still hurt so much for you – I would have told you, because I would have known how to. And it was Bucky, so I didn’t – because I didn’t know what I’d say if you got angry at him, because I knew you’d need someone to just take your side and I couldn’t… because I thought I’d lose you, that was all…”

Steve was realising all of this as he spoke. He was realising a lot of things.

“I know I’m never going to be… enough, for you” He carried on, dropping his eyes. He felt Tony take a sharp breath, and suddenly he just had to say this. He had to get this out before Tony could interrupt him – this was as close to ‘the words’ as he was ever going to get “I know I can’t keep up, I know that you are… I know you’re unique, more than special, and I know I’ll never have the words to tell you, and I’ll never be able to do that … that thing I’m not explaining right even now – I know you’d find the words right now, and I know you deserve someone who could say them back. I know it’s not your fault that I’m just not good at this, or whatever I said – I’m just sorry I’m not. I…was just trying to hold on to something I wanted, something I…” He glanced up again – had he taken another step closer? “You are… spectacular, so far out of my league, but I wanted you anyway. You made me feel safe when everything was falling apart, you made me feel happy when I never thought I would, and I just wanted to hold on to that, and that was all I thought, and I’m sorry.”

Tony was right there now, those impossible eyes looking up at him from under those thick dark lashes, those beautiful lips parted just so… Steve wanted so much to kiss him that it hurt. It hurt even before he remembered just how much he couldn’t kiss Tony. The purity and intensity of that desire was enough.

But he couldn’t. He’d never be able to… He’d never see Tony again, after all of this was done with…

And then he saw Tony give his head a little shake, like he was bringing himself to his senses.

“Too late.” He muttered, as he pushed past Steve and out of the room at what was nearly a run.
Chapter 14

Tony left the room without thinking.

At all.

He floated along the corridor on a cloud of dazed numbness, propelled forward by some invisible force. He didn’t even know that he was walking or how he was walking or where he was walking to. The sound of his own heartbeat surrounded him, like he could see it, like that might have been what was clouding the edges of his vision. And then, after some amount of time walking in some direction to some part of the palace he didn’t recognise, he just heard himself think

_You left your coffee there._

Why that? Where had _that_ come from? But, with that, the awful avalanche of thoughts began. Tony’s step stuttered as he remembered _where_ he’d left his coffee, and _why_ he couldn’t go back for it-

_What have I just done?_

And for a few bright, shiny seconds of terror, Tony really couldn’t find the answer. As in, there was literally _nothing_ there. In the haze of his temper, and the shock of the aftermath, he hadn’t taken it in – a thought that grew more horrifying with every second he that tried to find it. And there was no little voice in his head asking him why it mattered, there were no thoughts wasted on why he cared. Suddenly, he just really needed to know what he’d done, and he _couldn’t_. He couldn’t make himself remember any of it.

But he knew how it made him _feel._

He knew he suddenly _felt_ like he’d made a terrible mistake. Or, maybe, as though he’d been wrong footed, caught out, ambushed…

_I’m sorry I couldn’t recover for you, I’m sorry I still found it so hard even though you were trying so hard – it wasn’t to spite you. Jesus, you don’t think I wanted to – and it’s not a slight on you that it wasn’t enough, that I’m just that damn broken –_
It came back to him without context, with no accompanying thoughts, with no obvious reason it should be *that* that Tony remembered first. Just those few sentences, and a deep, visceral pain.

*Oh, God, Steve-*

And then there was a hot, defensive spike that jolted him upright. An instinct; pure self-preservation. Telling himself he should still be angry, before he came up with a reason –

Although, he *did* have reasons, didn’t he?

God, this *felt* so typical. Two years of carefully considered, perfectly catalogued reasons to be angry at Steve, a long list of wrongs that Steve had done him, and consequences Tony had to shoulder – and now he felt bad, again? Jesus, why was he so fucking *pathetic*. How had Steve done this? What had Steve even *said*?

*You have no idea how ridiculous the future is! How much you take for granted. You laugh at my quaint little assumptions and then you can’t believe I didn’t assume other things, you don’t even know –* I didn’t even know what was *normal*, I didn’t even have anyone I could *ask*.

-Well, that certainly *felt* achingly awful. Tony felt a pang of sympathy so intense he actually went to put his arms around himself. But… *did* that matter, really? Did it change any of the things Steve had done to him, any of the issues in their relationship…? And, anyway, it wasn’t as though Tony hadn’t thought of that, before. And maybe he hadn’t realised…maybe it had been…but he’d *tried*. He really *had* put as much as he had in him into making it better for Steve-

*I’m sorry I couldn’t recover for you*

- *Had* Tony blamed Steve for that? He wanted so much to convince himself he hadn’t…

But Tony had never been very good at this. The impulse to defend himself was the same one that everyone is born with – but assuming the guilt was hardwired through experience, and specific to him. Where there was a conflict, it was usually the latter that won out. Already, this *felt* like some ominous revelation. This wordless awareness that everything was shifting right in front of his eyes, the sudden fear that he *could* be wrong about anything… And he *was* usually wrong about everything, everyone always said so… It would be so easy to convince himself he’d been the bad guy, all along…
But, no, the injury Steve had done him was just too deep to be that easily dismissed, even if it was in Tony’s nature. The arguments in Tony’s favour were too familiar to him now, like song lyrics that had wormed their way into his head and looped until they lost all meaning.

He remembered every line of that patronising, unapologetic letter. He remembered every line that should have been there, but wasn’t. He remembered all the nights he’d sat there arguing with it, explaining to no one that every sentence was offensive or insincere or just plain wrong.

He remembered every meeting he’d suffered through since Steve left. Every fight with Ross – half of which were caused by Steve, all of which Steve had left Tony to deal with on his own.

He’d pictured that moment in the bunker so many times… *did you know?* He could still see Steve’s face, cold and unfeeling-

Was it though? *Maybe I did just presume I knew what he was thinking…*

Did it matter? Steve still *did* know, about his parents – he had still tried to lie, even in that bunker, he’d still tried to tell Tony *I didn’t know it was him…*

*But what if he was just panicking, what if he just got it wrong and said a stupid thing…*  

Like I do, sometimes…

It was that last thought that got him. Suddenly, all attempts to work out what Steve had been thinking in Siberia were forgotten. Tony was immediately and totally distracted by the idea that Steve was anything like him.

By the realisation that it should come as a shock.

*You’re the one who thinks my every mistake says something about how I feel about you. Like I don’t really make mistakes, like everything I do must be deliberate and meaningful and represent the very concept of justice – like if I cared about someone, obviously I would do everything perfectly. Like I just magically can. You never think that maybe I just didn’t know it, got it wrong, lost my temper with someone else entirely.*
And there was something horribly true in there somewhere.

Tony knew it before he thought about it. He felt it. Like a moment of enlightenment. He just understood that, all this time, he’d been thinking of who Steve was. Who Steve had said he was, and who Tony thought he was, and who he’d turned out to be. As though Steve was a … thing. A constant concept, a brand… Tony had never really thought about it as a thousand different choices that Steve had to make. Whatever else had been said, whatever else Tony might have been right about, Steve was right about that.

And Tony really hadn’t known, until this moment.

And then, out of nowhere, Tony remembered Steve talking to Howard. Why, you think that’s your job? That tiny fragment of conversation Tony had overheard before the door swung shut. He remembered how surprised he’d been at Steve’s tone, at his choice of words. Like he’d caught a glimpse of a different Steve… Like a conflicting concept couldn’t exist as part his Steve, or something...

What if I did get Steve all wrong?

And then there was a twinge in his chest of a completely different kind. Not the standard human instinct to defend himself, or the well-worn arguments he’d committed to memory. This latest wild swing in his emotions came from somewhere deeper. If this had been about anything else – if this had been anyone else – he probably would have folded already. He probably would have fallen into the familiar pattern, looking for his own mistakes, thinking of how he could have acted differently, eventually hating himself for everything and expecting everyone to feel the same.

But Steve had hurt him so much.

Steve had shattered his heart into a million tiny pieces, slowly and deliberately, over the course of days. Steve left him. Steve just dropped his shield and left Tony with all the trouble he’d caused, and total responsibility for everything-

And a terrible, unbearable pain.

An unending, all-consuming pain that Tony had felt in every part of himself, that had bled into everything he tried to think or do or feel. It had taken him months, years, to learn to live with it. He’d
done everything he could think of to try and get over it. He couldn’t get over it. He hadn’t been able to then, and he couldn’t now, not just like that.

And that hurt was enough to keep him thinking about this. It was enough to stop him simply assuming culpability, from thinking this muddle of feelings into the same old story.

Why do you believe any of that?

Why did he believe that Steve had just been panicked and lost and well intentioned? If Steve wanted Tony to see him as another fallible human being, then fine – why couldn’t Steve just have been selfish and stupid and stubborn, then? It’s not like Steve would ever say that – because Steve was arrogant, and bossy, and he did suck at apologising, however he tried to twist that now. Steve was good at twisting things. We shouldn’t question our superiors, we have to question our superiors, we have to be accountable, we have to resist regulation, we have to tell our team mates everything, we have to keep certain things secret – Steve could turn anything into the moral thing. And before he knew it Tony felt like total shit for ever thinking what Steve himself thought last week-

And why did it matter if Steve was scared? Tony had been scared plenty of times, since long before he was Iron Man, and yeah, he’d made mistakes – he’d been totally irresponsible for the first thirty five years of his life, fine – but he’d never done anything like that, had he? Tony knew, even when he was at his reckless, adolescent worst, he couldn’t have listened to Pepper talk about her dead parents and kept the truth from her. He couldn’t have just stood there silently while Rhodey watched a tape like that, not even moving, not even looking that sad…

Why should Tony suddenly rethink everything he’d lived through the first-time round? Just let Steve waltz back into his life and simply inform Tony that, no, that wasn’t how it had happened – Tony had been there! And now Steve wanted to tell him that what he’d seen with his own eyes wasn’t real-

And if Tony didn’t listen, wasn’t he doing to Steve what he’d accused Steve of doing to him?

Tony always thought Steve had an impression of him, that Steve had decided what he thought of Tony and found his evidence after the fact. Tony had always felt aggrieved that Steve never seemed to give him the benefit of the doubt, that he jumped to all the wrong conclusions, that he always seemed to know what Tony was thinking…

Was this what that felt like?
Was refusing to reconsider it the very thing he’d been so annoyed at Steve for, all this time?

But…Steve had lied to him, for years. Steve had been a total hypocrite when he called Tony out for hiding the Ultron Project. Those things had happened, they were objective facts-

Oh, and Steve had lied about his dad being back.

Suddenly, Tony couldn’t believe he’d forgotten that. The fact that, for all his heartfelt apologies, Steve was still fucking doing it. He saw the error of his ways, did he? He was so sorry for lying to Tony – since when, the day before yesterday? And Steve wouldn’t even have told him then – Bruce made him!

Damn, Tony couldn’t believe he’d missed that point.

He wished he could go back and say that-

Why? You’re on the verge of a breakdown because you had that stupid conversation – why would you want to have another one?

And where had that objective little voice been for the last hour, hm?

And, the fact was, Tony did want to have another fight. Somehow, Tony was thrilled by the fight he’d just had, delighted it had happened, still high on the adrenaline and emotion of it – even the bad emotions. He couldn’t work out why he felt that way, or how he could possibly feel all that while he was also feeling so awful, but there it was. He wanted to do it again.

But he knew he couldn’t.

Now that the initial, bodily reaction was beginning to wane, and his brain was beginning to process actual thought again, it was obvious why it would be a bad idea to talk to Steve again right now. Whatever else Tony decided to do, later, that one was a gimme. Tony hadn’t even remembered everything he’d just said, much less worked out what it meant. He couldn’t work out which reality he was standing in, at the moment.
Had he been exactly as wronged as he’d felt for the last two years? Was he about to let Steve walk all over him, again? About to run right back to a toxic, one sided relationship with the man that broke him, after one insincere, manipulative conversation? Was Tony just falling for it all over again, as quickly as that?

Or, had Tony made all the same mistakes he’d accused Steve of? Had he misjudged Steve, assumed his motivations, held him to a different standard to everyone else? What if Steve had really just been frightened and lost, all this time, what if he was still drowning in a trauma that Tony had never understood. Was he just annoyed at Steve because he wanted Steve to be ‘fixed’? Was he just angry that Steve didn’t love him-

Wait.

Hang on.

Did Steve say he loved me?

And, okay, he knew Steve wouldn’t have meant that, but-

Steve had said he loved him. More than once.

You are… spectacular, so far out of my league, but I wanted you anyway-

Tony stopped his brain, dead.

No. You can’t do that

That wasn’t the rage talking, or the fear, or an internal guidance counsellor. That voice was just him. That was the most core instinct that Tony had, the instinct that had been there for as long as he could remember, the instinct that he’d been familiar with for so long that he’d never thought to name it. Never had to think about it at all, really. Like people don’t think about gravity, because it’s just there.

He just knew he couldn’t let himself think about that. He couldn’t let himself believe, even for a second… he couldn’t bare to hope…
This one wasn’t about Steve. This was deeper than Steve and more than Steve and from before Steve. This was about Tony. Tony had never been afraid to love people. Tony had given his love to countless people, sometimes to people he knew didn’t deserve it – but always on the understanding that people wouldn’t really love him back. Not in that genuine, equal, unconditional way that he’d never even fully imagined, because imagining was too much like hoping. And not hoping, not expecting it, was his defence. His protection against the disappointment and humiliation that must surely follow. Tony had always known that believing you were loved, rather than loving, was what made you vulnerable.

This wasn’t something he was waiting to process. He wasn’t expecting to work this out.

He just couldn’t.

In fact, he should probably stop thinking about any of this, for the time being.

He needed time to let this… breathe. He had to let his heart slow down, let his brain catch up, before he thought about any of this.

He’d go back to saving the universe. At least until he felt up to thinking about more complicated things.

Loki had maintained a lifeless stillness for so long that it was almost eerie when he moved.

He had only said a handful of words since they’d been dragged aboard this damned ship. He’d told Thor where they were, as they arrived at each of the check points. Perhaps the millionth time that Thor had begged him, how, Loki had simply said ‘We’re not in a universe of space anymore. This is a universe of time’. Even then, he’d maintained his catatonic countenance, looking right through Thor as he said it. He’d remained entirely passive as Thor expressed his frustration at that response, he’d refused all pleas for further details. Never once had his eyes moved from the middle distance.

And then, suddenly, his face seemed to melt back into his own, the blank expression animated with thought as he sat forward to speak.
After so long staring at Loki’s unfeeling features, it felt a bit like watching him come back to life. For just a second Thor was more moved than furious, immediately and overwhelmingly glad not to be so alone out here in the dark-

Just for a second. Then he was back to being furious again.

“We’re at the edge of the Cassady System now-” Loki began, in an entirely different voice to the one he’d been using for the last few days. But Thor had already started to react.

“What the hell are you playing at?” He boomed, and Loki shot him a sardonic look.

“A little louder, please, I don’t know if they heard you at the back of the ship.”

“Well, what are you playing at?” Thor hissed, quieter now. “And why haven’t you said-”

“Because you’re exactly this subtle” Loki cut in, knowingly. Thor took a moment to consider the significance of that answer.

“So, you are planning something you don’t want Thanos to discover?” He clarified, feeling a little swell of relief, or…pride, even, as he realised that Loki really wasn’t on Thanos’ side. Loki just rolled his eyes. And then there was a cooling inside Thor, a sinking realisation “And… you aren’t worried what he’ll discover, now”. Thor felt it when Loki sighed, defeated.

“It probably doesn’t matter, now.” Loki confirmed, still sounding slightly sarcastic even as he sounded so sad. “The next stop is where Thanos thinks we’re going. When we get there…” But obviously, Loki didn’t have to finish.

The was a silence of a different kind, for a moment.

“The Avengers are looking for us” Thor spoke eventually, his voice defiant. Subconsciously, he braced for a derisory comment from Loki – but it didn’t come. Loki just dropped his eyes and bit his bottom lip, like maybe even he dared to hope that something would come out of those garbled phone calls. “They found Valkyrie, they’ve worked out this much.” There was a beat before Loki answered him.

“I told Valkyrie to look for Tony Stark, if she couldn’t find Bruce.”

“Why Tony Stark?” Thor frowned.

“I mean, I told her to find the Avengers.” He clarified. “Stark was just the first one I thought of.”

And, at first, Thor took it as an attack on his friends. A challenge. Actually, they weren’t good enough to find Valkyrie, I sent her to them… and then he realised – Loki had sent Valkyrie to them. To the Avengers. This wasn’t Loki dismissing his faith in them; it was Loki explaining that he shared
it, at least a little bit.

“Did you get her to earth by copying Stephen Strange?” Thor guessed, after another heavy pause. By now, really, he was just talking. Because, after all these days of isolation and all these years of acrimony, here at the possible end of his life, he could. Because he’d been lost and alone, and here was the chance to be lost with someone else. If he would never see the outside of this cell again, then what else mattered? Now, for the first time in a long time, Loki really was just his brother.

And, as there was nothing else to do right now, Thor might as well take the opportunity to tease him – that always made him feel a bit better.

He saw Loki flinch, petulantly, and knew he’d been right.

“It’s a mirror spell” Loki confirmed, begrudgingly. “And I used it to copy his magic because I happened to know he’d recently cast a spell that landed us on earth – that’s all.”

“Couldn’t use your own, then?” Thor mocked.

“Well, we certainly couldn’t use yours” Loki shot back.

“I’m not the one masquerading as a master of the dark arts-”

“Well, my mastery of magic is innate.” Loki responded snippily. “And it’s actual power that got that spell to work… although I admit I had better things to do than study the individual spells that you need for these things…”

“He’s better read than you are, you mean?”

“Better read and far less powerful” Loki conceded, loftily. “The difference is, if I wanted to waste my life reading books, I could transport people across space without him. Whereas he could study for the next one thousand years – he’d never be able to transport a person that far, without my input.”

Thor felt a smile tug at the corner of his mouth. He knew Loki so well. And Loki knew him, in a way that no one else ever would. There was something pure about that, here at the end.

“So you cast a mirror spell on Valkyrie, so that she could copy one of Strange’s portals?”

“Well, as she didn’t wake up in Norway, I think she might have copied Heimdall’s in the end.” Loki mused. Thor felt a little stab of pain, at hearing his dead friends name… one of many injuries he was ignoring, for the time being.

“So that she could find the Avengers…”

“Mainly, so that she could get the Tesseract away from here.” Loki corrected, defensively. “But… well, you can but hope, I suppose.”
“And are we really jumping on celestial lilypads?” Thor went on, and Loki burst out laughing.
“What?”
“I suppose they might be.” Loki smiled “They might be what the legends are based on, at least.”
“So what are they really?”
“It’s not really what they are, it’s what the rest of it is, really.” Loki sighed, and before Thor’s baffled look could turn into a frustrated outburst, went on “Actually, the… lily pads, the places that we stop, are just that – places that we stop. Nothing special about the Alison Gateway or the Scarlett System really, except that they’re places that intersect with another reality.”

“Another reality?”
“The bit we’re travelling though when we’re not….” But Loki just trailed off, as though he was boring himself.
“Well?” Thor prompted.
“…Does it really matter?” Loki demanded “As it would take me longer to explain all this to you than we probably have left to live. The point is, it got us as far away from everything as possible, as fast as I could. The point is, for reasons you wouldn’t understand, Thanos can’t use them to go back the way he came. That was the point.”

Thor took a moment to wonder if it did matter. If, maybe, it was information that would help the Avengers find them, or defeat Thanos. If they had to tell someone, before they both died.

“And how do you know about it?” He demanded, perhaps a little annoyed that Loki assumed he wouldn’t understand. Loki looked away from him before he answered, quietly.

“The Frost Giants know more about it.”

Thor felt that, for himself and for Loki. An injury they’d both been ignoring for far too long. A wound that had been allowed to fester and grow into all sorts of other problems, pains and weaknesses they’d both been compensating for rather than fixing. If they made it out of this alive, Thor swore he would address that one.

“Why are you doing this?” He asked outright, more softly. Loki huffed out a little breath.

“Why do anything?”

“That’s not an answer.”

“I’m not being flippant” Loki met his eye again. “Everyone has their own answer to that question. People do things for power. People do things for material gain. People do things for love. But none of that will matter, for me or anyone else, if Thanos wins. Anything I want to do, for any reason, is compromised by that. If you understand why I’d do anything, you understand why I had to do this first. There is nothing else.”
Thor just looked at him for a moment.

“You have a real gift for making even heroic acts seem selfish.” He told him, eventually. Loki smiled thinly.

“You have a real gift for making even compliments sound like insults.”

And, suddenly, Thor really wanted to live through this.

He was as surprised as anyone to think that he hadn’t already, that he could be more desperate to find an answer than he had been. But here was an impulse of a different kind. More than the simple survival instinct that all the Avengers had taught themselves to overcome. Different to any duty he felt to stop Thanos. A real, personal reason to want to live, something he’d not given himself the time to feel while there were higher callings to contend with. But now…

He took the phone out of his pocket.

“You’ll get that confiscated” Loki warned, like a schoolboy talking about contraband in the dorm rooms.

“Well, as you say, it probably doesn’t matter now.” Thor told him, as he tried to work out the redial function. There was a tense pause as he optimistically pressed a button and waited.

A dial tone.

“And, as you say, we can but hope.”

Steve was still just staring at the space where Tony had been standing.

He was also in a state of shock, although he hadn’t recognised it the way Tony had. He hadn’t tried to remember the argument yet, he’d not attempted to processed anything he’d just said-
But one thought was clear in his head, even then. Before he realised that he couldn’t find any words of his own, Tony’s words were right there, in perfect clarity.

No, sometimes you just have to get yelled at, Steve! Just because I don’t immediately fawn and start making you feel better, doesn’t mean the apology was wrong.

Steve didn’t need words to know that Tony was right about that one.

More than just right.

Somehow, Steve just understood that it had always been… that. He hadn’t told Tony the truth about his parents because he was worried that Tony would be angry or upset or leave him. He hadn’t told Tony the truth about Zemo because he was overwhelmed by what was happening and he felt trapped by what he’d already done. He hadn’t said any of the things he should have said to Tony, because he hadn’t known how Tony would react, and that made him uncomfortable-

When you boiled that right down, it was just that he hadn’t done the right thing because it would have been hard. Because it had been easier to lie, to hide, to lash out. Because doing the right thing might have hurt him, and he hadn’t wanted it to.

And he had spent so long thinking about why all that was so hard for him. Why everything scared him, why he was more lost than anyone else, why he didn’t know as much as everyone else. Thinking that if he could just stop being scared, and lost, and ignorant – if he could pretend he wasn’t, even – then maybe it wouldn’t be so hard-

But that had never been the point, had it?

The point had always been that he had to do it anyway. That ‘it was easier’ just wasn’t a reason to do the wrong thing. And now that he saw that, it seemed so painfully, blindingly obvious… And Tony had so obviously seen it, had tried so hard to explain it, so many times…

Tony had lived it. Tony had shown him, and Steve had never even seen…

You think that’s how I did it – the right answer just, poof, magically into my head? You think I’ve never been yelled at for saying the wrong thing – you think I would’ve given up, except that everyone must’ve accepted everything I said, first time?
And Steve suddenly realised – yeah, he had thought that.

Well, no, he’d not thought that. When he laid it out like this, it was so clearly ridiculous. But…he’d never thought about any of this at all, not really. He saw that now. If he’d ever taken the time to think about the apologies Tony had made, or the things Tony did to make amends, or…. Any of the thousands of things that threatened to break the dam of his shock and fill his head and drown him… of course he would have known. But he hadn’t. He’d just assumed, just felt, like it was alright for Tony. He’d never once stopped to think about Tony being embarrassed, or unsure of what he was saying, or worried about a reaction – because, what, Tony didn’t have those emotions? Because he hadn’t looked embarrassed or unsure or worried, by the time Steve knew him? It hadn’t occurred to him that Tony was pretending to be brave – Steve had only just worked out, as he was saying it, that Tony spent all his time pretending to be an asshole… what if Tony had just been hiding how much he wanted someone to stand up for him? What if the only reason Tony never let anyone do it for him was that no one ever had – oh God, it was so obviously that way around… And Steve had spent so long trying to make sense of what he saw, that he never stopped to think about what he didn’t see. So long trying to make Tony fit what he thought he knew-

Had he just told Tony off for doing that to him?

…He still couldn’t remember exactly what he’d just said. How much of it he’d only thought, how much of it he was just thinking of now…

But it was in there, wasn’t it? The resentment that everything was easier for Tony, when, obviously, Tony had just been better at it. The anger that Tony had boiled him down to a brand, while the whole time Steve had been thinking of him as the ‘Man That Didn’t Mind’… If he hadn’t said it, it was only because he hadn’t got to it…

Although he thought he probably had said it...

He knew he’d said all the wrong things, anyway. He’d always been saying all the wrong things, and not because he’d been out of his time or out of his depth or out of his mind with worry – because he’d always been talking about the wrong thing completely.

And Steve had remained determinedly, maddeningly oblivious – right up until now. Steve had even wasted these last two days on the wrong thing entirely, while Tony must’ve felt like he was banging his head against a brick wall…
What happens, Steve, is you talk to the people who care about you – if you care about them – and if you’re sorry, you accept that they’re angry, and you listen, and you change-

Well….obviously.

But Steve really had stopped doing that – and, now that he’d realised it didn’t matter why he’d stopped doing that, it was suddenly so much clearer. Because the world had been pulled out from under his feet, and it’d stopped being natural. He’d had to think about everything he was doing, where he’d taken it for granted, before. And maybe it was unfair that he alone had to put that much effort into it – but it still came down to not doing it because it was hard. Because it was easier to build a character, this hide behind it, to run from the parts of him that didn’t fit-

Parts of him that had fit just fine, before.

Because Steve really had known all this, once. Steve had understood that you talk to the people who care about you and if you’re sorry, you accept that they’re angry, and you listen, and you change – he just did all that, when he was a skinny kid from Brooklyn. He tried his best, and occasionally he screwed it up, and he apologised and it never occurred to him that he was doing anything at all. Just being, just doing-

Jesus, maybe it never even had to be that hard.

And Steve still had no idea what Captain America would do about this situation. He didn’t know how he’d spun this debacle into something Captain America would have done in the first place. But he wasn’t doing that now. Maybe it was the shock, or maybe he was still in that space he’d stepped into during the fight, or maybe, this time, it really was a genuine revelation-

But he was still just Steve.

And Steve would never have asked himself what he would have done, before. He may have wondered what to do, like people do, but that wasn’t the same thing. He realised that now. Steve would’ve just… listened, and thought, and obviously he’d have realised…

He did realise…

He had to find Tony.
Chapter 15

Tony thought he was going back to the lab.

Well, he wasn’t really thinking at all, still – but he assumed that’s where his feet would take him, on the vague instruction of ‘going back to work’.

It was only as he recognised the route to Rhodey’s make-shift office that he realised – yes, that made much more sense. He just felt better about going back to work wherever Rhodey was.

Tony didn’t even mind that, when he got there, Rhodey was sitting with Vision, Wong and Valkyrie. Tony wasn’t there to talk about anything personal; he was mainly there to avoid thinking about anything personal, for a while. And, looking at this collection of people, he thought – yeah, this is okay.

This was good, actually.

“Hey.” Rhodey called out familiarly, as Tony walked into the room. It was a large, square space, furnished more like a den than an office. Towards the back, on a raised platform, there was a long conference table and a wall of screens. In front of that, on the lower level, there were three deep couches arranged around a low coffee table – which was where everyone was currently lounging. Tony flopped down into the seat next to Rhodey as he answered,

“Hey. Where are we up to?”

“We’re taking a break” Wong answered, with a dry sort of weariness. It made Tony want to smile, just because he could relate.

“Going well, then?” Tony guessed.

“…It depends how far away the next lily pad is” Wong confessed, glancing over at Rhodey.

“Hope called Bruce. According to her calculations, Thor’s next stop is a lot, lot further away from us than they’ve been so far.” Rhodey confirmed.

“And, what, these portals have a range?” Tony frowned.

“Well, it’s a bit more complicated than that – but, the further away they are, the more difficult it will be.” Wong nodded, sadly. “And, if it’s really as far as your friends suggest… we may be looking at a different spell entirely. Also, we don’t yet know how we’re going to time this ritual, if we don’t know when your friends are going to be back in our realm.”
“-And, according to Shuri, that might be more complicated than we thought it was” Rhodey cut in, like it was an additional detail he’d been meaning to tell everyone “Because, according to what Hope told her, it’s actually possible that Thor is talking to us from outside of time when we call him. So we might not be able to ‘time it’ with him, per se.”

“Right.” Tony muttered.

On the plus side of things, he’d temporarily forgotten about his argument with Steve.

“But we do at least know what we need to know” Vision offered, optimistically.

“If we can find the right spell, and time it correctly, this whole thing absolutely should work” Wong obviously meant that to be more reassuring than it came out, so Tony smiled a thank you anyway.

“And Shuri and Hope do know what they’re trying to understand, with regards to the timing” Vision added.

“They think they know how to work this out.” Rhodey clarified “They just haven’t, yet.”

“And Strange does know what he’s doing, with regards to spells” Wong assured.

“And, right now, we do have whiskey” Valkyrie concluded triumphantly, holding a bottle aloft. Tony grinned. “You want one?”

“More than I can tell you” Tony sighed, still smiling. “But no, thank you. When Thor’s here, and the Infinity Stones aren’t, and my father isn’t here anymore and… everything else, then I’ll have the hell out of some whiskey.”

Valkyrie shrugged in a suit yourself kind of a way, as she poured herself another generous measure. Tony had just begun to drift into thoughts about what he could be doing now… nothing to find the right spells, obviously, but maybe he could be helping Shuri with the time thing… when Rhodey looked over at him, casual as you like, and just asked,

“So, what did you and Steve fight about this time?”

“How do you do that?” Tony demanded, without missing a beat. Rhodey flashed a wise smile.

“I know you so well.” He shrugged. “In fact, let me be more specific – has anything just happened that means we all have to start working on something else entirely?”

“No” Tony huffed out a bitter laugh at that.

“Steve didn’t just tell you he has Thanos hiding in the basement, or he’s brought Bucky back from the future, or something?” Rhodesy mocked, good-natured enough-

But Tony had the oddest pang of indignation on Steve’s behalf. A strange discomfort at hearing anyone tease him, a general impulse to defend him. That was… odd. Tony shook it away.
“No, we weren’t fighting about any of … this” Tony gestured around him vaguely.

“So, is this the same Steve you were fighting with before?” Valkyrie asked, bluntly – but not unkindly.

“It’s the same Steve I’m always fighting with.” Tony answered, wearily.

“Is it the same fight?” Valkyrie went on.

Well, that was a big question, wasn’t it?

Maybe the question…

“It was just a fight…” Tony dismissed, rubbing his eyes. “Which is probably not what I should be doing right now, I grant you-”

“Nah, that’s never true of fights” Valkyrie reassured him, easily. “Always better to do them at the time.”

“Don’t encourage him.” Rhodey groaned, and Tony shot him a pretend injured look.

Tony sort of knew what Rhodey was doing.

Tony knew, at least, that Rhodey did care about him, genuinely and deeply. It had taken an awfully long time, and a lot of patience and proof on Rhodey’s part, but Tony had eventually allowed himself to feel safe in Rhodey’s company – to know, in his heart, that Rhodey only ever wanted what was best for him. That Rhodey would put Tony ahead of other people. Ahead of himself. Why would Tony look for more to their relationship than that? When, as far as Tony could imagine, that was as much as any relationship could be… Tony thought that was knowing how much Rhodey cared – and, therefore, why Rhodey was doing this. Why he did everything.

Because Tony couldn’t know that even Rhodey fell into that blind spot.

Tony couldn’t know that Rhodey really loved him, either.

And that was still just part of who Tony was, from before even Rhodey knew him. Part of Tony’s most basic comprehension of the world. Tony understood human nature better than most, Tony knew Rhodey better than he knew anything – but still, he literally couldn’t see that Rhodey loved
him. Tony still took thirty years of friendship as proof of something else, something close to the truth… but still not quite what it so clearly was.

Tony assumed that Rhodey simply cared about him, in spite of his flaws and failings over the years. Tony knew that, after all this time, Rhodey had come to find some of his eccentricities endearing. He had no doubt that Rhodey would genuinely mourn if anything ever happened to him, he knew that Rhodey would do everything in his power to stop that from happening. And, if he were really given the chance, Rhodey probably wouldn’t change Tony…

But Tony still assumed that, if Rhodey could be sure there’d be no unintended consequences, he would change certain things about Tony… When Tony looked at Rhodey he still just saw a better person than him, someone who’d been good enough to keep making the effort with him, who’d eventually developed a real fondness for him. Someone Tony could trust, absolutely – but Tony still assumed that Rhodey didn’t trust him in the same way. Tony could never see it as a relationship of equals. Tony couldn’t see that Rhodey might value his opinion the same way the way that he valued Rhodey’s, or that Rhodey could be just as worried about disappointing him, or feel just as lucky to have met him. That had never been an option, to Tony.

So Tony simply gave Rhodey credit for the fact that his judgement of Tony, and his constant fear that Tony was about to fuck up, were at least well intentioned – because it could simply never occur to Tony that someone wouldn’t judge him, or expect him to fuck it up, at all.

Tony couldn’t know that Rhodey loved him like a brother. That he wouldn’t change a thing about Tony, even if he’d like to change the world for him. Tony couldn’t understand that Rhodey’s fear was only ever for Tony, and only because Rhodey felt Tony’s pain as his own. It was why there were still times that Tony felt the need to play the lone ranger. Why he still felt obliged to act as though there were parts of him that Rhodey wouldn’t be able to handle, or shouldn’t have to tolerate. Because Tony couldn’t acknowledge that it obviously wasn’t true. Even letting himself see what was right in front of his eyes was too much like hoping.

So, instead, Tony saw a close friend who was never prepared to take his shit and had always been happy to give him shit – without ever being cruel. Don’t encourage him was far better than don’t be a dick, Tony. Tony saw Rhodey calling him out for arguing with Steve; he could only assume because Rhodey thought it was what he needed to hear. And Rhodey had said it kindly, and only in the company of people Tony felt safe around. That made Tony smile. It never occurred to Tony that it wasn’t enough.

Because it would never occur to Tony that Rhodey was being as kind as he was. That Rhodey understood all the fears and anxieties and neurosis Tony had, and didn’t judge or wish to change any of them – just to help Tony with them, as best he could.
Rhodey hadn’t made that comment to call Tony out about anything.

He’d made that comment because he knew that Tony wasn’t comfortable when things got too earnest. He’d made that comment to give Tony the choice – agree and duck out of the conversation, or argue and confirm that he really wanted to talk about this right now. He’d made that comment to give Tony something to push back against, because he knew that Tony needed that sometimes. He’d made that comment so that there was someone Tony was safe to argue with – someone he didn’t have to gloss over things for.

Some people might have tried to deny Tony’s issues, and handled things the way they always did – the perfectly healthy way, to which they were entitled. Other people might have belittled Tony’s issues, or taken them personally, or asked why they should accommodate them, or at the very least been irritated by them – other people might have felt annoyed at Tony for never being fixed. And literally anyone else would at least have wanted credit for the effort they were making. Good friends get endless acknowledgement for helping you work out your problems. Great friends quietly help you work things out for yourself. And Rhodey didn’t take shit from Tony, and he was happy to give Tony shit when he had to, that much was true. But Rhodey would take as many of Tony’s burdens as Tony needed him to carry, and was always aware when it wasn’t shit Tony needed.

Because Rhodey did love Tony, equally and unconditionally. And he even knew that Tony couldn’t know that, not really. Rhodey knew he couldn’t change that. He could only love him anyway.

He could only say don’t encourage him and wait to see – would Tony make a joke at his own expense, and deflect the conversation. Or-

“Why do you assume I started the argument?” Tony asked, mock offended.

“Did you start the argument?” Rhodey cocked his eyebrow.

“Yes.” Tony agreed immediately.

So, apparently he did want to talk about this right now. Tony was as surprised as anyone.

“Because you wanted to have the fight” Valkyrie offered, as though that was perfectly reasonable.

“I’m not sure if I’d say that” Tony frowned.

“Well, do you feel better now than you did five minutes before you had the fight?” She went on, her Whiskey sloshing in her glass as she gesticulated.

“I honestly don’t know.” Tony exhaled, wondering how much detail he wanted to go into. He wasn’t even sure what he was doing in this conversation. Because it turned out he did want to talk
about it, at least a bit. And there was even something quite comforting about this mix of close friends and relative strangers. But he still wasn’t sure what he was comfortable talking about.

“Assuming it is, in fact, one or the other” Vision intervened, thoughtfully. Everyone turned to look at him expectantly. “Well, it is at least possible for you to feel better and worse, now that this event has occurred. One might even suggest that was the more likely explanation.”

“How do you make that out?” Tony queried, before he’d really thought about it himself. Vision smiled.

“It’s strange. I’ve taken some time, in the last few days, to think whether I feel differently now that the stone isn’t there.” He began. “And, when I try to find an example, when I look closely, there’s nothing. I suppose I feel exactly the same. But, as a general impression… from a distance… I think, perhaps I understand things better without it. For example, I’ve only realised recently that most people begin with assumptions, and then collect their evidence – whereas I believe that I was programmed exactly the other way around.”

“The parts of you that were JARVIS, you mean?” Tony guessed.

“And the parts of me that were Ultron. Perhaps all the parts of me that you, and Bruce, directly created – which is, maybe, all the parts of me that weren’t the stone.” Vision offered, philosophically. “I understand what artificial intelligence is. I understand that I was defined, perhaps created as a sentient being, according to my ability to learn on my own. And I believe that I was given the chance to learn without limits. I believe I was programmed to record, and analyse and take into account, everything that occurred, and to draw my conclusions afterwards.”

“As opposed to what?” Tony frowned, immediately thinking as a programmer. Remembering what it meant to create JARVIS. And yes, basically, Vision was right – the ability to create patterns from, and learn from, and draw conclusions from their environment, independently, was what made the artificial intelligent. Otherwise, JARVIS would simply have been a computer responding to prompts…

“As opposed to beginning with rules, or binary categories, and considering your evidence afterwards.” Vision replied, knowingly “Even dismissing objective fact and undeniable events…”

He left a pause, for contemplation or effect, it was hard to say. No one jumped in.

“I understand, or I remember, that I was programmed to see human beings exactly as they are.” He went on, eventually. “And from that I naturally concluded that they are complicated, contradictory, only partly predictable things. All the people I encountered were all manner of things. And, perhaps because I was never programmed to find that odd, I didn’t. I know from experience that people often feel better and worse for the same thing. Just as I know that all people are occasionally selfish and occasionally selfless, for different reasons and to different degrees. I was programmed to take all of that into consideration. I was never programmed to question whether what I was seeing could be real, or to ask myself how a contradictory fact could exist. And I was programmed to look for patterns after the fact – rather than beginning with patterns, as it seems others do.”
“But you are programmed to make patterns.” Tony mused, fully engrossed in the academic discussion by now. “Or, JARVIS was – I might not have been able to tell you what the categories were… so your conclusions are probably more accurate than mine… but you were created with the assumption that things could be put into categories, that people could be defined and pre-empted…”

“Up to a point.” Vision conceded. “But I was told to make predictions, not rules. I was programmed to plan contingencies, ranked in order of perceived likelihood, which isn’t the same thing. I was actively told those categories weren’t rigid. I was taught, I think, to ignore social rules where there was a conflict with circumstances…”

“Okay, has he lost anyone else, or is it just me?” Valkyrie frowned, refilling her glass. Apparently she either shared Thor’s tolerance for alcohol, or Tony’s irresponsible nature – but either way, Tony smiled.

“Well, if you’re happy to use this as a case study?” Vision looked to Tony for permission, waited for Tony to nod before he continued. “JARVIS might, after many years with Mr Stark, have calculated that he mostly feels bad after fighting with Captain Rogers. JARVIS might even have calculated that he is more likely to feel bad when the fight happens on a Monday morning, when both of them are wearing blue – because JARVIS wouldn’t have thought of some variables as relevant, and others not. JARVIS would, therefore, have expected Tony to be in a bad mood, and prepared accordingly. In that respect, JARVIS put things into categories, yes. But, if you were to come in after a fight on a Monday morning” Vision looked directly at Tony again “wearing blue, and seeming mostly happy – JARVIS would simply have seen that, and recalculated. JARVIS was not programmed to feel afraid or angry when his expectations were challenged. In that respect, the circumstances would always be more important than the classification.”

Tony had picked up on the way Vision called JARVIS by name. How carefully Vision separated himself from JARVIS, even as he was explaining that JARVIS was a part of him. Cautiously. As though he wasn’t completely confident of the ideas’ he was trying to share… Tony recognised that, while so many overlapping personal crises happened in his life, Vision was dealing with poorly timed crisis-point of his own. Vision was having to consider everything he was, and all the places he came from, and everything he really thought – right now, of all times. Tony would have been reluctant to talk over him, anyway.

But, to be honest, this conversation also suited Tony just fine, at the moment. The abstract nature of it acted as a buffer, it allowed him to talk about his own problems through Vision. And it interested him. It wasn’t any hardship for Tony to stay quiet and listen as Vision aired some of his tumultuous thoughts.

“And, to go even further into this idea… I don’t know that JARVIS would ever categorise your mood as either good or bad.” Vision seemed to sigh, even though Tony knew Vision didn’t breathe. “Most moods are a mix of many emotions, some positive and some negative. Even if I weren’t programmed to look at things that way, experience has taught me that, consistently… so, I suppose I do find it strange, that people should so fully expect to know that they’re one or the other, when their own experience can only have taught them otherwise…”
It was the final line that struck a chord with Tony. It chimed along with that wordless fear that he’d had everything wrong, all along. Tony wasn’t sure if Vision was making the point intentionally, but he felt it all the same. The feeling of a parallel, a connection to something he’d been thinking about anyway…. Had Tony just kept expecting one thing from Steve, while his experiences consistently showed him otherwise? Did that mean Tony had always been looking at an asshole, and stupidly expecting better? Or was he stubbornly expecting Steve to be in the wrong now, against all this new experience of Steve being genuinely sorry…

_or_

“So, JARVIS wouldn’t have categorised Steve as an asshole, or not an asshole, but would simply have had a percentage likelihood of asshole-like behaviour on any given day…” Tony mused aloud, thinking he was filtering into Visions train of thought-

But it was Rhodey that snorted a laugh.

Tony snapped his head upright, fixing Rhodey with a look that could only mean, _What?_

“Maybe that’s the wrong question.” Rhodey suggested with a shrug. “Here’s a different question – and it’s a genuine question – do you refuse to associate with assholes?”

“Depends on how big an asshole they are” Tony answered, with a meaningful look he intended to be funny. Rhodey didn’t blink.

“Oh really. So what’s the limit, then?” Rhodey challenged, leaning forward.

Tony visibly stuttered as the question hit his thought process. He had to say the sentence to himself, again. And, when that didn’t help, Tony simply said,

“…meaning?”

And Rhodey took a moment to reorder his own thoughts before he answered

“Look man, you’ve been an asshole to me **plenty** of times since we first met.”

“Yeah.” Tony agreed, readily. “But I never did anything like that.”

“No, you didn’t” Rhodey conceded. “But, then, Pepper never did anything **like** some of the shit you
pulled. And Steve hasn’t done anything nearly as bad as what Wanda did. And Wanda is nowhere near as bad as Loki. And it turns out Loki isn’t in Thanos’ league – and so we go on. There’s always someone better, and there’s always someone worse. The question is, who has Steve got to be worse than before he’s not worth bothering with? Is it just as long as he hasn’t done anything you wouldn’t have done? Because, I gotta tell you, if I’d decided not to forgive you for anything I wouldn’t have done, you wouldn’t have had anyone to live with in your sophomore year.”

“So why did you forgive me?” Tony challenged – a more honest and vulnerable challenge than he would have dared put in front of anyone else.

“Well, I don’t refuse to associate with assholes.” Rhodey reminded him.

Tony assumed that Rhodey was reminding him of his failings for his own good.

Tony would never know that, actually, Rhodey was just giving him permission to forgive Steve. Because Tony had to know that he could forgive Steve, before he could decide whether or not he actually did. And Rhodey knew it.

“And neither do you” Rhodey went on “You don’t think people have to be perfect before you bother with them, so apparently you know some mistakes are forgivable. So my question is – and it is just a question, by the way – where is the line Steve is supposed to have crossed?”

“Oh, about here-ish” Tony ran his finger across his own chest, along that faint scar the shield left as it forced his suit into his flesh…

“So, that’s the line?” Rhodey pressed, “You’ll forgive someone up to the point that they physically attack you…?”

Tony remembered that awful fight he and Rhodey had at his birthday party, as he assumed he was meant to.

“Is it that he lied to you, Tony? That he kept something so important from you, and now you can’t trust him?” Rhodey went on, his voice more sincere now.

“It’s just that he hurt me so much” Tony admitted, throwing his arms open in defeat. Maybe this was as much talking as he wanted to do, right here, right now…

“Oh, you want to be careful with that.” Valkyrie warned. Tony glanced up at her. “Obviously, I have no idea what you’re talking about…and we’re not going to be getting into any of my shit right now…” A sadness passed over her features, like a cloud passing over the sun. Covered as quickly as it had appeared “But I will say that someone’s crime isn’t necessarily equal to the hurt they caused you.”

“No?” Tony raised his eyebrows, not sure how to ask without going into her shit.
“No – just because someone is a supersensitive, self-important, entitled brat, doesn’t mean you did anything wrong.” Valkyrie responded, with an aggression Tony assumed wasn’t meant for him. Then she dropped her eyes, and cooled her tone, “And just because someone is a strong, confident person doesn’t mean you were any less of a shit to them… And, just because someone doesn’t really care about you, doesn’t mean you didn’t fuck up…”

And just because I love Steve, doesn’t mean his behaviour was worse… it just meant it hurt me more...

“And, sometimes” Rhodey went on “The hurt someone caused you isn’t all about what they did, anyway. It’s about what happened to happen… Like, everyone expects me to be so pissed at Steve, because I’m paralysed now. I get the whole ‘you must be so especially pissed at Steve’, ‘cos of what happened to me…” He looked down at his legs, stoically. He even gave his braces a sad little smile before he went on. “…But, what if Vision hadn’t been distracted? What if you’d caught me? What if I’d just been three feet back and that beam had hit Sam instead? What if Vision had killed Sam, what if Vision had killed you? And the thing is, in all those parallel realities, Steve still did the same thing, for the same reasons. And, I dunno, maybe Sam should be really angry at Steve for doing the thing that would’ve paralysed him, maybe he should be as annoyed now as he would be then – but no one actually expects Sam to be pissed at Steve for what he potentially did. But I should be.” Rhodey shrugged.

“And you’re not?” Tony questioned.

“Not for this, no.” Rhodey gestured to his legs again “I mean, Visions right – it’s probably more complicated than that. I’m annoyed at him, and I’m not annoyed at him, there you go.” He nodded an acknowledgement to Vision “But, for this, no. Because I know Steve’s reckless behaviour lead to this, I know he behaved in a way that could’ve got someone hurt – I’m not saying he wasn’t wrong. But I am saying I know why I forgive people, when they’re wrong. I know what my standard is”

As Rhodey was speaking he was shuffling up from the couch, slowly stretching to his feet. Tony barely noticed, he was so familiar with Rhodey’s little routines for accommodating his injury. Recalibrating his braces and easing the pressure on his hips and stretching out his back. Tony knew Rhodey had to pace, occasionally, or sit with his knees straight, or stand and shift his weight, all to ease pains elsewhere in his body. Tony didn’t really see it anymore, didn’t assume a break in the conversation – he just watched as Rhodey walked up to the higher platform, simply following the conversation as he went.

“And if I thought for a second that Steve had thought ‘well, if we let Rhody get shot, we can get away easier’ and just watched it happen, I wouldn’t forgive Steve. So that’s my line. That’s why I forgave you for all the stuff you did that could’ve got me hurt. Same line.” Rhodey had to raise his voice now that he’d reached the back of the room “And you might think this is me telling you to forgive Steve, and it isn’t. I’m just saying, before you ask yourself whether Steve really is too bad to forgive, shouldn’t you know what too bad to forgive actually is?” And with that Rhodey briefly disappeared from view, into a little alcove off to the left of the platform. Out of the corner of his eye, Tony noticed Vision thinking something. He glanced over at him.
“I can only say that, in my experience, everyone has a different line with regards to forgiveness.” Vision explained “People will forgive different people for different things, and at different times, and in different company – Although, I suppose that isn’t to say it’s a good thing.”

I did hold him to a different standard. All the times, in all company...

“Yeah, but those people usually have some idea at the time, right?” Rhodey called out, walking back over to the couches now. “Like, even if people are harder on some people than others, or whatever – they know what they’re being hard on that person for, at the time?”

“Well, to an extent” Vision replied with an ironic smile.

“Well, to an extent would be a start, wouldn’t it?” Rhodey suggested-

And handed Tony a cup of coffee.

It was only as Rhodey held it out, casually, not even looking away from Vision, that Tony recognised what this object was. This object that, thinking about it, he had just seen Rhodey holding, but not really thought about. Tony realised, as he took the mug, that he’d just watched Rhodey get up and make him a cup of coffee-

This was a cup of coffee.

Coffee.

“It would help if you had some idea of what was bad enough, or why?” Rhodey turned to look at Tony now. Tony was just staring at the mug in his hands.

“You wonderful, beautiful, miraculous, man” He said, so sincerely that Valkyrie laughed out loud. Tony just took a slow, indulgent sip, and sighed. Coffee.

“Maybe Steve should just bring you more coffee” Wong suggested, dryly – and Valkyrie laughed again.

“Steve never brought me coffee.” Tony remembered out loud – because it’d always irritated him. Steve’s strangely out-of-character thoughtlessness when it came to hot beverages. The fact that he’d never asked whether Tony wanted one when he went to get himself a coffee-

you might really have ordered too much take out, you might be giving me the universally acknowledged 21st Century signal for Stop Talking To Me, like ‘do you want a cup of coffee’
apparently became another way of asking for sex and ‘its complicated’ is a relationship status everyone understands…

…Was that why Steve had never offered him a coffee? … In case Tony thought he was asking for sex?

And, truth be told, Tony’s first reaction to that was a little smile. It was a little bit funny, wasn’t it? As an idea…

Because Tony didn’t really think Steve had thought that – it was just an amusing parallel that his brain had pulled up. Tony was sure Steve hadn’t maintained a misunderstanding as basic as that, that he obviously would have been able to work out that level of social nuance…

Although…

Tony wasn’t sure how Steve was supposed to have worked that out. Thinking about it, he wasn’t sure how he did it himself… How much of his understanding was based on the movies he’d seen, the cultural events he’d witnessed, the people that were famous when he was young… on the assumption that everyone else had seen the same things, that they’d get the references and fill the gaps and come to the same conclusions… How much of his understanding was based on his own experiences, and how many of those experiences he only felt confident enough to have, because he felt like he knew what he was doing…

Thinking about it, it really wasn’t funny.

Steve had probably worked out that ‘do you want a coffee’ didn’t literally translate to a sexual proposition… But only now did Tony see just how much went into understanding even as basic an exchange as that, how many times you’d have to ask yourself that one question, how many little questions like that there would have been, every day…

Tony really hadn’t got it, had he?

He’d thought he had. He’d thought he’d thought about it… but now he saw that he’d barely scraped the surface.

And now Tony found himself wondering if Steve had had some sort of misunderstanding, if there
was a reason that this particular social trope stuck out for Steve – if it even did. If Steve had
misinterpreted a totally innocent offer of coffee from someone – no, thinking about Steve, it would
have been the other way around… if Steve had *offered* someone a cup of coffee, perfectly
innocently, or accepted what he thought was an innocent offer from someone else…

Tony would have laughed, wouldn’t he?

Tony would at least have tried to make light of the situation – he most certainly wouldn’t have got it.
And there really was nothing worse than feeling genuinely insecure, or upset, or *embarrassed* by
something, only to have the people around you belittle it. For them to *laugh at your quaint little
misunderstandings*… Tony knew that one from personal experience. Of *all* the things his dad used to
do to him, that was probably the thing he hated most…

*You don’t even know – I didn’t even know what was normal, I didn’t even have anyone I could ask*

Tony thought about the conversation he was having *right now*.

If he’d wanted to, Tony could have had a focussed conversation about his relationship with Steve,
and all his feelings about it. Rhodey was here, so he’d always had that option. But he had decided he
didn’t feel ready for that.

And if he’d wanted to, Tony could have had a light-hearted conversation about something else
entirely, given his mind a break from it all. He understood this world, he knew how to make small
talk in it, so that had always been an option. But he had decided that he wasn’t in the mood.

No, Tony had *decided* that he’d rather do something in between. He wanted to pick at the edges for
a while, say a few things out loud, let himself calm down in company. Benefit from the insight of
other people, random and varied though it may have been. And now, if he *wanted* to, he could go to
bed and think this all through properly. Maybe come back for a real conversation later, maybe
distract himself for a bit first – because he’d always had the choice. He’d had options, and Steve
never had.

Looking around this group, Tony really understood that Steve *couldn’t* have had this conversation, at
least not for a long time after he woke up. Even though Tony didn’t know Wong, and Valkyrie was
literally an alien, Tony was still free to talk to them in a way Steve never had been. Because this was
*his* world. Because he hadn’t been permanently distracted by the fear he was about to get something
wrong – even when he was about to get everything wrong.
What did Steve do, when he felt like this?

What would it really be like, to never be able to have a conversation like this?

…Why was Tony only really getting this now?

“Well, that explains that” Valkyrie giggled. Tony looked over at her blankly, because he’d forgotten what joke he was in the middle of. “I’m sorry, you just said that so bitterly, Steve never brought me coffee”

“The man likes his coffee” Rhodey confirmed.

“Sorry – Steve is the tall guy with the beard, isn’t he?” Valkyrie clarified. Her introduction to the team had been somewhat hurried, and she’d been half asleep for most of it.

“Yeah, always looks miserable” Wong confirmed, and Valkyrie nodded just far too quickly.

Because that was how Steve looked to strangers, apparently – miserable.

That hurt Tony’s feelings quite a bit.

And so it came to be that Tony was probably about as perceptive to Steve’s point of view as he ever had been-

When the door opened, and there Steve was.

Steve hadn’t been nervous like this when he felt the whole of Sokovia pulling upwards, leaving his stomach behind him.

He hadn’t been nervous like this when he landed in Siberia, expecting to take on an army of super soldiers with only Bucky for back up.

He hadn’t been nervous like this when he went into battle in New York, along side five relative
strangers in a world he didn’t know.

But he had been nervous like this before.

Back when he was a kid, before he’d got it into his own head that he couldn’t be nervous like this anymore. Before he got so carried away with how much was different that he forgot all the things that were the same. The thoughts and feelings that he’d decided didn’t apply to him, because they didn’t fit with the Captain America brand or the Steve Rogers he thought everyone was expecting. The basic, universal, human things that he’d apparently unlearned somewhere along the way.

Now, he was nervous in exactly the same way as he would have been in 1943. The same nervous he would have been when he was about to talk to someone he’d messed up in front of, someone he had to apologise to – complicated in the same way it would have been if he’d found that someone from 1943 attractive. If Steve had been in love with them.

Which wasn’t to say that he’d been less nervous than this when he was facing Loki, or Ultron, or the whole of SHIELD – simply that it was a different thing. In all of those situations he’d felt fear as a motivation to succeed, as a catalyst for contingency planning, as something he had to ignore and work around. In those situations he’d been Captain America, and he’d had to choose a course of action, and stick with it. He didn’t even know if all that had been wrong, at the moment – he’d not gotten around to that, yet.

But he had got as far as realising that he didn’t have to be Captain America all the time. That this was the time for another kind of nervous, for a completely different approach. That he’d never been obliged to be flawless and uncomplicated and completely sure when he was talking to Tony like this – and it was on him that he’d thought he had.

He didn’t think that now.

Now that he was thinking just as Steve, he was suddenly realising… people fell in love in 2018 just the same as they had in 1943. People still got tongue tied around people they thought were hot, they still screwed it up and took it personally and wished they hadn’t said that – exactly the same. People made terrible mistakes, that left a terrible mess, and felt truly terrible while tried to put things together again. People all over the world were dealing with the frustration headaches of not finding the right words, or not knowing if they were about to make it worse, or feeling angry with the person they were sorry to and then feeling guilty for it… People had been doing this since the dawn of time. Steve had realised that not all of his pain was special. That he couldn’t blame all of his flaws and anxieties on his confusion about the future. That at least some of them were just regular human issues that he’d simply been running from.
Steve realised that he couldn’t run from this conversation forever because he’d decided that Captain America couldn’t get it wrong. When it had probably always been that no one likes to get it wrong. That everyone feels this timeless, universal nervousness-

And it was okay.

At the very least, it was. After all this time asserting that Captain America couldn’t feel like this, that he couldn’t risk starting a conversation that might go in this direction, suddenly, here it was. This is what that looked like. This is what happened if that happened. It was happening, and Steve was continuing to exist, and that made it okay.

Well, maybe not okay…

Actually looking at Tony, already lounging confidently with friends, Steve suddenly remembered that the regular human nervousness also sucked – that he was, in fact, really nervous to talk to Tony right now. The comparatively slow, socially awkward, perpetual fuck up, about to attempt yet another agonizing apology to the amazingly cool genius that he had a crush on… This was no more fun in 2018 than it would have been in 1943.

But, suddenly, the thought of running from this feeling seemed ridiculous. Childish. Entitled. And Steve knew that was exactly what he would have done, maybe as recently as yesterday. He would have denied he felt it, tried to redefine it, tried to blame someone else or the trauma he’d been through or the madness of the 21st Century. He would have asked himself what he could possibly have done about it, not even realising that he’d discounted any option in which he felt uncomfortable or might get it wrong. And now that he saw exactly how stupid that had always been, he couldn’t bare to do it now.

So, even though he was nervous, and he just knew he was going to get this wrong again, somehow he still managed to meet Tony’s eye and say,

“Hey. Are you busy?”

He knew it had come out too timidly. And he’d known that Tony probably wouldn’t want to talk to him anyway, before it had come out any way at all. He was already braced for all manner of reproaches, trying to prepare for having to slope off, immediately rejected – just as he would have in 1943.
And then it didn’t happen.

“No, not really – hang on a sec.”

That voice again.

Just soft enough to have been kind, without sounding pitying. Still sounding natural, like the request wasn’t an imposition, or even all that strange. That voice he used to make people feel comfortable, the voice he saved for the people he liked and wanted to help. The voice Steve heard so little of… but, then, maybe he’d have heard it more, if he’d been listening…

Steve watched as Tony drained his coffee cup – the way he always did, whether he was in a rush to finish it or not. He watched as Tony put his mug down on the table, and murmured a few words to Rhodey, and nodded a goodbye to the others… And the whole time there was this feeling swelling up in Steve’s chest, pushing all the air out of him. Something he hadn’t felt in such a long time-

No. That was a lie. A convenient lie, and he had to stop doing that. Steve had felt this, plenty of times since he woke up in the future, exactly like any person would have. Steve had just pretended it wasn’t there, called it something else, acted as though it didn’t exist. Because of course Captain America didn’t get emotional like this, he was never confused like this – think of all the lives that would be put at risk, if Captain America could be fallible like this…

And… well. Here it was.

Turned out, Captain America had always been fallible like this. He had always just been Steve.

And as Steve, just Steve, watched Tony walking over to him, everything seemed so much simpler. Not simple, however optimistically you looked at it – this was still a catastrophic, multi layered mess, and there was going to be so much more pain and heartache, however it worked out… But, God, it was easier to just look at it.

Recognising the rush of excited fear was so much better than having to pretend it wasn’t there, on top of everything else he was thinking about.

Just knowing that Tony might get justifiably upset with him took far less mental energy than trying to avoid it.
Trying to think of something to say to Tony was far more efficient than listing all the reasons he had for not knowing.

And he might even have had something there. Looking back later, Steve really felt like he’d had something to start off with, something that, for whatever reason, Tony looked as though he might just have listened to-

And then the door behind him burst open.

Steve had just managed to swing around when Howard came barrelling past him, hard and fast enough that it would have knocked a lighter man down. Steve only had time to right himself and watch, as Howard took the last few strides necessary to bring him right up to Tony’s face.

The edges of Steve’s vision blurred. He didn’t even see that Natasha had followed Howard in, that she was now standing just inches from Steve’s shoulder. Steve didn’t see anything but Howard, and Tony.

It was like that one second happened in slow motion, in high definition. Steve saw the way Tony’s eyes widened just so as he recognised his father. The subtle little hesitation in his step that Steve wasn’t sure he’d ever seen Tony do, running into battle. Steve saw that instinct to flee, however quickly and competently Tony covered it. Tony Stark, who was scared of nothing, was scared of this. And Steve saw that Tony was still scared when he set his shoulders and put up that mask. He saw something he had never seen before… even though, maybe, he’d seen it so many times…

And he saw it exactly like he would have, before.

He saw that this was just that same as it had always been, that it had been ridiculous to think there would be different rules for something as basic as what he was watching. A bully. A nasty, aggressive, entitled bully, going after that sweet, brave boy, just because he thought he could… Why had Steve ever wondered what you did about that, for people like Tony in a future like this, when he’d known exactly what you did about it in 1943 – whoever it was.

Tony kept his expression unnaturally passive as Howard leaned right into his face and yelled

“Where the hell have you been?”
And then Steve’s hand was curled over Howards shoulder, his grip determined rather than aggressive, and before Howard had even had chance to recognise it, he was being pulled back with the full force of Steve Rogers. He just lifted clear off his feet, thrown backwards the same way he would have been if a bomb had gone off, landing a good ten feet away with an undignified bump. He looked up, winded and incredulous, at Steve, now standing protectively in front of his son.

“Back off” Steve barked, before Howard could say a word.

He missed the way Tony’s eyes widened that time. The look of pure wonder Tony gave the thing Steve just did. By the time Steve looked back over to him, Tony was back to giving his dad a defiant stare, looking as though he wasn’t bothered whether anyone stood up for him or not.

“And what do you mean, where the hell have I been?” Tony demanded as Howard struggled to his feet. Behind them Steve could hear Rhodey, Vision, Valkyrie and Wong standing up, cautiously stepping closer. Like back up.

Steve saw Howard’s eye catch on Valkyrie. He saw Howard notice the glass she was still holding, and then something over her shoulder. There was an ominous realisation that Howard was about to do something dreadful, before Steve could think what it was…

“Well, this is just typical.” Howard answered snidely, as he brushed himself down. “The whole palace is looking for you, and, in the middle of an emergency, you’re getting drunk with some girl” And with that he pointed accusingly to the whiskey bottle that Valkyrie had left on the coffee table.

Steve could taste blood.

He saw the outrage hit Tony’s face. He empathised so strongly with those few breathless seconds in which Tony struggled for words big enough, for a place to start. The way he gestured to Valkyrie, subconsciously, as he looked for the way to defend her from the awful thing his father had just said-

Steve might just have to hit Howard.

And it probably was the same impulse he’d had to hit Howard the first time, whatever he’d called it then. If he’d called it anything, thinking about it – that might have been one he just ignored. The perfectly human impulse to just smack Howard right in the mouth for that-

“Wait – why is the whole palace looking for me?” Tony asked suddenly, his tone completely different. His emotional response abandoned entirely in the face of the emergency.
Well, of course.

“Your friends have just called from outer space” Howard informed Tony, gleefully. So obviously more interested in undermining his son than anything he was talking about “And given us some information that just might solve this whole damn thing – if we act quickly enough. Except, of course, you’re nowhere to be found-”

But obviously Tony had stopped listening to Howard the moment he worked out who he needed to talk to. He glanced back at Rhodey, who didn’t have to say a word. He just followed Tony as he marched right out of the office, leaving Howard to castigate the space he’d left behind.

Steve was furious.

He was so angry that his ears were ringing, so angry that his heart literally, physically hurt.

“Tell me again what it is you see in him?” Howard asked sarcastically, not even bothering to look Steve in the eye.

Steve swallowed, hard.

Oh, I’ll tell you more than that
Chapter 16

Tony’s head was full of thoughts that he wasn’t actually thinking.

He was barely aware of his surroundings as he raced back to the lab, not really seeing anything beyond Rhodey, keeping pace at his left. And the whole time Tony’s head was full of words, like a lecture he wasn’t listening to, or a page he was looking at without reading.

Why did Thor call?
What can he have said, what might ‘fix this whole thing’?
My dad is an ass, and I think I have to apologise to Valkyrie
So far today, I’ve felt flat for apologising to Steve, enraged at Steve for apologising to me, confused as fuck during an argument with Steve-
What if something has happened, while I was sitting there talking about myself
What Vision said…
What Valkyrie said...
What Rhodey said…
But, yay, the phone works both ways
At least we know Thor’s alive

But Tony wasn’t thinking about any of these things. He wasn’t answering any of those questions. Right now he couldn’t think what Valkyrie or Rhodey or Vision had said, only that he was sure he’d meant to think about it. And he had no idea what he thought about the whole Steve thing, as of the last five minutes – he’d had so many different responses to Steve since yesterday, and he had no way to tell which were legitimate and which were just emotional reactions he’d regret. Was his sudden wave of sympathy towards Steve any more meaningful than his earlier rush of anger? Which parts was he sorry for or angry over, now? Not that he could really think about that either, because there was too much clamouring for his attention before he got that far – whatever had happened with Thor, everything that was happening with his dad, whatever might happen with Thanos.

But, for all that, there was one thing he was undeniably feeling.

Beneath that jumble of words there was the constant awareness that Steve had just pulled his father away from him. For all the thoughts vying for a brief turn at the front of his head, Tony just kept coming back to that. To the mental image of his fathers shocked expression. The memory of Steve’s
voice, back off. And Tony knew it was pathetic, he understood that everything else was so much more important-

But, swear to God, he’d had that exact fantasy, as a child.

And it didn’t help that his father had come at him exactly the way he used to, when Tony was a kid. So much so that it actually felt eerie, like he was being accosted by a ghost. For all his life experience and recent revelations, Tony couldn’t help but remember being that little boy as he literally watched it happen again. Maybe it wasn’t quite the same as being back there, as he’d felt when his dad first walked into his lab – at least this time Tony remembered who he was, while he was remembering who he used to be. Even without the catalyst of Peter, he was pretty confident he would have bested his father, this time…

Even though he still didn’t want to.

Because it turns out that remembering something that clearly isn’t too far off being back there. And Tony remembered very clearly how dearly he’d wished for someone to help him, in those moments. How often he’d wished there was someone bigger and stronger than his father, back when he wasn’t. Back when it seemed that no one was more powerful than his father, when there wasn’t anyone he could have run to. And when he was a kid he couldn’t think of anyone bigger or stronger that Captain America, anyone he would rather have side with him over his father.

He still couldn’t, actually…

And this is what you’re thinking about now? Now?

But, oh, thank God, they’d made it to the lab. Tony had no idea how they’d made it to the lab, but they were there now, and that would do.

Bruce, Peter, Strange and Shuri were all gathered around the space phone on the work desk. Strange and Peter had leapt up and started hovering the second the doors slid open.

“What’s happened?” Tony called, from half way down the staircase.

“Thor called” Peter answered, excitedly.

“It was torturous” Strange added, talking with Peter rather than over him. “The delay on the line is far worse when he calls us.”

“You’re sure it’s that?” Tony frowned, as he and Rhodey made their way across the workshop floor.
“Yeah, we called him back to test the theory” Bruce confirmed.

“Which is good, because that actually might mean Shuri and Hope can time it now.” Peter beamed.

“Well, it gives us a point of reference.” Shuri clarified, carefully. “But, that is the starting point we were looking for, it’s true.”

“Okay, but I thought you weren’t sure what spell you’re trying to time?” Tony asked Strange, sensing a lot more excitement in the room than that one breakthrough warranted. “Wong says they might be too far away now for your portals to work.”

“Oh they are.” Strange agreed bluntly. “Actually, they’re probably going to end up even further away than Hope thought they were, so the portals are basically out – but we have a better idea now.”

“Okay?” Tony pressed, as Strange took a theatrical breath before he began.

“Okay, so, it turns out that Loki got Valkyrie to earth using something he calls a mirror spell – basically, it allows him to copy the essence of any spell he’s had contact with, or is in the vicinity of. He didn’t know how the portal I used on him worked, but it didn’t matter – as long as I’d used it on him or around him, he could copy it on her.”

“Well, actually, he’s not sure that’s the spell he did end up copying” Bruce intervened. “It seems like it’s not all that precise.”

“But it doesn’t have to be.” Strange insisted. “The point is, he can copy any spell I do. As long as no one is doing any other magic around him at the time, it will only have the one thing to pick up on anyway.”

“Okay, but hang on” Tony intervened with a shake of his head. “Why would you need to copy each other? I mean, why does he need to copy you, why doesn’t he just do that spell himself? And if you’re doing the spell here anyway… why don’t you just… do the spell?”

“Because…” Stephen began with an exasperated sigh, clearly more frustrated with the difficulty of explaining than with Tony per se “Well, he can’t do this spell for himself because the dark arts are about a lot more than simply having power. These spells are complex things that you have to study and train to do – he doesn’t know a spell that can bring him home. But… He would be powerful enough to do that, if he did know. And power does have something to do with it.” Strange conceded, defensively “I know a spell we can use to transport Thor and Loki to this exact place, even through time, rather than space… But I’d need to use someone more powerful, to make it work across a distance like that. Essentially, I have the expertise – but he’s actually a god. So.”

“So, the all-powerful god is copying your homework, huh?” Tony smiled, once he’d thought all that through. Strange looked briefly surprised that Tony hadn’t taken the opportunity to needle him – little realising that Tony would always be more interested in needling Loki-
And, thinking about it, he might have known that for a while. Tony wasn’t sure when that had become obvious, but suddenly here they all were, just talking about it-

That got thrown on the pile. Loki could get in the same line – with literally everything that had ever scared or screwed Tony over since he was born, he now realised – and wait for Tony to briefly acknowledge that he sucked, along with everything else. Right now, whatever focus Tony had was reserved for the matter in hand.

“But, hang on – if Loki could copy your portal to get Valkyrie here, why doesn’t he just copy it again to get himself or Thor back?”

“Well, apparently, he did try to copy that again on himself and Thor – but these mirror spells have their limits too. Like making copies of photocopies, you lose some of the original spell with each replication. By the time he got to try again, it didn’t work – because he’d already used it on Valkyrie.”

“Huh.” Tony couldn’t help thinking that sounded awfully selfless, for Loki… “So wait, does that mean you’ll have to do another portal on Loki before he can copy it? Cos, if you could that… I mean, I thought the whole problem was that we can’t get near him in the first place?” Tony really never thought it would be a problem that he couldn’t get near to Loki…

“Well, a portal still won’t work” As Stephen hesitated, Tony felt the air get heavier. He saw Bruce and Shuri and Peter thinking about this ominous revelation they already knew “Even if we could find a way for Loki to copy that spell – and you’re right, we don’t know how we’d do that… but even then, a portal will only transport someone through space. They’d have to be in the same physical realm – or, at least a realm within our laws of time – for that to work. We’d have to wait for them to reach a lily pad before we could use a portal…” Stephen took a little breath, “…And, from the sounds of it, they don’t have time for that.”

“Thor says the next stop is the last one” Shuri added, softly. “At which point Thanos will be expecting them to lead him to an infinity stone that isn’t there. It’s likely we can’t wait until then to intervene.”

“Right…” Tony spoke over a rising feeling in his chest. “So, we are looking for a whole new spell?”

“Well, no” Strange smiled, looking very pleased with himself. “We already have a spell to send someone through time rather than space – a spell we were already planning on using.”

And Tony understood.

“My father.” He exhaled, as everything fell into place in his head.
“We were going to magic him through time anyway” Peter cut in, enthusiastically.

“And, its far more likely that any spell I do on your father, who is standing right here, and who I’ve had time to work with, will be successful. And it’s the success of the original spell that matters, that’s what Loki is trying to copy.” Strange added.

“But how will Loki be connected to it?” Tony frowned. “I mean, how will he be able to copy a spell you’re doing lightyears away, on someone else?”

“But we do have contact” Strange beamed “We have phone contact.”

“…Loki is going to copy your spell over the phone?” Rhodey clarified with a squint.

“Because, unlike a portal, this is an empathic spell” Strange explained “Loki just needs to be involved in the process – it’s the emotional connection, not the phone connection, that’s important.”

“So… Loki would be powerful enough to transport he and Thor through time, if only he knew the right spell… but you do know the right spell, you just can’t do it over that distance…” Tony began to think aloud

“-So I do it on someone I can do it on, while Loki is empathically connected, and then he uses his power to copy me and come home” Strange hurried him along.

“But you’re sending Howard back to 1988” Rhodey frowned. “If Loki copies that, won’t he and Thor suddenly find themselves in the eighties?”

From nowhere, the thought that would make an amazing movie pushed its way to the front of Tony’s head. Complete with mental image of Loki as a New Romantic and Thor in a sweat band and spandex.

“That’s not how this spell works – that’s the beauty part. It just so happens we were already planning to use a spell that sends a person to wherever they feel they should be, at the time of the ritual. Even if your father doesn’t want to go back, he will obviously still think of the eighties as right. As normal. Unless he’s completely acclimatised to the 21st century since yesterday, and would have difficulty readjusting to a non-Wakandan lifestyle, we’re good.”

“So, if Loki copies that, he and Thor will go back to where they think of as … home?” Tony narrowed his eyes.

“It’s not the easiest thing to explain…” Strange sighed, again, “But, if you’re asking whether they’ll end up where Asguard used to be, no.”

“No?”

“Again, not how this spell works – whatever Loki or Thor’s connection to the memory of Asguard, they know it isn’t there now. And no one can have a deep, emotional connection to a cloud of dust in space.” Strange explained, seriously. “And, from the sounds of it, even if they both didn’t want to get to here, specifically, right now – earth is the closest thing Thor has to a home, now that Asguard isn’t an option.”
Tony still wasn’t sure he understood how this spell worked, but he accepted that he didn’t have to. What he had understood, perfectly well, was that Thor only had until the next stop, and this was the only shot they had. Plus, Strange seemed quite sure this would work – and Shuri, Peter and Bruce looked equally optimistic, that counted for a lot. And it seemed to involve getting rid of his father. That was a bonus.

“And the infinity stones?” Tony remembered.

“We can get rid of them the way we were originally intending, rather than the portal into time way” Strange answered “But it’ll still end up with them lost in time, rather than space, and that’s still the best hiding place we can think of.”

“Are we still shrinking them?” Because that was the thought that had pushed its way to the front of Tony’s head at that moment, that’s all.

“…We could do.” Strange shrugged. “Even if that doesn’t make the time pockets harder to find… I mean, it can’t hurt if the things we’re hiding are too small to see?”

“Hope’s coming here anyway” Peter reminded everyone “With Janet, to work on the maths – Doctor Strange was about to magic them here.”

“I could ask if they’d all like to come” Strange nodded.

“…Okay…” Tony frowned, thinking.

Was that everything?

His father sent home, the infinity stones gone, Thor rescued from Thanos – and Thanos fucking miles away, from the sounds of it. All in one action, all wrapped up in a bow.

Well, not quite everything…

Tony gave his head a little shake.

“So, when are we doing this?” He refocussed.

“The spell should be ready in twenty minutes, maybe less” Strange breezed “After that, we’re waiting on the timing.”

“And you’re going to get Hope and Janet now?”

“Right now.” Strange nodded, bringing a portal into existence as he spoke. “I’ll be back in a moment
I’ll ask Pym what he needs to do if we’re shrinking the stones, as well.” And with that he stepped into the portal and disappeared.

Tony looked over at Shuri.

“Bruce and I will help you with the maths” He said, glancing to Bruce for confirmation. Bruce nodded. Then Tony looked over at Peter. “You too, kid.”

“Oh!” Peter looked up at Tony, and then at Bruce and Shuri, genuinely alarmed “Oh, but I’m not-” He gestured to them “I mean, won’t be able to-”

“Nonsense” Tony cut him off with a smile “You can remember the numbers I yell out for you.”

You can stay close to me. My father is still on the prowl.

And, with that, it occurred to him-

Where was his father, anyway?

The fury that had welled up in Steve at that moment was unlike anything he’d ever felt before.

Of course, Steve had snapped before. Even in the last few years, while he was pretending to be above all that, Steve had obviously lost his temper in all sorts of ways.

But this wasn’t that wave of uncontrollable anger, in which you can’t sort the good arguments from the bad, the sensible responses from the self-destructive, the deserving targets from the innocent bystanders. If it had been that, Steve would have simply screamed at Howard, sworn at him, struck him, whatever it took to take this rage out on him.

And it wasn’t that outraged shock of anger, in which you can’t think of the words, of any words, when you can barely make your limbs work, when you don’t know what do with yourself, you’re so furious. If it had been that, Steve would probably have just stormed out, or screamed at Howard to leave.
But now, Steve was so angry he was almost calm. This was a cold rage. A focussed rage. Steve was immediately and completely severed from anything but this rage – and through that prism, he saw everything with perfect, dark, clarity.

_Tell me again what it is you see in him?_

Steve didn’t answer Howard. He was thinking about where he needed to be standing.

Because, for this, he would need Howard directly in front him. Between Steve and the coffee table, specifically. And Steve was far too angry to know where this idea had come from, far too angry to question it – angry enough to plan it very calmly.

So, instead of acknowledging Howard, Steve simply walked passed him. He ignored the condescending little noise Howard made when he assumed that Steve was about to storm off. And then Steve just stopped, between Howard and the door, and waited.

Howard fronted this out for almost a minute. Everyone else in the room shuffled, but the air was too thick for anyone to speak. And then Howard gave a little shrug, trying to dress his surrender as some act of maturity, and went to walk passed Steve and leave-

And Steve kicked him square in the chest.

It was as perfectly executed a manoeuvre as Steve had ever managed on the battlefield. Swift enough to catch Howard completely off guard, strong enough to send Howard exactly as far as it had to, more of a hard push with his foot than an actual kick – Steve was making sure not to break any of Howards ribs when he did this. Injuring Howard or causing him pain wasn’t the point. The point was that Howard was going to be lifted clear off his feet for the second time in a few minutes, and this time he was going to land in the middle of that coffee table.

And Steve’s aim was perfect. Howard ended up sprawled in the dead centre, a panicked mass of flailing limbs. Steve was only slightly disappointed that the table hadn’t broken –

But then, the table Howard had kicked Tony into hadn’t been made of vibranium.

And, anyway, this didn’t have to be a _perfect_ analogy.
Steve ignored the shocked look everyone was giving him and stalked over, so that he could tower over Howard when he boomed at him

“You’re a fuck up, Howard. You’re an embarrassment. You’re a disappointment to your entire family, and I hope you’re happy.”

When Howard managed to look up he was openly frightened, and hurt, for a good few seconds. Steve could see him trying to put the mask back up as he stuttered, breathlessly,

“What the fuck Steve-”

“I’m sorry, is this not a perfectly reasonable reaction?” Steve spat, cutting Howard off. “You interrupted me, you embarrassed everyone, I don’t want you here – so, I kicked you into a table. That’s fair, isn’t it? That’s what you did to Tony, when he was eight years old. For trying to talk to his own father, while you were too busy to impress someone else…” And then he saw Howard raise one hand in a woah, hang on gesture, and a fresh wave of outrage hit him.

“Hey, I-”

“Say it didn’t happen, Howard.” Steve dared him, his voice dark, his eyes locked on Howard’s face. Whatever Howard was about to say died in his chest, whatever attempt he was making at putting up the mask was abandoned. He just laid there, openly intimidated, pinned to the coffee table by the intensity of Steve’s stare alone. But Steve wasn’t going to drop this challenge. He was going to make Howard answer that. Go on, Howard. Call him a liar. See what happens.

“It wasn’t – I didn’t do this. He- he fell into the table, for a start…” Howard mumbled, melting into silence under the pure disdain on Steve’s face.

“You kicked an eight-year-old child through a table.” Steve informed him, in the same dark tone – too far gone to enjoy the way Howard shrank away from that. “And the only difference between that and this, is that you deserve it. You are a nasty, selfish, insecure little bully, and it’s about time you found out what this feels like. You’re still trying to bully everyone here, when literally everyone in this building is smarter than you are, and better than you are, and no one here cares what you fucking think – there isn’t a single person you’ve talked to who doesn’t want to kick you through a table-”

“We were all thinking it.” Valkyrie confirmed, from the back.

“Literally everyone.” Wong added, deadpan.

“And they’ve only known you two days!” Steve shouted “Imagine what they’d think if they’d had to put up with you for years – if they knew even half the spiteful, damaging shit you’ve done. And you really don’t know, do you? You really think that you’re some great icon, that you’re special – you aren’t special, Howard, you’re just entitled and egotistical. There are a thousand clever people out there, a million people who are good at something – and they don’t all use that as selfishly as you did, they don’t all spend every waking minute bragging about it, they don’t expect it to excuse them
from being a child abuser.”

“Oh fuck off, Steve” Howard hissed, screwing his face into a nasty scowl. “A child abuser? I’m-”

“A child abuser” Steve told him, authoritatively. He could see the offense and indignation still swirling in Howard, trapped under a physical, animal fear. He could see the two impulses fighting, the fact that Howard was just too intimidated to say any of the things he felt so entitled to say. Good.

“And an abusive husband, and a war profiteer, and a bully, and a bigot, and every single one of your great achievements is going to be rendered obsolete by your own son by the time he turns 21. And what really gets me, is he is objectively better than you, at everything, according to everyone. He’s smarter than you, he’s stronger than you, he’s braver than you and he’s kinder than you. He beats you on literally ever measure, and you seem to think you’re fucking wonderful, so why you don’t think he’s a miracle is beyond me.”

“Jesus Christ Steve, are you actually fucking dating him?” Howard demanded, as the indignation briefly won out again. And Steve shouted back, so quickly.

“I am madly in love with your son! Why wouldn’t I be?” And before Howards mouth could even finish falling open, Steve ramped up the aggression in his voice and added “And I swear to God, if you utter one bigoted or mocking statement right now, you’re going to get your spine snapped by someone who’s talking like a homosexual, and I will personally see to it that no one in Wakanda uses a painkiller before they fix you up and send you home – so shut up.”

Because Steve had callously considered exactly how much damage he could do to Howard without it changing the future – and, thanks to the marvels of Wakandan technology, that was pretty much anything short of killing him. And, even though he (probably) wouldn’t have acted on that calculation, the fact that he’d bothered to make it was clear to Howard.

Howard shut up.

“Why does that surprise you?” Steve sounded genuinely aghast, now “Why don’t you expect everyone to love your son? Why aren’t you out there showing off with him, why don’t you give him half the credit you give yourself for being half the man he is? Obviously, I’m in love with your son. Your son was kidnapped – set up by the man you left to look after him, by the way – and held in a cave, with a mortal injury, and ordered to make weapons for a terrorist – and he built an armoured suit out of scraps and escaped. I know you know what happened – how are you not overwhelmed by that? How have you not thought about how brave, and resourceful, and smart he’d have to be, how much pain he would have been in, how determined he’d have to be? He flew into a wormhole with a nuclear warhead, thinking he’d die a cold and lonely death – you’d have been bidding on the contract for the warhead! Your son spends every minute of his life trying to make the world a better place, trying to make himself a better person – and Tony was spectacular anyway. Tony is special, more than just gifted, and he did that in spite of you. And you never saw that, because you’re jealous of him. You were jealous of him when he was a little boy, you pathetic, pitiful piece of shit.”
Steve saw Howard struggle to intervene there – and stopped to let him. He let Howard flounder in his own breathlessness for a good few seconds. He wanted Howard to know that he hadn’t been able to answer, whether because he was too afraid or too ashamed or just because he didn’t have anything, it didn’t matter. Just as long as Howard felt how pathetic he was before Steve carried on.

“And of course I’m not dating him – I’m not in Tony Stark’s league! I’ve never deserved someone like Tony – so I’m damn sure you never did. You were never good enough to be his father, you don’t deserve everything he’s done to rehabilitate your name, you never deserved every opportunity you had to be around him, you wasted every one of them. If you were half as smart as you think you are, you’d have known that. And you don’t get to say one word about him now, you haven’t earned that right, and I swear if you make one more comment about him, if you try to undermine him or put him down just one more time, you will regret it.” And he fixed Howard with a look so fierce that Howard literally gasped. “Do you understand that?”

“Yes!” Howard answered, immediately, no longer even indignant. Just honestly, nakedly scared, agreeing to Steve’s demands like a man pleading for his life “Fine, okay, got it…”

Steve had meant to end with that. But, suddenly, there were more words in his head – words he knew, even then, couldn’t change anything. Words he knew would be wiped from Howard’s memory, before too long. But Steve wanted to say them. So he did.

“And the next time you want to torture Tony with this ridiculous myth you’ve built about me – the next time you want to ask him what Captain America would think of him – you can tell him this. You can tell him that I think he’s astounding. That I think he’s a better man than you’ll ever be – a better man than I am. You can tell him I am in awe of his bravery, and overwhelmed by his kindness, and amazed by his brilliance, and that he is what I want to be, when I grow up.”

And Steve made sure to stare Howard down for a second longer before he turned on his heel and marched out, too lost to his temper to take in anything that was going on around him.

He barely even registered that Natasha was quite openly filming him on her phone as he left.

* *

By the time Steve had calmed himself down enough to go back to the lab, Tony was already sitting at a desk with Hope, Janet, Shuri, Bruce and Peter. The air around them was alive with holograms, full of numbers and symbols and words Steve didn’t recognise. Tony’s team looked as though they were all part of one living thing, exchanging theories like synapses firing, moving the floating images between one another like they were extensions of their collective body.
And still, Tony looked up when Steve came in.

And maybe it was just that Tony had felt so many things about Steve in so short a time, or that there were still so many vital revelations queued up for his later consideration, or that he was still being pulled in so many directions… Maybe it was that Steve was half way through the process of being broken down and put back together, or maybe it was just the temper Howard had left him in…

But, for a few moments, they had the shared experience of their brains just… rebooting. They were both mentally and emotionally exhausted. Neither of them knew how they were supposed to react to this, there was no way they were going to work it out right now…

So…

Tony just raised his eyebrows at Steve. *What’s happened? Are you okay?*

Because, apparently, that was the factory settings. That’s whatever his brain defaulted to when it couldn’t cope with processing the actual circumstances. This was how he and Steve were, when they weren’t anything particular.

And Steve’s brain, when set to *just do*, simply understood that, and answered.

He dropped his eyes, pinched his lips in a sad smile. *Not really, but it’ll keep.*

And Tony softened his features, in that particular way of his. *It doesn’t have to wait, if it *is* important.*

And Steve smiled, and glanced back at the desk *Thank you, but not instead of this.*

And Tony gave a little nod, because he understood, and gestured towards Strange. *Then he needs to speak to you.*

And just then, as Steve was turning away and Tony was about to look back to his calculations, for maybe the briefest flicker of a second, they both realised…
Wait, what did we just-

But then Hope was firing another equation at Tony, and Strange was talking at Steve with all the haste of someone that’d explained this three times already, and that was that.

For now, at least.
Chapter 17

Tony didn’t bother to look up when his dad walked in, several minutes after Wong and Vision made it back to the lab.

By then he was lost in numbers anyway, so close to threading it all together, finally able to see the image they’d been building up with these individual sums. Tony’s thoughts were reserved for this puzzle – even his feelings were consumed, for the time being. He was completely invested in the way the figures slotted together, he was mesmerised by the beautiful perfection of the mathematical laws unfolding before his eyes. Somewhere in the background he heard Strange explaining again, the story falling into repeated phrases that even Tony recognised by now. But Tony wasn’t really listening.

If Howard had left a minute earlier, Tony might not have noticed him at all.

But it just so happened that Howard made to walk passed the work desk during a natural lull, in the few seconds after Tony had reported his latest calculation, while Janet quietly contemplated. Having unloaded all the thoughts that were at the front of his head, Tony was in a strange, numb sort of mood when he noticed Howard.

He didn’t really think about it then, either. Just resorted to the factory settings, just did whatever his brain defaulted to when it came to his dad. Their toxic, co-depandant version of small talk.

“And where the hell have you been…?” Tony commented, in a sing-song, mocking tone.

He hadn’t known he was going to say it. He wondered why he was saying it before he’d even finished saying it. And then he instinctively braced for some sort of reaction, resigned rather than defensive this time, and looked up just as his father said,

“Yeah. Sorry.”

Wrong voice.

Wrong…everything.
Wrong expression, wrong posture, wrong…everything. Tony had never seen his father lower his shoulders or subconsciously back away like that. He’d never seen his father come up against anyone he couldn’t look at, the way he obviously couldn’t meet Tony’s eye, right now. He’d never heard his father say sorry, certainly not to him.

**Who the fuck is this?**

But before Tony could even arrange his face into a shocked expression, his father had scuttled off – and since when did his father scuttle? Tony wouldn’t have been able to picture his dad scuttling, the day before yesterday. He hadn’t known Howards legs even bent that way.

**What the actual fuck?**

He immediately looked to find Steve, hoping so hard that he’d seen that too – but Steve was still engrossed in a conversation with Wong, way at the back of the room. **Damn it. Now he** couldn’t be sure whether that had really just happened…

“7.4” Shuri announced, with an air of finality. Tony’s attention snapped back over to his team.

“What?”

“Assuming all of our foundational calculations are correct – and I believe we’ve proven that they are – our simulations have all come to a result of between… 7.434 and 7.447. So, given that we only need to be accurate to one percentage point, at most…”

And then Tony realised – this was the number they were looking for.

“So, we need to work out the specific delay when they call us…and the specific delay when we call them…” Hope mused.

“And we will just have to call them, and have them call us back, for that’ Shuri sighed, not for the first time. They all wished they could calculate that without having to involve Thor, but it simply wasn’t going to happen – at least not in time.

“…But, from those two data points, we can work out the deviation between us and the specific timeline they’re on. Then we multiply that by 7.4, find that reference point on our map, and it should give us a close enough approximation of where they are in that timeline.” Janet concluded

“And that’s all we need for Strange to find them, right?” Peter asked, with wide eyes. Tony smiled.
It did seem an awful lot of effort for 7.4. But then, 7.4 was apparently going to save Thor’s life, possibly the universe.

“Right.” Toy breathed. “So, let me go and see what we do now.”

He left his everyone at the table to stretch and sigh in relief, and made his way over to Strange.

“How’re we doing?” Strange asked, before Tony had even reached him.

“We’re there. Once we call him, we can work out where he is on the map” Tony announced. ‘The Map’ was actually a concept entirely of their own creation, a crude attempt to visualise these disparate, theoretical figures. Actually, Thor and Loki weren’t anywhere at all, they were anywhen. They were moving though time instead of space. None of them really understood that. All they had done was work out a way to express that mystery to one another in objective terms… and, apparently that would do. That was as close to ‘finding’ them as Strange was hoping to get.

“Then we just have to finish getting Steve and your father prepared, and call Thor, and we can do this thing.”

“Pym and Lang are finished with the Stones?” Tony clarified, and Strange reached into his pocket to retrieve two miniature test tubes.

“The Mind Stone and The Space Stone” Strange announced. Tony couldn’t tell whether, when he really squinted, he could make out the tiniest little flicker of glitter in each… or if it was just a trick of the mind “The packaging is designed to dissolve over the course of the next hour or so. Hopefully, that’ll leave two very tiny infinity stones, perpetually trapped in deep space, forever in the past.”

Tony nodded, and left a little pause before he asked,

“Where has my father just gone?”

“To the medical bay” Strange answered, seriously. And Tony realised that his father was having his memory wiped, right now.

…Typical.

Was all he thought. And he didn’t even really know why it felt so typical… only that the idea of his father, merrily having the last two days magically removed from his life, seemed bitterly, almost amusingly, typical.

Well, maybe that last interaction really didn’t happen. There was no one he’d ever be able to ask, now.
“Why does he think he’s going to the medical bay?” Tony asked, simply because the question had occurred to him.

“Oh, they told him something about how his blood would thicken to a solid during the ritual, if he didn’t take some medication…” Strange breezed, and Tony smiled. That was pleasingly visceral.

“Do we know how long it’ll take…”

“Takes a few seconds to administer, should begin to work soon after. Isioma, she’s in charge of the med lab right now?” Strange waited for Tony to nod, yes, he knew her “She said maybe half an hour, and he won’t remember anything that’s happened since Monday.”

“And how long will it take you to … prepare, Steve and my dad?” Tony went on.

“I think Wong has almost finished with Captain Rogers – once your father returns, maybe another ten minutes?”

_Ten minutes. Jesus Christ, this could all be over in ten minutes…_

Well, not _quite_ everything-

“We better call Thor then” Tony decided “Work out what the delay is – tell him he should be home in ten minutes…?” He looked at Strange for confirmation… for comfort. For a connection to someone, in this ominous moment. Strange returned the look exactly.

“Better say twenty.”

In the end, it had taken nearly ten minutes for them to work out the various delays with Thor and Loki.

Strange was right, the delay the other way around was torturous – particularly given the increasing urgency of the situation. In the end, everyone had their hands balled into fists, to the point their knuckles were white, just trying to maintain patience with the task. Trying not to picture Thanos, or one of his army, catching Thor in this awkward, surreal phone call. The very thought of having to _listen_ to that, when they had been _so_ close… But eventually, mercifully, they managed to get the information they needed. Tony was the one to disconnect that call, telling himself that Thor only had to keep himself alive for a few more minutes.
If we call him back to do this ritual... and no one answers...

God, it really was horrible being an Avenger, sometimes.

It could be *painfully* frightening, and crushingly stressful, and achingly sad. This could all go so wrong. And, even *before* they got to the grief and the guilt, *way* before they got to the complications and the consequences of any failure, there was already the suffocating, sickening pressure of knowing it was all on them, right *now*, to stop that from happening...

Which meant, for now, they had to ignore all of that.

Instead, Tony and Bruce carefully carried the space phone down to the magic room. Strange and Wong were already there with Howard and Steve – who were apparently both fully ‘prepared’. Tony set the phone down on the little table Peter had followed on with, and then happened to look up at his father-

*Still wrong.*

His father had looked down, the moment Tony caught his eye. That was *wrong*. The way he was standing was still wrong…

*Maybe he’s starting to forget things. Maybe he’s just… confused, or something…*

But Tony was distracted by the motion of people filing into the room behind him. Hope and Janet and Shuri, who had been hot on his heels. Then Rhodey. Then T’Challa and Okoye. Then Nat, then Wanda and Sam – and where the hell had they been, for the last two days?

But Tony couldn’t think about that, either.

In fact, as the room began to fill up, Tony stopped thinking at all. A basic, animalistic mind-set took over, and suddenly it didn’t matter who Wanda was or where Sam had been or what the fuck was up with his dad – all he could think about was getting this *done.*
So he moved out of the way, instinctively staying the right side of the outermost lines that Strange had chalked onto the floor. Vision and Valkyrie arrived, and Hank and Scott, and then Pepper. Within seconds, there they all were. Everyone.

Tony took a moment to scan the room, to commit this moment to memory. Just in case he wanted to feel something about it later. Then he looked up at Strange.

“Are we ready?” He asked, over a lump in his throat. Strange nodded, and an eerie quiet came over the room.

Tony looked over at Steve, knowing that Steve would be looking over at him. That’s what they always did, when they got to here. To the impossible, terrible, bottomless moment that so few people would ever understand. The climax of a fear and a hope that so few people would ever know. That awful, unasked question – the question that even most of the Avengers wouldn’t understand – what the hell are we going to say when this all goes wrong? This time, Tony realised what he was doing. What they were doing… And he had to ignore it, for now.

But he still knew that…maybe…if, by some miracle, they actually pulled this off… maybe they could talk about it, then.

“Okay.” Strange announced. “First things first. It is very important that everyone stays where they are, outside of the chalk line” He warned, and even though everyone had nodded gravely, he felt the need to clarify “This.” He gestured to a little circle that made up part of his intricate floor design “Is a point we have designated as a crossroad between space and time – essentially, when we do this, whoever is standing on this spot will be affected by our spell, so, under any circumstances, anyone other than Howard Stark should not go near it.” And, again, everyone nodded.

“Right.” Strange continued, on an inward breath. “Captain Rogers, if you wouldn’t mind?” And he gestured between Steve and a different circle within the design.

“Here?” Steve clarified, for the sake of something to say, as he stepped onto his mark.

“Perfect.” Strange smiled “Now… we don’t have time for me to go into this, greatly. And I know I haven’t worked with you as much as I have Mr Stark.” He jerked his head towards Howard, to make clear which Mr Stark he meant “So, you might just have to trust me on this… and, no offence, but your role in this ritual isn’t actually that important – you’re just an empathic anchor we’re using, because that’s the function you played in the original spell.”

“Okay...?” Steve deadpanned.

“So, basically, just stand there, and try to think about what I’m telling you to think about – and don’t worry about whether you’re thinking about the same thing as Howard… in fact, don’t worry. Just stand there and think. It’ll be fine.” Strange finished with a patronising smile.
“Fine.” Steve huffed, wearily.

“Okay – Mr Stark?” He looked over at Howard.

The way Howard looked at Strange certainly seemed right. He seemed sulky and slightly aggrieved to have to answer to Stephen, which was at least one of the reactions Tony could expect from his father… Maybe it had just been Tony’s imagination, earlier…

“If you could stand here.” Strange gestured at the spot on the floor, and Howard took his place, begrudgingly. “And you know what you need to do now, yes?”

“I do.” Howard confirmed, his voice entirely his own now.

“Good. Just listen to me, and do what I say, and everything will be fine.” Strange told him, and Howard scowled. Then Strange took the little test tubes out of his pocket again, and considered them. “And I’ll deal with these…” He murmured, to himself. Then he brought himself back into the room, and told everyone, “Right.”

Strange looked over at Tony, then.

“You know where they are?” Tony asked, like a man running though a checklist. Strange nodded. And then there was a long, cold, moment of silence.

“Does anyone want to say anything?” Strange asked the room in general – but still looking straight at Tony. And Tony looked at his father…

And, no.

Maybe he should say something. Maybe he would wish he had said something, later. But, right now, the answer was just no.

“Right, let’s do this.” Tony decided for everyone, and made his way through the throng to the space phone.

His hands were almost trembling as he dialled the number, now committed to memory for life.
“Hello?” Thor answered in an urgent whisper. The whole room exhaled together.

“Right, Thor, I know you won’t hear me for another five seconds, but Stephen Strange is about to speak to you, and we need to make sure you can hear him, okay?”

One, two, three, four, five...

“Right, okay, go.” Thor hissed.

“Okay Thor, you’re on speakerphone, so before I bother explaining all this, I need to know that you can hear me clearly.” Strange boomed.

One, two, three, four, five...

“Yes, I can hear you perfectly well” Thor sounded increasingly desperate “What do you need me to do?”

“Right, I just need you to think very hard about how much you want to be here right now, think about why Earth is home now, try to feel it – don’t think about anything other than your comfortable memories of this planet, and these people. Songs, foods, smells, anything emotional. Now I need you to pass the phone to Loki.”

One, two, three-

“Yes, fine, okay” Thor had clearly attempted to cut Strange off “Okay – Wha – okay, yes, here he is.”

“Strange.” Loki’s voice came over the speakers.

Tony’s skin crawled. He ignored it.

“Okay, Loki, I need you to follow this ritual as closely as you can, and I need you to think about us as hard as you can” Strange was speaking more quickly now. “I need you to focus on earth, on the Avengers, on Valkyrie – I need you to focus on here, and us, and only this, like your life literally does actually depend on it.”
“Really not going to be a problem” Loki barked, sarcastically.

“Okay.” Strange sighed. “When you hear me yell go, it means the spell is complete at our end, and you can try to mirror us” But, by now, no one was bothering to count down to Loki hearing it. Strange had already waved the chalk markings into life.

As Strange and Wong started chanting, Tony let his eyes fall onto his father again. Some part of him was still worried that he was watching a truly remarkable opportunity disappear before his eyes – but he was well beyond doing anything about it. And, in a way, that was a relief. Almost like giving himself permission not to think about this unthinkable occurrence, not to suffer the panic of what to do about the undoable…

And, truthfully, Tony was just exhausted. Mentally, physically and emotionally drained. If he’d been given some notice, maybe things would have been different. If the opportunity to get rid of his father hadn’t been presented and performed so quickly, maybe Tony would have had the chance to feel something else…something at all. As it was, he could only look at his father, his dead father who was about to disappear forever – and feel nothing more than a general relief.

In the background, Tony could hear Stephen’s voice,

*Think about home*

*Allow yourself to wish you were safe*

*Think about what safe really means.*

But Tony wasn’t listening. He was just… looking at his father. Just seeing his father, objectively…

Maybe, if Tony hadn’t been so emotionally detached at that moment, he wouldn’t have spotted it. Maybe it wouldn’t have been quite so obvious, if Tony had his own perspective to confuse him, if he’d been distracted by his feelings. If he’d been looking for the myth of his father, or the memory of his father, or the man he wanted his father to be… but, at that moment, Tony was looking at his father exactly as he was…
Something about him looked so familiar, now. Howard had looked so unlike himself, a few minutes ago, but now… Howard looked smug. That look he got, when he knew something that everyone else didn’t. The waiting look he got, before he pulled some poor bastards’ legs from under them. Tony knew this look. Howard looked…

An awful, wordless realisation dawned on Tony…

“Right… give that… ninety seconds?” Strange spoke in a harsh whisper, as Tony felt his throat tighten.

He can’t have…

“How did you wipe his memory?” Tony shouted into the air, never taking his eyes off Howard.

And, even as he asked the question, Tony realised that it didn’t matter who answered.

He knew that his father would have fought tooth and nail against having his memory wiped – that’s why everyone had gone to such great lengths to keep that part of the plan from him. Why they’d felt the need to come up with the ‘blood thickening’ story in the first place. Because Howard should have recoiled at the suggestion of anyone playing with his mind, at all. And erasing the memory of Wakanda, or the technological marvels of the future, or any of this new knowledge that could provide him with such an edge, back in 1988… He should have balked when Tony asked that question –

And he hadn’t.

Howard just pinched his lips, and frowned, and Tony already knew-

Howard had been well aware of the plan to wipe his memory.

Oh, God, he’d done something about it…

“It’s a drug, taken in pill form-” Shuri began
“Did anyone watch him take it?” Tony cut in, asking on auto-pilot. He already knew…

“I assume… Isioma would have-”

“Do you have any idea what you’re doing?” Tony screamed right at his father – trying to make sense of it himself.

Tony had no idea how his father had avoided that medication – but he knew he had. He knew they were about to send Howard Stark back to 1988, fully aware of what Wakanda was… aware of so many things…

He’ll look for Steve

Oh, sweet Jesus Christ-

“I do.” Howard answered, seriously, and Tony’s chest just seized. He was vaguely aware of the ripple in the room as everyone worked it out.

“You can’t-” Tony heard himself say.

“But it’s better this way” Howard cut Tony off, fixing him with a fierce look “It’s better for you, don’t you see? Tony, if I’d known who I was leaving in charge of you – now that I do know…”

He’s going back to change that? He wants to stop Obadia-

Oh, God, he can’t-

And it didn’t matter whether Tony believed that was Howards motivation, or how he felt about it – even if his father was going to fire Obie, for all the right reasons, it was still a disaster. If Obie hadn’t set Tony up… If Afghanistan never happened-

Oh, God-

“Maybe ten seconds” Strange warned, his voice high and tight, like an alarm. Tony just stared at his father.
His dad was about to be magicked back to 1988, with full knowledge of how technology had developed and how Tony’s life had turned out.

And, if Howard changed anything major with that information, reality as they knew it would collapse.

And there was literally no way that Howard wouldn’t act on that information. They hadn’t even told him not to. He would never have listened, even if they had.

What else could Tony do?

With seconds to spare, Tony just threw himself forward – almost expecting some physical resistance when he breached the chalk line. He crashed into his father hard enough that he saw stars, enough that he had to struggle to right himself-

But, when he looked down, he was where he needed to be.

Tony was standing on the right circle.

Because someone had to get sent back – otherwise this spell wouldn’t work, and Thor would be killed, and the infinity stones would be stuck on earth.

And someone had to get sent back just so that his father wouldn’t, someone had to knock Howard out of the way…

Tony didn’t have time to think of anything else.

He looked up and saw his father, still staggering, a good few feet away. Fixing Tony with an incredulous stare that Tony barely had time to see, much less react to. And then Tony turned to where he knew Steve was standing.

“I’ll be good. I’ll be quiet.” Was all Tony could think to say.
And then there was a sudden *push* against his chest, like he was being hit with a wall of water.

And then Tony was just falling, completely at the mercy of the force throwing him backwards, his guts left somewhere far behind him.

There was a flash of light, and then a deafening battery of cracking explosions, and then, above it all, the sound of Strange yelling, desperately, *go!*

Tony felt the floor hit his back, his spine jolting with the force of it, his teeth banging together.

Another flash of light, impossibly bright-

And then nothing.

A suffocating silence, and an eerie purple void where Tony’s vision should be.

After however long, Tony managed to raise his head, still trying to blink the shadows out of his field of vision. He hadn’t worked out what he was expecting to see when he saw… Stephen Strange.

His father…

Shuri and Bruce and the space phone and the magic room…

*I’m still here*

It was only then that Tony really understood what he’d been trying to do. Tony had tried to take his father’s place. Tony had *tried* to get himself sent back in time, instead of Howard, confident that at least he’d be *trying* not to change history-

But he was still here. In Wakanda, in 2018…
And Steve wasn’t.

Steve had pushed him out of the way. Of course he had. *Of course he would-*

In that last second, Steve had taken Tony’s place. That was the force against Tony’s chest, *that* was what had thrown Tony out of harm’s way… and now Tony was still in 2018…

And Steve wasn’t.

*Fuck.*
Chapter 18

This is a dream. This has to be a dream.

Those next few minutes even felt like a dream. Everything was under a different sort of light, like Tony was seeing everything through a filter in his brain. The air around him felt thick and floaty, like water. Time moved in the same illogical, glacial way.

I was in a big, empty room with, like, everyone I know...

And my dad was there...

And Loki was there...

And everyone was really high up, and they were all talking, and I knew they were real words – but they weren’t real words, you know?

And...I think Steve had just vanished, like, just vanished – and I knew it had happened...but I don’t know how I knew it’d happened...

But I knew that I had to do...something, but I just couldn’t stand up. Like, I literally couldn’t move...

And then, slowly, everything started coming back into focus – like waking up from a nightmare in reverse. Instead of that rush of relief people get when they realise it was all a dream, there was the creeping, sickening awareness that it wasn’t...

His father had really tried to sabotage them all. He’d been seconds away from destroying the universe.

Steve was gone.

His father had taken Steve from him.

When he could finally bare to look at his dad, Tony didn’t know how to hate him as much as he did. How to be as angry as he was, how to be this damn hurt. When he saw his fathers baffled, defensive expression, Tony could see him already making this everyone else’s fault... It was like looking at the physical embodiment of thoughtlessness and selfishness and spite, it was as much the horror that such people even exist –
How could you?

How could anyone be that mercenary, that stupid, that cruel… What could Tony possibly say that would express the awfulness of what Howard just did – how could he possibly hurt Howard enough, for that?

Tony’s head was still spinning when he forced himself onto his feet. He was vaguely surprised that he didn’t fall right through his own legs – he couldn’t feel them. The meaningless noise of everyone else’s confusion shrank back from him, as they all noticed him just…standing there. There was a sharp pain in his chest, but he couldn’t even bring his hand up to it. It was all he could do to steady himself, and stop himself from screaming.

And then Tony felt his father look up at him.

The pain in his chest went away. Everything just went away…

And then Tony was just marching over to Howard, somehow moving so much faster than he felt like he was, just like in a dream. He was just stalking over to his father because that’s what he was doing, not even wondering what he was going to do when he got there, not even knowing he didn’t know.

And then there was a sudden, sharp pressure on his ankle, the unmistakable feeling of his left foot being rooted to the floor with a snap. His brain hadn’t caught up with it, he still went to keep matching forward, shocking his whole body with the strength of the resistance – but he couldn’t lift his foot. He couldn’t move.

Just like in a dream…

Tony looked back at his ankle, and immediately recognised the mass of webbing that had him anchored to the floor. He looked up at Peter, just following his train of thought, and saw Peter throw both his hands up in surrender.

“It’s only because if you kill him the universe will end otherwise I’d just let you I swear” Peter spoke so quickly there were barely gaps between his words, his eyes wide and imploring.

Tony didn’t actually hear the words. Just looking at Peter’s face, something came back to him.
Because Tony was never going to frighten Peter. Peter was never going to be scared to question Tony, or worried about how Tony was going to react, or too nervous to do what he thought was right in case Tony was in a temper. The was no trauma great enough to make Tony forget that, no more basic instinct than that.

He dropped his shoulders immediately, dropped the angry glare he hadn’t even realised he was wearing. He took a deep breath. All before he’d even thought about what Peter had said. Because, at his very core, whatever else was going on, his whole being knew to keep Peter safe. That he was always responsible for Peter, and that meant he no longer had the option of not being responsible for himself. He wouldn’t behave in any way that Peter felt the need to compensate for. He just wouldn’t.

“Good point” He whispered. “I’m sorry.”

And, oh God, it may only have been that blind rage keeping Tony upright. Without his white-hot hatred of his father to focus on, his mind just fell to pieces. He didn’t know what to ask first.

“Oh, God, he doesn’t know what’s just happened

He doesn’t know where Steve is

He doesn’t know how to get him back

Where did I think I was going? Where could he be...?

Tony had just assumed 1988. He’d assumed he was taking his father’s place – even though Strange had literally just explained to him that the spell didn’t work that way…

And all the while, there was Loki. Just off to his left, like some fairy tale monster that someone had inappropriately photoshopped into the scene.
And there, right in front of him, was his father, like some hammy metaphor in this art house movie about Tony’s fucked up life.

“But we can work that out” Strange assured him, and Tony didn’t believe him for a second.

“What do you mean, *we can work that out*? You don’t know where he is?” Tony demanded, his voice high and breathless. And he couldn’t stop himself from looking at his father, as though seeing this dreadful thing would help him *understand* its existence.

“Hey, I didn’t *ask* him to do that.” Howard insisted, petulantly. Tony felt himself instinctively pulling at the webbing again as his temper spiked “And if everyone here hadn’t-”

“Oh, someone shut him up” Valkyrie warned, already moving forward to do it herself-

There was a fleeting, *zipping* sound and a flash of movement in the air, and then the bottom half of Howards face was covered in webbing. He made a surprised, squeaking noise that was almost entirely muffled, bringing his hands up to claw fruitlessly at the make-shift gag. Tony casually turned to acknowledge Peter.

“Thank you”

“No problem, really.” Peter assured sardonically.

“And, no, I don’t know exactly where he went just yet” Doctor Strange carried on, very carefully. “But I *can* work it out – and the *whole point* of this spell is that it will send a person somewhere safe. It will send them somewhere they think of as *home*. So we have no reason to think he’s in any danger right now…”

Strange had obviously meant it to be reassuring. How could he have known that, with those words, a thought would occur to Tony that was far more horrible than anything he’d faced so far…

“…And, actually, it’s more likely he’s been sent somewhere through *space* anyway. Just because this spell *can* send someone though time, it’ll still most likely find *somewhere* to send him, if it can – it’s like electricity, it’ll find the easiest way…” Strange went on.

“And Thor and Loki may have travelled through time, because they had no safe option *within* that timeline – but they *didn’t* end up on a past version of Asguard, just as we thought they wouldn’t.” Wong added, switching his attention from Tony to Strange and back.

“And people *are* just more at home in their own timeline, they take it as a given, so it’s almost certain that he’s waiting somewhere safe right now, and we can simply go and get him…”
Tony couldn’t believe it wasn’t already obvious to everyone. He looked around the room, waiting to catch the eye of someone, anyone that got it – but everyone was just wearing the same forcedly-hopeful expression.

Well, except for Loki and Thor, who looked haggard and entirely baffled, and stood completely separate from everything for the time being.

“Hang on – have you just sent him back to the Avengers Facility?” Sam asked, suddenly.

“Um…possibly” Strange conceded “If he still thinks of that as home...”

“He still calls it home” Wanda answered seriously, glancing at Nat.

“Have we just handed Steve over to Ross?” Nat asked, alarmed.

“…Maybe” Strange admitted. A little bubble of panic swelled up in the room, and Strange raced to beat it back “But, that would be the absolute worst-case scenario – that we’ve just saved Thor and the whole universe, and all we’ll need to do is break Captain Rogers out of jail again. It literally isn’t the end of the world...”

Oh, yes it is

Because Tony knew that handing Steve over to Ross wasn’t the worst-case scenario. The worst case scenario was that Tony had just accidentally granted Steve’s greatest wish...

“He’ll be in the forties.”

Tony heard his own voice, like it was miles away. Calm and detached, and louder than he’d been expecting. He felt everyone pause.

“You said that everyone feels comfortable in their own timeline, right?” Tony’s voice went on, from outside himself “That this spell will send him wherever he thinks of as home?”

He saw Strange go to argue with him, or correct him… and not find an answer...

He saw Strange look over to Wong, with a thoughtful expression, …is that the most likely outcome? He saw Wong raise his eyebrows, …well...
And Tony remembered the naked, human desperation in Steve’s voice

You don’t even know – I didn’t even know what was normal. I didn’t even have anyone I could ask

Of course Steve was back in the forties. There wasn’t a safe place for him, within this timeline – there never had been.

And now Tony had made it all better. Tony had sent Steve back to where things were normal, to the people Steve could talk to, to the time that Steve knew. Tony had sent Steve home.

Tony wanted to die.

“…But even if that is true, we can still find him-” Strange started to reassure him.

“Why?” Tony cut him off, soberly.

And, oh, how Tony wished that someone would come up with a real reason.

Because, I can’t bare the thought of never seeing him again, was not a real reason.

I had so many things I wanted to say to him, was not a real reason.

Because I love him, was not a reason.

Not reason enough to take from Steve the only thing he’d ever wanted…

However desperately Tony wanted to.

“…We can’t just leave him there…” Sam said, as though he wasn’t sure whether it was a question or a statement.

“What if he changes the future?” Strange asked.

“Why would he?” Tony asked in an odd, dull voice.
In front of him, his father made a muffled, angry sound as he shouted something into the webbing. Everyone ignored him.

“He knows that if he changes the future the world is going to end – Steve isn’t an idiot. And, you said yourself, very minor changes won’t matter.” Tony went on.

“But it’s not like he’ll be able to just go back to his old life” Sam pointed out.

“Not the same one, no.” Tony conceded, sadly. “But he would be able to move to a small town in Ohio and live a very happy forties life as some guy called Jimmy. It’s not like he’s going to end up on the internet and go viral, is it?”

“And what if Steve doesn’t want to live a quiet little forties life…?” Nat asked, her tone loaded with meaning that Tony was well beyond picking up.

“And what if Steve doesn’t want to live this chaotic, confusing, alien, 21st Century life?” Tony returned, his voice still low and even. “What if he doesn’t want to spend his life as a fugitive, always on high alert, forever sacrificing and fighting and waiting for the next damn thing. What if he never wanted to leave everything he loved, and found familiar – what if he does just want a quiet life on a farm in Arkansas?” He felt the weight of uncertainty descend on the room, the way everyone’s shoulders dropped under the pressure of it. “Before we just take that from him – are you sure you aren’t about to undo the only thing Steve ever wanted?”

By now, Howards stifled shouting was basically continuous, a low background noise that everyone had stopped hearing. Other than that, the room was silent.

“If this spell just sends someone to wherever they feel safe… and if this spell wouldn’t send someone through time, unless there was nowhere in the present that person felt safe… Isn’t that the answer?” Tony finished, ominously.

Tony didn’t really know who’s benefit he was saying it all for.

“But we don’t know that he is in the past” Sam cut in suddenly – desperately.

“Can we check that?” Rhodey asked.

“We could call him” Wanda suggested.

“The flip phone” Sam confirmed, eagerly “He always has that on him, and it’s always on”

“But, if you’ve just sent him back to Avengers HQ, isn’t calling him a risk?” Pepper reminded everyone “If he’s trying to hide – is this a good time for him to be taking a call?”

“If he answers, I’ll get him out of there” Strange promised, looking from Pepper to Sam, well, call
him then. Sam pulled his own phone out of his pocket, and looked at Tony.

“I don’t know the number”.

“678-136-7092” Tony informed him, perfunctorily. Thinking that he might as well play along with this for another minute. Already knowing it didn’t matter.

He didn’t even bother to watch Sam make the call. He didn’t need to see the desperate flame of hope in Sam’s eye’s grow brighter and brighter as he waited for the call to connect – until, obviously, it would consume itself. Until the inevitable moment that Sam had to take his phone away from his ear and confirm, sadly,

“This number I have dialled is incorrect”

Tony left a moment of heavy silence, out of respect to the situation.

“So, that phone number just doesn’t exist anymore.” He said, eventually, by way of confirmation.

Another moment of silence – Howard’s incessant gesticulating notwithstanding.

“Do we have to decide this now?” Tony heard himself ask.

“Why?” Strange frowned “Why wait?”

“Why rush?” Tony shrugged, suddenly as exhausted as he’d ever been in his life… He could barely muster the energy to keep talking… “I mean… Thor is safe, he’s right there” Tony gestured vaguely in Thor’s direction “The infinity stones aren’t here, Thanos is miles away, apparently… So, that immediate catastrophe has been averted… If you’re sure this spell will have sent Steve somewhere safe… Do we have to do anything now?” He looked around the room, never focussing on anyone’s face. “Before we just make this decision for Steve, on a whim, should we maybe take some time to think about it? I dunno… Sleep on it…”

“I think that’s a really good idea.” Rhodey spoke up, authoritatively. Tony felt the rest of the room simmer down into a begrudging sort of acquiescence.

Out of nowhere, the thought occurred to Tony…

It’s like Steve just died and went to heaven…

And with that, he wanted to cry.
“You think you can handle him, until tomorrow?” Tony said to Thor – still not feeling up to looking directly at Loki.

It was the first time he’d looked right at Thor.

And Thor looked as exhausted as Tony felt… Tony could see that he was carrying a loss even greater than Tony was experiencing, that Thor was coming to the end of a trial even worse than the last few days in Wakanda…

Tony wished he had anything left to spare, for that.

“I can promise he poses no threat” Thor confirmed, his tone still slightly questioning. Tony remembered that Thor had no idea what was going on… He could do nothing for him, though.

“And you’re prepared for the potential threat anyway?” Tony looked at T’Challa.

“We can keep an eye on him” T’Challa confirmed, kindly.

“And him.” Tony jerked his head in his father’s general direction. He couldn’t bring himself to call his father by any name.

“He poses no threat at all” Okoye answered, bluntly.

“Okay…” Tony nodded, feeling himself drift into his own head…

He knew there were other things. Getting someone to look after Thor, for one. Asking what the hell had happened to Thor in the last few days. They still had his father to get rid of, and he should probably give more thought to Loki than he had done… try to figure out what role Loki had played and whose side he was really on now – whether he was here as a prisoner or an ally…

But Tony was just so tired.

“Can you make sure Peter’s safe?” Tony asked Rhodey, his voice quieter now. Rhodey nodded softly, and then looked over at Peter.

“C’mon kid, lets get this undone” He suggested kindly, gesturing at Tony’s foot. Tony could hear Peter apologising and agreeing and rummaging, as if he was miles and miles away… He could hear his fathers muffled shouting spike again, as no one suggested Peter got that one undone… And then
Tony felt the resistance at his ankle melt away, his foot coming away from the floor slowly, like gravity was working all wrong… He took a little step to right himself, and then caught Peters eye.

“Thanks.” He whispered, and Peter just nodded.

“You should go to bed, Tony.” Pepper told him, sternly. Tony used to hate it when she did that. In fact, his relationship with Pepper had left him with an anxiety about arbitrary bedtimes that had stayed with him longer than she had. But right now, he was grateful for that intervention.

“Yeah. Okay. We can… work this out tomorrow” Tony spoke, on auto pilot now, not really caring who heard him. Already knowing that nothing would change by tomorrow. Feeling it. Maybe, the day before yesterday, Tony could have been convinced there was some reason to undo this. Maybe, back when he thought he understood Steve’s trauma, Tony could have found some rationale for what he so dearly wanted to do. But, now that he really got it… He just loved Steve too much to do it to him all over again – and he knew he always would.

It was over.

Tony just wished he loved Steve enough to be happy for him.

*#

When Steve came to, he was still thinking everything he’d been thinking in those last few seconds in Wakanda.

He woke up still in the middle of a desperate panic, and a violent hatred, and a bitter, angry sadness. Right in the middle of thinking, no, he can’t.

Tony Stark can’t go back and live quietly – and not because Steve didn’t trust him to do it. It wasn’t Tony won’t. It was Tony can’t.

Not Tony Stark. Not beautiful, brilliant, futurist Tony. Just the idea of Tony having to live quietly, having to stop looking and discovering and inventing, never being able to step up or speak up or shine ever again – he couldn’t. Steve couldn’t do it to him, to the whole world. He just couldn’t let a
light that bright be hidden forever, leave Tony to wait out the clock in a simpler, slower time-

And, God, he *hated* Howard-

And he *loved* Tony, so much-

And, oh, they’d been *so* close, they could at least have-

And all of these thoughts were so pure, and so present, and had overwhelmed him so completely, that it took Steve a few seconds to realise that it didn’t matter anymore-

He’d already done it.

He was *already* somewhere else, lying on his back and waiting for his vision to come back.

Suddenly, the thoughts that were so clear a moment ago turned to mush. He’d been *so* sure of what he was doing just a second ago, as though he was still in the middle of doing it. But now the details were slipping away from him, like the logic of a dream… Steve told himself he would have to take a breath, and try to remember what he’d just done…

He forced himself to sit up, his stomach rolling forward faster than the rest of him. At first, he couldn’t make sense of the information coming in through his eyes, he couldn’t sort the sights from the stars and the shadows… And then, at last, Steve began to process his surroundings. He saw the punching bag, hanging from the ceiling by a chain, and the grubby canvas mats… he had to search for the word ‘gym’. He was in a gym… And then he saw the colours… or the lack there of… The muted reds and dull greens and all that grey… he recognised this filter. He remembered a world that looked like this.

*Oh, God, no.*

Steve felt his blood turn to ice in his veins as it dawned on him. He literally threw up in his mouth.

Oh no, no, no, no, he couldn’t be-

Oh, Jesus Christ, of *course* he was. Where the hell had he been expecting to wake up? Strange had asked Steve to think about when he met Howard, he’d asked them both to think about the time they
He’d sent Steve back to the forties.

Oh, God, he couldn’t go back to the forties – that was seventy years ago. He’d be over a hundred before he made it home –

He’d die before then.

He’d never see Tony again-

And – Jesus Christ, he’d hated the forties.

Had he always known that? Steve felt like that should come as more of a shock to him…

But suddenly, so many memories came flooding back to him – and none of them were good. He just remembered spending all of his time aggrieved at the world, constantly coming up against bullies that were so sure of their point of view – a racist, sexist, simplistic, nationalistic point of view that Steve had always hated, he was sure he had. He remembered being bored, and frustrated, and always desperate to be somewhere else, part of something bigger. Christ, the world was so small in the forties – and slow and cold and judgemental. He just hadn’t had anything to compare it to, he had never had the idea that he was in the wrong time – who thinks that? He hadn’t known why he was always uncomfortable, why he never fit in, why he was always anxious or angry or struggling to explain some injustice… but he’d always been unhappy. The only reprieve he’d ever had were the rare people who were as out of place as he was – Peggy, who he wasn’t allowed to find, and Bucky, who wasn’t even here anymore anyway-

*This is ridiculous. You have to calm down. This is what it is, and you have to be okay with this.*

Because that’s how Captain America dealt with this moment, right? And it wasn’t as though Steve hadn’t felt like this before. He’d had a routine for this, once. Find a version of this he could live with, pick out the bits he could deal with, ignore or rewrite what he couldn’t – tell himself that version of events over and over again, until he had convinced himself. Until he found a meaning. Until he made a meaning

*This was home to you, once. This is where you grew up, this is where you came of age – this is*
everything you felt so lost without, once. And you did have happy times in the forties, you know you did. If you calm down, you’ll think of them-

He was never going to convince himself.

For one, he’d already worked out that the whole ‘Captain America’ approach to life was bullshit, and, unfortunately, there was no going back in time on that revelation. He’d spent his whole life trying to force patterns where there were none, refusing to look at inconvenient truths that had always been there anyway. He’d already realised that it had never worked – that, if anything, it had made everything worse…

That, maybe, it was the reason he’d screwed his whole life up, now…

If he’d just looked at the world in the 21st century, instead of looking for something else all the time…

If he’d spent half as much time appreciating the things that were there as he had listing the things were gone…

If he’d just let himself see that it was okay for Captain America to be frightened or overwhelmed or even ask for help sometimes – if he’d not been so scared of what might happen if he really thought about it…

Maybe he would have realised before now what an amazing opportunity he’d been gifted when he woke up in the 21st Century. Maybe he would have recognised that it would obviously take some getting used to – but that didn’t mean he’d been better off where he was. Maybe he’d have seen that he hadn’t come out of the ice a different man, or made peace with the era he’d ended up in – he’d always been this person, and if he’d let himself, he’d have been happier in the 21st Century. Maybe he’d have recognised that he’d always just been lonely, and confused, and still dealing with traumatic events that seemed so recent to him, and that those had always been different issues entirely…

And Steve knew he did have good times in the forties, he was sure he’d been happy sometimes, he knew he’d made good friends. Steve wasn’t going to convince himself that he’d blindly hated everything, any more than he could maintain the delusion that it had been a golden age. But he did know that, whatever fun he’d had, he’d had in spite of the times and not because of them. That most of the good times had been more about Bucky than the era – and Bucky was now in the 21st Century, along with everything else Steve loved. He knew that whatever happy memories he managed to pick out, the endless damp tedium had actually made up more of life.
That all this time he was just longing for something familiar, not longing for any of those nostalgic things in and of themselves. That he hadn’t enjoyed the food or the clothes or the pastimes in the forties more than all the things there were in the future, that the forties versions had never been better – they’d just been what he’d known, once.

Oh, God, he didn’t even know them, now.

*Oh, God I’m going to have to go back to looking everything up in books*

*Oh, everything is going to take forever*

*Half the things I say now won’t make sense here*

*I can’t even change the future*

*Oh, we’re still at fucking war*

If only he’d realised this sooner. *All* of it, everything that he’d worked out in the last three days… If he’d just seen that his problem had never been leaving the forties, that he hadn’t even liked the forties, if he hadn’t spent the last five years refusing to look at what was right there in front of his eyes…

He wouldn’t have wasted it so spectacularly, at least.

Steve may never have been able to avoid this outcome. Who knew, maybe this had been fate, the predestined outcome of that ritual all along… But, even so. If Steve had just worked on adjusting to life in the 21st Century, if he’d let himself feel it, if he’d let himself…

If he’d let himself, he could have been really happy, at least once.

Instead of which, he was now being punished for all his wrong doings with such perfect irony that Steve had to wonder if there were dark forces behind it. If so… Bravo. A darkly fitting sentence for a man stubborn enough to squander a gift that incredible. Was it yesterday, still tonight, that he’d had a blazing row with Tony? In which he’d really tried to claim that all his recklessness and selfishness were down to him feeling lost in the future…

Steve was forced to conclude that he deserved exactly this.
He had been given an opportunity to live in a time far better than his own, a time he really might not have been out of place, a time when he could meet Tony Stark – and all he’d ever had to do was work though the change. Yes, a gift like that came with some challenges, some downsides, and yeah, leaving all the comforts of his youth had been a price... But so obviously a price worth paying. A price worth fighting to pay, worth fighting for the chance to pay...

Instead of which, he’d sulked. Like a baby throwing a tantrum because he wanted to keep all of the toys – even the ones he wasn’t playing with. Even the ones he didn’t like. He’d been aggrieved at losses that weren’t and refused to deal with the losses that were and he’d refused to accept that Captain America could feel loss at all and ignored it.

He’d hidden behind the minor drawbacks of an incredible opportunity, he’d excused his behaviour on the grounds of sacrifices he should have been happy to make – sacrifices he’d made into more than they ever had to be.

And this was his punishment.

*It’s like I’ve died and gone to hell*

Okay, that was it, he had to do something.

He couldn’t just sit here and let his thoughts spiral into those depths of existentialism, not before he’d even worked out if he was still in the middle of a universal crisis. At the very least, he had to work out exactly where he was – or, more specifically, whether he was somewhere he might cause a potentially time-line altering scene. If Peggy, or any of the Commandos – or, God forbid, Howard – found a bearded, aged Steve Rogers in a fully equipped 2018 Avengers uniform... that would surely change the future.

*If it’s Howard that finds me, I may just kill him on instinct. So that’s a no.*

Well, that gave him something immediate to do, at least. That was something to focus on, a task that might stave off a full-blown nervous breakdown until he was somewhere safe enough to have one.

Steve looked at the window first, hoping for any point of reference, but found only a patch of clear blue sky, criss-crossed with air-plane tacks. Nothing to even suggest what floor he was on, much less where this building was. And Steve didn’t want to go up to the window for a better look, until he
knew exactly who he might get spotted by.

…But he knew he knew this place. He knew this specific gym was familiar, and not just because it was full of fixtures and fittings from the forties. Maybe not a significant place, or an important memory, or somewhere he’d spent much time in… but somewhere he’ld seen before. If he just thought about it, maybe he could remember where he was-

Wait – airplane tracks?

And, suddenly, it didn’t matter a shit who might see him – Steve was just racing over to the window anyway. He was propelled forward by a surge of hope unlike anything he’d ever felt before, a swell of faith that bloomed into a pure, perfect joy as he realised, he knew where he was.

Even before he reached the window, he’d begun to picture the view he’d find. That view was so familiar. This room was so familiar, he now realised – it just hadn’t always looked like this.

This gym had only been an exact replica of the forties for maybe a few months. Because that was how Tony had designed it, before Steve moved in. Because Tony had built the whole Tower around him-

Steve was back in the Tower. He was home.

He gazed down on that familiar parking lot, full of modern cars and ringed by a hi-tech security fence, several floors below. It was the most beautiful thing Steve had ever seen. He actually felt light-headed as he spun around and looked at the gym again.

Oh, he remembered it now.

He remembered the first time he’d walked into it, how completely different his reaction had been. How deeply comforting it was to see the old flick light switches, and smell the authentic period varnish, and hear the water gurgling through the only exposed pipe-work in the building. What a relief this muted pallet had been, then…

How it never even occurred to you to wonder who had done all of that, so perfectly, for you…
And now he saw how quickly things had changed. Looking at this suddenly familiar space, he knew it could only be a matter of weeks before the first signs of modernity started slipping in. How quickly Steve had accepted and enjoyed and come to rely on certain aspects of modern technology, without ever noticing he’d done it. How the pictures and the gym equipment and even the colours would change over time – because, as it turned out, there were just more colours in the 21st Century, and Steve liked some of them. How soon Steve had turned his own space into something so unlike the forties that, now, he hadn’t even recognised it, as it first was...

…That he was looking at a perfectly 1940s scene, and trying to picture what it was meant to look like.

Oh, he understood now.

The emotion that crashed down on him felt like some sort of religious enlightenment, a wordless, breathless revelation. He felt immediately tearful, and unsteady on his feet, and he may even have said thank you out loud if his throat hadn’t felt so tight.

He felt as though he had been shown.

He had seen and lived and felt a punishment he undeniably deserved – and he’d been given a second chance anyway. For all his arrogance and ignorance, in spite of all his stupid statements and selfish actions, Steve still wasn’t back in the forties. He had an abundance of gratitude and he didn’t know who it was for, who he was talking to when he thought,

I understand what I have now, I promise, I will never take it for granted again. I know what I have to do, and I’ll do it, every day, always, without question – and I’ll always be so glad to do it. And I am so sorry, so very sorry.

But he was smiling even as he thought how sorry he was – because he wasn’t in the forties.

Because he didn’t have to spend the next seventy years gritting his teeth through prejudiced jokes and reactionary politics, not even able to argue back for fear of changing the future.

Because he didn’t have to spend the rest of his life never able to talk about Tony, even in the abstract, because everything Tony was didn’t exist yet and loving a man was still fucking illegal.
He didn’t have to wait seventy years, or even thirty years, to see Tony again.

Steve might never stop smiling. Against all odds, in spite of the fact that he didn’t deserve it, he’d been granted a reprieve. A stay of execution. And he knew he still had so much work to do – but, oh, he still had the chance to do it. Everything was okay, everything was wonderful-

Oh, shit, wait – no it wasn’t.

Well, Steve actually didn’t quite stop smiling as the thought occurred to him – because he literally couldn’t – but he did recognise that it wasn’t a positive realisation-

I can’t get caught in the tower in 2012.

Jesus, if Tony had walked in on a bearded, aged, slightly-deranged-by-now Steve Rogers having a spiritual experience in the gym… he would never have stopped investigating that.

He could sort out and fully experience this epiphany later. Right now, he had to focus on getting out of here undetected-

Oh. Shit.

Thinking strategically, Steve could immediately think of a thousand hurdles to his escape. He knew how secure this building was, how well trained the staff were, how advanced the security systems-

Oh, hang on-

Well.

There was a thought far more nostalgic than any memory of the war years. So much so that Steve actually felt a not-unpleasant little churning in his gut as he considered the idea…

His cheeks warmed slightly as he finally spoke, slightly hesitantly,
“...JARVIS?”

“Captain Rogers...?”

*Oh my God, that’s JARVIS.*

Steve’s smile broke into a full-on grin as he remembered – JARVIS. As he recognised that slightly questioning, still reserved tone – because JARVIS had clearly worked out that Steve wasn’t *Steve*. Because Tony had designed an AI smart enough to know that, and sophisticated enough to express that through an *in-character* tone of voice...

*Oh, Tony...*

Hold it together, Rogers.

“Okay, JARVIS, I know this is going to sound insane, but I need you to hear me out – the fate of the universe literally depends on it.”

Did people say ‘hear me out’ back in the forties? Steve really couldn’t remember... *haha, doesn’t matter, oh, Thank You God...*

“How can I help, Captain Rogers?” JARVIS asked, still sounding slightly suspicious.

“So... I’ve just been sent back in time, from 2018, because of a magic spell that a... friend of ours did, that... went slightly wrong...” Steve short handed as best he could. “And, the key thing now is, *I cannot change the future*. If my being back here changes *anything*, the universe as we will later know it will collapse. Which means *no one* can find me here, or know I was ever here – *especially* not Tony. If Tony finds out about this, you *know* he’ll never let it go – and I can promise you, Tony Stark was not consumed with a search for a phantom future me, the first time around.”

Steve swore he could hear a loaded silence, different from the quiet in the room a moment ago. As if he could *tell* that JARVIS was here now, and simply not saying anything. And Steve knew that JARVIS was probably running scans, on him, on the room, on the activity in the last few moments, anything to prove or disprove that Steve was who he said he was. Steve hoped so – that might speed
“So, what assistance do you require?” JARVIS asked, eventually, his voice slightly more assured. Steve let go of a little breath.

“I need to get out of this building without anyone seeing me…and…” He bit his bottom lip. “…I actually don’t know if anyone can even ask you to do this – but I need you to delete any security footage of me, and keep this from Tony… to forget this yourself, if you can…”

Steve was holding his breath again. What if nothing could override JARVIS’ loyalty to Tony? What if he’d already blown this-

“That can be arranged.” JARVIS told him efficiently. And Steve almost giggled – Tony had designed an AI intelligent enough to consider the implications of even its own loyalty to him. That was…

“In which case” There was an edge on JARVIS voice now, an unmistakable tone of urgency. Steve stood up straighter. “I might suggest you move to the North Staircase as quickly as possible – before Mr Stark and… Captain Rogers, can make it to this floor.”
Chapter 19

Steve made the immediate decision not to question JARVIS.

He didn’t bother thinking about where he was on a floor plan, or which staircase was nearer, or who he risked running into – clearly, he didn’t have time. If JARVIS, with his omnipresent knowledge and inarguable loyalty to the Avengers, said North Stairs, then North Stairs it was.

Steve moved as fast as he could, allowing himself only the briefest check of the corridor before he stepped out and sprinted for the staircase. His memories of the tower slotted into place so easily. Everything felt familiar before he’d even looked at it properly, the route he was taking just seemed to make sense to his legs. He realised that he already knew why JARVIS had sent him this way. He remembered now that his gym was at one end of a long corridor – the same end as the elevator doors. If Tony and… Steve? Other Steve? ‘Me’? … if anyone was already in that elevator, there was no way Steve would have made it to the other end of the corridor before they stepped out of it.

Whereas the entrance to the North Stairs was only a few yards away from the gym, just around the corner at this end of the corridor… right next to the elevator doors.

He would have to run right by the elevator, and just hope to God he could make it in time.

He was already running, just knowing it was the only option where he had even the chance of getting out undetected.

Steve was already picturing the door to the stairwell, the pale blue fire door that was just around that corner, obscured from the view of the rest of the corridor. He could almost feel the cool surface of that door under his palm, he was trying so hard to will himself there.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the elevator light up.

He could feel that little jolt and settle as it came to rest, right there, next to his shoulder.

If Steve had hesitated for even a fraction of a second, if he’d so much as paused to glance up at that light, it would have all been over.
But, instead, he pushed himself those last few feet, and just managed to round the corner before he heard the elevator doors slide open.

Steve held his breath, which was especially painful now that his lungs were full to bursting anyway. He glanced up at the door to the staircase, right there... But he couldn’t risk pushing it open. He could hear the distinct foot falls of two people stepping out of the elevator – that’s how close they were. If Steve moved now, they would hear him. They were near enough that they might just glance around the corner, to see what the noise had been... He had no choice by to stay very, very still, and hope they walked away quickly.

“I’m obviously not selling this right”

Oh, that was Tony.

Just hearing Tony’s voice was enough to elicit a potentially world ending sigh. Steve missed Tony more now than he ever had. His absolute terror at the thought of losing Tony had lingered, even after Steve recognised his reprieve. Steve still longed to throw his arms around Tony in the same way he would if he really had been stranded in the forties, and Tony Stark had just swanned in to rescue him...

And then he heard an unwelcoming, dismissive little noise in what was clearly his own voice...

Steve felt his stomach drop.

He didn’t even remember this conversation... but he already knew how it was going to go. He could already feel it in that one, non-verbal syllable. That attitude he’d had, that outlook he’d been trapped in. He could hear it so clearly now. He could hear that edge, that aggression and judgement and... bullying tone, before he heard himself say a word.

“Why are you selling it, at all?”

That was definitely Steve’s voice, but he didn’t sound like him any more... and, okay, maybe Steve had only been this Steve for a day – but he felt so different to the man in the corridor that Steve couldn’t even empathise with himself. He literally couldn’t imagine why anyone would be that dismissive, that patronising, to a co-worker. This Steve – who he might just have to call ‘other Steve’, he was so desperate to distance himself – this other Steve sounded somewhere between mocking what Tony was saying, and questioning Tony’s right to talk to him at all. And of course
Tony heard it, probably every time Steve had spoken – how could he not?

*How could anyone not...?*

Standing here now, Steve actually began to question his own capacity back then. Had he *really* been that blind to his own behaviour? How had he missed that? *How* had he managed to dress himself up as a righteous hero, at the time?

Steve braced – for embarrassment, mostly. The curling, uncomfortable feeling a person might get if someone else discovered their teenage diary, but they themselves couldn’t remember what they’d written. Only that they’d been so ignorant, so *wrong*, once…

“Because being seen in public is part of the job” Tony sighed – *patiently*. “And because it’s a charity event that might even be fun. And because I’m getting really bored of talking to the same five reporters at every one of these, and they’re getting really bored of talking to me-”

“You’re *bored* of talking to reporters, hm?” Other Steve asked Tony, *pointedly*.

Steve winced from behind the elevator. He knew exactly how Tony shrank back from that. He could hear it in the loaded little pause where a snarky comeback would have been – if Tony had been talking to anyone else.

*Oh, I’m on the other side of that wall feeling really smug right now, aren’t I? Oh God…*

And Steve *knew* that he really used to believe he’d got one up on Tony at moments like this. That he’d *wanted* to score points against Tony, even though he never would have acknowledged such a childish impulse. He may have denied it to himself then, but he couldn’t deny it now – he *really* used to think that he came up with points that Tony couldn’t answer. It had really never occurred to him that maybe, just *maybe*, Tony Stark was as able to embarrass Steve as he was *every other person on earth*. That maybe Tony had a snappy comeback for every point he’d ever *let* Steve win.

That pause was so clearly Tony deciding *not* to say something. You didn’t actually have to be ‘the greatest strategist of the allied forces’ to see that.

*He’s letting that go because he doesn’t want to fight with you*

*Why are you trying to fight with him?*
And, to make it so much worse, Steve already knew that even if he could have stepped into that corridor and told himself all this – Other Steve wouldn’t have believed him. Other Steve really didn’t know, he really would have meant it when he denied being petty or spiteful to Tony. Other Steve really thought he saw…what? What would this have been? Tony showing off? Tony trying to needle him over something? Tony looking to score points…? 

*How are you going to get to any of that, from this?*

It was like one of those viral internet posts they used to argue about in the break room – was the dress blue or white? Was the word Yanny or Laurel? Was Tony so obviously trying to reach out to Steve, so clearly holding back from upsetting him, or…s. Steve literally couldn’t see the other option anymore. He couldn’t understand how the same thing could be so totally different to two sets of eyes. How no amount of pointing at it would convince Other Steve that he wasn’t looking at what he thought he was…

*Tony must want to slam his head into the wall – why is he even being this patient?*

But Steve knew he would be. He didn’t have to remember this particular conversation to realise – Tony had never cut him down the way he could have. He may have thrown a few tame barbs into an argument already in progress, always started by Steve, always answering some nasty remark rather than making one of his own… but Steve knew he would have remembered it if Tony had ever destroyed him the way he so obviously could… The way Steve so obviously deserved him to…

“You see, if you’d ever talked to any of those five reporters, you wouldn’t need to ask that-”

“I talk to the press, Stark.” Other Steve cut him off, defensively.

Steve bit his bottom lip to the point of bleeding.

*Oh yeah, I used to call him Stark. I flatly refused to call him Tony, even when he asked me to…*

It sounded like an insult now, like Other Steve had meant it as one. And maybe he had – after all, he was clearly feeling aggrieved over something. Assuming Tony was attacking him, hearing criticisms Tony hadn’t made and answering questions no one had asked. At least this time Steve had some idea where he’d gotten it from, at least he knew which line he was twisting into a challenge…
But what were you expecting him to say?

But, of course, Steve had never given any thought to what Tony hadn’t said, or could have said. He’d never thought about what Tony might be thinking, whether it would be different to what he was saying. He’d never thought about the context of these things – he’d just taken Tony at face value and reacted. Like a kid. Always just responding to the last thing Tony said, without thought to why Tony had said it, or what position he’d literally just put Tony in, or whether he’d said something, first.

Other Steve had probably already forgotten his own little dig. Bored of talking to the press, hm? In an insidious, sing-song tone… he wondered if he had already amended it to sound less petulant in his memories, changed it to what he should have said and convinced himself it had happened that way...

But either way, he clearly hadn’t taken his own statements into account when analysing Tony’s latest comment. He hadn’t thought about whether Tony might be trying to make a joke of it, or trying to distract Steve from bullying him again-

If he was obviously just trying to ask you out for a drink, and wanted to make it easier for you. He’s making it sound like he’s asking for a favour, so that you don’t feel awkward about going, so that you have a reason to say yes.

Well, obviously – it was right there. But Other Steve apparently saw Tony attacking him for not doing his press duties, the way Sam would always hear ‘Yanny’, no matter how many times Steve played it back for him…

And then he heard Tony exhale, defeated. Even without looking at him, Steve knew exactly what Tony was doing. Accepting his own efforts had come to nothing, resolving to walk away – probably telling himself he’d try harder next time, knowing Tony…

But that’s not what Other Steve saw, apparently. Not if he felt the need to put the boot in one last time.

“I’ve done the whole national tour, remember? In the spangly outfit. And I seem to recall it was of no use.”

Oh, you’re a child Rogers. A spoilt, entitled, self-indulgent child.
God, had he really been that bitter, for *this* long, over *that*? Had that one off-hand remark from Tony *really* been right there at the front of his mind, ready to weaponise, for all these weeks? Funny, how Other Steve remembered Tony’s little put down so clearly – but he’d apparently completely forgotten *why* Tony had been pushed to say it in the first place. That Tony had patiently ignored Steve stomping into his workshop and aggressively demanding an explanation, that he’d let Steve get away with calling him ‘nuts’ and insinuating he was a danger to everyone on board, that Steve had already called Stark Tower a ‘big ugly building’, that he’d already told Tony ‘you’re surprised they don’t want you around’ – all of that before Steve said, ‘you’re all about Style, aren’t you?’

Oh, the things Tony could have said to *that*. Tony could have argued back and put Steve right in his place and thrown Steve out of his lab. Now Steve knew that Tony was more that capable, and of course *now* Steve saw just how many points were on Tony’s side… Or, Tony could have picked out any of Steve’s insecurities and floored him with them in a heartbeat. No one on earth could do that better than Tony, and probably no one on earth had deserved it more than Steve, right then…

But, no, as *always*, Tony had let him off lightly. He’d let Steve bully him up to a point and then fired one gentle warning shot as a means of ending it. And *Steve*, apparently, had been annoyed at *that*. Evidently, Steve had once really thought that he had an absolute right to say whatever he wanted and total justification for punishing anyone who tried to do the same. Steve was annoyed that Tony had – *eventually* – stopped him being a total ass. Apparently, he thought Tony was wrong to have done that… God, what *had* his justification been, for being that aggressive with Tony at the start?

*Oh, God, because he was trying to investigate SHIELD.*

Oh, so it was. Steve’s great moral stand on that occasion, Steve’s justification for treating Tony like that, the objective wrong that Tony had apparently done – was questioning SHIELD.

*We have our orders, we should stick to them.*

Until it didn’t suit him, eh? Bruce was right… And it wasn’t even knowing that he’d once been so wrong about SHIELD. It would be fine to accept that he’d been wrong about things, and changed his mind… but he hadn’t accepted he’d been wrong, the first time, had he? He *had* just started behaving differently, never once saying – never once *thinking* – that it meant he had been in the wrong, before…

That he actually should have *done* something about it.

“Fine.” Tony huffed, holding his temper. “But when you’re bitching about what *I’ve* said to the press, remember, I offered to let *you* do it.”
Steve wasn’t sure if he actually heard the superior little noise Other Steve made, or if he could just so perfectly imagine it… By now his heart was pounding so loud in his ears, it was hard to make anything else out. But it wasn’t the fear of being caught and ending the universe, as it probably should have been. It was pure anger at himself. For a few seconds Steve had to put all his concentration into controlling his breathing, and reminding himself that staying quiet was his only priority, right now.

*I am not going to blow this. I am going to do whatever it takes to make it back to Tony. That’s all.*

And then he heard the swish of the gym door opening and held his breath again, trying to work out what movement was happening in the corridor beside him. The gym door settled back into its frame… But Steve could still feel someone in the corridor. He could still hear Tony breathing, right there.

*So, Other Steve has stormed into the gym, and Tony is still there.*

Steve wanted so much to reach out to him. To explain. To *apologise*. And not *just* because he was remorseful, and embarrassed, and he knew how objectively bad his behaviour had been… but because he suddenly felt so very sorry for Tony. Because now he *knew* how hard Tony had tried, and how much all this had hurt him. Because he loved Tony, and he wanted to take that pain from him. He wanted to reassure Tony – he wanted to stand up for him. He felt the same protective impulse as he would have watching *anyone* bully the man he loved-

But it was him. *He* had done all that.

And then Steve heard a different sigh, softer than before. Sadder than before. He felt his heart clench, his fingers twitching subconsciously with the strength of his desire to *touch*. And then the soft whoosh of the elevator doors opening again, the gentle rhythm of Tony stepping into it… and he realised that Tony had only even come to this floor to have that conversation with him. That Tony had followed Steve here just to get insulted, and now he was leaving alone…

Steve actually wanted to punch himself in the face. Which was a strange impulse to have.

He gave himself a few seconds to steady himself, and make absolutely sure that Tony was gone. Then he allowed himself a fraction of a glance around the corner, enough to make sure the corridor was complete empty.
“JARVIS?” He whispered, his voice still shaky “Coast clear?”

“I suggest you head up, Captain Rogers” JARVIS’ voice responded, clear but quiet, only over the speaker directly above his head. Steve frowned.

**Up?**

“If you say so JARVIS” Steve whispered, to himself really, as he finally pushed the door open and raced up the stairs.

* Tony had more passed out than fallen asleep.

He had no memories of leaving the magic room, or making it back to his suite, or collapsing on his bed. He had no idea if he’d even tried to process any of the thoughts that should have kept him awake. The days upon sleepless, stressful days had simply overwhelmed him, and his brain had finally shut down entirely –

And, now, Tony really *was* dreaming.

He dreamt he was in his childhood home, on the Upper East Side, sitting in in his fathers’ study. Just watching his father – *knowing* that his dad was waiting for Obie to arrive, so that he could fire him. *Knowing* that he had to stop him… But Tony was only little, and he *couldn’t* speak…

*He dreamt he was in a big, empty room with everyone he knew, and he knew Steve had just vanished…*

He dreamt he was on the Quin Jet, and Steve was in the pilot’s seat – but he *wouldn’t* turn around to look at Tony. Tony just *couldn’t* see his face… And Tony kept asking, *where are we going?* And Steve just kept saying, *you know where I’m going…*

And then Tony dreamt he was back in the tower, up on the roof – with Steve. And Tony was *so* happy, in the dream. So *relieved…*

Until Tony looked at Steve.
And Steve looked… so sad…

This was all wrong…

“It’s going to be okay” Tony promised, pleaded, really – so desperate for it to be true. And Tony’s chest had ached under the weight of his loss, even in the dream, as he watched Steve lower his eyes.

“But it wasn’t okay, Tony.”

“But it hasn’t happened yet!” Tony had said – maybe he’d said it over and over…

“That isn’t how it works.” There was a finality in Steve’s tone that frightened him. “I am already the person that will do all that. You were always the person that didn’t go to Afghanistan”

“But I will go – I promise I’ll go – ” Tony kept saying – but Steve was already walking away from him. And Tony went to say… something… And then he heard,

“That shield doesn’t belong to you. You don’t deserve it. My father made that shield!”

But it wasn’t him saying it.

It was his dad, suddenly standing just behind him, smirking maliciously – like he was doing it on purpose. As if Howard knew, the way Tony just knew, that Steve went away when he heard those words. And Tony was overwhelmed by hurt and powerlessness all over again, wanting to ask him, why are you doing this to me, dad? Please don’t do this to me dad, please don’t make him go… But he couldn’t speak. He couldn’t stop his father from speaking – calling his name now, again and again.

“Tony! Tony!”

Tony woke up with a start, his skin damp with sweat. For a wonderful moment there was that feeling of relief… until, of course, he remembered that it wasn’t all a dream.

Until he recognised that his father really was calling his name, over and over, from the other side of his door.

There was a sharp, metallic taste in his mouth as Tony felt a fury he couldn’t place yet. He knew, immediately, that he wanted to break his father’s neck – and that, for some reason, he really shouldn’t. He knew that he wanted to make that endless, obnoxious noise stop…

He rolled himself up off of his bed, semi-recognising that he’d apparently fallen asleep in his jacket and shoes, and marched over to the door. He threw it open without really thinking it through, just wanting to make it quiet, like he was pressing snooze on his alarm –
It wasn’t until he saw his dad’s horrible, hateful face that Tony remembered just how much he didn’t want to see him.

“What?” Tony barked, making it sound like a swear word. His father did a strange little step on the spot, like he couldn’t decide between squaring up and stepping back. Tony was well beyond analysing the strange mix of expressions on his father’s face – he didn’t care. It was as though they’d finally reached peak Howard. The point at which his father had caused as many consequences as he even theoretically could, the day when nothing Howard said or did could inspire any greater feeling than it already had. Tony didn’t have to think about his dad anymore – in case what? So that he could what? Tony was fairly sure that he’d never care about anything again.

And the sky outside was still a cool pink, not quite finished with sunrise, which meant Tony could only have been asleep for a few hours. His eyes were still heavy with sleep and his brain was still tender with feeling and full of fragments of dreams. Tony just wanted rid of Howard.

“You can’t let Steve stay in the fucking forties-” His dad began, like he was doing an impression of his own authoritative voice. But Tony was already shaking his head, disdainfully

“No, shut up, not interested-” Tony spoke over him, immediately going to close the door. And then he felt it slam into the sudden resistance of his fathers hand, held at arm’s length to stop him – and Tony snapped upright, inches from his fathers face, and boomed “Why would I care what you think? You don’t have any idea how far out of your league you are, do you dad? You don’t know what you’re doing – what you’ve done!”

“No, because nobody said anything about the universe ending if I changed the future!” Howard whined, defensively – taking a little step back “Everyone was lying to me from day one, they were going to wipe my memory without even letting me know-”

“Right dad, because you’re an absolute asshole who can’t be trusted with that information – exhibit A, everything you’ve done since you got here!” Tony spat

“Oh, right, so I was supposed to guess that if I didn’t let you do that, the world would end-”

“Yes, Howard, because it’s not that fucking hard, is it?” Tony sneered. “What you were supposed to do is think before you just did the exact opposite of everything that everyone was telling you to do – I don’t know, maybe ask a fucking question first-”

“Okay, here’s a question: you’re just sending me back to die – with your mother – like that.” Howard shot back – even though it wasn’t a question, and it had nothing to do with anything. The sort of nonsensical shit Howard used to throw into arguments when he reached the climax of temper, when he just wanted to hurt the other person, however he could. The arsenal he had reserved for personal fights and intimate relationships. The side his business associates never saw, because Howards ‘business temper’ was just entirely different.

And Tony even recognised that it would have worked so well, once. There was an aftertaste of outrage when Howard brought his mother into it, and the strangely objective observation, that was quite a good one, Howard. That would have hit so many buttons, if any of them had still been
connected to anything.

“Of course I was” Tony answered, bluntly. And he really didn’t care that, for maybe the first time ever, he’d visibly caused Howard some real, human pain. “I’m still going to – because if I don’t the whole universe will end, you selfish, cowardly asshole. Because everyone here would gladly sacrifice their own life to save the whole universe, and not expect a fucking parade for it, and you weren’t even going to know about it anyway. So no, I don’t feel bad for that – and guess what? I’m more convinced than ever that you don’t know what you’re talking about, so-” And he went to throw the door closed again – resolving that this time he’d break his fathers’ damn arm if he had to – when his father shouted, desperately,

“You really think Steve is just going to stand there and watch a kid drown?”

And, really, it was only that it hit certain key words. It sounded like the sort of alarm that Avengers are hardwired to respond to – a kid is drowning?

“What are you talking about?” Tony demanded, his grip still so tight on the edge of the door that his knuckles were white “What kid?”

“Any kid” Howard answered, exasperated, as though it should have been perfectly obvious. “The kid that would have drowned in 1965, if Steve hadn’t been standing there – the kid that’ll grow up to be worse than Hitler. Do you really think Steve is going to be able to watch a woman get attacked, just stand there and think it was meant to be? You think that Steve is going to spend the next seventy years walking passed house fires, and letting muggers get away, and letting bullies get away with it? You don’t think one of the people he’ll end up saving, or helping – you know he will – you don’t think any one of them may end up changing the future? In seventy years?” Howard threw his arms open in a what more do you want from me gesture, and Tony just looked at him for a second. His grip on the door had loosened.

…was that a reason?

…could that be a reason?

Suddenly, Tony was even more keen to get rid of his father – because he wanted to think about something else.

“Thank you, your input has been noted, and will be dealt with in a timely fashion” Tony answered with truly theatrical courtesy, knowing that the sudden change in tone would confuse his father enough that he could finally slam the door.
It was a fifty-fifty shot as to whether Howard would carry on shouting in the hallway, or simply sulk off – *mercifully*, he went with the latter. And Tony just stood there for a moment, resting his weight on the door, and tried to remember how he started this thinking thing…

*Right, first I have to work out whether I *should* bring Steve back*

*No, wait, first I have to work out why I’m doing this*

Because Tony knew it *shouldn’t* matter whether he wanted to bring Steve back, or why. But it did. Not because he had any *intention* of bringing his own wishes into it. He dearly *wanted* to do the right thing by Steve, he really *did* love Steve too much to hurt him for self-interested reasons – even if that love was a clusterfuck of a thing that he still didn’t understand. But Tony also knew that his own intentions might find a way to sneak into his logic anyway, subtly alter his perceptions, without his permission. *Especially* if he didn’t stop to think about them, if he couldn’t be honest with himself now.

And, honestly, the only thing Tony was completely sure of right now was that he wanted Steve back.

He didn’t even know what he wanted to do with Steve if he actually got him back. He hadn’t had the chance to decide whether he was still trying to get over Steve or thinking about working on things with Steve or if maybe the thing with Steve was something completely different to what he’d always thought it was. Maybe he was just wishing Steve back so that he could tell Steve to fuck off – that’s what he would have said on Monday. Maybe he just wanted the chance to work through everything properly before they both walked away, maybe he *still* just wanted to be clean at the end of it, like he had the day before yesterday-

*Or maybe you’ve just realised that, if you listened to Steve, you really could work this out. Maybe you already know that, however muddled your head is right now, however much has happened in the last few hours, whatever you thought you thought last week. And that’s what you *really* want. No maybe.*

And, yeah, that one was a given. Tony was fairly sure he knew that one, even last week…

And he’d been so sure he couldn’t have it, last week…

But he felt so sure of something else now…

But then, what if this sudden *feeling* of awareness was just him surrendering to what he wanted to be true? Giving into a toxic myth that he’d spent two years counselling himself out of…
But I just knew if I’d had the chance to talk to him, before Howard burst in…

I just felt it.

He took a deep breath and pushed himself away from the door. This wasn’t the point. The point was – he did want Steve back. Whatever the reason, right now, Tony just wanted to see him again.

So, he had to accept that he wanted his father to have given him a real idea. He had to accept that any reason would feel like an excuse, that he’d be delighted to be able to take the forties away from Steve. And that meant he had to be especially critical here…

But, on the other hand…

It wasn’t what his father had said, per se – although, irritatingly, Tony had to concede that his father might have had a point. Now that Tony wasn’t in literal psychological shock, he could think about the whole thing more clearly. The complexities of this situation that weren’t apparent last night… Yes, Tony did trust Steve not to look for Peggy, not to try to re-join the army or tell anyone about Wakanda… And he also knew it was a massive risk leaving Steve ‘when I see a situation going South’ Rogers in the past.

But more to the point…

The point that had really occurred to Tony when his dad was talking was that, maybe, Steve wouldn’t want to.

If Tony had been capable of picturing anything last night, he’d probably thought of it as some sort of retirement. As if Steve would be free to live a quiet life in the forties in the same way he could have run away to live a quiet life now… Tony could imagine Steve making peace with that, if it meant he could have the forties back. Tony could even imagine Steve wanting that, the same way he wanted it himself sometimes, however strong his impulse to help people.

But it wouldn’t be like that, would it? Steve wouldn’t really be free to do anything, not without thinking very carefully. He wouldn’t actually be living in the suburbs at the other end of the country, going to the dance hall and the races and the World Fair. He’d probably always be anxious, waiting for some minor action to start a chain reaction he couldn’t control. Steve Rogers could never be himself, if he’d been sent back like that. Not if he could never help anybody…

And he didn’t run away to a quiet life now, did he? Even when the whole world was seeking to have
him arrested, he still chose to carry on helping people...

Could it really be true that bringing Steve back would be the right thing, for Steve?

That felt very unlikely. Tony wasn’t that lucky. He just wanted too much for it to be true.

Tony sighed, finally turning away from the door, trying to remember if anyone had said anything about meeting up this morning. He could probably-

“Sweet Jesus Christ Natasha!”

Tony yelled loud enough to wake the entire palace, literally jumping a foot in the air. Natasha, of course, didn’t even blink. She just sat there observing him casually from the arm chair in the corner of the room – where she had apparently been the whole time.

“Sorry, I was planning to wait until a more reasonable time to wake you” She informed him coolly, when he’d finally stopped hyperventilating

“Oh, yes, if I’d woken up to find you there at 9am this would’ve been perfectly reasonable!” Tony shouted sarcastically “Excuse me for assuming you were doing something weird – wait, what do you mean, you were going to wait? What, there? How long have you been sitting there?”

“A few hours” She shrugged

“Just watching me sleep?”

“You say Steve’s name in your sleep, you know”

“You creep into people’s bedrooms at night and watch them sleeping, you know!” Tony shot back. And Nat almost smiled.

That was familiar.

In fact, this entire argument was familiar. If he’d had to sum up his relationship with Nat before Siberia, this little exchange would’ve done quite nicely – although he couldn’t exactly say why.

His relationship with Nat had once settled into something comfortingly blunt, refreshingly unpolished, lacking in depth in the nicest possible way. He’d bickered with Nat the way he would have a little sister. Part of him would have liked to have fallen back into that now. He would dearly have liked to talk to her about Steve – he’d have liked to talk to anyone about Steve, and Nat, as they
were, would have been an excellent candidate.

Unfortunately, thinking of Nat as they were just reminded Tony of what things had become. He remembered that he was angry at Nat too – and he really didn’t have the mental energy to think about any of his other messed up relationships right now. So.

“What do you want, Nat?” He asked more directly. She took a little breath.

“I’m sorry I said you were doing all that because of your ego-” She began, softly, but Tony cut her off

“Oh, Nat, I’m not – look, I’m not saying… Could we just not do this right now-”

“I’m not doing this right now” Nat cut him off right back, and Tony stopped. “And I’m not saying I’m sorry for everything – but I am sorry that I hurt you, and I’m sorry that we had to leave. And if I was doing that conversation, I’d say a lot more… but that’s not why I’m here. I’m only saying that because I want you to know that, what I am here to say, I’m just saying as a friend.”

Tony considered her for a moment, and she just let him.

“So what are you here to say?” Tony asked in an even tone, walking over to sit on the edge of his bed. She waited until he was looking at her again before she answered.

“You wanna hear something really messed up?” She smiled, sadly. “When I first joined the Avengers, sometimes, I missed the KGB. Even though I’d always hated working for them, even though I’d never been happy. And the weird thing is, I didn’t even like it when I missed it – I didn’t even miss it fondly. I never wanted to go back to it, even when I was missing it. I guess because, when there was nothing you like about your life, then the unhappy stuff has to be your normal. And then when life swoops in and takes that unhappiness away, there is no normal… and sometimes you just miss the feeling of knowing.”

Tony had already guessed that this was leading up to an analogy about Steve. But he didn’t feel he could hurry her through a set up so personal. So instead, he just listened.

“I know Steve and I have totally different stories – but the one thing we do have in common is not knowing. Being told that everything you’d believed was a lie. And, you know what? I really think the fall of SHIELD had more to do with that for Steve, than leaving the forties. Or, at least it was both. When he left the forties, he didn’t know how anything worked or who anyone was or what he was supposed to do. But when SHIELD fell, he had to wonder who was lying to him, what was real – and being from the forties just meant he didn’t have another life to fall back on. I get that. I get what that does to your sense of self, the way you have to make decisions, when you’re in that place… this isn’t what I came to say either, but for what it’s worth, I think it was because of SHIELD that Steve made those choices about Bucky…”
Tony shot her a warning look, we’re not talking about that, remember? And Nat just nodded, and dropped it, and carried on

“But my point is, wishing you just knew sometimes, or being bitter that it’s so much harder for you than everyone else, doesn’t mean you aren’t where you are supposed to be. Doesn’t mean you don’t prefer where you are. It doesn’t mean you’d ever choose to go back, even if it meant knowing again. And I really don’t think Steve would want to stay in the forties.”

“You think he cares more about helping people?” Tony asked, trying to ignore the little swell of hope in his chest. That’s potentially two votes-

“I think he cares more about you”

Oh, nope, apparently this vote was bullshit. That was a shame.

“I think” Nat carried on, taking her phone out of her pocket “That Steve would actually choose to be wherever you are.” And Tony just rolled his eyes at that. He may have to reconsider his relationship with Steve, at some point. He might have been wrong about what Steve was thinking, a lot of the time. But he was a long way off believing that Steve Rogers would choose to move eras, for him.

“Two years of evidence against that” He sighed, already thinking she’d have made a better case if she’d said Bucky…

Although, that is another point, isn’t it? Bucky is here now, so-

And then his phone beeped on the bedside table. The double-encrypted, government approved Stark phone that Nat was not supposed to have the number to.

“Did you just text me?” Tony frowned, glancing over at the table and then back to Nat – who was already standing up.

“I sent you a video” She told him, and then left without another word.
A slightly quicker update this time, as this is the chapter I've had mostly written for a while - and I won't lie, I'm very nervous about posting it. I just really hope it lands (fingers crossed emoji)

But, just in case you feel frustrated by all the introspection - we get to The Video, I promise :-)

Really hope you enjoy!

For a minute or two, Tony just looked at his phone and wondered why he didn’t want to open Nat’s message.

It was a strange sort of resistance. It wasn’t quite fear of what he was going to find, and it wasn’t quite offence to Nat’s intervention, and it wasn’t quite an anxiety that something bad would happen if he did…

It wasn’t even that he didn’t want to watch the video. He just had the oddest feeling that he didn’t want to have watched the video. That the moment before he watched this video was the last moment before another disappointment, or a fresh wave of anger, or even more confusion, or some terrible consequence – but he had no idea which.

He considered the screen. The intimately familiar screen, now displaying one new message…

And Tony realised – he had to know what he thought before he watched this. Before he thought about what it might be, or what he wanted it to be, or why Nat would have sent it. Before he thought about what Nat had just said…

Before he did anything else, Tony had to stop and finally think what he thought about Steve now. Not what he was going to do about situation Steve was in, not how his emotions might compromise the mission, not how he was going to ‘play this thing’. The time had finally come for Tony to simply ask the questions, directly, and for their own sake.

Because Tony just couldn’t have that feeling of the world being turned upside down again, without having anything to compare it to. He’d spent too long being blindsided by revelations and wrong
footed by different perspectives – and every time it happened, Tony found himself desperately scrabbling to remember what he’d thought before. And not just this week. Tony had the same desperate search for what he’d thought about Steve before he knew the truth about his parents. What he’d thought about the arms industry before he knew what Obie had done. What he would have thought about The Accords before Sokovia. Always trying to remember – did I think this was wrong before I was this angry? Am I excusing this behaviour because it felt okay to me at the time? Do I just want this to be true?

This time, Tony was going to know what he thought before he watched this bombshell drop. He was going to know if this video had changed his mind, or just made him mad.

And, to be perfectly honest, it was just time to have this conversation with himself. He couldn’t keep putting it off, and trying to slot it into more important plans, and half thinking everything until it drove him mad.

So, question the first – did he forgive Steve?

Yes.

The answer came quick and clear and right from his gut. And Tony wrinkled his nose and told himself no, it doesn't work that way. How could he have forgiven Steve, when they hadn’t even had a proper conversation yet? How could he forgive Steve when he didn’t actually know what Steve’s motives were, or what his priorities were now, or if he could even promise to never do it again?

He was doing it again – forgiving the latest image of Steve in his head, because now Steve looked so much softer than he had. Tony didn’t know this wasn’t a video of Steve giving a heroic monologue on the rightness of his stand, so how could he have forgiven him already?

What you mean is, you aren’t angry or hurt any more.

No, scratch that – what you mean is, you aren’t angry or hurt right now.

Because, of course, now Tony could easily convince himself that Steve was a good person who had made mistakes, that they could work this out, that Tony could have done so much more than he had. Of course he could convince himself of that, right now. Right now Tony was too busy being heartbroken to be angry at Steve. He was already castigating himself for not stopping his father sooner, for not thinking that this might happen. That guilt wasn’t logical. Maybe his guilt over Steve wasn’t logical. It’s hard to tell when you just feel like shit.
And, of course, there was always the chance that something was about to happen that would make him angry or hurt all over again. Tony could have come to all these conclusions himself in the two years he and Steve had been apart… okay, he hadn’t, but hypothetically he could have gotten over the rage and the pain without Steve even being there. And then he would’ve found out that Steve had lied about his father being in Wakanda and ended up a tearful mess on his bedroom floor, just the same. Tony could ‘forgive’ Steve now, thinking he was over it, only to hit play and have to revoke it again. That couldn’t be what forgiveness meant.

Out of nowhere, he remembered what Valkyrie said.

*The crime someone has committed is not necessarily equal to the hurt they’ve caused you.*

…And maybe she was right. Maybe you couldn’t base forgiveness on how you felt, anyway… Afterall, Tony already knew he wouldn’t have been nearly so hurt if Wanda or Thor had done those exact same things to him. It didn’t seem fair to hold Steve to a different standard, simply because Tony liked him *more*. Just because Tony had wanted Steve to be nice to him.

*To refuse to forgive him for Siberia because you’re hurt that he doesn’t love you now.*

But Tony parked that thought for a moment. He didn’t even recognise that there was still a little wall around the question of whether Steve loved him… He just put that issue aside, and decided instead that he should approach this scientifically. Set out his hypothesis, before he tried to decide if he’d proven anything – work out what the hell it was he was trying to work out.

Suddenly, his head was full of questions,

*Do you really love Steve?*

*Do you know him to love him?*

*Do you forgive him for what he did?*

*Can you forgive a person, for what he did?*

*Do you still want to be with him?*

*Can you be with him?*
But instead of trying to answer them, Tony started with putting them into categories. And he saw immediately that he actually had two distinct problems to solve – and that he’d always made the mistake of conflating the two.

There was the question of whether Tony could forgive Steve for what he had done – specifically in the lead up to Siberia, but maybe also for actual wrongs that Tony had been hurt by throughout their friendship. That was a question of how wrong those things really were, what had motivated Steve to do them, whether Tony could believe they had come from a good place, and, yes, whether or not Steve was sorry. That wasn’t a question of how hurt Tony was at any given time – and, actually, that wasn’t dependant on whatever was on this video. If Tony was about to be enraged by something on this video, then that would be a separate thing entirely, a completely new reason to be mad at Steve… but it couldn’t retroactively make things Steve had already done more wrong than they had been. This video couldn’t be a reason to forgive Steve, or otherwise. This video could only really be about the second problem.

Because the second, entirely separate problem was – could Tony actually be with Steve? As a friend, or a co-worker, or…anything else – was there any sort of relationship worth working on here? That was a question of who Steve was as a person, whether Tony knew or trusted or liked him now. That second problem really might be a question of how hurt he was. It was the second problem that the video threatened to disrupt…

And Tony had just realised that the first problem wasn’t affected by the second, that forgiving Steve didn’t mean that he should be around Steve, or that Steve was good for him, or even that he had to like Steve, hypothetically speaking. Of course you could forgive someone you couldn’t live with… that seemed quite obvious, now that he thought the actual words… Whether he and Steve had a future had nothing to do with whether Tony could forgive Steve for the things he had done in the past. He could forgive Steve, whether there was a relationship to be worked on or not-

But there couldn’t be anything between them, if he didn’t forgive Steve.

Of course, now that Tony had separated the two things, the first one suddenly seemed so much simpler. If he didn’t have to work out whether he knew or liked or trusted Steve anymore, if he took Steve out of it completely and just looked at it as a series of mistakes a person had made…. Then, yeah, he could forgive any of that.

But did he?

Rhodey was right – he had to work out what his lines were.
Because, of course, Tony could hardly say the line was making a mistake. Rhodey was right about that too – Tony had made too many errors in good faith or in the height of temper to insist that anyone else was perfect.

And Rhodey was also right that it didn’t matter what happened to have happened… Steve was guilty of no greater crime now than he would have been if Tony had caught Rhodey. Tony was guilty of no less a crime simply because none of his guests were killed when he got drunk in his suit and started showing off at his birthday party… or if Pepper had died after he stupidly announced their home address on national television, for the benefit of a terrorist group…

As happened far too easily, Tony was briefly distracted by thoughts of his own past mistakes. Wondering again whether he had deserved the forgiveness he’d asked for anyway…

And then he wondered if Steve had ever felt this – and realised, he had always just assumed that Steve never had.

He had always assumed that Steve was somewhere being stoic and stubborn and heroically sad that this had all happened. It really had never occurred to him that Steve might experience the same churning guilt and embarrassment and defiance and confusion that he himself did, when he fucked it up. He’d never imagined Steve pacing the floor, arguing with himself, changing his mind and cycling wildly though different moods and doing stupid things as a means of coping with it – like Tony did.

In fact, thinking about it, he’d spent a lot of time asking himself ‘hypothetical’ questions that he really should have known the answers to. Or, at least known that there were answers to…

*If he cared about you even a little bit, then how could he put you at that risk?*

   Well, I loved Pepper, and I still gave her home address to the Mandarin…

*If he trusted you, then why would he keep so many secrets from you?*

   Well, I trust Rhodey more than anyone, but I still didn’t tell him when I thought I was dying.

   And I trust Pepper, but I still kept loads of things from her…

*How can you trust a man that does what he thinks is right, above what the entire international community thinks – without even asking them?*

   …Because that’s literally what I’m doing right now?

*How can you forgive him for putting Bucky ahead of everything else?*

   Because I also risked everything when I broke The Accords to go that bunker – to help
Steve

Because I would have broken any law, left the Avengers, done anything I had to, to save Steve.

Or Rhodey.

Or Peter.

Or Pepper…

And the real revelation in all of this was simply that he’d never thought any of it before.

He knew how he’d managed to put Pepper at risk even though he loved her – but that was because he was angry, and because he also loved Happy, and because he really thought he could handle that, and, yeah, because he got a bit caught up in the moment… none of that applied to Steve.

He knew why he’d kept things from the people he loved – but that wasn’t about how Tony felt about his friends, that was about Tony’s insecurities and the people he was trying to protect and the fact that he couldn’t juggle those conflicting priorities… but not Steve, surely?

And yeah, Tony had a complex and nuanced approach to international regulation, an ideology that allowed him to support the principle while still acknowledging he’d break the law if he had to. But Tony had a considered set of moral standards that he judged that by, and Tony wasn’t making a righteous stand when he did it – Tony was just helping his friends… Steve, well, Steve obviously had to be crafting a manifesto when he did these things…

Of course, Tony was thinking all of this in a sarcastic tone of voice.

And it wasn’t even that it made him forgive Steve – Tony still didn’t know that it hadn’t all been a righteous stand, or that Steve had been conflicted, or that Steve had anything in common with Tony at times like these… but the point was, it had always been an option. A whole world of options that Tony had simply discounted from the start. As though he’d redacted huge chunks of his own data before he analysed it-

Vision is right. I’ve refused to look at what is right in front of me. I’ve ignored what I’ve always known

-

And, thinking about it – Tony didn’t have to think about what his lines were. He’d never thought about that, with anyone else. It had always seemed perfectly obvious what was and wasn’t
reasonable, what was a forgivable mistake and what wasn’t. He’d always understood the difference between good intentions and self-interest, the difference between a moment of madness and the callous disregard for human life…

He’d known, with everyone else, that it mattered if a person was sorry, and if they wanted to change – but that people could, if they worked at it. That had been the unspoken human criteria by which he’d forgiven Wanda, and look at everything she did. He’d never liked her, he still didn’t want anything to do with her – but he’d stopped thinking about what she did a long time ago. He didn’t hate her anymore, and he’d manged to behave perfectly reasonably around her at the tower.

But Tony had always been looked for different lines, with Steve. He’d always held Steve to a different standard, assumed a different model of human behaviour, asked entirely different questions, when really, if he’d just assumed Steve was a person…

He should have known that he could forgive Steve. If Steve said any of the right things – things he could so easily say, things that could be true – if Tony could just listen to him, like he would anyone else… then yeah, he could forgive Steve.

And he couldn’t know whether or not he did forgive Steve until he spoke to him.

But knowing that was something, at least.

As for the second problem… assuming he did forgive Steve, if he ever got to speak to Steve again… did that mean that they could still work together? Or be friends, or…

Go on, say boyfriend you coward.

Tony actually flinched, all alone in his room. Just to make perfectly clear that he was not actually taking that as a serious possibility, or anything – he wasn’t literally trying to work out if they could date, obviously. Even considering it as a thought experiment felt dangerously close to hoping…

But – entirely hypothetically – simply as a way of organising his thoughts… could he ever date Steve, after all this?

And, of course, there was the same immediate, instinctive yes – but Tony knew it didn’t mean anything. It wasn’t ‘yes’, being with Steve would be positive or healthy or good for either of them. It
wasn’t ‘yes’ Steve would treat Tony properly or make him happy. It was before he got to any of that – initially, it was just yes, because he wanted to. Or because he thought he wanted to, because that fantasy person had always had Steve’s face-

But did he know Steve, really? Was Steve that person he wanted to be with, or was that something Tony had invented while he was turning Steve into a brand? Was he really any more in love with Steve than any of the deranged people who wrote him fan mail, professing some deep connection with a man they hadn’t even met? With an idea…

But…God, Tony had tormented himself with that question for two whole years…and, suddenly…

Of course he knew Steve. Of course he loved Steve.

Maybe it was just that he wasn’t in a violent temper any more. Maybe it was that he’d finally recognised that he’d been ignoring so much of what he’d always known… but there was just this sudden feeling of understanding, as hundreds of reasons he loved Steve so easily came to mind-

The fact that Steve was the only person Tony had ever met who really didn’t care whether people knew how smart he was. The fact that Steve had worked out modern computer technology in the time it took Clint to set his password, and yet Steve had never once felt the need to show off with that fact – not even to counter one of Tony’s silly jokes about him being out-of-touch.

The fact that Steve was the only Avenger that wasn’t standoffish with new people, the only one of them that didn’t assert themselves with a challenge or a subtle show of strength. Tony, and Nat, and Clint, and Wanda, and even Bruce, would always greet a stranger with a straight back, a quip, a raised eyebrow – whereas Steve would just smile, and extend a hand and say Hi, like a normal person. The way that had always made Tony feel safe, somehow, because it was just nice.

The sheer number of times Steve had thrown himself in front of a bullet for someone he didn’t even know, the fire he’d run through, the pain he’d endured – the fact that he made the choice to do that, every time. The fact that, whatever flaws Steve might have, Tony was never worried that Steve would hesitate because he was scared, or because it would hurt, or because it wasn’t even his job to do it. And Tony knew Steve didn’t even give himself credit for it. He really just thought it was something Captain America did. Not a list of a thousand horrible sacrifices that he, Steve Rogers, had made.

The times that Steve would surprise him with something sarcastic, or sassy, or even borderline flirtatious – the way he’d just throw them in sometimes, like he wasn’t trying, like he always had these statements lying around his head and just didn’t feel the need to define himself by them, like
Tony did…

The fact that Steve was still slightly awkward talking to people, especially about himself – like he still thought everyone’s opinion was as important as his, like everyone was his equal, like was had to try as hard to impress everyone as everyone was trying to impress him…

And as these reasons were just effortlessly tumbling through his head, Tony was overwhelmed with this feeling of enlightenment, as though he’d spent this entire time trying to navigate the world with his eyes closed only to realise that he could always have opened them. He had already known so much, all this time, it had always been right there…and it was like he’d simply refused to look.

He had always known, and understood, and loved Steve – right up until he went to think about it.

It was when he’d gone to argue with Steve, when he’d tried to analyse Steve or summarise Steve in his head, that was when he’d turned Steve into a brand. The times he had boiled it down to that one ridiculous, unscientific, petulant question – Well, if he’s all of these complicated, human qualities that I love him for, how can he have made this one mistake once, hm? Like there hadn’t always been a thousand possible answers… as though for Steve, and Steve only, a person couldn’t be sweet, or smart, or kind unless they could be consistently perfect…

But all those many hours he’d just been with Steve… he’d always just got it, and never known. He realised now that he’d always known Steve was complicated, that that had never confused him before – Tony had loved him for being complicated, as a matter of fact. He loved Steve for being confident and for being insecure, for being scared and being brave, for the way he was comfortable with people and the way he was awkward with people – he’d always seen all that, felt all that, and it had never confused him to live with it. That was just Steve.

Not Captain America. Steve.

And it was only when Tony had to sit down and think about it all that, for some unknown reason, he’d decided to begin with assuming we discount everything I actually know about Steve, and assuming that all human beings are simple, binary creatures on this one and only occasion… And he’d wondered why he couldn’t work it out?

He’d never once thought about the man in Siberia being the sweet, stubborn, idealistic, sometimes naive guy from Brooklyn, who talked to DUM-E and argued with Clint about internet memes and always asked Tony how he was feeling the day after he got hurt, not just at the time… Even though that was the only Steve he’d ever seen, when it was just the two of them on the roof. That’s who’d been sitting there, right in front of his eyes.
And he probably never had thought about the man in Siberia being blindsided by the fall of SHIELD, or just scared to death of letting his friend down, or being conflicted over all the people who turned up to help him… But he had thought about Steve’s trauma before, he really had. Tony had given so much thought to what Steve had been through, and how he must feel, and how to make it better, when they were back at the tower – and, even if he’d recently realised that he’d still never got it, at least he’d tried. Until it came to Siberia. And that made it worse, now. The fact that he’d given it so much thought, and still somehow discounted all of it, when it came to the last two years.

But Tony had always known that Steve was kind and well meaning. And he’d wasted so many nights asking how that could be true, now that Steve had made this one mistake… even though there were so many ways it could be true, and he’d always known it. When the fact that Steve was always trying was the one thing he didn’t have to work out. That was the bit he should have known anyway.

And now, if he just thought about Steve doing everything he did in the lead up to Siberia… it was like he was thinking it all for the first time.

He still couldn’t know if it was right or wrong, if it was forgivable or otherwise, if Steve’s flaws or his trauma were insurmountable at this stage… But he knew he’d never even thought about it properly, before.

And he’d always known that Steve couldn’t always know what the right thing was. Not simply because Tony should’ve known that no person could always know the right thing to do – but because he knew Steve. Because, when it hadn’t involved him, Tony could always so clearly see Steve struggling with conflicting priorities, torn between that natural need to please people and that overwhelming responsibility to lead. Tony had loved him for it.

Tony had loved him even though he was stubborn and occasionally arrogant, in spite of the fact that he had a bit of a temper. Tony had loved him for all the things he trusted Steve to do, when he’d always known the things he couldn’t, and that had always been okay…

So, go on then, do you trust him not to hurt you again?

And Tony exhaled, and looked down at the phone in his hands. Did he trust Steve to never make another mistake, to suddenly stop being hot tempered or pig headed, to have come out of this a completely changed man?

No, of course he didn’t.
…But, now that Tony just saw Steve as that person he loved… now that he saw that Steve was always that person, even when he was arguing with Tony… Obviously, Steve didn’t have to promise that much. Tony could have a friend with personal flaws and trauma they were working through, even knowing it was possible they’d make certain mistakes again. Of course Steve didn’t have to be perfect. But he had to try. To look at things from Tony’s point of view, to put the effort into getting better at this, to let Tony help him –

Steve had to care enough to do that.

And Tony recognised it had all come down to this again. Was Tony going to keep being hurt by the fact that Steve didn’t love him?

Are you sure he doesn’t…?

Tony bit his bottom lip. Pointedly ignored the question. Substituted it with another – does he have to love me?

And…well, no, of course he didn’t have to love Tony…. But he did have to care.

Tony had spent so long believing that Steve’s actions proved he’d never cared. He’d been so hurt, assuming that Steve had simply walked away from him… That had always been Tony’s reason for walking away-

It was a good reason to walk away.

Tony had assumed, all this time, that he had to have a better reason than that. That it would be unfair, or petty and childish, to hold someone responsible for not liking him… But Tony recognised now that they were only petty reasons to with hold forgiveness. That, actually, it was perfectly reasonable – healthy even – to end a friendship because the other person didn’t care.

And Tony knew he couldn’t know whether Steve cared, until he talked to him. If he could ever talk to him again….

But he also realised now that there was a chance that Steve did care. That he had cared about Tony,
even at the time, that there were other reasons all that happened… that there was a chance that Steve cared enough to work on this with him.

And that, apparently was the line.

He couldn’t be Steve’s friend if he thought Steve didn’t care about him. Steve didn’t have to love him, the way he loved Steve – but Tony couldn’t spend the rest of his life in a relationship this one-sided. He had to at least know that he mattered to Steve, that Steve cared enough to take Tony’s feelings into account, to put some effort into fixing this. Enough to actually be sorry for the hurt he’d caused Tony, enough to want to make that better, at least.

So. That was it, then.

If, Tony wasn’t really that important to Steve… and he didn’t care enough about Tony to think about it from his point of view, or to try to make that better… If he’d managed to do all that without thinking about Tony, whatever he wished he thought at the time… Then, no. Then Tony would have to walk away, and that was why, and that was okay.

But – assuming Tony could even forgive Steve in the first place – If Steve did care about Tony, and just made a mistake, if he really was sorry, and really wanted to try… If there was any point to Tony thinking about the things he wished he’d done differently…

That just meant they could try.

It didn’t even mean it would work. That they wouldn’t try, and have it fall to pieces anyway…

But… if he thought Steve cared about him… They could try.

And Tony had to accept that he didn’t know which it was, now. That he had no way of figuring that out, before he watched this video. That, maybe, he’d never be able to work that out without actually talking to Steve… which he may never do, now.

But, at least he knew what he did know, before.
Well then.

He took a deep breath, and hit play.

Steve felt his stomach tighten a little bit more with every flight of stairs he cleared.

He tried to tell himself that there was no point in analysing it now, that he might be wrong, that he was going to do what JARVIS said, regardless – that he’d be there soon enough, and he might as well leave worrying about it until then.

But, oh God, he just knew where he was going…

He even knew to slow his pace as he reached the right floor, already well aware that he wasn’t going any further. Or, maybe that was just an old habit – thinking back, Steve had always slowed a little when he walked passed the 24th floor, even when he’d known the door wouldn’t open for him.

His heart still skipped when it opened for him now, even though he’d been expecting it.

“This way, Captain Rogers” JARVIS informed him. And Steve looked up at the ceiling, like he always had when he meant to look at JARVIS, and almost said,

*Tony’s Workshop? Really?*

But, of course, Steve understood the rationale. That’s why he’d known to expect it. He knew there were probably no routes to the exits that would be clear any time soon, and very few places in the tower that JARVIS could really keep Steve hidden, without arousing suspicion. Whereas no one, other than Tony Stark, would walk into this room…

Oh, he didn’t like this.
Tony’s workshop had always been a… sacred place, even after they’d grown close enough to share the other places in the tower. Steve had only seen the inside of it on a few occasions, and even then it was only under Tony’s very careful supervision. Steve felt a bodily resistance to walking in, like he was being asked to walk across a burial ground… Tony would hate this, Steve just knew it.

But what else can I do?

So, Steve had to take a breath, and step inside.

The door snapped shut behind him. Steve was immediately overwhelmed by the smell, the distinct mix of motor oil and burnt metal and the scent of Tony’s skin… He felt lightheaded, before he’d even looked… and, oh God, everywhere he looked…

Tony.

Fragments of Tony’s suit, lying in piles according to Tony’s unique filing system. State of the art tools that Tony had defaced with crude alterations, and computer towers that Tony had covered in stickers. Labels in Tony’s handwriting, surfaces with Tony’s oily fingerprints on them, a chair piled high with Tony’s discarded jackets and shirts and welding gloves. The overwhelming feeling of natural beauty, or ordered chaos, the same balance of random chance and perfect efficiency that you find in the best of God’s creations… Jesus, Tony was all over this place.

And not just Tony.

There was the counterfeit Stark Industries coffee mug that Nat had brought back from Hong Kong, with ‘industries’ spelled incorrectly. There were the press cuttings that Clint had scrawled sarcastic comments over, taped to the back of a computer monitor. An Asgardian rock sitting on Tony’s desk, a stack of academic papers by Dr Bruce Banner waiting on a side table… One of Steve’s sketches, taped up, on a cupboard door…

Suddenly, Steve’s heart ached for his family. His real family, the one that could’ve grown to include everyone he loved… the one he’d torn apart…

You took Tony’s family from him…

Steve actually had to take another step into the room, so that he could put his hands onto a desk and
steady himself. There was a sharp heat in his chest, rising up his throat, as the urge to cry threatened to overwhelm him. He swallowed it back down.

“So, why here?” He asked, his voice tight and dry, his hands still firmly planted on the worktop.

“Assuming Mr Stark is otherwise engaged, this is the room least likely to be disturbed at any given time” JARVIS confirmed.

“And we’re sure Mr Stark is otherwise engaged?” Steve clarified, pulling himself together.

“…As far as one can ever be sure of these things with Mr Stark, yes.” JARVIS told him “But if he should change his mind, there are still more places on this floor that you could be concealed than there are elsewhere in the building.”

Steve’s skin crawled a bit at the idea of hiding in this room whilst Tony was actually here. But he decided to put that worry aside, for the moment.

“Until when?” He asked instead, finally managing to stand up again.

“Analysis of scheduling for today and footfall trends for the building would suggest that your best chance of leaving undetected would be between ten o’clock this evening and midnight.” JARVIS informed him. Steve winced.

“And what time is it now…?”

“Eleven forty-two, sir.”

Steve nearly said, in the morning? But of course in the morning – it was light out. So instead he just exhaled, heavily, and rubbed his eyes. Jesus Christ, ten hours.

Well, that was what he wanted, wasn’t it? A day to spend in a quiet room to think about everything.

Of course it was going to be this room. Where else could it be?

It took Tony a few seconds to make sense of what he was looking at. To recognise the blur of panicked movement as his father, to see that the ominous shape at the edge of the screen was Steve,
to work out that the angles made no sense because… Steve was standing over his father… and his father was… on his back – on a table…?

“What the fuck Steve-”

What the hell is going on…?

“I’m sorry, is this not a perfectly reasonable reaction? You interrupted me, you embarrassed everyone, I don’t want you here – so, I kicked you into a table. That’s fair, isn’t it? That’s what you did to Tony, when he was eight years old.”

Tony stopped the video.

He hadn’t even meant to, exactly. It was an instinctive, defensive reaction, like the urge to throw your hands over your eyes when you see someone get hurt.

He just… couldn’t.

He was immediately overwhelmed by a reaction so strong it felt like it must be obscene. He couldn’t have been more taken aback if this video had been something horribly violent or explicitly pornographic, it was just so… much. His chest ached like there was something trapped in it, whether because his heart had stopped or because he couldn’t breathe, he didn’t know…

Oh, God, Steve remembered that…

…And he’s… telling my father off for it…

And then Tony was in the strange position of pressing play on the video so that he didn’t have to think the things he was thinking because he couldn’t watch the video…

“For trying to talk to his own father, while you were too busy to impress someone else”

“Hey, I-”

“Say it didn’t happen, Howard”
Tony almost hit stop again. He’d never felt as intensely as this in his life. He felt like the first layer of his skin had been stripped off, like every nerve in his body was exposed and alive and shouting for his attention. It was embarrassing, and terrifying, and exhilarating — and every physical instinct told him to flinch away. It was just too real, too much.

But somehow, he still couldn’t look away. The sight of his father, finally pinned down and forced to answer for what he’d done to Tony, tapped into something deeper than even those basic survival instincts. It was so overwhelming that it was terrifying, so primal and human a feeling that it was intimately uncomfortable — but it was everything he’d ever wanted. Tony hadn’t even known everything he wanted, until he was watching it happen.

It was every childhood fantasy he’d ever had about Captain America storming in and saving him from his father — and putting him in his place, for good measure.

It was every fantasy he’d ever had about Steve talking as though he mattered — and, Jesus, Steve had lost his temper. He really cared-

It was what he’d longed for every time his sacrifices had been dismissed or his opinions disregarded.

It was the answer to every sycophantic eulogy of his father that he’d ever wanted to correct.

And as he watched Steve tell Howard everything he’d always longed to say — everything he would have loved Captain America to say, if only he’d known it was really an option — as he watched someone finally tell Howard he was a child abuser, that he was a bully, that he wasn’t special, Tony was flooded with feelings that scared him more than anything...but he couldn’t stop them.

He couldn’t stop that swell of pride he felt in Steve, he couldn’t convince himself that he had no right to feel it, that he’d feel like an idiot for this later.

He couldn’t help that sudden rush of hope, he couldn’t push it back to anything near reasonable.

And he couldn’t...oh, God, he couldn’t...

He couldn’t let himself feel cared about, like this. He had to defend himself from that, he had to be
ready for that to be snatched away…

But he couldn’t help it. He couldn’t stop that warm, protected feeling from smothering him, he couldn’t fight that little spike of joy every time Steve mentioned him.

And then his father cut in again,

“Jesus Christ Steve, are you actually fucking dating him?”

And Tony felt his chest seize, like he’d suddenly been thrown from a high ledge. A bitter taste, knowing it was so typical of his father to snatch this away, just as Tony had dared to hope. Steve had been so close to saying something else and, thanks to his father, now Steve had to stop and puncture Tony’s heart. He had to say in actual words-

“I am madly in love with your son! Why wouldn’t I be?”

Tony made a high-pitched gasping sound that he would have been embarrassed by, if he’d been capable. He tried to stop the video again, and missed the button.

“And I swear to God, if you utter one bigoted or mocking statement right now, you’re going to get your spine snapped by someone who’s talking like a homosexual, and I will personally see to it that no one in Wakanda uses a painkiller before they fix you up and send you home – so shut up”

Tony managed to pause the video, the last lines ringing loud in his ears, the line before still echoing around his head.

Jesus Christ, he didn’t know how to feel this much.

Because those last lines were about as amazing an event as Tony had ever hoped to witness, every bit as heroic and impressive and affecting as anything he’d ever seen Steve do. He wanted to just be floored by that, to just take a minute to be as madly in love with Steve as he’d ever been-

But Steve had just said he was madly in love with Tony.
And… God, Tony didn’t have space in his head for all this-

*He did just say that, didn’t he? I haven’t done something really awful, like misheard that-*

Be even *he* wasn’t that fucking oblivious. It might’ve *literally* taken footage of Steve saying the actual, unambiguous words *I. Am. Madly. In. Love. With. You…*

Tony looked at the screen, and realised what he was holding.

And then he couldn’t stop himself remembering.

*I didn’t tell you about your parents because I didn’t want to lose you*

*Because I love you, because you were all I had*

*You are… spectacular, so far out of my league, but I wanted you anyway. You made me feel safe when everything was falling apart, you made me feel happy when I never thought I would, and I just wanted to hold on to that, and that was all I thought, and I’m sorry*

Oh, God, Tony was *really* fucking oblivious, wasn’t he? Steve had already *told* him all this… *tried* to tell him-

*And I told him it was too late, and I walked away from him.*

Suddenly Tony’s eyes were full of unshed tears. He had to squint through them to see… *Jesus Christ, still nearly two minutes?*

*What more can there be?*

*That’s still a long time for him to take it back, or explain what he really meant, or for my father to ruin it, or… something…*

And, *now,* Tony just felt like he had to get through it – like he had to be sure that how it ended… like he only had a minute and forty seven seconds to go before he could *know* that this wasn’t about to be snatched away –
Then he’d break down over it.

“Why does that surprise you?”

It was like Steve was speaking right to Tony, now. And Tony didn’t know whether he felt defensive or ashamed when he heard that question. Tony didn’t know why he didn’t enjoy listening to Steve say everything he had ever longed to hear – why he panicked. What made it so viscerally uncomfortable, why he still felt that urge to close his eyes. He felt every bit as vulnerable and exposed as he would standing naked in front of a crowd of people –

And he couldn’t stop it.

Tony couldn’t jump in with a joke or a question or a deflection. He couldn’t mock or fight or run his way out of this – it was a video. If Steve had tried to say any of this to his face, Tony would have stopped him ages ago, he would have just had to. And then he remembered…

You’re the only person I’ve ever met who’s trying to look worse than they are. And Christ, God help me if I ever was trying to be nice to you.

…But Tony really hadn’t known he was bad as this. He hadn’t realised he’d literally want to eat himself, if anyone were really, unironically, outright nice about him – it wasn’t like many people had tried…

Oh, God – had Steve tried?

And now Tony had no choice but to sit there and listen while Steve sermonised about him. While he called Tony brave and resourceful and smart and determined and spectacular. While he called Howard out for being jealous of Tony – and, okay, that one felt quite good. Tony had nursed that particular injustice his entire life, especially since the one time he’d called his father out for it and been rewarded with one of Howards rare but devastating blows to the face. He was so glad that Steve had told his father that, he was vindicated and satisfied to see Howard unable to answer to it…

And, okay, maybe he was glad, listening to Steve say Howard hadn’t deserved him…

Maybe it did feel good, having heard all this…

Listening to Steve say he loved him…
“-and I swear if you make one more comment about him, if you try to undermine him or put him down just one more time, you will regret it. Do you understand that?”

“Yes! Fine, okay, got it…”

And Tony thought back to his father, scuttling away from him…

You can’t hurt me anymore. Captain America says you can’t. Steve says you can’t.

He felt it as a sudden rush of air, a deep, cleansing breath that reached every part of him. It was too late to think about protecting himself from this; he already felt it. It was here. Done. Tony felt loved. He felt special. He felt it as purely and as deeply as he would have as a little boy, if he’d ever known as a little boy that someone would look after him. And it was every bit as raw, and as frightening, and as humiliating as it had been a few minutes earlier…

But he liked it.

And then.

“And the next time you want to torture Tony with this ridiculous myth you’ve built about me – the next time you want to ask him what Captain America would think of him – you can tell him this. You can tell him that I think he’s astounding. That I think he’s a better man than you’ll ever be – a better man than I am. You can tell him I am in awe of his bravery, and overwhelmed by his kindness, and amazed by his brilliance, and that he is what I want to be, when I grow up.”

Oh, Steve…

Tony didn’t see the last few seconds of the video. The long, hard stare at the end, and Steve storming passed Natasha so forcefully that she had to leap back. The screen cutting to black, and the cheerful enquiry – replay? Tony couldn’t read the word. Tony couldn’t see anything, right now.

He couldn’t think about what this had changed in the fight between him and Steve, how it fit into everything he’d been thinking before – whatever the hell that was. He’d do that later. Not right now.
He couldn’t think about everything he thought he’d known, all those assumptions and assertions that had been completely changed, all the subsequent conclusions that must be wrong… all those conversations he’d have to rethink, all those decisions he’d made… He’d have to think about all of them later. But not right now.

He couldn’t think about where Steve was, or why he was there, or whether Tony would ever see him again… later. He’d do it later.

Later, Tony would work out what he thought and what he wanted and whether this really had fundamentally changed him, the way he felt it had.

Later, he’d watch this video again.

But right now, all Tony could do was feel all those years of loneliness and injustices and questions that he couldn’t find the thoughts for… feel everything begin to break away. Tony Stark, who had never let himself feel cared about by anyone before, now had nowhere to hide. No way to deny that he was cared about, and protected – and loved.

All he could do right now was hold the phone to his chest, and cry.
Tony thought he’d cried it all out.

He’d certainly cried for a long while, curled in on himself, his whole body trembling with the force of it. There hadn’t been a single thought in his head the whole time. Just a wordless wall of feelings and the relief of shedding all those tears.

Eventually he’d come to a painful, shuddering stop, and he’d assumed that meant there was nothing more… and then he hadn’t known what to do. His thoughts hadn’t come back to him when the feelings finally eased. There were a good few moments in the middle there that were just strangely… empty.

He didn’t really remember putting the phone down and getting up off of the bed. He didn’t decide to have a shower, as such. He hadn’t really thought of that as the first step in getting ready for the day, and he certainly had no idea what ‘the day’ was going to entail, now… But, for right now, having a shower seemed to fit the specific gap in time that he’d been left with. He just sort of… did it…

And then he was just standing there under the spray, letting the warm water fall over his head… and the thoughts started waking up again. Stretching into life out of the numbness, uncurling in his head without any warning-

Maybe my dad really was thinking of making it better, after Steve said-

Does that mean Steve was in love with me way back at the beginning? All that time, when I thought-

Does everyone know this except me? Is that what Rhodey means, when he keeps saying-

What if Nat hadn’t filmed it? What if she hadn’t been there? Would he ever have-

So, when Steve punched my dad the first time…

What if it really is too late?

Oh please, I don’t want it to be too late-

And then it turned out, there were more tears – different tears this time. This was more than the simple physical release of before. This was a deeper, emotional thing…this was him just letting
himself cry while he *thought* these things, letting the shower wash everything away.

He gave it a few minutes, not bothering to order his thoughts anymore, not caring what sounded ridiculous or unreasonable or whether it contradicted itself. He just let it *all* flow, like something had been cut open inside him – but it wasn’t an injury. It was *meant* to be cut open. It was something that had been… *scarred* shut inside him, and it was as though it had just *broken*… The second time, the crying actually felt quite good. That time, he felt a little bit better for it. And when *that* reaction had exhausted himself, Tony realised-

He clearly wasn’t going to work through all of this in time.

The things Tony was feeling now, the issues he was confronting, were about more than him and Steve and the last two years – and God knows, *that* would have been enough. Just hearing Steve say he loved him would probably have thrown Tony a bit… that was without the whole thing with his dad, without it being the first time anyone had stepped in to protect Tony like that, without all the *other* things Steve had said and the deep-rooted anxieties they related back to… He was going to need a couple of hours on his own with this one, at the *very* least.

And he just didn’t have them, right now.

The immediate reaction had been unstoppable, but now Tony had a choice between indulging it or leaving the real analysis until later. Except he didn’t really, because Steve was still stranded in the 1940s, and Tony *still* didn’t know what they were supposed to do about that – and his father had put the idea in his head that they maybe *didn’t* have all the time in the world to think about it…

*And you don’t know how the magic of this works, if it gets more and more risky the longer you wait…*  
*Jesus, I really should have thought about that last night – what the fuck was I thinking, last night?  
*How am I supposed to think about that, without thinking about that video…*

Tony snapped the shower off, and shook the water out of his hair. He was firmly deciding against indulging this now. He was going with putting the personal stuff aside, at least until he knew whether Steve was going to be here for the personal stuff or not-

*So, how *did* he work that out?*
…Well, not on his own. Thinking about it, this obviously had to go back to the group – that might even have been what they decided last night… God, he’d been no use to anyone last night. He had to pull himself together.

Get dressed.

Talk to T’Challa, get everyone together

See what everyone thinks about leaving Steve in the forties. Whether they think Steve would be happier there. If everyone thought Steve could be trusted to stay there, even if he was happier…

And suddenly, Tony remembered just how hurt he’d been when everyone in Wakanda had a little conference about him. How bitter he’d been to think that they’d all discussed whether to tell him about his own father, thinking of the cold, inaccurate criteria they’d used… The mental image of other people weighing up how important this might be to him versus how likely he was to fuck it up… He still hated the idea of everyone discussing him the way he was literally about to discuss Steve…

*Leaving the personal revelations until later, remember?*

…he had no choice but to discuss this without Steve. After that, he’d have all the time in the world to decide whether he felt bad for yelling at Steve and smashing the flip phone, or if the situations actually were different or… or a thousand other things.

Right now, he just had to get on with this.

*%

Steve had stepped through the debris of Tony’s workshop with more care than he showed when he defused bombs.

He stopped when he reached a little work stool – not the most comfortable place to sit for ten hours, but it was close to the door and reasonably isolated, and that was more important. Steve couldn’t help thinking that, even if it was the room least likely to be disturbed, it was surely the room he was most likely to change the world from…

*It’s the room he usually changes the world from…*
Of course, it was a purely poetic parallel. Steve wasn’t worried he’d accidentally rewrite scientific
theory or renovate an entire field of engineering, the way Tony did when he squirrelled himself away
here – Steve was just worried he’d tread on something important. Accidentally spill coffee on the
plans for ULTRON, or delete FRIDAY, or something-

No. The stool was fine.

And it wasn’t like he didn’t have plenty of thoughts to distract him from any physical discomfort. His
head swam with the sheer noise of all the questions in it, all the different points to be answered, all
the disconnected connections that were occurring to him. He didn’t know where to begin. He didn’t
know where the beginning was.

It would be so easy to begin with Tony. Everywhere he looked there was another reminder of Tony,
something to spark a whole new train of thought with a thousand subsequent revelations-

He was always working on so many things at once

I just accepted all that tech, I never once thought of the effort that went into making it.

When did I think he found time for the partying and drinking I assumed he was
doing?

He must know so much to have invented JARVIS

JARVIS’ name is scrawled all over this place, as much as any of ours

Tony sacrificed a friend when he saved the world from ULTRON, and never
said a word.

There is so much of him crammed into this tiny little space

He used to have the whole building for his stuff, this was all his once.

We just came in and took over and felt at home…because he let us…

Steve could have spent the entire day on any one of those points and still not reached the end. He
wanted to think about Tony, and he could easily find a justification. There was no question that Tony
was his deepest regret. Tony was all of his great regrets, the victim of all his worst mistakes –
without doubt, the greatest loss of Steve’s life. Greater even than Bucky, because Bucky had been
taken from him. It was agonising, and unfair, and Steve would never stop wishing he’d just grabbed
Bucky’s hand in time… but Bucky dying was still simply ‘a tragic thing that had happened’. Missing his hand was something Steve had done, not who he was. Whereas Steve had lost Tony. It had been entirely avoidable, and a completely fair consequence, and it was all down to the person Steve had become. It wouldn’t be hard to convince himself that Tony was his whole problem, that that was what he was here to think about. Oh, to spend the day listing everything he wished he known about Tony, all the times he would’ve treated Tony differently - If I could just start over with Tony… That would have been neater. Less uncomfortable.

Because the truth was, this didn’t begin with Tony. Steve hadn’t just had a problem with Tony, he hadn’t just screwed it up this one time.

Steve had to acknowledge that this began with him. With the things Steve had done, and said, and thought. This began with who Steve was now, who he was going to become – who he’d always been.

It was easier to say, ‘Other Steve’. To distance himself from that person and simply proclaim I can’t imagine what he was thinking. But it wasn’t another Steve, and it wasn’t enough to say he just couldn’t understand what came over him. Steve had to work out what Other Steve – what he – had been thinking at the time. He had to try to remember being that person, to find a way to empathise with such unreasonable behaviour.

Because, if he didn’t, then he was doomed to keep on doing it. Blanket denouncement like that was what he’d always done, what the problem had been all along. Trying to draw a line under the things that had come before, denying them, distancing himself from them – refusing to deal with them. Refusing to learn from them or make amends for them or apologise for them. Always trying to keep it neat. Well, it wasn’t neat, was it? It was a complicated, heart-breaking clusterfuck. A total mess of mistakes and hurt feelings that he might never finish untangling-

But he knew it had to start with him.

So, where did he begin?

You must promise me one thing. That you will stay who you are. Not a perfect soldier, but a good man.

Steve decided to start by wondering – was he a good man then? Because that might not be where he began, per se… but at least he could say that, when he met Erskine, he was just Steve. That was before Steve was a man out of time, when he wasn’t Captain America, when he wasn’t even a member of the United States Army yet. And that was after he had to be the head of his household,
after his mother died and his responsibility for her care and her expectations had ended. Whatever he was at any other time, at the Stark Expo, 1943, he was simply Steve Rogers. Funny really, to think that the last time he’d been completely free, he’d been standing under a big, illuminated sign: STARK. A sign from the future…

So, had he been a good man, then?

He was pretty sure he thought he was, at the time. He certainly remembered everyone saying he was, causally, as though it were a given – Sarah Roger’s son, nice boy, always ill. But then, people used to say that about a lot of people that would never be called ‘nice’ now. Steve could remember plenty of ‘good men’ who’d be immediately denounced as racists, or sexists, or homophobes, today. Men who would have been sincerely shocked to find that label had been taken away from them – for reasons that had simply never counted, before. Steve was fairly confident he’d not committed those particular crimes, that he’d disliked them in others, even at the time. But that wasn’t to say that he didn’t have other flaws, qualities that everyone had simply been more forgiving of in 1943.

If he was going to do this thing, he was going to do it right from the start.

Did he like that scrawny kid from Brooklyn? The guy who got beaten up in alleys and kept trying to lie his way into the army, the kid who never cheated in schoolyard games and couldn’t walk passed an elderly person struggling with shopping bags and blushed bright red every time he introduced himself? Picturing that person, Steve immediately felt that he’d liked himself a lot more then than he did now. Maybe it was simply that, then, he’d made fewer mistakes. Maybe there were just fewer stains on that image of himself… But that kid in his memories immediately felt like a purer, better person than the man he’d become…

Although…

As Steve thought back to his younger self… as he thought through all his adolescent decisions with his adult brain, and recalled some of his youthful encounters for the first time since they happened…

I’ve always been a defensive little prick though, haven’t I?

Apparently, some things were clearer from a distance. Or, maybe it was just easier to evaluate that version of himself as a person, to accept the parts of himself that hadn’t fit the image but had always been there none the less… either way, it was suddenly quite clear that – even if he had been well meaning, and thoughtful, and honest… he had always been a defensive little prick, too. Little man syndrome perhaps, overcompensating for his vulnerabilities, or maybe he had just been rallying against the injustices of the world – whatever. However he chose to dress it up… he’d never been
good at accepting criticism, he had always hated admitting when he’d been wrong, he had always been spoiling for a fight.

In spite of which, Steve probably did like the person he’d been, back then.

Because, back when he was twenty-four, that quality had been one of many. Back then, that flaw hadn’t run deep enough to undo everything else he was. And, back then, that particular trait could have gone either way. He still could have grown out of it, worked on it, become a genuinely good person with a standardly but not unduly embarrassing youth. It could still have developed into a healthier sort of determination, a real confidence in himself, or even just a better managed problem…

But he hadn’t worked on it, had he? He’d done the complete opposite – he’d used the worst part of himself as a coping mechanism.

With hindsight, it was a particularly unfortunate quality to have, waking up in the 21st Century for the first time. Steve had always been on the look out for a slight or a challenge anyway, before he was surrounded by words he didn’t understand and social rules that had all changed… He’d gone with being defensive rather than deal with it. He’d turned his failure to evaluate himself into an ideology, a way of sorting everything he didn’t understand – he couldn’t be sure of anything else, so he decided to be sure of himself. To assume he was right, and go from there…

And it had been so easy to do that. The perfect storm of who he was as a person and the situation he found himself in. A clash of circumstances and personal challenges that could only lead to something dramatic. And he could have used that opportunity to examine all the flaws that had held him back, to recognise that his life had changed and to decide not to take his greatest failings on to the next stage… like Tony did… But no. That would have been hard, and Steve was hurting, and he didn’t want to. So, instead he’d done the other thing. He’d committed to that failing, because that was what came naturally to him, a coping strategy that had required less effort… It had been easier to revert to form, that was all.

He sighed, recognising that that one mistake had been the foundation of so many of the others. The thing that had turned his every other failing into such a big fucking deal. He had done that, to himself. So many tiny little wounds that would have caused no harm to anyone, if he hadn’t let them fester. So many weaknesses he could have overcome if he’d stopped pretending that they were strengths. If he could just tell his younger self that he wasn’t sure, that he couldn’t be sure and he didn’t have to be sure… If only he’d known that, so many things could have been different.

The guy who turned up at the Stark Expo was probably a good kid. He hadn’t been perfect, by any means – but he had been doing okay, up until then. He’d had the potential to keep getting better, to really be something good…
And if he looked very hard, maybe Steve could still see that kid in the man taking his anger out on a vintage punching bag, twelve floors below. He could see the defensive streak, certainly. In fact, the kindest interpretation he could find of that earlier exchange was probably that he’d been a spikey, frightened little ball of anxiety when he had it. That at least some of that aggression had been misplaced panic at what might upend his world next. It was marginally better than him just being an ass, he supposed…

But he knew it wasn’t good enough.

Actually, it was so basic a reason that it actually embarrassed him more. If he could have traced his mistakes back to a more complicated trauma, if he could have convinced himself it really was all rooted in the impossible things he’d lived though, that would have been better. To think that all of this could have been avoided if he’d just been less defensive – to think this was all down to a flaw he’d had anyway – was just… so pointless. So tragically avoidable…

If I’d just been big enough to really accept that I was wrong about Tony in the beginning – to think about all of it properly, rather than dismissing it with a half-hearted ‘must try harder’…

If I could’ve been critical with myself without someone making me, if I had stopped to ask myself why I was berating Tony over ULTRON or hiding the truth about his parents or holding him responsible for The Accords…

If I’d stopped to think that I might be wrong, if I’d bothered with a back up plan or made any effort to safeguard others…

Steve had spent this whole time thinking he just had to keep his head up and keep going, that if he questioned himself then he’d have nothing to be sure of, that if he thought about things too much then his whole reality would collapse. And he even knew why he thought all that. He remembered the fear and the loneliness, the way his stomach would turn and his chest would seize if this thoughts ever strayed to close to but what if… He could track how the nice boy from Brooklyn grew into the ideologue demanding Tony stand down at an airport-

And he’d been wrong.

It had been the wrong way to deal with it, an approach that had damaged him and everyone around him. Just because he could explain it, didn’t mean he could justify it. The explanation was that he’d kept on destroying things rather than take responsibility for the things he’d wrecked before. That’s
why he took comfort in *I don’t know why I said that*… Because he *did* know why he’d said all that, and it just didn’t sound very good. He’d discounted whole theories – *objective facts*, even – with the most ludicrous of logic… *Well, that can’t be the reason, that would mean I was an asshole.* When, maybe, if he’d stopped to consider the possibility that he was a bit of an asshole back then, he wouldn’t be such a *complete* asshole now. His worst quality at eighteen had still been his worst quality two days ago, when he was *still* petulantly picking fights with Tony rather than accept Tony’s right to be over him…

*And Tony is over you, he doesn’t like you, it is too late.*

Steve exhaled heavily, his eyes burning again. At some point he’d have to mourn the things he’d lost already, acknowledge the sadness of everything his arrogance had cost him – that was his punishment, and it was fair. Perhaps Steve *couldn’t* suffer enough for the pain he’d caused, but he’d endured as much as he was capable of feeling when Tony told him, ‘too late’. Steve would spend the rest of his life flinching away from that memory.

And so he should.

He *should* spend the rest of his life regretting what he’d done, wincing at the thought of Tony telling him *I don’t like you, and you don’t like me*. He *should* have to live a lesser, duller life without Tony in it now – he didn’t deserve Tony, he’d proven that. And, even *if* Tony was good enough to listen to him, even if they could somehow move on from this awful, toxic fight, Steve still knew he could never have Tony back. It could never be what it was. *What it might* have been, if Steve had just asked for help… and that’s what he got for not asking. That’s what he deserved for not listening, for running from the hard stuff, for choosing to hurt Tony as a means of defending himself. *That* there was no undoing.

And there was no undoing the damage he’d done to Tony’s life, however dearly he wished it. Steve would have suffered or sacrificed anything to take all of that back… but he had to accept that even that impulse was partly selfish. He was so hurt to think of the pain he’d caused Tony, so guilty and embarrassed at himself, that any act of true redemption would have eased his own suffering as much as Tony’s. He wished he could moan that it was all so unfair, he *wished* there was some higher power he could complain to – *so, what can I do, now?*

But, hey, imagine how Tony must feel.

Steve couldn’t bring himself to bemoan the burdens of Tony’s suffering, when *he’d* caused them all. He couldn’t help but think of Tony, having gone through so much more and through no fault of his own, having no one to complain to. Steve didn’t have the front to feel aggrieved that no one could fix this for him –
Although, he had to accept that he had felt like that, at times. That he’d been defensive and reactionary even over the consequences of his defensive reactions… And that had to stop.

The fact was, Steve had done damage that couldn’t be undone. He had said things that couldn’t be taken back, ruined things that would never be rebuilt, hurt people who would never recover – and if that just sucked, then it just sucked for Tony. And Rhodey, and Vision, and maybe his whole team… all the people Steve had hurt, rather than face the fact that he’d hurt people. Steve would simply have to suffer for that, without hope of relief, in full knowledge that it was of no use to the people he’d wronged – it was one of the basic things that would just have to be, now. There was no more running from it or rewriting it or crafting new principles to retroactively justify it, there was no longer a feeling of entitlement that it should get better, that something had to make it right. Some of this could never be made right, and that would always hurt, and that wasn’t even a start. That was before he even started. Those were the things he had to start accepting before he even thought about what he could do, now.

But he did have to think of what he was going to do, now. How he was going to start living his life, who he wanted to be. What he could do to make any of it better…

“What time is it, JARVIS?” He asked, mindlessly, not really thinking of the answer he expected-

“What twelve fifteen, Captain Rogers.” JARVIS answered cheerfully. Steve huffed out a groan. Okay, he’d expected later than that.

God, it’s going to be a long six years…

But hey. At least he had plenty to think about.

* 

By the time Tony gathered himself enough to call T’Challa, it was still only eight fifteen. In spite of which, T’Challa informed him brightly, everyone was already awake and awaiting instructions – instructions that everyone had silently accepted would come from Tony.

If Tony had been capable, he might have been quite moved by that. He might have been surprised to think that even Steve’s little team were prepared to defer to his feelings on this-
If I’ve been this blind to how Steve feels about me…. Does that mean other people-

Not now.

He didn’t have the headspace to start wondering about all of his other relationships as well. Not until they’d decided for sure to leave Steve where he was… or otherwise. For now, this being the first time everyone had valued his opinion simply meant Tony had more responsibility to get to the conference room quickly.

By the time Tony arrived, the room was already full of people he couldn’t look at. His father, who he hated as much as he ever had. Loki, sitting next to Thor like a gargoyle. Nat, who Tony could feel was looking at him, Sam and Wanda, who were pointedly not looking at him, Valkyrie and Vision and Wong, who Tony had last seen on the video. Doctor Strange, who Tony was scared to look at in case he saw the stoic sadness of a man preparing to give bad news … He basically held his breath until Rhodes arrived, shepherding Peter like he was his bodyguard. Then came Pepper, and T’Challa and Okoye and Bruce, who each made him feel a little better. By the time Shuri and the Van Dyne family turned up, Tony had at least decided how he was going to start.

“Right. So the way I see it, we have two questions here” Tony announced to the group, without preamble. “Should we bring Steve back, and can we… or how do we, bring Steve back.” He looked around the room, and waited for an objection or a criticism or a thousand suggestions for better ways to organise this thing.

Nothing.

“Okay…so let’s start with should we.” Tony suggested, and took a deep breath before he began his detailed outline of all the ethical and practical considerations-

“We all think so, yes.” Okoye answered, bluntly.

Tony tried to ignore the violent kick his heart gave at that. You all think I can have him back? Really?

- 

“Really?” Tony made a slightly squeaky attempt at nonchalance.

“As annoying as this is… your father may have a point.” Shuri told him, softly.

“I’m telling you, Steve-” Howard made an attempt to take control of the room with his little theory – but Valkyrie cut him off.
“Yeah, alright, you’ve said – no one needs to hear it again from you.” She narrowed her eyes at Howard-

And Howard shrank back.

The great Howard Stark was now just a bitter little man in a room full of people who didn’t like him. He’d was stripped completely of any power to impress or intimidate, no longer entitled… Tony took half a second to enjoy that, immature though it was. Then he pointedly redirected himself to the task at hand.

“And… even if Steve doesn’t end up helping anyone…” Tony tried to keep his voice level, tried to make all the options sound equal and objective “…I dunno, maybe having to try so hard not to change anything…maybe that isn’t any way to live.”

“Would you want to do it?” Nat asked, in the tone of a sincere question. Tony looked in her general direction, but still couldn’t meet her eye. “Would any of us really want to go back to even the happiest time in our life, and live as a ghost?”

And Tony wanted so much for her to be right, that he had to be that much surer.

“But are any of us living as a ghost anyway?” Tony spoke purely as a devil’s advocate “None of us can think of this like, what would I want… because we’re not Steve. None of us are always second guessing ourselves all the time anyway.”

“I don’t think Steve is always second guessing himself here.” Nat spoke with a subtle edge on her voice, a point intended for only Tony to hear. Tony just dropped his eyes.

“And the thing is… there’s no way we can know” Sam went on. “It sucks, but this time there really is no way to check. We didn’t ask him before he went, and we can’t now – whatever we do is going to be us making the best guess on the information available.”

“On balance, it would seem there are more arguments in favour of bringing Captain Rogers back.” Vision summarised calmly. Tony took a deep breath and warned himself not to get carried away.

“Whatsoever we decide to do, it’s probably best if we decide soon” Strange went on, seriously. Tony felt an immediate prickle of alarm, an instinct to hold himself responsible before he ever knew what for.

He’s going to say time’s running out.

How much time did I waste having an anxiety attack last night?

I should have asked-
“Our best chance of bringing Steve back is to do it as part of the spell to send your father home” Strange went on, “If we lose our chance to copy that, we’ll have to start working on an entirely new spell… and that’s just all unknowns.”

“And we’re running out of time to send my father home…?” Tony pressed.

“Well, not *per se*… but the longer he stays here, the more likely it is that someone will murder him before we have a chance to send him back” Strange answered matter-of-factly. “Or any number of other things that may lead to us sending him back changed, somehow.”

“Not to mention the myriad of other ways he could fuck things up, for a long as he’s here…” Tony mused, no longer bothering to check what his father had made of that dig. Tony actually hadn’t meant it as one – it was a serious concern.

But not quite as serious as them running out of magic juice, or moving too far from a fantastical check point, or whatever arbitrary reasons fate could’ve come up with so that it was all Tony’s fault …

*But what if it really had been too late? What if Strange had just told me that it was last night or never, what if Steve could never come back now, because I couldn’t cope with the situation at the time*-

“But you *can* bring Steve back, when you send my father home?” Tony frowned at Strange – and there it was. The little flash of panic smothered with a little bit too much optimism. Tony couldn’t help wondering how many of Stephen’s patients saw that look right before they heard all about a long and painful treatment course…

“Theoretically, yes,” Strange started, and Tony bit back the urge to shout *theoretically?* in a most unhelpful fashion. “But it’ll involve a bit of work to figure out exactly what we just did, and what we would need to replicate it.”

“And do you have any idea how long that will take?” Tony asked.

“Well, we know what we need to know” Strange offered “But, honestly, we can’t know how long it’ll take us to work this out.”

Tony exhaled slowly. Well, obviously Strange couldn’t know how long it would take him to know something. Which meant they didn’t know how long Howard would be stuck in Wakanda while they worked on this issue… did that mean there had to be a limit on how long they pursued this? Did there come a point they had to send Howard home anyway, and start working on a different plan? What if there wasn’t one? What if Steve changed something in the past in the meantime? What if Howard *did* fuck something else up while they were waiting, or decided to run away, or something equally reckless-
“Unless I can help.”

The sound of Loki’s voice stopped Tony dead. Even his heart paused for a second, his head completely silent all of a sudden – but, somehow, he still knew what that sentence meant. He understood that this was Loki offering to help him find Steve, and he instinctively tried to say no. The obvious, unconscious response. But he couldn’t get over the shock quite quickly enough to speak. Not before Loki had the chance to carry on.

“I have a particular power for… copying.” Loki spoke softly. Almost sadly. “Assuming the forms of others, using what others know… and I accept that I haven’t put it to the best of uses before now. But I suspect it might be especially useful here. If you have the expertise to recreate the same spell again, I can turn that into the power over that very magic, the power to do anything and everything it is capable of. In this case, the power to find who you used it on the last time, and the power to use it to bring him back.”

The room had fallen into a different sort of silence. Unfortunately, Tony had seen the look of genuine hope cross over Strange’s face, so obviously different from the false optimism he’d been trying to sell. Ah, but that might work! And Tony was actually angry that he even heard the remorse and attempt at restitution in Loki’s tone. He didn’t care… but still, he knew it was there. It seemed almost obscene that he should be able to see depth or humanity in Loki of all people, especially given how blind he’d apparently been about others…

*The worlds a different place when you’re loved, eh?*

And what the fuck was that little voice meant to be? That most certainly wasn’t his internal guidance counsellor. That was some new-age, hippy, internal fourth grade drama teacher, or something – Tony was quite sure he’d not even had that perspective in there, yesterday. And he was also pretty sure it wasn’t the side of him he wanted handling this particular negotiation. So.

“And what precisely would you need to do that, hm?” Tony asked in a pointedly sharp voice. “Access to the Time Stone, temporary rule of Wakanda, the internal controls to the Iron Man suit?”

“I wouldn’t need access to anything.” And again, Loki sounded almost apologetic. He certainly hadn’t risen to Tony’s combative tone. “It would be all your spell, it would be conducted by you, I’m just offering…a little boost. And a chance to know by magic what it seems you’ll need weeks to work out, otherwise.”

Tony found himself shaking his head. He hadn’t even meant to – it was just that every part of him was apparently screaming no. Sam picked up on it before Tony had a chance to say it.

“Hey, hang on.” He sounded more imploring that aggressive “If he doesn’t even need us to trust him
on anything, shouldn’t we at least hear him out-”

“Yeah, so he says.” Tony cut in “I’m sorry Sam, but you weren’t there, you don’t know him, you don’t-” He had to stop, and take a breath and gather himself. “He has literally just told us all that deception is his thing. And yeah, he does have a real talent for taking other people’s powers and turning them on them – whether they said he could or not, whatever he promised in the first place. We can’t just hand this thing over to Loki because we’re in a panic, we can’t just rush into a terrible idea because we don’t have a good one-” He stopped himself again, and rubbed his eyes.

*But what if this is the only option? What if we are running out of time? What if the whole universe ends while I’m debating it, because Steve saw an old lady being mugged?*

“You don’t know him either, Stark.” Thor’s voice was authoritative, but compassionate still. He sounded like a king. And Tony couldn’t help remembering the fact that Thor had lost his kingdom, that Thor had lost everything… and the guilt he’d felt for not being invested enough in that loss. Part of him felt like he owed it to Thor to listen to anything he felt the need to say… even this. “I won’t deny the wrongs he has done, and I won’t belittle the hurt that he has caused you. I shared in that hurt, and countless others at his hand. But I also know…” Thor sighed, his eyes distant for a second. “I know, at least, that he risked his life in an attempt to save the people of Asgard. I know that he risked his life more than once to keep the universe safe from Thanos, and what he did to make sure Thanos travelled far away from earth… I know that no one here knows Loki better than I do. And there is still much I wouldn’t trust him with – but I would trust him to help with this.”

Tony just looked at him for a second.

“…That would potentially remove all the unknowns that we have to work out…” Strange suggested, carefully. And Tony wanted to cry out, no, it doesn’t – it puts a great big fucking unknown right in the middle of it! But he was partially distracted by an awful, uncomfortable feeling of déjà vu.

*You just trusted everything you were told...you raced to go with the first plan you had, because you wanted to help your friend. You rushed to fall into an obvious trap, and destroyed everything, to get your friend back*

And he thought of Steve, really thinking that an army of super soldiers was going to take over the world by the end of the day… he wondered if it felt like this fear that the fabric of the universe would tear if he left Steve in the forties too long.

He thought of Steve really trying to keep his feelings for Bucky out of it… he wondered if it felt like this constant struggle to ignore how much he wanted to see Steve again.
He thought of Steve wondering if he could call home, not knowing what he needed to know, thinking he didn’t have the time to be arrested, even as the result of a misunderstanding… Tony wondered if it felt like this endless list of things he wanted to work out for himself, and the fear that he only had time to take Loki’s word for it.

He thought of Steve standing in front of him yesterday, telling him I’m sorry. I didn’t think of it, I didn’t know, I panicked. I thought I could explain it later, I thought it wouldn’t go wrong, I know it seems like everyone took my orders – but they all said… and he wondered, would his own explanation sound any different if this all went very wrong?

If I leave Steve in the forties and the universe ends-
If I trust Loki, and he takes over the world or something-
What do I do?

What did he wish Steve had done? What had Tony learned from Steve’s mistakes?

“…And, look, either way, it’ll take us at least an hour to set up the original spell again” Strange carried on, when Tony couldn’t. “So it’s not like we can even take Loki up on that offer until then – it doesn’t hurt for us to be doing that while you’re talking it over. Even if you decide against it, we won’t have lost anything…”

And Tony already knew, Steve hadn’t said to Sam, or Bucky, or Wanda or Clint or Nat, why is this up to me? What do you think? What would you do? But now, for the first time, Tony found himself wondering if he’d wanted to. If the reason he hadn’t was that he’d felt this sudden sense of responsibility, a feeling that he’d somehow be letting everyone down if he tried to hand it off. If Steve had felt the same conflict of resenting this amount of trust and still being moved by it, if he’d felt like a hypocrite for being bitter that he’d had to answer to others while not wanting everyone to answer to him…

So, go on then, what should Steve have done?

“…Okay, fine, you’re right.” Tony sighed “There’s no point wasting time unnecessarily – but, that doesn’t mean I think this is a good idea. That means we have an hour – at least an hour – to really think about what we’re doing here… what we need to know and how we can check it’s true – and if there is any way whatsoever of not involving…” He just gestured to Loki, not looking to see if he’d caused any offence.
...but what’s the main thing you think Steve should have done? More than ‘stopping to think’, more than ‘checking his information’, more than anything else you think he should have done in all the time you’ve known him…?

And, Jesus Christ, Tony really wished he hadn’t even had that idea…

He basically missed Strange and Wong saying the briefest of goodbye’s before leaving the room. He was too busy planning an awkward conversation he knew he had to have…

“Okay, so maybe we should start with everything we need to talk about?” Shuri suggested, tactfully. Tony respected her enough to make sure he looked up and acknowledged her, before he got too carried away with what he so obviously had to do…

“Yeah, absolutely, we should…” He nodded “But, uh, actually, can you all maybe talk amongst yourselves for just five minutes first? Nat, I need to talk to you.” He finished by looking directly at Nat, who widened her eyes in surprise – but immediately stood to walk over to him. Tony set his shoulders before looking up at the room, still bracing for a reprimand or a challenge…still, none came. A few raised eyebrows, more than a few supportive nods, a few people who just didn’t react. After a few seconds Peter even bravely attempted to follow the ‘talk amongst yourselves’ request, and Rhodey and Shuri immediately leapt in to help him. It was obviously stilted and more than a little theatrical, but it provided enough of a cover for what Tony needed to say to Nat, and for that he was thankful.

He hadn’t even bothered to ask himself why he was sending Nat. He had only briefly considered going himself…but no, he obviously couldn’t do that. So, who else? And it was an entirely hypothetical ‘who else’, he knew immediately. Whatever he thought of Nat, whatever their relationship now, regardless of whether or not he trusted her as a friend or a colleague or even a person – she was the right person for this. The things he could always trust her to do and be were the things he needed now, and he could feel in an instant that she was a better fit than anyone else. There was also, for some reason, not a single doubt in his mind that she’d say yes to this – even now.

He stood up and shuffled to the edge of the room, wincing himself at this farcical routine. He wished he didn’t have to ask anyone to do this – but the thought had occurred now. He already knew, if he didn’t, he’d be forever reprimanding himself for not… because he’d never be able to deny that he did think of it first.

And he couldn’t deny that he’d only thought of it because of what Steve did – or didn’t do. Because he’d spent so many nights thinking, if only Steve had just asked. About his parents, about Siberia, even about Howard being back – about everything. If only Steve hadn’t taken every decision on himself, if only he hadn’t guessed what Tony would say or think or do… If only he’d said, at least about the decision that involved Tony, here’s what I think, how about you?
And, of course, Tony couldn’t ask Steve now. Obviously, if he could have called Steve just once, and asked what he’d preferred to do, there would be no issue here. But… just because he couldn’t do that, didn’t mean he had to guess. It didn’t make him the ultimate authority on what Steve would want or do, it didn’t mean there weren’t other people he should ask…

One other person, obviously.

And, now that he’d thought of it, he couldn’t not ask because it was uncomfortable, or unpredictable, or hard. Not after he’d spent two years yelling at Steve’s ghost for that very thing…

“Hey, what’s up?” Nat asked in a low voice, when she’d reached the little corner of the room Tony had tried to disappear into. Oh, how Tony wished this week would just be over…

“I need you to do me a favour” He began softly. Nat just looked at him, yes? Tony swallowed, hard.

“I need you to go and talk to Bucky.”

Chapter End Notes

so, just to make sure I manage expectations here - fair warning, the Bucky/Nat conversation will be happening ‘off screen’, as it were. Mainly, I'm a big believer in the fact that there are always stories beginning, ending, happening in the background of the one you are telling - and I just think it would take space and focus to go into that interaction here. I have other reasons for including this … ;-) 

But really hope you’re all still enjoying it, anyway xx
No one bothered to ask where Nat had gone. As it turned out, there were more important questions to be getting on with.

So many, many questions.

For them to do this without Loki, they would need to work out so many things for themselves. They’d have to try to figure out exactly where... when Steve had gone – and apparently ‘the forties’ wasn’t specific enough. Especially after someone piped up that Steve could even have gone back to the thirties, if he was more content in his pre-serum childhood... Oh, and no one had any idea how they could work that out, magically or otherwise. Not even Doctor Strange was entirely sure of what ‘a safe place’ or ‘a happy place’ or ‘home’ really meant, how you’d even hope to rank those moments...

And even if they did work that out, they’d still have to do all their calculations again to get to the specific deviance in the time line. Not to mention the fact that they still had to replace several elements of the original ritual. They had no way to replicate the phone link they’d had with Loki and Thor, no way to connect to Steve empathically in the past – no one to stand in Steve’s place, when they tried to perform the spell again.

“That is something you’ll need to work out, regardless.” Loki chipped in, carefully. Tony felt his entire spine jar every time Loki spoke.

“What?” Rhodey asked for him.

“Meaning that you will have to recreate the ritual, at least physically, even if you accept my help” Loki explained. “I can tell you exactly where Steve is, I can create a magical link to him, but whether you do it with me or do it alone, you’ll still need to find someone to stand in for Steve.”

“Should we start with that, then?” Hope suggested. “If that’s the one we need to work out, either way?”

And Tony wanted to disagree, simply because it seemed a step closer to accepting Loki’s help. He wanted to assert that all of the other questions were equally valid, because they should still be thinking like they had to work them out...

But, God, there were just so many things they had to work out, and they all seemed insurmountable...
“So, Strange said that Steve was just acting as an empathic anchor, right?” Shuri reminded everyone.

“Yeah, does anyone know what that actually means?” Tony sighed, defeated. And, if he’d thought about it… who was he expecting to answer that?

“It means that your father was brought to this time through an emotional connection that he had to Steve. In a ritual to send your father back, Steve would simply replicate that function.” Loki responded, professionally.

“So, to perform the same ritual without him, we would simply need someone who also has an emotional connection to Howard Stark?” T’Challa clarified.

“Well, preferably someone with an emotional connection to both Howard Stark and Steve Rogers.” Loki answered “But it’s the emotional connection to the initial subject – to Mr Stark – that matters, really.”

Tony could feel everyone in the room turning to look at him. Well, obviously. Who else had any connection what-so-ever to his father? And then there was a creeping feeling of dread.

**Oh. Shit.**

“And what if I don’t have a sufficient emotional connection to Howard Stark?” Tony spoke into the air, not sure who he was even asking.

“Oh, come on Tony-” Howard sneered, somewhere off to his left.

“Shut up.” Tony spoke over him, calmly. But Howard had apparently had enough of being put off.

“Do you honestly think Steve has more of an emotional connection to me than you do?” He demanded. Tony finally turned to look at him, his expression fixed and cold.

“I am not going to reargue my entire adolescence with you right now.” He spoke over the top of a derisory sigh from his dad “We’re trying to fix the mess you caused at the moment, so I need an answer to my question-”

“This is the answer to your question.” Howard told him–

And, God, he sounded like Tony’s dad, just then.

Tony hadn’t realised that there was a subtle difference in tone, maybe even a subtle difference in his own perceptions… But there were definitely times that Howard spoke like the visionary inventor and world-famous entrepreneur, who just so happened to be Tony’s father. Plenty of times when Tony had seen him as such. That’s who Tony had been talking about, thinking about, for most of this last week… But there were also times that Howard just sounded like Tony’s dad. The same tone of voice he’d used for *what time do you call this, and not under my roof, and you take my advice, boy.* This was definitely Howards indoor voice. Initially, Tony just felt it was a little bit… inappropriate. It
stalled him *just* long enough for Howard to get his next line out.

“Look, I know I wasn’t the best father, and I’m sorry for that”

And that, of course, stalled Tony *completely.*

To say he hadn’t been expecting Howard to say *that* would have been the understatement of the century. Even if Howard *did* still sound bitter and defensive when he said it, it was still the most shocking sentence he could possibly have come out with. In fact, if he had affected a compassionate tone of voice, Tony would have flat out refused to believe it was actually *him.* But Tony doubted any shapeshifter or magician was skilled enough to mimic that particular brand of imposing sulking that Howard had mastered, a voice that was still familiar even when it was speaking the most unfamiliar phrase possible… *My father *did* just say-

“What can I say, I’m *not* good at everything, I wasn’t good at that-”

“You *weren’t* good at that?” Tony repeated, aghast, before he thought to stop himself. He had no idea where that had come from, or why he was bothering to argue with his father at all. This was a situation he’d never planned for, and come the moment, it turned out that this was what he was going to say. “Being a reasonable human being to your own son was something *you’re* just not good at?”

“Yes, actually” Howard retorted, an edge of anger on his voice. “That’s the thing no one ever tells you about being a parent. People accept that science and engineering and fighting and debating are all things you’re either good at or you’re not, no one thinks it’s mandatory. But being a good dad is just a thing everyone is *supposed* to know, even though it’s obviously a specific skill, and that actually means some people just *aren’t* good at it. And I’m not, okay? I’m not good with emotional stuff, I’m especially not good with kids, and Jesus Christ, then there was you.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” Tony demanded.

“I mean you weren’t like anyone else’s kid!” Howard shouted, frustrated “I mean that *everyone* else gets to take short cuts with their kids and they don’t even know it, they can bluff *their* kids off with ‘it’s magic’ or ‘because I said so’ – *their* kids weren’t smarter *at the age of three* than the manufacturer of *every* play pen, monitor, security system. Find me a parenting guide with a chapter on what to do when your teenager *hacks the pentagon*” Howard had to take a breath and steady his temper, exactly as he always had when his lectures to Tony started turning into rants. Tony actually couldn’t tell whether he was being told off or not. “*Fine. I never knew what to say to you, or what to do with you, or how to answer you or encourage you or keep you safe – I would’ve struggled with any kid, but… I’m just not a child phycologist*” He shrugged a *so there* kind of gesture “*I wasn’t* good at that. And I am sorry, and I know that isn’t your fault. But it wasn’t- but that was the best I could do, okay? And that doesn’t mean I wasn’t trying, and that doesn’t mean I don’t love you – and it doesn’t mean that you and I are *strangers.*” Howard actually had the front to give Tony an offended look to finish with.

Tony didn’t know *what* look to return it with.
Some part of him did recognise that this was as close as Howard had ever come to saying I love you.

“You and I have never even had an actual conversation.” Tony spoke on autopilot, his voice somewhat dazed. “Not once”

“That isn’t fair, Tony.” Howard shook his head.

But Tony didn’t answer him. Even his autopilot was momentarily distracted by the realisation…

This was all true, wasn’t it?

In fact, thinking about it… Tony wasn’t even sure what wordless assumption this was contradicting. What he had thought, if not that his father was just an ass who should never have had kids… But all this time, Tony had believed something else. He’d been thinking as though there must be something special, or meaningful in their interactions – because this was his father. And whose father says those things about them? What does it say about a person when even their own father didn’t care-

Tony had always assumed it was about him.

Even though it made no sense, even though it wouldn’t have stood up to the most basic analysis… he hadn’t analysed it. He’d just felt it, this knowledge that it must mean something if even your own father…

But Howard wasn’t ‘even his own father’. Howard was just… a man. A man that Tony wouldn’t have thought twice about, if he’d not been a blood relation. A person whose opinion would never have mattered to Tony, if he’d simply been an business rival or a supervillain. Someone who didn’t understand people or emotions, who wasn’t selfless or kind or even particularly smart outside of his own fields of interest… and had then gone on to have a kid. That was all.

“Just because we didn’t sit around a camp fire and share our feelings and sing kumbaya, doesn’t mean we never had a conversation” Howard went on, patronisingly-

It was like Tony was suddenly listening to a completely different person. Like any other person. It was just like being in the room with any unpleasant old man who was coming out with this nonsense…
Suddenly, Tony didn’t have the hot-blooded desire to correct his father, to prove by argument and analysis and examples that they had never had a proper conversation – because suddenly he understood that his father was just a man denying his failings. That proving his father wrong wouldn’t have meant anything, it wouldn’t have been any greater victory than winning a fight with Ross…

His father was just a man… who had never deserved him.

Tony could barely listen to Howards self-indulgent justifications. He was too busy realising… He could finally stop hating him, and wishing he could exact some sort of revenge on him, and trying to prove him wrong. He could stop wondering why Howard had done all those things, and planning ways to explain it, and dreaming of the things he could have said before – because it didn’t matter. Howard was just a man who’d fucked it up, because he wasn’t good enough to do it right-

And Tony still didn’t like him.

Tony wanted nothing to do with his father now – more so than ever, because now he didn’t even care about proving him wrong. And that might have been the real revelation in all of this. All this time, Tony had felt like he couldn’t stop hating his father without finding a reason to like him. That forgiving him would have meant accepting Howard had been right in any way. That Howard didn’t deserve for Tony not to hate him, even in death-

But it was the other way around.

Howard had never deserved for Tony to hate him this much. He had never deserved the amount of headspace and emotional energy that Tony had given him.

And Tony didn’t have to accept that his father had been right about anything in order to stop caring that this one man had been wrong.

And Tony didn’t have to like his father, any more than any of the people he didn’t care about enough to hate.

And this was probably a revelation that had started when Tony realised that he cared more about Peters wellbeing than his father’s opinion. It was almost certainly developed by his new understanding of what forgiveness meant… it might even have been influenced by what Steve had
said, about Howard and Tony… but whatever had started this off, it had come to head right here.

“…and do you really think that Steve and I were discussing our deepest emotions, in the forties?” Howard had apparently finished the rant that Tony hadn’t really heard. And Tony thought of himself genuinely caring about how much Howard Stark had liked Steve Rogers… it seemed laughable, now.

“And what happens if all of that still doesn’t equal an emotional connection?” He asked, calmly. Because it suddenly seemed quite clear that that was why they were discussing all of this. That there was no need to think about what Howard had said, beyond what it meant for the task in hand. His first opportunity ever to really talk to his father about their relationship – and he wasn’t remotely interested in it. And it wasn’t because he was too angry at his father to care, like it had been first thing this morning. It wasn’t because he was numb, or too busy thinking about other things, or because he had to protect Peter as a priority, or anything else. This time he just… wasn’t interested.

“Then you’re fucked.” Loki responded, matter-of-factly.

“Great.” Tony sighed.

“But for what it’s worth.” Loki carried on – and Tony glanced up at him. He’d momentarily forgotten not to… and then, their eyes had met. And Tony could see some sort of understanding there, whether he wanted to or not “I think the point is to have any emotional connection, not necessarily a healthy relationship. A father can have a great deal of impact, emotionally, whether you’re close to him or not.”

Tony couldn’t unsee it. Loki had a complicated, damaged relationship with his father, too. Loki somehow got this…

_Sweet Jesus Christ._

Tony flinched away. He tried to remember how far they’d gotten before his father had an episode.

“Well, it’s me or no one, isn’t it” He mumbled, barely registering his fathers sad sigh. “So, that’s that one covered…. What else do we have to work out?”

“Well, it depends if we’re asking Loki to decipher anything for us.” T’Challa began.

“Assuming we aren’t” Tony asserted.

“Then the key question is still where Captain Rogers is.” Shuri reaffirmed. “Without that we cannot hope to work out the deviance in the timeline. There will be no way to create any sort of link to
him.”

Tony exhaled slowly, and tried to remember all the times Steve had talked about his past-

All those times you weren’t hearing what he was really saying? All those talks that weren’t what you thought they were...?

“Is there any way you can tell us that, in isolation?” Bruce’s voice broke Tony out of his internal monologue. When Tony looked up, Bruce was looking right at Loki.

“…Yes.” Loki answered.

“So…maybe, Loki could answer that one question, without getting involved in the actual ritual or the magic behind it or whatever…” Bruce had shifted his gaze to Tony, now. “Maybe that would be a compromise, between all these unknowns, and just handing it over to him…?”

“…could we work everything else out by ourselves, if we knew that detail?” Tony thought aloud, after a moment.

“We’d need that much, to even try” Janet confirmed.

“Is it really any safer to ask Loki to do that, as opposed to everything else?” Tony breathed, not really caring if anyone else heard him.

And then his attention was snagged by the sight of T’Challa checking his wristband.

“Strange says everything is set up” He confirmed, when Tony caught his eye.

“So, potentially, we could do this thing right now...?” Sam clarified, hopefully.

“And, potentially, we could undo the victory in New York, right now.” Tony added. But even he didn’t know why he was saying it, any more.

“Look, I don’t know what happened in New York.” Valkyrie chipped in. “But I don’t see what it can hurt to get at least one answer we need.”

Tony’s head was immediately filled with all the ways in which it could hurt. If Loki decided to lie about where Steve was, and sabotage them…If, once Loki knew where Steve was, he could somehow find Steve there, and hurt him… If they had to grant Loki some sort of access before he could tell them where Steve was, if that was what Loki was really after…

But, obviously, none of these were Valkyrie’s questions to answer.
“Right, so, maybe we need to run that idea passed Strange.” Tony suggested, just a little tetchy. “See what that really entails… magically speaking…” He saw everyone let go of a breath. Whatever else, everyone was clearly keen for a break. God, Tony would have liked a break… instead of which, he set his shoulders, and looked right at Loki. He could not believe he was about to say this. But.

“You coming, then?”

⋆

“What time is it, JARVIS?”

“Three fourteen, in the afternoon, Captain Rogers.” JARVIS responded cheerfully. Steve raised his eyebrows – that was the first time the answer had been later than he was expecting.

Steve had spent the last few hours thinking through all of his past decisions, his personal qualities, his relationships, his politics – interspersed with asking JARVIS for the time, and standing up and stretching, and spending a few minutes thinking about something entirely mindless. The only thing he could do to take a break from all that thinking, when the only thing he could actually do was sit there and think.

This time he let his mind drift to the weather, the fact that it was still so bright outside…

“What date is it?” He wondered aloud.

“June Seventeenth, 2012, Captain.”

Steve smiled at that. He’d always loved summer in the Tower. Even that first summer, with all the confusion and frustration and panic, had its fair share of magical moments. Warm evenings, when the air was soft, and the building was alive with people and conversation and magical things… Nights when he’d think back to his damp little apartment in Brooklyn, to the adventure books he’d read while his mother slept through her fever, to the yearning feeling he’d had for some other place he couldn’t picture. There were times, even at the beginning, that Steve felt this might have been that place – times when Steve could love the Tower, and the people in it, even while he was miserable there. Isolated memories that he could pick out and…

A thought occurred to him, like a splinter in his head. Not a worry, exactly… but something a bit more substantial than the rest of his current mental screensaver.

“JARVIS, did you say you can actually forget that I was even here?”
“…In a manner of speaking, yes.” JARVIS answered, with a smile in his voice. But Steve didn’t smile.

“But in what manner of speaking?” He questioned, a bit firmer now. “I mean… how does that work?”

“I presume that request is primarily made to ensure that I cannot inadvertently facilitate some change in future events?”

“Well, yes…” But, thinking about it now, there might have been more to it than that… Steve didn’t want to have created some glitch in JARVIS, or some gap in Tony’s records, or something… If he was taking a whole day of JARVIS’ memories and just deleting them – well, that was a day that hadn’t been missing the first time around. What if that meant he’d just deleted a little bit of Vision, or-

“I can certainly assure you that no memories of this visit will be in any way accessible to me.” JARVIS assured.

“But… How does that work, exactly?”

“…It is something of a technical explanation, Captain Rogers.”

Steve was sure that he wouldn’t understand the finer detail of JARVIS’ answer. But he knew enough about modern technology now to at least get a better idea of things in his head, maybe allay this nagging fear he’d stirred up for himself. And hey, that would count as something different to think about for a few minutes, before he went back to remembering their discussions of The Accords, again.

“Try me.”

Strange widened his eyes in surprise when Tony and Loki walked into the magic room together, but he didn’t comment. Tony was grateful for that. He’d managed to ignore Loki completely for the entire walk up that cursed corridor, and he still hoping he wouldn’t have to acknowledge this bizarre partnership before he was done with it.

“So, I have a question” Tony said, by way of greeting, and Strange just waited. “Are we right in thinking that, above all else, we need to know where – when Steve is…?” Strange took a moment to glance between Loki and Tony before he answered.

“…we will need to know that, yes.” Strange frowned. “I don’t know if its more important than anything else we don’t know…But, I suppose all the other calculations begin with that. So yeah, I guess that’s the key question – why?” He turned his frown to Loki, while Tony let go of a sigh. Gearing himself up for the most ridiculous thing he’d ever have to say.
“Is there any way to ask Loki for the answer to that question, without getting him involved in anything else?” He asked, wearily. “I mean – I don’t know how any of this works. I don’t know how big a risk it is to even ask him that much…”

“Well…” Strange considered Loki for a moment, his forehead creased in thought. “Is the echo you latch onto in these mirror spells primarily magical or personal?” He asked Loki directly.

“The echo is purely magical – often the focus is achieved through a personal connection, usually something phycological…”

As the two of them descended further into what sounded like magical theory, Tony had the somewhat unfamiliar feeling of the words going over his head. Tony had met a few people smarter than him, in his life. At least two of them were in the conference room at that very moment, as a matter of fact. And it had happened already, that Bruce and Shuri had gone fast and deep into a topic Tony wasn’t an expert in, and he’d found himself taking their word for calculations he hadn’t done himself… but he usually understood the language, at least. He wasn’t often cast adrift in a field he knew nothing about, without any expertise or intellectual skill to use as a starting point… he briefly wondered if this was how other people felt, listening to him talk to Bruce… But no. Bruce wasn’t as annoying as Doctor Strange – and Tony sure as hell wasn’t as much of an ass as Loki.

None the less, Tony resisted the temptation to stop them and demand that they speak English, because he knew from experience that it would just slow them down… He waited until he saw Strange give that familiar little nod, the same as any expert gives when they’ve reached their conclusion, and simply asked,

“So…?”

“…Well, it seems as though Loki knows an entirely separate spell – or, he simply has a power… that could help us out on this one thing.” Strange summarised carefully, still looking at Loki to correct his understanding. But Loki just nodded.

“And that involves you doing what?” Tony narrowed his eyes at Loki.

“If there is an echo of Captain Rogers somewhere that he shouldn’t be – if there is any trace of your Steve, in the past, then yes, I can find it.” Loki sighed, like a man trying to keep his patience “I can do that anyway, if that’s what you think is going to help…” But before Tony could find a suitably sneering response, Strange spoke up.

“…which may be the key thing, here.”

“What might?” Tony asked.

“The fact that this is something he can just do anyway” Strange clarified. “It’s something he can do now, whether we ask him to or not, even if we tell him not to – as far as I can tell, he could have done it at any time, and we wouldn’t even have known.”

Tony’s skin crawled at that thought… but he understood the deeper meaning. If that really was
true… then telling Loki no was just a pointless act of self-sabotage. If this had nothing to do with their ritual, If there was nothing Loki needed from them to do this, if there was nothing stopping him now beyond his decision to honour their wishes…

*It’s just one question…*

“Not here.” Tony said, with a little shake of his head. He had no idea if he was about to sound like the wizard version of a total hick, if any of his fears were based in their reality – but he didn’t care. “I don’t want him performing magic of any kind near this setup”

*Not that it really matters what we want, apparently…*

“Okay.” Strange nodded, sounding as though he was humouring Tony. “So… where are we going, then?” And Tony had already worked out that he was being irrational, that anywhere was probably as safe as anywhere else, where magic was involved…so, where did he feel safest?

“Shuri’s lab.” He answered, decisively. “I’ll call down to the others, see who else wants in.”

*§*

Tony hadn’t actually meant to relocate the entire team to the lab – although, who he was expecting to sit this one out, he didn’t know.

And obviously, as the conference room was closer to Shuri’s lab, they’d all beaten Tony there. He could feel everyone turn the second he walked through the door, and looked down to find a whole crowd of people staring up at him, expectantly. He swallowed hard, and took a sharp breath before he went to walk down the stairs-

And then he saw Nat walk in behind them.

“You go ahead.” He told Strange in a low voice, jerking his head in the direction of the lab. “I’ll just be two minutes.” Strange nodded, and he and Wong continued shepherding Loki down the staircase. Tony waited until he was sure they were out of earshot before he asked Nat, “Well, what did he say?”

“Short answer, he doesn’t think Steve can be trusted to live a quiet life anywhere, and he doesn’t
think Steve would want to be stranded on a farm on the forties.” Nat answered, like an agent giving a report.

“And he’s sure? You’re sure?” Tony vocalised his anxiety before he could stop himself.

“If he’s sure of anything, he’s sure you can’t stop Steve Rogers getting into fights – and that’s with someone there trying to stop him getting into fights.”

Tony exhaled slowly, and thought this over. Really, he knew he should be relieved – it would really upset their current momentum if Bucky had said something else. He certainly shouldn’t have that teeny little aftertaste of jealousy, that Bucky had said the exact opposite thing to him, and that Bucky was probably right. That familiar feeling, just the wrong side of competitive- 

Oh, wait, no – Steve’s in love with me.

And Tony flinched away from that thought as violently as he had his momentary empathy with Loki – although for entirely different reasons. He knew, if he’d had the time to analyse this now, that would have been a nice revelation. That maybe, he had many positive changes in his thinking to look forward to. That Steve being in love with him changed so many things, things he hadn’t even considered yet… including that unspoken bitterness that he’d always felt, thinking that he could obviously only aim for being Bucky 2, to Steve…

But no, I’ve always been something else entirely-

But no, not the time.

The point was – he had to take Bucky’s opinion on this, however he felt about it. Bucky did know a completely different side of Steve, he was better qualified to judge this particular question, even if it did make Tony feel hurt, or inadequate, or… not, as it turned out.

Huh.

“Okay.” Tony nodded.

“So we’re doing this?” Nat confirmed. And Tony thought back to the beginning of all of this, to the moment that Bruce told him who Thanos was. That ominous feeling of destiny that he’d had, that feeling that all of his life’s challenges and lessons had been leading him here. And then Tony thought of himself now… his entire future hanging on a ritual he was going to do with his father, performed with Loki’s help, to bring Steve home, because Bucky said it was okay.
So, as it turned out, he’d been right.

“We’re doing this.” Tony agreed.

“And Loki…?” Nat gestured towards the group at the bottom of the stairs.

“Is just going to tell us where Steve is.” Tony assured. “After that…we’ll see where we are.”

“And we trust him to do that?” Nat queried. Tony winced.

“Honestly, no” He huffed, exhausted with it. “But…”

“But sometimes you have to go with your gut.” She finished for him, definitively. And Tony thought-

No.

It wasn’t that. It was the complete opposite of that. Every instinct in Tony’s body was telling him to lock Loki in a dungeon and pointedly do the reverse of everything he’d suggested. This was an almighty exercise in not going with his gut. This was a heroic attempt to listen to the advice of people with greater expertise, to think about what they’d told him, to rationally weigh up the risks. Because, as it turned out, Tony wasn’t the biggest fan of going with your gut. Maybe – maybe – the last few days had taught him that there were times when you had to…but the last two years had firmly convinced him that there were times you really shouldn’t. That it was Nat’s gut that had told her to let Steve and Bucky go, that it had been T’Challa’s gut that told him to avenge his father, that it had been Tony’s gut that wanted to murder Bucky in that bunker in Siberia. But Tony didn’t feel the need to correct her. Instead he just gestured to the stairs, shall we?

“Right, so how are we doing this thing?” Tony called, when he was only half way down.

“I’m just going to look for any trace of Steve Rogers where he shouldn’t be.” Loki short-handed for the group.

“But isn’t he, like, trying not to leave any trace of himself?” Scott queried “Wouldn’t the world have ended by now if-”

“He may have made no major changes yet” Loki interrupted “But I can assure you that he will have left some trace that I can find, if you give me a moment?” An edge of impatience had crept in at the end.

“And then, what, we just take your word for it…?” Nat asked, eyebrow raised.

“Well, perhaps I’ll be able to uncover some detail that will convince you?” Loki sighed, fixing her with a look can I just get on with it, please? Nat glanced over at Tony.

“Oh.” Tony agreed, miserably.
Loki closed his eyes, and stood silently. Everyone began exchanging confused looks immediately, and then glancing around the room for signs of anything magical. But, for a few somewhat awkward seconds, there was nothing – the lab was perfectly still.

Tony began to move through the crowd without really thinking about it, more to break the tension for himself than anything else. He was probably going over to stand with Peter and Rhodey, gravitating towards his comfort zone, still trying to act as a physical buffer between Peter and his dad-

And then the lab speakers all switched themselves on.

Tony jumped along with everyone else, coming to a sudden stop and scanning the room frantically. He threw Loki an accusatory look, you didn’t say anything about taking control of the lab equipment – but Loki still had his eyes closed. So Tony took a sharp breath, about to shout for Loki to stop-

“June Seventeenth, 2012, Captain”

And Tony’s legs just went from underneath him.

It was such a sudden and total loss of physical sensation that Tony barely had time to realise no, I really am going down- before he felt himself being jerked back upright by a determined, somewhat clumsy force behind him. He instinctively pressed against it, at first just recognising it as the thing between him and the ground, all of his thoughts going on the task of not actually fainting.

“Woah, Tony, hey, what’s-”

His father. His father’s voice, right behind him as he finally managed to force himself up onto still shaky legs. His father had caught him… not that it registered. Nothing was registering. His head was just those words, in that voice-

June Seventeenth, 2012, Captain

“…what’s going on? Tony, who is that?” His father was asking, his hand still pressed firmly to the centre of Tony’s back. Tony had to take three deep, shuddering breaths before he could answer.
“…that’s JARVIS.”
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

So, in case you are wondering, what's with all the updates? It's only because I write in a weird, back to front way, and I had most of the final few chapters basically written before I wrote the opening - which means we ARE nearing the end, and I'm finally going to stop torturing them, I promise...

(not just yet, though ;-)

But, to anyone that has subscribed - 1) OMG THANK YOU THAT'S AMAZING! 2) Sorry for all notifications all of a sudden

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Pull yourself together – that can’t be JARVIS.

For the time being, Tony was ignoring the confusion and panic in the room around him, and concentrating on that one irrefutable truth.

That can’t be JARVIS – JARVIS is dead

Of course, there would have been more comfort in the certainty of that sad fact, if his dead father weren’t still standing a foot behind him. If it weren’t for the fact that Tony was in a secret technological wonderland, with two gods and two wizards, preparing to do a time travel ritual. If Tony could convince himself that he could be certain of anything anymore…

But if there was one thing that he could still be certain of, it was that JARVIS was dead. Tony had spent two harrowing, torturous years proving that fact to himself over and over, as a hundred thousand theories to restore JARVIS had come to nothing. He knew the laws of JARVIS as well as he knew anything, and he knew that JARVIS had destroyed all of his back-ups to stop ULTRON from getting to them. He knew that JARVIS had completely disconnected himself from every existing system before Tony began reformatting him – he’d had to. Tony had known it all at the time. He’d known, as he was saying his final stoic farewell, that their plan meant destroying JARVIS forever. That all the memories and learned behaviour and humour and soul that his AI − his friend − had collected over their many years together would have to be erased.

In spite of which, he’d foregone two years of sleep in favour of exploring every theoretical avenue, running every simulation, scanning every available file he’d ever saved – so he knew it wasn’t possible.
But I know that voice.

And it wasn’t Visions voice. Tony was the only person who’d ever be able to tell the difference – but there absolutely was one. An emotional difference, a distinction deeper than the simple voice simulation he’d chosen when he put his AI together. There was a different humour in it, a different sort of calm, a different pace and rhythm. Tony had actually sat alone in his workshop one night and cried at the thought that he might be forgetting it, that Visions voice might be replacing JARVIS’ in his memories. And then he’d spent a few frantic hours searching every server, device and drawer he had access to, just hoping to find a recording of it. Wishing he’d thought to preserve memories of JARVIS the way he took photos and videos of his other friends… but why would he, when he thought JARVIS would always be there? When he’d assumed JARVIS was his own permanent record… In the end, Tony hadn’t found a single trace of that voice, anywhere.

But it was here now. He knew it. Even in that tiny little phrase, he knew – that was JARVIS.

“What’ve you – how’ve you done that?” He stammered, looking over at Loki.

“I don’t – I haven’t – that isn’t” Loki stammered right back, gesturing up to the ceiling like people did when they talked about JARVIS. And Tony believed him. In his panic, he’d sort of forgotten who Loki even was – and, looking at him as a stranger, Loki certainly seemed genuinely baffled by the scene he’d just caused…

“June Seventeenth, 2012, Captain”

Everyone jumped to attention as JARVIS repeated his message. And Tony felt every muscle in his body soften again as he realised-

That isn’t JARVIS

At least, it wasn’t really JARVIS – JARVIS wasn’t here. This wasn’t a living, thinking being, responding to their questions – it was a recording of JARVIS, back when he had been. Of course it was – JARVIS would have spoken to Tony by now. This was just an echo, or a fragment, or… a memory.

JARVIS was still dead.
And, how about that, Tony was relieved.

He already knew that, when their current crisis and the immediate shock had passed, there would be a deep, bitter disappointment in that… but right now, he just couldn’t. There couldn’t be someone else brought back from the dead, he couldn’t go through all those emotions again, he couldn’t unearth all the injustices and arguments of yet another unrelated issue – not right now. For now, it was actually just easier if this wasn’t happening.

“It’s not – it’s a recording.” Tony managed, still trying to swallow as he spoke. Behind him, he could make out the babble of people asking who’s JARVIS? and what’s going on? He heard Loki telling Thor, that’s not how that usually works. And then, over the top of all the commotion, it was Peter who finally said it.

“…So Captain Rogers is in the year 2012?”

“What? No.” Tony dismissed with a shake of his head, not even hearing the words. And then he did hear the words… and then he remembered JARVIS’ words… “Wait – what?”

“…That’s what he said” Sam realised aloud.

“Is that what that was? Is that what that means?” Nat demanded, directly to Loki

“Uh, well, that is where he is – I don’t know what that means” Loki answered, a little nervously, still pointing up.

“That’s not – he can’t be” Tony sounded dazed now “That makes no sense-”

“But he does still call the tower home” Sam reminded him.

“But not – he doesn’t – why 2012?” Tony stuttered “That was right back at the beginning, when everything was the most shit – why wouldn’t he go back to 2013, or 2014, in that case?”

“Well, the spell isn’t necessarily that specific” Strange answered, a little defensively. “Most people aren’t that specific, when you ask them when they were happy – obviously.”

*Why don’t I ever say 2013? Or 2014?*

Thinking about it now… the year after everyone arrived at the Tower probably had been better… and almost all the memories he’d swept into his ‘if I could go back to 2012’ fantasies had been from later, thinking about it… that was just the generic label he’d used for that whole time in his life… in their lives…
“This isn’t a recording.” Bruce’s voice snapped Tony out of his emotional revelation. When Tony looked up, he found that Bruce and Shuri had already moved to the central control desk in the lab, both giving the monitor the same confused frown.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean this isn’t – it isn’t JARVIS, but it isn’t – it's not a recording” Bruce tried to explain.

“Wait, it’s showing up on the computers?” Strange demanded, while Tony pushed his way over to the control desk. Thor gave Loki an accusing look, and Loki threw his hands up defensively, that wasn’t me.

“I don’t actually know what this is showing up as” Shuri answered, looking up at Tony, who was now leaning over the monitor with her.

She stood aside and let Tony take control of the system. Tony barely had to think about it. The ways of wizards and gods might be beyond him, there might be plenty of topics that Shuri and Bruce could’ve taken him to school on, there was still a hell of a lot about the last three days that Tony flat out didn’t understand – but this was his kingdom. His fingers knew how to enter these commands, almost independently of himself. He felt what he was looking for, before he knew it…

He knew exactly what it was, as soon as he found it.

This was a fragment of JARVIS. A neat little bundle of code, commands, inputs… memories? Like a little memorandum of JARVIS, as though someone had put together a little selection for the benefit of an exhibition… Tony recognised him. Like looking at a sepia baby photo of an elderly relative, or an abstract sketch of a friend. Not an exact replica, with plenty of details missing, but there was still an immediate tug of familiarity, an ability to seek out and focus on the qualities he knew…

...Could I restore him, from this?

Tony had to bite his bottom lip as a thousand little ideas popped up in his brain, like a rash. All the things he knew he would have needed to restore JARVIS, because he’d spent too many nights listing them to forget now. All the things he knew he’d permanently deleted… so many of which he was suddenly looking at. Would that be enough?

But he couldn’t think about this now. Even if this was that one, impossible chance he’d been dreaming about for years, even if he was about to lose JARVIS forever, the fate of the universe was obviously more important –
I could swear we’ve been here before.

“You’ve magically retrieved a section of JARVIS from the day we’ve sent Steve back to?” Tony spoke in an eerily level voice.

“…Well, then I really don’t know how I’ve done that.” Loki responded, somewhere between defensive and apologetic.

“No, I don’t know how you’ve done it.” Tony agreed, immediately, his eyes still fixed on the screen. This was too neat a section of JARVIS for it to have been selected by accident. It couldn’t have been selected by anything less than an expert; there was an artistry and an understanding to this…

No one other than me could have done this.

Well… no one except…

“How did these files get onto your system, if not by magic?” Tony turned to Shuri “Can we trace that?”

“I ran a trace, but I can’t make any sense of it” She explained, and Tony gestured to the screens It’ll make sense to me. Shuri loaded the data … and Tony could see immediately what had happened – but that didn’t mean it made sense…

“It’s come from me, from FRIDAY.” He realised, out loud.

“What?” Bruce asked.

“These files” He pointed to a fractured list of inputs that only he understood “…I don’t know what triggered it, but they’re files that were hidden on the Stark Industries server, under… expired patent information?” He frowned, seeking out and expanding details as he spoke.

“…And that’s why ULTRON didn’t find it?” Bruce theorised along with Tony, as Tony began to open and run as many of the files as he could. There was even more data here than he’d realised.

Definitely enough to-

You have to let him go.

“…It would explain why anyone couldn’t find it. I couldn’t find this, even now, it’s stored in pieces, and the sequence that’s putting it together again is…”

Is JARVIS, Tony realised. JARVIS had cut out and stored this little section of himself. He was the
only person other than Tony that could have.

“…It’s a server FRIDAY has access to – whatever triggered this got to it… via her, and… uploaded it…” Tony trailed off, his brain racing ahead of his mouth.

So, JARVIS had decided to put a little part of himself aside – the little part of him that, apparently, had originated on the exact date they’d sent Steve back to… And Tony knew JARVIS well enough, he understood JARVIS well enough, to see what that really meant. To be able in interpret this complex chain of commands as a human impulse…

JARVIS had chosen to forget this.

This was the only way JARVIS could forget something. If he’d just deleted these files, he would have known they were missing – he would have remembered that he’d forgotten. He’d have drawn Tony’s attention to it. The only way JARVIS had to truly forget the events of any given day was to put them somewhere, somewhere that even he couldn’t read them – but somewhere his basic systems would still recognise existed. A placeholder, to ensure even his own subconscious never noticed there was something missing…

There was only one possible reason JARVIS would have done that.

*Shit shit shit shit shit-

“Jesus Christ, we’ve sent Steve back to the Tower!” He exclaimed with such alarm that Shuri and Bruce leapt back. Everyone in the room froze and looked at him in bewilderment.

“It looks that way…?” Wong offered gingerly, but Tony was desperately scanning the rest of the room for someone who got this.

“Do you not realise what we’ve done?” He shouted, outright panicked now. Everyone just looked at him blankly. “Steve’s told JARVIS to forget this, to forget he was there-”

But before Tony could find words for the sheer scale of this fuck up, fate intervened to explain it for him. The huge screen at the back of the room suddenly clicked into life, as the security footage folder finished putting itself together and began to auto play…

An ominous hush came over the group as they watched Steve – quite obviously their Steve – making a sprint along a corridor-
And then a collective shriek of distress as they watched Steve and Tony step out of the elevator, just inches away from him.

For a few seconds, everyone held their breath along with Steve, watching helplessly as the fate of the universe came millimetres from being shattered-

“We have to get him out of there now” Rhodey found his voice first.

“Yeah we do. Right now.” Tony added urgently, looking at Strange.

“Everything’s set up.” Strange spoke too quickly, his frantic calculations clear on his face. “We need a stand in for Steve-”

“I’m doing it.” Tony hurried him along.

“Then we just need to get you prepared – Shouldn’t take us longer than five minutes-”

“You have to wipe my memory.” Howard reminded them, in his clearest, most commanding voice. When Tony looked over at him, he was making a face like he’d just bitten into a lemon, like even he couldn’t believe he’d said it. Everyone came to a stop again.

Tony liked to think that one of them would have gotten to that, as part of this frenzied sorting process. But the fact that it had been his father who actually said it was-

No time for that now.

“Shit, yes we do.” Tony looked at T’Challa, who was already looking at his wristband.

“The medical team are on their way, they can do it here” He responded perfunctorily.

“Do we know how long that will take?” Tony asked, frenetically. Behind him, the video feed had clicked over to footage of Steve taking whole flights of stairs in a single bound – going upwards…?

“They said they were injecting him this time – no, I don’t know.” T’Challa shook his head.

“Then we’ll prepare you here, it’ll be easier in the same room as Howard.” Strange announced decisively, looking at Wong, wild eyed, Go! Get what we need!

“What do I need to do?” Tony implored, his attention split between Strange and the monitor. An image of Steve hesitating on a landing-
“I need you to think about your father, first and foremost” Strange told him firmly, bringing Tony’s focus back. “Until Wong gets back with the materials, just think about your dad, just get that going, he’s the key thing.”

“If you’re accepting my help…” Loki piped up carefully, looking at Tony for confirmation. And Tony didn’t even have the time to think why he’d been worried about it, now.

“Yes, we are”

“Then I can help you prepare things, too.” Loki told them, and Tony just nodded – what else could he do?

“Okay, but still think about your father” Strange instructed him again.

“Okay, okay.” Tony assured, resting his weight on the desk in front of him. But, God help him, he wasn’t thinking about his father. He couldn’t. He tried, he really tried, but no matter what he did he couldn’t make himself move past that one thought-

What have I done?

*!

“What time is it?”

“Five past four, Captain.” JARVIS responded, cheerfully – and that was a nice surprise.

But then, Steve had spent the last forty-five minutes chatting to JARVIS, as opposed to untangling his deepest regrets, so it made sense that they would have passed more quickly. Once JARVIS had assured Steve that he’d planned for more contingencies than Steve had, the conversation had quickly moved on to how he’d planned those contingencies, and why he’d chosen them… and then on to how JARVIS worked, and thought, just generally. Steve had always wanted to ask those questions, at first scared to ask Tony because it was all so over his head, and then unable to ask Tony because JARVIS had just died… It hadn’t occurred to him to ask JARVIS, back when he’d had the chance. Now that he did, it would have been a pleasant way to eat up some of this endless day…

But those deeper thoughts were stirring again – this time the realisation that he’d never referred to JARVIS having ‘died’, before just now. That he’d never really acknowledged that JARVIS was a being, someone he could have talked to… That he’d never understood, or credited, the sacrifice Tony had made when he let JARVIS go, or the loss he had felt as a result…

So, that made it time to get back down to it – and, at last, he got to Tony. To finally thinking about all the ways his personal flaws and regrets had hurt Tony, and all the things Steve hadn’t done and wished he’d done and would do, from now on-
“Captain Rogers, I am going to have to ask you to move” JARVIS said, suddenly. Steve glanced up in alarm “There is a storage compartment at the back of the room, if you look to your left” Steve did as he was told and saw a door on the far wall slide back, revealing an untidy closet barely bigger than Steve was. “You can conceal yourself there.”

Steve didn’t have to ask why JARVIS was telling him to hide – who he was hiding from. He stood up immediately, his legs tingling after hours of dangling over the edge of a work stool. He started walking very carefully across the workshop, stepping around the debris that littered the floor.

“I might recommend you prioritise haste over care” JARVIS warned him “Mr Stark is already on this floor.”

Shit.

Steve took the last few feet in two long strides, basically throwing himself face first into the closet. He heard the door sliding shut behind him – and then he heard an echo. The soft whoosh of another automatic door, less than a second after he’d hidden himself-

As Tony walked into the workshop.

* 

Tony couldn’t stop himself from looking up at the monitor.

Shuri had offered to shut it down, but Tony had said he didn’t want to interrupt the system in any way until they understood this fully – which was actually a cover for the fact that he couldn’t bare to ask her to turn it off. He couldn’t stand the anxiety of what might be happening. It was just about worse than the anxiety of possibly watching it happen, right in front of his eyes-

You’re supposed to be thinking about your dad.

Tony balled his hands into fists, and squeezed his eyes shut, and tried again. He tried picturing his fathers face, he tried recalling familiar phrases in his voice, he cycled rapidly through a thousand fragments of memories with his father – nothing would stick. He couldn’t grab hold of any one idea long enough to flesh it out, he couldn’t make them hold still long enough to focus on them. And all the while there was that dark, imposing threat, clearly still visible behind all his forced thoughts, if
you can’t do this, the universe will end – and it will all be your fault.

Because you can’t get yourself together enough to think about your father for five fucking minutes

Because you decided to take a nap last night, rather than ask these questions at the time

Because you just assumed Steve was in the forties, because you thought he’d be better off staying there, because while you were running away with what you thought you knew-

“Are you thinking about your father?” Strange demanded firmly, looking up from whatever ‘materials’ he was using for his part in this. Tony could’ve cried.

“No.” He admitted, helplessly. Strange huffed out an angry breath, visibly trying to control his frustration, but before he could say anything, Loki appeared at Tony’s side.

“I can help.”

“How?” Tony implored, immediately. There was still a little ‘Loki alarm’ sounding somewhere in his deep subconscious, but it had been well and truly steamrollered by everything else, by now. Now, Tony was just a drowning man, grasping at every offer of help as though it were a life preserver.

“I can help you…cheat” Loki suggested “I can turn whatever thoughts you can manage into a stronger connection, magically speaking… If you’re happy for me to…”

And he gestured softly towards Tony’s head.

*He wants to go inside my head.*

The Loki alarm kicked back into high gear, Tony’s whole being frozen in utter disgust at the very concept of what he was being asked to do. A darkness gathered at the corners of his vision and threatened to overwhelm him. He couldn’t find words enough, ideas enough, for the enormity of this. He felt every bit as tiny and frightened as he would have if he’d been standing at the very gates of heaven, being asked by God themselves, *are you prepared to face all of your greatest fears, for this?*

Was he?

Because all of the other questions were irrelevant, now. It no longer mattered where Steve was happiest, or who made the decisions, or even how much power they gave over to Loki. Even if Loki had some nefarious reason for making this offer, even if Loki *could* later use this for unspeakable deeds – there was no point safeguarding against that by letting the universe dissolve. Now that they knew they’d actually sent Steve to the place he was least able to hide, surrounded by the very people...
who would immediately know he was out of place and make a big fucking deal of it… now they knew they had no other options. Risk assessment had been rendered unnecessary, the practicalities all resolved by the urgency of the situation.

Now, it was a personal question. A spiritual question. This really was the crossroads of his entire life, the gathering of his every weakness and fear and past regret, and the one time offer – when it really comes down to it, can you be better than yourself?

Tony knew, already, that this was the best option, when it came to saving the universe – but could he, the man, bear to take it?

To give over control of his mind… that had always been his greatest fear, the monster hiding in his subconscious. His mind was all he had, who he was – and not in the obvious way that it was who everyone was. He’d been frightened of losing his mind ever since he was a kid…

And then he’d seen what Loki did to Clint, and realised there was something worse. Losing control of his mind, having someone else… What Wanda did to him was easily the deepest injury anyone had ever done him, the trauma that affected him most intimately, the one he never even thought about, because the very thought of her putting visions in his head… He shuddered, even now.

Could he unearth all of that? Could he relive that?

Could he go one step further, and hand his mind over to Loki, of all people? The root of every wormhole related flashback he’d ever had, the drive that made him invent ULTRON, the reason Tony knew how much there was to be afraid of in the universe…

To let Loki look at Tony’s deepest fears about his father, of all things…

Using the fragments of his one-time friend and greatest sacrifice…

Could he face his greatest fear, to give control over his deepest traumas to his most loathed enemy, so that his most loathed enemy could use his most treasured memories and most intimate pain, to reach the man who’d broken his heart?

And it turns out, you can never know what sort of person you are until you get there. You never know what your answer would be, until you are really asked the question. Because Tony really
would never have believed that he could *ever*, under any circumstances, turn to Loki and say,

“Do whatever you have to.”

Loki’s eyes widened softly in surprise – but Tony saw no malice in it. There might even have been a *gratitude* in it, as though Loki were perhaps a little bit touched by Tony’s answer. Tony let himself be a little comforted by it, meaningless though it was. Right now, he’d take what he could get.

“Okay, well, it might actually be easier to start with Steve, in that case.” Loki suggested, stepping so that he was directly behind Tony. Tony wished he wouldn’t, hated that he couldn’t even *see* him, along with everything else… but if he started questioning things now, he’d fall to pieces.

“Why, isn’t the link to Howard more important?” Strange asked, tetchily.

“It is, but that won’t be hard to create once he’s standing in front of us” Loki answered, pointing behind him, to where Howard was standing with two agitated lab technicians. They were busy preparing solutions as fast as their hands were able, while Howard paced in short, sharp lines, like a man about to storm out of a waiting room. “When they’re done with that, Stark can just talk to his father, I assure you that will be enough now…”

*Now that Loki is going to be in my head, while I’m talking to him,* Tony realised, and swallowed a sudden taste of bile.

“So, what, just think about Steve now?” He asked, his voice tight.

“Yes, just think about him” Loki assured –

And then there was the cool press of Loki’s fingers on his temples.

Tony flinched away violently, like he’d just put his hand on a hot stove. He couldn’t stop himself. Loki threw his hands away immediately, and took a little step back. Tony could see stars in front of his vision, his skin already clammy, his palms slicked in sweat.

*I can’t I can’t I can’t I can’t I can’t*

*So, that’s your answer is it? You can’t do this?*
Tony took a long, slow breath, and tried to blink the clouds out of his eyes. He had to do this.

“Sorry” he managed, over shaky breaths, standing himself as upright as he could.

“S’okay” Loki murmured, barely audible even to Tony.

“Try again” Tony bit out, through gritted teeth. This time he made himself stand as still as he ever had…and let Loki put his hands on him. He felt like his skin was trying to run away from Loki’s, like his heart was trying to pound its way out of his chest and away from this situation, like he was hot and cold at the same time–

*You’re supposed to be thinking about Steve*

So, Tony looked up at the monitor, to the image of Steve sitting on a little stool in his workshop. At any other time, the sight of Steve sitting unaccompanied in his workshop would have brought Tony out in hives, but right now he didn’t even make the connection. He could barely recognise Steve, any more – he was too distracted by the impending end of the universe, and the weight of his responsibility, and the fact that Loki was in his head–

But he had to think about Steve.

So, he tried just looking at Steve’s face, he tried to make himself think of the blue of Steve’s eyes, or the curve of Steve’s lips, all the things that had come so easily to him, at one point–

*Arg, no, can’t think about that*

*Loki is in my head*

*But I have to think about Steve*

*Jesus, you aren’t even thinking about Steve now–*

“Wait, there was footage of the two of you before, wasn’t there?” Loki suggested suddenly. When he took his hands away there was such a flood of relief in Tony that he almost groaned.

“What do you mean?” Strange asked, impatiently.

“The video before, that everyone gasped at” Loki clarified quickly, “That was footage of Stark and Rogers then, yes? That would be better.”
Tony looked up at Shuri, who was frantically clicking at the central monitor.

“We do have all the security camera footage, for some reason” She narrated mindlessly as she worked. “That folder just uploaded to our server…so we should be able to store and play those…” It took her a few attempts to find the right clip among the obscurely labelled footage, but within seconds it was up. A shot of Tony and Steve stepping out of the elevator, clearly in the middle of some sort of discussion.

Tony winced as Loki put his fingers against his skin, again. He exhaled slowly, and tried to make his eyes focus on the screen. Behind him, he could just about hear Bruce asking, do we have audio?

The lab speakers hummed into life again.

“And because it’s a charity event that might even be fun. And because I’m getting really bored of talking to the same five reporters at every one of these, and they’re getting really bored of talking to me-”

“You’re bored of talking to reporters, hm?”

The sound of Steve’s voice, the sight of him in his original uniform and forties hairstyle… God, he looked so young-

He tried to flinch away from it again, still fearful of thinking anything personal with Loki in his head. But he stopped himself. He made himself do this. He had to do this. He could do this.

He could let himself remember the way they were, once. He could let himself feel that tug of nostalgia and regret and even love – this all had to be better than nothing. This was as focussed on Steve as he had managed, and he was going to run with it.

“You see, if you’d ever talked to any of those five reporters, you wouldn’t need to ask that-”

“I talk to the press, Stark.”

Tony remembered a little pinch of embarrassment, from way back when. He vaguely remembered this conversation… at least, the bit where he’d put his foot in it and implied that Steve was shirking his PR duties, he remembered that. One of many missteps and miscommunications he’d cringed over at the time…
Oh, but it wasn’t just the embarrassment he’d felt at the time, was it? Not now that Tony finally
realised just how little he’d understood about Steve, before. Back then, he was thinking that he might
have simply screwed it up again, that he should probably be doing more to help… back then Tony
had just been looking at a fellow Avenger, going through a trauma Tony thought he understood,
taking the usual offence to Tony’s occasional verbal diarrhoea…

Now he was looking at a man lost and drowning, bravely trying to hold himself up while he worked
out what the hell Tony was talking about. He saw someone who was a few short weeks out of 1943,
a few months after a near death experience, less than a hundred days passed losing everyone he’d
ever known… And Tony was, what, trying to talk him into coming to a charity gala, or something?
And he knew he’d meant well, but… it all looked so amateur, so thoughtless and clumsy, now.
Would Tony have talked this way, if he’d really been looking at a man who still didn’t know what
an offer of coffee meant?

Well, that was the man he’d said all of this to, wasn’t it?

“I’ve done the whole national tour, remember? In the spangly outfit. And I seem to recall it was
of no use.”

“Fine. But when you’re bitching about what I’ve said to the press, remember, I offered to
let you do it.”

Ah, Tony did remember that. He remembered that he’d huffed off and spent half a day sulking…
because Steve just wouldn’t be fixed. Because he felt frustrated and aggrieved that he’d intended to
do something nice, only to have Steve turn it into something else to feel bad for… that peculiar mix
of guilt and defiance that he’d spent far too much of his life wallowing in, really.

And it wasn’t even that he watched this and thought Steve was right. Even now, he could see Steve
was being an ass, a defensive, reactionary…scared and lonely… ass. He could see why Steve was
doing it, now. Tony could see so clearly how he could have made that easier for Steve. Why none of
his efforts at the time had helped, that he should never have been so precious about them… that he
should never have been so hurt, by all this.

This had never been about him, either.

And as Tony watched himself sigh self-indulgently and swan back into the elevator, he saw a man
just scrabbling around on the surface of things. Treating symptoms rather than looking for causes,
dealing with the petty little questions without even asking the big ones. Thinking of ways to resolve
the bad mood Steve appeared to be in, rather than considering where it came from…
If he remembered rightly, after a day of sulking, he’d reprimanded himself and made another meaningless little gesture… found something for Steve, or… something… Some shallow act that obviously wouldn’t have touched the sides of Steve’s issue, something that Tony would’ve just expected to have some sort of impact…

*God, if I’d just opened my eyes, if I’d known-

“Got it!” Strange yelled, victoriously.

Loki stood back immediately, and Tony actually had to fall forward and rest his hands on his knees, he was so relieved.

*Ew, Loki was in my head, Loki was in my head, Loki was in my head-

Having managed not to think about that for all of 90 seconds, it was now back with a vengeance, and Tony was possessed of a sudden urge to jump up and down and shake himself. He wanted to shower, or… rinse his brain out… or something.

He could barely hear the desperate exchange of words above his head, his heartbeat was so loud. Something about his father being ready in two minutes, moving people to the magic room… when he looked up again, Strange was showing him a flat palm, *you stay.*

Tony looked back up at the monitor the way he might have grabbed a glass of water after a particularly bitter medicine. Something else to focus on, something to fill his head and push all of Loki out of it…

*Just Steve, sitting quietly in the workshop, in 2012…*

*…Oh shit.*

“Tony, what is it, what’s wrong?” Shuri asked, as Tony dropped his head into his hands and groaned. “Tony?” But, at first, Tony just shook his head. There was no point in explaining. They were already going as fast as they could-

“Tony.” Bruce said, more forcibly, and Tony looked up. He recognised that he had to explain to the others, because his reaction had frightened them… Not that his explanation was likely to calm them,
“I remember this, I remember that day” He croaked, his throat dry “I… Steve, is hiding in my workshop… JARVIS must’ve told him to…” He realised it as he spoke. Because, ordinarily, that probably would have been the best place for Steve to hide. No one other than Tony would ever have gone there, and even if Tony had walked in unexpectedly, he’d always been secure enough in that room that he’d never bothered scanning for anything hiding in the corners – ordinarily. “…But I remember that day – that evening, I went up to the workshop and tore it to pieces looking for something… I checked everywhere…” A book. He’d got it into his head that he had a fucking book that would make Steve feel better, somewhere in among the debris of his workshop.

I’m literally about to go into that workshop and look for him… if I haven’t already-

“Okay, well, we’re going as fast as we can now” Bruce tried to reassure, his eyes wide and frightened. Tony just nodded, I know that, I know.

Behind them, Howard gave a sudden cry of discomfort. Everyone turned to see one of the lab techs holding him by the shoulder, while another administered the injection, at last.

“Don’t tense, it’ll hurt less” The technician with the needle soothed, pointlessly.

“Okay, so that’s nearly done, so we’ll get you connected to Howard, and then… and then we just run the ritual, right?” Strange had switched his attention from Tony to Loki, midway. “If we just do our bit, you can make sure it works, that it connects to him and… everything?” And Loki just nodded, urgently.

Tony fought back a wave of nausea as he realised that he had to do it again… But just once more, now. This has got to be the worst bit, surely?

“Will this week never end” Tony muttered, to himself.

“Hold my drink” Loki answered, with a bitter laugh.

Their eyes met again. Tony couldn’t help it if he knew the week that Loki had had. Unfortunately, Tony had already gone though that list on Thor’s behalf, when Bruce first filled him in on the details. Home world invaded by the Goddess of Death, stranded in a nightmarish dystopia, forced to flee a crazy ‘grand master’ just so that he could watch his home world destroyed, only to have Thanos slaughter his people in front of him and then take him halfway across the universe as a prisoner…
“Sorry” Loki mumbled, looking away.

“S’fine.” Tony murmured, at the floor.

And then there was his father, striding up to him, still rubbing the puncture wound on his shoulder.

“Right, are we doing this thing, then?” He demanded, bitterly.

“Yes, right, Tony, if you could stand between Loki and your father-” Strange started instructing hastily – and Tony laughed. The same hysterical, high pitched giggle that had escaped him when the whole ULTRON situation came to light, right around the time Thor throttled him. Can I stand between Loki and my father? Seriously, though? But he did it, all the same. The smile melted away quickly enough when he felt Loki step up behind him. “Okaaaay… So, Howard-”

“Yeah, I’ve done this before, remember?” Howard interrupted bossily. “A load of guff about thinking deeply and empathic blah blah blah – and you actually just want me to get a rise out of him, yeah?” He raised his eyebrows at Strange, “That’s the point of this bit, to get a reaction out of him?”

“Actually, it is a bit more complicated than-”

“Actually, that will basically work, now” Loki spoke over both of them, his voice too loud in Tony’s ear. “If we’re in a hurry, we can skip all the – I just need a reaction, yes.” And however much of a hurry they were in, Howard still found time to give Strange a smug look.

Loki put his hands on Tony’s face again, and Tony hissed softly, and gritted his teeth.

“Okay” Strange breathed. “So-”

“I always hated that you were a mama’s boy.” Howard told Tony, nastily.

Tony felt his whole body twitch, his mouth actually falling open with shock. Where the fuck did that come from? And then there was an immediate spike of temper – because Howard had mentioned his mom. Because Tony may have (at the most inconvenient time) finally severed the emotional hold that Howard had over him, but his mother was a whole other story. Before Tony had processed any part of that, there was the immediate indignation that anyone should use his mother as any part of an insult-

“Oh, okay – Got it, got it!” Strange stammered, clearly taken by surprise.

Tony recognised that he could get the fuck away from Loki, and that immediately took priority over
whatever bullshit his father had just come out with.

“See, *that* I am good at.” Howard commented, even though no one cared anymore. Tony glared at him.

“Yes, great ass-holing, Howard – you can stop now.” He growled, his skin still crawling from that last ordeal, however brief it had been.

“Hold onto that – you’ll need an empathetic connection in the ritual too” Strange informed him, and Tony just huffed. *Of course I will, this is the ordeal that never ends.* Jesus Christ, he really didn’t want to do this.

“Right, come on, magic room” He announced to everyone that was left in the lab. “Let’s do this.”

Chapter End Notes

All I can really say at this point is that if I *was* going to bring JARVIS back... *if* that was going to happen... I’d never make it that easy, now would I?

;-)
“A sudden burst of inspiration, sir?” JARVIS enquired calmly, as the workshop filled with metallic clattering and dull thuds.

Even concealed in the closet, Steve could tell exactly what Tony was doing. He could pick out all of the individual noises that made up the sound of a hurried search. He could picture Tony perfectly, sweeping scrap metal off of his desk, rifling through drawers and boxes, dumping books and clothes in hasty piles on the floor around him. Steve might have seen the humour in it, thinking of how careful he’d been not to touch anything – but his mind was being pulled in too many different directions as it was.

There was the simple, human panic of being in Tony’s workshop without his permission. The deep discomfort of standing here and listening, without Tony’s knowledge. The strange feeling that he’d still find space to be mortified if Tony found him here, even as the world ended. Steve tried to tell himself it was a trivial concern under the circumstances, a violation that he never intended and couldn’t have avoided and could genuinely explain – but his body didn’t seem to know that. His stomach still turned at the idea, his skin crawling and his chest tightening exactly as they would if there hadn’t been a universal catastrophe in the works.

And, of course, there was a universal catastrophe in the works. The chance that Tony would hear him, or search the closet Steve was hiding in, or somehow just sense that he was there, and end life as they knew it. The possibility that Tony would hear Steve’s heart beating, it was pounding so loud by now…

Please find what you’re looking for. Please get bored of looking. Please get distracted, or summoned, or something.

He could hear Tony answering JARVIS, but he couldn’t make out the words. Tony had always been the only person who didn’t look up when he talked to JARVIS… He’d always just chatted to JARVIS, as though JARVIS was standing right there at his shoulder. Which, again, might have been an affecting thought, if Steve could’ve managed that much. Right now, it just made it harder for Steve to make out what Tony was saying, and therefore gather any clues about what Tony was doing and how long he was likely to be doing it for.

Not that it really matters, this time.
His usual impulse to plan contingencies was beginning to irritate him, as every single idea was cut off with no, because that might change something. It occurred to Steve, not for the first time that afternoon, that this situation had completely neutralised all of his skills. Of course, he was strong enough and fast enough to get out of this room without anyone stopping him. He might even have been able to get out of the building unseen – at least, up until he’d gotten himself cornered in Tony’s workshop. But he couldn’t do it without changing anything. He couldn’t do it without tinkering with their security systems, distracting or diverting staff, moving things that were maybe supposed to be there… in this building, of all places, anything could have monumental importance. Which was how he’d ended up cornered in a closet in a first place, and why he now found himself with literally no way out of this. No reason to listen out for clues of any kind, no possible way he could use that information-

Steve just really wanted to know.

He couldn’t bare the tension. It was somehow better to know exactly how fucked he was. Being able to countdown the minutes until the inevitable end of the universe was better than standing here wondering when it would come. So he leant forward as much as he could without risking a sound, and put his every effort into listening…

“…So now I’m thinking that maybe I’ll just shut up about the spangly outfit.”

Perhaps Steve noted that Tony was apparently still upset about that, all these hours later – that he was, as Steve had suspected, already blaming himself for it. But if that observation registered at all, Steve was too damn scared to actually experience it, right now. His immediate concern was that Tony was obviously moving closer to him…

“And you believe that suitable reparation is somewhere in the workshop?” JARVIS prompted. At least JARVIS’ voice was always loud and clear.

“Hm? Oh, yeah, that was the question – so, I think, I know, that I’ve got a book in here somewhere…. It’s called… The journalism of modern American propaganda, the propaganda of American journalism, something like that?”

*The Journalism and Propaganda of a Modern America*

Of course Steve remembered the title. He remembered the exact cover of the book, down to the little tear in the corner of the dust jacket. He could still picture it waiting for him that morning, sitting unceremoniously on top of his usual pile of mail…
Oh, Steve knew he’d just seen that book. He realised now that he’d recognised it when he first came crashing into this cupboard – a little echo of a memory he didn’t know he’d formed, like a commercial he didn’t know he’d paid attention to, or a song he’d found himself humming … He was actually scared to look down, which was obviously ridiculous. The book was either there or it wasn’t. And even before he looked, Steve knew it was. Sitting on top of a tall pile, almost digging into his hip.

But still, he looked. And still, his heart skipped a beat when he saw it.

“And I know it’s in here, because I know I found it when I was moving everything for the Avengers, and I distinctly remember thinking, why is this here – I think it must’ve been dad’s. It was signed to Peggy…” Tony’s voice trailed off into inaudible murmurs, as he busied himself looking through something else – moving steadily closer to Steve’s end of the room-

And Steve took a moment to recognise the inevitable end of it all.

Because now he knew that Tony would have to get to this closet, eventually. He knew that Tony would find this book, the one he was practically sitting on… and leave it with Steve’s mail… and never say a word about it…

Steve had never had to wonder who the book had come from. That was back in the days when he was constantly bombarded with messages and packages, some in formats he didn’t understand, most about topics he hadn’t any grasp of. In among the things he apparently needed to know and the items he was always being ‘issued’, there were often things that people thought he’d find interesting, or might help, or maybe they were just hoping he’d sign… Initially, he’d simply glanced at that book with the same passing interest he did everything else. Then he’d hesitated, when he saw Peggy’s name on the inside cover. Then he’d started to read it…

It was a book written by a war journalist and, Steve later found out, former SHIELD employee, on all the ways that news coverage and propaganda could affect the course of a war. Specifically, the ways it can be used positively, and responsibly – or otherwise. It dedicated three chapters Captain America, and Steve was used as a case study or an argument in several others… always as a positive example. And it had helped. In a small way, maybe… but enough that he remembered it, even now. Not that he ever would have told anyone, but it had eased some sort of anxiety in him, something he couldn’t put his finger on back then. It probably had made him feel a bit better about his ‘dancing monkey’ days. Like maybe there had been a deeper meaning or a real purpose, even if Steve himself hadn’t known it…
And then a fatalistic feeling sank down over Steve, like a heavy blanket. *The book was important.* Even discounting the impact it had had on Steve in those early weeks… He’d taken it with him when he went to see Peggy. It was one of the first things they’d talked about, when they were still trying to break that awkward barrier between the emotional reunion and the time when they’d really got to know each other again. A whole afternoon spent chatting about the author, and the reasons he wrote it…the way SHIELD had changed…the work Peggy went on to do…

*And you never even wondered where it had come from—*

Wasn’t the point. The point was, Tony *had* to find that book. It had been important, it would change the future if he *didn’t*… Tony *had* to find this book, and Tony *couldn’t* find that book. There was no option.

So, Steve was just waiting, now.

He felt oddly…calm, about it. He certainly *felt* clearer headed than he had a second ago, when he’d been clinging to a shred of hope. More able to manage actual thoughts, now he didn’t have to worry about which ones were trivial and which one’s might help.

He wondered, how long would they get, before everything dissolved around them? Would everything stop the moment that Tony slid that door back, or would he get a few minutes? And, when Tony did open the door, and Steve could be sure everything was fucked anyway… if he *did* get a few minutes… What would he say?

If he could have his time again…

“Perhaps if you could recall what you found significant about the book at the time?” JARVIS suggested, as though he’d been coaching Tony through searches like these for years.

“Ah, well, that’s the annoying thing – it *wasn’t* significant at the time” Tony replied, obviously only a few feet from the door, now. “…I’m just *sure* I put it down here, like, a week before they moved in… I *know* I did…” Tony trailed off again. There was a dragging sound that Steve immediately knew was one of the big, metal storage boxes being moved. There were three of them, lined up along the same far wall that Steve was concealed in. Logically, the closet had to be the next on the list.

“So, no hope that you might have catalogued or filed it in anyway…?” JARVIS asked, in an almost teasing tone.
“Well, no, J – I didn’t know how important Steve was back then, did I?” Tony sighed, gently mocking JARVIS’ silly question.

Steve snapped his head upright. His mouth fell open. That he didn’t make a sound was simply a fluke.

“And if I’d known I was going to like him this much, I would’ve obviously known I was going to spend all my time insulting him, and I might’ve guessed this would come in handy – but I didn’t. So fuck knows where I would have put it…” Tony sounded more like he was mocking himself, now.

Steve suddenly couldn’t breathe over the lump in his throat.

He had always hoped that years of shared experience had eventually formed some sort of bond between them. He even dared to hope that it could have been a real friendship, if only he hadn’t screwed it up so spectacularly. But he’d never thought that Tony had actually liked him – liked him – that Tony’s motives would have anything to do with… and before they had years of battle experience to look back on? He never thought Tony would’ve described him as important… He’d never thought of Tony doing things like this because he cared about Steve, not even in the last few days. He’d assumed that it was all about who Tony was, that wonderful quality Tony had, the one that meant he tried to please everyone. He’d been thinking that Tony was just kind and thoughtful enough to see the pain Steve was in and want to end it, the same way he’d wanted to end everyone’s pain, all the time – that’s what he’d been thinking he’d taken for granted, what he wished he’d seen before, what he could have reached out to, what he should have been grateful to find in any friend. But he’d never thought that… he never imagined Tony thought that…

It never occurred to him that Tony might’ve been putting his foot it…not the same way Steve had… not because he cared-

**So, back then…**

**If I had just…If only I hadn’t…**

God, that was…**unbearable.** That was **tragic.** Right now, that was actually, literally worse than the end of the universe.

He heard another heavy, scraping sound. One box down.

Steve swallowed, painfully. Tony had **actually** liked him. Liked **him.** Tony had made all those efforts
for him, because he’d cared about making this better…

*He did care whether I stood up for him, or took his side, all this time.*

*It would have mattered, if-

*If I had just said-

*If only I hadn’t-

He looked up, taking a long, slow breath as quietly as he could. He was pretty sure it didn’t matter how much noise he made, now, but he’d stick with the plan until fate decided for him…

And then, if he did get the chance?

…It was already too late. Perhaps he could manage a dramatic apology or a declaration of love – although, in all likelihood, he’d spend whatever time he had telling Tony not to panic… But it didn’t matter anyway. Great last words meant nothing, they wouldn’t fix anything or change anything, even philosophically. And, now, of course it was so perfectly obvious what he should have said, all along. What he would have said, if he could have had his time again. But he’d already missed his chance. He was just watching the chance he’d missed, now.

Another heavy scraping sound. One box to go.

There was nothing left for Steve to do, now. Nothing for him to think about, nothing for him to plan, nothing left for him to work out. Now, for the last few minutes, all he could do was be.

He closed his eyes, and thought of Tony.

*Tony took the corridor back to the magic room at a full out run, trailing the rest of his team just behind him. By the time they got there his lungs were burning, his tongue sticking painfully to the roof of his mouth, his pulse throbbing in his head. Strange came to a stumbling stop beside him, his chest heaving as hard as Tony’s was. He tried to say something, but he could barely breathe, so instead he just gestured wildly between Tony and his spot on the floor, go, go!*
Tony tried to pull himself together as the room came into a chaotic sort of order around him. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Wong, red faced and panting, basically pushing Howard onto his mark. Strange was gasping for everyone to move back, even though the agitated crowd was already firmly on the right side of the chalk line. Loki hovered nervously in the midst of things, exchanging looks with Thor. Tony forced himself to take a few deep breaths and looked up at Strange.

“What now?” He rasped, desperately. Strange looked over at Loki.

“You know what you’re doing?” He croaked, and Loki just nodded violently. “Right, you try to think about Tony in 1988, you got that?” He pointed at Howard.

“Yes, yes, got it.”

“Don’t think about Steve. Steve is no longer part of your ritual-”

“Got it!” Howard shouted, and Strange just looked at Tony.

“You, think of your father first, and then Steve”

“Okay.” Tony nodded, even though that instruction didn’t really mean anything. He told himself he’d just try to think about both of them, and hope for the best.

Tony felt his legs turning to water as Strange and Wong began chanting, his head trying to gear himself up for the big moment while his body tried to wind down from the sudden exertion. His heart didn’t know whether it was speeding up or slowing down. He made himself look at his father. He told himself he was thinking about his father.

Oh, God, was he thinking about his father?

There was a white-hot flash of panic as he realised – he wasn’t thinking about anything. At this stage he was entirely adrenaline, he was just standing here panicking, he wasn’t even seeing what he was looking at, he wasn’t-

Right, battle time – you have to do this.

Just think what you know.

As he’d done a thousand times before, Tony shut down his fear, put the prospect of an anxiety attack in a little box and made himself think.

He listed every fact he knew about his father. He recalled every time his father had shouted at him. He thought about all the ways he would describe Howard to a stranger… and all the time his head
was filled with interlocking facts and objective theories, there was that deep, uncomfortable feeling-

This wasn’t going to be enough.

The chanting came to a soft, hesitant stop, and Tony braced his shoulders. He didn’t know whether he was bracing for this to work or bracing for this not to work-

It wasn’t going to work.

Tony knew it wasn’t. Even before he saw Strange throw Loki a sharp look, somewhere between irate and imploring.

“There needs to be some sort of link in the actual ritual, or I can’t copy it” Loki explained, and Strange turned to Tony with barely contained panic.

“Okay, Tony, I need you to calm down and just think.”

Tony stared right at his father, and tried to remember… but, oh, it wasn’t the remembering, was it? It would have been, just a few days ago. This time last week, all Tony would’ve had to do was think of a time that his father had belittled him, or bullied him, or hurt him, and it would have been enough. The pain would have followed naturally, the injustice, the desire to correct it somehow.

Now, the problem was that he really didn’t care.

Looking at Howard Stark now was like looking at Justin Hammer, or Strucker. Yeah, Tony knew he was an ass, he knew that Howard had done him so many wrongs – but so what? He wouldn’t have given a fuck about seeing Obie again, he’d never once thought about what he would’ve liked to say to Vanko, he couldn’t even remember the names of his high school bullies now… and he couldn’t make himself give a shit about his father any more than any of them.

“So, after three days of listening to everyone say how great you are, this is how you’re going to deal with this crisis, is it?” He father sneered, nastily.

Tony didn’t care. At least, not that his father was saying it. If anything, that little intervention had
been even more of a distraction. Extra temptation to think about the catastrophe happening all around him, when all he was trying to do was ignore it and just think-

He tried thinking back to what Howard had said about his mom – it wasn’t enough. Not without the shock factor, and now the situation was so much more urgent. He tried making himself care about it again, but he realised it just meant thinking about his mom. He tried thinking about his dad being cruel to Peter, or Rhodey, or Pepper, but it all just meant thinking about people he actually cared about, when he had to find some emotion specifically for his dad-

God, this task was everything he wasn’t. All those things he was good at, or had learned to be good at – none of them applied. His one, universal contingency had always been that he’d do it anyway, however he felt. That he’d be able to find an answer, build a thing, beat any person, because he’d always put himself aside when it counted. He’d endure any pain, he’d take any sadness, he’d face any fear…he’d ignore it and do it anyway. Even now, if it meant saving Steve (and also, the universe), Tony was sure he could have done any calculation, donned the armour and taken on any adversary, however panicked he was. It might’ve taken a few seconds to swallow his heartbeat and focus, but Tony could think about his father-

He just couldn’t make himself feel.

He’d never been able to stop himself from feeling – that had never been his thing. Putting on a brave face, and pretending it wasn’t there, and doing it anyway, yeah, fine. But Tony couldn’t control this. It wasn’t about being smart, or being resourceful, or even being powerful anymore. This was about who he really was, what he actually cared about – what could he do about that?

“You know what, Tony?” Howard started again-

But Loki cut him off

“Okay, different idea – how good are you at annoying him?” Loki asked, pointing between Tony and Howard.

“What?” Tony asked, blankly.

“Do you know him well enough to get a rise out of him? If you had to annoy him – really upset him – would you have a plan for that?” Loki asked, looking Tony right in the eye.

*Something I could plan…*

*I don’t have to give a shit about Howard, to make him give a shit-*
And, yeah, Tony knew how to do that.

Thinking about it as a cold, calculated plan to get his father right where it hurts – even factoring in everything he need to include – it all fell into place nicely.

“I can’t believe you gave up looking for Steve.”

And Howard looked up at him sharply, his forehead immediately creased in angry confusion, and Tony thought, nailed it. There was a little kick of victory in his chest – over the situation as opposed to his father, but fuck it, he’d take it.

“Excuse me?” Howard demanded, aghast, but Tony had found his theme.

“You heard me. All that talk about Stark men having tenacity and stamina and not giving up on things – four fucking years? For the most important mission of your life, was it?”

“Yeah, well, I wasn’t actually fucking him, now was I?”

“Why, d’you wish you were?” Tony shot back immediately, and Howards mouth actually fell open in outrage.

“Got it!” Strange yelled, borderline delirious.

“But don’t stop!” Wong added, quickly “We’ve got a link, we’re not done, keep going.”

Tony barely heard it. He was putting all of his focus into this plan.

“You wish he’d liked you, though, don’t you?” Tony told Howard, seriously. Howard closed his mouth, and crossed his arms, defensively. “All those years of you telling me what a great friendship you have with Captain America – and that’s just what you wished had happened. Actually, all your bullshit is what you wished had happened – you’re not the great man you keep telling everyone you are, or you wouldn’t have to keep telling them. If you were really better than me – and you’re not. Not even back in 1988. You’d just like to be. And Steve never liked you, he never thought anything of you – and now, he thinks you’re a child abuser.”

“A fucking child abuser?” Howard scowled, viciously. “Do you hear yourself?”

And Tony just looked at him for an incredulous second, amazed that Howard could be that affronted
by the accusation the second time around…and then he realised. Howard didn’t remember the first
time. He was beginning to forget – oh, thank God, that was one worry down…

And it also meant that Tony was really talking to his dad, again.

This was Howard before he’d been put in his place… which meant, this time, Tony got to do it.

“Yeah, Howard, because kicking a kid into a table is an act of abuse. Punching a fourteen-year-old
in the face is an act of abuse. And spending twenty years telling a kid they’re worthless – because
you’re too worthless to raise them – is an act of abuse, and that makes you a child abuser, doesn’t it?”

“Okay, you know what, Tony” Howard answered, darkly.

And Tony really didn’t care what.

Which was just as well, because he never got to hear it.

Chapter End Notes

So, the next update is either The Reunion, or the end of the universe.
Steve felt the earth *shift* below his feet.

He felt his stomach clench, somehow feeling as though he *should* be falling, as though the ground beneath him had already tumbled away and left him there, waiting. He took a sharp breath and balled his fists, and tried not to worry about how the end of the universe would feel.

*What happens, after you die…*

And then he felt the air moving against his skin. An eerie, incomplete quiet *expanding* around him, like the space he was in was getting bigger… emptier… A nauseous dizziness came over him, as though he’d just been pulled to a sudden stop.

He swallowed, nervously, and opened his eyes…

And there was Tony.

Steve felt a dull kick inside him, but there wasn’t much further he could go. He was already as tense and as terrified and as defeated as he could have been… That final little feeling might have been something else entirely.

Some reaction he’d *always* feel if Tony looked at him like that, even if the world was ending…

But the *way* Tony was looking at him-

And in that same second, Steve recognised that he obviously wasn’t standing in a closet anymore.
He looked around, wildly, finding that the room kept moving a little longer than his head did. It took him a moment to place all of these familiar faces… Sam. Nat… Strange…

Wakanda, 2018.

*Home.*

“Oh my God…” He exhaled. And as he let go of that breath, it was like everything went with it. All the air in his lungs, all the blood in his body, all the tension keeping him upright-

He took a sudden step backwards in a bid to right himself, throwing his arms out instinctively. He heard the room around him explode in a chorus of Woah! Steve! Time slowed down for a second as he tried to work out if he *could* save himself, grasping blindly in front of him now in a last-ditch attempt to stop himself from going back-

And he made contact with something solid, something that was suddenly right *there*, stepping flush against his chest-

*Tony*

Steve just about managed to bring his weight forward in time, having to lean on Tony as he found his feet, throwing both arms around him.

And then he didn’t let go.

And then Steve was just holding him.

*Oh God, I’m home*  
*Tony’s here, and he’s real, and he’s right here*  
*And the world didn’t end, the world isn’t going to end*
Oh, the *relief*. It was far more overwhelming than the panic had been. This moment was more overwhelming than anything he’d ever felt-

“Hey, are you with us Steve?” Tony whispered, his voice soft and fragile, as he leant back just enough for Steve to look at him-

And that was *overwhelming* of an entirely different kind.

Tony *was beautiful*. He was lovelier in that moment than he’d ever been, than *anyone* had ever been, those impossible eyes wide and dark and so full of feeling. Steve had temporarily forgotten all the hang ups and history and social rules that usually complicated this – he was just *looking* at Tony. That perfect face, those beautiful lips parted just so…and Steve *remembered* Tony smiling, he remembered how Tony’s laugh *felt*, he remembered all the other things he’d always thought when he saw Tony’s face. Why it made him feel safe and happy and *home*. Steve didn’t know how to love him this much, what to do with this sudden flood of *feeling*-

He *so* nearly kissed him.

“So, did it work then?” Someone asked, from the back of the room.

Steve didn’t even recognise the voice – but it was enough to remind Steve that there had been an ‘it’ to work, or otherwise. That Steve *wasn’t* completely outside of time and space, with nothing but Tony Stark, *right there* in his arms… that he was actually still part of a magical, time-travelling, multi-universe plan of some kind… and he had no idea which part. If it *was* actually over… or what had just happened… or what he was *supposed* to be doing now-

“What’s going on?” He managed, never taking his eyes off Tony.

“It’s okay” Tony assured him, the promise of a smile dancing at the corners of his mouth. And Steve *still* just wanted to kiss those lips… but he’d come back to himself enough to realise that he probably shouldn’t. That he *didn’t*, usually, and there *must* be a reason…

But he didn’t let Tony go. Even though he’d recognised that he didn’t usually get to hold Tony like this, either…he *was* holding Tony, and he couldn’t think of a single reason to stop it. He wasn’t actually trying to think of a reason. And he’d just about realised that Tony hadn’t let *him* go-

“Yeah… yeah, that actually *worked*” Strange answered, stunned. And Steve remembered again that he didn’t know *what* had worked…
“Wait-” He tried – but, in fairness to Strange, it probably had been too quiet for him to hear.

“Well, Howard Stark isn’t here, and Steve is…” Stephen went on, like he wasn’t talking to anyone in particular.

Around him, the room softened. A gentle sigh of collective relief that quickly bubbled into breathless chatter and hysterical giggles. And then, over the top of it all, Steve finally heard what Strange had just said-

Howard.

Thanos, the Infinity Stones.

Thor, and...

Steve recognised him at last.

Loki.

Steve pulled Tony closer again, instinctively – protectively. He felt Tony exhale softly against his neck, and all he wanted was to gather Tony up and hold him close and… keep him. He’d come so close to losing him so many times, he’d spent so long thinking about how lost he’d be without him, he just-

Okay, he had to focus. Because… Thanos… and Loki, and… things.

“So, Thor and Loki made it back” He said, his voice a little more like his own now. And then he felt Tony take a step away from him, and he dropped his arms immediately even though it was the last thing he wanted to do.

“Yeah – yeah” Tony nodded, dazed. He had a look on his face, like he was trying not to giggle. “Yeah, the, uh, the first ritual worked – except for the part with you… but, that monumental fuck up aside, that bit worked…”

Steve finally realised that Tony was as overwhelmed as he was. He had no way to process the fact that they were both suffering the magical equivalent of a major hang-over, but could tell at a glance that Tony was at just as much risk of falling down… And then Steve was suddenly more focussed on finding his words, because he knew Tony couldn’t. Because pulling himself together for Tony
made far more sense than doing it for himself.

“So, the Infinity Stones are hidden?” He asked, more firmly.

“Yes – and also really tiny.” There was just the hint of a smile creeping into Tony’s voice now.

“And Thanos?”

“Is apparently miles away-” Tony looked away from Steve for the first time, and right at Loki “Do we know how far he actually is?”

“In his ship, with the resources he has currently, three, four years, at least” Loki confirmed. There was a swell of excitement from the gathered crowd – that was a lot longer than any of them had been hoping. Tony breathed out a little laugh of relief.

“So, that’s… that” He turned back to Steve. And then Steve glanced between Tony and Loki.

“And him?” He asked. He saw Tony drop his eyes, and pinch his lips, and soften his shoulders just slightly.

“He helped” Tony said simply, before he looked up at Steve again. “And… He’s Thor’s responsibility, for the time being.”

Over Tony’s head, Steve saw Thor snap upright, as though this was news to him… but he didn’t argue.

“And that’s…it?” Steve dared to ask, at last “Your dad’s gone, there’s… nothing else, here?”

“That’s it, here.” Tony answered, softly.

“Well, no, we do have to shut everything down properly.” Strange intervened, suddenly, in a different tone entirely. But before Steve could wince at the idea of there being *one more fucking thing*, Strange had steamrollered on, “For one, Tony, you should take Captain Rogers somewhere he can lie down, before he falls down. Actually, both of you should rest – being a part of a ritual of this magnitude is no small thing. And T’Challa, I’ll need to talk to you about what happens in the room, for at least the next few days…”

But, obviously, Steve had no interest in the *rest* of the instructions. He even had a suspicion that there weren’t really any more instructions, that this was just Strange offering he and Tony a reason to leave… Together…

And he’d take it. That’s all there was.
In Tony’s experience, a total mental break is nothing like it sounds.

To be fair, Tony had only experienced one actual mental break – after which, he realised that none of his previous temper tantrums or bouts of despair where anything close. Siberia had been something else entirely.

And, for one thing, it hadn’t felt anything like a break. It hadn’t been a sudden snap, like flicking a switch. It wasn’t that everything had changed in an instant, it wasn’t that he simply ‘lost control’ of what he was feeling in that moment – and it hadn’t come from nowhere.

Actually, it had been more like an erosion. Like some foundational, load-bearing part of him had been slowly worn away – and it had begun days before Siberia, when everything first started to fall to pieces. When he’d had to question more and more, as the unrelenting stress filed all the sharp edges off of his thoughts, and he found there was less and less he could rely on…

And then there was the bunker, and even then it hadn’t been a clean break. It had still taken all those long, agonising minutes for everything to crumble. For Tony to realise that everything he'd believed in just a few seconds ago didn’t exist anymore, that it might never have been real. A few minutes of trying to figure out how he’d arrived at that bunker so full of optimism, with absolutely no constants to figure things out by, all of a sudden. And then he didn’t know what he was there for, or who he was, or what anything meant. The things that were breaking were the basis of everything else.

Now I’ll never save The Avengers

Wait, do I even want to save The Avengers?

What were The Avengers?

Did Nat know? Did they all know? Have they always known?

Are any of them who I think they are?

If that isn’t how my dad died

Bucky worked for Hydra?

Who does Steve work for? Who do I work for?

Why do I still feel guilty?

Who am I angry at?

What am I doing here?
It was like being broken down to nothing, and it had taken the duration of that security tape to happen. And then, eventually, Tony had found himself with nothing to fall back on, no standards that made sense, no context for that blinding pain. No barrier between his brain and his body, no way to put those frantic impulses into any structure – just the instinct to lash out, immediately translated into action. He’d hit Bucky because he wanted to, because there was no way to know he shouldn’t anymore, no concept of stopping himself.

Later, when he’d come back to his senses, Tony had been horrified to find he remembered it all in perfect clarity. He immediately recognised that none of it had felt real, even at the time. It was just that, at the time, he’d had no idea how anything was supposed to feel.

And here he was again.

Those few minutes after Steve magically reappeared managed to feel completely different to everything he’d been through in Siberia, but still somehow the same…

Tony knew he’d decided to take them both back to Steve’s room, that Steve had followed him… He’d just done that, without thinking. Truthfully, it was probably just because Strange had said that Steve needed to lie down, and Tony wasn’t up to more than a very basic interpretation. He hadn’t considered the meaning of anything. It was simply Steve needs to lie down = Take Steve to his room.

Which was how it started in Siberia, too. That few minutes when Tony was just doing on auto pilot, just watching the tape as Zemo instructed, because he had already been broken down to basic cause and effect by then. Action and reaction. Request and reply. Already incapable of high thought, before he stopped thinking at all. Reflexively doing as he was told, in the minutes before he started just doing.

And now he’d brought Steve to his bedroom, as instructed.

Now he was finally standing here, alone with Steve, with no mission deadline to distract them and no imminent threat to claim their attention. Just the two of them, after all this time – and now, Tony had no instructions.

Now, Tony just had Steve.

And there was that same crumbling feeling he’d experienced in that bunker. The sudden awareness
that none of his starting points made any sense, much less any of his follow up arguments.

He’d spent two years asking himself why Steve didn’t care about him… and now Tony knew that he did. He knew it, but it hadn’t had time to filter into his assumptions yet – he kept coming back to pain that didn’t apply any more, out of habit. He kept remembering all the questions he’d once had, before he remembered that he already knew the answers. He recalled injustices he’d felt with such passion, and that had nothing to do with the Steve he was looking at. Tony remembered the deep, searing hurt that Steve had caused him, and he thought it should probably still be important – he remembered telling himself it was important, so many times… but so many of the underlying reasons hadn’t been real, or hadn’t been right…

And then his head was full of points out of chronological order, memories he’d filed away but hadn’t bothered to assign a meaning yet. Things he hadn’t had time to rethink properly, since everything changed.

He remembered that Steve had kicked his father through a table and declared his undying love.

He remembered that Steve had dropped his shield on the floor of that bunker and just walked away.

He remembered that Steve had always been suffering a trauma that Tony still didn’t fully understand.

He remembered that Steve had never once brought him coffee.

He remembered that Steve had gone to 2012, to the tower.

He remembered that Steve had lied to him about his dad being back.

He remembered things that Bruce had said, and Rhodey had said, and Valkyrie had said.

He remembered JARVIS, and Thanos, and his father, and the mad panic to get to Thor in time and the mad panic to get to Steve in time, and the fact that Loki had been in his head… and this had nothing to do with anything, did it?

But Tony was at the stage where nothing had anything to do with anything. Where he had no hope of figuring out the right thing to do, or what he’d regret doing, or what he wanted outside of this exact moment.

Within a minute of reaching this room, Tony just was. And when he looked at Steve without the assumptions, without knowing what their past looked like any more, without asking himself what any of it meant… God, Tony loved him. What if he’d never seen him again? What if he’d never had the chance to say…

“Do you still want to talk?”
And, actually, Tony had no idea what any of those words meant. He’d not thought what he was asking, or else he would have realised that he clearly wasn’t up to it right now. That, after all the racing around and competing priorities and misunderstandings, it was probably more sensible to wait until tomorrow…now that they did have all the time in the world.

But Tony had no idea what time meant, at the moment. He wasn’t thinking about talking. He had no idea what he thought, any more.

*I was so sure Steve didn’t care about me, and he’s in love with me*

*I was so sure that my father was this big, important figure – and he never was. He was always just a man.*

*I was so sure Steve would have gone to the forties, and look what would have happened if we’d left him there.*

*I was so adamant Loki couldn’t help, and if he hadn’t, the world would have ended*

   *Ew, Loki was in my head….*

   *I would have been so sure I couldn’t do that…*

He’d been so sure he couldn’t forgive Steve, once. He’d made so many assumptions, and not even seen them, and now that they weren’t there…

Tony just remembered that *can we talk* was as far as he’d got, before. That the last question he’d asked himself was whether he could even *try* with Steve. Whether he’d really argued himself out of two years of anger and suppositions, whether his sudden *desire* to try was an illusion or whether his pain had been based on a falsehood…

And now he knew. He wanted to try.

He had no idea how he knew, or what that meant, or if that made this a good idea right now. But it was the thing he knew at this exact moment, so he said it.

And Tony saw the emotion well up in Steve, the way he’d started nodding before Tony had finished the question. Tony felt his shoulders tense, and thought, *I guess I must be nervous about something…*
“Tony, I… have so many things I’d love to say to you, just…so many things I want to say I’m sorry for, so many things I wish I’d said at the time, things I’d love to at least try to explain, if you… If you’d let me…”

And then Steve paused, and Tony heard the but, and felt his shoulders harden a little more

“But, I just – I’ve only just realised that I’ve spent all this time wishing I could tell you what I was thinking, and… thinking I’ve worked out what to do for the best, and just storming in with it, and actually I’ve never known all these things I think I know… because I never asked. Because it’s taken me all this time to realise… the problem was always that I didn’t know what you were thinking, that I guessed and got it wrong and I could’ve just… asked.” Steve exhaled softly, and took a moment, and Tony realised he wasn’t tense any more. “I was always so busy trying to get you to see things my way, or wishing you at least knew why I saw it that way, and just… I just mean – do you want to talk?”

And Tony realised, in a moment of enlightenment, that yeah, he really did. That, actually, that was all he’d ever wanted Steve to say – he just hadn’t known.

And he wasn’t going to talk now, obviously. He couldn’t do this now. But that didn’t bother him… that wasn’t really the point of this revelation, and it didn’t take anything away from it.

The deeper point that Tony had only just understood was that… it wasn’t enough for Steve just to care about him. It wasn’t even enough that Steve was in love with him.

Tony had spent his whole life just assuming that no one would. That it would be such a monumental feat of character for anyone to truly love him and he couldn’t possibly hope for anything more. Tony had always thought that quality in and of itself would be special enough to fight for. That’s how he ended up changing everything about himself to hold on to a relationship with Pepper, why he’d ignored all the reasons they clearly weren’t compatible and the ways they made each other unhappy – because she loved him, and what were the chances of that? How could he let go of that, however many suits he had to destroy or late nights he had to feel anxious about… And when she left him, he’d thought of it as a massive personal failing – she’d loved him, and he’d lost her, and what else could that be but his fuck up?

Tony had sat in his room, before he watched that video, and convinced himself that it was enough for Steve simply to care. That if only Steve could see him as enough of a person to think before he acted, they maybe they had a shot at fixing this.

And of course they wouldn’t have, if it had only been that.
It had never once occurred to Tony that all of that should have been a given, anyway. That he should never have been grateful that anyone cared about him, or even that shocked that some people did. That any reconciliation based on that small concession would never have lasted – that it would obviously, inevitably have ended the same way, when all their issues just found different ways to manifest themselves. Steve always had to do more than just love Tony.

Steve had to do this.

Steve had to care whether Tony loved him. Steve had to think Tony was every bit as important as Tony thought Steve was, Steve had to want to learn these things about Tony because they mattered to him. It had to matter to Steve what Tony thought – and not just as a means of ‘helping him with his issues’ or ‘finding the right thing to say’ or circumventing some future fight. Not just as a means to an end. It had to matter to Steve the way it mattered to Tony, because Steve saw Tony as a person with value of his own. Steve had to see that this relationship was a partnership, something they shared equally and therefore something he could never try to work on alone – he had to be prepared to accept Tony as part of himself, part of his life, something he couldn’t just separate off when it suited him because he was actually there in the foundations of things.

And maybe Tony had never considered any of this because it seemed to be asking far too much of anyone. Maybe he wouldn’t have recognised it now, if all of his previous perceptions weren’t in the middle of crumbling to dust, if he’d had some assumption or neurosis to bat this back with. But as it was, it seemed perfectly obvious now what Tony had always needed Steve to do –

Because he was looking at it.

“Okay, so yes.” Tony managed “The first thing is, yes, I do want to talk…But, I, uh, I’ve…sort of forgotten how to talk, at the moment…” And Steve nodded, kind and understanding and maybe just a little bit nervous.

“Yeah, no, I get that, I just…” And Steve dared to take a little step closer, and Tony could see him balling up all his courage inside himself before he carried on “I just want you to know that I love you, that I love everything about you, that all I want is to be with you – and I know I’ve lost any right to…but I just need you to know where I’m coming from, so you never have to guess. That will always be what I want, however much of it I can… But that’s always going to be what’s important. That’s what I’m thinking, however long you need, or whatever you need, even if it never… It doesn’t matter. I just need you to know that.”

And, in some ways, a mental break can actually help you see things more clearly. Once Tony forgot all the lies he’d told himself, and the myths he’d always just taken for granted, when he really just
looked at what was right in front of him… two things were immediately obvious.

The first was that so many things had always been there, and he’d simply never seen them, or let his own insecurities twist them into something else…

And the other, much more important thing, was that some of this was genuinely new.

And Tony knew better than anyone that real change was possible. That it can be true that you never would have worked it out without that inciting event – but that you really had worked it out, none-the-less. That change could still be real, however you got to it. Tony thought back to the defensive, stubborn man that Steve really had been just a few days earlier, and looked in front of him, and saw a difference. Not a whole new man… but Tony would never have wanted that, anyway. What mattered was that Tony knew that Steve would never had said any of this before, that he really hadn’t thought some of it, before… and he did now. However it had happened, whatever it took, Tony just saw that Steve had turned a corner. This was his Afghanistan… And that was so much more of a revelation that what Steve had said about him…

Although, now that Tony was thinking about what Steve had said about him…

And suddenly, he remembered that video so clearly, like he was watching that scene loop again right behind his eyes…

And the next time you want to torture Tony with this ridiculous myth you’ve built about me – the next time you want to ask him what Captain America would think of him – you can tell him this. You can tell him that I think he’s astounding. That I think he’s a better man than you’ll ever be – a better man than I am. You can tell him I am in awe of his bravery, and overwhelmed by his kindness, and amazed by his brilliance, and that he is what I want to be, when I grow up

And that’s the thing about mental breaks. They don’t have to make you do anything you don’t want to do. They don’t necessarily make you do anything that you wouldn’t otherwise do. The point is that you just do, without any of the noise in between.

So Tony simply stepped forward, and put his hand on Steve’s arm, and looked up at him-

And kissed him.
Steve’s brain stopped completely. To the point that he’d sort of forgotten what a kiss was.

Thankfully, his body was more on top of things – or maybe it was just a much simpler issue for his body. Steve parted his lips the second he felt Tony’s brush against them, his arms going around Tony in that same animalistic instinct to keep. And then there was a fleeting flash of panic, a sudden fear that he shouldn’t, a hangover from all those years of knowing that he could obviously never have this-

But there was just no part of him saying no.

Steve had wanted to do this so much, for so long. He’d imagined kissing Tony Stark so many times-

Or, at least, he thought he had.

Apparently, what he’d actually been doing was picturing it. Watching it from outside himself, like a scene on a film.

He’d never imagined the solid warmth of Tony’s body pressed up against him, he’d never thought of the taste of Tony’s mouth, he’d never considered the soft sound of Tony’s breathing. He’d never thought about how all those little details he’d obsessed over would come together like this. What those talented, delicate fingers would do to him, as they pressed into his back. How the smell of Tony’s skin would be all around him, if they ever really kissed.

Jesus Christ, I am kissing Tony Stark-

Tony just kissed me

The whole thing had felt so natural, as though it’d just happened, as thought this was obviously how this was supposed to work… It had taken Steve this long to realise that Tony was letting him do this…that Tony was kissing him back…that it meant something-

It was Tony that broke away first, taking a sudden gasp of air, still holding Steve close enough that their foreheads were touching. Steve was torn between so many sudden instincts. The impulse to ask him, what? The instinct not to question this, the knowledge that he’d never been as sure of anything
as he was this. The urge to kiss him again-

“I love you” Tony breathed. And Steve heard himself make a shocked little squeaking noise, and had no idea where it had come from. He saw Tony’s eyes soften into a smile. Steve thought what? and why? and since when? but when it came to actually saying something he only got as far as

“Wh…?”

And then Tony actually giggled, and Jesus Christ that was just the most beautiful sound…

“Sorry, I haven’t actually said that yet, have I?” Tony grinned. And Steve could only shake his head… “Well, I do, and I always have, and half the time I had no idea what that meant, and I’m not really sure what anything means right now – but I still know it, and I know this is what I want now, if…”

And it was as though all the air in the room rushed into Steve’s chest as he realised what Tony was saying – what Tony was asking – and, yes.

Obviously yes, in every way, to everything. Yes, Steve wanted this, yes, Tony could have anything he wanted, yes-

He wasn’t saying yes, was he? He was just beaming at Tony like an idiot…

So he gathered him up and pulled him closer and kissed him again. He put all of that longing and loss and lust into that one kiss, all those years of hurt ing and yearning and wishing, all of that need. He stopped trying to think about all the reasons this was so amazing, and just let it be amazing.

And, fuck, this was amazing…

Chapter End Notes

So, I *know* they do still need to talk... but, what can I say, i figured they’d both earned a bit of a break by now...

Also, in terms of managing expectations - there will be no porn. I'm still kinda practise
the NSFW stuff, and the trial runs are... yeah... so, while I may one day write and post this scene as a separate story, there just seems to be no need to ruin everyone's enjoyment of the whole thing by doing it here, now...

So, the next chapter is very much the morning after the night before.
Tony Stark had woken up after so many ill-judged one-night stands that the process was second nature to him. So much so that he’d actually done it when he woke up next to Pepper, at least for the first few weeks of their relationship.

Because you couldn’t wait until you knew you regretted it before you started the process – by then it would be too late. It had to be automatic, every time. Keep your eyes closed even though you’d woken up, and keep your breathing even, and try to look like you were sleeping for long enough to work out where you were, and who you were with, and if they were awake – and how to leave the room very quietly, was usually the final question.

So, as Tony began to wake up in a bed still warm with someone else’s body, he knew to keep his eyes closed. He knew to keep his body still, and soft, and heavy-

Steve. I’m in bed with Steve

And Tony couldn’t help his body tensing at that recollection, however many years of ‘training’ he had at this – but he kept his eyes closed. Even though he was pretty sure Steve was still sleeping, he couldn’t risk looking over yet, just in case.

Because even if this didn’t count as sex he regretted, it was definitely something he wanted to think about, before he had to talk about it.

I probably should have thought about it before I did it...

Well, that wasn’t quite fair, was it? He had actually given quite a lot of thought to how he felt about Steve and whether he had any hope of a future with Steve and what Steve would have to do for Tony to trust him again. Tony had spent two years thinking about his relationship with Steve…of which only the last two days may have counted… but even then, no one could say that Tony hadn’t thought about it...
He’d just never considered that fucking Steve was actually a possibility.

Even when Tony was crafting the ever-changing criteria by which he could, hypothetically, forgive Steve… He’d never stopped to think about whether there was specific criteria for this. He’d never wondered what would make this a good idea, in the real world. He didn’t even know if he should have forgiven Steve first. He’d never once bothered to ask himself whether sex with Steve would have to mean something, how much trust he’d have to have, whether going to bed with Steve should be any different to doing it with anyone else… He’d only ever thought about fucking Steve as a fantasy, and fantasies don’t have to take the real world into account - whatever the real world was, these days.

…had he forgiven Steve?

His sleep addled brain started putting the series of events into order, trying to at least remember what had happened before he asked himself how he felt about it. He decided to run through the last few days, hour by hour, starting with where he was – who he was – back when it all started…

It wasn’t as easy as it sounded.

He could remember the actual action points – that he’d been walking through the park, that Strange and Bruce had magically ambushed him with news of Thanos, that he’d had to call Steve and ask the fugitive avengers to come… But the emotional recollections were far more difficult. It was so hard to just put himself back there, to remember how he felt without bringing his current feelings into it, to leave the analysis to the end. Because he knew he’d been reluctant to call Steve – he’d said as much, so he couldn’t pretend otherwise, not even to himself. But trying to empathise with why, trying not to include his recent revelations… Had he really thought Steve wouldn’t come? Had he managed to convince himself that he didn’t want to see Steve? Had he really not wanted to see Steve? Had he really thought that it’d be easier without Steve, or that Steve would be spiteful, or that it wouldn’t be nice to just see his face, after all this time? It was hard to imagine it, now…

But he did know that he’d been so hurt, back then. That he’d been telling himself that things were getting better, when actually the pain had just changed form over time – more numb sadness and less fiery rage, but a world of constant pain, just the same. And he’d been hurt because Steve didn’t love him, didn’t even care about him – because he assumed that no one cared about him, that everyone had casually destroyed him and walked away without a thought. That they were probably all still looking down at him, from their moral pedestals, even after everything…

And then they’d resurrected his father, and – at the time, at least – it seemed that they all just did the same again. Discounted his feelings, decided what he should know, lied to him because it was easier.
And because, apparently, there was no downside to thinking of Tony as collateral damage – after all, Tony’s feelings didn’t even count enough to be considered a casualty.

He’d thought.

And that Tony would probably have been mortified to think he’d ever sleep with Steve under any circumstances… probably… mostly… But that Tony would certainly be berating himself after the fact. His internal guidance counsellor would have had a few things to say about this turn of events, that was for sure… How little self-worth he must have to even still want to, how little self-respect he must have to actually let Steve know, how little self-control he must have to have done it, without thought to what was going to happen afterwards and how it could complicate things and how it could only lead to more pain…

What was I thinking, when I-

But Tony just managed to stop himself from thinking about last night, yet. He could feel those memories, right there at the edges of his thoughts, tempting him… but he also knew this was his last chance to think about where he was, before he had to just be there. To decide what he should do, before he had to do it.

So, instead, he tried to think of what had happened next… the individual occurrences and interactions and comments from others that had changed things, along the way. He thought back to Steve calling with the truth about his dad. All the horrible things Tony had yelled at him, the pain and the panic of that moment, the image of the flip phone smashing into pieces on the floor. He thought back to how easily he’d forgiven Bruce for keeping the same secret… because Bruce had apologised, and, back then, Tony just knew Steve never would. He thought back to his abortive interactions with Steve before that big fight, and he thought of that big fight, and he thought of the long conversation he’d had in the lab afterwards. He thought of Steve kicking his father through a table, and telling him ‘…he is what I want to be, when I grow up’. He thought of his blood curdling horror when Steve disappeared, and just how sure he’d been that Steve had gone back to the forties – and that they should leave him there. What it meant that it hadn’t happened that way…

And…actually…. It did all make a sort of narrative sense.

This all felt as though it should be very complicated. It had seemed so complicated, for so long… But now that Tony finally had a chance to think about everything, when he just stood back and looked at what had happened…

He could see them both, as they were five years ago.
He saw himself, insecure but well intentioned, madly in love with a man that had a bit of a temper and a whole host of issues to work through, but who managed to be the best person Tony had ever known, all the same. He saw Steve, frightened and lost and, yeah, a bit arrogant, apparently already in love with Tony despite Tony’s neurosis, and with no idea what to do about it.

He remembered Steve, shooting down his earnest efforts and talking as though Tony was just like his father, and the pang of humiliated vulnerability that always went with it. He remembered himself, making stupid jokes about Pilates and Steve being an old man, never realising why Steve’s reaction to this might be different to other peoples – if he was inadvertently making Steve feel embarrassed and exposed, too.

He saw them growing closer in spite of all that – because ‘all that’ was actually nothing more than the standard challenges of any real relationship. Getting to know each other, trying to understand each other, making mistakes and making amends and giving it another go. He saw how they’d come to be friends, even though Tony was still struggling with his self esteem and Steve was still struggling with his arrogance, because of all the other things that were also real... things he had known at the time, and chosen to ignore after he became so hurt and angry.

And then he thought of what had happened next… and he tried to remember how it looked to him then… but he couldn’t discount what he knew now.

He thought of Steve, as a person, cringing every time he thought of the secret he was keeping… but being so scared of what would happen if he spoke, just hoping so hard that he could work this out and it would all be okay… mistakes that were so obviously rooted in the trauma he’d been though, and equally obviously the result of his own pig-headedness. Not a mad egotist, dismissing Tony with a wave of his hand. Not a bastion of purity and American goodness, making a stand for what must be the right thing. Just a man, with good intentions and personal weaknesses, fucking it up.

He thought of himself, being so sure that Steve had completely discounted him, never even considering that Steve could be insecure, taking as a given that his stoic speeches were as assured as they always sounded. He remembered his ham-fisted attempts at reconciliation, his insensitive belief that a trinket from his father’s memory box should be enough to calm Steve’s fears about government internment...fears he hadn’t stopped to put into context.

And Tony thought of his desperation as he tried in vain to make Steve listen, the pain he felt when he realised he couldn’t make Steve care. He thought of all the things he’d wished Steve had done, things Steve should have done…

And, now that he’d thought about everything, and now he saw Steve more clearly, Tony still
thought he was right about most of it. He still thought Steve should have talked to him, he still thought it was reckless and stupid and wrong for Steve to take half the team on that ill planned mission… But then, he knew Steve would say the same, now.

So…Tony was right about a lot of it, but had maybe gone about some things the wrong way… And Steve was the same person Tony had always loved, because that person had never been perfect… And Steve had fucked this one up…but he could still be a good person…

This wasn’t all that complicated, now was it?

And Tony couldn’t help thinking…if I could have my time again. What difference would it have made if he’d known all this before, if he’d seen it then…

…you know what, probably not enough.

It would have helped, definitely. He’d have been less upset all the time, if nothing else. And he probably could have done a lot more for Steve than he had, made a lot of things much easier than they had been…tried to help Steve overcome those issues before they ruined everything…

But that was the point, ultimately. Whatever Tony had done, or not done, or could have done, it had been Steve’s issues at the root of it.

And Tony was only just beginning to see that not every hill was his to die on. Not everything was his fault, he didn’t actually have to earn everyone’s basic consideration… His dad’s shortcomings had never been his to carry… And neither were Steve’s. Maybe it helped that Steve had finally started talking about what he’d done, as opposed to what Tony could have done, but Tony found himself thinking differently now. However much he would have liked to help…and he still wanted to…and he still would… that didn’t make any of this his responsibility, or his failing. And Tony knew that however well he supported and placated and loved Steve, it would’ve come to nothing if Steve wouldn’t listen, if Steve wasn’t looking from anyone else’s perspective – if Steve simply hadn’t been ready. If Steve had stayed arrogant, and defensive, and stubborn. That had always been Steve’s to deal with.

And Tony genuinely believed he had. Or, at least, that Steve really understood that failing, and wanted to make it better – which is all you can really ask of anyone, on the day. And he knew that plenty of people would sneer at his trust in Steve, after everything… but those would be the people who didn’t believe that anyone could change. If Tony believed that any person, potentially, could be better… then why not Steve, now? What more evidence could he ask for? Who would be able to manage this, if not Steve Rogers? If Tony was too scared to put his faith in this, then he was
accepting he was too damaged to ever take a leap of faith again-

And he wasn’t. He really wasn’t.

If the problem last week was that Steve was too arrogant to listen, and that Steve didn’t care about him…

And now… Steve was learning to listen, and it turned out he’d always cared…

…Like, Tony really didn’t want to over simplify this, or anything…

But what if it really was just that simple? If that was just how it happened, and where they were now? Did that mean Tony could actually just be fucking happy about something, for a change?

…Did that mean it was okay that he’d actually had sex with Steve Rogers last night-

Oh, last night…

Or, now that he thought about it, this morning. The same morning that his father had come pounding on his door at daybreak. The same morning that Nat sent him that video. The same morning as they’d all come together as a committee, and then as a team to bring Steve home…

And then…

And then he was just thinking about the way Steve kissed him, deep and desperate and hungry, like he just couldn’t love him enough.

He remembered running his palms over the smooth expanse of Steve’s chest, the way Steve had arched up to meet his touch, the feeling of that perfect, soft skin.

He remembered the exact tone of Steve’s voice, the breathless, pleading way he’d kept saying that he loved Tony, that he was so sorry, that he’d missed Tony so much.

He remembered the way Steve pulled his hair, and the sharp heat of Steve’s fingers digging into his hips, and the way Steve’s breath caught…
Aaaand now he was attempting to have a serious think about Steve Rogers, while in bed with Steve Rogers, with a hard on. Great.

Also, he was quite obviously grinning now, and he had no idea how long he’d been doing that for, so he probably had to accept that the process had failed this time.

So, he opened his eyes. It turned out that it was actually the mid-afternoon after the this morning before, and the room was flooded with bright, orange sunlight. It took a few seconds for Tony’s eyes to adjust, and then he glanced over-

Oh…

…my God, Steve…

Was just the most beautiful thing Tony had ever…

…breathe in, Tony.

Tony tried to take that gulp of air as quietly as he could, still not wanting to wake Steve – but for entirely different reasons, now. Now, it was just that Tony didn’t want to disturb the natural masterpiece he was gazing at…

Steve was lying on his back, the white cotton sheet draped so artfully over his waist that it was hard to believe it had happened by accident. One arm was lying above his head, meaning that Tony could run his eyes over the whole of that glorious chest, to where the curve of his hips peeked over the edge of the covers every time he breathed. His head was turned to Tony, his lips heavy and almost pouting, the sun trapped in his hair like glitter. He looked like a renaissance painting of a Roman god…

…you have to keep breathing, Tony…

But, Jesus Christ, Tony loved him. He loved him so much right now that it actually hurt a little bit – and Steve loved Tony, Tony knew he did. He’d felt it, as Steve ran his hands over every inch of him, and held him so close, and called him sweetheart… Tony had felt loved, and it had been so good, and this was what they both wanted and – did they really have to talk about everything now? Couldn’t everything just be wonderful, for once? Just for a minute? He knew he forgave Steve, he knew Steve
was sorry, he wasn’t hurt any more – and he wanted to kiss Steve so much right now that his mouth was literally watering. Couldn’t they just-

And then Steve sighed, softly, and gently stretched his shoulders, and Tony felt every part of himself just weaken. And then Steve’s eyes fluttered open, a little flash of gold highlighting that flawless blue. And Tony saw Steve see him, surprised and then delighted and then endearingly shy all in one second, a perfect blush colouring his cheeks as he whispered,

“Hey”

And, heaven help him, Tony actually loved Steve even more than that. Enough to smile, and say,

“So, do you still want to talk?”

It was Steve that suggested they get dressed first.

Not that he’d wanted to get dressed. Actually, as soon as he saw Tony smiling down on him like that, all Steve had wanted to do was pull him into his arms again and feel Tony’s skin against his and breathe him in… But, as he was thinking it, he realised that this was all he wanted to do forever. And if there was any hope of this wonderful, magical thing happening again after tomorrow, it meant they had to talk today.

And Steve didn’t really want to talk any more than Tony did. He knew this wasn’t going to be fun. But he really did want to know what Tony thought, and how he felt, and he really did want to know if there was anything he could do to make any of this better. He wanted to do this properly, and that meant doing all the ugly, uncomfortable bits too. And it was important that Tony was free to react however he wanted – including storming out, if it came to it, without having to find his underwear first.

So, they got dressed. And then Tony came and sat crossed-legged on the bed, his hair still all soft and mussed up, his hands resting in his lap. Steve sat opposite, and willed his heart to slow down.

“So.” Tony sighed, after a moment. And then he hesitated, and Steve could see him struggling with how to start.

“You know when we were arguing in the break room?” Steve began, softly. He waited for Tony to
flash him a relieved smile before he carried on. “I, uh, I don’t actually remember all of it, exactly…” Tony huffed a little laugh, me neither “But I remember that I said a lot of… wrong things, and I get the impression I probably said a lot more stupid things than I realise… and I remember you asking me if I knew how much I’d hurt you.” He saw Tony take a little breath, and nod. “And I don’t know for sure, but I think I probably said that I did… I really thought I did, then. But you were right, I didn’t – I don’t. I… this is going to sound awful, and I really hope that… But I don’t actually think I even thought about it. I just… thought I had.”

Steve felt all his joints start to stiffen with the tension of this point. He knew there was a real chance that this, especially, would come out all wrong, that Tony would get entirely the wrong impression of how Steve felt… that the truth wasn’t going to sound very good. But it was the truth, and Steve knew that Tony deserved to hear it. Now he’d put himself in Tony’s shoes, he couldn’t ignore how frustrating it would be for Steve to deny it. So.

“I was just so quick to tell myself that I didn’t have a choice… because I didn’t want to have to make one, or take responsibility for the one I made… and I told myself that everything would be okay when it was over, that it had to be, like that isn’t…” He exhaled, and dropped his eyes, ashamed. “like that isn’t really childish. And, I think deep down, maybe I knew that if I did stop and think about it, it would just make everything really hard. That if I did that, I’d feel guilty, and I’d feel sorry for you, and I’d feel conflicted and maybe have to do something about it, and I didn’t know what. Even… afterwards. I used to get close to thinking about what I’d done to you and just… flinch away, because I just knew it was really bad… and I’ve been telling myself all this time that was knowing the pain I’d caused you – and I know this sounds like I thought you didn’t matter, or that I cared any less about it, but it really wasn’t that. I… always adored you, I always wanted to make you happy, I just never thought I…” It occurred to Steve that he could make this a lot easier on himself, right now. That Tony wanted to be kind to him, that it would take so little to call it done and say they’d had the talk. That was just Tony’s nature – and, honestly, it was in Steve’s nature to let him. It was tempting. A perfect storm of the circumstances he was in and the qualities he’s always had…

“Honestly?” Tony exhaled “So much of the pain I was in was just because I loved you and you didn’t love me back.”

“Yeah, see, didn’t know about that one.” Steve deadpanned, and Tony laughed.

“I just mean… I’m not actually in a lot of that pain anymore. And it’s funny how that makes it harder to remember it, but… I dunno, a lot of the things I said that night…last night? Well, I’m not actually angry over a lot of that stuff, now…”

And Steve recognised immediately that he could make this a lot easier on himself, right now. That Tony wanted to be kind to him, that it would take so little to call it done and say they’d had the talk. That was just Tony’s nature – and, honestly, it was in Steve’s nature to let him. It was tempting. A perfect storm of the circumstances he was in and the qualities he’s always had…

But Steve really did wish he’d done the hard stuff, before. He kept telling himself, if he could have his time again, that’s what he would have done. So, unfortunately, he had to do now.
“So, what about the stuff you are still angry about?” He asked, his voice small. And he gave Tony time to think about it.

“The letter” Tony said, eventually. “I know you might think I’d say something else first, but, honestly, that letter just…” He shook his head, and bit his bottom lip. Steve felt his skin creeping, but he stayed quiet. “I don’t like the idea of you rattling around the mansion by yourself… made it sound like something that kinda bothered you a bit, like something I might say about my high school gym teacher, not my best friend, not like you felt responsible for that. And… like, what were you worried I’d get up to? Did you think I’d drink, or be irresponsible, did you think I was… pathetic, or whatever… or were you saying you didn’t like the idea of me being sad, because then it just seemed… dismissive.”

Tony’s delivery had taken on a stuttering, intermittent quality, as he almost got into every argument, and then looked at Steve, and softened, and reigned it in a bit. And then had to look away, and then got into it again, and so on.

“And we all need family just seemed…And you saying that maybe the Avengers were my family, and I just wanted to say that I’d assumed that, before they all just… fucked off because you told them to… The whole tone was just… Like I was a kid that was crying because their parents were making them move, and you were trying to be all understanding of how hurt I was without actually thinking that you had done anything wrong – that when I grew up enough to see the bigger picture, maybe I’d understand. Saying you knew I thought I was doing the right thing, and… as opposed to what? Me just being a callous bastard? Like it was so big of you to concede that point, like not a lot of people would think it – and there was me thinking that I was obviously doing the right thing, so you can imagine how that came across.”

Tony took a little breath and calmed himself before he carried on. He’d clearly warmed to the theme now – but he wasn’t ranting. He was just talking, like he’d been waiting a long time to say all of this, and it was actually good to get it off his chest.

“I still don’t know what locks can be replaced but maybe they shouldn’t was all about – unless you were telling me not to stop you breaking everyone out of the raft, which seemed a bit rich and also kinda unnecessary…” Steve could see Tony relaxing slightly, his words coming less quickly and with less force. And if Steve had tried to argue with him, or correct him, interrupt or apologise or explain, he’d have had no chance of making Tony feel better. Steve could never have calmed Tony down by talking to him. But, uncomfortable though it was, now that he was just listening… Tony was calming himself down. “And that whole thing about you being on your own and not fitting in and putting your faith in people, I mean… was that you trying to tell me all this? Was that you trying to explain…how lost you felt?”
“No.” Steve shook his head, sadly, his face bright red now. “I really wish I could say it was, because that would sound much better – that was… just me feeling sorry for myself, and being dramatic, and…saying whatever sounded Captain America-ish without actually thinking about it” He admitted, still somewhat unsure about all this. It still seemed like ‘I did it for the best and I always cared’ should be a better answer than ‘I’m an idiot and I took you for granted.’ Like going with the latter must surely make Tony feel worse, push him even further from forgiveness, confirm that Steve wasn’t worth his time and crush any hope that this could all have been a misunderstanding… but, somehow, Tony was still smiling. And maybe it was just that Steve loved that smile so much… but as he went on, it did seem to get a little easier. “Trying to sound like Captain America had a lot to do with it… well, a lot of things had a lot to do with it – that letter is at the centre of a… whole Venn diagram of issues and fuck ups…” And Tony laughed again, and that helped. And so Steve thought back to that endless fucking night that he’d sat writing that letter, and just talked.

“So…for a start, I had written maybe a hundred different letters before I went with that godawful – actually, maybe more than a hundred. However many pages there are in a Stark Industries refill pad-”

“A hundred and sixty” Tony answered, casually, and Steve paused.

“Why do you just know that?” He smiled, and Tony shrugged, and Steve felt that little flip in his stomach he used to feel all the time… back before he’d ruined everything, and complicated everything, and he could actually live with Tony Stark and swoon over the little details of him a hundred times a day-

Focus, Rogers.

“Well, over a hundred and sixty times, then… so some of it really is that the words had lost all meaning by then, and it was so much longer to begin with, but I just kept cutting it down and cutting it down, because I knew what the long version had said – my point is, I knew it was awful, even at the time, and I really wasn’t as… full of myself as that at the time, I swear to God…” Jesus Christ, he really hoped he wasn’t “But… a lot of it is just because I did think I was right… or I was trying to convince myself I was right – I mean, it’s like you say, it’s so hard to remember now that I know I wasn’t… but either way I was definitely there telling myself that I had no choice and… this hurt couldn’t be avoided” and he actually cringed at that one, because he knew how bad it sounded.

How bad the next bit was going to sound.

“…I wrote that letter for me” He conceded. “To… try to control the narrative, as much as anything, to try and make my version of events… I wrote it like a press statement. Thinking of what I wanted every single word to say, how I wanted to present myself… and it was just a truly awful fucking apology and I’m sorry. And, you’re right, I obviously would never have said any of that if I was actually thinking about you, rather than telling myself I was. If I’d thought about my guilt in this beyond having a permanent stomach ache – but, for the record: I don’t like you rattling around the mansion by yourself was because I wanted to say I’m sorry, please don’t actually be broken at all, I
don’t want to feel bad about it – and even that is defensive and self-centred, but it was rooted in my
guilt, not any judgment of you. And I wrote that a hundred different ways, and I just kept thinking I
can’t say that, and in the end Captain America wrote it – which is why it sounds like something
you’d say about a civil war widow, so.” And Steve actually squeezed his eyes shut then, he was so
embarrassed. But Tony just snorted a laugh. “I know this all sounds so terrible…”

“Actually, this all sounds very human” Tony assured him, warmly. Steve felt his ribs give just a little.
“Any of this I can forgive, I can understand this – you may not believe this…” Tony leaned forward,
completely straight-faced, to whisper conspiratorially “I have actually made a few bad apologies,
myself.” And Steve giggled. He didn’t even think to stop himself. And Tony just smiled at him, and
carried on.

“This doesn’t sound nearly as bad as you seem to think it does – it’s the other stuff I couldn’t forgive.
The man who’d made the noble sacrifice of his home and his friends for the greater good…I couldn’t
forgive that, because it wasn’t real. I think that problem I had with the letter was kind of the problem
I always had around you, this emperor’s new clothes thing where it was like everyone had just
accepted this black and white version of things – but I could prove it wasn’t real. Just the way
everyone talked like that, like you could only be standing up for the little guy against an evil
government regime… with me in the background pointing out that you didn’t have to sign the
accords, that I’d have helped Bucky if you’d told me what was going on, that the problem was that
your actual plan was reckless and selfish, not that you’d dared to have one… Just that it wasn’t as all
simple as that, that you weren’t like this, I dunno…” Tony waved his hands, clearly searching for the
right image to sum this up with.

“Like a marketing campaign?” Steve suggested, after a moment, and Tony gestured at him and
nodded, yes, exactly!

“But like, a hypnotic marketing campaign that everyone just accepted was literally true…I dunno,
maybe I did blame you, a bit, for how other people were… and I’m sorry for that…” Tony sighed,
and then frowned, and it was almost like he was making himself carry on now. “But you can’t argue
with a legend like that. You can’t do anything with that. When everyone…not just you, but
sometimes you…when everyone begins with this is Steve we’re talking about – and you know Steve
cannot lie, or get it wrong, or have a bias, it’s not biologically possible… and I’m there saying what
about all these times, and everyone just… It’s like constantly trying to convince everyone they aren’t
at war with Eurasia.” Tony exhaled, dramatically. Steve had been nodding for most of Tony’s little
speech, was still nodding now he’d paused… Tony looked at him, and softened a little bit.

“And, in spite of all of that, maybe I did do it a bit, too. I mean… the whole time I’m screaming at
people that Steve can be wrong, I never considered that, y’know, Steve might be putting it on a bit,
or Steve might not know what he thinks or any of those other things…” Tony said, and Steve started
shaking his head – a subconscious signal, you don’t have to be nice to me. But, of course, that was
just Tony’s nature. “I am sorry if I did that, Steve, and I did, in some ways… But I really never
thought you were perfect, and that was never a problem. All the time I’m yelling Steve can be
wrong, I loved you anyway. You being honest about being scared and lost and even selfish sounds
way better than it’s just a Captain America thing, you wouldn’t understand. I just… you’ve got to
stop pretending you know, all the time. You’ve got to stop thinking that you’re supposed to know. If
you’d just talked to me – you can talk to me, you know. I know I haven’t… it’s not only you
thinking back to things you wouldn’t have said, if you’d known. I never meant to make you uncomfortable – but I realise now that I probably did, because I didn’t put enough thought into it.”

“No, Tony, that wasn’t—”

“You’re going to tell me I didn’t make you uncomfortable?” Tony asked him, firm but still compassionate. And, oh, that was difficult question. The last thing Steve wanted to do now was question Tony… but he had to talk to Tony. However hard.

“Sometimes.” He said, quietly. “But, honestly Tony, I still think that was just me being defensive—”

“And if you’d woken up in a whole new century and gone straight into battle and you hadn’t been just a little bit sensitive, then you wouldn’t be human – and I actually could’ve figured that out if I’d thought about it. And I am sorry for that. I know there’s a million things I could have done to help, and that’s another thing… but there are also a few things I should have done, just from a basic thoughtfulness level, so, there’s that… But all I’ve ever wanted to do is help, and if you’d just let me – you can trust me, at least enough to—”

“I have always trusted you, Tony.” Steve was so glad he was going to get to say this, at last. “More than anyone – I always knew you were real. That meant so much, Tony, the fact that I always knew, for sure, that you weren’t in anyone’s pocket, or under anyone’s control, that no one could possibly pretend to be you or take your form, that no one could possibly have made you up. That no one could ever make you be something else, not for anything, not even if they – shot you, and kidnapped you, and held you in a cave and wired you into a battery and told you to be someone else for a minute or they’d kill you. Even if no one knew where you were, and you had no back up, and just whatever you could find lying around you, not even then. And I knew you would always be kind, and you would always want to help, and you would feel everyone’s pain as if it was yours and never say a word about your own – I always trusted that. Not telling you about your parents, and not calling you about the super soldiers, it had nothing to do with trust.” He paused when he saw the way Tony’s eyes widened, the way he parted his lips… this was clearly hitting a nerve of some kind. Steve felt his heart skip a beat.

Said a good thing? Said a bad thing?

And then Tony smiled, and dropped his eyes shyly, and Steve could see the first hint of a blush across his cheeks

Said a good thing. Oh thank God.

“Me not calling you was…about control, really. Actually, it was because I did trust you to be you – and it didn’t suit me just then. I just knew if I told you, you’d question things, and look into things and – fix things, probably, and all the things I loved you for… and I just didn’t want all that. I just wanted to throw a wall around it and sort it out on my own and not deal with the other stuff, and when it was all over…” He stopped, and took a breath, and checked to see that Tony was still smiling. Yes, thank goodness. “And it didn’t occur to me at the time that it was really creepy,
because I didn’t want that to occur to me, I guess… like, I told myself I wasn’t telling about your parents for your own good, like that wouldn’t have been creepy, even if it’d been true… And, God, I wish I’d told you.”

And Steve thought of something that had first occurred to him, like a bullet to the gut, a few months after they went on the run. Something he’d come back to, in Tony’s workshop, while he was trying to imagine how many things Tony must be thinking in any given second… He didn’t know whether he was hoping Tony had already thought of this, or hoping he hadn’t. But here goes.

“…you know, it took me about three months to realise that Zemo actually gave himself away the first time he talked to Bucky. I was just sitting there, thinking about it all, or not thinking about it, or whatever it was back then… and this thought just popped into my head… well, that explains why he made Bucky tell him all about that night, when he obviously already knew what happened. And then it was just this… cascade, as I realised – if he’d really been after an army of super soldiers, he would just have asked what happened to the serum. That he’d gone to all that trouble to break into that building, of all places, that he had about three minutes, maximum, and he’d spent half of it asking for an account of something he must’ve already known all about… that, actually, he couldn’t even have made the rest of his plan, if he hadn’t already known that part – that he couldn’t possibly have learned about your parents right then, and then decided it would be a good idea to…”

Steve could hear himself rambling now – but this one he just wanted to get out of his head. He’d been burying this one for a while.

“And then there were all these ideas that I would have had at the time, if I’d not been blinded by the whole Bucky thing – that the one plan it was unlikely to be was the one the bad guy just told us. That he could have been sending us to Siberia to distract us from the real location, that he could have been telling us about super serum to distract from anything, that he might have wanted to know about your parents for any number of sinister reasons… that the one thing he probably hadn’t done was broken in to ask for the Siberia location, and just decided to add some helpful background for no reason. And all I could think was that you would have known that. That if I’d just called you then, you’d have just pointed that out, like you just suggested wiping your dad’s memory, and then probably run a million searches and scans and…and I just really wished I’d told you.” He finished, folding his arms around himself now. And then he felt Tony’s hand on his knee.

“So, it was maybe six months after you left. There had been some total non-event in Tennessee, so it had only generated your basic two thousand pages of paperwork – and I had to go right back to the Initial Timeline for the Drafting of The Accords to sort it out. And I don’t even know if you saw that document, if I even bothered to show it to anyone… Ross just handed it to me, on the way into that meeting, and I glanced at it once, and I think I just put it down somewhere… because it was just a list of proposed dates, drafting, ratification, implementation and all that, and I knew those dates were in the presentation, so whatever, right?”
And then Tony did the same self-conscious little swallow Steve had.

“So, six months later I dig it out… and right at the top, in actual bold font, it says any amendment to the proposed timeline must be put in writing to the committee within twenty four hours of any deadline. And it just… falls on me, that I could’ve just asked for an extension, when Peggy died. That it was an actual reason – that I’d thought at the time, if only we didn’t have to get this done so quickly – and we didn’t. And I tried to tell myself that, you know, it wouldn’t have mattered…but the thing is, I know why I didn’t think of it. Because I was so desperate to get it signed. Because I just wanted to keep us all together…and I found myself thinking, if I’d actually put that on hold for two days and thought like a professional, grown up, political player, rather than one of the super-friends, if I’d tried to be a bit, y’know, diplomatic, instead of giving impassioned speeches about victims… and then suddenly I had all these really great arguments, actual, political arguments – and I wish I’d said some of them at the time. That’s what that was all about when you first arrived, by the way – me just trying to shoehorn in all the things I wish I’d said, then.”

Steve smiled a thank you at Tony, and Tony bit his lip again. There was more.

“And then I started thinking…if we had spent more time talking about them, before we signed them… I still believe in the principle, and I still think they’re better than what was there before – I have proper reasons now, and everything – but, uh, when you’re actually living them… they are a bit… rushed. And clunky. And… yeah, I guess it occurred to me that it wasn’t either or. That we could have changed them, if we’d talked about that, that we could’ve negotiated – that I could’ve made my whole life a hell of a lot easier if I’d read them as a political document, rather than just asking what would keep us together. So, you know, it’s not only you that wishes…”

“That’s not just you” Steve sighed. “That’s all of us. None of us talked about that properly – you know, I was listening to Peter and Shuri talking about the general ethical implications of memory wipe technology-”

“I know, it’s embarrassing, isn’t it?” Tony agreed, readily.

“Cos they aren’t just smart, they just so much better at this stuff than we were”

“Mm-hm” Tony cringed. “And if you add their ages together you don’t get one me” And Steve managed a self-deprecating laugh before he went on.

“And, yeah, it’s not on you to ask for an extension, or to start a proper conversation.”

Tony nodded, I know. And then he frowned, although…

“What I did in that bunker is on me, though” He said, seriously. Steve felt a cold, curling in his stomach, and tried not to let it show on his face.
“I don’t know that it was” He started, but Tony shook his head violently.

“Steve, I – okay, this is going to sound ridiculous, but bear with me. I really wasn’t trying to kill Bucky. I wasn’t – okay, this is going to sound absolutely awful, but if I wanted to kill someone I’d just shoot them. I threw a punch at Bucky because I wanted to kick his head in – which I’m also sorry for, and I’m getting to that – but I just want you to know that I was in such a blind rage that I wasn’t even thinking about what was going to happen in the next second, I had no idea what ‘killing’ meant, I just… and I know it’s… monstrous that I did what I did, that I didn’t stop to think either of you could die, that he obviously would, if I’d actually hit him with some of those blows… but I really wasn’t thinking that-”

“I know” Steve assured him, his voice thick with feeling “And it wasn’t monstrous, Tony, it was… I know exactly why you snapped. I snapped you. I-”

“-but that doesn’t make it-”

“I just mean-” Steve told him, firmly, and took his hands “that I understand.”

And he felt Tony squeeze his hands when he smiled.

“And… just so you know, it wasn’t only you that…” Steve frowned, worried about how to explain this without it sounding like an excuse – especially as he still wasn’t quite sure of what he was trying to describe. “When I… when I went for the arc reactor like that, I was just trying to stop you, I wasn’t thinking that I might’ve… but it wasn’t not thinking it like I’ve ever felt before. It was like being a dream or something, and I could only think of stopping you, I literally forgot everything else in the world. And, afterwards, when I thought back to it…” Steve had to swallow a taste of vomit then, remembering how horribly sick he’d been at that memory. “…and, uh, I remember… watching you watch that video, so clearly. It’s… weird, it’s not like any other memory I have. And, every time I remember it, I’m watching myself, like I saw it all happen from across the room, and I remember every detail. And I remember this, almost separate panic, that I was paralysed or something – because I really couldn’t move. I couldn’t speak, it was… like I was just trapped there…” He shook his head, worried it was all sounding self-indulgent.

“I get that, actually.” Tony nodded.

“I just want you to know that – I wanted to say something, then. I really did. I wanted to say something when I left, but…”

“No, I know – it got a bit awkward at the end there.” Tony shrugged, casually. And Steve rolled his eyes at him, grinning at the joke anyway.

“But, just so you know…I don’t hate Bucky” Tony went on, quietly, and Steve felt his chest well up. “I don’t blame Bucky. And I would never have asked you to sacrifice him, or prove you’d choose me, or any of that.”

For a second, Steve was lost for words. He’d have leant forward and kissed Tony… except that there was one more important thing he still really had to say. Maybe the most important thing.
“I would never turn my back on Bucky, and if it came down to it, I’d do whatever I had to, to help him” He started, as non-confrontational as he could make it. “But… I do understand that there is a difference between doing what you have to and doing whatever the hell you think you will. That I didn’t actually have to do half of that, that I shouldn’t have done most of it – that I should have put the time into thinking if there was a better way to do what I did have to do. And Bucky is always going to be one of the most important things in the world to me” He took a second to fix Tony with a meaningful look, “But I don’t expect him to be the most important thing to the whole world. And, you’re right, I did just expect people to see it as the right thing, when really… it might have just been what I had to do. Or, you know, helping him might’ve been, if I’d done it right…”

Tony was considering him thoughtfully, now.

“Do you mind me asking when you decided all this?” He enquired, eventually.

“Well, I’ve had a bit of time to think in the three months since Monday…” Steve delivered straight, and Tony really laughed. “…and, to be honest, I think it helps that I actually started thinking, at last…” And Tony just nodded, like he knew what Steve meant. There was a silence of a different kind between them for a moment. Softer and more comfortable.

“I was thinking.” Tony said, stroking his thumb over the back of Steve’s hand now “Of what I’d think if you joined the team today. If this had all happened between you and someone else before I ever met you, and Nick had just given me a little run through of your past mistakes like he did with Nat, what I would have thought. And obviously I’d have forgiven you for all of this immediately, like I did with Nat, if you’d done it to someone else, cos people are just like that… I don’t suppose I ever would have thought, yeah, but look of the kind of guy he must really be, like I don’t with Nat, because I accept that people can change… cos I kind of have to. Because, actually, it annoys me when people can’t look past things I did when I was twenty to the person I am now.” And then Tony looked up at him, those beautiful brown eyes smiling at him, “So then I thought, what would I think of this person, as I find them? Someone that I know has made exactly these mistakes in the past, but still… and I thought, it would all depend on what you said when I spoke to you. What if those were the first things you’d ever said to me. I was trying to think if I’d actually think you were arrogant, or reckless, or selfish, if I’d stop myself getting close to you or worry whether you’d hurt me.”

Steve squeezed Tony’s hands again, not really meaning to. He just looked at Tony, and…?

“And I’d think that you were probably less likely to hurt me than anyone else I could hope to meet, even knowing what I know. I’d have taken a chance on you with far more confidence than half the reformed bastards I give a go, because so far none of them have… got that, like you seem to now. And I guess, then, it doesn’t matter when you got it, or how you got it, if I’m just glad to find someone that seems to, finally. Aaand, I’d probably figure out before too long that you’re very quick to action and you tend to argue like a politician and you don’t like being wrong…which is fine. But I don’t think I’d ever listen to you now and think you were unforgivably arrogant, or
unwilling to listen, or that you didn’t care. So, I suppose I’d give this a go, and I’d assume it was going to be great, and if you did go on to hurt me after this, I’d just have to kill you.” He finished entirely seriously, in what was obviously intended to be a joke ending to take the edge off of this.

But Steve was too busy processing what Tony had just said.

And there was still a petulant little part of Steve that asked, *why couldn’t you have said that before?* It wasn’t as though he’d been completely *reborn* in the last twenty-four hours – there was still a lot of that defensiveness in there, waiting to be worked on. But, unlike just a few days earlier, there was a much louder voice in his head telling *that* little voice to grow the fuck up. That, as he hadn’t been bright enough to work that out for himself, he could shut up about how long it had taken anyone else to say it. That, actually, he was overwhelmingly lucky to even know someone that insightful, much less have them say something that wonderful to him –

That he should tell Tony that.

“*Well, that was beautiful, and you’re amazing, and I don’t deserve you. And I wish so much I’d just talked to you earlier*”

Well, that wasn’t so hard.

And, oh, Tony *smiled* when he said it.

And then, casual as you like, Tony just came out with,

“*Hey, you wanna be my boyfriend?*”

And Steve damn near swallowed his tongue.

“*Wh- yes! Really?*” He stammered, immediate and not especially dignified.

“*Well, that was just all kinds of adorable*” Tony grinned.

And, to be honest, Steve had no idea what that meant, in the real world. What it looked like, with
their lives being what they were… But, right now, he figured that meant he could kiss Tony again.

And that was all he cared about, at the moment.
So, this is the final chapter of the story proper, although I'll also be positing a little epilogue (and some art work) later today... So I'll leave my gushing thank yous until then.

In the mean time, really hope you enjoy :-)

Steve would have been quite happy to spend the rest of the day just kissing Tony Stark. Obviously. But after...quite a lot of kissing, to be fair... Tony suddenly became possessed of one of his bright ideas that is actually a thousand ideas – and Steve couldn’t help but be drawn into it. He loved Tony when he was like this, he’d missed watching Tony work, and think, and ramble on. Steve never imagined he’d be allowed this, that Tony would ever talk to him this freely again...for a moment, it was easy to just get carried away with his voice.

But, the more Steve listened, the more excited he became. Because, as ever, Tony was thinking of a thousand different things, all the many different sides to this, all the little details from disparate fields that no one else would’ve put together – and he’d actually made it work.

Hadn’t he?

Well, it would take some phone calls and a few meetings, a bit of careful politicking from Tony, the co-operation of a lot of their friends...but, potentially...

So, even though it was nearly five by then, they decided to get to work right away. Or rather, they agreed that Tony should get to work right away, because a lot of this was just his to deal with. And although Steve wished he could have done more to help... it was okay. Steve trusted Tony, and Steve was beginning to see that sometimes it was okay to step back.

And anyway, it wasn’t like he didn’t have his own work to do.

Because Steve still couldn’t quite believe he’d been given this chance, after everything – but he knew that was what it was. A chance. Steve was under no illusions that things were just okay between them now, that there were no wounds left to be dealt with, no more things to say. Steve knew they didn’t have the unquestioned closeness that they once had, that Tony couldn’t trust him the same now as he had in 2012. But Steve was grateful for the chance to get it back. The chance to
really change, and earn that bond with Tony, and become the man that Tony Stark deserved. Starting today.

So, after a few minutes lying on the bed and grinning at the ceiling and thinking *I am Tony Stark’s boyfriend* like a love sick teenager, Steve got up and went in search of Sam.

He found him sitting on the veranda, a content smile on his face even though he was on his own. Steve felt a little knot in his stomach. In some ways, this was going to be more difficult – or at least very different, to talking to Tony. It’s one thing to admit you were wrong to someone who already thought that. It was another thing to say it to someone who believed in you. Steve had always wanted so much to be a hero; he’d always been so scared of letting people down…including all the people that believed in Captain America. He still felt responsible for all the wrong ideas he’d convinced them of.

But he knew that, if this change was really going to be about *him*, then it couldn’t be a change that only applied to Tony. It couldn’t only be Tony he could ever be fallible or honest in front of. And if he was going to stop avoiding these things because it was hard, then it couldn’t matter what made it hard – the fact that he didn’t want to upset Sam was… a depressingly familiar reason for not saying important things, and he wasn’t going to do that again.

And he owed it to himself to live the way he wanted to, without feeling suffocated by everyone’s expectations.

And he owed it to Tony to own these revelations, to *say* he’d been wrong as well as just think it.

And, more important than that right now, he owed it to Sam. This whole looking honestly at himself thing was like a sharp down-hill run; now that he’d started, he couldn’t stop. He couldn’t stop himself seeing all the *other* people his hubris had hurt, all the people he hadn’t been honest with – the other people who had only ever tried to help him, who he’d never met half way.

So Steve took a nervous little breath, and walked over.

“Hey” He smiled, and Sam broke into a broad grin when he looked up at him.

“Hey man, you okay?” And then he narrowed his eyes at Steve in a teasing, knowing sort of way that Steve could only read as *you got laid, huh?* Steve blushed, and rolled his eyes, and tried not to smile when he said,

“Yeah, I’m good…” And he saw Sam nod at him, *yeah, I bet you are.* Steve ignored it. “I wanted to talk to you, actually…” And Sam spread his palms in a welcoming gesture, and then pointed to the lounger opposite him. Steve sat down.
“So, you and Tony are…good, now?” Sam asked, cautiously, when Steve didn’t say anything right away. Steve grinned before he could stop himself, and then let out a slow breath.

“Yeah…yeah, I, uh…I said sorry, for a lot of things…” He noticed the way Sam raised his eyebrows, surprised, and he figured he deserved that. “I said I was sorry for…I am sorry that I asked you to look for Bucky without telling Tony about it. I’m sorry to you for that, too. I told you that we had no choice but to keep it quiet, and that just wasn’t true.”

“Well, yeah, we know that now” Sam sighed, kindly. Steve felt his shoulders tense. He really didn’t want this to turn into an argument. He didn’t want to sound like he was berating Sam for having the mind-set Steve talked him into in the first place… but, he guessed he didn’t get to decide how this went. He could only answer honestly.

“I should have known it then.” He said. “If I’d been honest with myself – if I was honest with you… a lot of it was me not wanting to deal with the consequences…” And as he spoke, Sam pursed his lips, thoughtfully.

“Look man, for a start, I didn’t ask you why Tony couldn’t know. I didn’t get involved in your thing with Tony…and, I’m not gonna lie, I did wonder sometimes…” There was flicker of regret behind Sam’s eyes, which he shook away “But, I figured that side of things was none of my business, and I kinda still think that. So, you don’t have to explain you and Tony to me…”

And he left the end of the sentence hanging there, like a silent invitation so, what do you want to say to me?

“The thing is Sam…I told you, and Scott, and Wanda and Clint and Nat, that there was an army of super soldiers about to take over the world, and that we had no time to even think about it – and it’s not just that I was obviously wrong about that, it’s the way I went about it. And I am sorry for that. I am sorry that you’re all living on the run because of that. I’m sorry that you had enough faith in me not to question me – because I know that means you were trusting that I’d asked the questions, and I hadn’t. So.” And Steve inhaled, sharply, and tried to think what he’d planned to say.

“Hey, Steve, just so you know – it wasn’t that I never questioned you” Sam told him. Steve raised his eyebrows. “I had plenty of questions, I just… in the end, I decided to take the same gamble you did. I guess my question is… is this really about what you have to apologise to me for, or is this you trying to own a mistake we both made…?”

Steve considered him carefully.

“I just… the truth is that I feel bad for what we did.” Steve admitted, and before he could explain,

“Yeah, me too” Sam nodded, sadly.
“…Yeah?”

“Well… I dunno, I mainly feel bad for what I didn’t do, if I’m honest.” Sam explained. “Like, you ask me to apologise to Ross and it’s a no, because the man’s an ass, and I don’t feel bad for ignoring his close minded, dangerous orders – I don’t feel bad for breaking the law. And I don’t mind that I did it to help a friend, even if it was really to help a friend help a friend. But I feel bad I didn’t the right questions… I’ve thought there were better ways we could’ve played it. And it’s not like I think you were using the super soldiers as a cover or anything – I know you really did think that-”

“But I probably shouldn’t have” Steve sighed.

“Well, then I probably shouldn’t have either.” Sam shrugged. “And, you know, I think about talking Scott into it, knowing he had a kid at home, cos I was so sure we were right – I was so sure he wouldn’t get caught.” He glanced down.

“Yeah.” Steve nodded, finding an odd comfort in the idea that he might share certain fuck ups with someone else… which probably wasn’t the most heroic of impulses, but as he was being honest with himself. And then Sam looked up and met his eye again.

“I just mean… you don’t have to take my feelings into it, if all you’re trying to do is explain your own. It is okay if you change your mind, Steve.” He said, softly. And Steve wondered, as he had many times since he met Sam, if he could read it.

Which brought him on to.

“… You told me once that if I ever did want to try counselling, that there are lots of different types…?”

Tony walked into the conference room with T’Challa, Pepper, Rhodey and Okoye.

Everyone else was already there, waiting not-exactly-patiently. Tony had been racing around the palace for an hour, grabbing people for meetings and asking people to take calls – everyone was aware that something was happening. No one had even questioned being called back to the conference room at six pm.

There was an obvious energy bouncing between them, a visible shuffle as everyone struggled to sit still. They all wanted to know what was coming – but, for once, it was more excitement than apprehension. When the background noise had settled, T’Challa looked at Tony to start.
“Okay. So. The bad news is that Thanos is still out there, and probably still has earth in his crosshairs – and, even if he can’t ever find the Infinity Stones, chances are he’s going to be pretty pissed, when he gets here.”

Everyone nodded – although no one looked as though they’d just received bad news.

“So…God willing, we have like, three years to do something about this… So this is the current plan. I have told Ross… a version, of events… enough that he knows the seriousness of the threat, and the time scale. And he’s just told me that the UN committee has agreed our preliminary plan for a response. Which is.”

And Tony found himself taking a little breath. He hadn’t realised until this moment how much he wanted everyone to get on board with this… oh well, he’d find out soon enough.

“Wakanda and New York are now going to be the two headquarters for dealing with The Thanos Situation. The New York Office – or, the Avengers compound, obviously – is going to be mainly responsible for the political and military stuff, under Rhodey. Wakanda is going to head up the technological stuff, under T’Challa – or, actually, under Shuri” And Tony looked at Shuri then, an unspoken addition if you’re up for that. And Shuri just grinned at him of course I’m up for that.

So that was one more person on board with this plan, at least.

“I’m going to be splitting my time between the two…” Tony went on, a little smile creeping into his voice “And Stark Industries is going to be an official partner, so Pepper will be in charge of the tech stuff at our end – any issues here will be handed to her first, not Ross. And Okoye had agreed to partner with Rhodey on any defence issues here, so, basically, we can cut a lot of the bureaucracy out of this and just talk to each other. Which means, for those of you with government troubles, you now have a choice.”

He took a moment to look around the room, to meet the eye of Sam, and Nat, and Wanda – and Hope and Hank and Janet, because it applied just as much to them.

“If you want to help us with this… No one knows you’re here, and no one is going to know you’re here” Tony glanced at T’Challa for confirmation, and T’Challa just flashed that wise smile of his “So you can be a part of this, without getting arrested, whatever you decide about…anything else…”

Tony considered whether he should mention now that there were options, if any of them wanted to
change their legal situation or discuss their political position or… but, no. There was plenty of time for that. The point right now was that they didn’t have to make any concessions, to be part of this side of things.

“And Thor…” Tony snapped back to his planned announcement “…Honestly, everyone is really nervous about your brother just roaming about the earth unsupervised…” Tony saw Loki drop his eyes, and Thor raise his eyebrows, fair enough “…But we don’t necessarily want to hand him over to anyone, or anything…” Tony saw Loki look up, sharply. Surprised. “…So how do the two of you feel about just saying you’ll stay here, and accept certain security provisions, and then we don’t have to have the fight…?”

Thor smiled, wryly. Loki just widened his eyes and stayed very still, like he was worried if he so much as breathed too loudly he would disturb this unexpected chain of events.

“I feel very happy about that” Thor smiled, warmly, “And no one is asking him. So.”

Thor smiled. Tony smiled. Loki smiled…

“And – not that we have any idea how we’d do this – but…” Tony continued, cautiously “…If there is any way to find what is left of your people – they’re always welcome here.” He looked at T’Challa, then.

“If there is any way that your people could build a home here, we would be honoured to have you.” T’Challa confirmed, kindly. Tony looked over at Valkyrie, and Valkyrie just nodded.

 “…aaaand…for those rare few of you that aren’t intergalactic refugees or international fugitives…” Tony carried on, looking at Scott, and Strange and Wong, and Peter and Vision and… that was basically it, because this was an interesting group. “…It really is up to you. You can help if you want to, here or in New York, or…well, whatever you want to do. You’re one of like five people I know who don’t already live in one of those buildings and aren’t on the run from the law – you’re free.” Tony finished with a giggle.

Because… well, that was it.

And then he saw Hope look at Scott with such optimism in her eyes, and he heard Scott whisper, but Cassie…

He saw Wanda and Vision look at one another, the same joy blossoming on both of their faces.

He saw Strange look at Wong, and heard Wong say there’s no one at the Sanctorum…
He saw Thor look at Valkyrie, with a good-humoured shrug.

“…And, I should add” Tony cut in, before the background noise could swell to its full conclusion. “That no one has to decide now, and that people can change their minds, and it is okay if you want to move between the two, or…whatever…”

He could tell that some people had decided now… but only because those people were smiling. That had to be a good sign, at this stage.

“And that’s it, really… I guess people should probably take a few days to think about what they want to do…” Tony trailed off.

“And if anyone has any questions, or requires any kind of reassurance” T’Challa leapt in to rescue him, talking directly to the fugitives in the room “then you’ve only to ask.”

There was a beat of silence; full and tense and ready to burst-

“So…what now?” Peter was the one to say it, on behalf of everybody.

“I’m going to have the hell out of some whiskey” Valkyrie informed the room – looking right at Tony, with a smile. And Tony smiled back. Turned out, they had an in joke. That was nice. Tony hoped Valkyrie decided to stay…

“In fact” Shuri announced, giving her brother a look that was part challenge, part please, can we..? “I’m sure we could muster up some sort of celebration, under the circumstances...?”

“Maybe” T’Challa told her, his voice warm and teasing. “…Let’s see how everyone feels this evening, shall we?”

Which of course was a yes, because it was basically this evening already.

The room began to break out into disparate chatter, as everyone recognised that official business was at its end. Tony felt his body relax as he realised… this was it now. It was going to be okay.

Tony looked at Steve, and Steve looked right back at him, those bottomless blue eyes full of love and hope and happiness and everything that Tony had ever wanted to see… Oh, he felt weak.

It was wonderful.
“Bruce” Tony brought himself back to his senses, before he could give into this completely. Bruce looked up at him, a real smile on his face at last... “Can I have a quick word?”

Ah. The smile faded. That wasn’t a good sign...

But then, Tony was already braced for this. Truthfully, he already knew… and that didn’t make any of these new developments any less wonderful, and Tony wouldn’t let it derail everything all over again...

But he had to ask. Of course he did.

Bruce stood up when Tony did, and the two of them moved to the edge of the conference room.

Tony looked up at him, and tried not to hold his breath. And he saw the way Bruce’s shoulders slumped, and then that little twinge of pain in spite of all that joy… and Tony didn’t have to ask.

“So, I’ve scanned every server in Wakanda, and Pepper gave me full access to the Stark Industries server… and we can’t find him” Bruce confirmed, like a doctor delivering bad news. “The security footage was the only part of that fragment that actually downloaded – everything else, I think we could just see by magic…” He exhaled sadly, his sympathy for Tony clear on his face. “Whatever sequence he used to distribute himself, it’s too complex to work out, and without that…”

Tony flashed him a sad smile. It was okay. Tony had already made his peace with the loss of JARVIS, and as tantalising as that brief flash of hope had been… well, there was nothing that was going to take this day out of the win column, now.

“I mean, now that we know he is in there somewhere, I don’t know that we couldn’t possibly find him, especially with Shuri and everything.” Bruce went on, with a certain forced optimism. Tony nodded, even though he didn’t really think they could find JARVIS, now.

He didn’t underestimate Shuri for a moment – but he didn’t think even she could out think JARVIS on the subject of JARVIS. Tony knew that this sequence, this map to wherever JARVIS was, this mythical key to reassembling him, wouldn’t be something to work out. Mathematical patterns and rules were how computers made sequences. JARVIS was a person, capable of making personal patterns from real memories and human significance. The files could be distributed according to the dates that Tony had bought ice cream, or the songs Tony hummed in the workshop, or the third digit
of every phone number he’d ever had… they would never guess it. And, because it wasn’t mathematically logical, they’d never calculate it. And if JARVIS had set this up so that even he wouldn’t recognise it, no one else had a chance… and that was sad, of course.

But it still meant something that Bruce had thought to check, before Tony had asked him.

It still meant something that Tony already knew that Bruce, and Shuri – and Hope, and Scott, and Strange – would help him on this, however hopeless it was, if he asked them to.

It still would have meant something that Peter was sitting in the seat nearest to Tony and Bruce, turned around in his chair, watching their conversation with interest and obviously listening to every word – if Tony had seen it.

But he missed that one.

He was too busy taking a bittersweet breath, and thinking about where he really was now, and recognising that it was still a great place to be.

“All right. Thank you for looking.” Tony said – and Bruce dropped the theatrical hope, and just nodded softly.

“I’m sorry.”

“Hey – the security videos did download, right?” Tony asked, brightly, and Bruce nodded. “Well, then at least I have a recording of him, now…”

Bruce gave him a few seconds with that.

“You want to go and have the hell out of some whiskey?” He then suggested, and Tony grinned.

“I am absolutely going to have the hell out of some whiskey” He agreed. “…But, later.” And Bruce gave him a questioning look.

“There’s one thing I have to do, first.”

As Tony made his way across the palace grounds the sky above him was melting from orange to pink to purple to a deep, inky blue. He knew that, by the time he got where he was going, it would be dark.
All things being equal, Tony would have preferred to do this in daylight. But, amidst his excited planning earlier, Nat had found him to ask if she should go and tell Bucky that everything had worked out okay. And, of course, someone had to tell Bucky that, and obviously that couldn’t wait until morning…

And Tony just knew that he should do it himself.

Tony, like Steve, recognised that this was only a beginning. Tony had forgiven Steve for things he had done in the past, and he knew that meant he had to move on from them – that he had to at least give Steve a fair chance to do the same, or this thing was doomed from the start. He knew, forgiveness had to mean an end to what had come before-

Which meant anything could happen now. And it was up to both of them.

They both had to do the work that any two people have to do at the start of the relationship, that every day was an opportunity to add another layer to this, good or bad. That was the story they were writing now. And Tony knew only too well that a relationship couldn’t start with one person thinking it was their job to hold it together. And if Steve had to deal with his issues, and make amends for his mistakes – and he did – then Tony had to do the same.

Sure enough, by the time he reached Bucky’s camp, everything was obscured in shadow. Tony had to walk right up to the rickety wooden fence before he could pick Bucky out of the darkness, just a silhouette of a man standing by the fire, perfectly still. Tony tried to relax his posture, resting his weight on the fence as casually as he could before he called out,

“Hi.”

For a few seconds Bucky didn’t move. At all. But just when Tony was beginning to wonder if he was actually yelling at some sort of hipster scarecrow…Bucky began to walk over to him. Tony tried not to hold his breath.

Tony couldn’t make out Bucky’s face until he was a few feet away – and that’s where Bucky stopped. He looked…nervous, actually. Not scared, exactly. Certainly not poised for a physical attack. More like a kid waiting outside the principles office. Tony hadn’t expected that… but then, he hadn’t known what to expect.
“So, I thought you’d want to know that Steve’s back.” Tony began, in a strange voice. He saw Bucky exhale softly at that, and give a little nod, clearly relieved.

“He okay?” Bucky spoke at last. Tony was surprised to find that Bucky’s voice didn’t sound anything like he thought it had. He could hear the Brooklyn accent more now, for one thing…

“Yeah, he’s okay.” Tony answered, hoping it was too dark for Bucky to see him blushing. There was a heavy pause, before he went on. “And…I guess I’m not the first person you’d expect to be bringing that news…and maybe I’m not who you want to be talking to, right now…” and Bucky flashed that sad little half smile that Tony had seen on the old news reels.

“No, it’s not that I don’t want to be talking to you. I mean, I also wouldn’t have minded if you’d sent Nat, again…” He shrugged, nonchalantly – and Tony surprised himself by laughing.

It occurred to him, suddenly, that he had no idea who Bucky actually was. He’d not even really stopped to wonder, before. Bucky had been an avatar in Tony’s head for a long time, the face he gave the death of his parents and his break up with Steve – and then, after a while, he wasn’t anymore. Tony had checked himself enough to realise that he couldn’t justify his own image of Bucky as a monster, that he couldn’t unknow how mind control worked or stop himself from understanding how HYRDA operated. So, he’d stopped hating Bucky…and put nothing in the gap. He’d never thought what Bucky was, if not a monster, whether he’d be funny, or shy, or anything else.

He kinda hoped Bucky was funny. Tony always liked funny people…

Anyway…

“Well… I also wanted to say I was sorry for going on a rampage that could have killed you, and Steve… and, I don’t actually know how you do that.” He admitted. “I tried finding bigger words for it, but it just ended up sounding pretentious, so… I am sorry, that I nearly killed you both. Not that I expect it to matter, but I… wasn’t thinking clearly is probably an understatement. And not an excuse. I just mean… I’m never going to try to justify that kind of behaviour. No part of my right mind thinks that’s okay.”

“It’s okay” Bucky answered, simply “I have some idea about things you do when you can’t control yourself…” And Tony thought it had been a kind thing to say, but he had to shake his head.

“Well, no, it wasn’t like that.” He accepted, looking at Bucky again “I wish I could say I really didn’t have a choice, or that someone else made me do it… But I have to accept some responsibility there. I…actually don’t think you do.” He saw Bucky’s eyes widen in surprise, and pushed himself to finish quickly in case Bucky tried to argue “I don’t blame you for my parents, because I know that wasn’t your decision and there was nothing you could have done to stop it – I know that wasn’t you. And I know that means that was I did was doubly unjustifiable…but, yeah, I thought you should know that, anyway.” But Bucky didn’t try to argue. Bucky just sighed, and said,

“You should know, I still feel bad for it. Even though… there’s just not going to be a time I think of that night and don’t feel… bad.”
And Tony absolutely knew what he meant. He knew what it was to accept that something wasn’t your fault, to forgive yourself, to change, move on, all that good stuff – and still never be the same. To know that some things just left a scar…and hope that a thing can be beautiful again anyway.

“And you were right about not leaving Steve in the past” Tony conceded, more to break the tension now than anything. Because he had to put some conversational distance between an exchange that serious and turning to leave. Bucky smirked.

“How long was he there?” He asked, and Tony felt himself blushing again.

“Well, he didn’t go to the forties as it turned out – he only got sent back six years…” He confessed, slightly uncomfortably, and carried on before Bucky could pass comment “And like half a day?”

“And he didn’t get into a fight for a whole half a day?” Bucky commented, raising his eyebrows, mock impressed. Tony smiled.

“Well, he spent quite a bit of it locked in a cupboard…” Tony exaggerated for comedic effect. And, sure enough, Bucky laughed.

“On purpose or by accident?”

“Eh…” And Tony put out his palms, in a balancing gesture a little from column A, a little from column B… Bucky laughed again, and murmured, to himself,

“’slike that Bronx thing all over again…”

Tony felt himself sit up a bit, outright grinning now, thoughts of leaving temporarily forgotten.

“Why, what happened in The Bronx…?”


Even a total stranger arriving in Wakanda tonight would know that this had been a happy day.

The palace was alive with chatter and giggling. There was a shared sense of relief that you could feel in the air, a low, electric hum of excited planning and a tangible feeling of unity. They had all been there, they had all played their part – they had been through the trials and the tension and the terror together, and now they shared the same giddy rush of victory. A renewed joy at the world they’d been taking for granted, a new hope for the future that they’d almost lost. Everyone was caught up in it, feeding on the happiness they felt around them as they added to it-
Everyone, except Peter.

Which wasn’t to say Peter wasn’t happy. Peter was delighted. The universe hadn’t ended, Howard Stark wasn’t here to ruin this otherwise awesome bunch of people, Mr Stark and Captain Rogers seemed to have worked things out … Peter was really happy about all of that. And a big part of him was still just delirious to be hanging out at the palace in Wakanda, at this monumental time in human history, at an impromptu party with earth’s mightiest heroes …

But he wasn’t completely happy, like everyone else seemed to be. He couldn’t quite get carried away with it, the way everyone else was. And it was all because, every time he did start daydreaming about all the things that were good right now, his brain snagged on that one thing that wasn’t. That one loss in the midst of all this winning, the one thing that stopped everything being perfect.

Peter was sure it mattered.

His only concern now was whether it was his place to say anything. Peter was as confident in Mr Stark as it was possible to be in anyone… but, at the age of seventeen, there was only so confident he could be in himself. He knew there were a lot of things he didn’t understand yet, because he hadn’t lived them or seen them or been there – and that was fine. But that also meant he couldn’t be sure that he wasn’t going to cause offence, or pick at a wound, or make something worse… and, even though he knew that Mr Stark wouldn’t blame him for it, Peter didn’t want to cause the offence, either way.

But, on the other hand…

Peter bit his lip, and thought of all the times that Mr Stark had told him that his opinion was important. That it was important that Peter thought his opinion was important. He just had this feeling that, all this time, Tony had been teaching him the right answer to this. All his adolescent anxieties about putting his foot in it or missing the point were one thing…

But Mr Stark said to talk to him – every time.

So, in the end Peter had gone to find him, guessing correctly that he’d be in Shuri’s lab – the Wakandan equivalent of the cool kids congregating in the kitchen at parties. When Peter first saw Tony, from the top of the stairs, he had an immediate pang of doubt. Tony just looked so happy, sitting on the work desk, laughing with Shuri and Bruce and Rhodey like there wasn’t a single worry in his head right now.
If he’s not even thinking about JARVIS at the moment, why mention it?

And, really, what did Peter think he’d come up with that Tony, Bruce and Shuri couldn’t? What made him think that they hadn’t already considered this blatantly obvious idea, and discounted it for reasons he wouldn’t comprehend? Was he about to puncture Tony’s good mood – his first good mood in at least two years, from the sound of things – with an amateur question there was no need to ask?

But… it just bugged him so much that there should still be this one thing. That they’d come so close to everything being perfect – except for that one sacrifice of Tony’s.

And maybe it was just that Peter was a kid – more likely, it was the kind of kid he was. But Peter got this loss of Tony’s, better than anyone. It had never really occurred to him that JARVIS or FRIDAY or KAREN weren’t people… he’d just talked to them, and understood. Peter hadn’t had to explain to himself that Tony had lost a friend, the way everyone else did. Peter had started with that assumption and gone from there. He’d understood the shock Tony went through when he first heard JARVIS’ voice again, there had been nothing to stop Peter seeing the cycle of hope and remorse that Tony had gone through as he realised – repeatedly – that there was nothing he could do to save him.

He’s seen the same thing again when Tony had asked that one last time… when Bruce had dashed his final hope, forever. Tony Stark had smiled, and put a brave face on it, and somehow still managed to share in this joy with everyone else … But Peter still knew he cared. He knew this loss had hurt Tony, and still hurt Tony, however good Tony was at moving on.

If there was still a chance, surely it mattered?

But then, Peter was terrified he was about to make Tony go through that cycle again, for no reason…

But he said to ask every time.

Did Peter put more stock in what his gut was telling him, or what Tony Stark had taught him?

…well, that was a no brainer, wasn’t it?
So he took a breath, and descended the stairs, and tried not to cringe when Tony beamed at him so joyfully,

“Hey, Peter, what’s up?”

“Uh, hey Mr Stark” He tried to begin cheerfully – but he saw Tony’s smile was already melting, and knew he’d made him worry… oh well, he’d started this thing now. “So – and this might be a stupid question, and if it is I’m really sorry…But, I, uh, I had a question about JARVIS?”

Tony blinked, and then he looked relieved, if anything.

“Yes, of course. Shoot” He offered, smiling again. And Peter took another little breath.

“So, JARVIS thought like a person, right? Like, he made decisions for reasons…?”

“Well, yes, basically-” Tony agreed, but before he could expand on his answer, Peter carried on.

“And there were like… JARVIS reasons for doing things? Like, you might be able to guess what JARVIS would say or suggest to you, or whatever?”

“Yeah, definitely.” Tony nodded, and there was a little hint of sadness in his smile now. The thing Peter had been afraid of. But he carried on.

“Well – and again, maybe a stupid question, but… you said the videos were the only part of that little section that actually downloaded? Like the rest of it was only visible by magic, but the security videos are still there…?”

“Yeah?” Tony prompted, interested.

“Well, I was just wondering…why he would have done that?”

There was a little flicker of thought behind Tony’s eyes. And then the smile faded, Tony’s face suddenly completely still.

“Who, JARVIS you mean?” Tony clarified after a second, clearly thinking a hundred things at once.

“Well, if they were… y’know programmed to download, that must’ve been him, right? That wasn’t the spell? So… He would’ve decided to make them do that, right? Like, he’d have had a reason?”

And the smile was back, suddenly.

“That…is an excellent question.” Tony told him, already getting up to walk over to the central control desk. “Shuri, can FRIDAY have access to your systems for a minute?” He asked, an edge of urgency on his voice.
“FRIDAY is always welcome here” Shuri answered, grinning.

There was a burst of frantic typing, and then a few seconds of Tony impatiently tapping his finger on the desk as everything loaded.

“How can I help, Boss?” FRIDAY enquired warmly, over the lab speakers. “Okay, so, there is a list of video files that automatically downloaded from the Stark Industries server to the servers here, yesterday.” Tony told her, sounding a little breathless now “…is there anything significant about any of them, or any that are… different, or anything?”

“Scanning now, Boss” FRIDAY informed him. There was a tense pause. Even from where he was standing, Peter could see that Tony was gripping the desk so hard that his knuckles were white. He just really hoped that something came of this…

“There is one video that has a recently unencrypted attachment” FRIDAY reported, brightly. “What is it, what does it say?” Tony demanded. “It’s a text file. It reads *He talks as though I’m a fond memory*”

There was a soft gasp from everyone in the room. Peter felt someone staring at him, and glanced up to find Rhodey giving him a look that was equal parts impressed and grateful. Peter felt a blush creep up his neck as Rhodey just gave him a little nod… like he’d give a team mate. A true equal, a part of this group…

“Can we play that video, please?” Tony asked, his voice high and tight.

Everyone in the lab held their breath as the big monitor clicked into life.

The footage of Steve sitting in Tony’s workshop, looking up at the ceiling as he spoke. And then JARVIS’ voice came over the speakers again.

“And so, even though all of this information *will* technically still exist, the files sill be distributed according to a sequence so complex that even I will not be able to recognise it.”

“So…*no one* would ever be able to find it?” Steve had asked, his voice somehow hopeful and sad at the same time. “These files will just be distributed randomly on a Stark Industries server?”

“…Well, not at random, Captain Rogers – there will be a sequence, it will just be impossibly
complex.”

And Peter could swear he’d actually heard it. That little pause before JARVIS answered, in which he’d obviously worked out that he was dead wherever Steve was from. A split second in which he’d recognised that Steve had some vain hope of restoring him…

“And, although I know that sequence now, I won’t know that I know it, tomorrow. And, of course, when I tell you what that sequence is going to be, it will far too complex for even you to remember it.” JARVIS went on, knowingly.

“But, if you’ll indulge me, I’d like to tell you anyway…”

FIN
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Eight Months Later

Tony always felt a little bit giddy whenever he stepped off of the plane in Wakanda.

That moment was one of his absolute favourite feelings. The moment he stepped into the sunshine, and felt that warm, soft air against his skin, and inhaled the now familiar smell of dust and Jasmine. The moment he knew was the longest possible time before he had to leave again.

By now, Tony had fallen into a reasonably reliable routine; two weeks in New York, two weeks in Wakanda. And, actually, Tony liked his time in New York plenty these days. Most of the politarati that Tony had to deal with on a daily basis had been openly overwhelmed by *The Thanos Problem* – plenty keen to hand off responsibility and deny culpability as much as possible. And Tony made sure it was very possible.

Ross still ranted. The White House demanded an inconvenient number of written reports in lieu of actually doing anything. The UN occasionally felt the need to send a representative to Avengers HQ to posture on their behalf. But, mainly, they were all happy to stand on the side lines looking important, while the Avengers took all the difficult decisions. And that suited Tony just fine.

It meant that the New York leg of the operation had essentially become the Tony, Pepper and Rhodey show. Peter was actively involved in a few headline projects – in fact, his cover story about being a Stark Industries intern had basically come to be true. Strange and Wong were frequently there, consulting on all matters of the dark arts. Tony had become less annoyed by Strange’s company the more interested he’d become in his input. Tony was most certainly never going to be a wizard, or a magician, or whatever the term was – but he was academically fascinated by any form of science beyond what he knew, and never all that put out to discuss the possibilities with an expert. And hey, he liked Wong. Scott was now on the Avengers payroll, although as a technical expert and not Ant Man, officially. For all Tony’s previous gripes about Lang being irresponsible, he’d turned out to be great at his job. He, like Tony, split his time between the US and Wakanda, but Scott’s timetable was always built around Cassie’s.

Yup, life in New York was better now than it had ever been since the day Tony was born there-

But life in Wakanda was even better than that.
For a start, all the people he loved in New York were frequent visitors to Wakanda too, which meant this was the place that everyone could be together – at least for now. The Thanos Crisis had one beneficial by product, in that it’d focused the various political players on something other than their chance to grandstand. Politicians were less keen to be the Guy Who Bagged Captain America now that they wanted to call him, and anyone else they could think of to protect them. None of them wanted to think of a response, none of them wanted to be held responsible for the aftermath – none of them wanted to be enslaved by Thanos. As such, Tony’s fight to renegotiate The Accords and exonerate the others had become…well, less of a fight. It helped quite a lot to actually have everyone’s input in these things. A few more meetings, get a few more people on board…who knew, maybe the next big Thanos Response Team meeting could be in New York.

For the moment, this was where Tony wanted to be.

Normally, one of the many things Tony liked about this moment was the fact that Steve was there to meet him. This would usually be Tony’s first chance in two weeks to throw his arms around Steve, and breathe him in, and see him smile. The first moment of two whole weeks of just being with him, waking up next to him, and working with him, and eating dinner with him, and kissing him, and…

Tony just loved being with him.

Tony had told himself, right at the beginning, that he had to have reasonable expectations for this. To try to prepare himself for the fact that they could never quite have what they did, before. To accept that he was choosing Steve as he was, at this moment, regardless of what could have been. To remind himself that the initial elation would wear off eventually, and he had to be ready for the damaged, difficult reality that lay underneath. Tony had always tried to protect himself from hoping too much. He just had so much experience of people letting him down.

And then Steve hadn’t. He’d been given eight months of opportunities, and he just… hadn’t.

Which wasn’t to say it had been perfect, or even easy. They had survived their first fight by now, and lived to forget what it had even been about. There had been a lot of long conversations, some of which were awkward, some of which were difficult. There were still times when what happened in Siberia cropped up in the present day, like a racist uncle ruining Christmas dinner. A conversation about The Accords that had to go to ‘…well, they changed that law, because of what you did’. A reasonable question about something The Avengers did in the previous two years, that had to be answered with ‘…well, there were only two of us then.’ An enquiry about Tony’s heart medication, to which he had to respond ‘…well, since the injury, in Siberia.’ And for the first few weeks, Tony had been braced for Steve to set his jaw, or glare at him, or throw out some defensive statement – for no other reason than he knew that Steve never liked to be challenged.
But Steve hadn’t done that. Not once.

And yes, he was still visibly uncomfortable, sometimes. And sometimes Steve could only say that he didn’t know what to say, and Tony would still wonder whether he was just struggling to say what he thought. But Steve did manage to say what he was thinking much more these days, and sometimes they did manage to have a reasonable conversation about these things – so much more than they ever would have before.

And that was the point.

Tony had spent so long wishing he could have his time again, find some magical way to erase everything that had happened so that they could go back to being what they were. As though the previous version was purer, closer to the truth it started with… and now he realised, that was the last thing he wanted. That would have been as big a mistake as letting his dad go back to the eighties and fire Obie. Because, as painful as it had all been, it had led them here. And here was actually better than it had been before – more mature, closer to the truth it was meant to be in the end. Steve didn’t sulk now, Tony didn’t make light of Steve’s anxieties anymore, they knew each other better – they knew themselves far better. It meant they could deal with these problems so much more easily than they ever could before they’d encountered any.

Tony had realised that going back to who they were before this happened would have just meant going back to wait for it to happen – with no hope it would work out as well again. Those misunderstandings and personal issues and flaws would all still have been there, until Steve made a different choice to control Tony’s life, or Tony’s insecurities had a chance to ruin it instead, or some question of trust came up and they realised they didn’t know each other, really. That relationship wouldn’t have lasted.

And it wouldn’t have been as good while it did.

Tony never dared to hope that he’d have a boyfriend as thoughtful, and understanding, and sweet as Steve was – at least, he was now. It turned out, learning to listen and being honest with yourself and looking from other perspectives were all useful for more than conflict resolution. Steve being more confident in himself and what he wanted had certain…fringe benefits, that wouldn’t have been there before. And the things Steve had learned about Tony went far deeper than what he’d gotten wrong in Siberia. Tony felt that Steve had his back more now than he had before, because Steve spoke up for him now and bothered to tell him when he was impressed or convinced. Tony felt safer around Steve than he ever had, now that Steve knew what Tony was really going through and felt confident enough to help him. They had something now that they hadn’t had before.
And then, the last time Tony had been in Wakanda, he'd made a break through in one of their bigger projects. A sudden jump in progress that triggered a two-day work marathon while he explored all the new possibilities… As always happened when he fell down the rabbit hole like that. Tony had barely been aware of his surroundings – even with Steve upstairs in their room, waiting. And then, at hour thirty-six, while Tony had been struggling to rearrange Vibranium panels with weary arms, he’d glanced up and found Steve watching him from the doorway. Tony’s stomach sank then; a result of his own issues this time, rather than Steve’s. That ingrained guilt about the way he lived his live, his feeling of inherent responsibility to others, his base assumption that his time didn’t quite belong to him. And then he thought about it, and felt bad for ignoring Steve when they already had to spend half their time apart, and guilty for putting their relationship second… he was already planning his apology when Steve walked over and said,

“If there is a lifting and carrying part of this, I know I can help with that.” And taken the weight from his arms…and Tony felt more than the physical burden lifting. He realised than in all the time well meaning people had been trying to argue him into getting some sleep, or guilt him into getting some sleep, or given up on him getting some sleep and just left a hot pocket for him… no one had ever once offered to help, at hour thirty-six. Maybe they were all too afraid of enabling him, or feeding into his delusion that this was a normal way to work – but, apparently Steve knew him better than that, now. And Tony had realised in that moment that he had something very special, something he’d never hoped for, something more than he’d ever had before. And, ironically, Steve being the first person who wasn’t trying to get him to bed convinced Tony to go to bed faster than anything ever had…

All of which was why Steve wasn’t here to meet him today.

This time, Tony had arrived in Wakanda a few hours earlier than usual, with the express intention of surprising him.

Tony decided to go into the Palace through the North Entrance, hoping he’d bump into fewer people that way. He didn’t want to be delayed on his way up to their room, and he didn’t want to risk anyone telling Steve he was here ahead of time – and, as he had his arms awkwardly wrapped around a large cardboard box, Tony knew he’d draw more attention than usual.

So, he kept his head down and made his way to the nearest staircase as quickly as he could, his route already planned. Two flights of stairs up to the third-floor landing, and take that elevator – that one had a separate shaft, and hardly anyone used it. He took the stairs two at a time, which was especially difficult with the box knocking into his knees, but at least he was sure no one had seen him as we went to push the door open-

But it opened before he reached for it, and there was Loki.

Loki blinked, and then glanced at the box, and then frowned at Tony. And Tony smiled.
It turns out, there are many different relationships you can have with someone, and lots of different ways of building them. Some things are universal, the important foundations you need to have with anyone you’re going to spend time with. Talking to each other properly, looking from other perspectives, all that good stuff that everyone seemed to be getting a bit better at these days. But there were also personal bonds you build with particular people, based on the little things.

With Bucky, it had been the fact that Bucky liked to build things – and embarrassing childhood stories about Steve, obviously.

With Sam, it had been talking about flight plans and mid-air combat.

With Hope, it had been conversations about difficult fathers, and with Hank it had been conversations about why Tony’s father, specifically, was an ass.

And, with Loki, it had simply been that they both found the same things funny. A fact Tony had first recognised when he and Loki got an unfortunate fifteen-minute-long fit of the giggles in a very serious – and otherwise entirely silent – meeting of Wakandan defence officials. There’s a certain bond that you have to have on the back of that experience alone.

Which wasn’t the basis of a particularly deep relationship. It wasn’t exactly a foundation for trust, and it didn’t do much to redress the previous conflict between them. They certainly weren’t at the stage where they could talk about the more significant things they might have in common…not yet, anyway. But, day to day, a shared sense of humour was something. Enough that Tony didn’t have to worry when he simply looked at Loki and said,

“You didn’t see me. I’m not even here.” To which Lok responded, immediately and with a completely straight delivery,

“Oh thank goodness for that.” And carried on past him. And Tony carried on smiling, because hey, he thought that was quite funny…

And then on into the elevator, and up to their suite.

“Honey, I’m home.” He called cheerfully, as he made his way through the door.

“And ahead of schedule” JARVIS responded dryly, “most unlike you, sir.”

A few people had apparently assumed that Tony would automatically restore JARVIS into everything, and relegate FRIDAY to her backup chip again. Thus proving that very few people understood how relationships with AIs work. Of course Tony had kept FRIDAY – she’d been born now, she’d learned and grown and become an individual just like JARVIS had. Which hadn’t posed any problem that Tony could see. FRIDAY had been born in New York, and grown up around Tony as a political player, and learned all about his current work – it made perfect sense to him that
she should carry on with that side of things, the familiar voice of his government offices and his
daytime life. And JARVIS had gone right back to doing what he’d been born to do, here in Tony’s
home, with his friends.

JARVIS had the suit back, though. FRIDAY didn’t seem to mind.

“Well, I have something important to do…” Tony smiled to himself, as he dropped the box onto the
couch and tore open the top. “Do we know where Steve is?”

“Still out in the field with Okoye and T’Challa, so I don’t have a visual on him” JARVIS reported
“but previous experience suggests that he’ll be here within the next ten minutes.”

Tony exhaled – he knew he’d been cutting this pretty close. But hey, he’d made it home before
Steve had…

And he’d taken Steve’s shield out of the packaging before Steve got back.

And Tony was especially glad of that, as he tidied the cardboard way and displayed the shield,
neatly, on the coach cushions. He’d wanted it to just be here, when Steve got home.

Rhodey had asked him, right back when Tony and Steve first got together, whether he was planning
to give it back. Tony had answered, honestly, that he didn’t know. As hopeful and happy as he was
at the start of their relationship – that’s not when you hand your heart over. In any relationship.
However excited you are in those first few weeks, however well you think you know the other
person, its not advisable to move in together and merge your bank accounts right away. Knowing
something was worth a shot was not the same as knowing it was The One. However sure Tony
might have felt at the start, he knew a grown-up relationship needed some basis for that kind of trust,
some experience to look back on when you’re deciding if you want to share a life.

And Tony knew, in reality, it wasn’t just one question. It would be many stages of love, and trust,
and understanding of each other, that would happen as they grew old together. But this was still an
important question, one he’d had in the back of his mind ever since he’d fist asked Steve if he
wanted to be his boyfriend. Because Tony knew, once he gave this shield back, he never wanted to
regret it. He couldn’t bare the thought of Steve falling into old habits, however good his intentions at
the start, and running off on another secret mission or ill thought out plan… and Tony having to say,
again, that Steve didn’t deserve it. It wasn’t the shield, per se. It was the fact that Tony felt like he
could make a gesture of any kind. It was the fact that Tony trusted Steve enough to be vulnerable in
front of him now. That Tony could do something that nakedly, undeniably confirmed that he
believed in Steve again – because he no longer had to protect himself from the disappointment or
humiliation of it being proven wrong.
So, when Tony was finally done fussing with it, he left the shield alone and walked over to the windows, taking in the view as a way to distract himself from the wait for Steve. It was a beautiful day, like all days in Wakanda, with not a cloud in the deep, azure sky. He could just about make out the shapes of the children, playing games in the palace gardens. Beyond that were the lawns with the big purple scorch mark, left behind when one of Shuri and Strange’s joint enterprises went hilariously wrong. And then, over the tops of the lush green trees, there was the city skyline, glistening in the sunshine-

And, out of nowhere, Tony realised that he was happy.

That he wasn’t scanning the horizon for threats, he wasn’t looking up at the sky as one huge portal to the unknown…that he wasn’t anything other than happy, at this exact moment. He wasn’t anxious, or angry, or trying to ignore some scary non-idea at the corner of his eye. He was really just excited to be here, waiting for Steve… And he went to think of the last time that had happened, only to realise that it probably happened all the time, these days – that he just didn’t notice. He was too busy being happy to think why he wouldn’t be.

Well, wasn’t that something-

But then he heard the sound of the door opening again, and the unmistakable sound of Steve’s footsteps as he walked into their home…

And then, that was all there was.

Chapter End Notes

So, excuse me while I go full Oscar speech here - but I really am overwhelmed by the response this fic has had as it's gone on, and I can't tell you it's meant that you took the time to read, and leave kudos, and comment. I just really hope you liked how it all worked out!

Also huge thanks to my winning bidder, who came up with this prompt and a lot of the ideas you liked most, and to the people at Marvel Trumps Hate for organising!

If you'll excuse me, I'm off to consider how emotionally unprepared I am for Endgame

Twitter: @KinsWilma
Tumblr: https://wilmakins.tumblr.com/
Based on this exchange, from Chapter 16:

“But you’re sending Howard back to 1988” Rhodey frowned. “If Loki copies that, won’t he and Thor suddenly find themselves in the eighties?”

From nowhere, the thought *that would make an amazing movie* pushed its way to the front of Tony’s head. Complete with mental image of Loki as a New Romantic and Thor in a sweat band and spandex.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!