Darkness, My Old Friend... and Silence

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Summary

Tony is getting tired of cleaning up the messes the other Avengers keep dumping in his lap, expecting him to deal with it all. They say change is healthy, but Tony wants to vehemently disagree when he finds himself alone and gravely injured in an abandoned bunker in one of the coldest places on Earth.

My very first MCU story 😊
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*Comments moderated.
*Inspirational work is welcome. 😊
"Were we close to creating something?" Tony glared at Bruce, willing the other man with his stare to back him up. When the scientist pursed his lips and blinked away, Tony allowed his jaw to clench in frustration, leaving his mask firmly locked in place. He hadn’t expected Bruce’s support, but the betrayal hurt just as much as it always did.

Bruce shrugged then, letting his breath out in a soft sigh, meeting Tony's irritated gaze with a silent apology in them. "We did something."

Great, awesome, wonderful. Bruce, as always, was going to throw him under the bus again. Leave him dangling, alone and without support. Why it surprised him every damn time he didn’t know, you'd think he'd be used to betrayal by now.

With a sigh of his own, he turned back to the room of Avengers, subconsciously moving closer to Rhodey, the only one in the group who he felt a modicum of trust for. The cold accusation coming from the rest of the team was obvious in their body language and their glares. He couldn't believe these were the same people who'd been drinking his liquor, eating his food and treating him like a friend less than an hour ago. The contrast was glaring and something he'd have to look more closely at later. Much, much later.

"You remember? Aliens? Big nuclear weapon, giant hole in the sky? How are you guys planning on dealing with that?" Tony demanded, staring at Steve and willing himself to not dwell on the nightmare visions he'd seen during his trip through the wormhole.

"Together." Steve replied, his voice so calm and reasonable, it took all his self control not to smack that superior look off Cap's face.

"We'll lose." Tony retorted, unwilling to continue the argument further.

"Then we'll do that together as well."

Tony bit his tongue at the idiotic reply, blinked and looked away from Cap's arrogant declaration. The man still didn't get it. No matter how many times he'd tried to explain his urgency and concern, none of them took him seriously. The silence was almost too much, but as he shifted away from his irritation, Thor returned. His hand immediately went around Tony's throat as he stormed across the room, closing the distance quickly. He blinked in surprise, fear clawing at him as the Asgardian lifted him into the air, waves of anger rolling off the other man.

"Use your words big guy." He choked, black spots forming at the edge of his vision.

"Thor." He heard Steve say calmly as if this display was perfectly normal behaviour. Fuck, were any of them ever concerned for his well-being? "The Legionnaire?"

Thor abruptly let go, still glaring at him at he relayed Ultron’s escape. Tony winced at the pain in his larynx, tensing with guilt at the knowledge Ultron had escaped with Loki's sceptre. Great. Just what he needed. Something else for them to blame him for.

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"Sonovabitch!" He swore, bolting upright from where he'd fallen asleep on his work bench. He dragged weary hands over his face, rubbing them through his hair as he slowly blinked awake. The nightmares had lessened a lot since they'd defeated Ultron, but had never truly left him.

Getting to his feet, he ignored the tremble in his legs, making his way to the far counter and pressing a button for an instant gourmet coffee. Despite his exhaustion, there was no getting back to sleep now, not with the lingering memory of that event fresh in his mind.

"Boss?" FRIDAY asked from overhead. "Are you alright? May I suggest a glass of water?"

Tony snorted, rolling his eyes as the delicious aroma of freshly brewed coffee filled his senses. "You can suggest FRIDAY, but I'm not having water."

"Then allow me to remind you that both Ms. Potts and Colonel Rhodes have expressed their concern for your well-being?"

"I think you just did that." Tony retorted, taking a sip of the hot beverage and closing his eyes in an expression of pure bliss.

"Boss." FRIDAY admonished in a tone of reprimand that made him miss Jarvis and the AI he'd modelled him after with a sudden and unexpected pang of loss.

"FRIDAY." Tony sighed. "I'll have some later alright?"

"Very well boss. I'll hold you to that." But Tony could tell she wasn't finished, sighing when FRIDAY continued. "Did you have another nightmare?"

"What do you think?" Tony snapped irritably, returning to the chair at his workbench.

"I think you should try talking to someone who can help you."

"Pointless. You already know what the result will be, just like every other time I tried it. Are you sure you don't have a virus? Has some of your wiring been fried? Because I don't make a habit of creating complicated algorithmic programs on purpose and then sabotaging them to say stupid things. It's counter-productive."

"Which sir?" FRIDAY queried. "Creating pointless things or talking to someone?"

"Did I teach you to be this irritating?"

"Must be an evolved trait boss." FRIDAY retorted. "I was, after all, created by you."

Tony groaned again, glaring at the holographic screen still suspended in the air before him. "So I'm arguing with myself."

"Not entirely boss." FRIDAY replied. "I'm not designed to be as stubborn as you, but the sarcasm IS yours. You did design me to place your well-being at the core protocol of my programming for self learning. You designed me to take care of you, despite or perhaps because of your detrimental inclination to not take care of yourself."

"I must've been drunk at the time."
"On the contrary boss, you were quite sober when you created your AI's. I have a visual record stored in my archives should you wish to review them."

"Definitely not."

"Very well."

Tony continued sipping his coffee as FRIDAY subsided into silence, lucid enough now to review the memory of his recent nightmare with some sense of objectivity. There wasn't a reason he could easily point to as to why that dream was still alive and kicking in his subconscious. Nor was there an explanation that he was willing to look at, aside from the obvious. From how everything had progressed from that point in events, the rift between himself and Thor had essentially been repaired, much to his surprise. Though no one had been more shocked than he had been when the Asgardian had helped give "birth" to Vision.

"Boss?"

"Yeah FRIDAY?"

"I do not wish to intrude on your thoughts, but perhaps you could tell me what your dream was about? I may be of assistance."

"It's nothing baby girl. Just memories of Ultron's creation."

"Sad memories?"

Tony frowned. "No... why would they be sad? You mean... JARVIS?"

"My records show that you fashioned him from a living man. There are... instances of... growth during these emotional times."

Tony frowned at that. He'd known JARVIS grew during his more trying emotional episodes on an intellectual and scientific level. But hearing FRIDAY describe it... "Are you saying there are direct and measurable correlations between my ah, "episodes" and JARVIS'... evolution?"

FRIDAY made what sounded suspiciously like a giggle before answering in a more serious tone. "That is exactly what I'm saying boss."

Tony snorted at her response. He knew he shouldn't be surprised by it... yet after a moment he realized he was. For a genius, he could be dense sometimes.

"Boss?"

"Yeah FRIDAY?"

"Your nightmare boss. You did not answer my question."

"Question? Right, your question." He nodded. "Well since we both know I'm not eager to sit in some pompous head shrinks' over priced office...." Tony paused, downing the rest of his coffee."DUM-E?"

A pleased mechanical chirrup answered. "Another cup please." He said, handing his empty mug to
the excited bot. "And don't spill it this time." DUM-E replied with a sad hum as he made his way across the floor to the coffee maker. "You can do it buddy." He added, turning back to the screen above his desk. "FRIDAY?"

"Yes boss?"

"Just checking." He said, leaning back in his chair. "If I tell you this nightmare can you keep working on it after you give me your initial impressions?"

"Adding the subroutine now."

"Good. So, dream time. How odd is it that I'm telling this to an AI? Don't answer that." FRIDAY remained quiet. "Right, so... I dreamt of what happened just after Ultron escaped and Thor came back angry."

"Who was in the dream boss?"

Tony frowned. What did that matter? "The usual suspects obviously."

"I do not have a frame of reference for the 'usual suspects' boss. According to leading professionals in the field, what appears in a dream is not the same as what really happened. Dreams are meant to show what someone has trouble accepting. Truths an individual is not willing to face."

"What? You mean that dream is showing me a hang up? I know what happened FRIDAY, I was there."

"Dreams are not memories boss. Which is why it matters who was in the dream. Did you speak to anyone? Did anyone speak to you?"

Tony paused, his brow furrowed in concentration. "Bruce, Steve and Thor."

"How did you feel?"

"What? That's even more bizarre than your first question."

"Studies show that feelings in a dream state are the most important clue to resolving them boss."

"That's ridiculous."

"Less ridiculous than wormholes and Mind Stones boss."

"Sounds like mumbo jumbo to me." Tony grumbled. "But fine, I'll play along. The feeling was...hmm disappointment."

"Your voice inflection indicates you're not sure about that."

"Fine. I felt betrayed, alone. Abandoned. Is that what you wanted to hear?"

"No boss." FRIDAY replied softly. "I will start a file for your review another time."

"I thought we were doing this now?" Tony groused.
"Ms. Potts is on the line."

Tony sighed, accepting the mug of coffee DUM-E offered him. He smiled at the bot, patted its camera and sent him off to tidy the counter. "Put her through FRIDAY."

"Tony?" Pepper's voice rang through the sound system, her tone less than pleased.

"The one and only Sunshine. What can I do for you Buttercup?"

An exasperated sigh flooded the room. "I swear to god Tony, if you've forgotten the meeting today..."

Tony frowned as FRIDAY lit up with a list of the day's itinerary making him curse under his breath.

"Of course I didn't forget." Tony scoffed, getting to his feet with a sigh. "But remind me, who exactly am I meeting?"

"Of course you forgot." Pepper sighed again as Tony stepped into his private elevator, pressing the button to take him up to his penthouse.

"Oh yee of little faith Pepp. You wound me."

"Not yet I haven't."

"Still waiting sweety." Tony shot back, a grin on his lips knowing how her face would now be scrunching up in extreme irritation as he headed to his private shower.

"For what?" She demanded,

"FRIDAY, mute ambient sound." Tony muttered under his breath, ensuring Pepper wouldn't know he was taking a shower.

"Why am I meeting these people? Come on Pepp, you're supposed to be my CEO. Meetings are your department now." He continued, stepping under a stream of hot water.

"This meeting requires Iron man's presence." She answered, this time it was clear he'd succeeded in annoying her. He groaned as memory returned.

"Dammit Pepper." He swore, rinsing the soap from his hair. "This is about the Avengers isn't it?"

"More specifically about what happened in New York."

"How does what happened in New York and what Loki did have anything to do with lawyers? I thought all that legal shit had been handled already."

"You know why Tony." She answered, only this time her voice held no irritation. "I don't understand why you can't discuss this with the rest of the Avengers."

Tony barked a laugh as he stepped out of the shower and towelled off. "You're joking. We've been over this Pepper. None of them have any money, never mind a job."
"That doesn't make the damage done to the city your sole responsibility Tony."

"I'm well aware of that. Too bad the rest of the team doesn't see it that way."

"Tony..."

"I'll bring it up Pepp, but I'm telling you it's a lost cause. I'm the billionaire, playboy philanthropist remember? Sacrificing myself on the altar of hero worship to feed my insatiable ego."

"Don't give me that crap Tony. That's Barton taking and we both know it."

"Doesn't change anything."

"I'm calling Rhodey."

"No."

"Tony don't be so damned stubborn! He can help. He's part of the Avengers too."

"And have the press find out I'm talking money from someone in the military? Even if it's going to the city, you know how reporters will paint it. Anything to tarnish the self-proclaimed hero."

"I'm not arguing with you over this right now." Pepper retorted. "The meeting's in half an hour. Don't be late."

"Who are these lawyers again?"

"Nelson and Murdock."
"Thanks FRIDAY." Tony said as the holographic image went dark.

"No problem boss."

"Keep an eye on those stories for me. Seems to be a lot of vigilantes popping up since that business with Loki."

"Yes boss."

"Find out what you can about this Devil of Hell's Kitchen. I'll take a look after the meeting today."

"You have a charity dinner tonight boss."

"What for this time?"

"An art auction to benefit those affected by Dr. Banner's altercation with the Abomination through Harlem boss."

Tony frowned. "Please tell me we aren't on the hook for that too."

"Stark Industries is currently not being sued for damages or repairs affecting Harlem. Though I believe that your meeting today is related."

"Bleeding heart lawyers?"

"As I do not have a heart, I am unable to provide an accurate response to that question."

"You're good at deflecting me. You know that right?"

"Of course. I had an excellent teacher."

"Now you're sassing me, and not in a good way."

"We're here Mr. Stark." Happy announced from the driver's seat. "Do you want me to get your door for you sir?"

"I'm good." Tony said, stepping out of the car onto the sidewalk. "Thanks Happy."

"See you in a few hours boss."

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Tony joined Pepper outside the boardroom doors, flashing her one of his signature charming smiles in response to her frustrated glare. "What? I'm here aren't I?"

"As Iron Man and as Tony Stark, would it kill you to arrive early? Fashionably late is not charming or professional when meeting a new law firm. It won't impress them. In fact it will probably tick them off."
"I looked them up Pepp and I don't see the problem. They've barely got a thousand dollars to their name and little to no clients, nearly all of them pro-bono cases. Why are we bending over backwards to be nice to them?"

"So I guess you missed the part where they were instrumental in putting Wilson Fisk in prison?" Pepper retorted. "Or how often their case seemed to revolve around a certain vigilante reported in the news?"

Tony blushed and looked away. "I didn't miss anything Pepp, my plate has just been rather full lately."

Pepper rolled her eyes. "I know that Tony, but it isn't like you to come to something like this unprepared. You make a habit of hacking anything and everything you can get your hands on. Please tell me I don't have to get on FRIDAY's case again."

"I'm fine Pepper. Just a little tired."

"Fine. But we're having a talk later."

"Fine."

"Fine."

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Tony settled in his chair across from the two lawyers, his posture relaxed as Pepper preceded him into the room, taking a seat in the chair to his left. He watched the two men across from him with a thoughtful expression on his face, giving nothing away as he took in the dark glasses the ebony haired man across from him wore.

Nothing in Tony's body language or facial expression gave away what he was thinking as his gaze took note of the red tint of man's sunglasses or the odd way he tipped his neck to the side as though he was listening to something no one else could hear. That was interesting, he noted to himself as Pepper spoke, introducing them to each other. He waited a beat as pleasantries were exchanged, anxious to get to the point of this unorthodox meeting.

"So, gentlemen." He said, sitting straighter in his chair, leaning his elbows on the table to steeple his hands together. "Let's skip the usual legalese mumbo jumbo and assume you have all your papers in order. We're all busy people. I don't see the point in wasting our time here."

"Mr. Stark..." The man who'd insisted on being called Foggy interrupted. "With all due respect..."

"Let's stop right there." Tony replied, cutting the man off before he could continue. "None of this "all due respect" lawyer-speak. Instead, why don't you tell me what you're doing here and what it has to do with Iron Man."

For the first time since entering the room, the man with the red shades straightened, resting a hand in the table as he leaned forward, training his sightless eyes on Tony's location. "You're an Avenger."

The man, Matt, Tony corrected in his head, said, frowning when Tony scoffed under his breath as
though he'd heard him. Tony's brow arched. Of course he'd heard him, Tony thought, giving himself a mental slap. Without the use of his eyes, his other senses would be heightened.

"Sure," he nodded casually. "Let's go with that. And?" He prompted, not missing how his response made the other man frown in visible confusion which only served to heighten Tony's interest in him further.

"You're one of the more... public faces of the Avengers team and though that helps to remind the people of New York and the rest of the world that you're also human, there isn't much known about your teammates."

It was all he could do not to laugh at that, sensing that Murdock man was more than he pretended. He'd been around reporters all his life, he wasn't about to bare his thoughts to a blind lawyer, intentionally or not. "I don't see how that has anything to do with me and it still doesn't tell me what you're doing here."

"Mr. Stark." Foggy continued, Tony frowned at the man as his attention snapped to him. He didn't like the feeling of Matt's eyes on him. Probably just paranoia he reminded himself, but he'd also stopped ignoring his instincts after Obie. "We're aware of the relief efforts the Maria Stark Foundation is providing to the people of Hell's Kitchen. What brings us here today is well.... for lack of a better word, unorthodox and frankly... a little presumptive."

"What my partner is trying to say Mr. Stark," Matt continued, "is that we feel you should not be held solely responsible for the actions of others. We are here to offer our services in contract negotiations with your fellow teammates on the very serious business of having them share the responsibility of their actions in this city."

Whatever he'd been expecting from these unknown, untested lawyers, this was not it. By the look on Pepper's face, she was struck just as speechless as he was.

"I'm sorry, what?" He said at the same time Pepper found her voice.

"About time."

His eyes narrowed as he met her gaze, suspicion surging to the forefront of his thoughts. "Is this your doing?" He grunted. It was too similar to the conversation he'd had with her this morning to be a coincidence. Or at least, he hoped it was a coincidence.

"I had nothing to do with this." She retorted.

"Mr. Stark?" Matt said, drawing his attention back to the lawyer. "If we've overstepped our bounds, we apologize. But by Ms. Potts reaction, I'm guessing this issue has come up before?"

"It has. Just this morning in fact." Pepper nodded, casting Tony a meaningful stare for which he could clearly hear her smug side comment in his head. 'Told you so'.

Tony got to his feet, levelling a meaningful stare at Pepper as he spoke. "Gentlemen. If you'll excuse us a moment. Ms. Potts?" He said, moving to the door. "I need to speak with you in the hall."

Without waiting for her to answer, Tony marched from the room, stopping when he reached the hallway. Pepper joined him a minute later, irritation lining her features.
"That was rude."

"Rude?" He scoffed. "How did we not know what they were here for? Do we not do our homework anymore?"

Pepper scowled at him. "Don't start with me Tony. Of course I checked them out. Which, I'll remind you I forwarded to you last week. If you'd read it, you would have had some idea why they were here. Ferreting out other people's motivations are not my department. It's yours."

"So I'm stuck with all the hard work and saving the world?"

"I'm CEO of YOUR company. Don't you dare insinuate that it's a walk in the park. Board meetings, shareholder meetings, security issues, trade deals, client contracts, patent meetings, takeover attempts... and babysitting you. Should I go on?"

"What!? No! Of course not! Just..."

"You didn't read anything I sent you did you?"

Tony stared at a spot on the wall, avoiding her eyes. "Like I said before... I've been busy Pepp." He muttered, even to his ears it sounded like an excuse. It was true, he had been busy, but Pepper was right, he should have read her report. It just hadn't made the top 50 of his list of priorities along with all the other fires he'd been trying to put out since Sokovia and prior.

"I know you work hard Tony. That's not what I'm saying."

"I know Pepper. And I know I don't say it nearly enough, but I appreciate everything you do. More than I can ever tell you in words."

"Okay stop right there." Pepper huffed. "I know okay? Just... honour me, see what these lawyers have to say. They could really help you out here. I know you've tried to tell the other Avengers about this before, but maybe if it came from someone else..."

Tony snorted, rolling his eyes as tension creeped back into his shoulders. "We can dream right?"

"Excuse me? Mr. Stark? Ms. Potts?"

They both turned to see Foggy Nelson framed in the doorway. "Yes Mr. Nelson?"

"I realize that our reason for being here is a little out there, but perhaps if I could speak with Ms. Potts privately while Mr. Stark talks with my partner, things might go a little faster?"

Pepper caught Tony's eye and at his slight nod, she turned back to Foggy with a smile. "I think that's a good idea. If you'll follow me?"

"Of course." Foggy nodded, retreating back inside the boardroom to retrieve his briefcase.

"I'll take him to meeting room 3." She said, turning back to Tony.

"Right. And Pepp? Highest security level."
"Right. FRIDAY will take care of that?"

"Of course Ms. Potts." FRIDAY affirmed from Tony's watch.

"I don't know if I'll ever get used to that." Pepper frowned. "Having JARVIS in the tower was easier. Having FRIDAY follow you around..."

Tony glared at her as Foggy joined them, not wanting to let the lawyer hear them talking about FRIDAY. "See you later Pepp."

"Of course Mr. Stark." She beamed back at him, leading Foggy down the hall.

With a deep sigh, Tony returned to the boardroom and Matt Murdock.
Avocados at Stark Tower

Tony settled back in his chair. He hadn't been able to resist reviewing the files FRIDAY had compiled on the lawyer seated across from him. Matt sat quietly while he did so, seemingly unaffected by what Tony was doing up until FRIDAY showed him something that made him pause.

Matt's demeanour shifted from open, unassuming blind lawyer to something else entirely. Tony frowned as he collapsed the holographic screen which had been muted while he watched the accumulated video feeds. His eyes flicked over the lawyer, taking note of how he didn't seem completely blind anymore. His interest spiked as he mulled over what FRIDAY had shown him, uncertain how to proceed.

"So, Mr. Murdock. I can't imagine you came here willingly. Everything in your history indicates a, shall we say, utter disdain for someone like me. Did your partner put you up to this?"

"It was a mutual agreement."

Tony snorted, leaning further back in his chair. This was going to be fun... well, entertaining at least. "I highly doubt that. You're barely keeping hold of your temper right now."

"I just don't see how my past has any bearing on our meeting today."

"Let's cut the bullshit right there. We can pretend till the cows come home that you don't have something to prove and I can pretend I haven't guessed who you are. Let's not."

"I don't know what you're talking about Mr. Stark." Matt retorted, though Tony caught the brief clenching of the other man's fist before he forced it to relax at his side.

"Fine. We'll do it the hard way." Tony huffed. "Does your partner know who you are?"

"I don't..."

"You're Daredevil." Tony interrupted, smiling to himself at Matt's involuntary inhale. "I'm Iron Man. I'm going to go out on a limb here and guess that's the real reason you agreed to this meeting, and not whatever your partner ssid."

Matt sighed and leaned back in his chair. "Fine. What do you want to know?"

"Wow! Really? How... no wait... I think I can guess. That accident when you were a kid... it took your sight but enhanced everything else right? And you probably learned how to fight from your dad... and then, I'm guessing someone else showed you other techniques later on."

"And I'm going to guess that your impromptu profile of me is how you turned a multi-million dollar company into a multi-billion dollar company."

Tony shrugged. "People see what they want to see Mr. Murdock. Underestimating me always works in my favour."

"Well you're not wrong." Matt sighed. "About me."
"So I gotta ask..." Tony paused. "Why do you do it?"

Matt scowled and leaned forward in his chair. "Because people like you and your friends not only damage buildings, but lives. Your "super" fights create power vacuums and increase crime rates when infrastructure and businesses are destroyed. I doubt you're even aware of the increased crime rates in the affected areas."

"You're right. I'm not." Tony admitted. "Though I'm not about to apologize for it either. The public might see a spoiled billionaire playboy philanthropist, but I hold seven PhDs and all tech innovations from Stark Industries come from me."

"You don't need to apologize Mr. Stark. I'm well aware of your efforts to rectify the damage done to the city, both here and internationally. What I don't see is any sort of public accountability from your associates. You and by default, Iron Man, show you are willing to take responsibility for any problems you might have caused. But you are one member of a six person team. Where is their accountability? Where is their remorse? Or do they all assume that because you have the money that you should also shoulder all the responsibility and blame?"

"Uh..." Tony paused, blinking away the shock Matt's speech had just caused. "Congratulations Mr. Murdock. I can count on one hand how many people have left me speechless."

Matt chuckled under his breath. "I'll take that as a compliment."

"As it was meant to be." Tony paused. "So, this... proposal you've brought to me... it will make the other Avengers aware of what's going on?"

"From what I overheard you say to Ms. Potts in the hall, you've already tried that and failed. It's possible they may be more inclined to listen if it comes from an outside party."

"Possible. But not likely." Tony scoffed. "And let me guess, your personal reason for being here is about the momentum that's been brewing about international oversight into Avenger missions."

Matt frowned. "How did you come to that conclusion?"

"I personally don't know any secret identity supers... but these Accords could change that. If they aren't handled properly from the very beginning, a lot of people will be in danger."

"I'd heard you're involved in those talks and the talks with the United Nations. I just... would like the opportunity to have some say in how secret identity heroes are handled."

Tony sat back in his chair, a thoughtful expression in his face.

"Mr. Stark?"

"You realize that presenting the other Avengers with these contracts can't have any connection to me right?"

"Of course." Matt nodded. "We came to you because we needed your input on how to proceed. Once we have what we need, we'll take it to the Governor or Senator of New York and they can take it from there."
"You know you're going to get a lot of pushback on this right?" Tony reminded him.

"I know. Foggy isn't convinced, but... he'll learn."

"You should also consider taking this to the papers. Public opinion can go a long way to getting the politicians to listen to you. If not, it can't hurt to remind the public regarding accountability for everyone, even super heroes."

"We were hoping we could avoid that." Matt hesitated. "Public opinion is already divided on this issue."

"All the more reason to go public." Tony retorted with a sigh. "Look, I know you're hesitant, but trust me on this. Getting it out there first will set the tone once the general public catches wind of what's going on internationally. Either way, we aren't going to work everything out today."

"True." Matt agreed, though Tony could tell he didn't like it.

"You like charity dinners?" Tony asked suddenly.

Matt laughed. "Not especially."

"Well it's time for a change Mr. Murdock. You're coming with me tonight as my guests. I'll have Pepper forward the invitations to your office along with some... appropriate attire."

"You want me to accept clothes from you?"

Tony groaned. "Oh for... it's not a bribe all right? Think of it as a promise from me to keep your secret and my word that we'll meet again to discuss the Accords mess later. Plus, they won't let you in the door dressed the way you are now. Besides, coming with me tonight would be doing me a favour."

"Well that's not condescending at all." Matt scoffed, getting to his feet at the same time Tony did.

"Look, you want to make a difference, I get it. I want to make a difference. But what you want to do is something I can't do. They're not going to listen to me about accountability and property damages. I'm not a lawyer, but if you want to see how things work in my world, you're gonna have to blend in. Just do what you do already..." Tony smirked. "Pretend you're blind."

Matt snorted. "You're an ass. Funny... but still an ass."

"I've been called worse." Tony chuckled, walking the other man into the hallway. "I'll have my driver pick you up at 7. See you then." Tony said, heading for the nearest elevator.

"Mr. Stark!"

"Yeah?"

"Will any of your teammates be in attendance tonight?"

Tony frowned. He'd been trying not to think about that even though it was pointless. "Steve Rogers might be there. He's not a fan of these dinners, but it involves the actions of another teammate so he'll probably feel compelled to make an appearance."
"Appearances aren't the same as accountability."

Tony smiled. "I think you and I are going to get along just fine Mr. Murdock."
Behind the Mask

"FRIDAY? Has Happy picked up the lawyers yet?" Tony asked as he straightened his tie, surveying himself in his floor length bedroom mirror.

"Yes, but Happy reports that Mr. Nelson won't be attending."

"No?"

"He had a prior engagement boss. There was a blonde female with him on the street when Mr. Hogan arrived at their office."

"Right. Okay, have Happy tell Matt I'll see him there."

"Will do boss."

Tony gave himself a final approving look as he smoothed his tie down the front of his shirt. He struck an impressive image. Ebony suit, midnight blue silk shirt with a fire engine red tie. He smiled at himself, liking what he saw and comforted by the thought of seeing Matt tonight. Steve had let Pepper know he would be there and it had not been something Tony wanted to hear. With Matt there, at least he'd have someone to talk to and subsequently keep Steve from being his usual irritating self. Well, he hoped so anyway.

He scowled at himself in the mirror, tearing his thoughts away from Cap. He'd never really liked Steve, despite his efforts to see the man for who he was rather than through the warped filter of his father's obsession with the man. He'd eventually succeeded in taking the blinders off, but the results were not what he'd anticipated.

In the elevator to the ground floor, he leaned against the wall as the numbers descended, bringing him down to the garage. With the sparkle of his dad's hero worship for Steve Rogers removed, all he could see was arrogance, ignorance and a self-righteousness that was not only irritating, but dangerous. Rogers had no concept of fairness or compromise and owning his mistakes were a completely foreign concept.

Tony dropped into his shiny red Buggatti Veyron, letting the door slip closed as the engine roared to life. Pulling into traffic, he scowled again at the turn his thoughts had taken. Clearly his brain wanted to stay on the topic of Rogers, despite his efforts to stop.

After what had happened with Ultron, and the fallout from Rogers' and Romanoff's idiotic plan to expose Hydra while simultaneously putting hundreds of undercover SHIELD agents in danger, he'd decided to do a background check on the good old Cap. What he found not only shocked him, but made everything he thought he knew about Rogers irrelevant. The Captain was no captain. Christ, Rogers hadn't even finished basic training before being tapped for the super soldier program. The Captain moniker came when upper brass used Rogers to sell war bonds and put him on stage like a performing monkey.

It still made him laugh when he pictured the old propaganda films that starred Rogers and the dozen women in all their star-spangled glory. He'd been further surprised when he found out that the only reason Steve had been given command of the Howling Commandos was because he'd ignored a direct order.

Once he'd reviewed everything he could get his hands on, he'd sat reclining in his chair in the workshop, a glass of scotch in his hand. The liquor had helped to dispel his shock and further clear
his mind as he went over the facts of Rogers' history.

Steve Rogers was essentially still a child, a full grown child mind you, but yeah, a child in everything that mattered. A man filled with conviction and patriotism that was completely out of touch with the 21st century. Enlisted in the army and serving less than six months of basic training, he'd volunteered for a classified and highly dangerous genetic experiment. After his stint as a performing symbol of patriotic inspiration in propaganda films, he'd defied his superiors to rescue his best friend from behind enemy lines. Miraculously, he'd emerged unscathed from that fiasco, rescuing almost 200 prisoners of war who'd been held captive by the Red Skull and Hydra.

Those in charge had clearly been impressed by this, and volunteers were found to join Rogers in forming the Howling Commandos. Unsupervised, untrained and highly skilled at taking out their enemies, they were deployed to shut down Hydra cells all over Europe.

Tony sped through two intersections, ignoring the angry honks from other drivers as he slipped past them at warp speed. Scowling to himself, he tapped the brakes. Getting into an accident over Rogers was not worth it. Steve was not worth it, yet the thought did nothing to dispel his irritation.

God, he had to stop thinking of that man, he frowned to himself, pulling up to the valet outside the building where the Charity dinner was being held. Leaving the engine running, he stepped out, took a deep breath and headed for the stairs, stopping when he caught sight of the lawyer.

A smile bloomed on his lips as he approached the man. "Mr. Murdock." He beamed, smiling more when Matt turned to him, the other man unable to stop the twitch of a smile appearing on his face.

"Mr. Stark. Nice ride."

Tony shrugged. "Not one of my favourites, but it's all about appearances right?"

Matt smiled further as Tony stuck his elbow out to lead him inside. "I wouldn't know since I've not had any experience with appearances."

Tony chuckled at his side. "Smooth. You better watch yourself in there. These people are sharks in expensive shoes. They'll eat you alive if they think you're hiding something."

"Lucky for me, I'm not very tasty."

"Is that so? Well in that case we might have to sweeten you up a bit. Can I get you a drink before they drag out the dinner?"

"This isn't some secret billionaire ritual is it?"

"What?" Tony frowned.

"Dragging out dinner. Does it include a sacrifice?"

Tony laughed, feeling his cheeks ache. "Shit Murdock, I never would have guessed you've got that kind of snark hidden behind those glasses of yours. What'll you have?"


"Coming right up." Tony nodded, surprising Matt when the billionaire let his earlier teasing slide. "I'll be right back. There's a chair to your right behind you and a large group of people near the windows on your left. Back in a jiff."
"Thank you Mr. Stark. I'll be here."

"Call me Tony," He said and Matt caught the faint thump of Stark's pulse picking up as he walked off. Matt frowned, wondering what that had been about. Did he think asking Matt to call him by his first name was inappropriate? It was something to think about at any rate. He drifted in his thoughts, listening to the quiet conversations around him, taking in the room as subtly as possible, the ever present red tinge colouring everything he could "see."

Tony returned and pressed a drink into his hand. "Here you go. Just like you asked."

"Thank you Tony." He murmured, lifting the glass to his lips to cover his smile as Tony's pulse sped in pleasure to the use of his first name. "You can call me Matt if you want."

"I'd like that." Tony nodded, sipping his drink. "So, do you know what this charity is for?"

Matt shook his head. "I didn't have time to check."

"Charity art auction. The proceeds are going towards a fund to help rebuild Harlem."

"That's... nice." Matt replied, trying not to sound surprised. Damn, did anyone really know how much Stark did for the city?

"Yeah." Tony nodded, his voice losing it's lighter tone. "Seems a bit stupid to host a charity dinner, auctioning expensive art just to get rich guys to donate money to something worthwhile. Not like they could be persuaded to part with their bottom line for a good cause or anything." Tony added bitterly.

"Mr. Stark..." Matt began, putting a hand to the man's shoulder. "Tony. I owe you an apology."

"Uh... what? Why?"

"I completely misjudged you. You are much more than anyone could ever guess."

Tony shrugged, letting Matt drop his hand as if it meant nothing. "Yeah. I get that a lot. Don't worry about it, I'm used to it."

"Mr. Stark..."

"Oh fine." Tony huffed, knocking back the rest of his drink. "Thank you for saying so."

"You shouldn't let people think those things. You'd enjoy these events more if people knew who you really were behind the mask you wear."

"Really? Drop the mask? And how's that working out for you?" Tony retorted, his voice dropping in an effort to take out the sting of his reply. "Trust me Matt, no one cares. I've tried."

"Some people do care. But you have a point. I shouldn't be giving advice about masks when I still wear one."

"Hey, no, I'm sorry about that. I didn't mean it. I know you're only trying to protect the people you care about. I get it. I do. But it reminds me that I wanted to let you know that if you ever need me for anything, just get in touch. I can help."

"I don't think having Iron Man involved in what I'm doing would help keep me protected."

"Oh! No, of course not. Not what I meant really, though yeah Iron Man could help out if you
needed him. But I was thinking more if you need help with investigating stuff or maybe better equipment. Even just a place to crash if something bad were to happen."

"That's... very generous of you."

"Well, we good guys have to stick together." Tony replied, though the cheer in his voice was clearly forced making Matt frown. "You want another?"

"I'm good thanks."

"Oh, never mind, it's too late anyway. They're serving dinner. Follow me."

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Fun fact: I didn't know before writing this chapter, but of the three cars Tony Stark owns canonically is a Bugatti Veyron. ;)
Dinner was delicious and impressive, if over the top and Matt had to wonder how any money would ever make it into Charity coffers by the end of the night. He and Tony spent much of that time quietly discussing the United Nations push for Avenger oversight and Tony's push back on some of their more outrageous demands.

By the end of the meal, Matt couldn't help but wonder how the billionaire could manage everything he was doing outside his role as Iron Man. He doubted very much he was taking care of himself or getting much sleep if he was doing even half the things he'd mentioned he was working on.

They drifted away from the other guests after dessert had been cleared away, finding a quiet corner where they could continue their conversation.

"So how hard is it to be in a room like this?" Tony asked, sipping at his second scotch for the night. "I can't imagine it's all that pleasant if your other senses are amplified."

"It can get a little overwhelming at times, but it's alright. I'm good."

"Oh shit, I forgot about him." Tony swore, staring into the crowd. Matt followed Tony's line of sight, watching as the red glow before him coalesced around a tall figure who was rapidly approaching.

"Stark." The man said without a hint of friendliness in his tone. "What are you doing hiding in a corner? Aren't you usually the centre of attention at these things?"

"We're having a conversation." Matt piped up, getting to his feet, smiling inwardly as the other man took a half step back from him.

"Oh! I'm sorry, I didn't see you there." The newcomer said, his voice filling with charm as he stuck his hand out. "Steve Rogers, or Captain America, at your service."

Matt ignored Steve's outstretched hand, waiting for him to realize his mistake.

"Christ Rogers." Tony muttered from behind him. "This is Matt Murdock. He's blind."

"Oh my goodness!" Steve exclaimed, stammering out an apology. "I'm so sorry. Guess you can't see my hand there huh?"

"Did you need something?" Tony sighed as he stood at Matt's side.

"Well no. Not really. I just wanted to come say hi. I didn't realize you had company."

"Right." Tony nodded, though Matt could feel the waves of irritation and tension coming off him, while Steve remained oblivious. "I'm getting another drink. You want a refill Matt?"

"Sure. Thanks Tony."

Steve cleared his throat, clearly uncomfortable with having been left alone with a stranger. "So.
You here as Tony's guest? How do you two know each other?"

"Actually we just met today."

Steve chuckled under his breath. "Right. I should've guessed."

"Oh? What exactly have you guessed?"

"Uh... nothing. I mean, well it's none of my business but you should know that Tony's not very reliable."

"I honestly have no idea what you're taking about Mr. Rogers."

"Well, you're his date right? Though I never imagined he'd bring a blind person to an art auction."

Tony returned just then and Matt could feel the moment the other man was prepared to punch Rogers in the face when his pulse began to race. He reached for the scotch Tony had brought back, brushing his fingers against the other man's hand in an attempt to bring his attention back to him.

"God Rogers. I didn't think you had it in you to put your foot any further down your throat. Apparently, I was wrong." Tony snorted. "Matt Murdock is not my date as you so ignorantly concluded. He's my guest, and a lawyer. You might want to reign it in a bit."

"I.. what? I mean... I didn't..."

"Oh just go away Steve. No one wants to hear your excuses. Besides, I think Nat misses you. She hasn't stopped glaring since you walked over here."

"Sorry." Steve muttered as he made his way back the way he'd come.

"I am so sorry about that." Tony stammered, his eyes glaring holes in Steve's back. "I should've warned you he'd be here."

"Don't you dare apologize for that man's behaviour." Matt retorted, downing half his drink. "You're not responsible for other people's actions."

Tony shrugged. "Maybe not, but it's still embarrassing."

"You've nothing to be embarrassed about. Rogers is an ass."

Tony chuckled under his breath. "True. So, I hate to leave you alone after that, but there's someone I wanted to speak to before I leave tonight. I can have Happy drive you home if you'd rather not wait."

"No, it's fine. I'll wait. Besides, like you said earlier, I need to make nice with these people if I'm going to help you with the Accords."

"Oh, well. Okay then. I promise I won't take long."

"Take as much time as you need. I think I'll just mingle until the auction starts."

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Tony made his way through the various pockets of guests, searching the room for one of the people he'd wanted to talk to. Ten minutes later, he spotted the man he'd been looking for. Tall and striking in his midnight blue tux, a deep red silk shirt graced his collar with a matching black silk tie disappearing into the folds of his jacket.

Beside him stood a perfectly coiffed blonde, the deep magenta of her dress shifting colours as she leaned in close to whisper something in his ear, before stepping away. The man spotted Tony walking towards him, a faint frown on his features before his lips turned up in a bright false smile.

Huh. Tony thought as he approached. Guess the guy's not a fan.

"Doctor Stark." He greeted him, shaking Tony's offered hand.

"I don't usually go by that title Doctor Strange. Good to see you here."

"Mmm. Likewise." The other man nodded, clearly uninterested in him. "Are you planning to purchase a few pieces tonight?"

"Eh, probably." Tony shrugged, though he knew it wasn't necessary given all the money he'd already provided for relief finds in Harlem and other parts of the city. But Strange didn't know that and Tony wasn't in the mood to enlighten him. Besides, the good doctor would probably think he was boasting. "Pepper would tear me a new one if I didn't."

"Well we can't have that can we?" Strange chuckled, raising his glass of champagne to his lips.

"What about you? See anything you like on the menu?"

"One or two items struck my fancy, but Christine insists I can only choose one." Strange replied, his voice exceedingly casual. "I do have to agree with her though. I'm running out of wall space with all the art I've purchased. I'll have to build a new house to display all the pieces I currently have just to do them justice."

"I can see where that would be a problem for sure." Tony nodded, unsure why Strange was being so off-putting tonight.

"So, did you come alone? I thought you typically avoided functions like this?"

"Well since it's for a good cause, I couldn't say no. As for the other thing, I brought a guest. A lawyer I met this morning, thought he might like to get a feel for the kind of people I associate with."

"So no date then?"

Tony frowned. What was Strange's problem tonight? "Nope, no date. Why? Are you looking for company?"

"Don't be ridiculous Stark." Stephen scoffed. "I have a date. She's just gone to get us another drink."

"Right. Well, I should get back to my guest and introduce him to a few people before the auction starts. Nice seeing you Strange. Enjoy the rest of your evening."
"Likewise Mr. Stark." Stephen replied in a much friendlier tone. "Enjoy your evening as well."

Tony walked away from Strange feeling as though he'd missed something important, but for the life of him couldn't figure out what. With a final glance back, he couldn't deny the Doctor's attractiveness and wondered what it would be like to have those blue eyes look at him with warmth rather than cool indifference.

He shrugged the thought away, knowing the chances of that happening were slim to none. But he was always up for a challenge and vowed to try to win the man over the next time they met. Little did he know then that it would be almost a year before he saw Strange again or that the Doctor would have changed so drastically.

***

Matt didn't go far after Tony had left to go look for his friends. He slipped through the other guests in attendance, nodding and smiling, and making general small talk. He made it seem purposeful even as he followed the sound of Steve Rogers' movement through the hall.

"Something wrong Steve?" He heard a woman ask, who he presumed must be the "Nat" Tony had mentioned, detecting traces of a European accent in her voice. "You look upset."

"Stark's just being his usual rude self." Steve retorted, his voice cutting off as he drank from the glass the woman handed him. "I'm fine Nat."

"Who was that with him? I don't recognize him."

"Not sure why you would."

"Spy remember? It's what I do. I keep track of Tony's contacts."

"Some lawyer or something. Said he was here as his guest."

"Did you get a name?"

"Damn." Steve swore softly. "I did, but I forgot it after Tony embarrassed me."

"Don't worry about it." Nat replied. "If he's local, it shouldn't be too hard to find out."

"Even easier, he's blind. I doubt there's that many blind lawyers in New York."

"You're kidding."

"No, and I didn't realize until after it was too late. I mean, it was an honest mistake, the guy was wearing sunglasses, same as Tony does. Thought he might be Tony's date."

Nat let a short giggle escape her. "For a guy from the forties, you've caught on quick to 21st century dating. Though you do need to stop making assumptions, it would really help improve things with Tony."

"I thought I should be prepared after I got to New York. Didn't want to embarrass myself again like I did with Karen. And I know I need to stop putting my foot in my mouth but I'm afraid I've got
Barton's voice in my head every time I see Tony."

"Should probably stop that, for the sake of your sanity at least. Barton has issues. Anyway, are we sticking around or do you want to take off?"

"Probably shouldn't leave Stark here alone and it wouldn't look good if Captain America left before the auction started."

"I suppose you have a point" nat huffed. "Let's find a good place to keep an eye on things before the auction starts."

"Hey, there you are." Tony sighed as he joined Matt at his side. He flinched a bit having been focusing on Steve's conversation with Nat. He felt the other man stiffen, then frown, his heart rate picking up. "You okay? I didn't mean to startle you."

"I'm fine Tony." Matt assured him, turning to face him.

"Uh huh." Tony replied, his voice taking on a teasing note. "Mr. Super hearing didn't hear me coming. Yeah, not buying that, so who are you eavesdropping on?"

Another voice cut through the din of conversation in the room and Matt tilted his head to the side to get a better fix on where to focus his attention. "One moment Tony." He muttered.

"I was an idiot when I agreed come with you tonight." A woman's voice hissed at the man beside her. "I heard you being rude to Stark again and lying to him that I'm your date is beneath you Stephen."

"You are my date Christine."

"Only because we already paid for the tickets months ago. I should've known you'd behave like an ass."

"As you so eloquently informed me, my behaviour is no longer your problem remember?"

"Doesn't give you the right to be rude to people when I'm with you. I don't get you. Tony's a good guy. He turned his father's business around and has done everything he could to eliminate his company's involvement in weapons development."

"He still profited from that for years before he suppsedly 'saw the light' Christine."

Christine sighed loudly and Matt could almost see the look of irritation that was likely plain on her face. "One of these days you're going to need a friend and you'll find yourself very alone. Not everything is as black and white as you think Stephen and I for one am tired of waiting for you to see it."

"I have friends, so I can honestly say I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Of course you don't." Christine retorted. "I'm leaving, I've had enough for one night. I'll be outside if you're leaving with me, otherwise I'll just call a cab."

"You're being childish." Stephen scoffed. "But fine. I'll meet you outside after I speak to the auctioneer. Have them bring the car around and I'll join you shortly."
Matt let the conversation dwindle into the background, turning his attention to the man at his side. "You have... interesting friends Tony."

"Oh? Who?"

"Perhaps we could discuss it another time?"

"Oh, sure right. You want to get out of here? I've sent for someone to come collect my car so Happy can drive us back if you want to leave. Or we can stay?"

"No I think I'm alright with leaving. Though weren't you going to purchase something tonight?" Matt asked as Tony led them to the door.

"Already done. I spoke to the auctioneer and I'm having Pepper set up a similar deal with an equal donation to projects in your neck of the woods."

"You did what?"

"Shh." Tony hushed him. "We can talk about it more on the ride back."
"I think you do too much already Mr. Stark." Matt said where he was seated to his left in the back of Happy's car.

"Tony."

"Fine, Tony. But you aren't responsible for fixing the world."

"Eh." Tony shrugged. "So does that mean you're on board with managing the fund for Hell's Kitchen? I mean, it just makes sense. It's your neighbourhood, I figure you have a better idea than me where the money should go."

"Yes, fine. I agree." Matt huffed.

"So, what were you doing back there? And what did you mean I have interesting friends?"

"Your Captain America didn't seem very friendly." Matt replied. "Neither was his companion, someone named Nat."

"That honestly doesn't surprise me." Tony snorted. "But back to Rogers'. One, he's not my Captain. Not my anything, and two he's not even a real Captain. Never finished basic training."

"Is he the reason the others haven't listened to you regarding accountability?"

"Well until you said that just now, I would have said it was because they believe everything the press has said about me. But you're probably right, it likely has more to do with Rogers' attitude."

"I also overheard another conversation, probably the same man you said you needed to speak to earlier."

"You mean Doctor Strange?"

Matt smirked. "Fun name, but yes if his first name is Stephen."

"Really? He was talking about me? That's surprising. He didn't seem pleased to see me at all."

"I think many of the people you think of as possible friends find you intimidating."

"What? Little old me?" Tony smiled. "Nice theory Murdock, but you aren't intimidated."

"Unlike everyone else, I can hear your heartbeat. It let's me know when someone's lying."

"Yeah that's not at all creepy." Tony snorted. "Must come in handy when taking in new clients. Not exactly textbook innocent until proven guilty."

"No, it's not. And my partner doesn't like it at all."

"He knows about you?"
"I didn't plan for him to find out if that's what you're asking."

"I wasn't, but that could have been avoided if we'd met sooner. You ever get in a bind like that in future I can just come get you and keep you safe until you recover. I'm guessing he found you injured somewhere and it forced you to come clean?"

"Yeah. Found me on the floor of my apartment. He wasn't happy about it."

"You're still working together though." Tony reminded him.

"For now. Not sure how much longer it will last."

"Well if it doesn't work out, give me a call. I'm sure we can come up with some kind of arrangement that helps us both out."

"I don't want your charity Stark."

"God, you'd think people were deaf or something. Did I say charity? No, I said an arrangement. I've had enough of throwing money at people hoping they see how valuable I am. That's over. Like I already told you, it would be an arrangement we both agreed on."

"You're right." Matt sighed. "I'm sorry. Not sure if I'll take you up on it though."

"Don't worry about it. Take whatever time you need. In the meantime, I'll have Pepper contact you about that charity thing for Hell's Kitchen. Any problems, just talk to her or give me a call directly."

"I think Pepper will be able to handle anything that might come up."

"Well sure she can... but I'm more fun. Besides, she's not involved with the accords business. At least not yet. She does enough as it is."

"No offense Tony, but you work too hard."

"You know, if I wanted someone to nag me I'd put FRIDAY on a loop of all the times people have told me that."

"Doesn't make it less true."

"Right." Tony retorted. "Well, we're here. I'll be in touch."

"Looking forward to working with you Stark."

"Of course you are." Tony laughed. "I'm the most entertaining guy you'll ever meet."

"Well, you're something."

"I'm gonna take that as a compliment. Goodnight Mr. Murdock."

"Goodnight Tony."
Following the Charity dinner, Matt came by Stark Tower once per week or once every other week. They spent their time working on the amendments and proposal drafts to the ongoing Accords issue, in addition to the contracts for the other Avengers.

In the times between meetings, Tony worked on improvements to the Iron Man armour, designed more versatile prosthetics and wrote a new program code to upgrade Stark Industries security protocols. Matt continued to tell him he worked too hard, to which Tony usually ignored him, though on occasion the lawyer would manage to get him to leave his workshop and they'd leave the tower to get dinner. Eight months passed before he had another nightmare.

"You murdered my parents Stark." Wanda’s icy glare accused him, blood red pools of energy lashing at him from where he was pressed into a wall with a column of concrete. "I can never make you suffer enough for what you did."

"That's not true!" He protested, struggling to push against the weight on his chest. JARVIS was down... no FRIDAY was down, JARVIS was long gone and the arc reactor had long since dimmed. "I stopped it! I shut it all down!"

"Lies! You never stopped creating weapons! You lied while telling the world a pretty story about how you'd changed. Anything to get the world to like you again."

"That wasn't me! It was Stane! Obie tried to kill me when I found out what he'd done."

"A convenient excuse." She snarled. "Hard to ask his version of what happened when he's dead! Because you killed him."

"He didn't give me a choice! He was going to kill Pepper."

"Come now Tony." Steve's voice came from his right, gradually increasing in volume as he joined Wanda at her side. "Tell the truth. You lied about everything. Your actions led to the murder of Wanda's parents. It's time you paid for your sins."

"Go to hell Rogers. I should never have trusted you. You're no hero."

"Goodbye Stark." Wanda grinned wickedly, a red energy cloud pressing into the concrete at his chest, crushing it against him.

"No! Rogers help me! Stop her!"

"Goodbye Tony."

"Arrgh!" Tony moaned, the vision in his mind receding as he became aware of a cold, hard surface pressing into his cheek. He brought a hand to his face, swiping drool from the corner of his mouth as he struggled to his knees.

"FRIDAY?"

"Yes boss?"

"What happened? Why am I on the floor?" Tony groaned as he crawled to his couch and sat down.
"You collapsed boss. You've been working for 26 hours straight with no food. You stood up too fast, then you fell down and became unresponsive."

A whirring beep to his left had him cracking an eye open to see DUM-E holding out a steaming cup of hot coffee. He smiled and took it, sipping gratefully as the remnants of his dream faded. "Thanks buddy." He murmured.

"Did you have another nightmare boss? You were talking in your sleep."

"Before I answer that, why did you leave me on the floor?"

"You needed the rest. Though it would be more beneficial to have you get proper rest in a proper bed, I thought this was an acceptable compromise. Also, I ran a scan and found nothing that would require medical assistance."

"Compromise.. right."

"Boss?"

"Yeah?"

"What did you dream about?"

"We're doing this now?"

"Conscious recall of dream details are statistically better within minutes of waking."

"Fine." Tony groaned. "It was about Wanda this time. And Steve was there."

"Ms. Maximoff's transgressions against the Avengers are greatly downplayed and readily dismissed boss."

"Yeah, I know that."

"Mr. Rogers is her most vocal defender."

"I know that too FRIDAY."

"Can I assume your dream featured them... threatening you?"

"Yes. But I want you to tell me how you knew that."

"A natural conclusion based on previous discussions regarding your nightmares boss."

"But we never discussed it last time."

"We did not."

"Yet you've clearly reached some conclusion. Care to share it with me?"

"Based on your previous responses, you are still resentful of several of your teammates. I do not
know the extent of your feelings as I do not have any, but whatever they are, I know they are not without cause."

"Alright. I accept that. Thrill me with your conclusion FRIDAY."

"You consider Dr. Banner your friend and yet he did not support you or have your back over what happened with Ultron. After Sokovia, he made no effort to make amends for his betrayal before running away and has since made no effort to get in touch. Mr. Rogers has rarely shown appreciation for your contributions to the Avengers and can be counted on to undermine your efforts rather than support them. The God of Thunder is quick to anger and though he somewhat made up for the incident in the lab, he too has run away and has also not made any effort to keep in touch."

"This is all very fascinating FRIDAY but it doesn't really help."

"I am not finished boss. Ms. Maximoff might be considered the least trustworthy of those you have dreamt about. However, despite the fact she assaulted every Avenger except Mr. Barton, the other's lack of concern and caution is more disturbing by far. It is my opinion that should a conflict arise, your teammates would choose her over you."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"I am on your side boss. I am concerned that you will allow your desire for acceptance to take precedence over your own well-being. Ms. Maximoff assaulted you and Dr. Banner more severely than she did the others. They should be told what she did."

"They won't care FRIDAY."

"What does that tell you boss? Will they have your back in the future? Or will they choose her?"

"A question for another time baby girl." Tony huffed, his tone letting the AI know he didn't want to discuss it further. "What time is it?"

"It is currently 7:05 am boss."

"When was Matt Murdock last here?"

"Twenty-two days, 12 hours and 56 minutes boss."

Tony chuckled under his breath. "That's very specific FRIDAY."

"It is."

"It's not like Matt to disappear for this long. How come I didn't notice it sooner?"

"You have been very busy boss and General Ross has been especially... intrusive in your schedule."

"Didn't need a reminder of that man." Tony groaned, getting to his feet. "Run a city wide scan and see if you catch anything about Daredevil or Matt."

"Running it now boss. May I suggest a shower and some breakfast?"
"You aren't going to tell me to go to bed?"

"You slept for twelve hours boss. I don't think your current sleep habits would allow you to return to bed."

"Twelve hours? I think that's a record."

"Considering it wasn't brought on by life threatening injuries, I have to agree."

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An hour later, Tony was dressed and had just finished breakfast and was working on his third cup of coffee.

"Boss?"

"Yes FRIDAY?"

"I found something."

"Is it good or bad?"

"Mr. Murdock was involved in an altercation with several highly skilled fighters on a rooftop in Hell's Kitchen. There were several deaths involved."

"When was this?"

"Eleven days ago boss."

"Is Matt okay?"

"Unclear. From the data I've managed to compile I believe it is relative. He attended a funeral following the incident."

"Shit." Tony swore. "FRIDAY, starting now, I want you to run that scanning program I developed. Keep track of every "super" incident that comes up and I want active eyes on Matt's movement throughout Hell's Kitchen."

"You want to spy on him boss?"

"Monitor FRIDAY. No hard copies. I just want to know when he might need help. The man is more stubborn than I am and after all his help with the Accords I feel bad I wasn't there for him for his friend's funeral."

"It was his choice boss."

"I know that FRIDAY, but I can at least visit the man. Have Happy pick up a bottle of scotch and bring the car around. I have a video conference meeting with Ms. Potts in an hour which shouldn't take long. Let Happy know we're going to Matt's place when I'm finished here."

"Will do boss."
So, thoughts? Comments? I don't usually insert author messages but since I'm new to this fandom, I'm a little inexperienced with the canon for this universe. Most of my research has come from the MCU wiki and the movies and Netflix Marvel, so don't expect anything from the comics or 616 to show up here. I also haven't seen Homecoming, but have read the transcript.

So yeah, comments fuel my writing. Thanks for reading!
"Tony." Pepper huffed. "You know Secretary Ross is going to force this issue."

"I know."

"We're running out of time."

"I know."

Pepper sighed. "Did Matt get those contracts finalized?"

"He did. They're great. Unfortunately, that business involving Wilson Fisk complicated everything. I've had FRIDAY checking cctv feeds, local cops, FBI, anyone involved in his arrest and the attack on his transport car. So far we haven't found anyone we can trust to handle backing the contracts Matt drew up."

"So we're dead in the water with you as the only target. I don't like this Tony."

"Neither do I, but I have a contingency plan to at least make the rest of the team aware of the contract's existence."

"You're going to tip them off? Is that wise?"

"Ms. Potts you wound me. Nothing will trace back to me. It will just give them a head's up that shit is about to hit the fan before Ross makes his move."

"I hope you know what you're doing."

"That's why I'm going to run it by Matt when I see him today."

"Fine... just, be tactful alright? You don't know how close he was to that friend who died."

"Are you calling me insensitive?" Tony retorted. "Never mind, don't answer that. Trust me Pepper, I won't mess this up. It's too important."

"Alright fine. Just don't get your hopes up that this back up plan of yours will work. The other Avengers can be... stubborn."

"I think the words you're looking for are self-absorbed assholes, but I take your point. Anyway, gotta run."

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Scotch in hand, Tony made his way up the stairs to Matt's apartment, cringing at the state of the building and surrounding streets. He was more than a little annoyed that Murdock had clearly been downplaying how bad it was here. As far as he knew from Matt’s report, the Maria Stark Foundation was making a difference, but as far as he could see there was nothing to support that claim.
With a sigh and a frown of annoyance on his face, he knocked on Murdock's door and waited. Faintly he could hear someone moving around and wondered if Matt was debating letting him in or not. He had no doubt the lawyer already knew who was at his door, the question was whether or not he was happy about it.

Five minutes later, the lock disengaged and Matt swung the door open. He looked like shit and didn't smell much better. It was such a shock that Tony didn't know what to say at first.

"Tony. What are you doing here?"

He blinked a few times, cleared his throat and after what seemed an eternity, found his voice. "Matt. Haven't seen you around for a while. Thought I'd drop by, see how you're doing. Can I come in?"

Matt blinked, his face giving away nothing as he took a step back from the door "Yeah. Sure. Come in."

"Thanks." Tony replied, his eyes sweeping up and down the hallway before setting the bottle down to hang his coat on the wall.

"What have you got there?" Matt asked, moving past him, into a wide open area with two giant windows taking up much of the opposite wall.

Tony frowned, unsure if he'd chosen right or if his gift was too presumptive. "Oh, this? It's scotch. I uh... heard about your friend and since I missed the funeral, I thought... well, flowers aren't very appropriate for this sort of thing, so... yeah, I went with scotch."

"It's fine Tony. Thank you." Matt smiled, taking the bottle from him. "You didn't have to, but I appreciate the thought."

"Right. Well uh... my condolences on your loss." Tony stammered, unsure what to say to fix the awkwardness of the moment. "And I wanted to. You've been a big help on those Accords amendments."

"Thank you. Really. Why don't you have a seat and I'll get some glasses?"

"Oh, sure. Sounds good."

Matt took a seat across from him, filling each glass with an inch of amber liquid before handing one to Tony. "To friends." He said, his voice sombre.

"To friends." Tony echoed, though even he could hear the hollowness in his voice and winced at the sound.

"Is that the only reason you stopped by?"

"Well yeah." Tony replied, tensing.

"Tony."

The billionaire sighed, running a hand over his face as he slumped in the chair, his cheery air leaving him in an exhale of breath. Matt tensed at the change, Tony's entire aura seeming to
diminish in front of him.

"I've been a terrible friend."

Matt blinked in confusion. "What? What are you talking about?"

"Really? I don't contact you for almost a month, miss your friend's funeral... how is that the behaviour a friend?"

"I could have called you. It's not all up to you Tony."

"Yeah, about that. Why didn't you?"

"I... wasn't in a good place. And what happened... it was my fault. I should have asked for your help, but I thought I could handle it and... I got her killed."

"Well from what FRIDAY could find, you did everything you could and then some. Those people you fought, they have no history, no identity. There's nothing anywhere to prove they ever existed and it seemed like you were in a race against time."

"I still failed."

Tony sighed, knocking back his scotch before levelling a steady gaze at the man across from him. "Look. I've been there. I know there's nothing I can say or do to... make you see what happened differently. But you're wrong. I know you did everything you could, but... sometimes you can't save everyone."

"I know that."

"Good."

"What else is on your mind?"

"We don't need to do this now. You're still grieving."

"Don't worry about it. I could use the distraction."

"It's not good news. You did great getting Fisk back behind bars. Unfortunately it's muddied the political waters which leaves us with no one to take those contracts to. You know, the ones that let the other Avengers know they have responsibilities other than destroying public property while fighting bad guys?"

"Well... shit. That never occurred to me. It complicates things. But why is it a problem now? I thought we had time."

"Ross is being his usual dickish self. I don't see him holding off much longer before he starts waving his hands and making a loud stink over everything he thinks is wrong with supers."

"Can he even do that? He's not in charge of the talks. Hell, he's got no power or connection to the UN at all. Why are you so stressed?"

"Because he knows more about supers than most. He tried locking Doctor Banner up. Wanted to
use him as a guinea pig to figure out how to recreate the super soldier serum. Didn't work out so good if Harlem is any indication."

"Wait. That was him? I thought it was all that big green guy."

"That's what he wanted everyone to think. But he took a volunteer from his team and tried to recreate Banner's accident. Turned the guy crazy and he's the one who went after Banner as the Abomination."

"Abomination? I've never of him. Just the Hulk and Banner."

"Ross has a lot of friends in high places. Major cover up. Not like the government or the military were eager to admit they let some whack job experiment on someone. Besides, if Ross had succeeded, it would have worked out for them. Win win. Keeping a lid on what really happened is just covering their asses. And they couldn't fire him either, too many questions they didn't want asked."

"Your enemies are bigger assholes than I ever imagined." Matt huffed, a frown on his face. "So what happened to this Abomination? And Banner, where's he? Last I heard anything about the hulk was that incident in Sokovia."

Tony got to his feet in one fluid movement at Matt's words. He'd done it so quickly that Matt was unprepared and leaned away from the other man even as Tony ignored him and moved to the window.

"I wish I knew." Tony sighed loudly.

Matt waited, expecting him to continue but he remained silent. He got to his feet after a minute, joining him at the window. "I'm told it's a terrible view." He said, smiling faintly when Tony snorted, following the sound with another swallow of scotch.

"I tracked him.... after Sokovia and after I returned to New York." Tony said quietly. "SHEILD couldn't but only because they couldn't track my stealth tech. Helps to have been the one to engineer it." Clearing his throat, he continued. "He moved around for a while before settling in South America, just outside a small village. Remote, small community, likely in need of medical knowledge or something like it."

"You didn't try to get in touch with him?"

Tony shrugged, trying to look indifferent, but to Matt he sounded resigned, perhaps defeated and he frowned at that.

"What for? Bruce has always run away after the Hulk has come out. I can't blame him... he's afraid of what he'll do if the Hulk can't be contained. The damage the hulk does... collateral or otherwise, scares him a lot."

"But he's also supposed to be your friend right? What about what you need Tony? You could use his support with this Accords mess."

Tony chuckled at that, but there was no humour in it. "Yeah, well. We all wish things were different but he wouldn't support me in this. He hates Ross and Ross is just crazy enough to try and lock Bruce up the minute he learns his whereabouts. Besides, even if I wanted Bruce's help he's
disappeared. I went there, where I tracked the Quinjet... but it's also missing. There's evidence someone from Asgardia might be involved, but since I have no way of contacting Thor..." Tony shrugged again.

"Sorry Tony. I didn't realize it was so complicated. Is there anything I can do?"

"There is." Tony nodded, his spine straightening as he shrugged off his melancholy and slipped behind his emotional mask again. "FRIDAY and I came up with a plan to alert the other Avengers to what's going on without giving away the source. It also won't have any way of pointing them at Ross, though Romanoff will definitely look for one. Not much I can do about that." He added, slipping a hand inside his shirt, he pulled out a StarkPad and held it out to Matt.

"If you could take a look at this. Tell me what you think, maybe suggest changes."

"Sure." Matt hesitated. "But..."

Tony laughed. "Right. Haven't seen you for a while. There's a button on the bottom edge there. Just push it and the keyboard will switch to Braille. New tech... thought I'd try my hand at creating something for the blind."

Matt gaped at the billionaire at his side. "That's.... that's brilliant Tony."

"Eh." Tony shrugged. "I got bored. I know it seems like a leap, but I just found a way to combine the tech that's already in use with StarkPad technology."

Matt shook his head at him with a slight frown. He wanted to argue, but Tony was already so far down his rabbit hole of self-recrimination and isolation, he knew the engineer wouldn't hear anything he said. Instead, he turned his attention to the StarkPad and began to read. "Help yourself to another scotch if you like." He murmured as Tony returned to the couch.

"Thanks Matt, but I know my limits."

"This looks good Tony." Matt said ten minutes later, joining him on the couch. "I can't think of anything to change or add to it. You were very thorough. When will you send it out?"

"As soon as I get back to the penthouse."

Matt nodded. "If you have any problems after the emails are sent, call me. I'll help any way I can."

"I'm not sure anyone will be able to do that if they think I'm involved, but I appreciate the offer." Tony smiled, getting to his feet. "Well, I should be getting back."

"Of course. Thank you for uh... stopping by. Um... can I ask you something?" Matt asked as Tony pulled his jacket on.

"Sure."

"When you came out as Iron Man, how did your friends take it?"

Tony chuckled under his breath. "Rhodes was pissed. Probably because I put his job on the line... but yeah, he wasn't happy. We had some rough patches after that... still a bit rough now, but since he's War Machine now, his superiors have stopped pressuring him." Tony sighed. "Pepper... she
was okay with it at first but... she wants something I don't think I can give her. I'm not sure either of us is ready to admit that. I take it your friends weren't as... understanding?"

Matt felt a broad smile brighten his face as he laughed softly. "No. Not exactly."

"Well I don't have a solution for you, but if Daredevil is important to you, giving that up for them will always come between you and your friends. You might not think so now, but... well, I don't know what's going to break first. My refusal to giving up Iron Man, or Pepper's patience. All I know is that Iron Man is a part of me and I don't think Pepper will ever understand that."

"Thanks for telling me that Tony. It helps to see it from another perspective."

"No problem. Thanks again for your help and... take care of yourself alright? Keep in touch."

"I will. You do the same."

"I make no promises."
Tony spent the next two weeks holed up in his workshop. Most of his time was spent upgrading his armour and testing out improvements to Rhodey's War Machine armour. He'd had FRIDAY send out subtle leaks regarding the contracts to each of the other Avengers, staggering them over a period of several days to reduce suspicion. He had no illusions that Romanoff would see though it, but the others wouldn't and despite her skillset, he doubted she'd be able to convince them of anything she might suspect. Well... maybe Rogers and Barton, but it was done and there was no going back now.

He had his welding helmet firmly down over his face as worked his arc welder over his suit when Rhodey showed up.

"Tones." Rhodey said from the doorway making Tony smile behind his mask. He had to hand it to him, Rhodes knew not to enter when he ran the arc welder. A shame he'd had to learn the hard way; seeing spots of light in his vision for over an hour after he'd walked in without shielding his eyes had taught him a lesson he hadn't forgot.

"One minute sweet cheeks." Tony called out cheerily as he traced the seam in the armour he'd been working on with the welder. Ten minutes later, he flipped the switch to cut power to the welder and flipped the mask up to smile at Rhodey as the other man crossed the room to join him by the workbench.

Rhodey's arms were crossed over his chest as he frowned back at him, his eyes hard. "How long has Ross been on your back Tones?"

"Don't know what you're talking about Platypus." Tony retorted. He tossed the welding helmet aside before pulling his shirt up over his head, swiping it over his face to wipe away the sweat on his forehead. Ignoring the other man, he crossed the room to a small locker, grabbed a clean t-shirt there and pulled it on before pushing the button on his instant coffee maker.

"Don't play games Tony. It's beneath you. I know you're somehow behind that email I got. Not because you tipped your hand or anything, don't think you're outed, it's just that I know Ross. And you're the most visible target he can get to. Why didn't you tell me about this?"

Tony shrugged, staring at his mug as the machine did it's job, filling his mug to the brim while he watched. "What for? You read the email. How exactly could you help with that?"

Tony shrugged, staring at his mug as the machine did it's job, filling his mug to the brim while he watched. "What for? You read the email. How exactly could you help with that?"

"I could get approval to help you out with this accountability thing. Stand with you against the UN. I'm not useless Tones."

Tony sighed into his coffee, the smell and taste settling the knot of tension in his gut. "Yeah and once the media catches wind of that, they'd be screaming about military contracts. I can't risk that kind of publicity right now."

"How could they possibly come to that conclusion?" Rhodey argued, his tone leaving no doubt to how exasperated he was. "That's just your paranoia talking, or Rogers, or Barton. Admit it Tony, you left me out because you thought you couldn't trust me."

"Rhodes... babe, I trust you." Tony protested, though it sounded false even to his own ears.
"No, you don't. Not like you used to and you have a damn good reason not to."

Tony scowled at the other man, moving to the elevator. "I'm going up. You coming?"

With an exasperated sigh, Rhodey joined him in the elevator keeping quiet as they rode the lift to Tony's penthouse. "Drink? Tony asked, making his way to the kitchen island, his coffee mug still clutched in his hand.

"I'll take a beer if you got it." Rhodey huffed.

"I've always got beer for my honey bear." Tony grinned. "Help yourself."


Tony laughed, burying his face in his coffee, his eyes filled with mirth. "Of course I did. You should see your face sourpatch."

"Ha ha, very funny." Rhodey scoffed, downing a healthy swallow of ale.

"What's more funny is the one you chose." Tony smiled, giving him a pointed look.

"Seemed appropriate for the occasion." Rhodey replied, an air of seriousness entering his voice. "I never really apologized for what happened with War Machine. I am sorry about how that all went down Tony."

"I didn't exactly give you much choice."

"That's doesn't make what I did okay Tones. I never should have backed you into a corner like that or let my superiors threaten me."

"You were trying to protect me Rhodey."

"Didn't do a very good job of it. I should have tried harder than I did after that shit Obie put you though. Patched things up in person."

"Bygones Rhodes. You've had my back several times since then. I think we're pretty square on that."

"Not square enough." Rhodey protested. "Keeping this business with Ross from me tells me I still haven't earned it back. Not in the way it matters."

"Rhodey you're making me feel like a jerk." Tony huffed. "Stop it."

"Come on Tony, let me make it up to you. Tell me what the hell is going on with Ross."

"Only if you promise to stop feeling guilty."

"I can promise, but I'm not going to stop feeling it till you trust me again."
"Gah! You're impossible!" Tony groaned, throwing his hands up in defeat. "Fine. Ross is being the dick he's always been, and the Accords are gaining a lot of traction in dozens of countries around the world, with more signing on every day. There's no way to stop this train and Ross is doing everything he can to fan the flames of his personal agenda."

"How can he get away with that?" Rhodey scowled as Tony crossed the room to brew another coffee. "He's Secretary of Defence, he shouldn't even be involved with those talks."

"No, he shouldn't. But it isn't stopping him and since he has experience with supers that the rest of the assembled council doesn't, they're choosing to overlook that detail."

"Well shit." Rhodey swore. "How long do you think we have before the council goes public?"

Tony shrugged as he settled back into the chair beside Rhodey. "Six months? Maybe less?"

"What about the others? You send them letters too?"

"Yeah."

"And who among them do you think will blame you for what's happening with the Accords?"

Tony sighed, sipping his coffee a moment before meeting Rhodey's eyes. "If you'd asked me that a few months ago, I probably would have said Barton and Maximoff. But I've been doing some... work with FRIDAY. Going over some... personal stuff and had a couple chats with a lawyer."

"What lawyer?"

"Local vigilante type, likes red. Thought I should make nice with supers outside the Avengers, you know? Just in case."

"In case of what?"

"Ross gets his way and we all get lo-jacked. Not that I think it'll go that far, but it's Ross, so... Anyway, not really relevant right now. What's important is that my answer to that question has changed."

"To what?"

"All of them. Well, maybe not Vision and you, but yeah. All of them. I mean Romanoff might not, and that's a big might. But long term? Yeah, I think they'll all be against me."

"But you're not the one behind the Accords Tony."

Tony snorted, downing the last of his coffee. "Do you honestly believe that will matter when I announce my support for oversight? Have any of them shown any loyalty to me? Have any of them defended my actions or supported by choices in all the years they've known me? No, they haven't. They've taken my money, my tech, my influence but they have never listened to me about what's coming. And they've never fully trusted me outside of fighting the bad guys."

"What about Bruce?"
Tony scowled at him. "Seriously? It's Bruce and Ross. You think Banner is just gonna be like oh yeah, you're totally right Tony, let's let General Psycho have access to all this highly classified information. Let him influence how the Avengers are implemented, great plan. Besides, I don't even know where he is."

"I thought you'd tracked him to a village in South America."

"I did. And I went there. He's gone and so is the missing Quinjet. But you know what I did find? Evidence of the bifrost or some variation of it being used in the exact spot of the Quinjet's last known location."

"What would Thor or any of the Asgardians want with Bruce?"

"No idea. Not like I can call him up and ask him. Besides, I don't know for sure that it was the Asgardians, so there's that."

"What about Vision?"

Tony grimaced and turned his gaze to the picture window overlooking the city. It was dark and the tower high enough in the sky that it was hard to tell the lights from the city from the stars dotting the horizon. He didn't like thinking about Vision. Sure, he was the result of... Well, a lot of bad things and some hard work on his and Bruce's part, but... the loss of JARVIS was...mmm. Vision was a miracle creation, but he had never imagined any scenario in which he sacrificed his beloved AI for what Vision had become. That had never been on any list of possibilities and without Vision here, a small part of him blamed the... well, whatever Vision was, for eliminating his friend. It was humbling seeing Vision walking around, knowing he, Tony Stark had created that but... yeah, it was complicated.

"Tones?"

"Mmm." Tony hummed tearing his eyes away from the window to stare at the mug in his hands, the coffee now gone cold.

"Where's Vision?"

Tony shrugged, accompanying the movement with a loud sigh. "I don't know for sure, but if I had to guess he's with Maximoff."


Tony nodded. "I've thought about that and I think it's because of the mind stone. They... share a link only the two of them understand and... and I imagine for Vision she's like an anchor for him. A safe haven. Maybe it's the same for her, not that I give a shit about that, but yeah... wherever she us, that's where Vision is."

"Have you tried getting in touch with him?"

"No."

"Jesus Tony. You're doing that thing you do... again. Stop being the damn martyr for once and let people help you. Ask people to help you. For crying out loud Tones, I know you don't like it, but
the last time you acted like this...." Rhodey swore, getting to his feet to pace. "Just don't, okay? I can't help you if I don't know what's going on and I never want to go through that shit again like what happened before. I can't. So just don't. Okay?"

Tony hid his face, his cheeks flushing with colour under Rhodey's glare. "Okay. But this time I'm not dying. You're taking this a bit far don't you think?"

"No. I don't. I know Ross Tony. You could disappear and Ross could make up any story he liked and no one would know anything because you didn't let anyone in."

"FRIDAY would know." Tony retorted. He got what his friend was saying, but implying he couldn't handle one rogue government spook was insulting.

"Don't be stupid Tony. Ross would have a plan for that. You know this. If he really wanted you out of the picture, he'd take you, set off an emp in the building and blame it on one of your experiments. FRIDAY and any files she had would be useless to you, so stop acting like you don't need anyone. It's insulting after everything we've been through together."

"And now you've given me nightmares of that very thing coming to pass." Tony huffed, a scowl on his face. "Fine. You're right. I'm being a selfish asshole. Kind of my thing, remember?"

"Yeah not buying that. You told me you were going to stop doing that. Stop shutting people out, start asking for help when you needed it. Stop keeping this shit a secret, handling everything on your own."

"That's not going to happen overnight Rhodey. You know that. So I slipped into old habits, sue me. It didn't feel like an emergency okay? I'm sorry. But now you know so you can stop tearing me a new one."

Rhodey frowned but settled back onto his chair at Tony's side with a loud sigh. "Look. I get why you aren't excited to see Vision. But he can help and he'd be on your side in this."

"He's still learning Rhodes and he's doing something he wants to be doing. I don't want him putting that on hold to hover in the background, watching over me like a protective hen. He did that for long enough already."

"No he didn't Tones. That was JARVIS. And as much as you want it to be otherwise... he's not JARVIS, not really."

"You're not going to let this go are you?"

"No. And if you don't call him, I'll do it myself or I'll get Pepper on it."


"Good." Rhodey sighed, getting to his feet. "I'm holding you to that. Thanks for the beer, I'll be keeping in touch." He said, heading for the elevator. "And I'll be checking in with Pepper too so don't even think about making excuses or lying to me."

"That's playing dirty."

"It's the only way to play when you're being an ass." Rhodey chuckled. "Keep me posted."
"Yeah, fine. Whatever. See you Rhodes."

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Fun fact: Beer names mentioned, including the chapter title are real ales made in different parts of the world.

;)


"Boss. Ms. Romanoff is here to see you."

Tony groaned as he stepped free of the shower, towelling off quickly. "Now?" Tony sighed. "Did she say what she wanted?"

"No boss."

"Shit." Tony murmured, tossing the towel to the floor as he crossed to his room and got dressed. "Has she tried hacking your system to gain access yet?"

"She has. But she's been unsuccessful. If she tries again, security protocol lockdown will engage and she'll be contained. According to my scans of her vitals, I believe she knows of the existence of the new safeguards and wishes to avoid it. Her heart rate and blood pressure are rising. I believe she is... upset she's not able to bypass your new security measures boss."

Tony chuckled under his breath. "Good. Keep monitoring her FRIDAY and take her up to the Avenger's common room. No clearance to access anything else but that room. Activate security protocol Widow's Peak."

"On it boss." FRIDAY replied, sounding amused. "She'll reach the common room in ten minutes."

"Thanks FRIDAY. Offer her a drink, coffee, whatever. Keep her feeling welcome. I'll be there in ten."

With Romanoff on her way and FRIDAY's security protocol activated, Tony checked himself in the mirror one more time. Satisfied with what he saw, he moved through the kitchen and snapped up the StarkPad lying there. He knew what Romanoff wanted but he had a plan to keep her distracted with news about Bruce. It wasn't likely to keep her off his back for long, but it would be enough to get her side-tracked for the time being.

With a last check over the files he'd had FRIDAY compile, he snagged his freshly brewed coffee and headed for the elevator.

"You kept me waiting Stark. " Nat said as he entered the common room.

Tony smiled, joining her at the expansive kitchen island and seated himself across from her as he took a sip of his coffee. "That'll happen when you show up announced Nat. What's up? I thought you and Rogers were in Europe tracking the Winter Soldier." He said, grinning to himself when the corners of her eyes flinched and her mouth pulled down into a grimace.

"You knew."

"Come on Natasha. It's not like either of you have been all that careful about your movements. Not to mention that Rogers is still spending my money. Which, I have to tell you, is coming to an end."

"What are you talking about? That money is for the Avengers. Last I checked we were on the same team." Nat scowled, sipping at the tea FRIDAY had provided her.
"Avenger business only. Tracking down the Winter Soldier has nothing to do with the Avengers. That was SHIELD business and last I checked you and Cap shut that down. Nice job by the way, exposing all those agents and their families. Guess Rogers has finally crossed the line into acceptable levels of collateral damage."

"Those agents were Hydra Stark."

"Really? You expect me to believe that Fury would allow all of SHIELD to become comprised with every agent working for Hydra and not notice? Don't insult me Nat. Better yet stop lying to yourself that what you did was anything noble. Do you have any idea how many good agents died? How many families were murdered after you exposed them? Or how long it took for Fury and I to protect the people you so callously threw to the wolves? Or how about how many died when you crashed those helicarriers?" Tony snapped, holding up a hand when she tried to protest. "Don't bother boring me with your excuses. I know you don't care. Not once did you apologize to Fury or even make an attempt to look at the fallout your stupid plan caused. Now, I'll ask you again. What are you doing here?"

Nat's cheeks were bright red and he could hear the grinding of bones as she cracked her knuckles and clenched her fist in her lap. Her eyes were pools of angry fire, but her voice was steady when she spoke. "I just wanted to check in. See how you're doing. We haven't heard from you in a while."

Tony laughed. "Don't pretend you care Romanoff. And who's we? You're the only one I see here and if you were so concerned, you could've picked up a phone."

"Steve's watching a suspected Hydra base. We don't want to lose our lead."

"Uh huh. Sure. Whatever. All of you have gone radio silent these past few months. I haven't heard squat from any of you and suddenly you just show up because you're what? Concerned? Don't insult me. Why are you really here?" Tony pressed, his irritation with himself bleeding into his voice. Dammit, he had not wants to do this but he hadn't realized how seeing her would piss him off so bad. He'd mistakenly thought he'd put the SHIELD fiasco behind him, but apparently he'd been wrong.

"Have you heard anything about some talks going on regarding some international council? Supposed to be some oversight thing for deploying supers like the Avengers."

"I've heard something about it. Why? Is that what you came back to the States for? To ask me that?"

Nat narrowed her eyes, studying him like he was a tasty bit of prey while she sipped her tea before answering. "It just seems like something you would know more about. You tend to be at the centre of anything that causes problems for the Avengers."

Tony arched his brow, letting his irritation show clearly on his face. "Oh really? So Loki coming down from the sky was somehow my fault? Jesus Nat, you really are delusional. Also, you may have noticed I'm no longer open to your psychological manipulation. That ship has long since sailed." He said, getting to his feet and pulling out his StarkPad. He was confident leaving it with her. It wasn't connected to anything but the files he had on Bruce. For all intents and purposes, it was nothing short of a glorified file folder. There was no way to exploit the tech or somehow use it as a gateway to gain back door access to his systems.
He tossed it on the table between them, cradling his now empty mug in his hands. "Those are the files I have on Bruce's whereabouts. I mistakenly thought you'd come here for that. Tell Rogers you've got thirty days before I cut you both off. Might be wise to start looking at other options. I'm done footing the bill for people who don't keep me in the loop."

"You can't shut the Avengers down Tony." Nat retorted. "It's not your call."

Tony smirked as he waited for the elevator. "That's where you're wrong. If any of you had bothered to keep in touch you'd know that already. The original Avenger team was started by Fury who then passed that responsibility to me after you and Rogers' massive clusterfuck with those Helicarriers. Now, since no one on the team has bothered to check in, communicate or otherwise keep me in the loop, I'm shutting it down. Thor and Bruce are in the wind, Rhodey is back in the military doing his job, Barton has retired to god knows where and Vision left. And before you say anything, neither Sam Wilson or Wanda Maximoff were ever made official Avenger status. So that leaves me, you and Rogers and with the two of you working on some long dead Hydra problem, that leaves it just me. So, not a team and now, not my problem. One month Romanoff, and no, it's not a bluff." He added, stepping into the elevator.

As the doors slid shut, he let out the breath he'd been holding and sagged back into the wall. "Boss? Your blood pressure is spiking. Are you alright?"

"I'm fine FRIDAY. Just an adrenaline rush. It's been a while."

"May I suggest a cup of Dr. Banner's tea? I have recordings of how often he said it helped calm him down."

Tony smiled and nodded to himself. "Sure. Keep an eye on Romanoff. Let me know if she tries anything stupid and notify me when she leaves. Oh, and remove her security clearance once she exits the building."

"Got it boss."
"FRIDAY?" Tony called, running his hands through his hair as he let his posture slump in his chair, bracing himself by his elbows on the workshop table.

"Yes boss?"

"How is the remodelling going on the new Avenger compound?"

"Ahead of schedule boss. The security perimeter is in its final testing stage and will be fully functional before nightfall. The common room, kitchen areas and training rooms are complete. Final touches on the exterior of the facility will be finalized by the end of the day tomorrow."

"What about the individual quarters, and my workshop?"

"Workshop is complete boss. Just waiting on your input on security clearance, access and voice and palm print recognition. The entire facility will be fully functional by the end of the week, and all private quarters were finalized yesterday."

"Good." Tony nodded. "That's great FRIDAY. Let the team there know they've done a fine job and offer them whatever they want by way of celebration tonight. I can't get away to join them, but send along my thanks and gratitude for a job well done."

"Will do boss. Message sent and received. They've requested a pizza and beer party."

Tony chuckled. "Of course they did. Make sure security is notified that everyone not staying at the compound tonight needs transportation home. No exceptions."

"Got it boss." FRIDAY replied. "I also have word from Ms. Potts that the paperwork on the transfer of ownership has been finalized. They are ready to be signed as soon the UN decides to move on the Accords."

"Can't we get that done now?" Tony sighed. "I'd really like to distance myself from the financial side of things."

"That is not possible at this time. The council wants the Accords agreement presented to the existing Avengers first. Have you had any success with those you've singled out for the New Avenger roster?"

"Only the kids. Harley and Peter are on board, but they're minors and I want them kept out of this for now. Rhodes and Vision are on board for sure. Matt is undecided but has agreed to be our on-call legal rep. Jessica is... well she says if Matt joins she'll follow. Cage is busy and I do mean busy. He also doesn't like being called a hero. Rand might be more inclined to join, but the last time we spoke he was trying to get his company back while dealing with some whack job ninja cult or something. I honestly couldn't pin him down on anything."

"He is pretty young boss." FRIDAY reminded him.

"I was younger than he is now when I inherited Stark Industries FRIDAY." Tony retorted. "I may not have run it in the most moral way, but I did what needed to be done. This... kid seems more
concerned with some ninja group called the Hand and wherever he's spent the last ten years of his life."

"But isn't that where he got his powers? It is why you reached out to him in the first place."

Tony sighed. "Yeah, I know Fri... I guess I'm just tired."

"Then I hate to disturb you further, but I detected an anomaly in the city a little over twelve hours ago."

"Why are you only telling me this now?"

"You've been very busy boss. And you were sleeping. Since I had very few things to add to my report I judged it could wait."

"Fine. Where did it happen? And what kind of anomaly are we talking about?" Tony asked, sitting up straighter in his chair. "Show me."

A holographic screen popped up and played out what appeared to be a normal New York afternoon. Five minutes in, the image distorted, lasting more than ten minutes before returning to the original view. Tony watched for another five minutes as several people could be seen running off camera and an ambulance sped past. Tony frowned as the video faded to black.

"Is that all you got FRIDAY?"

"No other cameras were operational at the time."

"Do we know what the ambulance was for?"

"When EMT's arrived on scene there was no one to attend to. Social media sites claim a woman fell from a building. Two unknown males took her from the scene. An unidentified female died shortly after this event on an operating table at Metro General."

"So we're assuming the men took her to the hospital then? How'd they get there so fast?"

"It would seem they did but it is unknown how." FRIDAY paused. "Due to the strangeness of the event, I did a global search and found another energy anomaly similar to this one. It took place in London a few hours prior to the one in New York but there were no injuries or anything else reported."

Tony groaned. He didn't have time for this. With Ross circling like a vulture he couldn't afford to be chasing down yet another unknown super in Manhattan. "Thanks for checking FRIDAY. Do you have a ground zero where the one in New York took place?"

"Yes boss. I traced the source of energy to Greenwich Village at 177a Bleecker Street."

"Do we know who lives there?"

"Nothing definitive. It has been owned by the same organization for many decades. It appears to be a safe house of some kind or perhaps a meeting place for its members. No single individual has ever claimed ownership."
"Great. Just what I need, a secret cult society playing around with unknown power sources. And we know nothing about them. Ross will have my head on a platter if he finds out about it."

"I will maintain surveillance on the building and monitor all channels to alert you should General Ross find out about it. Though I would like to point out that it is unlikely. He's very focused on reigning in known supers. I doubt he has any idea how many actually reside in New York City."

"And I'd like to keep it that way." Tony said, getting to his feet. "Have Happy bring the car around."

"Happy is already on his way boss. You have a dinner date with Ms. Potts in an hour."

"Dammit! That's today?" Tony swore. "I thought it was tomorrow."

"It IS tomorrow boss. You worked 18 hours straight again. Shall I prepare the shower and lay out suitable clothing for the occasion?"

"Shit. Yeah FRIDAY. I'm on my way up," Tony sighed. "Clear my schedule and put this Bleecker Street business on my agenda for first thing tomorrow morning. I need to get to the bottom of this and assess the threat level."

"Shall I contact Colonel Rhodes?"

"No." Tony said, stepping into the shower. "Let's do this on the down low. I'll have enough of a challenge going as myself. No need to scare them by bringing in War Machine and complicating the situation even more."
"You look stunning tonight Ms. Potts." Tony said, bending slightly as he lifted her hand to press a kiss to the back of it.

"Thank you Tony." Pepper blushed as she preceded him into the restaurant. "You look handsome as always."

"Next to you, I'm practically invisible."

"Flattery will get you nowhere." Pepper quipped keeping her voice light but making Tony frown at the sound of it.

"Ah, Mr. Stark, Ms. Potts. A pleasure to see you again. Your table is ready and may I say you both look splendid together? Such a lovely couple."

"Uh, thanks Adler." Tony smiled, holding Pepper's chair out for her. "Bring us a bottle of '61 Haut-Brion."

"Of course Mr. Stark. Right away." Adler said, bowing slightly as he hurried off.

Tony settled into his chair opposite Pepper, her earlier words coming back as she smiled at him from across the table. It had seemed like she was her usual self and yet... He knew Pepper pretty well by now and the tone she'd used with him earlier had not been happy Pepper or teasing Pepper. There'd been a bit of... hesitancy in her voice, but damned if he could pinpoint what might have caused it.

"Everything going well as CEO?" He asked, setting his napkin in his lap and leaning towards her with interest.

"Everything's fine. A few issues with R & D, some shuffling of positions while we finalize the plans on the new Avengers compound. But for the most part, things have been pretty quiet. It's a nice change."

"I have to agree with you on that. It IS a nice change." Tony smiled, leaning out of the way as Adler poured out a snifter for him to try. Nodding to him as he swirled the liquid over his palate, he watched Pepper thoughtfully. Outwardly she seemed perfectly normal, perfectly relaxed and yet there was something off about her tonight. Adler poured out the two glasses of wine and disappeared, leaving them alone once more.

"So what are you in the mood for tonight beautiful?" Tony asked, deciding to let whatever was bothering her come out when she was ready to share. Besides, it probably had nothing to do with him. Sixty percent chance it wasn't anything to do with him, he thought and then she pursed her lips and he ratcheted the odds up to eighty. His palms were suddenly slick and he could feel his pulse picking up speed.

"I'm not sure" She replied, swirling the wine in her glass as she watched it, a thoughtful expression on her face. "But I think I want to go with the Chateaubriand for two and a tossed salad."

Tony's brow shot up to his hairline and an icy shiver trailed down his spine. Something was
definitely up. Pepper never wanted to eat the same foods he chose and she definitely never wanted that much... meat. What the hell was going in?

"Mr. Stark, Ms. Potts? Are you ready to order?" Adler asked quietly causing Tony to blink stupidly at Pepper, still not having found his voice.

"We'll have the Chateaubriand Adler. And two tossed salads thank you."

"Of course." Adler bowed, his eyes flicking between her and Tony, clearly confused. "Excellent choice. Your salads will be out momentarily."

Tony continued to stare as Adler left, then brought the wine to his lips and drank deeply. With a sigh, he narrowed his eyes at the woman across from him and took a deep breath.

"Uh, what the hell was that Pepper? What's going on? Did I miss a meeting? Forget a birthday? Do something embarrassing and now it's all over the internet and I just haven't heard about it yet?"

Adler returned with their salads and beat a hasty retreat at the tension surrounding his guest's table. Tony waited, breath held as Pepper picked up her fork and began to eat. After she swallowed a bite she smiled at him once before focusing on her salad. "You haven't done anything wrong Tony. I just thought we might try something different tonight. Eat your salad."

Tony frowned harder, his mouth working at saying something, anything, but nothing would come. Mechanically, he picked up his fork and began to eat, not really tasting anything. Minutes later, his plate was empty and he couldn't remember it. Pepper still hadn't said anything further, so he refilled their glasses and waited until he was about to snap with the tension curling in his gut.

"Okay, no. Just no Pepper." Tony blurted as Adler whisked their plates away, replacing them with their main course. The aroma was pure heaven, clouding his senses and making it difficult to think. "You don't just decide to change things. You never change things. You're like clockwork, always in the same place, always there. My strong, sturdy Pepper who never wavers. You don't do different Pepper. It just isn't who you are. So I'll ask again, what's going on?"

"Eat your steak Tony." She replied, lifting her fork and placing a piece in her mouth. "Oh god, that's delicious!" She gushed and now Tony knew there had to be some trick at work, something sinister happening because Pepper just didn't say things like that about steak. "Eat Tony, I promise you haven't done anything wrong."

Tony hunched his shoulders, still frowning at her but the smell of the food was getting to him, so he did as she suggested and began to eat. When they finished, he was feeling much more relaxed and his earlier sense of wrongness had eased, though he still wasn't completely settled.

Pepper ordered coffee for them both once the table had been cleared and now he could clearly see the tension around her eyes and the stiff set of her shoulders. He swore softly to himself. He should have known, he was only seeing it now because she wanted him to see it.

"I knew you were lying." He snapped, though there was no heat behind his words. "Are you going to tell me what's going on now?"

"Tony." She sighed, her mouth turning down, a hint of sad resignation in her eyes. "I know we agreed to try again and we have. It's been great, I've enjoyed every moment we've shared together. I had a lot of fun and I like to think it was mutual. Our trips to Maui, Paris, Venice, that private
ocean voyage off the coast of Alaska was breathtaking by the way... all of it was wonderful, more than I ever could have imagined for myself."

Pepper took a deep breath and seemed to fortify herself with a sip of coffee before forging ahead. "But the truth is, I've realized that this isn't the life for me. It isn't what I want, and I think on some level you don't want it either. You've convinced yourself it's what you want because other people expect you to want it and you don't want to be criticized anymore. I get that and I'm not saying you've been pretending, not at all. I just... sorry, that's not what I meant to say. The truth is we're very different people and we don't belong together."

Tony gaped at her, a million thoughts and a dozen protests trying to force themselves past stunned lips but he couldn't make his mouth form words. "I..." Tony shook himself, leaning subconsciously away from the table. "You're shitting me. You figured this out now? Where the hell is this coming from? What did I do? Tell me and we can work things out. We can work anything out Pepper, you're my rock, my friend, my everything. You can't mean..." Tony waved a hand in her direction, words failing him at her verbal assault. "Everything you just said. You can't. I thought things were going good for a change. What happened? Come on Pepper, tell me we can fix this."

Pepper met his eyes as he ran out of steam, his face flushed and his heart hammering in his chest. "No, we can't Tony. Tonight proved that to me and I'm sorry it took this long for me to see it."

Tony scowled, an expression of confusion in his eyes. "See what?"

"We're not compatible Tony. Not even a little. You like rich foods and late nights and saving the world and being a diplomat and rescuing people. You love helping others Tony, you thrive on situations where you can make a difference. It gives you a sense of joy I've never seen you display in any other part of your life other than when you're in your workshop."

"That's... not true." He protested though even he could hear the uncertainty in his voice.

"It is." Pepper sighed. "And you know how I feel about all of it. Hell, I even tried to blackmail you into giving up Iron Man for me. I hate that it feels like a competition for your attention when it comes to using the armour. I hate how petty it makes me feel or how worried I am when you put it on. But it's not even about that really. I thought you were what I wanted for years and then I had you and it wasn't at all like I imagined. And then we broke up and I was lonely and I thought we could try again, but... I can't lie to myself anymore. More importantly, I can't lie to you anymore. I'm so sorry Tony."

Tony sat in stunned silence, his mind unable to process everything Pepper had thrown at him. He wanted to argue, to protest, to deny everything she'd voiced aloud, but every time he tried to speak the words wouldn't come. "Why now? Why tonight?" He said instead, feeling numb.

Pepper shrugged. "It was time. And with everything that's going on, there won't be a better time to talk like this. I'm going on a trip, a vacation, to give us both space and time away from each other. You're one of my best friends Tony and regardless of whatever you decide after tonight I don't want to lose that. But we can't do that if we just go on, business as usual, without putting some distance between us for a while."

Tony nodded as though his heart hadn't just shattered, as though the world hadn't just tilted, leaving him adrift and alone at sea once again. "You're right... we should take a break. Get some perspective on things."
"Tony. Don't do that. None of this, none of any of this is your fault okay? I'll be in touch. Thank you for dinner." She said as she got to her feet and quietly left the restaurant.

"Mr. Stark?" Tony flicked his eyes up from the empty chair Pepper had just vacated to look up at Adler. "Ms. Potts settled the bill and your driver is waiting for you outside."

Tony snorted under his breath and got to his feet. "She thought of everything didn't she? Guess I know how to pick them." He continued as he moved to the door. "Tell the chef dinner was excellent as usual."

"Of course, thank you Mr. Stark."
By two, Tony was working on his third scotch. He'd mostly quit drinking since Ultron, but this had been an especially upsetting night.

Despite Pepper's unexpected speech he found he wasn't as upset now as he'd been when he first left the restaurant. In the half hour it took to return to Stark tower, the shock had mostly worn off and a crushing sadness had hit him as he stumbled out of the elevator into his kitchen.

Crossing to the bar, he'd poured out two fingers of scotch, settling in a chair that he dragged over to the floor to ceiling window to watch the stars. At the first sip, tears flowed unchecked down his cheeks, his mind unable to process what had just happened. So many people seemed to just up and leave him. It had become routine to the point it didn't surprise him much, but he had never expected Pepper to be one of them. At least not like this. Sure they'd had their problems in the past, but this... this felt permanent. There was no going back this time. It really was over.

For a long time, he just sat there. Thinking about Pepper, thinking about all the mistakes he'd made, all the times she'd had to cover for him, or found him in questionable situations, embarrassing, humiliating situations... he couldn't help but think that all those things combined were the real reason Pepper had left.

By one in the morning he was on his second scotch. He had no interest in getting drunk, it was more to dull the pain of loss. He'd also decided that even though Pepper had hurt him and despite not wanting to admit it, she had been right. They weren't good for each other and he knew Iron Man would always come between them, eventually becoming something they couldn't get past. And as Pepper had said, he valued their friendship as much as she did, and he didn't want to lose it.

Before he could talk himself out of it or overthink it or analyse it any more than he already had, he dug his cell phone out of his pocket and typed a message.

"Pepper, I know I didn't react well to what you had to say, but you're right. I agree that we may not be right for each other. You're one of my closest friends and I don't want to lose that friendship. Enjoy your trip. When you get back, I hope we can find a way forward that is beneficial and healthy for both of us. I want you to be happy Pepper. See you soon. Tony."

Feeling more peaceful than he had since before dinner, he poured his third scotch, loosening his tie and tossing his jacket aside. With a start, he realized that with Pepper gone, he was now single again. It was not something he'd ever expected to have happen, yet the sudden realization didn't make him sad this time. Surprisingly, he actually felt hopeful, free and full of possibility. It had been a long time since he'd looked at other people with any sort of interest in that regard and wondered who might cross his radar now that he was looking.

His cell pinged as he swallowed the last of his scotch and got to his feet to stretch. Picking it up from the cushion he'd tossed it on earlier, he unlocked it and began to read.

"Tony, Honestly I was surprised to hear from you so soon. I know I hurt you and I'm sorry. I value our friendship very much and I hope we can move past this. I wish you only the best Tony. You deserve to be happy. I'll be back soon. Pepper."

With a small sad smile, Tony backed out of the app and closed the phone before slipping it into his
pocket. He tidied away his glass and the bottle of scotch and headed to his bedroom. With his heart still heavy but his soul feeling lighter, he stripped down to his boxers and went to bed.

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"Boss? Boss. Boss?!"

Tony groaned, throwing an arm over his eyes as he rolled over onto his back, the sunlight streaming through the window searing his eyes. "Ugh. FRIDAY. Do you have to be so loud so damn early in the morning?"

"Sorry boss but you wanted an 8 am wake up call."

"What?! I would never ask for that unless the world was ending."

"I can play back the order you gave me if you like." FRIDAY replied cheerily.

"No!" Tony groaned, rolling over to put his feet on the floor. "No, that's not necessary. Just... remind why I asked for that."

"The anomaly I detected in Manhattan boss. The one on Bleecker street."

Tony frowned, running a hand through his hair as he got to his feet and headed to the bathroom. "Bleecker Street? Right, right. That thing that happened in London and that dead women in Metro General."

"Yes boss, that's the one."

Tony sighed and stepped into the shower, the events of the previous night hitting him at the same time the water hit his bare skin. He groaned, letting the memories wash over and through him as he scrubbed his body clean and washed his hair.

Half an hour later he was dressed in what he considered a somewhat subdued look. Dressing down from his usual expensive designer suits to something more... approachable and what he thought might be less intimidating.

"Boss?"

"Yes FRIDAY?" Tony asked as he sipped his coffee, absently nibbling on a buttered cinnamon bagel as he checked the messages on his StarkPad.

"May I offer you my sympathies on what happened with Ms. Potts last night? I know she means a lot to you."

"That she does baby girl. Thanks for your concern, but surprisingly enough I'm okay. I might have been taken by surprise, but Pepper was right. We're better at just being friends, anything more than that and we aren't very good for each other."

"I understand. Do you want me to have Happy bring the car around?"

"Yeah. I'll be down in ten minutes. Tell Happy we're headed to Greenwich Village and give him the address."
"Right away boss."
Tony stood on the mostly empty street, scowling up at the three story brick building before him. He glanced up and down the block, noting the handful of people out and about at this time of the morning.

There was a woman walking a large black dog, a group of teenagers laughing and jostling each other on the way to the bus stop, a man on a bike wearing skin tight pants with matching black safety helmet, and a traffic cop at the end of the street arguing with someone about where they'd parked. Every one of them passed him by on their way to wherever they were going, but not a single one paid him any attention. Normally that would have been a welcome thing especially given how often his photo appeared on social media sites. But this felt different. It was as though no one took notice of him, not because he wasn't recognized, but because they didn't see him.

Frowning, he turned back to the car where Happy was standing by the driver's door watching him with interest. "Are you seeing this?" He asked, his brow rising as he waved his hand in the general direction of the people on the street. "Is it just me, or do they really not see me standing here?"

Happy shook his head. "I don't understand it boss. But I think you're right. I don't think they see you at all."

"Which totally makes no sense because you can see me and I can see you, so why is that?"

"Maybe it's something that only affects the building. We parked in front of it and you're closer to it than I am and..." Happy shrugged helplessly, unable to finish his thought.

"Maybe I buy that. But the car has to be visible or someone would crash into it."

"Beats me boss." Happy shrugged again, the beginnings of a smirk on his lips. "Then again, I don't need to get it. Crazy is your department, I just drive you to it."

“Lucky me.” Tony said with a scowl before turning back around to look at 177a Bleecker Street, a nagging feeling clawing at his thoughts. He frowned harder, his hand nervously rubbing the cell phone in his pocket, his anxiety increasing as he continued to stare at the building where FRIDAY had traced the source of the anomaly from two days ago.

And then it hit him. "Shit! Shit, shit shit! Bloody hell! Of all the... stupid, crappiest, dumbest, suckyest luck... and no, I don't care if that's not a real word... A freaking shit show, that's what my life has become! Dammit!"

"Boss?" Happy asked.

Tony turned to glare at his driver slash bodyguard who had moved to join him on the sidewalk at his unexpected outburst. "Someone, somewhere, is laughing their asses off at me. Having a great time, entertaining themselves at my expense. Mark my words Happy, someone is taking great
pleasure from this very moment."

"Sir?" Happy asked again, concern in his face or maybe he just thought Tony had finally lost his mind. It would be understandable considering the bullshit he'd had to live through and survive so far.

Tony shook his head. "Magic Happy. The reason his area is so weird is because there's magic in that building. Freaking magic!"

"Um." Happy stammered. "Should I call Colonel Rhodes for back up boss?"

"What?" Tony frowned, some of his tension leaving him in a rush of expelled breath. "No. No, I can't have him come here now. Ross is probably having him watched. Dammit!"

"Maybe we should come back another time sir. After you've... calmed down?"

"Calmed down? Yeah, no. Putting this off won't calm me down and I don't have the time to spare. I need to know what happened here and whether or not I need to deal with it or if it's good or bad or... because knowing my luck Ross will find this place first and decide to burn it down rather than deal with it, all because I don't like magic. Yeah, so no... that's not gonna happen. Not on my watch. I'll just march up to the door of that building that isn't magic at all because it's completely normal and demand to know what happened here. No, wait, I'll ask politely what happened here because I really don't want to be turned into a toad or something equally horrible and getting tossed out of the window of my own freaking building was bad enough the first time and..."

"Boss? Mr. Stark."

The words he'd been about to say died on his lips, his cheeks flushing as he realized he'd been babbling out loud for at least five minutes without taking a breath. And now Happy was looking at him like he'd grown three heads and might seriously be considering knocking him on the head for his own good and taking him home.

Which would be bad, because then FRIDAY would know how badly he'd freaked out, and then Vision would know and Rhody would know and then someone would call Pepper and then she would know. And he couldn't have that because then she'd feel guilty and think it was her fault somehow, even though it totally was, but he'd never say that blind-siding him about their relationship had shocked the hell out of him, leaving him adrift and unable to deal with one freaking magic building. Which, he reminded himself, had produced an unknown surge of power with the potential to destroy the entire city and that wasn't scary at all. But yeah, it was all Pepper's fault for why he was currently standing on a city street having a major panic attack in broad daylight, like it was a completely normal thing to do.

"I'm fine Happy. Give me a minute." He finally said, feeling some tension leave him when Happy's hands relaxed at his sides.

"Sure thing boss. Let me know if you need anything."

Tony frowned. "Actually, I could use some water."

Happy's face brightened into a small grin as he returned to the car, coming back a moment later to pass him a bottled water.
"Thanks." Tony said, gulping the whole thing down before passing the now empty bottle back to him. "Thanks Happy." Tony said again. "That helped and... let's just keep what happened here between the two of us. I'm fine now. No need to worry anyone else right?"

"You can count on me Mr. Stark. I won't tell a soul." Happy said gravely. "Do you still want to go in there alone?"

"No. But I can't bring you with me either. Don't worry, I've got my suit at my fingertips if anything bad happens. But nothing bad is going to happen because it's Wednesday. Nothing bad happens on Wednesday." The look Happy gave him wasn't reassuring and he realized he was doing it again and he clamped his jaw shut. "Right. Shutting up now. Just wait in the car. Give me an hour. If it's going to be longer, I'll have FRIDAY let you know alright?"

"Sure Mr. Stark. I'll be right here if you need me."

"Okay. Good." Tony nodded and turned back to face the building. "Right. Going up the steps now and knocking on the door. Hey, hi you wouldn't know anything about some strange energy things from two days ago? Right, completely normal conversation. Nothing to see here." He muttered under his breath before lifting his hand to knock.
Tony's fist hadn't even made contact with the door when it swung open on it's own. Swallowing nervously, he stepped up to the threshold. "Uh... hello?" When no one answered, he turned back to the street and waved reassuringly at Happy who was still standing where he'd left him and stepped inside.

Clear of the door, it swung closed behind him and a shiver travelled up his spine. He was standing in a wide foyer near the base of a sweeping staircase. A sound nearby snapped his gaze to the left where someone was watching him.

Tony frowned. A short, balding Asian man was glaring at him. He was dressed in... wait, was that a robe? His arms were crossed over his chest as though daring him to make a sarcastic comment. The effect was even more impressive since he was also holding a book in one hand which was at least two inches thick. He didn't doubt that whoever this guy was he could probably beat him in a hand to hand fight with his eyes closed despite being at least a foot shorter than him, and that was with or without the Iron Man armour.

"Uh hi?" He said nervously, glancing around him. "Do you live here?"

The man said nothing and glared harder at the same time Tony noticed the wallpaper. Later, he couldn't say why that happened, but it was better than being stared at by a mute ninja dude who was projecting nothing but hostility.

"Do you guys not know how to decorate?" He heard himself say as he continued staring at the walls. "You know this style went out of fashion like 60 years ago? Who's your decorator and... is that dust? I thought dust was bad for books and it seems like you have a lot of books here. Don't you have like a maid or something? Maybe a service because I could totally recommend someone, they do excellent work. This whole ancient library theme you've got going is so 18th century, would it kill you to update?"

A sound from the second floor had him break off his tirade and he gave up trying to provoke a response from the monk guy, turning to stare at the landing of the second floor.

"Wong? Have you seen that book on Temporal Displacement and Other Anomalies? I swear I left it in the south library, but it's not there now. I certainly hope it hasn't vanished again." The newcomer broke off as he reached the edge of the stairs, staring down at Tony in shock.

Tony's jaw dropped, his mind unable to process what he was seeing even as his right arm came up to point a finger at him. "You? No, no, no... you can't be here. Now I know I'm for sure hallucinating, shock from too many bad things happening in a short period of time, and because... Yeah, that makes sense cuz this wallpaper is super old and so this is all some elaborate trick to get me... What? I dunno... confused? That makes no sense..." He muttered, so lost in his rambling that he didn't see the look the two men shared or notice when the first man marched down the hallway towards a back room.

He was about to make another comment regarding the decor when a warm hand settled on his shoulder and he turned to stare into the bluest eyes he'd ever seen. A part of him registered that he probably should have been startled by the gesture, but all he felt was ease.
"Mr. Stark?"

"Yeah?" He answered, still reeling from the face looking back at him.

"Perhaps you'd care to follow me to where we can sit and talk?" The man's voice was different from the last time he'd heard it. Warm and silky and infused with calm, so unlike the chilly indifference he remembered hearing the last time he'd seen this man, that he felt himself nod.

"Talk. Yeah, sure. Lead the way."

Ten minutes later they were seated across from each other in matching high back, antique chairs, a small table the only thing separating them. He was still staring at the man he'd recognized, so he didn't notice when the first man returned with a tea tray, set it down and disappeared back the way he'd come.

"You know you should really think about getting a decorator in here. This place could really use an upgrade. The whole ancient library look is so last century." He muttered, some part of him hoping this guy from his past would get it and respond, unlike the glaring man from earlier. But he received no comment, even as he accepted the cup of tea the man opposite him placed in his hands.

"No, no." He said, shaking his head even as he sipped his tea. "You can't be here, this has to be a trick, an illusion. Though I've no idea why I'd be imagining you. And what's with the freaky clothing? Is it some kind of lounge pant, pajama combo? Cuz you probably shouldn't go outside looking like that, people will stare. And is that a cape? It looks like a cape, but that collar is so retro. It's a bit much. Are you an evil mastermind, a bad guy? Cuz Dr. Doom wears a cape and Loki wears a cape and they do magic, though the Scarlet Witch does magic but she doesn't have a cape so that totally doesn't add up."

"Mr. Stark?"

"Mmm?" Tony replied as he thoughts began to drift.

"Perhaps it would help if you told me the reason behind your visit. Why are you here?"

Tony frowned again, his mind drawing a blank as he stared at the man across from him. He seemed perfectly normal, if a little older than he remembered and if you ignored the weird clothes, he could almost accept it was the same man he'd spoken to at that Charity event over a year ago.

"Right, of course. The reason I'm here. Why am I here?" He wondered aloud. "FRIDAY? Why am I here?"

"To ask about the anomaly boss. And I detected another one about nine hours ago, centred in Hong Kong."

Tony smiled and nodded, enjoying the look of shock on the other man's face as he met his eyes expectantly. "Well?"

"Did you just have a conversation with a watch?"

Jeez, where had this guy been living all this time? Under a rock? "What? No. That's FRIDAY, my work in progress A.I. So, about this anomaly. FRIDAY detected an unexplained surge of power in three separate locations. One of which originated here and I'm here to investigate it."
"I can't help you."

Tony blinked, then set aside his tea to glare at the other man. "You don't get to say that. And while
I'm at it, what the hell? What are you doing here Strange? Why are you dressed like that? What's
with the cape? Are you a wizard? Is Gandalf lurking in one of the rooms here, planning to jump
out at me and yell boo? Because I gotta say, that's not very original."

Strange glared back at him, setting his own tea aside and placed his hands in his lap, calmly
returning Tony's stare. "First of all, I am not a wizard, I'm a sorcerer. Sorcerer Supreme, a Master
of the Mystic Arts."

The dam of tension broke at Strange's words as Tony burst out laughing, unable to stop the tide of
emotion that had nowhere else to go. Tears streamed from his eyes, the other man's face growing
red and angry while he filled the room with uncontrollable laughter. When he subsided, a smile still
tugged at the corner of his mouth and he couldn't seem to get hold of himself.

"I honestly do not see what it is that you find so amusing Mr. Stark."

"So what? You're now Stephen Strange, Sorcerer Supreme? Is that a cosmic joke? Or did your
parents just love alliteration, cuz that right there is priceless."

"My name has nothing to do with my position here." Strange retorted.

"What's your position again? Right, you said Sorcerer Supreme. What does that even mean Dr.
Wizard? What do you do all day besides read and compete with each other on who makes the best
balloon animals?"

"That's Doctor Strange and we do not make balloon animals. We protect the planet from cosmic
threats. It is our sworn duty to guard the earth from forces beyond your comprehension."

The smile died on Tony's lips almost instantly as he registered what Strange had just said, his face
draining of colour. "You're serious." He said, a distant part of him registering that his palms had
gone damp and his pulse had begun to pulse in his veins. "No, you can't be serious. That's what that
anomaly was, wasn't it?" He croaked, wincing at the way his voice wavered. "You and your wizard
buddies were fighting evil magicians and..." Tony paused for breath, but his vision was becoming
spotty, the edges going dark as his breath started coming in short, frantic gasps for air. Then he was
falling, or at least it felt like falling and the room dissolved, narrowing to a single spot of colour on
the floor, a bright red triangle catching his attention as he stared at it, trying desperately to make
sense of his surroundings. It felt as though he was on the verge of passing out when he heard a
voice calling his name.

"Breathe... That's it. With me... breathe, Tony. In... out. You're doing good. You're okay, you're
safe."

Tony blinked as the room began to right itself, slowly becoming aware of the warm press of a
gentle hand rubbing soothing circles on his back. A second hand was gripping one of his own,
squeezing it reassuringly as he slowly came back to himself.

He blinked a second time, his pulse steadying as he leaned back into his chair, meeting a pair of
calm blue eyes that were just on this side of being too close and his face flushed with
embarrassment. Closing his eyes, he moved out of the other man's reach, hating the fact that he'd
just had an almost full blown panic attack in front of someone he barely knew.

When he could, he opened his eyes to glare at Strange, everything inside him still too unsettled to focus on any one reaction. "That was unpleasant." He said roughly, getting to his feet, thankful he didn't sway and the room didn't spin as he did so. "Secret magic cults and ugh, no, just... no." He muttered, still glaring at the former Doctor as if what had just happened was his fault. "Sorry, but I have to cut this short, I have somewhere to be." He said, heading towards the front door without waiting for a response.

Nodding to himself, he didn't look back when he heard Strange following him. "Are you alright Mr. Stark?" He asked.

Tony turned back to scowl at him. "Why wouldn't I be? Never mind, I'm fine and... I'll be back. Thanks for the tea."
A Spot of Tea

Back in his living room an hour later, he sipped a cup of Bruce's calming tea, staring at nothing in particular as he went over what had happened. He was mortified he'd lost control. Not just in front of Strange but also on the street with Happy; not once but several times, before he even got in the door.

He knew exactly what had set him off and kicked himself for his hard-headedness. He should have left and come back after he'd calmed down. Instead he'd stubbornly pushed on. Once he'd seen the interior of the building, his fears had been confirmed when he realized the inside was much larger than the exterior implied. Then Strange had been difficult and evasive, and he'd put together what had happened faster than the Doctor could finish speaking. And what the hell was Strange even doing there? When he realized what Strange's implication meant, he'd gone head first over the precarious edge he'd been balancing on.

Four years living with the mind screwing Wanda had inflicted on him featuring the death of everyone he knew, hadn't prepared him for the revelation that there were threats to the earth he wasn't even aware of. That realization had been enough to shove him brutally over the edge of the last shred of calm he possessed.

"Boss?" FRIDAY asked, interrupting his thoughts. "Did you learn anything from Doctor Strange?"

"Yeah." Tony snorted. "I learned it's not only possible but guaranteed that I can make an ass of myself in front of people who I kinda, sorta know professionally."

"I don't believe it's as bad as you think boss. I did hear what happened."

"I think you should delete that conversation."

"You will regret not reviewing it later. When you're feeling more yourself, I think a review of the meeting will be informative."

"I highly doubt watching my own embarrassing meltdown will be helpful FRIDAY."

"As you say boss, but Colonel Rhodes is on the line for you."

"Sure. Nice save. Don't think I don't know what you're doing FRIDAY. This conversation isn't over."

"Of course not."

"Rhodey bear, Playtpus, light of my life, how's life been treating you?"

"You feeling alright Tones?"

"I'm feeling great! Why wouldn't I feel great? I mean Pepper and I broke up and there's some weird energy signatures popping up all over the planet and apparently earth wizards are real. So yeah, I'm just peachy buddy." Tony smacked his hand to his forehead. Why had he just said that?

"Whoah, woah Tony. You and Pepper broke up? What happened?"

"Mutual break up Rhodey. Amicable, logical. I get it and I'm not blind, we're just not good for each other that way. I'm good or I will be, so what did you call about?"
"What was that about wizards and energy?"

"It's nothing. Nothing to worry about. I've got it all under control, or I will. Soon. I just have to, you know, have a plan of attack when I go back there."

"You have wizards under control?" Rhodey repeated, his voice filling with disbelief. "You? With your... extreme views and perfectly justified feelings on anything even remotely connected to magic?"

"It's fine Rhodes. I'm fine. Nothing to worry about."

"I'm inbound Tony."

"Nope, no you're not. I'm fine. You do not need to come here. FRIDAY don't let Colonel Rhodes land. Revoke his security clearance."

"No can do boss. Colonel Rhodes has emergency override clearance."

"What? Who did that? Did you do that? I wouldn't do that."

"When under extreme emotional fluctuations in perspective, I am not required to follow orders of that nature." FRIDAY paused. "War Machine has landed boss."

"Shit." Tony muttered under his breath. Tossing his cell to the couch, he settled at the kitchen island, waiting for Rhodey to join him.

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This time Rhodey seated himself at the counter with his beer of choice, *Amber's Hot Friend*. Tony couldn't help but smirk at that, smiling into his coffee as Rhodey took his seat.

"Are you projecting Playtpus?" Tony laughed. "Never thought you'd go for blatant propaganda beer labels. And where'd you get the idea you were hot? Do you even know anyone named Amber?"

"I'm hot where it counts Tones and you don't know as much about me as you think you do. I might be dating an Amber right now for all you know." Rhodey smirked back, tipping the bottle to his lips. "So what's this about magicians in New York? Are we talking wannabe back alley charlatans or the real deal?"

Tony shrugged and refused to meet Rhodey's eyes. "I couldn't say."

"What do you mean you couldn't say?" Rhodey asked again. "Did something happen?"

"Maybe?"

"Tony."

"Fine. I may have slightly, kinda sorta had a small panic attack."

"What? Why?"

"Well, when I realized the building might be enchanted from the street, I freaked out a bit and rather than leave and come back I went in. And then I was sure the place was enchanted and then I asked about the anomalies FRIDAY detected and... and then it just sorta clicked... and I went a little mental." Tony finished with a shrug.
"A little mental." Rhodey echoed. "I assume whoever was there managed to talk you down?"

"Can we not talk about that? Please?"

"Fine. So who was inside? Can you tell me that much at least?"

"A short, glaring Asian guy who was dressed like a Tibetan monk and... shit, I can't believe that was him. Completely and totally mortified Rhodes. Unless he was a hallucination..." Tony laughed but it wasn't a happy sound. "No probably not a hallucination, I'm not that lucky."

"You can start making sense anytime now Tony. Are you saying you knew the other guy you saw?"

"I... think so Rhodey bear, but at the same time, not exactly." Rhodey scowled at him and Tony huffed in annoyance. "He used to be a doctor, well, he probably still is a doctor. Anyway, he was a renowned neurosurgeon when I last saw him and I have no idea what happened, but he wears a cape now Rhodes. A red, magical cape, with real high collars... totally not something to be seen in public in, but yeah, a cape."

"A cape." Rhodey echoed. "And he used to be a doctor, but now he's a magician? Am I getting this right?"

Tony shook his head. "No, not a magician. Sorcerer Supreme, Master of the Mystic Arts, protector of the earth from cosmic threats."

"Holy shit. No wonder you freaked."

"I appreciate your attempt at solidarity, but really not helping. Can we maybe not focus on that right now?"

"So when are you going back there?"

"I'm gonna need a few days and maybe a disguise or some plastic surgery, you know, so they don't recognize me? But no, seriously, I will go back. I have to assess the threat level before Ross hears about it. And if you're interested, talk to FRIDAY she can go over it with you. As for me... I'm going to bed. I'm exhausted. See you in the morning?"

Rhodey nodded. "Yeah, I'll be here. I'm on leave for a couple days. See you tomorrow Tones."

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*Another real ale, made in Arlington, Washington by Skookum brewery.*
Try, Try Again

In the end it was two days before Tony had gotten over his embarrassing freak out enough to get over it and return to the house on Bleecker Street. In preparation for the visit, he'd had FRIDAY search news archives on Doctor Stephen Strange to find out how a neurosurgeon had become a Sorcerer Supreme, who was now living in a nondescript house in Greenwich Village.

He felt like an ass when he read about Stephen's accident and the subsequent painful surgeries the man had had to endure. He didn't remember hearing anything about what had happened, though it had been reported in the news.

Of course when he looked closely it was easy to deduce why. The man who had revolutionized new procedures in advanced brain surgery wasn't really newsworthy once the press knew he would never hold a scalpel again. Stories like that didn't make the front page once the initial horror of the car crash had been reported on, which was likely why he hadn't heard about it.

Well that, and he'd had his hands full. Tracking Bruce, monitoring Steve and Natasha's movements in Europe, designing a program to track Ross, assisting Fury with protecting SHIELD agents, avoiding getting caught hacking government holdings and upgrading the suit.

With a heavy sigh he lifted his hand to knock on the door again when it swung open before he could make contact. Shit, he was never going to get used to that. He stepped over the threshold, once more seeing the dispassionate glare of the Asian man from before.

"Is that door thing normal? Don't you have some sort of security measure in place? You'd think that someone important like a Sorcerer Supreme would want at least a little bit of security. A door that opens without provocation is kinda dangerous."

The other man grunted, arms still crossed over his chest before turning and heading down the hall. They entered the same room Tony remembered from his last visit, wincing at the memory and frowning when he caught sight of Strange waiting for him, a book in his hand.

As he stared, he was struck by the memory of Strange using his first name to get him through his panic attack and a warmth bloomed in his chest. Strange frowned at whatever he saw in Tony's eyes and Tony looked away, forcing his mask back in place before facing him again.

Strange watched him cross to the other chair, his eyes now holding nothing but cool indifference.

"We weren't sure you would come back. Wong and I had a bet."

"Let me guess," Tony drawled, "he lost."

Stephen frowned, shaking his head. "No, I did."

"Good to know who has the better opinion of me." Tony retorted with a heavy sigh. "Right, so. First off, I want to apologize for what happened last time I was here."

"Alright."

"Yeah, sorry I freaked out on you, and though I really don't want to know what caused those energy spikes I mentioned, I have to know what they were."
"I'm afraid I can't give you any details. As loyal servants of Kamar-Taj we are sworn to protect the planet from cosmic threats and to keep the secrets of this Sanctum from falling into the wrong hands."

"I knew you were going to say that. I knew you were going to be difficult. I should've brought Rhodey."

Stephen scowled at him, his eyes tight with anger. "You told others about this place?"

"I got news for you wizard boy, you aren't as invisible as you seem to think. And yeah, I told others about you, but for the sake of playing nice, only Rhodey and FRIDAY know about your little magic cult."

"It's not a cult." Stephen snapped.

"Fine. Club, secret society, sanctum, order, whatever you call yourselves, I don't really care. I'm just here to tell you that it's only a matter of time before someone else finds out about you and your friends."

"Is that a threat? We wage wars on entities of a galactic nature, we protect the planet from things you can't even begin to comprehend. If you think..."

"Woah!" Tony said holding up his hands. "Easy there Gandalf. Getting the wrong impression here. And you'd be surprised what I can comprehend, so let's stop making this personal."

"Rather hard not to when you're being an ass and insulting me."

"Like you just did by insinuating I can't comprehend something?" Tony scowled back at him. "Look, I get it. You don't like me. But get in line alright? Whatever, moving on. So here's the thing. You've probably or not, heard something about the United Nations and their plans to reign in supers right?"

"I might have heard something."

"Good." Tony nodded and then frowned, rubbing his hands together nervously. "No, not good. Really not good. Running out of time. Anyway, back to you. I thought it might be a good idea to bring you and other supers in on the negotiations regarding changes to the Accords. I've done what I can to change some of the more ludicrous requests in the agreements, but I have limited understanding of other types of supers. I've taken suggestions from several groups, most recently Doctor Reed and his team and Professor Xavier to help with the part on protecting minors, and someone else who knows something about secret identities. What I don't have is input from someone like you."

"You want me to join the Avengers?" Stephen scoffed. "The Sorcerer Supreme does not join superhero... clubs."

"Maybe not. But you'd be better off joining us now than being discovered after the Accords are ratified, and so much better off if you do it before Ross knows you exist."

"We do not need your help Mr. Stark. From you or your alter ego, Iron Man." Stephen asserted, glaring at him with a haughty expression on his face.
Tony stood, an angry glare of his own in his eyes. "Of course not. It wouldn't do for someone like you to accept help from the former Merchant of Death now would it?" He said, dropping a file folder on the seat he'd just vacated. "A copy of the existing Accords. Might want to read it Doctor." He sneered. "I'll see myself out."
Tony was vibrating with anger by the time he returned to the car, barely keeping himself in check until Happy had pulled away from the curb.

"You alright boss?" Happy asked.

Free of keeping his game face on, Tony let loose. "No, no I'm not okay, very far from okay actually. Stupid freaking Stephen asshole Strange, so high and freaking mighty, doesn't need help from Tony, Merchant of Death, Stark! Try to do someone a goddamn freaking favour and they throw it back in your face! Like I'm not up to my bloody eyeballs in enough crap, I thought I'd add more to the stunning pile of manure by annoying a former world-renowned, nobel peace prize neurosurgeon. Yeah sure, cuz I have absolutely nothing better to do with my time."

"Sir? Do you want me to contact Colonel Rhodes?"

"No Happy. Think I'll just take the Mark 46 out for a test drive. Let off some steam, maybe blow up some abandoned buildings. I'll be fine Happy, but thanks for looking out for me."

"Of course boss. Anytime."

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On reaching the Tower, Tony headed straight to the landing pad where he immediately donned the Mark 46 armour. Minutes later he shot straight up into the sky, past the clouds to where the sun warred with his view of the stars.

Queuing up his mixtape, his helmet filled with the bass beat of *Who Made Who*, followed by *For Those About to Rock, Shoot to Thrill, For Whom the Bell Tolls* and finishing with *Back in Black*.

He was in the middle of a barrel roll across the Atlantic when his phone rang, interrupting his enjoyment of *Shoot to Thrill*, his favourite. He scowled behind his helmet as it continued to ring.

"I thought I put that on mute. FRIDAY who's calling and why should I care?"

"It's a private line boss."

"Shit." Tiny sighed. "Mute music and put them through."

"Uh, hello?"

"Hi. Who is this and how did you get this number?"

"Is this Tony Stark? It's Danny Rand."

"Rand? Thought you were busy with some Finger thing?"

"Finger?" Danny chuckled. "Uh, no sir. They're called the Hand."

"Hand." Tony snorted. "Sounds made up. Let me guess, there's five of them right?"
"Yeah there is."

"Of course there is. So what can I do for you Mr. Rand?"

"Actually it's what I can do for you sir. I've been talking to Matt Murdock about your work in the city and I want to help."

Okay, now Tony knew he was dreaming. Things like this didn't just fall into his lap. People never offered to help him, they were too busy taking.

"I think Mr. Murdock has a silver tongue. And he definitely talks about my work more than I thought."

"Well I don't know about that. I just happened to overhear him talking to a Ms. Potts and he mentioned a Charity dinner? So I asked him about it and he told me about your Foundation."

"Right, well, you know Jessica Jones? He says she wants to meet with me. It's actually kinda terrifying given how my last meeting with her went. Anyway what do want to help with? I have a lot of projects in New York."

"That is terrifying. Jones is an odd and complicated woman. Drinks too much, no idea how she does that. But yeah, I'd like to offer some financial support to the Maria Stark Foundation. It's not as though I'm making use of Rand resources myself, so I thought I could use the money to help others. I wanted to do it myself, but then Geri told me what you were doing and that it would be easier to donate the money to your foundation. It would also give me a place on the board and a say in where the money goes."

"Who's Geri?" Tony asked.

"Oh! She's my lawyer."

"Right." Tony nodded inside his helmet as though it should have been obvious. "Okay. So I appreciate what you're offering Mr. Rand. Normally I'd put you in touch with my CEO but she's away. Instead, have Geri meet with Mr. Murdock and the three of you can go over the details and legalities of how to proceed."

"Really? Murdock is working for you now?"

"In a manner of speaking."

"Okay great. I'll call Geri right away."

"Good. And thanks for the help Mr. Rand."

"Oh sure, no problem. I gotta do something with all that money right?"

"Sure. Anyway, I gotta run."

"Right, of course. Thanks Mr. Stark."

Tony sighed and went right back into his music where he’d left off, changing course and heading
west back to New York.

***

Wong entered the sitting room and sank into the chair Tony had just vacated the moment the billionaire left. His glare was filled with disapproval and disappointment, but Stephen was still processing everything Stark had said to him before storming out the door.

"What?" He snapped when he could no longer take the silence.

"You should not have done that. I see your arrogance is still not a thing of the past."

"You're telling me I should have agreed to join the Avengers?"

"I think Tony Stark offered us an olive branch into his world on our terms and you proceeded to set it on fire." Wong said pointedly. "Regardless of what you think of the man or the so-called Avengers, I believe the time for our order to work in the shadows is coming to an end."

"The Avengers are a glorified false idol private club. They have no regard for their actions or the people whose lives they irrevocably change." Stephen retorted. "And Tony Stark made millions selling weapons to governments all over the world."

"I thought you said you knew about these Accords? They're supposed to make the Avengers accountable to the law. And didn't Mr. Stark put an end to his weapons program? You have to have been wilfully ignoring everything Stark has done for some time now if you still think that."

"And how is it you know so much about it?"

Wong narrowed his eyes and crossed his arms over his chest. "I know how to Google Stephen. What do you think I was doing after Stark showed up here the first time? More than that, how is it that you know nothing?"

Stephen groaned, a hand going over his eyes as he used his fingers to massage his temples. "You truly think we should be on the side of being in agreement with these Accords? How will we keep the Sanctum and all it's knowledge protected if the world knows of our existence?"

"We're sorcerers Strange. We haven't kept the Sanctum protected through millennia without knowing a thing or two about safeguarding secrets. And these Accords are very serious. There are over 100 countries in agreement on these documents and I imagine by the time they're brought to the public's awareness, a dozen more will have signed on. I don't think we will be able to stay on the sidelines this time."

"Why couldn't you have told me all this before Stark came back?" He demanded, scowling hard when Wong smirked at him. "Dammit Wong, this was another one of your stupid tests wasn't it? One I failed spectacularly."

"You're learning Stephen. At a snail's pace, but you are learning." He said, handing him the folder Tony had left behind as he got to his feet. "Read it. And then you should work on your apology."

"Me? You're the one who thinks we should join the outside world!"
"That's not what I said. And you are the Sorcerer Supreme. Making apologies, deals and arrangements for our order is your responsibility, not mine."

"I would appreciate these lessons more if you were a little less smug about it."

"If I were less smug, the lesson wouldn't hold as much weight. And you know that Stephen." Wong retorted, moving to the hall. "Read the Accords. Call Stark and apologize before you both run out of time."
By the time Tony landed on Stark Tower and headed into his kitchen, all his earlier anger had been burned off. His heart felt lighter and his shoulders had relaxed while he'd flown across the city and up into the atmosphere, just letting himself go while AC/DC blasted through his helmet.

"FRIDAY?" He said, crossing to the counter to brew a fresh pot of coffee.

"Yes boss?"

"Any calls or visitors while I was out?"

"No boss."

Tony poured himself a steaming mug of coffee and crossed to his couch with a frown. "Really? Nothing? No one was looking for me at all today?"

"No."

"Tell me you think that's just as disturbing as I do."

"It is... unsettling boss."

"Damn."

"Boss, Matthew Murdock is downstairs requesting access to the penthouse."

"Let him up FRIDAY."

"Tony." Matt said as he stepped out of the elevator.


"Coffee is fine thanks."

"Coming right up. Have a seat on the couch while I get you a cup." Tony said, pulling a clean mug from the cupboard. "So, how have you been? Didn't we just see each other a week ago?"

Matt smiled as Tony handed him the coffee and took a seat across from him. "More like three."

"Three?" Tony shook his head. "Been a while since I lost track of time like that."

"It happened often?"

Tony made a face and stared out the window. "Used to happen all the time both before and after Ultron. Kinda my go-to when everything goes to shit and it's my fault."

Matt frowned, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees. "Your fault? That's... not what I've read."

"What?" Tony blurted, his eyes filling with confusion. "What are you talking about? What reading? What have you been reading?"

Matt smiled, but he wasn't laughing and Tony thought the look was gentle, which if you thought about it was odd, since the guy was blind, how could a blind guy have a look that was gentle?
"Unlike everyone else, some people can't actually watch your incriminating videos or any social media that gets flooded with your image. I have to read the news and with that, I and others like me learn more than the general public."

Tony sipped more of his coffee, letting his shoulders relax a bit at Matt's words. "Okay, I'll bite. What have you read about me?"

"Well to be honest, at first I didn't trust you. I read a lot about what happened after Colonel Rhodes brought you home." Matt said, carefully avoiding naming where Tony had been. "Then I read about the Senate hearing, Justin Hammer, Stane and Killian."

"Not things I like to think about much." Tony replied, his voice cold.

"I know and I understand why, believe me. I was still in law school when Loki fell out of the sky, but everyone remembered the sacrifice you made, well almost. And there are a lot people who are happy we didn't lose you." Matt said, making Tony frown at him with surprised confusion. "Then I read about Ultron and the work you were doing that wasn't making headlines. The relief efforts, the sponsorships, your reparations. I doubt anyone other than the few friends you trust know even half of the things you do to protect the world."

"What does that have to do with what I said earlier?"

"Ultron wasn't your fault Tony. Anyone who was there and anyone who really knows you, knows that. Sokovia wasn't your fault. Everything Hammer, Killian and Stane did, wasn't your fault. From where I'm sitting, all you ever did was invent new technology that made other people jealous. So they made you a target and since the public loves a good story, no one questions it any further than that."

"Not you though."

"I doubt I'm the only one Tony. But no, not me. I see a man trying to do the right thing, who's being held back by people who believe what they're told. People who hold you back because they're afraid of what you can do. It's human nature to fear the unknown and it stifles you because you're trying to show the world that change doesn't have to be scary."

"You know, I really could have used my own personal cheering section four years ago." Tony smirked. "But I gotta ask, why are you telling me all this?"

"Because in the short time I've known you, I like what I see. I admire you and what you can do and what you're still doing."

"You keep talking like that and I might have to kiss you." Tony teased, getting up to top up his coffee. "Refill?"

"Sure." Matt stammered as Tony returned with a carafe. "Um, why did you say that?"

"Say what? Kiss you?"

"Yes. I thought you and Ms. Potts..."

"We broke up. Like yesterday? Recently. And you're very attractive. I'm sure you've heard that before."

"I'm sorry to hear that."
"Thanks, but Pepper and I have been rocky from day one. She decided... well she figured it out first and then explained it to me, but we're better off just being friends. The romance part... it just wasn't healthy, for either of us."

"Is it because of what you told me before? Being Iron Man makes it too hard?"

"Something like that. But then I realized, we're always arguing and it's never about anything important, but I feel like I can never be myself around her. I'm always apologizing and... well it makes me feel bad about myself and no one should have to apologize for who they are."

"You're nothing like what the reporters make you out to be."

"I'm glad you think so."

"I do." Matt nodded. "Anyway, I guess should get going. Thanks for having me over Tony. I enjoy our talks."

"Me too. Come on, I'll walk you to the elevator." Tony said offering Matt his elbow. "You back to practicing law yet?" Tony asked as they waited together at the door.

"Not yet. I have some... apologizing to do first." Matt paused, tilting his head to observe him. "Tony?"

"Mmm?"

"Do you mind if I..." Matt raised his hand hesitantly toward Tony's cheek. "It's just that I don't know what you look like. May I?"

"Uh... sure." Tony said as Matt trailed his hands over his face. It was a weirdly intimate moment and he felt for a minute that he couldn't breathe as Matt's fingertips traced the planes and contours of his face.

"You're a very attractive man Stark." Matt said, using his last name to create a semblance of distance.

"Uh... thanks. So are you."

Matt chuckled under his breath. "So Foggy keeps telling me." He said as he stepped into the elevator. "Oh, before I go, Jessica wanted me to tell you she'll sign the Accords and that she wants to talk to you privately."

"Okay. Do you know what about?"

Matt shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine. Little advice? It'll probably go better if you've got some whiskey to offer her."

"I don't make a habit of drinking anymore Matt."

"Yeah, I know. That's why I mentioned it."

"Considering she practically hates my guts a little peace offering can't hurt."

"Take care Tony. Keep me updated."

"Will do."
With nothing needing his immediate attention, Tony spent the majority of the next day happily ensconced in his workshop. He'd finally completed the upgrades to his suit armour, designing a tech watch that would allow a gauntlet to form around his hand if he couldn't call in his suit. Mark XLVI was his most recent and best iteration of the Iron Man armour to date and he was ecstatic with the results.

"FRIDAY, what do you think about a new paint job?"

"I think it would be appropriate given your flamboyant nature boss. But perhaps a simple gloss finish would be more practical. Besides, you can't improve on design perfection."

"Ugh. Fine, fabricate and finalize."

"Boss. A Miss Jones is asking to see you. She's in the lobby."

A chill went down Tony's spine at this announcement. "I guess Matt wasn't kidding. Scan her vitals. Is she drunk?"

"Miss Jones has a blood alcohol level of .07. I suspect this is a normal state given what I have on her in my archives."

"Alright. Send her to the penthouse. I'm on my way."
"Stark." Jessica growled as he crossed the room to the kitchen island.

"Miss Jones." He replied, moving straight for his liquor cabinet. "Matt mentioned you wanted to talk. I didn't expect to see you this soon though."

"I had nothing better to do." She shrugged, watching him with an intensity that left him feeling unsettled. "What are you doing?"

"I had FRIDAY bring in some whisky." He said, carrying a large bottle and a glass tumbler with him as he joined her at the island. "FRIDAY? Coffee please."

"Of course boss."

Tony slid both the tumbler and the bottle across the kitchen island to Jessica. She smirked, even as she narrowed her eyes at him. Wordlessly, she cracked the seal on the bottle and filled the tumbler full before replacing the cap and sliding the bottle back to the centre of the table. Lifting the glass to her lips, she took three healthy swallows, her eyes never leaving his face.

A chime sounded, rousing Tony from watching her drink and he moved to the kitchen counter to retrieve his coffee. He returned to his seat where Jones was still watching him, an unreadable expression on her face.

"I was under the distinct impression you hated me Ms. Jones."

"I've never hated you. I just didn't like you much."

"Didn't? As in past tense?"

Jessica shrugged, swirling the liquid in her glass. "Things change."

"Okay." Tony said carefully, still at a loss as to what the angry, whiskey swilling, part time private investigator and enhanced human was doing in his tower.

"Matt has been talking you up and I did some investigating of my own on you. Shared some of what I found with him. You should care more about good PR Stark. You may not think so, but it matters what the public believes."

"Really? This coming from a woman whose idea of making friends is to tell them they're fired every day? You don't care what people think and yet you're telling me I should? What is this, 'do as I say, not as I do' adventure hour?"

Jess narrowed her eyes at him and downed more whiskey. "Because you're already in the public eye. And the things you do, people pay attention to."

Tony snorted, shaking his head as he drank deeply of his coffee. "People pay attention she says. Yeah they just love to pay attention when it's something bad or embarrassing or scandalous, though all three at once is better. Not so much when it's good, decent or heroic."
"Doesn't mean you shouldn't try."

"You honestly think I have time for that? Despite what the masses believe, I work very hard. I'm a damn inventor for crying out loud. Where do people think all those advances in technology coming out of Stark Industries come from? I'll tell you where, the backs of the hard working, unappreciated employees. Not Tony Stark, the playboy, billionaire, genius philanthropist. Oh no, all Stark does is make grand entrances, drink too much, buy favours, embarrass myself in public, look pretty and make bad decisions."

Jessica laughed, downing the last of her whisky and reached for the bottle. "Jesus Stark. Tell me what you really think."

Tony narrowed his eyes at her, the tension in his shoulders easing. "So what? You're just jerking me around?"

"Actually I was being serious, but I see your point. But I might have a solution." Jess continued, pouring herself another whisky. "My sister has a show, I could get her doing some interviews and Matt has a... well, a friend who works for the Bulletin. A few articles once in a while couldn't hurt."

"You want to help improve my public image?" Tony couldn't be more shocked than if she'd fallen to her knees and kissed his feet. "Am I dreaming right now?"

"You wish."

"Uh, no offense, but not really. Why would you want to do that? More importantly, why do you care?"

"It doesn't take a genius to figure out that this Accords business isn't going to go away Stark. From what I've seen, you're the only superhero talking about it and doing something about it. Every super out there should be lining up to shake your hand or kiss your ass. Without you, this Secretary Ross dipsh!t would have us all locked up somewhere to be stuck under a microscope with no one the wiser. Then he'd make up any story he wanted and the U.N. would believe him. But because of you, that won't happen now - because you care. You could've just retired and washed your hands of all of this crap, but you didn't."

"Congratulations Jones. You are the second person in two days to leave me speechless." Tony huffed, sipping at his now cooled coffee while she sat there watching him. "I'm almost afraid to ask, but is that the only reason you wanted to see me?"

"No." She said meeting his eyes. "I want to be your bodyguard."

Tony's jaw dropped, his coffee forgotten as he met her steady and very serious gaze. He was waiting for the punchline to what she'd just said and when it didn't come, he still hadn't thought of a snappy response. "Twice in one night Jones. Please tell me that's the last crazy thing you're going to say tonight."

She smirked at him. Actually smirked without narrowing her eyes as though she was enjoying his company. "Not quite."

Tony sucked in a deep breath, Jones' words running through his head like pieces of a puzzle he hadn't known he'd been trying to put together for years. "I can't believe this is you saying these
things, but you're right about the reputation thing. So, if you really want to help me out with that, I accept. But the bodyguard thing... I'm going to need an explanation for that one. I mean, I'm Iron Man and I have a bodyguard."

Jessica rolled her eyes so far back in her head, Tony imagined they might not go back to where they were supposed to be. "Jesus Stark, and here I thought I was careless with my life. Look, I get you have a bodyguard, but he's a civilian. You're going to have a lot of people asking you hard questions when all that U.N. crap goes public. You think every super out there is going to be happy about that? Because I'm damn sure there will be a lot of them who don't agree with you. Are you getting what I'm saying? No one else can speak for people like us and I doubt there's anyone out there more qualified to handle government and political agencies than you are. Even if there are, they sure as shit aren't stepping up to help either."

"Huh." Tony huffed. He still couldn't wrap his brain around the fact that it was Jessica freaking Jones saying these things. The same woman who'd told him to shove his money and his ego where the sun didn't shine and that if he couldn't figure out how, she'd do it for him.

"So, assuming this is real and I'm not hallucinating, how would this work? I don't always know when I'm going to be needed for a public appearance and once the U.N. goes public, a lot of it will be on foreign soil and Happy stays on the premises here at the tower. That's a big commitment Jones. No offense, but don't you already have a job?"

"I'm taking a vacation."

"Vacation." Tony dead-panned arching a dark eyebrow at her.

"Look, I know you don't pay attention to us commoners but let's just say I need some distance from the wreck my life has become alright? Don't ask questions." She snapped when he opened his mouth to do just that. "So couple that with your glaring disregard for your life and personal safety, you need someone like me watching your back."

"Someone like you."

Jessica frowned, downing more whisky. "A super who doesn't have some super secret identity, who doesn't need a damn costume or a bulletproof robot suit to fight bad guys. Everyone knows Colonel Rhodes is War Machine, but he's just human without the armour. And so are you."

Tony sucked in a breath, then let it out again in a slow exhale. "Alright. You've made your point. I'm still not convinced I'm not dreaming all this, but... " Tony sighed, running a tired hand through his hair. "You can be my bodyguard. I have a public appearance set for the day after tomorrow. Is that too soon?"

"No problem Iron Heart." She smirked, getting to her feet. "I'm not available till then anyways."

"Uh huh." Tony replied still not convinced this wasn't some elaborate hallucination. "Well um... I'll have Pepper call you with a contract. And you'll have a place of your own here in the tower. Free, as part of the job."

Jessica gave him another unreadable look as she headed to the elevator. "I figured. See you Stark."
"It's been two days Strange." Wong grunted at him for the fourth time that day. "Is your ego so important that you would put the sanctum and all within it at risk because you're too proud to apologize? I was sceptical when The Ancient One told me you were her choice to succeed her. Then you defeated Dormammu and I saw in you what she saw before she died. Now, I see the same arrogant man who came begging on the Sanctum's doorstep. Your success in the Dark Dimension had nothing to so with saving anyone but yourself. You couldn't accept the possibility of failure so you kept going until you won. That does not make you a hero Stephen, it makes you dangerous."

"I saved the planet and all you can do is criticize! Never mind the fact that no one in Kamar-Taj ever told me what my job actually entails. The Ancient One died, telling me next to nothing of what was expected of me and you have said nothing at all." Stephen retorted. "Half of what happened with Stark is on you! That entire mess could have been avoided if you'd just said something about the Sanctum's views on being known about outside these walls!"

"No." Wong shook his head. "It could have been avoided if you'd just asked me before picking a fight with Stark. Do not put your failure on me Strange. It was your choice to declare us removed from the rest of the world. I was here. You could have asked me. Instead you lashed out and insulted Stark. Now call him before it really is too late and this Secretary Ross I've read about tries to arrest us."

"They can't arrest us Wong." Stephen argued. Seriously. What was wrong with the man? They were Interdimensional, Intergalactic Sorcerers and here Wong was, worrying about jail.

"They can make our lives difficult Strange, quite easily I might add. Or have you forgotten Loki and the aliens he brought to earth a few years ago? No one who witnessed that incident will look kindly on magic users of any kind. It won't matter that we're on their side. We need allies Strange. Go. Make some."

Stephen opened his mouth to protest, trying several times to come up with a retort, but each time he tried the words died on his lips. "You're actually worried about this, aren't you?"

Wong nodded carefully, as though he didn't believe for a moment that Stephen was finished arguing. "I have never seen so many countries readily agree to something so quickly."

"You really think this Secretary Ross is a serious threat to the Sanctum and Kamar-Taj?" Stephen pressed.

"I do. And despite your personal feelings regarding Mr. Stark, he is our only ally right now. We need him on our side more than he needs us."

"There are no personal feelings Wong." Stephen huffed. "I just find his way of speaking to be... insufferable and... grating."

"Sounds personal to me." Wong retorted. "He was perfectly polite to me, ingratiating in fact. If your ego hadn't surfaced on seeing him, you might have noticed that before you insulted him."

"You haven't a soft word in you at all do you? Would it kill you to point these things out without insulting me?"
"No, it wouldn't kill me. But you're an adult Stephen and your ego has ruled how you interact with others for far longer than you've been one. Subtle doesn't work with you. You'd find some way of justifying your behaviour and thus learn nothing. The Ancient One knew that when she forced your astral body out of you when you first came to us. Being blunt is the only way you hear anything."

"I liked you better when you were silent and glaring."

Wong snorted, his lip curling in what Stephen imagined might be his attempt at a smile. It was unsettling to see. "I don't doubt it."

Stephen sighed, tilting his head from side to side to release the tension in his shoulders. "Fine. You've made your point. I will... go to Stark Tower and apologize."

Wong raised a brow at him to which Stephen sighed loudly. "And speak with him about the Accords."

"Good. I'll be in Kamar-Taj for the rest of the day." Wong nodded, seemingly satisfied with his response. "Portal there if you need me for anything. Otherwise I will be back at the Sanctum later tonight. We can discuss what happened with Stark tomorrow."

"Fine."

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"Sir." Vision's voice startled Tony so bad that he very nearly jumped out of his skin as he hunched over a new motherboard design.

"Shit Viz! You could have let me know you were coming!" Tony swore. "FRIDAY! Announce people when I'm in here, even if they have the required clearance."

"Of course boss. I'm sorry, I thought it would be a nice surprise for you." FRIDAY replied sounding properly chastised.

Tony groaned and ran a hand through his hair. "Well it might have been if I was in the kitchen or the common room and not completely absorbed in my work. Context FRIDAY. You're still learning... and I'm not mad, just... tired."

"It's alright boss. You're allowed to be angry. I made a bad call and you have every right to be upset."

"Sir." Vision interrupted. "I am equally to blame. I should have called ahead to let you know I was coming. I'm sorry."

"It's fine buddy." Tony protested but let anything else he thought to say go when he noted the disapproving look on Vision's face. "Okay you're right, it's not fine, but apology accepted anyway." He sighed, straightening. "Clean up time guys. Dad's going upstairs. Try not to break anything Dum-E."

An excited beep followed this statement and Tony left the workshop with Vision following close behind.
"I am sorry Tony. I did not mean to startle you." Vision said as Tony crossed to the coffee machine in the common room. "I'm still learning appropriate behaviour with human interactions."

"Yeah and how's that going with Maximoff as your teacher?" Tony snapped before immediately smacking his hand to his forehead, groaning at his lack of control. "I... didn't mean it that way."

"On the contrary. It's exactly how you meant it and I take no offense. You have every right to be angry with me for what I did."

"So what, you've mastered painfully understanding now?" Tony retorted, deciding in an instant to just be angry for once. "You weren't so clued in when you left. In fact, you were downright insulting and condescending if I remember right."

"You are correct sir. I was insufferably rude and you have my sincere apologies for that as well. I had no right or reason for speaking to you the way I did. You were also right about Ms. Maximoff and my... inexplicable attraction to her."

Tony turned angry eyes on the being he'd indirectly helped give life to, seriously questioning the state of his world. "I'm actually becoming convinced that this entire week has been some long extended episode of the *Twilight Zone*. Seriously? You're not only apologizing but you're agreeing with me too? The world must be ending for the sheer number of times people have shocked me this week."

"I'm not sure I follow."

Tony waved his arm dismissively as he took a sip of his coffee. "Not important. FRIDAY has it recorded. Talk to her if you really want to know." He said, turning and crossing to the living area to settle on his couch. "So, talk. I assume you didn't come all this way just to shock me. Why are you here?"

"You... knew where I was this entire time?"

Tony glared at him but said nothing as he continued to sip his coffee.

"Of course you did." Vision looked down at his hands as he took a seat on the adjoining couch. "I came because I have been keeping myself apprised of what you've been doing these past months. You've been extraordinarily busy. More than that, it seems you've been doing it all by yourself, again. And I've been a terrible friend. I'm here to remedy that if you'll let me."

"Bullshit. You came because things didn't work out with Maximoff."

"It didn't work out because she did not want to come with me. I insisted we needed to be here to help with everything you've been doing and everything you're trying to do, but she refused to listen to anything I had to say. I'm embarrassed to admit that I believed I could get through to her because of our shared connection. I was wrong."

"Pinch me."
"I beg your pardon?"

"Pinch me. I want to know I'm not dreaming all this."

"I fail to understand how causing you physical harm will establish this conversation as fact."

A loud frustrated sigh followed as Tony slumped back in his seat. "Not dreaming then. Only you would argue with a request like that. So does everything you just said mean that you're back?"

"I am not leaving again if that is what you're asking. I am here to ask if you would like my assistance with what's been happening with the new Avengers compound."

"You heard about that?" Tony snorted. "Of course you did. You talked to FRIDAY."

"I also spoke with Ms. Potts and Colonel Rhodes. I am sorry to hear about what happened with Ms. Potts. You seemed happy with her. Part of what made me seek out Ms. Maximoff was because I was envious of what you and Ms. Potts seemed to have with each other. Unfortunately I did not understand at the time that appearances are very different from being in a real relationship. My... existence and my understanding of my place amongst humans was very... clinical at the time. My interpretation of things are what led me to behave as I did towards you and I am very regretful. I should have listened to you and spent more time interacting with others in my new form, without the added expectations that a more personal relationship places on such things."

"You... envied me? I didn't realize your new form would allow you to experience emotion." Tony replied, still reeling from Vision's confession. "If I had, I would've worded things differently."

"That is not your fault sir. Please do not assume responsibility for my mistakes. It is not yours to shoulder."

Tony narrowed his eyes a moment, considering Vision's words before giving a faint shrug. "Alright fine. So what kind of work did you have in mind for helping me with?"

"I would like to take over the management and direction regarding the redesigning of the Avengers compound. I will of course bring anything needing your attention to you for final say, but I want to take over the responsibilities for everything else for the duration of it's remodelling. I believe you do too much already and it is upsetting to me that you have not asked for help."

"Unbelievable." Tony huffed, shaking his head at how just unbelievable he thought it was. "Alright. I'll have FRIDAY make all the necessary arrangements and you can take over at the compound starting tomorrow. Can I assume you're staying here tonight?"

"If you don't mind."

"Why would I mind? This place has been empty with all of you off doing your own things without me." Tony huffed, getting to his feet.

"Have you been taking care of yourself sir? You seem well, if a little tired."

"I have been taking care of myself actually. Funny how not having to defend myself every day improves my outlook on things." Tony scowled at him. "No, don't say it. I don't want to hear how sorry you are. I'm going to bed. If you want to know more about how things have been going, ask FRIDAY."
"Very well." Vision nodded. "Goodnight sir."

Tony gave him a look that was unreadable before nodding and heading up to the penthouse.
The following morning, Tony was in the shower when FRIDAY notified him of an incoming call.

"Sir? I have a Doctor Strange asking to speak to you."

Tony groaned and stuck his head under the steaming hot water, letting it course down his back in soothing waves. "Tell him I'm in the shower and to call back in half an hour."

"Very well boss."

"Thanks FRIDAY."

"Mr. Vision is asking if you'll be joining him for breakfast. He's presently in the kitchen."

"Is he cooking?"

"He's waiting on an answer before making any food choices boss."

"Ugh." Tony sighed, rinsing the soap from his hair. "Would it be rude to just have breakfast delivered? Don't answer that. Tell him I'll be down in fifteen minutes and that I'll take bacon, eggs and toast. I don't think he can screw that up." He muttered to himself, reaching for a towel.

"I'll let him know boss."

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Tony stepped out of the elevator to the heady and enticing aroma of bacon and coffee permeating the air in the kitchen. It was such an uncommon occurrence that his stomach growled in response as he crossed the room to sit at the kitchen island. "That smells sinful buddy." Tony smiled as Vision slid a mug of coffee across to him. "Have you been practicing your cooking skills?"

"I have." Vision nodded. "And I had some help from FRIDAY as well."

"You're making me proud baby girl." Tony said as Vision slid a plate full of food in front of him.

"Thank you boss." FRIDAY replied and Tony didn't miss how pleased she sounded before turning his attention back to his plate. FRIDAY's growth in seeking and being rewarded by his praise, made his heart swell with pride and hoped to do well by her. The thought then extended to the being sitting across from him who had been silent throughout his exchange with FRIDAY. Which then made him think that Vision might be seeking the same thing.

Vision must have read his mind because he spoke before Tony could swallow the bacon he'd been chewing. "You are probably thinking I only came back here because I sought your praise and approval. Though I won't deny I derive satisfaction from receiving such things from you, but it is not why I came back."

"Do you have any idea how unnerving it is when you seem to be reading my mind?" Tony replied, pointing his fork at him.

"I may have some understanding sir." Vision drawled. "But it is not my intent. I merely wish to disabuse you of the notion that my intentions here are in any way self-serving. I only wish to help you in any way I can be of assistance."
"Okay."

This time it was Vision who raised his brow at him as if he'd heard him wrong.

"What? I'm not going to argue with you about it. I've had enough of that from other people saying pretty much the same thing this past week. I'm starting to see a pattern here."

"Does that mean you are willing to accept that some people really only want to help you? That they don't have ulterior motives?"

Tony chuckled under his breath. "I wouldn't go that far, but I'm willing to accept it's possible. Anything more, well... I'll need more than just words to convince me."

"I understand sir."

"Boss? A Ms. Jones is here. Shall I let her up?"

"She's early." Tony replied, sharing a look with Vision. "But yeah FRIDAY. Let her up."

"I also have Doctor Strange on the phone for you."

Tony groaned, having forgotten about the earlier phone call. "That man has terrible timing. But yeah, give me a minute and then put him through." He said, getting to his feet before a terrible thought occurred to him and he rounded on Vision with alarm in his eyes.

"You have to leave." He said, pointing at him.

"I, what? Have I done something to offend you?"

"Jones. The woman on the elevator. She has... issues with people who can do mind control on others. I didn't know you were going to be here and I gave her a job as my bodyguard without explaining... certain things."

"Very well. I will leave discreetly." Vision nodded, moving to a nearby window. "I'll read over your files and get in touch with you later if my presence here will be a problem."

"Yeah alright." Tony nodded as FRIDAY put Strange through.

"Mr. Stark?" Stephen asked, sounding annoyed which made Tony frown at the phone in his hand.

"Speaking. What can I do for you Doctor?" He said coolly as Jessica stepped out of the elevator.

"I was hoping we might start over. I would like to meet with you at the tower to... discuss some things."

Tony arched a brow at Strange's subdued tone. That was an interesting development. "Uh sure. That would be good. When do you want to come by?"

"I can teleport there now if it's convenient."

"No, no it's not convenient. I have a... meeting." He stammered, shaking his head at Jessica's questioning look and took a seat at his island counter. "And what do you mean you can teleport here?"

"Surely you haven't forgotten what I am." Strange retorted.
Asshole? Arrogant Bastard? Pretentious jerk? Tony winced. As much as he wanted to take advantage of the opening Strange had given him, he restrained himself. Now wasn't the time to provoke the wizard. Besides, there'd be time enough for that later if the situation warranted it. "No, I haven't forgotten. Can I call you back with a time? I'm not sure how long this meeting is going to run."

"Of course." Came the curt reply. "I'll await your call then."

"Okay. Thanks." He said as the other man ended the call. He scowled at it. Clearly Strange was still pissed with him or he had no phone etiquette to speak of. Whatever, Tony shrugged, sliding the phone back into his pocket before smiling at Jessica. One problem at a time.
"Hey." She said as he joined her at the counter. "Didn't mean to interrupt your breakfast Stark."

"I was mostly done anyway." He shrugged. "What's up? I thought you weren't available till tomorrow?"

"Plans change. Is that a problem?"

Tony sighed. "Nope, no problem. Though I'm glad you're here, saves me a phone call. Something's come up that we really need to have a discussion about."

Jessica snorted. "I did my homework Stark or I wouldn't be here. This is about that Russian girl right? The one who gave you those nightmares?"

"Yeah." Tony nodded, letting out his tension with a small sigh. "Does that mean you know about the Vision too?"

"You mean the android?"

"I wouldn't call him that exactly, but yes."

"So long as he stays away from me, I'm good."

"That might not be possible. He returned to New York last night. He'll be overseeing the redesign of the new Avengers' compound in upstate New York. With that said, he'll likely need me to approve plans and whatever else that might come up."

"I can't promise I can be in the same room with him. And I'll expect you to give me fair warning if he's going to be around when I'm here."

"You don't have to be anywhere near him while I'm in the tower Jones. I don't need protection here."

"I'm guessing Loki and Ultron didn't get that particular memo."

"Fine." Tony huffed. "I don't usually need protection here."

"Which is why I'm here Stark. Nothing about you is usual these days."

"True, but there's something else you should know. I've been in touch with a Sorcerer or two. They live here in Manhattan, one of which may or may not be joining the rest of the Avengers in the new compound when it's completed."

"Well that's just perfect." Jessica huffed. "You still have that whiskey lying around?"

Tony nodded. "I have an entire case just for you under the bar. Help yourself."

Jessica retrieved a bottle and returned to the kitchen island while Tony refilled his coffee. "I didn't expect either Vision or this Sorcerer to be around while you were here." Tony said, closing his eyes
in bliss with his first sip of his second coffee of the day. "However, it's possible the Sorcerer might be able to help with some kind of protective spell or something against magical attacks. Maybe a charm or whatever to protect people from mind control. He wants to come by here later today to... go over some things. I can ask him when he's here, if you're interested.”

"Fine." Jessica nodded. "But I want everything you have on this guy and his secret club before I go anywhere near him, and that goes for the android too. Anything you have that I can't find out on my own."

"You'll have it. Just ask FRIDAY and she'll pass on all relevant files along with my current itinerary for the week."

"Fine." Jessica said, getting to her feet, the bottle still in her hand. "Can you show me my room now?"

"FRIDAY can direct you. If you have any questions, just ask her. Anything she doesn't know or can't answer, ask me and I'll see what I can do."

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After Jessica had returned to her room, Tony dug out his phone and sent a quick text to Vision.

"Hey Viz, Gonna need you to stay away from the Tower for a while. I have a new bodyguard starting today and she's even less comfortable around magic users than I am. Might have a solution for that, but I'll text you when things are more settled. Thanks for coming back. I kinda missed your purple face. Tony"

His phone beeped a reply message almost instantly.

"Tony, I have no desire to make anyone uncomfortable. I will do as you ask and keep you informed as to the progress with the compound. I missed you as well. Vision"
With Vision settled out at the compound and Jessica ensconced in her assigned room with a steady supply of whisky, Tony headed to his penthouse to change. After a moment's internal debate he decided to go with something more casual than the suit he'd had on when he last spoke to Strange. Though wearing his Armani and his other designer outfits made him feel powerful by using his clothes to keep others at a distance, that play was not appropriate now.

Despite the fact that Doctor Strange had made no effort to be polite or even listen to him, he still wanted the Sorcerer's to have some protections from Ross. He couldn't do that if he knew nothing about them and he needed Strange's help and input to amend the Accords. So he needed Stephen to cooperate, at least until he knew where they stood and he had some understanding of how the Accords would affect magic users. Dressing in a loose casual top, black blazer and designer jeans, he hoped the look would put the Sorcerer more at ease this time around.

Satisfied that he looked a little less intimidating and hopeful that his choice of clothing made him seem more approachable, he headed back down to the common room. After setting another pot of coffee to brew, he dug out Bruce's stash of herbal teas, filled the kettle and called Strange.

"Strange speaking." A rough voice answered.

"Strange? It's Tony. I have some free time now if you're able to come by."

"I... yes. I have time. Where do you want to meet?"

"Come to the Tower. I'll let security know you're coming and they can show you which elevator to take."

"Very well." Strange replied coolly, and though Tony detected a note of nervousness in his voice, the man didn't waver. "I will be there in ten minutes."

"Oh okay." Tony replied, frowning at the phone when the other end clicked off without a goodbye. Strange definitely needed more practice with manners, his phone etiquette sucked. With a shrug he set the kettle to boil, gathering spoons, sugar, honey and cream while he waited. It wasn't until FRIDAY announced that Strange was on his way up, that he wondered how the Doctor had gotten here so fast.

Strange stepped out of the elevator, once again dressed in that weird blue suit thing that Tony still couldn't describe properly. He was also wearing that ridiculous cape, which floated and twitched on Strange's shoulders as he crossed the room to where Tony stood waiting.

Stephen's lip quirked as he stuck his hand out in a gesture of greeting. Tony frowned, but shook it wondering what exactly the good Doctor was up to.

"Mr. Stark." He said, his eyes flicking nervously over Tony's face. "I imagine you're wondering what brings me here, given the way we... last interacted."

Tony smirked, dropping his hand as he moved to the kitchen island to take the kettle off the stove. "It may have crossed my mind." He said coolly, "Can I interest you in some tea? Coffee perhaps?"
Strange frowned, following him to the island making it clear that he hadn't expected Tony to be so... accommodating. "Ah... tea would be nice if you have something non-caffeinated."

Tony frowned, rifling through Bruce's stash while Stephen chose a chair to settle in. "I have peppermint and chamomile and a combination of cinnamon, ginger spice?"

"Peppermint is fine thank you."

Tony nodded and slipped the box of tea back in the cupboard and poured water into one of the fancy tea cups he'd found buried in a cupboard before Strange had arrived and added the tea bag. He slid it across the counter to him as he filled his mug of coffee before joining the other man at the island.

Stephen had no idea what to make of Stark's domesticity. He'd never once imagined the billionaire would do anything for himself, much less know his way around a kitchen. On top of that shocking revelation, he'd been expecting him to be abrasive, or at the very least, difficult on seeing him again and had spent the elevator ride rehearsing what he wanted to say.

All of that fell away the moment he stepped into the room to see Tony dressed in something other than the designer suits he always wore in public. The sight threw him immediately off guard as he noted how stunning the other man looked in his semi-casual attire. Which then only added to his nervousness and annoyance when he realised what he'd just thought. Narrowing his eyes at the tea bag, he lifted it out of the cup and wondered how long he could delay trying to recover some semblance of balance before Stark noticed how unsettled he was.

"I wasn't sure what to think when you called this morning." Tony said, making Strange tense imperceptibly. "I didn't expect to hear from you at all after..." Tony paused, staring into his mug. "Well, after the last time we spoke."

"Perfectly understandable." Stephen nodded, his voice as even as he could make it. "I was unforgivably rude. I came because I wanted to apologize to you in person."

Tony's eyes widened, his coffee forgotten as he blinked in confusion at him. "It's official. I'm definitely living in the Twilight Zone this week."

"I... excuse me?" Stephen blinked, the comment completely knocking him off balance once more.

Tony waved his hand dismissively and returned his attention to his coffee. "Never mind, it's not important. So uh, apology accepted. I apologize as well. I'm sure there are better ways I could have handled things."

"Possibly." Stephen huffed. "Perhaps we both need more practice dealing with the unknown."

Tony laughed and set his mug down. "The unknown, I like that. So, was that the only reason you wanted to talk to me or was there something else?"

"I may have been a bit hasty when I told you we didn't need your help."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Wong and I had a talk. It seems he feels our time for secrecy is at an end. I am not entirely convinced of that but he has been with the order longer than I have. As such, we would like to be
involved with this Accords business. If the offer still stands."

"You... want to help me?" Tony managed to get out, unable to disguise the shock and disbelief in his voice.

"Is that really so surprising?" Strange snapped back, ignoring or perhaps missing entirely how stunned the other man was. "You did pretty much explain how we'd be better off joining your side before this Accords thing goes public, and after reviewing everything you gave me, I have to agree with you."
Tony sagged in his chair when Strange finished talking. The other man could not have shocked him more than if he'd suddenly professed he worshipped the ground Tony walked on. As it was, Strange was now giving him the most puzzled look, so some of what he was feeling must've shown on his face.

He blinked once, twice, then gathered himself back to what he was accustomed to projecting to those around him and gave Strange the gold carat smile he was famous for. In response, Strange blinked and relaxed, apparently finding comfort in what he saw. It made Tony frown, feeling an undeniable sense of disappointment that the other man seemed to draw more comfort from his public face than he did his private.

It hurt, unexpectedly so and he stored the thought away for later. But it wasn't something he hadn't felt or experienced before so with practiced ease, he lifted his mug in a show of solidarity and widened his smile. "To allies." He said, letting his false cheer drop the moment his coffee mug hid his lower lip.

Clearly startled, Strange copied him and did the same. "Uh, yes of course. To allies."

"So what changes or suggestions do you have regarding the amendments to the Accords so far?" Tony asked, tapping his phone to bring up a holographic display for them both to look at.

Stephen tamped down on the sudden and unexpected admiration he felt as Tony expertly navigated the 80 page document. "I believe there was something on pages 17, 35, 42, 54 and 76 that needed revision."

"Okay Doc, impressive eidetic memory by the way," Tony said, navigating to the first page he'd mentioned before blowing up so they could easily read it. "So, hit me with your insight. What do we need to change here?"

For the next two hours, they went through it, page by page. Tony made the changes while Stephen explained the reasoning behind them, with Tony asking questions throughout.

At first Stephen thought the other man was being difficult with his endless questioning, but as they continued on to the next point, he realized Tony cared. Not only that, but he wanted to understand it from Stephen's view which made sense once he thought about it. The billionaire was likely going to be asked hard questions on each point. In order to get those changes made, he would need to fully understand why they were necessary if he wanted them kept in.

By the end of the hour they'd managed to cover every point and Tony set the kettle to boil again while he made himself a fresh coffee. "Well that went well." Tony said, smiling as he placed a fresh cup of hot water in front of him, sliding the box of tea within Stephen's reach before refilling his mug from earlier.

"Yes. It did." Stephen agreed, selecting a tea bag while he tried not to react to Tony's slip in unguarded behaviour towards him. He doubted Stark was even aware that he'd let his professional persona slip as he bustled about his kitchen before settling back in his chair. He was surprised by the change and if he were being honest, pleased that Stark seemed to trust him enough to drop his guard. He was also a little charmed by what he saw, maybe even a little attracted but he banished that thought the moment he recognized it for what it was.
"I hope you don't hold any ill will towards me for some of the things I said to you earlier." He heard himself say, instantly horrified to have just exposed himself so plainly. Perhaps he hadn't banished his admiration soon enough, he thought with a grimace.

"Only some?" Stark teased, his lips quirking in a small smile, making sudden warmth bloom in Stephen's chest at the sight. "Not to worry Gandalf. I've heard much worse from people more irritating than you. I'm made of tougher stuff than that."

"Well good. Glad to hear it." Stephen replied, though he doubted everything Stark had just proclaimed if the tightening of his eyes and jaw hadn't just given it away for the lie it was.

"Yeah, um don't... shit. Sorry about the Gandalf thing." Tony said, his eyes darting away from his face. "Sometimes my mouth doesn't know when to stop."

"It's fine Stark. We both know how this game is played, there's no shame in being practiced in deflection and keeping people at a distance."

Tony frowned at him and opened his mouth to say something only to change his mind and take another sip of coffee. "Right. So um... I'm not sure how to ask this so I'll just come out and say it. Is there a spell or a charm or something to protect people who aren't magicians from having other people do magic on them?"

"First of all, as I've told you several times, I'm not a magician. I am the **Sorcerer Supreme**. Second, what kind of magic are you referring to? If you're talking about Loki there's not much I can do. Most of that demi-god's powers are force based and heavy on illusion. My best advice would be to stay out of his way. Dodge his attacks or just not engage and get someone with magic to fight him."

"Right." Tony huffed. "That would have been much more helpful four years ago, but whatever. But no, that's not what I'm talking about, and I can handle Loki just fine thanks."

"Can you really?" Stephen needled, annoyed by the other man's insinuation that he should have aided in the fight against the Chitauri. Completely ignoring the fact that he'd still been a doctor at the time, and a **damned succesful one at that.**

"Yes. I can." Tony scowled. "But I'm talking about mind control. Mind manipulation? Mind fuckery? Is that a thing? You got any magic do-hickies that can... I dunno? Stop that from happening or maybe just give a warning someone's trying something?"

Stephen's tea cup clattered in the saucer as he levelled a cold, angry gaze at the other man. "What? Are you saying someone has used magic on your mind? Manipulated or otherwise subverted your free will? Invaded your thoughts?"

Tony shrugged. "Yeah. Why? I'm guessing by your reaction that's not normal then?"

"You think it's normal to subjugate someone's will and abuse them from within the privacy of their own thoughts?"

Tony shrugged again. "Not normal or nice, but whatever, and I'm not a fan if that's what you're asking. Do you have something to counteract it or not?"

"Who?" Stephen growled.

Tony blinked. "What?"

"Who used this magic on you?"
"Uh well, it wasn't just me. She did it to all of us except Clint, though she hurt Bruce and I more than the rest of them."

"That does not answer my question Stark." Stephen growled making Tony look at him in shock at the anger in his voice.

"Fine, chill put Doc...okay? It was Wanda, Wanda Maximoff. She... attacked me in Sokovia, the rest she went after later in Johannesburg."

Strange swore under his breath and shot to his feet, his hands trying to clench in anger while his eyes tightened with pain at his slip. He paced, a string of curses falling from his lips before he suddenly marched to Tony's side and levelled him with a serious gaze. "What did she do to you Stark?"

"Uh..." Tony hesitated as he got to his feet and took a step back from the very angry Doctor. "She... gave me a vision."

Somehow Strange's ice blue eyes grew even colder though Tony was almost certain the look wasn't meant for him. Almost. "I saw the Chitauri and earth through a dark wormhole in space and... all the Avengers, dead."

Stephen narrowed his eyes. "When was this?"

"Almost two years ago? When we first went to Sokovia to retrieve Loki's staff. Why? Is that important?"

"You don't know." Stephen gasped, concern in his eyes.

"Know what?" Tony demanded, his anger rising. "What's going on Strange? Know what? Why are you so upset? I mean it was two years ago, I'm over it. I just wanted to know if there's a way to stop it from happening again."

"Where is this Wanda now?"

Tony shrugged. "No idea. Europe maybe? Look, tell me what it is I don't know before I make you tell me."

"You shouldn't be able to recall the vision she gave you so easily. It's dangerous what she did. How is it you recall it so clearly? Have you seen something that would make you believe in this vision?"

"Look Doctor wizard, this isn't psychoanalyze Tony Stark hour, I've had my therapy. Been there, done that, not a fan. Now is there a spell to protect me or not?"

Strange paused in whatever he'd been about to say and took a step back, an unreadable expression in his eyes. "There's... something. Yes."

"You don't sound very sure of that Doc. And... is there a but in there somewhere? Sounds like there's a but in there."

"I need to speak with Wong. I have to be sure." Strange replied sharply and without waiting for a reply, made a circular movement with his hand and golden sparks formed a portal five feet from where Tony stood.
A/N: Infinity War is now on Netflix in Canada/US for anyone who hasn't yet seen it. 😊
Super Soldiers, Friend and Foe?

Tony gave a startled shout and scrambled away from the magic portal at the same time Strange stepped through it, vanishing the portal behind him. "Shit!" Tony swore, his hands ice cold as he leaned his weight against the counter, one hand covering his heart to slow it and his breathing.

"Boss? Your heart rate is accelerating, should I call someone?"

"No. I'm good FRIDAY. Just... give me a minute." Tony answered, closing his eyes at the thrumming pulse in his chest.

After another minute he took a steadying breath, exhaling slowly through his mouth as he got his heart rate under control. When he felt steady enough, he pushed away from the counter and gathered up the dishes on the counter, needing something mundane to focus on to help quiet the panic that was still fluttering a little too close to the surface to be comfortable.

"Tony." Tony looked up to see Steve Rogers crossing the room to him. He cursed under his breath, allowing a groan to escape him as he set the dishes in the sink, turning to face the blonde with his arms crossed over his chest.

"Rogers." He nodded.

"What's wrong with you?"

Tony laughed, the tension of the morning overwhelming him and leaving him no choice but to let it out. "You'll have to be a little more specific there Cap." He said, moving to the fridge to gather ingredients for a smoothie. "And FRIDAY? You're getting a stern talking to later."

"Understood boss."

"Why are you upset with FRIDAY?"

Tony narrowed his eyes at Rogers. "Not important. Why are you here Rogers?"

"I can't visit?"

"No, you can't. You don't call, you don't write. You don't send me updates on this missing Winter Soldier case that you, Wilson and Romanoff are on. Flitting all over Europe on my dime. So no, you don't just... visit. You're here because you want something."

Steve narrowed his eyes at him, crossing his arms over his chest as he looked down his nose at Stark. "So what? You're throwing a tantrum because I didn't keep you in the loop?"

"No. I'm cutting you off because what you're doing with your pals isn't Avenger business. You want to keep doing what you're doing, call Fury. I'm sure the agents at the New Avenger facility can track your target down for you."

"What we're doing is important work Stark."

"Funny how you only use my last name when you're trying to pressure me into doing what you
want Rogers. Not going to happen. Wrap it up or talk to Fury."

"Fury is still SHIELD. I don't trust them after what happened with Hydra."

Tony laughed again as he turned the blender on. "You mean after you exposed hundreds of innocent agents and their families to the world? Funny you should say that. Fury isn't your biggest fan right now Rogers. Ever since that little stunt you pulled on Project Insight, he's not too big on trusting you either. I gotta wonder, do you plan to burn your bridges on purpose or is it purely by accident?"

"I had no choice. We had to expose Hydra."

"Right. So all those people who weren't Hydra were just what? Casualties of war? Acceptable losses? Collateral damage?"

"It was unavoidable Tony. If there'd been any other way..."

Tony stopped pouring his smoothie and slammed the container onto the counter. "Excuse me? No other way? You could've called me Rogers. I could've had JARVIS take control of those Helicarriers. I could have helped save lives and you're telling me you had no choice? Christ Rogers, I knew you were self-righteous, but blissfully ignorant and selectively stubborn? How much is your ego worth to you?"

"It wasn't like that." Steve protested, sighing as though Tony was incapable of understanding that what he and Natasha had done had been unavoidable. "There wasn't time for anything else."

"A phone call. You didn't have time for a phone call." Tony drawled, moving away from him. "Fine Cap. However you need to justify it."

"It's not..." Steve shook his head as though Tony were incapable of listening. "Do you know anything about these Accords or Secretary Ross?"

"What? The report Natasha gave you not good enough?"

"You have to know something about it Tony. More than what you told Nat."

"Such as?"

"Stop being difficult Stark." Rogers growled.

"Stark." A female voice called from the elevator.

"Ah." Tony sighed. "My heroine has arrived."

"Who are you?" Rogers demanded as Jessica moved Tony's side.

"Who are you?" Jessica shot back at him.

"Tony?"

Tony groaned, rubbing his temples and wishing Strange would come back and portal Rogers out of his tower. "Jessica Jones, Steve Rogers. There, you're introduced. Are we done?"
"What's she doing here Stark? Is this who you're seeing now? What about Pepper?"

"Oh. You should not have said that." Tony murmured as Jones moved to invade Steve's personal space.

"Excuse me. Did you just talk about me like I'm not here?"

"What?!" Steve stammered. "No! No, I didn't mean..."

"I'd heard Captain America was a bit of a dick. Gotta say I'm not impressed."

"Who do you think you are ma'am?"

Jessica smirked and crossed her arms over her chest. "None of your business, and don't call me ma'am. Now, I believe Mr. Stark wants you to leave. So leave. Door's over there." She added, nodding her head toward the hall.

"We haven't finished our talk yet."

"Oh you're done. Now leave before I make you leave."

Steve couldn't stop the grin that formed on his lips. "Or what? You'll make me?" He scoffed.

Jones' smirked and poked her finger into Steve's chest making him stumble back a step. The look of surprise on his face was priceless and Tony suppressed a laugh on seeing it.

"You're... you're an enhanced?"

"Wow. You're quick. Figured that out all by yourself? Stark wants you to leave, so leave. I won't tell you again."

"Fine. I'm going." Steve retorted, moving to the elevator. "This conversation isn't over Tony."

"Looks over to me." Jessica shot back as the doors slid closed.
"I thought you were busy drinking." Tony said as Jessica turned away from the elevator and crossed to the case of whisky by the bar.

She shrugged, twisting the lid off a new bottle and drinking it as she moved to stand just shy of his personal space. "I got bored. And my bottle was empty."

"I can't decide if your timing is perfect or terrible."

"Can't wait to hear the outcome of that earth shattering observation. So what's with Captain get-a-clue? I thought you had a meeting with that wizard guy or whatever."

"He left. Abruptly. But our meeting was over so... yeah. No idea what's happening there."

"Right." Jessica nodded as though she knew there was more to it and either didn't care or was too drunk to push for more. "Whatever. So how do I get food? Is there like a cafeteria or something around here?"

"Food?" Tony blinked. He was going to get whiplash from the sudden changes in topics his visitors kept taking. "Just... order something from FRIDAY. She'll take care of it. The kitchen in your room would've been stocked when you got here, but..."

"But I came a day early." Jessica interrupted, giving him a strange look. "Thanks Stark. I'll get out of your hair now."

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It was full dark when Wong returned to the Sanctum. He had expected Stephen to seek him out in Kamar-Taj or at least send him a message that he'd returned to the Sanctum after his meeting, but there'd been nothing.

Considering Stephen's reluctance to even meet with the billionaire after Stark had stormed off, Wong had been certain Strange would want to rant at him for how insufferable the genius was. But that hadn't happened either.

As he stepped into the foyer he was struck by the lack of light in the hall. No matter where he might be, Stephen always left lights lit in the hallway and up the staircase. As the New York Sanctum Sanctorum, they had to be prepared for unexpected visitors to drop in seeking their aid at any time of day or night. The fact that there were no lamps lit in the entry was cause for alarm.

Scowling to himself, he hoped that for Strange's sake he was severely injured and not simply shirking his duties as Sorcerer Supreme or there'd be hell to pay. Shaking off his annoyance, he marched up the stairs certain he'd find Strange asleep in his bed, still fully dressed.

He paused outside the closed door before shoving it open on well-oiled hinges, prepared to berate the man but stopped on seeing the bed empty. He frowned and looked down the hallway. Was he not back yet? That made no sense. It was full dark. Strange didn't even like Stark, there was no way he'd still be at the Avenger Tower at this time of night. He had to be here somewhere.
Determined to get to the bottom of Strange's negligent behaviour, he headed down the hall, poking his head into dark rooms as he went. With each room he passed, he began to worry that something bad had happened. Then he heard a noise which seemed to be coming from the west library, the largest section of all the entire book collections they housed in the Sanctum.

He stepped into the room with the flickering lights of at least a dozen lamps and almost fainted at what he saw. Strange had opened and discarded over two dozen tomes of magic and was sitting on the floor in a sea of parchment and discarded references.

"Strange?" He said, his annoyance rising when Stephen didn't acknowledge his arrival.

Stephen's eyes shot up with a look of fear in them which rapidly changed to one of shame when he registered who was calling his name.

"Wong?" He blinked as he took in the space around him, a faint spot of crimson rising in his cheeks at the disarray he sat in.

"What the devil are you doing?" Wong demanded. "Do you have any idea what time it is? You haven't lit the entry lamps. And I demand an explanation for the state of his room. You aren't some bumbling apprentice, there's no excuse for the chaos in here."

Stephen blinked and got shakily to his feet. His legs felt wobbly and he wondered just how long he'd been sitting on the floor. His eyes flitted to a nearby window and shock coursed through him on seeing street lamps flickering against a dark sky.

"I didn't realize the time." He mumbled, his mind still working on the problem he'd been trying to find a solution to.

"And that's your excuse for neglecting your duties as Sorcerer Supreme?" Wong pressed. "What happened with Stark? Did you apologize?"

"What?" Stephen replied, his voice sharp with confusion. "Yes, of course I apologized. I'm not a heathen Wong. We worked through the Accords document and he made tea."

"He?" Wong repeated, his face filling with confusion. "Who is he?"

"Stark of course." Stephen snapped irritably. "Isn't that who you were just asking about?"

"But you just said he made tea. Tony Stark made you tea?"

"Did you get hit on the head recently? Yes. Tony Stark made me tea. Can we move on?"

Wong scowled back at Strange, further irritated the man was mocking his confusion. "Fine. You had tea with a genius billionaire which he made with his own hands. Of course, nothing weird at all about that. Now explain this mess and why you didn't light the foyer."

Stephen blinked as his irritation dissolved to be immediately replaced with a new tension that pinched the corners of his eyes. "Stark has a... magical problem. I was looking for methods I could use that weren't... overly invasive."

Wong narrowed his eyes, his arms crossing over his chest. "What are you talking about now?"
"He asked me for a charm against magical attacks. Specifically mind control."

"What?!" Wong exclaimed, dropping his arms to his sides. "Someone used mind control on him? Who? When? Mordo? Someone else who left the order?"

"It's nothing recent Wong. He said it happened during the start of that Ultron thing two years ago. As for who, it wasn't Mordo. It was some woman he met in Sokovia."

"That's impossible." Wong scoffed, his shoulders dropping. "He must be mistaken. There are no magic users past or present from that part of the world."

"That's what I thought until I asked him what she did. He had perfect, vivid recall of the vision she planted in his mind. He said her name was Wanda Maximoff and he thought she might be somewhere in Europe now."

"But that's impossible." Wong protested just as a terrible thought occurred to him. "She's not a natural witch."

"That's what I concluded as well and if Stark's recall is that clear, she had no control when she attacked him. Which means she acquired her abilities some other way."

"You think she left pieces of her magic behind."

"Yes."

"Well that's easy enough to fix." Wong shrugged, dismissive. "Just take him to the mirror dimension and separate it from his astral body. Though the protection spell will be more difficult to craft if we don't know the source of her powers."

"It's not that simple Wong. Stark seems to have extreme negative reactions to magic of any kind. I don't think I can just take him into the mirror dimension. Which is why I've been looking for an alternative."

Wong shook his head. "You can stop looking. For a spell that old to still hold that much power, there is no alternative. If we'd been able to treat him immediately, there would have been options. But not now. Not after so much time has passed."

"Well that's just perfect." Stephen growled, snapping the book he held shut in frustration. "How am I supposed to convince someone who doesn't like me, who also hates magic that they need to go to a dimension he refuses to acknowledge even exists? And even if I do convince him, how am I supposed to get him to relax enough to let me in? The man is more private than I am. If he doesn't feel safe he'll fight me every step of the way and he could be injured in the process."

"You're telling me things I already know Stephen." Wong retorted. "You're the Sorcerer Supreme, it's your job to fix things like this. He came to you for help so he must have some faith in your abilities. Figure it out. And clean up this mess." Wong muttered, turning his back to match down the hallway leaving Stephen scowling at him from where he stood rooted to the floor.

Of course he would be stuck with this. How had he ever entertained the idea that Wong would step in and take charge of the situation? He wasn't Sorcerer Supreme. Yet he'd hoped that once he'd explained the problem, Wong would volunteer to help Stark, rather than stand on ceremony. He should have known better, he scoffed to himself as he began putting the books in their rightful
Once he'd finished, Stephen was struck with just how impossible the current situation really was. He could see no way to convince Stark that Wanda's magic still affected him, never mind get him to a level of trust that would make Tony feel safe enough to go into the mirror dimension.

Damn. Why did Stark have to come here and complicate his life like this? And why was he so bothered by what had been done to the man? Well that part was easy, he huffed. It angered him that anyone could be so cruel as to leave remnants of hostile magic in anyone. No one deserved that kind of invasion.

He sighed as he doused the lamps and left the room, heading to his quarters. He would have to think on this more. Figure out a way to get Stark more comfortable around magic. In the meantime, he could work on the protective charm he'd had asked for. Perhaps use it as an olive branch to show Stark he could be trusted.

He had just slipped under the covers of his bed when he mentally slapped himself. Creating protective charms was all well and good, but without knowing the exact nature of the magic he was dealing with, it wouldn't be as effective, though he supposed a general charm might still work as a peace offering. Unfortunately, given how he'd fled the billionaire's tower without a word of explanation, he doubted Stark would want to talk to him again anytime in the near future. It was that thought which kept him tossing and turning for another hour before finally drifting off into a restless sleep.
"Stark."

"Fury." Tony acknowledged as FRIDAY put the video call through to his workshop.

"Seems you've been busy lately." Fury commented, his single eye seeming to bore a hole into his soul.

"I'm always busy Boris." Tony quipped. He wasn't in the mood for Fury's heavy-handed, cryptic bullshit today. He had a million things to do and no time or patience for the man's word games. He could feel the walls closing in on him in regards to both the Accords and Ross. He didn't need another headache.

"That's cute. And I can see you're taking care of yourself in the same manner you always have." Fury retorted. "You do realize you're only one man right? It's not all on you to fix the universe Stark, despite the fact your ego believes otherwise."

"Well maybe if everyone I know stopped dumping all their problems at my feet, expecting me to fix them, my ego would get the message." Tony snapped back, his morning coffee having done nothing to ease the growing anxiety he'd been unsuccessful in suppressing.

"Really Stark?" Fury pressed, his brow rising. "From what I hear you've had several people come to you to help you out, not to ask for favours. How is that expecting you to fix their problems?"

"You, for one." Tony retorted. "I still don't see why you have to disappear. What are you afraid of? Then there's Rogers and the rest of them. They still don't get that accountability is something they need to take seriously and they're still not listening to me."

"Roger's and the rest of the Avengers will fall in line." Fury shrugged. "Or they won't. Either way, what they do isn't your problem. It's also why you've been head-hunting other supers. You know that Stark. As for me, you know why I have to leave. I cannot and will not allow Secretary Ross access to anything I have knowledge of and the only way to do that is to go off the grid."

"Leaving me holding the bag." Tony growled.

"It has to be you Stark. No one else has the resources to go up against Ross and others like him. No one else has the smarts and the means to out-manoeuvre a guy like Ross. Which makes you my only choice when it comes to handing over the reigns. If these accords hadn't come up, I still would've wanted you in charge Stark. Maybe not solely in charge given your tendency to not think things through, but I do know you will always do what is best for earth. Right now, it's the only play I've got."

"Well maybe I don't want to be in charge of something this important. Maybe I just want to stop the Avengers from being torn apart."

"Don't start letting your heart overrule that genius mind of yours Tony. I know what you want to protect, but a broken thing can't be patched with good intentions. Humans always want to keep what they have, always afraid that if they let it go there will be nothing left to replace it. You of all people know that's not true." Fury admonished.

"What the hell are you talking about?"
"You." Fury replied. "Isn't that your favourite subject? When you were in Afghanistan, you didn't give up. You never stopped looking for ways to escape an impossible situation. And you succeeded. Every time you encountered a problem, you faced it head on without flinching. You never stopped improving on the original Stark and I've no doubt you aren't finished pushing the limits of possibility. Fear may drive you forward, but it doesn't control you. You don't quit unless it involves people. I doubt you'd be surprised to know I share that aversion with you. People have a habit of letting you down, makes it hard to trust that this time or next time things will be different. But if there's one thing I do know, they can surprise you. You just have to know when to take the risk."

"The difference is that I'm not everyone else. I have a reputation, I have no privacy, which means everyone I meet has already made up their minds about me. They see their expectations, not the reality. So I don't have the luxury of being myself. Pretty much no one is aware there's a difference between public me and private me. So whatever advice you think you're imparting, you're wasting my time."

Fury nodded as though he'd known Tony would say as much before continuing. "I believe Doctor Banner already predicted an outcome like the one that's looming before you. Something along the lines of "we're a dangerous mix of volatile chemicals just waiting for the wrong match to be struck." It was always going to come down to this Tony. Those who step up and those who run. None of you ever really trusted one another. Fortunately, or unfortunately, however you choose to look at it, you're the one who took responsibility for what you all were doing. You surprised me Stark. It made me admire you, even respect you. I thought Rogers would be the one standing where you are now, but I underestimated how deeply stuck in the past he truly is."

"You told me I wasn't Avenger material years ago Fury, that I wasn't a team player. How did you go from that to trusting me enough to be in charge of it all?"

"You're not seriously still obsessing over that profile Romanoff did on you, are you?" Fury asked, incredulous. "For a genius you still have some pretty big blind spots Stark. You should have figured it out by now that it was all bullshit, a way to get you to cooperate on our terms. I always trusted you Stark, but what I needed was for you to trust me to lead you."

"Yeah. Bang up job on that one. And you seriously expect me to believe that you trusted me?"

"Romanoff wasn't the only one profiling you Stark. She was just the one I told you about."

"Christ." Tony swore. "You're a sonofabitch."

"Takes one to know one." Fury ahtoh back with a sigh. "At any rate, everything will be in place for you the moment the accords are signed. The support staff and security is ready to go on your say so, but as we discussed you'll need to transition slowly. Some of the people here can't be trusted and can't be forced out just yet. I have documents I'll forward to you when I'm secure and the accords have been signed. After they've been ratified with the changes you've put forward, I'll send you a list of people I've identified who should be amenable to joining the New Avengers. You've got this Stark and don't refuse help when it's offered. You don't need to do this alone."

"Right. Thanks pops." Tony huffed sarcastically. "Now, enough with the pep talk. I might start thinking I like you."

Fury smirked back at him. "Whatever happens, just know that it wasn't my choice Tony. Promises were made and I trusted the wrong people. I'll be in touch, Fury out."

"Now wait just a damn minute!" Tony shouted as the screen went dark. "FRIDAY call him back!"
"I'm sorry boss but that connection has been severed. That line no longer exists."

"Sonofabitch!" Tony swore. "What the hell did he mean by that? What wasn't his choice? He just lulled me into complacency so he could drop that word bomb in my lap before I could react."

"He is skilled at that boss, but I detected no deception from him. He was very sincere in what he said, though there was regret in his parting words."

"I think that I truly have entered another dimension FRIDAY." Tony sighed, getting to his feet. "I've got people who I thought wanted nothing to do with me, offering me help, while those who I thought wanted me around, are nowhere to be seen."

"These are strange times boss." FRIDAY agreed.

"I'm heading up FRIDAY. Give Jones the heads up that I need to see her tomorrow morning."

"Will do."

~~~~~

Happy New Year!
"You're giving a speech at MIT to a bunch of nerds." Jones grumbled from the back seat of Happy's car.

She was currently fidgeting with the designer black outfit Tony had made her wear. That had been a headache and a half to get her into until he threatened to fire her and be done with it. The glare she gave him might've killed him if looks could kill, but she'd given in, cursing him the entire time.

"It's an annual event and one of the few responsibilities I actually enjoy going to. Try not to bring me down alright?"

"Just seems like a way to boost your own ego."

"I can do that anywhere Jones." Tony snapped, narrowing his eyes at her. "But these kids are the future. If no one helps them out once in a while, nothing new would ever make the public market and only rich assholes would reap the benefits."

"You're a rich asshole."

Tony scowled. "I may be rich Jones, but I'm also a damn good philanthropist. I have the means to change the future, why wouldn't I want new ideas flooding the industry? Easiest way to do that is to fund research and foster young minds. Where better to fund that then at a prestigious science college?"

"Fine." Jones huffed. "Maybe you're not that much of an asshole."

"Tell me the truth Jones. Why are you really here? You have no concept of looking the part as my bodyguard and you don't actually enjoy my company. So what gives?"

Jones glared out the window. "I just... needed a place to crash for a while. Somewhere to… get away from a few things in Hell's Kitchen. Matt thought I could use the break. But I need to work, I need to feel useful alright?"

"You don't have to be my bodyguard to do that Jones. If you need a place to crash, you can stay but I'm not going to force you to work for me."

"I'm not taking your charity Stark. And I get that this Accords thing is important. And for the record, I don't dislike you, I just don't like being sober for long. Don't take it personal."

"Can I assume the drinking is somehow related to your powers?"

"I'm not here for a psych eval Stark."

"You are if it's going to cause me problems publicly. I have enough on my plate as it is. I certainly don't need you adding to it."

"It won't be a problem." Jones retorted. "And if you must know, I have anger management issues. It's a side effect from… ugh, having powers. Drinking helps me control the anger… most of the time."

"Let me guess… some ambitious doctor tried to play God and create a super soldier."
Jessica narrowed her eyes at him, her mouth tight. “I don't know Stark. But if I had to guess, I'd have to say no. I think my powers are a side effect of whatever they were trying to do. And I don't want to talk about it.”

“Consider the subject dropped then.” Tony nodded. "Do you have a passport?"

"Yes. Why?"

"If these UN talks go through, I'm likely going to have to make a public appearance somewhere in Europe. Probably Berlin if they don't move it to Geneva."

"Fine. But I don't want introductions unless absolutely necessary. I'm a silent bodyguard. Got it? I may support what you're doing, but that doesn't mean I want my name going public."

“That won't be a problem Jones.”

***

"Go break some eggs!" Tony shouted to the fully packed room of the crowded MiT theatre.

He'd gone speechless a moment before his confident declaration, leaving the stage blindly. He blinked away the sudden pain he felt over the teleprompter mentioning Pepper's name, clearly no one had told the organisers that Pepper had cancelled her appearance tonight. It still hurt that she'd left despite knowing it was the best for both of them. He left the stage in a state of emotional overwhelm, barely registering the dean's begging as he walked at his side. Brushing off the organizer's apology for the mistake, he stepped into the hallway with Jessica following a few steps behind him.

He paused when he spotted a well-dressed, ebony haired woman standing alone in front of the elevator. Tension coursed through him, just wanting to leave the building and definitely not in the mood to make small talk with strangers. Jones moved up to his side, glaring at the woman as she started to speak to him as it became apparent that the woman had been waiting for him.

A thread of fear coursed through him when the woman put her hand in her purse, only breathing a sigh of relief when Jones stopped her. Thankfully it was only a photograph of her son, which she pressed to Tony's chest as she talked about her loss. Guilt and shame coursed through him as the woman told her story, and panic made his hands tremble and his heart beat faster until Jessica huffed in annoyance at her.

"You've got some nerve lady." Jones growled, making the woman flinch away from her. "Yeah, it's a sad story. It's tragic. But what gives you the right to blame Mr. Stark for your loss? The Avengers are a team. Stark might be the most visible, but he's not responsible for everything the Avengers do. On top of that, those same people saved the world from an alien invasion. Where's your gratitude for that?"

"Who do you think you are?" The woman snapped.

"Someone who knows bullshit when I see it and you're full up. Amd it doesn't matter who I am. But I get it. You're grieving. Grief does terrible things to a person. I know. I lost my entire family in a car accident and the guilt of surviving drove me to drink and isolate myself and then an even worse thing happened. Do you think your son would approve of what you're doing now? Because I
know my parents would hate what I've done to myself because of the guilt."

By this time, the woman had tears in her eyes and one hand was covering her mouth. Tony had slumped against the wall, his eyes wide as he stared at Jones in surprise.

"You're right... and I hate you for calling me out on it, but you're right. My son would be appalled by what I'm doing. I'm... sorry, Mr. Stark... you don't deserve the blame for what happened to my son." She stammered before turning and marching down the hall.

Tony blinked at Jones, still having trouble processing what had just happened.

"What?" She snapped, catching his look.

"What was that?" Tony asked, his mind slowly settling.

"She was out of line. You know that right?"

"She had a point Jones. We may have saved the day, but a lot of people didn't live to see it happen."

"And if you hadn't gone to Sokovia, everyone on the planet would be dead or suffering. Not just the people who live there. Are you saying that's the better option? Stop being a hero and then you don't have to feel guilty about the ones you couldn't save? Is that what you want?" Jessica challenged.

"What I want is for bad guys to not be bad guys." Tony muttered.

"I know you're not that naive Stark. There will always be assholes out there. There will always be people you can't save. If you have the ability to reduce losses, you have to step up, but you can't hold on to the ones you didn't save. Allowing the guilt to take over will destroy you. Trust me. I know all about it."

Tony sighed, stepping into the elevator with Jessica following behind. "I don't know how to stop feeling guilty Jones. I already tried the drinking thing. It didn't work out."

"Do you always do your best in every situation to minimize casualties?"

"Always."

"Then stop setting the goal so high that you can't possibly reach it."

Tony groaned, closing his eyes as he leaned back against the wall. "That's harder than you might think. What I saw in that wormhole in New York has never left me. Never."

"Then you need someone to remind you why you do what you do." Jones said softly. "Someone who tells you every chance they get that you're enough. That you do enough Stark."

"I don't know anyone like that Jones." Tony sighed as they left the building and ducked inside Happy's car.

"Then you'll have to keep looking until you do Stark."
Tony nodded. "I'm not sure I'll ever find anyone like that."

"There's got to be someone Stark." Jessica replied. "Trish keeps telling me, and she puts up with me so maybe she knows what she's talking about."

"Then I'll keep an eye out Jones."

"Good."
Three days later, Tony got the call he'd been dreading for months.

"Boss."

"Yeah FRIDAY?"

"I've monitored some... bad news. Pulling the news reports now."

"Where FRIDAY?"

"Lagos, Nigeria."

Tony cursed as he watched a blonde female reporter describe the damage done to a building when a bomb went off inside it. The feed then cut to King T'Chaka and he held his breath. Dammit. He did not need this right now. He didn't....

"Boss. General Ross is on the line for you."

"Kill me now." Tony groaned as FRIDAY put him through.

Half an hour later he was in bed staring at the ceiling wishing he wasn't Iron Man. Wishing he'd been born to some normal family and not the son of a futurist inventor. But he knew it was pointless wishing for things that couldn't be. So he closed his eyes and tried to imagine what it would be like if he had someone like Jones had described, someone to prop him up and be there for him when the doubt and the fear threatened to drown him. But he couldn't picture it, he had no references for what that might look like or what form it would take and he fell asleep feeling more alone than he ever had before.

***

Ross put up a stink when Tony met him at the airport with Jessica at his side. But since he couldn't do anything about it, he and Jessica ignored him. It was a tense silence they rode in all the way to the new Avengers' compound and Tony's anxiety rose the closer they got to their destination.

When they met the rest of the Avengers in the boardroom, he avoided both Nat and Steve's eyes as he took a seat at the back of the room, Jessica taking up a spot by the window. He was impressed by her calm since the night of the speech at MIT, watching as she stood silent and rigid, her arms behind her back as she took in the room.

"New girlfriend Stark?" Wilson jeered, eyeing Jones.

"Talk about me again. Like I'm not here asshole." Jones hissed as they waited for Ross to join them.

"Sam." Rogers shook his head. "Don't."

"Where'd you find her Stark?" Wilson continued, ignoring her.

"You should probably shut up now." Tony warned as Jessica crossed the room and lifted him out of his chair by his collar.

"Whoa! Whoa! Chill lady. I didn't mean anything by it."
"Then maybe you shouldn't let your mouth show the world just how stupid you are." She retorted, dropping him back in his seat. "Anyone else have something to say?" She asked, turning in a slow circle to meet everyone's eyes.

"No ma'am." Steve replied, meeting her cold stare.

"Good. Keep it that way." She said, stepping away from Sam and returning to her spot by the window.

A minute later, Secretary Ross joined them, saving Tony from having to suffer through the looks he knew the others wanted to throw at him. He watched impassively as Ross laid out what the Wakandan king had finally pressured the UN into announcing to the public.

He didn't have to watch the video Ross brought up. He knew everything about the Sokovia Accords. Had read, reviewed and amended the early drafts for months now. The fact that they'd finally decided to give it an official name meant that for him, everything that followed was out of his hands. As much as he worried about it, the die had finally been cast. All that remained was who would choose to side with him.

Ross finished his speech, leaving a copy of the Accords on the table and left the room. The others erupted into conversation once the door closed and Tony moved to Jones' side while they were distracted.

"I know you're here for me, but would you mind stepping out of the room? Make sure Ross has left?"

Jessica rolled her eyes. "If you don't want me in here just say so Stark. It won't hurt my feelings. But whatever, I'll be on the other side of the door. And I expect another case of the good stuff when we get back to the Tower." She added, pointing a finger at his chest.

Tony smiled. "The finest whisky I can find."

***

"Tony." Natasha said, bringing a halt to the rising arguments in the room. "You're being decidedly non-hypoverbal. What's up?"

"It's because he's already decided." Steve replied, making Tony's headache flare up.

"Actually it's a headache Cap. A magnetic headache. You don't know me as well as you think you do."

"Who's the girl Tony?" Wilson asked, voicing what he assumed was on everyone else's minds.

"My bodyguard."

"Since when do you need one of those Stark?" Rogers asked with a frown.

"I've always had one Rogers. Jones is just a temporary replacement."

"She's a lot less friendly than Hogan." Rhodey commented, giving Tony a curious look.

"True." Tony agreed but he didn't want to discuss Jessica right now. With a loud sigh, he told those gathered what he thought of the Accords and settled in to listen to the arguments that followed. To his shock, Natasha agreed with him, though he'd be surprised if her loyalties didn't change the
moment she saw a benefit in betraying him.

After Nat had announced she agreed with the Accords, the rest of them continued to debate, or rather argue the logistics and pitfalls of having oversight. For the most part, Tony tuned them out. He wasn't interested in their arguments either for or against since he'd never really had a choice, he had to support the Accords. He was too public, too recognizable and he couldn't afford to reject something on such a large global scale. It didn't matter if he agreed it was good or not, his hands were tied. After spending months consulting with lawyers, the X-Men, the Fantastic Four, Matt, Jessica and Strange, he was tired and fed up with all of it. All he wanted now was to go home, tinker in his workshop and wait for the dust to settle.

An hour into the Avenger's debate, Rogers received a text and left the room. With a knowing look, they all realized pretty fast that Steve's former girlfriend, Peggy Carter must have died. Not long after that, they went their separate ways and Tony let out a sigh of relief the moment he and Jones were on the road, back to Stark Tower.

"So. Your friend. Rhodey?" Jones said, watching him where she sat across from him in the compact limo. "He called Rogers dangerously arrogant. Do you believe that too?"

Tony shrugged. "Rogers' life has always centred around the military. His ideals, morals and philosophy have never been challenged. I don't know if that's by design or because when SHIELD woke him up they controlled his exposure to 20th century culture. Either way, it doesn't matter. Rogers has never easily followed anyone's lead - it's how he became the leader of the Howling Commandos. From what I know and have witnessed first hand, that isn't likely to change."

"Is that a yes Stark?"

Tony levelled her with a calm glance. "Yeah, I guess it is."

"I think Rogers is going to be a thorn in your side Stark. My advice? Don't let him. If he wants to defy the world, that's his choice. But don't let him manipulate you into thinking you're betraying him by doing the opposite. I've met guys like him before, he'll try to make this personal. It's not personal. Hell, it's not really business either, but when 117 countries agree on something, you need to pay attention. I don't think Rogers gets that and given what I've seen of your relationship with him, he's going to see your decision as a personal betrayal."

"I knew that months ago Jones, but I'm happy to hear you think so. I know there's nothing I can do to change Rogers' mind, but I still have to try. I know how futile it will be, but..."

"But you want to keep the peace, show him there's a way to move forward through compromise. Hell, I get it Stark. But some people will always choose their life view over everything else and in Rogers' case that idealism is all he's got left."

"I know that too Jones." Tony sighed.

"Just remember that whatever Rogers chooses to do, it's not on you to take the blame or the responsibility for it." Jones huffed, turning to look out the window. "Anyways, are we stopping to pick up my whisky now?"

Tony chuckled under his breath. "No need. I had FRIDAY make a call. It's waiting for you in your room at the tower."

Keeping her eyes on Tony, she turned her head to talk to Happy with a smile on her lips. "Hogan? Drive faster."
"How are you doing Tony?"

"I'm fine platypus." Tony said, smiling into the video call with Rhodes. "How are you?"

"Oh I'm just super Tones. Waiting on Ross to make his demands, my superiors to tell me what to do next, and Rogers to get his head out of his ass. Yeah I'm just peachy waiting for a bomb to go off on my vicinity that I want no part in."

"You agreed with the Accords Rhodey bear, so why the sourpuss?"

"I know I did. That's not it. It's Rogers and his obsession with Barnes. You know he spent two tears tracking the Winter Soldier with nothing to show for it. Now this incident in Lagos with cillians dead and countless injured... and Rogers and his lackeys doing nothing to even pretend cooperation. I get that losing Peggy Carter was hard on the guy, but he's ignoring the fact that governments, plural, are demanding safeguards. It's dangerous."

"Yeah, you said that before." Tony nodded. "You should know that Jones agreed with you."

"I'm not sure if that's good or bad Tony."

Tony shook his head. "Come on Rhodey, things aren't that bad. Cap will come around, eventually."

"I'm not so sure about that." Rhodey sighed. "Just watch your back alright?"

"It won't come to that. Besides, that's what I have you for platypus."

"Right," Rhodey replied, though his voice was still tense. "Gotta run Tones. Call me if anything changes."

"You got it sourpuss."

Ten minutes later, Tony was hunched over his workable, chin propped against his fists as he spoke into the phone. Matt had called half an hour ago, peppering him with a string of questions over what the news had been reporting over the past week.

"So the Accords were finally announced to the public." Matt sighed through the phone. "How'd your co-workers take the news?"

"Exactly as I suspected. Except for Natasha. She signed. So did Vision and Rhodes."

"Really?" Matt exclaimed. "How honest do you think she's being?"

"I think Nat will do what she wants and whatever suits her in the moment. Rogers is going to challenge us on this and if he gives her the chance to show loyalty to him, she'll do it"

"Even if it means betraying you?"

"Natasha doesn't think that way Matt. Agreeing with me doesn't mean betraying Rogers. For her,
switching to Rogers later isn't a betrayal either."

"Must be damn lonely to never need to be trusted."

Tony chuckled under his breath. "I'm sure it doesn't keep her awake at night."

"You have complicated friends Tony." Matt observed. "So what happens now with the Avengers tower?"

"I'm putting it up for sale. I'll be moving to the new compound in upstate New York once all the paperwork has been signed and processed. Once it's on the market, I doubt it will take long to find a buyer."

"Can I ask why you're selling?"

Tony shrugged even though he knew Matt couldn't see him, the lawyer wanting nothing to do with video calls. "It was time for a change. After the Chitauri incident it's become more of a target for trouble than the symbol of hope it was intended to be."

"I take it the new compound is better hidden then?"

"It is." Tony hesitated. "I don't know if you're interested, but there's a place for you there as well. Either as Matt Murdock or as your alter ego. I'd love to have you there even if it's just temporary. And I hope you know you always have a place to crash there if you ever need it."

"I appreciate that Stark, but is it alright with you if I give it some thought? I'm still working out how to handle both sides of my life and what it means to my friends. I haven't decided if staying on as Foggy's business partner is going to work out for me or not."

"Not a problem Red. The door's always open."

"Thanks Tony. It was good chatting with you, but I gotta run. Karen just walked in."

"Right. Talk to you later then."

Tony leaned back in his chair, stretching his arms above his head to work the kinks from from his neck. "FRIDAY? Do I have anything else on my agenda today?"

"No boss."

"Good. Let's eat. I'm thinking Thai. Order from the last one I used, it was good. Oh, and ask Jones if she wants to join me for dinner. I'm gonna take a shower."

***

Feeling better than he had in some time, Tony stepped out of the shower and dressed in something both comfortable and casual. He donned a loose fitting dark blue t-shirt over a pair of his favourite jeans, shrugging into his favourite black hoodie before he headed to the kitchen. Jones had declined to join him saying she'd already made plans with her sister, so he was once again dining alone.

While he ate, he stared out the window watching as the lights of New York began to dot the
landscape as the sun dipped below the horizon. It was like watching fireflies flare to life, magical in some ways as long as you didn't think about the light pollution or the drain on resources each light represented.

He frowned at the dark turn his thoughts had taken, idly wondering if magic could solve the world's energy crisis. That thought made him snort out loud. Even if such a thing existed or was possible, he doubted the Sorcerer Supreme would allow it, never mind that anything that could do that would most certainly also hold the potential for a major disaster. All he had to do was think about the tesseract and the idea that magic was the solution died instantly.

He was in the middle of clearing off the counter when FRIDAY interrupted. "Boss, you have a call from Doctor Strange. Shall I put him through?"

Tony scowled at the ceiling. Strange had been silent for over a week since he'd asked about protection from magic. After he'd conjured that damn portal and disappeared he hadn't heard boo from the man. He wasn't sure he was in the mood for Strange, but he was curious as to what the Doctor wanted.

"Put him through FRIDAY." He said, waiting as the line clicked open. "Stark speaking."

"Mr. Stark. I was wondering if we could meet. I would like to discuss what we talked about last time."

"Now?"

"Only if it's convenient. I imagine your time is limited given what's been in the news regarding the Accords."

"It's fine Strange, I have time." Tony replied, his irritation rising. "But no portals into my room. Use the elevator. FRIDAY will bring you to the right floor."

"Oh, of course. No portals. I'll be there momentarily."
Mystic Gift

Tony abandoned the mess on the counter, took a seat at the island and waited. He wasn't about to rush around tidying the kitchen just for Strange's benefit. The Doctor could have made an appointment or at least called to tell him what was going on instead of inviting himself over.

Ten minutes later, Strange was in his kitchen, the odd cloak he wore once again moving of its own accord on his shoulders. He wondered idly what powered the bizarre and outdated 'fashion don't', but right now he didn't much care.

"So?" He challenged, his arms crossing involuntarily over his chest. "What did you want to talk about?"

Strange ducked his head, avoiding Tony's eyes as he spoke, moving to the other side of the counter across from him. "First, I want to apologize for my behaviour last time I was here. How I left was unforgivably rude, as was creating a portal in your presence without your permission. I want you to know that it will never happen again."

"Okay." Tony replied, his tone careful. "Which one?"

Strange's eyes snapped up, confusion in their cool blue depths. "I... beg your pardon?"

"Which one won't happen again? Rudely disappearing or making portals without permission?"

"Both."

"Okay." Tony nodded. "Apology accepted, though I don't know if I'll ever give you permission to make portals in my rooms."

Tony expected Strange to argue with him about how paranoid he was being, so he was unprepared for the flush that suddenly crept up the other man's cheeks, or how he looked away as though embarrassed by whatever he'd been thinking. He frowned at that. He couldn't imagine what could have caused Strange's embarrassed flush and shrugged it off, assuming it was a private joke or something.

"Was that all you wanted to talk about?" Tony prompted when Strange remained silent.

"No." Strange sighed. "I did some research on the protection we discussed and the magic that was used against you. I brought you an amulet that should prevent anyone from affecting your mind through magic. It isn't as powerful as it could be since I don't know the nature of Ms. Maximoff's particular talent." He said, placing a small gold and amber jeweled amulet on the counter and slid it across to him.

Tony frowned at the simple piece of jewellery, wondering how something so small could possible protect him. With a shrug he slipped it over his head, letting it hang outside his shirt where it glittered faintly in the lights of the room.

Strange was silent during Tony's examination of the pendant. He'd been struck by how striking Tony looked and how attractive his casual attire made him seem like someone he might spend an
afternoon with, talking over coffee or tea. He was further surprised to see what could only be used take-out containers, causing a pang of sadness at the picture he conjured of the genius eating alone. He'd believed Stark must employ a full time household staff, but it didn't appear he had anyone other than a cleaning service, though it could just as easily be his bots doing the cleaning. Twice now, he'd caught Stark tidying up after himself and again wondered how often the billionaire was alone.

"How does it look?" Tony asked, a teasing lilt in his voice. "Does it bring out my eyes?"

Strange felt a sudden jolt of attraction shoot through him at the open look Stark was giving him and quickly averted his eyes, but he couldn't stop the nervous chuckle that escaped him at the other man's teasing. "You just can't help yourself can you?"

"Flaunt it if you've got it Doc."

"That's Doctor Strange and at the risk of boosting your ego further, it actually does bring out your eyes."

Surprise and something resembling pleasure bloomed on Tony's face which he quickly hid behind narrowed eyes and a furrowed brow. "That was way too easy Doc." Tony accused, pointing at him. "You're trying to butter me up for something bad. Come on, spit it out."

Strange sighed and dropped into a chair. He straightened his shoulders and took a calming breath before meeting Stark's eyes again. "It's about the spell that was cast on you two years ago. I'm certain there are remnants still in there, possibly affecting you in some way. None of them good. Unfortunately, if I'm right, there's only one way to check it and one way to remove it."

Tony frowned at him, his left hand absently running the pendant through his fingers. It was clearly a nervous habit and Strange doubted Stark was even aware he was doing it.

"I'm not going to like your solution am I?"

"Doubtful. I'm aware of your dislike for magic. Unfortunately the only way to be certain there's no... residue still affecting your mind is to take you into the mirror dimension. You must also be in a relaxed state for the procedure to be safe as well as effective."

"Mirror dimension? That doesn't sound like somewhere I want to go."

"It's really not as bad as you think. It's a place outside of normal reality where what happens there cannot affect the real world."

"There has to be some other way for you to... I dunno, scan my brain."

Strange shook his head. "There isn't. I looked. It's why I was out of contact with you for so long. I was looking for alternatives. The fact is, too much time has passed since the spell was cast so there's no other option."

Tony narrowed his eyes at him. "Fine. But according to you, this mirror dimension doesn't affect the real world. So how exactly will going there fix me? By your own logic, what happens there can't affect me here."

"It's not your physical body I need to interact with Stark. It's your astral body."
"That sounds... uncomfortably intimate. And what do you mean astral?"

"You aren't a sorcerer Stark, so I can't have you meditate and project your astral body out of your physical one. The mirror dimension is a safe place for interacting with someone's astral form."

Tony fell silent, staring at nothing while he continued rolling the pendant through nervous fingers. "You want some tea Doc?" He asked suddenly, getting up and crossing to his fancy instant coffee maker.

Stephen frowned, though Tony wasn't looking when he nodded. "Um... that would be lovely." He said, continuing to watch while Tony went though what was clearly practiced motions as he prepared his coffee.

He like an intruder watching a private ritual while Tony retrieved the coffee grounds, a mug, sugar and a small spoon. Once finished, he snatched up a simple kettle, filled it with water and set it on the stove. He then pulled out the same box of tea from the last time Stephen had been there, setting it and a mug in front of him, before turning his attention back to his coffee preparations.

"Help yourself." He said absently while he filled his mug with coffee and added a single spoon of sugar.

Stephen nodded and looked through Tony's box of teas. He frowned at some, raised his eyebrows at others and wondered where it all had come from. He chose another peppermint flavour, this one blended with chamomile and lotus flower. Tony returned to his seat, both hands cradling his mug as though he were holding something priceless in his hands. It was a very endearing and vulnerable image and again Stephen wondered how often Tony did this; enjoy a cup of coffee alone as though he somehow knew it would be his only source of private happiness for the day.

The kettle came to a boil and Tony moved to get up, stopping when Stephen put up a hand and took it off the burner himself. After filling his cup, he sat back down and enjoyed the aroma, letting it ease his tension.

"So Doc," Tony said, breaking the silence. "I was wondering why you don't like coffee. Did you swear off caffeine or something? Or was it a habit or a ritual thing when you became a doctor?"

Normally Stephen might have been offended by the questions, having developed an acute sensitivity, bordering on paranoia regarding his scarred hands. But Tony had worded his question carefully and his eyes were on Stephen's face, not his hands.

"Actually," Stephen replied, playing with the string on his tea bag. "I used to love coffee. When I became a neurosurgeon I had to avoid it when I was working since I couldn't afford to risk a caffeine drop when I was in surgery."

"That makes sense." Tony nodded, sipping his coffee.

Stephen smiled, though it was pained and removed his tea bag, setting it on the tea holder Tony had slipped beside him when he'd returned to his chair. "After the accident, I did try coffee again, but my hands... well they shake more when I have caffeine. It was a difficult time. But then I went to Kamar-Taj and became a sorcerer. I have coffee on occasion now, but I and my magic are better served with herbal tea."
Tony hummed under his breath and gave him a small smile. "That's a nice story Strange. Thank you for sharing that. I imagine it's... challenging talking about your accident."

Stephen chuckled under his breath as he lifted his tea to his lips. "Challenging is a good word Stark, but you asked. I have a question of my own though."

"Shoot Doc. Ask away."

"I realize I don't know you well, but I'm curious why you have so many tea's. You don't seem to drink anything but coffee. Was it a gift or did a friend leave it behind? You have some rare blends in here."

"Are you jealous Doc?" Tony teased, a twinkle of mischief in his eyes. "Funny enough, you're mostly right. I bought it for a friend. He thought it might help calm him and keep his alter ego in check. He left it behind when he disappeared after Sokovia." Tony shrugged, dropping his gaze back to his coffee, his mood having switched from light-hearted to somber as he talked.

Stephen didn't like the change in Tony at all, wondering with a faint scowl why those who were supposed to have the man's back never seemed to be there for him.

"Is this man's alter ego big and green?" Stephen promoted, hoping to tease a smile from the other man.

"Big, green and really doesn't like anyone talking about the puny human he shares a body with." Tony grinned.

Stephen relaxed and sipped more tea, wondering if he should try to draw the genius out more. "Do you know where Dr. Banner is now? You don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

Tony shrugged. "I have no idea where Bruce is. He was in a small village in South America, but he's not now and neither is the Quinjet he took."

"That's not what I was expecting. Do you think he went into hiding because of the Accords?"

"It's possible, but I'm not even sure Bruce is on the planet. There was evidence someone had used a form of the bifrost where Bruce was staying."

Stephen blinked. "You think Dr. Banner is on Asgard?"

"No. I don't think that's likely. Besides, Thor would have no use for a Quinjet."

"And you can't contact him?"

"Nope."

"Well that sounds exceedingly frustrating."

"It is." Tony agreed, sighing loudly. "Alright Strange, I'll do it."

Stephen blinked at him over the rim of his tea cup. "I'm... sorry. Do what?"

"Let you do your weird magic thing on me," Tony shrugged.
"May I ask what changed your mind?"

"You did." Tony replied, meeting his eyes. "You... shared a personal story about your past with me. You didn't have to and I appreciate your honesty. If you can trust me enough to do that, I can trust you to do what I can't."

"I see." Stephen said, setting his cup down. "To be honest, I thought I would have to be a lot more convincing than that."

"I won't lie Doc. I'm not saying I'm comfortable with the idea of magic or mirror dimensions, but the thought that Maximoff has left magic in my head is more disturbing than my aversion to things I can't yet explain."

"That's well thought out." Stephen paused. "Alright, when would you like to do this?"

Tony looked away. "Well not today. Maybe not tomorrow either. I need some time to get used to the idea so, two days from now? If you're not busy."

"Very well. I'll check my calendar, make sure Wong hasn't got me scheduled for anything that day and call you to confirm."

"Sounds good Strange." Tony smiled, getting to his feet.

"Right. I've taken up enough of your time. Thank you for the tea." Stephen said, setting his tea cup in the sink.

"You uh... can do your portal thing if you want."

Stephen arched a brow at him. "Are you sure about that Stark?"

Tony shrugged. "I need to get used to it sometime."

"Very well. I'll be in touch" Stephen nodded, conjuring a portal back to the Sanctum. The last thing he saw as the portal dissolved was that of Tony suppressing a shudder and walking away.
"Stark? We have a problem." Tony groaned, scowling at the voice on the phone. He knew it had been a mistake not to watch the news when FRIDAY told him something had happened in Vienna.

"What happened?"

"King T'Chaka is dead. There's video footage that the Winter Soldier was involved." Ross growled.

"Sonofabitch." Tony swore.

"As much as I don't like you, I need you in Berlin. CIA and German police think they have a lead on him in Bucharest."

"Feeling's mutual Ross. Any sign of Rogers?"

"Three people got off a government plane an hour ago. Only Agent Carter went through customs."

"Dammit Rogers." Tony swore.

"Get there Stark. Barnes will be brought in and if Rogers is with him, I need you running damage control. Do not bring the suit Stark. You're going as an active duty non-combatant."

Half an hour later, Tony was halfway across the Pacific when he remembered his appointment with Strange. With a heavy sigh, he had FRIDAY connect him and left a message when Stephen didn't answer.

"Strange? It's Tony Stark. I'm afraid I have to cancel our meeting. Something's come up and I'm needed in Germany. I'll give you a call as soon as I can. Oh, and sorry about calling you Doc all those times. Don't take it personal... I just... yeah, never mind, I don't even know what I'm saying right now. Stark out."

Stark out? Tony scowled out the window of his private plane as he needed the call. He was stressed and it was coming out in his words. Strange not answering his phone had him wondering what wizards did all day. What little he'd seen of the house on Bleecker Street didn't seem like anything more than a dusty old library filled with equally dusty relics. Certainly not a hideout for magicians who protected the planet. Not that he knew what that should look like, but still... he should probably go back and visit a few times. Get a better understanding of what Strange and his friends actually did.

***

"Matt?"

"Tony. What can I do for you?"

"I don't know if you've watched the news recently, but I could use your help. Have you given any more thought to my offer?"

"I've seen it. Looks like a mess." Matt replied, followed by a heavy sigh. "What do you need?"
"Something happen Murdock?"

"Later. You've got enough on your plate. Just tell me what you need."

"Get to the Compound in upstate New York, the new staff will be arriving tomorrow. I'll have FRIDAY send you the details on that and then you can go ahead and approach the Accords council with those contracts you drew up."

"Alright." Matt replied. "Anything else?"

"Call Jessica. She's staying at Stark Tower. Let her know what's happened and if she's interested, take her with you. There's a contract at the Compound for her to look over and I should be back in New York in two days."

“Okay. I'll leave this afternoon. And Tony? Be careful."

***

"For the record, this is how you make things worse." Nat said as she fell in beside Steve.

"Bucky's alive Nat."

"And you turned yourself into a criminal to do it." She retorted. "I hope it was worth it."

They continued walking, entering a room filled with several screens where Tony was talking on his phone.

"Consequences? Damn right there'll be be consequences. Obviously you can quote me on that cuz I just said it. Anything else?" Tony snapped into the phone. "Thank you, sir."

"Consequences?" Steve asked as Tony ended the call.

"Secretary Ross wants you both prosecuted." Tony retorted staring at Rogers and Wilson. "Had to give him something."

"Not getting that suit back am I?" Steve drawled.

"Technically, it's government property." Natasha shot back. "Wing's too."

"That's cold." Wilson muttered.

"Warmer than jail." Tony called over his shoulder as he and Nat left the room.

After everyone had been debriefed, Tony joined Steve in the conference room.

"Nothing's happened that can't be undone, if you sign. We can make the last 24 hours legit, and Barnes' gets sent to a psychiatric hospital in the U.S. instead of a Wakandan prison.

"I'm not saying it's impossible. But there would have to be safeguards." Steve said cautiously and Tony relaxed slightly. He and Rogers had been arguing about the Accords for the past ten minutes and it seemed the other man might finally be listening.
"Sure. After we put out the PR fire, documents can be amended. I'll file a motion to have you and Wanda reinstated."

"Wanda? What about Wanda?"

"She's confined to the Compound. Vision is keeping her company."

"God Tony, every time I think you're seeing things the right way..."

"Excuse me? The right way? Or your way? Because it seems to me every time anyone disagrees with you, they're always wrong. Must be nice to be right all the time. Always painting yourself as this self-righteous do-gooder hero. Is that how you justify what you do? Because that's dangerous." Tony retorted. "And Wanda is staying in a place with 100 acres, a lap pool, screening room... there are worse ways to protect people."

"Protection? Is that how you see it?"

"She's not a U.S. citizen Rogers and they don't grant visas to weapons of mass destruction!"

"She's a kid!"

"No she's not! Newsflash Captain 'get-a-clue'. Wanda and her brother were 18 when they joined Hydra. That was BEFORE they volunteered for Strucker's experiments and at least a year before Ultron. Which was two years ago. Do the math, she's over 20, probably closer to 24. Or is being good at math another thing you're bad at?"

"It's internment Tony." Rogers retorted, his cheeks flushed with anger.

"Saying the same thing over and over again doesn't make it true Rogers. And you were younger than her when you joined the army, or is it that you just can't see past the fact she's female?"

"Steve." Sam called from the doorway, interrupting their shouting match.

Casting a scathing look at Tony, Rogers left the room with Sam at the same time Natasha entered to speak with Tony.

"Didn't listen did he?"

"It was a long shot. He never listened before, why would he start now?" Tony sighed. "What I want to know, is why did you sign? Why did you agree with me Nat?"

"Same as you. If you're on the outside of something 117 different countries agree on, you can't change it or make it better. I've been out in the cold before, I didn't care for it much."

"And what will you do if Steve won't let this go?" Tony asked.

"What are you talking about?"

"You were friends with Rogers before you warmed up to me, and I gotta say, I don't entirely trust you and I know you know that. If it's a choice, we both know you won't choose me. I just want to know when you plan to stab me in the back."
Nat swore and moved to the doorway. "I'll do my damn job Tony. Same as you."

Tony huffed a breath and met her cold gaze. "Guess we'll see won't we?"
Poor Choices

Tony sat in the conference room, trying not to whimper in pain. The fight with Barnes after he'd escaped the CIA compound in Berlin had been a clusterfuck of unpreparedness. He knew he shouldn't engage Barnes, but he'd been certain his flash bang and sonic pulse would be enough to level the playing field.

He'd been so wrong. At least the pain in his chest was better than the memory of the sound Barnes' gun had made when he'd fired it at his face. The only reason he wasn't dead now was because he'd worn his bulletproof sunglasses, but the blow Barnes landed on his body had almost stopped his heart. Still could if he wasn't careful.

Ross entered the room and Tony sighed, hiding the pain behind his perfected mask of indifference. He couldn't afford to stay out of this now. If he left Ross in charge, more people would die. Ross had proven multiple times in his career that he cared nothing for collateral damage or bringing fugitives in alive or dead, so long as it got the job done.

Ross left the room soon after he'd agreed to let him and Natasha bring Barnes and Rogers in themselves.

"Thirty-six hours." Tony sighed, his right hand rubbing his chest absently. "Jesus. My left arm is numb. Is that normal?"

Natasha gave him a look and put a hand to his shoulder. "Are you all right?"

"Always." Tony nodded, lying through his teeth.

"We are seriously outnumbered here." She murmured.

"We could really use a hulk right about now. Any ideas?"

"You really think he'd be on our side?"

"No. Though I might have something else."

"I might have something too." Nat nodded.

"Where's yours?"

"Downstairs. You?"

***

Tony returned to New York and headed straight to the Tower. He might be selling the place, but he had no desire to be surrounded by strangers and the new Compound currently held more than he cared to be around right now. He needed to kill time, so he headed to his workshop and had FRIDAY screen his calls.

He spent most of the day tinkering at his work bench. He'd been playing around with the idea of revisiting the Extremis program and finding a way to combine it with Helen Cho's cradle.
Unfortunately, every trial he attempted failed after twenty minutes. Either the tech wasn't compatible and disintegrated when it tried to mesh together or it blew up. At least it wasn't burning anymore. He scoffed at the screen, swiping a hand across it to clear it away. The Extremis cure he'd developed for Pepper might hold a solution, but he'd avoided that research after Killian. His guilt and worry over what had happened left him unable to focus on the data.

With a sigh, he closed out his screens and shut down the lab. Maybe after the mess with Rogers had been dealt with and Strange had done his thing on Wanda's magic, he'd try again.

He headed to the penthouse and changed into a conservative three piece suit before grabbing his sunglasses from the counter and taking the elevator to the garage. Twenty minutes later, he was parked in front of a modest two-story apartment complex, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel.

Half an hour after that, he was sitting in a teenager's bedroom asking Peter Parker to come to Germany with him.

"I can't go to Germany!" Peter exclaimed.

"Why not?"

Peter hesitated, averting his eyes. "Because... I have homework."

"I'm going to pretend you didn't just say that."

"Mr. Stark... I'm being serious. I can't just drop out of school."

Tony ignored him and moved to the door. " Might be a little dangerous. Better tell Aunt Hottie I'm taking you on a little field trip." He said at the same time Peter webbed his hand to the door.

"Don't tell Aunt May."

"Alright Spiderman," Tony agreed, giving him a look when the teen didn't move. ".....get me out of this." Tony huffed impatiently when Peter remained where he was.

"Sorry... I'll just..." Peter rushed about the room muttering under his breath. "I'll get the... something..."

***

"Tony."

"Vision? Please don't give me more bad news." Tony groaned into the phone as he drove back to the Tower.

"I am sorry sir, but Wanda is gone. Mr. Barton came and they left together. I assumed you would know why."

"I gave up trying to figure Barton out years ago. Get to the Compound. I'll fill you in on the plane."

***
After talking to Vision, Tony headed to his workout room. He needed to burn off the adrenaline which had accumulated during his argument with Rogers, before he returned to Berlin. The entire conversation was still running through his brain like a damn audio tape on repeat.

With boxing gloves and loose fitting clothes on, he punched and kicked the sandbag in front of him. Every time he remembered another one of Steve's comments, he hit harder and faster until his pulse was throbbing in his veins and sweat ran between his shoulder blades.

An hour later he was almost drained of energy when he heard a voice. He froze, his breathing harsh, and turned to see Stephen Strange framed in the doorway giving him a concerned look.

"Strange?" He said, the sudden drop in adrenaline and his blood sugar levels making spots appear at the edge of his vision. "What are you doing here?"

Strange said nothing as he closed the distance between them, his cool blue eyes never leaving Tony's own. "Are you all right Stark?" He asked.

Tony put a hand on the sandbag as a wave of dizziness hit him. "I'm fine Doctor. Why are you here?" He wheezed, his eyes widening as his legs suddenly gave out. He had a moment to see the alarm and concern on Strange's face before everything went black.

***

He woke with a throbbing in his head to find himself lying on a lumpy surface, which he guessed must be the couch in his workshop. A comforting warmth surrounded him and a dull ache in his chest made him groan in protest. He shifted and the warmth moved with him, snuggling him closer.

"What the..?" He murmured, his mouth dry, feeling like it was stuffed with cotton.

"You're lucky you're not dead." An angry voice growled from his right.

He blinked and shifted up, craning his neck to see who had spoken. When he could focus, it was to see the anger filled gaze of Stephen Strange. He frowned, looking down to see Strange's weird cape wrapped around him and he struggled, the cape leaving him to settle on Strange's shoulders.

"Strange?" He said blearily, sitting up and leaning his back into the couch. "What are you doing here?"

"Shut up and take this." Strange barked, handing him a glass of water and two small white pills. Tony scowled but did as he asked, downing the pills and the water. When he finished, he handed the glass back, watching the Doctor's face warily, unsure why the other man was so furious.

"How long have you had heart problems?" Strange growled, the anger in his eyes not dimming.

"Since Afghanistan. Shrapnel in the heart will do that." Tony retorted.

"Yet you continue to willingly engage in violent, physical altercations. I thought the Iron Man armour was designed to protect you. How did you get that bruise on your chest?"
Tony looked down at his hands. The dull throb hadn't diminished and with Strange talking about it, he was having a hard time ignoring it. "I... wasn't wearing the armour when it happened. And how do you even know it's there?"

"I saw it when you passed out and flinched when I moved you to the couch. Christ Stark!" Strange swore, getting to his feet to pace. "Do you have a death wish? Are you actively trying to get yourself killed?"

Tony scowled at him and got to his feet unaided, unwilling to let the other man scold him like a defiant child. "Even if I did, which I don't, it's none of your damn business! What are you even doing here? How'd you get in?"

"I let him in boss." FRIDAY answered, interrupting him.

"I came because I hadn't heard from you. When I called, FRIDAY told me you were here and she asked me to come by." Strange hissed. "I thought you wanted to talk about the mirror dimension. I sure as hell wasn't expecting to come in here and see you on the verge of having a coronary."

"FRIDAY told you to come?" Tony asked, feeling a wave of guilt wash through him.

"I was concerned when you didn't answer me boss." FRIDAY replied.

Tony stared at the floor, the weight of Strange's gaze rooting him to the floor. "Look, I know what it must have looked like, but I wasn't trying to hurt myself." He paused, running a hand through his hair. "I was just... I needed to burn off some anger. I didn't realize I was pushing myself that hard. I'm... sorry I yelled at you."

"You should be in a hospital getting that looked at, not putting more stress on your heart." Strange snapped.

"I don't need it looked at Doctor." Tony retorted. "I know exactly what the problem is. I had my rib cage rebuilt after I had the arc reactor removed. Reconstructive surgery is not a substitute for real human bone. I'm always going to have chest pains Strange, I've learned to live with it."

"What you did in Berlin was reckless and irresponsible. What you did here was just plain stupid."

"I don't need a damn lecture from you Merlin! I know I screwed up. I was trying to keep innocent people from being hurt."

"As noble as that might be, you can't help anyone if you have a heart attack."

"You think I don't know that?" Tony snapped. "Look, I appreciate what you did for me tonight, so thank you for that. But I don't have time to argue with you, I have to get back to Berlin."

"You are the most stubborn, pig-headed man I've ever met." Strange growled, flapping his hand in Tony's general direction. "Fine. If you don't manage to get yourself killed, call me when you're less... you."

With a final parting anger-filled glare, Stephen conjured a portal and disappearing from his workshop a moment later. Tony let out the breath he'd been holding, wincing in pain as he shuffled over to the counter to get a glass of water.
"Boss? Vision is asking when you'll be joining him at the Compound. Peter Parker will be arriving there in 30 minutes."

"Tell him I'll be there in an hour or so." Tony sighed, downing the glass of water he held.

"Understood."

"Oh and Friday? Thank you for asking Strange to come over. I'm sorry I scared you."

"Just don't do it again boss." FRIDAY admonished before going silent.

"I'll try." Tony murmured, heading for the penthouse and a much needed shower.
You Can't Handle the Truth

Wong looked up in shock from his book, *The Astral Body and Other Non-Physical Realms* he was reading over when Stephen stepped through a portal, cursing a stream of expletives under his breath. He scowled and got to his feet, closing the tome and setting it aside before fixing the other man with a harsh glare.

Stephen seemed unaware of his presence as he paced the length of the room, muttering to himself. After he'd made the fifth pass without stopping, Wong had had enough.

"Strange!"

Stephen jumped and turned wide eyes in his direction, a flush colouring his cheeks. "Wong. I... didn't know you were here." He stammered.

"That much I already gathered." Wong retorted, wiggling his fingers in Stephen's direction. "Care to explain yourself?"

Stephen narrowed his eyes and drew himself up straight. "No. I need to hit something. Can you watch over the Sanctum while I go to Kamar-Taj?"

Wong arched an eyebrow. "If you promise to explain when you return."


***

A drop of sweat landed in his eye, and Stephen swiped at it angrily, his left hand coming back up a second later, shield at the ready. "Again." He snapped, his gaze boring holes in the Master opposite him.

Wynn shrugged and sent a series of attacks at him, sparks of magic trailing from his fingers. Stephen deflected, dodged and then ducked as Wynn conjured steps in the air and flew over him, a whip in his hand. He reached down, aiming for Stephen's arm, missing his intended target but catching Strange by the ankle and flipping him face-first onto the ground.

Wynn halted his attack, conjuring shields while he waited for Strange to right himself. "Perhaps if you talked about it, you wouldn't feel the need to fight." The other Master drawled.

"If I talk about it now, I'll have to fight longer." Stephen hissed.

Wynn shrugged. "Very well."

For another hour Stephen sparred with Wynn, sweat dripping in his eyes and pooling between his shoulder blades. Each successful strike he landed drained a sliver of his anger and frustration from him. Each hit he took, jarred his thoughts as much as it jarred his body, reminding him of the reason behind his anger.

Wynn's last successful hit landed Stephen on his back again where he lay gasping for breath, the wind knocked out of him. The other man loomed over him, a thoughtful but firm look in his eyes.
"You're done Strange." He growled, his gaze piercing in it's intensity. "Clean yourself up and meet me in the meditation room. You will explain your actions here today. Do not be late."

***

Stephen shuffled into the room, head bowed with most of his anger having burned off during his match with Wynn. He'd showered and changed and met his own eyes in the mirror as he'd combed his hair. He took note of the lingering anger there and acknowledged the helplessness he could now see in equal measure.

Wynn sat cross-legged on the floor in the centre of the room on one side of a small square table. Stephen sank to the floor opposite him and waited in silence as Wynn poured tea for them both. They drank quietly for several minutes, each paying respect and homage to the need and purpose of the ritual, leaving their egos aside as they sipped the hot liquid.

"You've had enough time to still your heart and mind Stephen?" Wynn asked quietly as he set his tea cup down.

Stephen nodded. "I have, and I thank you for your help."

"But?"

"But something tells me this will be an... ongoing problem. I will need another method for dealing with my... frustrations."

"Will you tell me what happened now?"

Stephen nodded, staring at the cup he held cradled in his lap. "I met someone who is more stubborn, more hard-headed than I am. Yet it is not fuelled by his ego or his need to win. His reasons for doing anything seems to be entirely fuelled by his fear of failing others and his complete indifference to his own health and well-being."

"And why is this so offensive to you?" Wynn asked quietly. "How does his indifference have anything to do with you? Can you not simply avoid him?"

"Because he wants to save everyone but himself!" Stephen snapped. "It's not right!"

"What exactly did this man do?"

"He fought a super soldier without his armour and took a serious hit to his chest. When I went to see him, he was on the verge of having a heart attack."

"And?"

"And he was hitting a sand bag! He knew what he was doing was dangerous and he knew he had a heart condition. He might have died if I hadn't arrived when I did."

"How does that have anything to do with you? You are not responsible for other people's choices Strange." Wynn admonished him.

"Because I'm still a bloody Doctor!" Strange growled. "I took an oath to preserve and protect life! I
can't stand by and watch someone behave like that and not be upset by it."

"There are many people who do that every day. I don't ever recall seeing you react like this. Why is what this man does to himself so personal? So important to you?"

"It's not personal." Stephen scoffed. "But I think he's under the influence of an insidious bit of magic and if so, then I'm responsible. I am the Sorcerer Supreme, it's my job to safeguard others from illegal use of magic."

"When did this supposed attack occur? Were you Sorcerer Supreme at the time?"

"No, but I should be aware of everyone who is in possession of magic. I should have done something about it."

"Despite your rather... inflated view of yourself and your abilities, you are not omniscient. Nor do you know where our former colleague Mordo is, so I'm unclear how you are supposed to know the whereabouts of others like him."

"She's not like Mordo. She obtained her powers some other way." Stephen argued.

"Regardless, nothing of what you've told me so far even begins to explain your behaviour today."

"What?! I just told you, I can't just..."

"Enough Stephen." Wynn snapped, holding up his hand for silence. "It's clear to me that you cannot answer my question because you do not have an answer. Until you can be honest with yourself, I recommend you spend time at the New York Sanctum in astral meditation."

"I am being honest." Stephen protested.

Wynn glared at him until the other man broke eye contact with a huff of frustration. "Go home Doctor Strange. Do not return to Kamar-Taj until you are able to be honest with both of us."
Tony was aboard the Quinjet less than an hour after Stephen left the Tower. The Doctor's behaviour and reaction to what he'd seen had been startling, though he'd been more ashamed at being called out on what he'd been doing than anything else.

He groaned when he caught sight of Jessica and Peter staring at Vision with polar opposite expressions on their faces when he boarded the jet. Vision looked up when he saw him, with what looked like relief in his eyes. He floated toward Tony with a faint smile on his face.

"Ah, Mr. Stark. There you are. I was beginning to wonder if you might have changed your mind about travelling with us and had gone on ahead in your armour."

Tony blinked as he moved deeper inside the jet. "No, I didn't change my mind buddy. Just... had to work a few things out."

"Pardon my saying so sir, but you do not look well. Is something wrong?"

"No, no, nothing's wrong." Tony lied. "I just over-reached when I tried to stop the Winter Soldier from escaping."

"Sir." Vision sighed with clear disappointment in his voice, but moved away when Jessica approached. Her presence exuding as much hostility towards the Vision as her small frame would allow.

"Stark." She growled, coming to a stop in front of him. "You asshole. You were supposed to get back to me about that magic protection thing you and that wizard friend were going to discuss. What the hell happened?"

"Oh shit." Tony swore under his breath.

"You forgot?!" Jones hissed.

"No, I didn't forget. Well not exactly. I did talk to him and he gave me a charm. I just forgot to ask for another one. Here," he said, pulling the amulet out from beneath his shirt and handing it to her. "You can have this one. I'll... I'll get another one..." He said, not mentioning the fact that after what had happened that afternoon, Strange might not want to make him another one.

Jones narrowed her eyes at him, running the amulet through her fingers with a frown on her face. "Doesn't look like much." She said, slipping it over her head and tucking it away.

"It'll work Jones." Tony insisted, his fingers itching to take it back.

It felt wrong to give away something Strange had given him personally and to then see it around her neck. It bothered him even more that he'd forgotten he had it and that he hadn't taken it off since the day Strange had given it to him. It felt as though he'd just given an important piece of himself away and he felt naked without it. And that thought held so many implications, it startled him into focusing on Jessica again.

Who was now looking at him with an odd expression in her eyes and he blinked. "What?"
"What's the kid doing here?"

"Kid? What kid? I don't see any kids here." Tony said, catching Peter's eye and giving him a wink. "For the record Jones, there's no kid here. Understand what I'm saying?"

"Oh I get it Stark, so long as you get that I'll hold you responsible if..."

"Hey, uh Miss Jones?" Peter said, hesitating as he joined them. "No offense ma'am, but I can take care of myself."

"Look, it's no skin off my back, but if you got family you care about, you shouldn't be here, you should be at home with them. And don't call me ma'am again. Like ever."

"Okay, but... honestly?" Peter stammered. "What I do is none of your business. And if you want to be with your family, maybe you should go home, uh... no offense. But why I'm here is between me and Mr. Stark so maybe you could, I dunno, stay out of it?"

"You got guts kid, I'll give you that. But watch it. I don't usually let anyone talk to me like that. You get a pass this time since we just met, but never do it again, understand?" Jessica retorted, turning away from them both. "I'm gonna sleep now. Wake me up if something interesting happens."

He and Peter watched her go, the intercom activating then and flooding the cabin with FRIDAY's voice. "Boss? We're cleared for take off. Do you wish to depart now?"

"Sure FRIDAY. Take us up." Tony said, putting a hand to Peter's shoulder. "Come on kid, let's go sit up front. You can see how all this works. We can't have you missing out on seeing the ocean on your first trip to Germany now can we?"

"Mr. Stark." Peter stammered, letting Tony guide him towards the cockpit. "This... this is unbelievable sir. Who was that lady in the black leather, is she like a friend of yours? Cuz I gotta say, she's kinda intimidating you know? Not like pee your pants scary, more like my heart is beating out of my chest scary. I think I might pass out."

Tony chuckled under his breath. "You're not going to faint kid. Come on, sit up front there in the cockpit. Yeah, right there in the pilot's seat. You're good right?"

"But... Mr. Stark, there's so many things to uh... I want to figure all this out and see how it works and... it looks really expensive and I don't want to... um, what if I break something? It's not like I can pay you back or anything, I mean I suppose I could maybe work for you or something, I..."

"Peter, Peter... relax okay? That's good, now take a breath. Now take another one. Good. Now, are you listening? Okay, so FRIDAY is flying the jet now, right Fri?"

"Affirmative boss."

"And she can answer any questions you have about the jet and anything else you want to know. And you won't break anything because FRIDAY won't let you. Alright? Are you hearing me?"

"Yes sir." Peter nodded, a faint blush on his cheeks. "I mean, yes Mr. Stark. Thank you Mr. Stark."
"Don't mention it kid. Now I'm gonna leave you to it while I catch some shut eye. I'll just be back here sleeping. FRIDAY will wake me before we land okay?"

"Okay."

"Good. Have fun kid."

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Tony didn't drift off the moment he got settled. Instead, he went back to his reaction to the amulet he'd just given away. He couldn't pinpoint what he was so upset about. It was just a protection amulet, Strange probably made them all the time. It didn't mean anything. Tony frowned at that, because somehow it did mean something. It mattered and he couldn't explain to himself when or how Strange had come to mean something more to him than just an ally.

He rarely let people in, guarding his privacy like a dragon guarding its treasure. He couldn't accept that he'd let Strange past his defenses nor could he accept that he hadn't realized he'd done so until now. It was true enough that he felt safe in the other man's presence and he enjoyed the Doctor's company. What was more surprising was the realization he felt more himself with Strange than with anyone else he'd spent time with. Neither Rhodey or Pepper had made him feel so comfortable in his own skin that he relaxed completely around them, yet somehow he'd done just that with Strange and hadn't even noticed.

He would definitely need to speak to the man when he got back to New York. Now that he was aware, he had to know... was he thinking of Strange like a friend? Or was it something more than that? He drifted to sleep with the image of friendly ice blue eyes and a cloak in serious need of a fashion upgrade staring back at him.

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He woke a few hours later with a smile on his lips and a warmth suffusing his body. He'd been dreaming of... oh, he tensed and blushed as he looked around, letting out the breath he'd been holding when he realized no one was nearby. He hadn't had one of those dreams in... well, he honestly couldn't remember the last time he'd had an arousing dream. He blushed even more when he realized he'd been dreaming of the wizard.

Shaking himself, he stretched and moved to the cockpit where Parker had fallen asleep. He chuckled to himself when he was struck by how quiet the teen was, feeling a strange warmth bloom in his chest knowing he was witness to something rare. Despite not knowing him well, Peter clearly trusted him and he felt humbled by it as it was something few people in his life had shown him so readily.

"Friday?" He whispered.

"Yes boss?"

"Can you wake Mr. Parker up? Gently? I don't want to startle him."

"Of course."

Tony nodded and returned to his seat, closing his eyes while he waited for Peter to come wake him. He smiled to himself while he listened to Parker stir, then mutter to himself in panic for
falling asleep. A moment later he heard footsteps and stretched to let the kid know he wasn't fully asleep.

"Mr. Stark?" He whispered, and Tony suppressed the smile and the warm feeling the kid's earnestness set off inside him.

"Mmm?" He blinked his eyes open to smile at him, a question in his eyes. "Parker? Have we arrived?"

Peter shook his head. "Not yet Mr. Stark, but Miss FRIDAY said we'll be landing in less than an hour."

Tony stretched and got to his feet, leading Peter back to the cockpit. "So, how was it kid? Your first trip over the Atlantic."

"Oh, it was great Mr. Stark. Fantastic really, it's like flying with all that water down there... um.." Peter hesitated and Tony turned to look at him.

"Something wrong Mr. Parker?"

"Uh, no, no nothing, it's just, well I might have fallen asleep, but... but it wasn't for very long." He stammered.

"It's okay kid." Tony chuckled. "It's a long flight. How about we go sit down and I'll fill you in on what I want you to do and why you're here."

"Yeah, okay. That sounds great uh... is there like, any food on the plane? I mean the uh, Quinjet?"

"You hungry?"

"Oh, man, you have no idea! I'm practically starving!" He blurted, his eyes going wide with embarrassment. "I mean, yeah. A little."

"It's okay Parker." Tony smiled. "I need my coffee and we'll see if Ms. Jones is up, though I don't think I have anything she'll want."

Half an hour later he'd had two cups of coffee, supplied Jessica with several cans of an energy drink and Peter had eaten pancakes, eggs, bacon and two glasses of orange juice from the Quinjet's kitchen. Tony had FRIDAY make a note to have it restocked when they landed and then had gone over what he wanted Peter to do and why they were after Steve Rogers.

"So? You get all that?" Tony prompted.

"Yeah. It's just... so crazy. I mean, you're an Avenger and they're Avengers. I don't get why you can't just explain things to them. It would be so much easier than fighting."

"Rogers has never been big on listening to people who disagree with him and Wilson... well, I don't know the guy very well but he mostly just follows Cap's lead. Doesn't seem too big on thinking for himself."

"Yeah, but he's gotta know that helping an assassin is wrong. I mean, the Winter Soldier dude killed people. How can they think they're doing the right thing? I mean, yeah he was brainwashed
sure, but he's dangerous too right? That's how he escaped in the first place. And yeah he's Cap's friend and all, but how can he think he knows better than all those countries?"

"Now that is a damn good question kid." Tony smiled. "I wish I had a damn good answer to match. But Rogers isn't even thinking about the Accords right now. His concern is for Bucky. Now, are we good? You know what to do?"

"Yeah Mr. Stark. Keep my distance and web them up. Go for Cap's shield and his legs."

"Well done kid. Now, let's show you Berlin."
CIA Headquarters in Berlin provided Tony and the others with private rooms on site. Rhodes had met them at the airport, taking Jones and Vision with him while Tony took Peter on a tour of the city.

"Thanks for this Mr. Stark." Peter said as they pulled into underground parking at a five star hotel. "I know what you were trying to do and I didn't think it would work, but it did, it really did. I feel much better now."

"That's good." Tony smiled. "Because for the rest of your stay, you'll be here with Happy Hogan."

"What?!" Peter spluttered. "But Mr. Stark, I thought you wanted me to help you! I can't sit on the sidelines while bad things are happening! I thought you understood that."

"Peter... Mr. Parker!"

"Wh...what?"

"Settle down okay? Good, now take a breath and let me finish."

"Finish, right. Because you weren't done talking." Peter flushed crimson and looked away. "You're going to send me home now aren't you? I yelled at you. Oh God, please Mr. Stark, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean it!"

"Peter first of all, calm down. Second, I'm not going to send you home, but you do need to work on your impulse control."

"Impulse control? Right, right... I get carried away sometimes."

"Third, you're staying at a hotel because I don't want Secretary Ross knowing anything about you. This is serious Peter, so I need you to pay attention. Remember the Accords? Good, because Ross is in charge of that and you're a minor and if he knows about you then he's going to know who you are and how old you are. You understand what I'm saying?"

"Yes sir." Peter nodded. "Yes, Mr. Stark."

"Good." Tony nodded, walking him inside the hotel where they joined Happy at the elevator. "Now, Happy is going to take care of you. He'll bring you to meet up with the rest of us when we're ready to move."

"I understand. I'll be ready when you are sir."

***

Back at CIA HQ, Tony headed to his private quarters. The others were taking a tour of the facility and would be busy for the next hour, so he had some time to himself for a change.

He sat on the edge of the bed, the past two days washing through him, leaving him drained and weighed down by everything he still needed to do. With a sigh, he ran his fingers through his hair
and wondered for the hundredth time that day if he'd made a mistake bringing Peter to Berlin.

Parker was just a kid, not even legal yet and he'd brought him in as back-up. Back-up against Captain America and the most infamous assassin in history. But he believed in Peter and his abilities and besides, it was Steve freaking Rogers. It wasn't Hydra or Chitauri or a demigod, so the kid wouldn't be in any real danger and this way he could assess the kid's skillset with minimal risk.

Still, despite his reasoning, he worried what people would think. He'd spent his entire life being judged and criticized over everything he'd ever done. Shit, this was not what he wanted to be doing now. Besides, he'd just make sure no one found out about it. Simple.

Yeah, right, he scoffed to himself, heading for the bathroom. It was while he was drying his hands when he remembered the embarrassing conversation he'd had with Strange and groaned aloud.

He rolled his eyes, cursing under his breath as he sat back down on the bed and dug out his phone. Did he even have the number? Yeah, he did. Strange had called him several times, leaving his number in the process.

After doing some quick math in his head he determined it wasn't too late to call. With a deep sigh, he dialled and held his breath, hoping he wasn't about to make things worse.

"Hello?"

"Hi. Uh, this is Tony Stark calling. Is Doctor Strange in? I'd like to speak to him."

"He is busy meditating."

"Hey! Is this the other guy who lives there? I never got your name."

"Because I never gave it to you."

"Sir. May I please have your name?"

"It's Wong."

"Is that like Mr. Wong? Or Wong like Beyonce and Cher? No? Okay, Wong it is I guess." Tony said, hiding his disappointment when the other man didn't respond. "So this meditating thing Strange is doing. Is it important? Can he be interrupted at all? Because I'd really appreciate it if I could talk to him for a minute."

"It is important Mr. Stark. But it is also time for him to take a break. Can you hold a moment?"

"Yeah! Uh, yes. Yes I can wait."

It took more than a minute. After five Tony wondered if Wong had just been playing with him. Five more and he was about to hang up when a voice came on the line.

"Stark?"

"Yes, in the flesh... sort of. Is that you Strange?"

"It is. Wong said you wanted to talk to me. What do you want?"
"Uh, well, I want a lot of things actually. For one I'd like to have never been kidnapped and 
tortured, but we can't change the past. I'd also really like to be having dinner in Paris right now, not 
stuck in some dusty old CIA building in Berlin. But what I really want, is to apologize to you. I was 
rude earlier and you were right, I shouldn't have been working out like I was. I'm sorry if what you 
saw gave you a poor opinion of me. Well, a poorer opinion than you already had." Tony waited, 
but Strange said nothing. "Doctor? Are you still there?"

"I'm here. Is this really Tony Stark I'm talking to?"

"Of course it is. I mean, I can't prove it since you never agreed to take one of my holo watches, but 
yeah it's me." Tony paused. "So are we good? You aren't saying anything, so I'm thinking maybe 
now I should've waited and done this in person. Know what? Forget I said anything, that's what I'll 
do. I'll see you when I get back and I'll come and apologize in person."

"Mr. Stark. Tony? That isn't necessary. I was just at a loss for words. Thank you for calling. I hope 
this means you had someone take a look at you? Your heart is okay?"

Tony hiccuped a laugh, his chest constricting at the sound of concern in Strange's voice. "Um, 
about that..."

"You didn't see anyone did you? Damn it Stark, do you have any idea the kind of risk you're... wait, 
you aren't saying all these things because you're dying are you?"

"What?! No, no of course I'm not dying. And I told you, I don't need to see anyone and even if I 
did, there wasn't time."

"Alright Stark. I'll take your word for it that you don't need to see anyone. I want to apologize as 
well. I had no right to yell at you or tell you what to do. We barely know each other and I crossed 
the line of professionalism."

"Oh, I don't know." Tony drawled. "I mean, you are a Doctor right? You had some right to say 
something. Hippocratic oath and all that. So, are we good?"

"Yes Stark. We're good."

"Call me Tony." Tony smiled into the phone. "I mean, you did already cross that professional line 
and everything."

Strange chuckled softly. "Very well Tony. Thank you for calling, but I do need to go now. Oh and 
Stark, call me Stephen." He said, and before Tony could respond, the line went dead.

Tony smiled down at his phone. So the good Doctor liked having the last word huh? He could 
work with that. Pocketing his phone, he left his room and headed to the meeting with the rest of his 
team.
"I don't know about this plan Captain." Lang muttered under his breath. "Why are we fighting Stark again?"

"Because it's Stark." Clint huffed.

"He had me locked up at the Compound." Wanda added, an angry glint in her eye.

"Hank always said you can't trust a Stark, but I can't believe Howard's kid would do something like that." Lang mumbled.

"Look Lang," Steve sighed. "It's complicated. Stark isn't thinking straight. He's feeling guilty over Sokovia and Ultron. This is bigger than that."

"But you said there are more soldiers like him out there." Lang reminded them, pointing at Barnes. "I don't see why you can't just explain that to him."

"Scott, if you don't want to get involved, don't." Sam snapped. "No one's going to force you to fight."

"I never said I wouldn't fight." Lang protested, fidgeting nervously under the annoyed glares he was getting from the others. "I just..." Scott hesitated. Nothing about this situation made much sense.

Ever since Barton had shown up on his doorstep and dragged him into a car, everything about it felt off. Super soldiers were bad if they were as evil as Rogers had implied, but there seemed to be something more going on than just Hydra sleeper agents.... And yet, he could really use some super friends right now. What with Hank and Hope likely to be pissed with him for taking the suit, having Captain America on his side could really turn things around.

"You know what? Forget I said anything. These super soldiers need to be stopped and if Stark can't see that, then we have to do whatever's necessary." Scott smiled. "So whatever you need Captain, I'm here for you. Let's do this."

Steve nodded, a smile forming on his lips. "Good to have you aboard Scott."

"Knew I could count on you Tic Tac." Sam added, clapping him on the shoulder.

Wanda and Clint hovered in the background leaving Scott feeling uneasy. Barton was completely unreadable, but Wanda's stare made him feel like a germ under a microscope. He shook himself to dispel the sensation of bugs crawling over his skin and turned back to focus on what Rogers was saying.

***

"They're going to try for the airport." Tony said as they gathered in a field nearby. "I've already called ahead to shut down all air traffic in the area."

"But Mr. Stark, isn't that where we left the Quinjet?" Peter asked and if he hadn't had his helmet
on, Tony might have smacked a hand to his own forehead.

Jones smirked at Parker's comment, while Vision sighed aloud as though his creator wasn't standing two feet away and could hear him.

"Tony. You didn't." Rhodey huffed at his side.

"What?! It's not like I could leave it at CIA HQ. The landing pad was damaged during Barnes' escape and Capsicle's brilliant plan to stop a helicopter one-handed."

"Can't you call FRIDAY sir? She could lock them out if they try to take it, right?" Peter pressed, his excitement making him fidget more than usual.

Tony frowned at the hyper teen, almost wishing Parker wasn't so insightful. Also, the energy thing... note to self: never give Parker caffeine. "That would be an excellent idea Spiderman if not for Secretary Ross." Parker tilted his head to the side at that, reminding Tony of a confused puppy.

"Yes, Ross knows about FRIDAY." Tony sighed. "No, he doesn't know FRIDAY is capable of flying a plane or that she's pretty much everywhere I am. I locked her out of the Quinjet after we landed to make sure it stays that way."

"Oh Stark." Natasha sighed, staring off across the tarmac. "So how are we going to do this?"

"First, we get to the airport." Tony began. "Then when Rogers and company show their faces, we talk them down and bring Barnes in."

"Just like that huh?" Jones drawled. "Sounds so simple when you put it that way."

"Who are you again?" Nat scowled at her. "I don't understand what you're doing here."

"And I don't understand what you're doing here." Jessica shot back. "Aren't you a double agent? Spy right? Or was that triple agent? How many times can someone switch sides before it doubles back on itself and becomes redundant?"

"Ladies." Rhodey huffed. "Let's not do this right now, alright? Our goal here is to stop Rogers from getting on a plane and to bring Barnes in for questioning."

"Thank you for the reminder Colonel. I agree. Stopping Mr. Rogers through reason is our first priority." Vision said, his voice calm.

"Captain get-a-clue doesn't strike me as the kind of person to listen to reason." Jones snorted.

"Regardless." Vision continued, levelling a warning glance at Nat to silence any protest she was about to make. "We still need to try. The last thing we want is to escalate an already volatile situation. We are here in lieu of Secretary Ross' predilection to shoot first, not to be his weapon."

"Vision's right. We don't do anything to escalate things. I'll talk to Rogers. The rest of you feel free to add whatever you like. Spiderman, when I call on you, take Cap's shield." Tony agreed.

"Understood Mr. Stark."

"Good." Tony nodded. "Are we all clear on our targets if it comes down to that?"
"Whatever Iron Head. I'm shadowing you and I'll be watching for that bow and arrow guy and the witch." Jones huffed.

"She's not a witch." Vision sighed.

"Says you purple grape. That's not what the tabloids say and I've heard what she's capable of and it's witchcraft in my book. Feel free to call it what you want."


***

"Sir. I don't understand what the Jones woman is doing here." Vision groused as they neared the airport parking structure.

"She wanted to come Viz." Tony shrugged. "And she was already on the plane when I got there. Even if I could have asked her to leave, she volunteered and I'm not about to turn away free help."

"It wasn't meant as a criticism sir. It just seems to me that she is particularly biased towards some of our former allies." Vision replied. "It may escalate things."

"Jones is many things, but she's a lot more objective about this than you might think."

"Very well. I will try my best to see the situation from her perspective if it pleases you."

"Don't do things to please me Viz. It's not necessary and I gotta say, also kinda creepy. Do it because you want to or don't."

"As you say sir."

"Are you two done having a private conversation over there?" Rhodey huffed aloud.

"Yep. All done here." Tony answered, moving to Rhodey's side and tuning his comms in to the rest of the team. "You got something Platypus?"

"Movement on the ground, heading this way."

"Everyone into position." Tony barked. "You all know what to do."

***

"Funny the people you run into at an airport huh Rhodes?" Tony said as he landed by War Machine on the tarmac.

"Sure is Tones."

"Weird right?" Tony continued, retracting his helmet to address Rogers with a nod. "Cap."

"Tony." Steve replied.
"So here's the thing. You need to surrender Barnes and come with us. Ross gave me 36 hours to bring you in and that was 12 hours ago. Can you help a brother out?"

"You don't have the whole picture Tony. Zemo set all this up. There are five more soldiers just like him, we have to stop him."

"And your judgement is compromised!" Tony retorted. *Jesus*, had there ever been a time when Rogers had ever just listened? Or took him at his word? Trusted him? "People are dead now because of Barnes. Even more are injured. I'm trying to stop this from getting any worse."

"He's innocent Tony. Hydra brainwashed him."

"Christ Rogers!" Tony snapped. "I'm trying to stop you from tearing the Avengers apart!"

"You did that when you signed." Steve replied, inclining his head as though daring Tony to deny it.

"Asshole!" Jones swore. "You're an even bigger dick than I thought. Self-righteous and arrogant. Absolving yourself of all responsibility and making Stark the target for your stupid choices. I thought you were a hero. Turns out you're just another arrogant dickhead in a suit."

"Who are you again?" Steve sighed.

"Not a fan of you."

"Okay, I'm out of patience." Tony sighed. "Underoos!"

"What the..." Scott exclaimed, taking a step back as Steve's shield suddenly went airborne.

"Hey Cap! Captain!" Peter stammered. "Friendly uh... well not a neighborhood really... uh Spider-Man. Hi! Big fan, kinda?"

"Good job kid." Tony said, turning to smile at him.

"Thanks Mr. Stark. I did it! That was good right?"

"We don't really need to have a conversation right now."

"Right. No, sure. I got it Mr. Stark, just... really excited to be here."

"Come on Steve." Nat said from Rogers right. "You know how this is going to go. Do you really want to punch your way out of this?"

"You know I have to do this."

"Well I don't." Jones muttered.

"Who are you and why should we care?" Clint demanded.

"She's an ally." Vision replied. "Something we all were not that long ago."

"Tell that to your boss." Barton sneered as Steve whispered something under his breath seconds before taking off at a run.
Tony slammed his helmet down to check in with FRIDAY. "Dammit." Tony swore. "We've got movement. Two on the lower deck and two more, other side of the parking lot."

"I've got my target." Jones muttered, moving fast toward the hangar.

"What should I do Mr. Stark?" Peter cried.

"Like we discussed! Keep your distance and web them up!"

***

"Sure you're on the right side of this Nat?" Barton jeered, ducking her punch.

"Are you?" She replied. "I thought you retired."

Clint shrugged, letting loose a shock arrow that missed her by inches. "I got bored."

"We still friends?" She teased, getting him in a headlock which he slipped free of seconds later.

"Depends how hard you hit me." He replied, his eyes wide as Nat's foot stalled an inch from his face before Wanda sent her flying into a truck.

Clint gave the witch a puzzled look and began jogging towards the hangar, leaving Wanda to keep Nat pinned down a moment longer.

"You were pulling your punches." Wanda shrugged in response as he passed her.

"Where do you think you're going?" Jones sneered as Clint disappeared behind a plane.

"You think you can stop me?" Wanda taunted, tendrils of red smoke unfurling from her hands to reach for her.

"I know I can." Jones replied, grabbing her by the collar and tossing her into a pile of luggage.

"How are you doing that?!!" Wanda cried, sending magic at Jessica's mind again as she struggled to her feet, eyes wide. "That's not possible! You have no magic."

"And what you just tried is abhorrent!" Jones snarled, closing in on her. "People like you have no concept of privacy. You think nothing of violating someone's mind."

"I protect myself!" Wanda argued.

"That's not protecting yourself bitch! It's malicious assault of another human being." Jessica had almost reached her when a rush of air hit her and suddenly she was airborne. "What the hell?! Put me down asshole!"

"Now, now, is that any way for a lady to talk?" Sam scolded, taking her further away from Wanda.

"I'm no lady dickwad." Jessica retorted, reaching up and clocking him in the jaw.

"Sonofabitch!" Sam swore, dropping her onto the back of a truck. "Heads up guys! Leather jacket
"girl is an enhanced."

"Another one?" Clint sighed aloud from his perch closer to the hanger.

Jessica dusted herself off and felt her breath catch in her throat at the same time a dozen cars came flying off the parkade to crush Iron Man beneath them. She vaulted off the trailer and ran to him, hoping the suit had protected him. "Stark!"

"Jones." Tony groaned, unable to free himself.

The crunch and screech of protesting metal filled the air as the weight on his back eased. A hand shot down near his face, helping him to his feet.

"You alright?"

"I will be." Tony nodded, pointing at a gash on her leg. "What happened?"

"That flying dude dropped me on a trailer when I punched him and I landed wrong. I'll live."

"Right. Let's go join the others."

***

"Captain Rogers. I'm afraid you need to stand down." Vision said from the air, directing it at the group before him. "Continuing on this course can only lead to more chaos. You will be crossing a line you may not be able to come back from."

"I don't have a choice." Steve insisted.

"You are so full of shit." Jones huffed.

"Tony? Where did you find this woman?" Rhodey asked.

"She's a friend." Tony shrugged. "We can't let you leave Cap."

"And I can't stop Tony." Steve replied, beginning to jog towards him.

"Are we really doing this?" Nat huffed at Vision's side.

"You have a better idea, now's the time Ms. Romanoff." T'Challa replied.

"Mr. Stark. They're not stopping." Peter called.

"Neither are we kid."
"Tony go high!" Rhodes cried, as they flew up the front of the giant man.

"I said I'd help you find him, not catch him." Natasha's voice rang out through the comm.

"I knew you couldn't be trusted." Jessica snarled, backhanding the spy into the wall. "Stay down. Stark? Your little spider just helped the targets get away."

"Regroup on the tar mac." Tony called back. "Rhodey and I are going after the Quin jet."

"Got it." Jones replied seconds before Nat hit her with a stun pin. She hit the ground hard, watching through a seizing nervous system as Nat hit T'Challa with the same thing and took off running. She was getting to her feet when Tony's fearful cry came through her ear piece.

"Rhodes!"

The silence was deafening as she and T'Challa ran to join Spiderman, Vision having taken to the air. Webbing covered Barton, Lang and Maximoff and Jessica smirked at seeing their hostile glares.

"Hey kid," Jessica said quietly. "Did you see what happened?"

Spiderman turned to look at her. His shoulders were shaking and his voice was unsteady when he spoke. "Um... War Machine fell. Mr. Stark... he didn't get there in time."

"Jesus." Jessica swore.

"It seems the worst has come to pass." T'Challa murmured. "You seem to have these three under control. I must go."

"What?!" Jessica growled. "You're leaving? What, you didn't get your vengeance so you're off to sulk? Are you serious right now?"

"I am a king Ms. Jones. You would do well to remember that."

"A king who's acting like a spoiled kid having a tantrum." Jessica retorted. "But you know what? I don't care. Go, do whatever it is that's so important you can't stick around to see if your allies are alright."

"You are a most disagreeable woman Ms. Jones."

"And you're an asshole." Jessica shot back with a cold glare.

T'Challa gave no reaction to her words but bowed in response to her scowl, smiled and walked away.

"Dickhead." Jessica muttered. "Stark? You okay? You need me to do anything?" Silence met her inquiry and she shared a look with Spiderman. Well, it seemed she did. Hard to tell with that weird mask he had on.
"Mr. Stark?"

"Yeah kid, I heard you." Tony replied, his voice sounding tired and broken and making Jessica suck in a harsh breath. "I'm okay. Wait for the German police to take the rogues into custody, then head to the hotel. Happy will take you to a waiting Quinjet back to the States."

"What about you?" Jessica demanded.

"I'm going with Rhodey to the hospital. Then Vision and I will need to debrief Ross and the council. I'll see you in New York as soon as Rhodes is cleared for travel."

"Is... War Machine okay sir?" Spiderman asked quietly.

"No kid, he's not. But he's alive. Stark out."

Jess shared a look with the kid, shrugged and took a seat on the ground beside him to wait for the cops. Neither said anything, preferring to wait until they had more privacy and spent their time glaring at the fugitives who were tied up and sitting ten feet away, glaring right back at them.

***

Tony paced outside the ER. It was killing him not to barge in there and demand answers. He had the best doctors, specialists and equipment back at the New York compound. All he needed was the green light to take Rhodey home.

"Sir." Vision said quietly at his side as Rhodey entered the MRI machine.

"What the hell happened?" Tony demanded, keeping his voice low.

"I became... distracted."

"I didn't think you could get distracted." Tony hissed.

Vision bowed his head. "Neither did I."

"That's not good enough." Tony huffed as his phone began vibrating in his pocket. He pulled it out and swore at what he saw. "We have to debrief Ross. Now."

***

Two hours later, Tony had Rhodes on a Quinjet back to New York. Vision kept his distance and stayed in the cockpit, leaving him alone with his friend.

"Tones." Rhodey croaked, drifting back to consciousness. "I know what you're doing and you need to stop. What happened wasn't Vision's fault. It wasn't yours either."

Tony looked away, staring out the window, a dozen conflicting emotions warring within him. "He said he became distracted. And I knew I should've upgraded your suit with a backup power source."

"Look Tony. I love you like a brother, but I can't argue this shit with you. Not right now."
Tony’s face fell as he met his friend's eyes. "Dammit. I'm a terrible friend Rhodes. You should've run the other way after college. Got as far away from me as possible."

"Tony, you are the biggest pain in the ass I have ever met. But I wouldn't trade our friendship for anything. I'm honoured to call you my friend. Besides, my life would be so boring without you. Promise me you won't let this drag you down alright?"

Tony let out the breath he'd been holding but said nothing.

"Look at me Tony." Rhodey pressed. "Promise me."

"Alright Platypus." Tony sighed, giving him a watery smile. "I promise."

"Good. Now get your butt in a bunk and go to sleep. That's an order. If you don't, I'll get that Jones woman to beat your ass when we get back to New York."

"Fine, fine." Tony agreed. "Just... I'm going to do everything I can to fix this. I need you to know that."

"I know you will Tones. Now go. FRIDAY will let me know if you don't. Won't you FRIDAY?"

"Yes Colonel. I will."

"Traitor." Tony muttered to his AI, getting to his feet. "Wake me if you need anything alright?"

"You got it."
With Rhodey in the best hospital available and with the best care Tony could provide, he headed to the new Avengers compound. With Rogers and Barnes having disappeared over the Russian border with the Quinjet, he was unable to track them.

It left him feeling useless. The guilt that clawed at him over the incident at the airport threatened to consume him if he couldn't do something to fix it. He was staring out a second floor window of one of the training rooms, lost in thought, when his phone rang.

"Stark here."

"Tony?"

"Strange?" Tony hesitated. He really couldn't deal with this right now. "What can I do for you?"

It was almost as though he could feel Stephen scowling into the phone and knew he hadn't succeeded in disguising the turmoil in his voice.

"I heard you got back from Germany, and about your friend. I wanted to tell you how sorry I was to hear it." Stephen replied, his voice careful.

"Thank you. Rhodey's a fighter and he's got the best care available. He'll pull through and... he'll get past this."

"And what about you?"

Tony scowled at the phone. "What about me?"

"Are you alright? You watched your friend get severely injured. I can't imagine that was easy."

"I'm fine Doctor. I'm not the one lying in traction right now." Tony retorted.

"Of course. How silly of me to think you might need a friend while your best friend is in serious condition."

"That's not..." Christ, he was being an asshole.

"Never mind." Stephen snapped, cutting him off. "It was stupid of me to ask and I will assume that now is also not a good time to attempt taking you to the mirror dimension."

"I'm pretty busy Strange. Up to my neck in bureaucratic bullshit. I can't just..."

"It's fine. My own fault for making assumptions. I'll leave you to it. Goodbye."

Tony's mouth was still open in protest when the line went dead. Shit on a stick. Now the Doctor was pissed at him and he hadn't done anything wrong other than call him when he was in a bad mood. At this rate, the other Avengers wouldn't be the only ones to leave him behind.

The sound of heels clicked on the smooth floor as Natasha joined him at the window. Speak of the
devil, he thought darkly. "How is he?"

"Getting the best care in the world. Shattered L4 through S1... best case scenario, we're still looking at some form of paralysis."

"Steve's not going to stop." Nat said, staring out the window. "If you don't stop too..." She trailed off. When he didn't respond, she continued. "Rhodey's going to be the best case scenario."

"You let them go Natasha."

"We played this wrong."

Tony barked a laugh. If he'd been drinking coffee at the time, he would've choked on it. "We? Boy, it must be hard to shake the whole double agent thing huh? Sticks in the dna."

"Are you incapable of letting go of your ego for one goddamn second?"

A barked laugh broke the tense bubble of silence surrounding the two of them and they turned together to see Jessica standing there. She was glaring at Natasha with eyes colder than ice. "Are you fucking kidding me right now?" She said, moving closer to Tony. "You betray him and the rest of us and now you're trying to make what happened his fault?"

"This doesn't concern you." Nat retorted.

"Like hell it doesn't. You screwed us all over. If not for you, Tony's friend wouldn't now be in ICU because Rogers and Barnes would be in custody."

"Look, I don't know who you think you are, but there's a lot going on here you don't understand."

"I understand plenty bitch, so don't you dare talk down to me. As for who I am, I'm Tony's friend. Do you even have any? Or do you just switch loyalties like changing your clothes? Whatever benefits you the most at the time I'm guessing."

Tony was reeling by the time Jessica ran out of words and the stunned expression on Nat's face was priceless. "T'Challa told Ross what you did, so... they're coming for you." Tony said, Nat turning to look at him with anger in her eyes.

"I'm not the one that needs to watch their back." Nat scowled, casting a pointed look at Jones before stalking away.

"Don't be so sure about that lady." Jones called out, a smirk on her lips when the other woman's spine stiffened before disappearing through the door.

Tony raised his eyebrows at her when she turned back to face him. "That was entertaining." She said, a smile on her lips. "Not sure letting her go was a good idea though. Hope you know what you're doing Stark."

"So do I." Tony murmured, glancing back to the door. "Your timing was fortuitous Jones. What are you doing here? I thought you were back in the city."

"Wanted to stick around, see you before I left." Jones shrugged, holding her hand out palm up. "And I wanted to give this back."
Tony looked down to see the amulet Strange had made for him glittering in the light from the window. "You're giving it back?" He asked, keeping the faint tremor in his voice controlled as he took it from her. "Why?"

Jones shrugged. "It did what you said it would and... I saw the look on your face when you gave it to me. That Doctor friend of yours? He made this for you, doesn't feel right for me to keep it."

"Uh...thanks Jones." Tony replied, his voice tight with emotion as he slipped the amulet over his head and tucked it under his shirt. "And thanks for your help in Germany. You were great."

"No problem Stark." Jessica shuffled in place, not meeting his eyes. "Look, I'm not good with all this emotional crap so... take care of yourself alright? Call me if you need someone's ass kicked."

"Of course." Tony nodded as she turned to go. "Hey Jones, what you said earlier about being my friend. Did you mean it?"

Jessica smirked and kept going, walking backwards to the door. "Don't let it go to your head Stark. I still think you're an arrogant jerk, but you're my kind of arrogant jerk."

Tony chuckled as he turned back to the window, a warm feeling in his chest. He sighed and turned to leave the room when FRIDAY pinged him with a news article. After watching for a minute, he closed the holo and stalked from the room, heading for the landing pad.

"FRIDAY, fire up the chopper." Tony said. "And get these files to Ross."

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"Boss. Are you certain it's a good idea for you to go to the Raft alone?"

"What choice do I have FRIDAY? If I bring anyone else, Ross will get it in his head I'm there to break them out. I don't need the headache that would cause."

"Are you so sure any of them will talk to you?"

"If these other super soldiers are a real threat, who else is available to stop them? Who else has the resources and means to do something about it? If I'm wrong, I don't want anyone else to take the heat if I get caught. I'm not condoning what Rogers did, I'm just making sure I didn't make things worse by not helping him."

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"We should implement facial recognition technology and circulate Zemo's profile as soon possible. He can't have gotten far." Tony said as he met Ross on the landing platform of the Raft.

"You honestly think I'm going to listen to anything you have to say after what happened in Leipzig? You're lucky you're not locked up in one of these cells." Ross retorted hotly as Tony moved past him to the holding cells.

***

"Oh look ladies and gentlemen, the futurist is here. He knows all, he knows what's best for you,
whether you like it or not." Clint sneered as Tony entered the room housing the former Avengers.

"Give me a break Barton. I didn't know they'd put you in here."

"You knew they'd put us somewhere."

"Oh right, right, of course I did. Because I know everything and you're too stupid to think for yourself. You broke the law Barton. You read it, you broke it. I don't understand Clint. You're an adult, you've got a wife and kids. Why didn't you think of them before you chose the wrong side?"

Clint slammed his fist into the wall by the bars, a murderous look in his eyes as Tony moved away. "Better watch your back with this guy. He might break it."

"Don't be an asshole Barton!" Wilson shouted from across the room, effectively shutting the other man up.

"Hank always said you couldn't trust a Stark." Lang muttered as Tony passed his cell. He had to say something. After being handed off by German police to guys in black military garb and stuffed into an air transport, no one had told them anything.

He had grown more tense the longer he thought of his predicament and increasingly alarmed that he was missing something important. Everyone else seemed to blame Stark for what had happened to them, but he couldn't see it. Sure Stark was rich, but military? Off the rez, maximum security? Even he wasn't dumb enough to think Stark could swing something like that.

"Who are you again?" Tony scoffed, ignoring him.

"Aw, come on man..." Scott groaned. He turned away from the bars of his cell, Barton's angry muttering beginning to grate on his nerves and he tuned him out. Instead he eavesdropped on the conversation Stark and Wilson were having next to him and felt his jaw drop at what he heard.

"How's Rhodes?" Sam asked, guilt filling his eyes.

"He's being transferred to Columbia medical tomorrow, so... fingers crossed." Tony paused. "You need anything in here? They feed you yet?"

"So what, you're good cop now?"

"I was wrong about Barnes."

"That's a first."

"Look, I don't know what the hell I ever did to you Wilson. What's with the attitude?"

"Sorry. Guess I just don't like the view from in here." Sam shook his head, his arms crossed over his chest as Tony showed him the image of the dead doctor. "I'll tell you where Steve went but you have to go alone and as a friend."

"Easy."

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"Did Wilson tell you anything?" Ross demanded on the walk back to Tony's helicopter.

"He told me to go to hell so I'm heading back to the Compound. You can call me anytime. I'll put you on hold, I like to watch the line blink."

Once he was in the air, Tony programmed FRIDAY to return to New York while he got ready to don his suit and head to Russia. "Boss. Are you sure you should be doing this alone?"

"I don't have a choice FRIDAY. There's no time to call anyone and Ross won't authorize something like this on a hunch."

"And if you're right, you'll be outnumbered even with Rogers and Barnes on your side."

"Your objection is noted FRIDAY. Return to the Compound. Tell Vision where I've gone." Tony said as he exited the helicopter in his armour.

"Boss?" FRIDAY said, ten minutes into his flight.

"What now?"

"I'm tracking a small unidentified craft following you. Initial scans indicate the ship is reinforced with Vibranium. It's clearly of Wakandan design."

"Let him follow. If Zemo has revived those soldiers, we'll need his help."

"Understood boss."
After a short, but tense conversation with Rogers, Tony led the way forward, deeper inside the abandoned Hydra facility.

"That's weird." Tony muttered, taking a thermal scan of the large room he was about to enter.

"How many?" Steve asked.

"Just one."

Steve saw Zemo first, letting his shield fly at the small glass window, flinching away when it bounced harmlessly off and ricocheted back to him.

"You must be Zemo." Steve growled, moving closer.

"Reinforced glass Captain. Your shield cannot break it."

"I think I could get it to break." Tony retorted.

"Given time, I've no doubt of that Mr. Stark. Unfortunately, you won't have it. You're about to be very busy with... other concerns."

"You did all this?" Steve challenged him. "Killed all those people, shot the super soldiers just to lure us out here?"

"I studied you, watched you. For over a year I thought of nothing else. Now that I see you up close... there's a bit of green in the blue of your eyes. It's nice to know you have some... visible flaws." Zemo smirked and pushed a button, activating a small laptop near the centre of the room.

"What is this?" Tony demanded, his heart clenching in panic and a rush of unpleasant emotion at the image on the screen. That road, he knew that road... no, no, no. What was this? "I know that road..." He murmured. "What is this?!"

An icy silence descended to envelop the three tense men in the room. The only sound was the video that continued playing on the screen. Distantly, Tony registered movement near the doorway, his brain helpfully supplying a name, T'Challa, while the rest of his attention remained riveted on the screen before him. Pain and loss as vivid as it had been the day he'd been told of his parent's deaths, settled in his chest like brittle glass making it hard to breathe, even harder to make sense of what he was seeing.

He felt his heart stop as the image on the screen faded to black. The room he stood in with Rogers and Barnes, the man who had murdered his parents was deathly silent. The only sound was that of Rogers' panicked breathing as he turned to glare at the Winter Soldier.

"Tony, no!" Steve cried, his arms suddenly around his chest to restrain him. Tony's skin crawled with dread, his heart beating an ever-increasing staccato rhythm behind his false rib cage. "It wasn't his fault Tony. Hydra was controlling him."

Wrenching himself free of Roger's hold, he turned. His throat as dry as the desert, his voice like
glass as he spoke. "Did you know?" He demanded, raw emotion overwhelming him and threatening to spill out.

"I suspected."

Steve's eyes shone, a million things reflected in their blue depths, but the only one Tony saw was guilt. "Don't bullshit me Rogers! Did you know?!"

Steve blinked and swallowed, and the ground fell away beneath Tony's feet. "Yes."

With Herculean effort, Tony fought the tears that he refused to let fall. He took a single step back and without warning slammed a fist into Steve's chest, throwing him twelve feet across the room.

Barnes surged from behind him, but he was ready. He fought Barnes off, activating his repulsors and slammed the other man into the far wall. Steve hit him with the shield, making him drop Barnes, then yelled for Bucky to run.

Tony saw red, throwing Steve off to pursue his parent's killer and Steve threw himself in his path. "Move!" Tony shouted.

"No! It wasn't him Tony!"

"Fine. Then I'll make you move." Tony retorted, hitting him again with a repulsor. He flew past him, Rogers getting in a hit that took out one of the reactors in his boot, but he was still moving.

He managed destroy the hinge on the silo hatch in time to slam it shut and almost caught Barnes, but Rogers was there again, dragging him back down the shaft. The three of them landed in a bruised heap at the bottom and Tony wasted no time going after Barnes.

The three of them fought, Tony's mind consumed with vengeance. His heart breaking more with every blow Rogers landed on his suit. Rogers, the great American hero, his teammate, someone he once thought a friend, the same man who his own father had idolized.

Steve fucking Rogers was now defending his father's murderer. Howard Stark, the man who had made Rogers what he was today. Not only was he betraying his father's memory in favour of his best friend, but betraying Howard's son and using Howard's gift to the man to do it.

After what felt like an eternity, the safeguard in the suit's chest reactor fired, obliterating Barnes' metal arm and Tony blasted Rogers out of his way. "This won't change what happened Tony."

Steve reminded him, moving to block him.

"I don't care." Tony whispered, wanting to add asshole to the end of that statement, but was too numb to voice it. "He killed my mom."

"He's my friend."

"So was I."

He blinked and next thing he knew, he was on his back, his suit's link to FRIDAY too damaged to assist him as Rogers slammed his shield into the edge of his helmet. Then his mask was torn free and he was staring into Steve's cold blue eyes, a thrill of icy fear making his heart falter in his chest. The shield came down a final time to slam hard into the arc reactor on the front of the suit.
He winced in pain and fear at what Steve had just done, his mind unable to clear from the shock of what had just happened.

He watched, frozen in silence as Rogers wrenched the shield loose from his chest and stumbled over to Barnes to help him to his feet. They shuffled through the snow away from him, Rogers stooping to retrieve the shield and something inside Tony snapped him out of his catatonia.

"That doesn't belong to you!" He cried, his voice breaking as he struggled to get to his feet, but the hydraulics were too damaged, the cold making everything sluggish and leaving him stuck on his knees. "My father made that shield! You don't deserve it!"

At that moment, he didn't know what he expected to happen or what reaction he was hoping for. When Rogers said nothing and dropped the shield into the snow, every ounce of his remaining energy drained out of him. He fell backwards, his balance and coordination gone as the arc reactor's light flickered a final time and went out.

A shiver ran through his entire body as he listened to Rogers and Barnes leave the bunker. The distant sound of a jet engine reached him, fading into the distance and leaving nothing but silence in its wake. He shivered again and knew he was suffering from shock, but he also knew he was about to get a lot colder.

He shifted as much as the suit would allow until his back was supported by the concrete wall. He reached for the manual release lever to free him from the suit, but it too was damaged and wouldn't disengage.

Several minutes passed, shock still flooding his senses. He couldn't believe Rogers... the man had known about Barnes, had pled the man's case to Tony, all the while knowing what Barnes had done. Stunned didn't cover what he was feeling. The only time he'd felt more betrayed by someone he trusted was when Stane had ordered the Ten Rings to kill him, and failing that had tried to kill him again with his own hands.

"FRIDAY? FRIDAY?! Come on Fri, don't leave me hanging here..." He called, feeling a weight drop into the pit of his stomach as the reality of his situation sank in. He was aware of an icy chill on his face and lifted an armoured hand to his cheek, surprised to see it come away wet. He snorted at the sight, unaware he'd been crying, then felt all his resolve fade.

He was screwed. Literally up a creek without a paddle. No one but FRIDAY knew his location, not that it would help. Even if she could get someone to come to his aid, there was no way of knowing how long it would take for them to reach him. By what little light remained, it would be full dark in less than a quarter hour and with it, he'd be plunged into sub-zero temperatures.

If he was out of the suit he might have a chance, but the arc reactor was done for and the manual release was inoperative. Trapped in a metal can, with only a thin layer of material between him and the suit, combined with his injuries, he doubted he'd still be conscious in an hour's time. It was anyone's guess how long he would live once he blacked out.

He laughed at himself then. The world's most famous (or infamous), futurist, inventor, billionaire and sometimes hero, who should have died in a terrorist's cave years ago, was instead going to perish in an abandoned Hydra bunker. Alone, injured and left to die by a former friend and ally, no one but FRIDAY would know the truth of what had happened when they found his body. In this, Tony felt everything he'd tried to do, all his inventions, all his plans and breakthroughs adding up to nothing much at all.
And who would be left to mourn his passing? Pepper was moving on and Happy was now more her bodyguard and chauffeur than his. Which left Rhodey. They'd known each other for decades since first meeting at MIT, but he was far from being Rhodes' only friend.

They'd be sad for a while, maybe shed some tears, but his legacy would die with him. His inventions and discoveries would eventually be sold or stolen without him there to stop it. Stark Industries would fade into obscurity without his constant breakthroughs in technology to shore it up.

The last thought he had before falling unconscious was regret for not explaining the concept of death to his babies, Dum-E, U and FRIDAY. And Stephen.... damn, it surprised him that it hurt when he realized he would never flirt with the Doctor again…
FRIDAY's Solution

Stephen had just poured his morning tea, when his phone rang. He glanced at the display and set his cup back in it's saucer before answering.

"Stark. I didn't expect to hear from you again so soon."

"I am not Mr. Stark." A female voice replied.

"Oh! Uh, who is this?"

"You probably don't remember me Doctor but I am FRIDAY. I am Mr. Stark's personal AI and I need your help."

"My help? Why?"

"Boss's suit has been damaged and I believe he is injured as well."

"Tony is hurt?"

"Doctor. This would be easier if I was there. Can you open your front door?"

"My door?" Strange repeated, feeling off balance as he spoke to an artificial intelligence through the phone.

"Yes."

"Alright." Strange agreed, heading to the front door. "Though I don't understand what..." Stephen cut off what he was about to say when a small drone zipped inside to hover before him. He held his hand out when it buzzed at him and the drone dropped a small package into it, before zipping back out the open door. "What is this?" He asked into the phone.

"Just open it Doctor and I will explain. FRIDAY out."

Stephen scowled at the phone, but set it aside and opened the package. Inside was what looked like a rectangular watch face but it was attached to a thin chain, clearly meant to be worn as a necklace. As soon as he touched it, the screen activated and FRIDAY spoke, almost making him drop it in surprise.

"Thank you Doctor." She said.

"What is this?"

"It is a modified version of boss's watch. It works the same as any phone but with very enhanced features."

"Why does it look like a necklace?"

"Boss designed it for your use after he learned the extent of the injuries to your hands. He believed you would prefer something that did not draw attention to them."

Overwhelmed by the AI's explanation of Tony's thought and consideration, he couldn't speak for several seconds. "Um..." Stephen paused to clear his throat as he dropped the chain over his head. "You said you believed Tony was injured? And you lost the connection with the suit, but you didn't
"Tell me why you need my help."

"Boss is in Siberia and if he is injured I do not know how long he can survive in such temperatures. I... was hoping you could portal there and retrieve him for me."

Strange was struck, not just by the absurdity of the situation, but by the urgency and worry he detected in Tony's AI. If the AI was worried... "It's not that simple FRIDAY. I need an image of where I'm portaling to before I can go there."

"We're in luck then Doctor." FRIDAY replied, her relief unmistakable. "I have video footage of boss' arrival at the structure from his suit. Please look at the device you're wearing." FRIDAY said.

Stephen lifted the small screen to see a projected holographic image spring to life. He bit back the curse that sprang to his lips when he noted how desolate, cold and near invisible the bunker was.

"That's perfect." Stephen said, slipping his sling ring onto his hand. The image in the photo solidified on the other side of his portal and he stepped through, his hands immediately beginning to shake and cramp in the cold air. "Do you know where I should start looking?"

"Enter the Doctor. Lift the device and I will scan the area."

A 3D holographic image of the structure he now stood in sprang up from the pendant. The base was huge and all of it underground, but he didn't understand what FRIDAY was doing. "Can I ask what you're doing?"

"Looking for heat signatures." She replied, her tone terse.

"I don't see anything."

"There is a lot of interference this far up, but boss was further down when I lost contact. Proceed inside please Doctor and take the stairs down. You will come to a large, round open area. Boss was inside an abandoned missile silo when the connection with the suit failed. When you get there, follow the damage... and if you don't mind, please hurry."

The urgency in FRIDAY's voice had him down the stairs and into the room she'd mentioned in minutes. The sight of the destruction chilled the blood in his veins as he moved past a small circular room. The way forward was littered with debris and the cloak lifted him over the worst of it.

Looking up, he could see nothing and there was no sign of anyone on the concrete slab he stood on. "FRIDAY? Where do I go?"

"Scanning. Doctor, I have detected a heat signature at the bottom of the silo. The reading is weak and fading quickly."

"Got it." Stephen nodded, the cloak activating and taking him to the bottom, where he assumed the fuel from long gone missiles discharged outside the structure. It was very dark so he conjured a small magical ball of light and sent it ahead.

A flash of red caught his eye and he moved with purpose toward it. "Christ." He muttered as he took in the damage to Tony's suit, but his heart caught in his throat when he registered the deathly pale look of Tony's skin. "Oh god Tony... what happened here?"

"Life signs are weak Doctor. We need to get him out of the cold and the suit."
"Right." Stephen nodded. "Give me a minute.

Without another word, Stephen conjured a portal. The shine of something large and silver caught his eye as he was about to travel through it and he paused. He shook off his shock on recognizing it and snatched it up before portaling himself and Tony into his bedroom at the Sanctum.

***

"Doctor, we need to get him out of the suit." FRIDAY repeated while Stephen looked at Tony lying prone on his bed. "You will need these tools." She added, projecting a holographic image of what he would need.

Stephen frowned. There was no way he could do what was required quickly and called for Wong to help him. The other sorcerer came running, surprise on his face at what greeted him, but said nothing and got to work. Stephen cursed his hands as he conjured magic tools to assist him. Wong worked on disengaging one side of Tony's armour while he did the other. In minutes they had the suit removed, the pieces piled neatly in the corner of the room.

"I need to stabilize him." Stephen muttered under his breath when Wong cast him a questioning look. "Can you start a fire in the hearth and bring up more blankets please Wong?"

Wong nodded and after lighting the fire, went to fetch what he'd requested.

Tony lay still on the covers of the bed, dressed only in a black one piece Stephen assumed must be to protect his body from the armour. He didn't like what he saw. There were dried bloody gashes on Tony's face, a trail of dried blood running over one eye. But the black suit he wore looked damaged and he was afraid to see what injuries might lie beneath it.

Shaking himself, he snapped his fingers, removing the black garment and quickly replacing it with a pair of dark blue sweat pants. He left Tony's torso bare and hissed in anger at the ugly bruise centred on his chest. With a muttered curse, he conjured a portal to the supply room of Metro General and snatched up a thermal blanket.

Wong returned as he was tucking the fabric around Tony's chilled skin, saying nothing as he set the blankets down. "What happened Strange?" He asked.

"I don't know." Stephen sighed. "He's been unconscious since I found him."

"Doctor, he needs to go to a hospital." FRIDAY said, startling Wong.

Stephen nodded even as he watched a spot of colour appear on Tony's skin as he settled the blankets over him. "I need to speak to Christine." He said. "Can you stay with him?"

"I think you should hurry Stephen." Wong nodded, his eyes glued to Tony's still form.

Stephen portaled himself straight to the ER of his former workplace, scanning the area for Christine. A wave of relief flooded him when he spotted her at the nurse's station reading a patient file. She looked up, her eyes filling with surprise when she saw him approach.

"Stephen? Is something wrong?"

"I... have a patient who needs you and I need a favour. It's Tony Stark. I don't know what happened but we need to keep this quiet. I found him in Siberia, unconscious and injured. I've got him at the Sanctum now and can portal him directly into the ER. I'd like you to examine him."
"Wait, what?" Christine gasped. "Tony Stark? Siberia? What the hell Stephen? I can't just clear the ER for..."

"Please Christine, I need you to do this. And I'll explain later. Or at least, I'll try to."

"Fine. Bring him to emergency. You know I won't be able to keep this quiet for long. Not when it's Tony Stark." She warned him.

"I know. I just would like to buy him some time before anyone finds out where he is. Make sure he's stable first."

"Fine." She said, her arms crossed over her chest. "But you're sticking around long enough to explain to me what the hell is going on."

"Of course."

"Good. I'll meet you there."
Stark Cold

Portaling Tony into the hospital would have been a simple thing, if not for the Cloak of Levitation. Wrapping itself around Tony's unconscious form it lifted him from the bed and flicked it's collar impatiently at Stephen as if to say, well, what are you waiting for?

Concealing both his surprise and embarrassment, he opened a portal and watched in disbelief as the Cloak gently deposited it's burden into a waiting bed. With a parting caress to Tony's cheek, it returned to Stephen's shoulders as though showing emotion for another person was nothing out of the ordinary. Disgruntled by this odd behaviour, Stephen put off questioning it until later as the room filled with emergency personnel.

He stood to the side and out of the way of Christine and the nurses while they bustled around the prone form of Tony Stark. Christine hissed with distaste and shock when she saw the darkening and spreading bruise on Tony's chest. She cast Stephen a dark look while the nurse's hooked up an IV, EKG and took Tony's blood pressure.

Clucking under her tongue in irritation, she took the gauze and antiseptic from a nurse and began cleaning up the cuts and dried blood from Tony's face herself. The heart monitor beeped steadily on in the background, but Stephen knew it wasn't anywhere near rhythmic or steady enough to be considered healthy.

Once the nurse's had gotten Tony out of the clothes Stephen had put him in, the extent of his injuries made a knot of anger form in the pit of his stomach. He didn't know how long ago Tony had received them, but from the quick look he'd gotten as he was fitted with a hospital gown, it was clear most of them were recent. His mind flashed on the shield he'd recovered near Tony's unconscious form and a fresh wave of irritation washed through him.

He was so pale against the white of the sheets that framed his body, he looked small and fragile. It was hard to believe this was the same man who'd stood in a kitchen preparing tea, who had flirted with him over the amulet Stephen had given him. An amulet that still lay undisturbed on Tony's immobile form. He was so consumed with anger on Tony's behalf that at first he didn't hear Christine when she called him.

"Stephen!" She hissed.

Tearing his eyes away from the sight of Tony's chest rising and falling slowly but steadily, he turned to look at her.

She narrowed her eyes and motioned for him to follow her into the hall. "You need to tell me what happened Stephen. I have to notify his emergency contacts and they're going to have questions I can't answer."

"Privately." Strange said, his gaze unwavering. Nodding, she led him down the hall to an unoccupied office and closed the door.

With a sigh, Stephen leaned against the desk and told Christine everything that had happened since first receiving the call from FRIDAY. But he left out the part regarding the dead men he'd seen in the bunker and the shield he'd recovered from where he found Tony. He wasn't about to share something like that without knowing the context first.
"So you don't know what he was doing in Siberia."

"I'm afraid not."

"Do you know what he was doing before that?"

"I spoke to him on the phone when he returned to New York. He'd just come back from Berlin with his friend who'd been seriously injured in the line of duty."

"So clearly something else happened after you spoke to him."

"Yes." Stephen hesitated. "Will he be alright? I... don't know anything specific about his injuries. Can you tell me anything? When or how he might have received them?"

"He sustained multiple contusions to various parts of his body. The most recent and the most serious was to his chest area. Whatever he was hit with has put stress on his heart, so we induced a mild coma to help him heal some of it. I can't tell you more until he wakes up, but I have to call his contacts now."

"Can you tell me who they are?"

"A Colonel Rhodes and a Ms. Potts, why?"

Stephen groaned, massaging his temples with shaking hands. "You won't be able to reach Rhodes. He's the friend who was seriously injured, partial paralysis is what I heard."

"And Ms. Potts?"

"That I don't know. But I may have heard Tony mention she was away on vacation."

"She's the only other name on his list of contacts." Christine sighed. "And he has his own doctor who I need to call in on this."

"I... " Stephen hesitated and forced a neutral look into his eyes. "I would be willing to stay with him until someone can be reached."

Christine's eyes widened at that and she opened her mouth to say something, but changed her mind at the last minute and nodded instead. "Alright. He should be stable enough to be moved to a private room in about an hour. I'll make my calls and come talk to you when I have a minute."

"I need to return to the Sanctum, but I will be back soon."

"Fine."

***

Stephen returned to the Sanctum to change his clothes to something clean and to let Wong know what was happening. Back at the hospital, he checked the ICU and was directed to a private room on the next floor up.

Upon reaching Tony's room, he hesitated. There was no reason for him to be here. He and Tony
may have shared a tea and a coffee and mild banter, but he couldn't exactly call the man a friend. For that matter he couldn't even say for certain that Tony would even want him here, never mind be privy to whatever had happened in Siberia.

With a pained groan, he turned around and headed to the cafeteria to get an herbal tea. Fifteen minutes later he was back outside Tony's room, his mind filled with the image of that shield on the ground and he couldn't walk away. Other than FRIDAY and Christine, he was the only one who knew where Tony had been when he received his injuries.

Squaring his shoulders, he pushed open the door. His eyes were immediately drawn to the silent form in the bed, the EKG beeping out Tony's heartbeat in a steady rhythm. He wanted to know what had happened in Siberia. More than that, he realized that somewhere along the way, in the short time he'd known Tony, he'd begun to develop very strong feelings for him. Though he'd said as much to Wynn already, he hadn't realized the depth of those growing emotions until now. It also wasn't something he was prepared to fully embrace just yet, but he wasn't going to leave either.

After moving it closer to Tony's bed, he settled in a chair. Sipping his tea, he waited and watched the sleeping man who had somehow slipped past his defences and begun to mean something to him.

***

Tony drifted in a haze of light and dark, cold and warm, fear and peace. The way his thoughts weaved and blended into each other, a small part of his mind knew it was caused by painkillers. Good ones considering he couldn't make his eyelids listen to his command to open or his brain to hold on to a single thought. And what did it say about his life that he recognized the drug induced haze he found himself in being familiar? Nothing good, his drug addled mind whispered helpfully.

With that haze, an underlying shiver of fear kept crawling up his spine only for a flush of warmth to chase it away. Then he felt as though he was cold, so cold that he would never be warm again. Yet when he shivered, comfort and safety, two feeling he had rarely felt in his life would infuse his body, seeping into his bones and he'd forget what being alone felt like.

Gradually, the drugs in his system lessened and sound returned to him in pieces. First a careful voice, the sound of a woman speaking soothingly while she stood close to his side. He became aware of the surface he lay on and the weight of a blanket over his skin. Then a deeper male voice spoke in hushed whispers, the higher pitch of a woman responding and he frowned. His thoughts began to clear, though he still couldn't wake and he knew he was in a hospital.

That seemed impossible and wrong somehow but he couldn't remember why. Voices again and something about the male voice he heard struck a memory, a feeling of familiarity, recognition. A red cloak appeared in his thoughts, the sparkle of an amber pendant catching the light, and cool blue eyes with the depth of entire galaxies reflected within them.

Sleep claimed him again as he listened to someone move around the room. The sound of a chair sliding across a bare floor, and then... nothing.

***

Stephen finished his tea, the herbal infusion doing nothing to dispel the unsettled feeling in his chest. He sat quietly, staring at the man in the bed, unable to explain or understand what he was feeling.
Sure he'd noticed Tony Stark. The man was impossible to ignore, even before he became Iron Man. He'd met him several times over the course of his personal rise to fame, his own time in the spotlight. The Charity dinner where Stark had sought him out and he'd behaved rudely had been the night before his life had irrevocably changed in that dreadful accident.

It changed a second time the moment Stark walked through the front door of the Sanctum, his entire world flipping upside down again. Much like when he'd flipped his car, the rules changed, the way in which he viewed his life and the path before him veered in a new and unknown direction.

He didn't like not knowing his place in the world or having his views altered. But he'd learned the hard way what happened when he resisted change after the accident. After all his money, friends, status, colleagues and self-respect had gone, did he accept that change didn't have to be so hard. But never once had he entertained the idea of seeing Tony Stark in person again and certainly not sitting opposite him in the library of the Sanctum.

As he watched Tony sleep, he realized he'd been gravitating toward the genius billionaire since the moment he'd appeared at the Sanctum. And now that he recognized what was happening, he couldn't bear to see Tony injured. Leaning forward, he slipped his hand into the other man's unresponsive one, applying only enough pressure to be reassuring before leaning back in his chair and closing his eyes to rest.
How Did I Get Here?

Four hours after Stark left the Raft, an older grey-haired, moustached man entered. He speared each of them in turn with a cold, but triumphant smirk that made Scott tense instantly.

"Barton." The man said, sauntering over to Clint's cell. "I have to say I'm shocked to see you in here. Thought you'd retired. Guess life on a farm isn't as enticing as breaking international law."

"I didn't break any laws." Clint sneered, his voice barely concealing his contempt.

"On the contrary, you broke several the minute you stepped out of that plane in Germany. Or didn't Rogers explain that to you? I have to say, having you deliver the Scarlet Witch right into my hands was a bonus even I couldn't have anticipated. Despite Stark's royal overconfidence and screw up at the airport, he did manage to contain the four of you. Not that he'll be getting any thanks from me for that. But hiding the witch at his own damn compound? She might've actually had a chance if you hadn't brought her right to me. A slim one, mind you, but still a chance. Instead, she's even more complicit in her actions than she was before Germany and I didn't even need the leverage. When you screw up, you really take others down with you huh Barton? Must be a leftover from how you betrayed your own people when Loki was holding your chains."

"Shut up!"

The Secretary, who Scott still had no clue who he was, laughed at him and moved to stand before Lang. "Mr. Lang." He nodded, a small smile playing at the corners of his mouth making Scott's insides twist in alarm. "We haven't been properly introduced. Secretary of Defence, Thaddeus Ross at your service. Formerly General Ross of the United States army."

Oh shit, Scott swore in his head. That's why he recognized him. "You're the guy who tried to capture the Hulk a few years back." Scott blurted before he could stop himself.

"So nice to be recognized." Ross smirked. "You really shouldn't have gotten on that plane with Mr. Barton, Lang. I doubt he told you the whole story behind what you were needed for. Not that it matters now."

"We were trying to stop super soldiers!" Scott retorted, panic wreaking havoc on his thoughts.

"Shut up Tic Tac." Wilson murmured to his left.

"Oh don't fret Mr. Wilson. I heard all about those soldiers from Stark, if they even exist. That's assuming they weren't just some ploy to justify Rogers' actions in protecting Barnes." He said, his voice bored as he turned back to Lang. "I would love to see the look on Hank Pym's face when he finds out we have his ant-man suit. We've been trying to get our hands on that tech for years and you just hand-delivered it to us. I guess thanks is in order." He murmured as Scott's face drained of colour as he sank to the bed in shock when his knees gave out.

"Mr. Wilson." Ross continued, leaving Scott with a quiet laugh. "I never would have pegged you as a traitor. All those medals, all that experience... and you threw it all away for what? A friend who's so blinded by his loyalty to Barnes he damned the consequences?"

"You didn't give us a choice." Wilson retorted, his arms crossed protectively over his chest.
"On the contrary, I gave you a choice. You just made the wrong one." Ross countered. "From the reaction Lang just had, you and Rogers didn't exactly explain what they were risking did you?"

Sam scowled and looked away, but Ross had his answer. "Guess you have some explaining to do Sam, I'll leave you to it." He nodded, smiling to himself and with a final pleased laugh he aimed at Lang and Barton, he left the room.

Barton glared daggers across the room at Sam who had backed up from the bars where Clint couldn't see him. "What the hell Wilson? What the hell was that about? What did he mean you didn't tell us everything? I thought this was about Stark and super soldiers."

"So did I." Scott grumbled, still weighed down by what this meant for his future. "I have a daughter to get back to. Shit! Fuck! What the hell did you get me into Wilson?"
"I'm sorry guys." Sam murmured. "I thought you knew what the stakes were."

"Sorry?!" Barton sputtered. "You're sorry?! Oh great, I feel so much better now that Steve's bro is sorry. Surprised your face isn't glued to his ass right now Wilson. Oh that's right, I forgot. He ditched you and us to take off with his new boy toy."

"It's not like that Clint."

"No? Then explain it to me. Steve told me Wanda was a prisoner at the Compound, but that wasn't true was it?"

"She was being kept there against her will." Sam protested.

"Really? Because after I got to her she sure as hell wasn't in a hurry to leave."

"But she did leave." Sam argued.

"Yeah." Clint growled. "Because I insisted, because Rogers insisted Stark was behind it. I never would have gone there if I'd known it was to keep her out of Ross's clutches."

"Clint, calm down. We'll figure this out."

"Figure it out?!" Scott exclaimed. "We're in a high security, top military, isolated prison in the middle of the fucking ocean! How exactly are you planning to figure it out? I have a kid to get back to. Joining you was supposed to help me with that. You screwed me over Wilson! I might never see her again because of you."

"Steve won't abandon us."

"That's your plan?!" Scott practically screeched, his voice filled with incredulity. "A fugitive is going to break us out of here so we can live as fugitives? That's great, that's awesome. Don't talk anymore. I don't wanna hear you."

"Scott..."

"Fuck off Wilson." Clint growled. "I don't want to know what laws we supposedly broke right now. I might decide to break out of this cell just to beat the crap out of you, and I wanna be on solid ground when I take you down."
"Clint, come on. We can get through this."

"Shut. Up."

***

Tony could hear the distant yet comforting sound of a heart monitor pulsing nearby. The change to his awareness in his surroundings let him know they had reduced the flow of painkillers to his bloodstream. His mind had also cleared enough that he knew he was in a hospital. As impossible as that was, it was undeniable. The bed he lay in was warm and comfortable, and the room was quiet, which told him it was a private room and that he wasn't in ICU.

The other thing he became aware of as he struggled to fully wake, was the feel of a warm hand holding one of his own. Which was... confusing. It didn't feel small enough to be Pepper's and it couldn't be Rhodey since he was in his own hospital. His other hand twitched in response to his confusion, his body trying to respond to his command to open his eyes.

A moment of struggle later and his eyes were open. He turned his head in the direction of the hand being held, expecting to find it had been his imagination. He blinked, but what he saw didn't change or disappear. It still didn't seem real to him and his brain couldn't process the fact that Stephen Strange was holding his hand. Not only that, but he was asleep in the chair beside his hospital bed.

Taking it on faith that what he was seeing was real and not a hallucination, he let his eyes rove over the Doctor. Stephen was more relaxed than Tony had ever seen him. The lines in his face were gone, making him appear young despite the silver at his temples. His shoulders had lost their perpetual defensive look as he slept in what looked like a very uncomfortable position.

His lips... woah, where had that come from? But he was still too dozy to fight that line of thought and continued. Stephen's lips were slightly parted and Tony vaguely wondered what they would feel like beneath his own. His heart began to increase in tempo, the ekg echoing what he felt in his chest.

Despite not knowing Strange all that well, he'd been pleasantly surprised to see him again. He'd thought the man attractive years ago and time had not changed that opinion. Their recent conversations combined with Stephen's willingness to banter with him had made him see the formerly standoffish man as someone he enjoyed being around. The amulet, the tea, the pleasant conversations and the light banner they'd exchanged over the phone... he realized with a jolt of surprise that all of it felt natural. That at some point in every one of their less pleasant interactions, he wanted more.

More conversations, more banter, more tea, more... Stephen. He... wanted Stephen, and with the other man's hand holding his at the side of his hospital bed, it was probably safe to assume Strange might want the same.

The reminder of where he was made him think of the why behind it and the memory of Siberia slammed into him, making his muscles twitch. Siberia... did that mean Strange knew..? His movement disturbed the hand holding his and Stephen startled awake. Strange's eyes widened when they met his and Stephen snatched his hand back as though burned, his cheeks flushing crimson even as he averted his eyes and got to his feet.
"Stark." He said, his voice unsteady. "You're awake. How do you feel?"

"Like I've been drugged with the best painkillers money can buy."

Strange let out a deep sigh. "Of course you'd say that. You know I meant physically."

Tony averted his eyes, wishing the EKG wasn't loudly announcing his state of distress to the entire room. "I assume you already know how I'm feeling." He said, meeting Strange's eyes.

Stephen scoffed and moved to the end of the bed, leaning his weight on the rail to glare at him. "Of course. Deflection. Why would I expect anything different?"

"I don't know." Tony replied. "Why would you? It's not like you know me."

"On the contrary, I know that you never saw a Doctor after we spoke at your Tower." Stephen huffed. "I also know you went somewhere after you called me from Berlin, and that the only one who knew where you were was your AI. As well, you seem to believe you have no need of friends."

"It's not friends I'm averse to." Tony retorted, his eyes going dark. "It's trust I have a problem with."

"Does that mean you aren't going to tell me what happened?"

Tony sighed and looked up at the ceiling. "I might. If you tell me what you're doing here."

"Gladly."

Tony arched a brow and met Strange's steady gaze. "AND why you were holding my hand."

Stephen flushed and looked down at his shoes. When he looked back up, he seemed resigned to explain everything when the door opened and Pepper Potts rushed into the room. Her steps faltered only long enough to frown at Strange before going to Tony's side and gathering him in a careful hug.

"Tony! Oh my god, Tony! What happened? Are you okay? I was in a plane when the hospital called and it took forever to land and I was so worried, and then to get a cab and the traffic was a nightmare, and no one could tell me what was going on, or what happened to you..." She trailed off to place a kiss to his cheek while Tony narrowed his eyes at her. "You promised me you were going to be careful, that you were an active duty non-combatant! I thought working with the UN would make you safer. Were you lying? Did you lie to me? What did you do Tony?!"

Stephen cleared his throat loudly, shifting his weight so that he appeared more authoritative than he was. "Excuse me? You must be Ms. Potts. I'm Doctor Stephen Strange and I believe Mr. Stark is still recovering from his injuries. Perhaps you might save your questions for after he's had more time to rest?"

Pepper turned to look at him, moving to block his view of Tony as though she were marking territory over the man in the bed behind her. "Excuse me, but I have every right to be here. I don't know you at all, nor is your name on Tony's list of trusted contacts. So tell me what YOU'RE doing here."

Stephen blinked, his eyes flicking between Pepper, who was glaring at him and Tony, who was
watching her with an expression of bafflement and discomfort. "As I said, I'm Doctor Strange. I am one of Mr. Stark's colleagues."

Pepper narrowed her eyes at him, but took a step back. "You're new?"

"I am." Stephen nodded.

She turned to look at Tony, one hand on her hip. "Tony?"

"It's fine Pepper, he's... a friend. But he does have a point. I should get more rest."

"It's fine Mr. Stark." Stephen said, moving to the door. "I really need to get back to the Sanctum."

"But we haven't finished our conversation." Tony protested.

Was that a note of interest or perhaps desperation Stephen detected in his voice? It made him hesitate with his hand on the door, but then his eyes flicked to Pepper and he shook it off. "I think you have something more pressing to discuss. We can talk another time."

Tony scowled at his back as Stephen slipped out and away, turning his attention back to Pepper who was watching him with a look of confusion. "Tony? Who was that?"

"You heard him Pep. He's a Doctor and a colleague."

"I don't believe that man is a Doctor Tony. Doctor's don't wear capes."

"It's not a cape, it's a cloak. And he was a Doctor until the day of his accident. Now he's a Sorcerer. Sorcerer Supreme, Master of the Mystic Arts."

"Did you hit your head?" Pepper asked, putting a hand to his forehead. "Do you have a concussion?"

"No I don't have a concussion." Tony retorted, gently removing her hand. "What I do have is questions. What are you doing here and why are you... well, acting like this? We broke up, remember?"

"I came because the hospital called me and because Rhodey is paralyzed. Something you didn't bother telling me."

"You were on vacation. And since when are you and Rhodes friendly? I didn't think you liked each other."

"Where would you get that idea?"

"Oh, I don't know. You didn't like him when he took one of the suits. Or when he joined the Avengers, encouraging me to stay with them. Or how about more recently when you suggested he help me out with the financial reparations?"

"That's just common sense Tony. Rhodey doesn't always have your best interest in mind. He encourages you."

"No he doesn't. Rhodey has rarely taken my side in anything and what do you mean common
sense? That sounds more like you expect him to babysit me. Is that how you see me? That I'm someone who needs babysitting?"

"You haven't got the best reputation for taking care of yourself Tony. You can at least be honest about that."

Tony nodded, his face impassive. "You know what? You're right. Get the doctor Pepper. I want to speak to my doctor now. And then I think you should go."

"You want me to go?"

"I do."

"Fine. But we aren't finished having a conversation Tony. We are going to talk later."

"Uh huh. Sure, we'll talk." Tony agreed with more than a little sarcasm. "You got it. Later."
Blatant Truths

Stephen collapsed into an armchair in the main floor library and stared into the fireplace. The arrival of Ms. Potts to the hospital had been unexpected, though only because he’d forgotten about her.

As for her timing... well, considering what he'd been about to tell Tony, he couldn't decide if it was good or bad. On one hand, he wanted to admit to an interest in the other man. On the other, he wasn't sure it was a good idea to say anything at all. He would have to explain why he'd been holding his hand, but it didn't necessarily require a declaration of any kind on his part.

In fact, given what Tony had been through, combined with the injury to his friend and whatever had happened in Siberia, it might not be the best time for such revelations. Then there was Pepper Potts. It was well known Tony and Pepper were a constant on again, off again item. Most of the public never knowing when they were or weren't a thing. From what he'd just seen in the hospital, it seemed apparent that Tony didn't know either.

Wong entered the library then. He took one look at Stephen's face and settled in a seat across from him, a scowl on his face.

"Stephen."

"Wong."

"Well? How is Stark doing? Were they able to help him?"

"I don't know." Stephen sighed. "They moved him to a private room after they induced a mild coma to help him heal. He was awake when I left, but they hadn't done much for him since he has standing medical orders. Metro General does not have the authorization to treat him without his personal physician present."

"That's... odd."

"It is." Stephen agreed though he seemed lost in thought.

"Any idea why?"

"It probably has something to do with what happened to him in Afghanistan eight years ago."

"What happened in Afghanistan? Do you know?"

"I'm not sure many people know precisely what happened. He was kidnapped by the Ten Rings, a terrorist group. They wanted him to make weapons for them."

"Sounds like he experienced hell first hand." Wong noted. "Yet he survived and grew from it."

"Whatever happened, he shut down the Stark Industries weapons division and cancelled all of their outstanding contracts with the military."

Wong narrowed his eyes at him. "I thought you said you didn't know anything about him Stephen."
You told me he was a war profiteer and you didn't care for him at all when he showed up here."

"I..." Stephen hesitated. "I did some research and... opened my eyes. Tony is nothing like what is
reported in the media."

"Tony?" Wong echoed.

Stephen scowled up at him. "Not a word Wong."

Wong smirked at him. "Stephen. There's no judgment here. Besides, the mantle of Sorcerer
Supreme doesn't come with a vow of chastity."

"Wong!" Stephen growled, his cheeks flushing crimson. "That's... not what this is. Besides, he...
has a girlfriend. I thought they might have broken up, but she was at the hospital and is still listed
as an emergency contact. And anyway, it's not like that at all. I've just come to respect and admire
Stark as a decent person. He has done more than any one man should have to, to make the world a
better place."

Wong hummed under his breath and got to his feet. "Whatever you wish to call it, I think it's a
positive development. You could use some friends outside your duties. It isn't all work and
research Stephen. Perhaps when he's recovered, you might consider getting out of here more often.
Socializing, enjoying yourself. We only get one life Strange, you don't have to spend all of it inside
these walls. Nor do you have to spend it alone."

"Maybe not, but that doesn't mean Stark wants me around. We don't exactly get along. And I
cannot believe you're giving me advice on my social life." Stephen huffed, incredulous.

"You don't have one Stephen, and that's the problem." Wong snorted. "I'll be upstairs if you need
anything."

***

Pepper left the room after several parting words of disapproval. Five minutes later, a woman with
shoulder length blonde hair entered with a clipboard in her hands.

"Mr. Stark." She said, smiling at him. "It's good to see you back with us. My name is Dr. Christine
Palmer, I was your attending physician when you arrived. Due to your standing medical orders, we
were only able to stabilize you and replenish lost fluids when you arrived. We also induced a mild
coma to aid in your body's healing while we contacted your personal physician."

"Mild coma?"

"Yes. You were unconscious when you came to us. You were also dehydrated, suffering from
numerous contusions and abrasions to your upper arms, chest and back, with superficial cuts to
your face."

"So no uh... hypothermia?"

"Hypothermia?" Christine echoed, looking at her chart. "No, should there have been?"

"No, no. I just... had a memory of being cold. Must've been a bad dream."
"Uh... sure. Or it might have been low blood pressure from blood loss or shock, though most of your injuries had healed over when you arrived."

"You said Dr. Wu is on his way?"

Christine looked down at her watch before answering. "We were able to reach him almost immediately, so he should be here in the next thirty minutes."

"Good. That's good." Tony nodded.

"Do you have any questions for me Mr. Stark?"

"Yeah. How did I get here?"

Christine's smile faltered as she looked back down at her clipboard. "Stephen brought you directly to the ER."

"Strange? Strange brought me to the hospital?"

"Yes." Christine frowned. "Is something wrong?"

"No, no. Nothing's wrong."

"Very well, I'll see if Dr. Wu has arrived. We can speak again later." She said, moving to the door.

"Uh, quick question."

"Yes?"

"You said Stephen, not Doctor Strange. Is he a friend of yours?"

"We were colleagues Mr. Stark and a bit more for a while, but now we're simply friends."

"Ah." Tony nodded, doing everything he could to keep from showing the relief he felt on hearing those words. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"I'm not. Stephen has always lived a complicated life. Even before the accident, we were never going to stay together for long."

"I... see. I didn't expect you to tell me all that Doctor." Tony stammered.

Christine blushed. "I hadn't planned to Mr. Stark. I suppose I've just been wanting to say it out loud to someone for some time now."

"I can relate." Tony smiled.

"Uh... okay, well... I'll send in Dr. Wu when he arrives. In the meantime, I'll have a nurse bring you something to eat."
"Can you explain to me how you managed to capture this man?" Agent Ross asked, giving the King of Wakanda an icy glare.

"I tracked him down through CCTV surveillance and... other sources. Once the truth regarding Mr. Zemo came to light, I was able to determine his destination." TChalla replied.

"You realize this action was not sanctioned by the Accords council."

"I felt the urgency of the situation required swift action, not debate. There was no way to determine what his ultimate goal was without first confronting the man."

"All due respect King, but that's not true. He said he wanted to topple a nation and he just told me that he'd succeeded. You're certain these other super soldiers are dead?"

"I saw their bodies with my own two eyes."

"Then what is he talking about?"

"A man like Mr. Zemo is consumed with vengeance. There is no way for men like us to truly know the minds of such people Agent Ross."

Ross nodded, but his eyes were hard. "It's good you managed to bring him in, but your country is still on shaky ground with the rest of the world. It would be wise not be so independent in the future."

"I will take it into consideration."

"Yeah, see that you do." Ross nodded as TChalla rose to leave. "You use pretty words and platitudes King, but don't think for a minute that I believe you're telling me everything. In fact, I know you aren't."

TChalla grimaced, but did not respond to Ross' bait. "I believe my business here is concluded, so I will take my leave. Good day Agent."

"Right back at you King." Ross replied. As soon as TChalla left, Ross was on the phone to an untraceable, private number. The person on the other end said nothing as the call connected. "I think we have a problem. I need eyes on Spangles, Winter and Spider. Something happened in Siberia. And check on our contact in the U.S., find out what he knows."

"Understood. We'll be in touch Agent." A scrambled voice replied.

"I'll be waiting."

***

"Dr. Wu." Tony said, smiling at the man who was giving him a most displeased glare.

"Mr. Stark... Tony." Wu sighed, approaching his bed. "I was disturbed by the call I received regarding your injuries."

"Yeah, sorry about that Doc."
"That is not what disturbed me." Wu scolded him, lowering the chart to glare at him. "It is the nature of the major injury you sustained with which I have very serious concerns."

"Major injury?" Tony echoed, pretending ignorance to what Wu was referring to.

"Mr. Stark. Don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about. Now, are you going to tell me what happened or do I need to make an educated guess?"

"I was in a close combat fight with supers Doc." Tony shrugged. "I took a few hits. Happens all the time."

Wu snorted and tossed his chart down on the seat Strange had been seated in earlier. "You did not receive that spectacular and potentially fatal injury to your chest from close combat. Fists do not and cannot make that pattern Tony. Something hard was slammed into the centre of the arc reactor by someone very strong. If there'd been even the slightest bit more force behind it you'd be dead now. Either your heart would have stopped or your sternum would have compressed, collapsing your lungs and suffocating you."

"It really doesn't feel that bad Doc." Tony protested weakly, flinching at the serious look Wu pierced him with.

"Is that so?" Wu snapped, drawing a calming breath. "You have numerous injuries everywhere on your body. Three cracked ribs, luckily they're nowhere near your heart..." Wu began, holding up a finger for each one. "A bruise twice the size of both your hands on your right kidney, a wrenched right shoulder, a sprain and massive bruising on your right ankle and your left shoulder was dislocated. If that wasn't enough, you have torn ligaments in your right arm and a mild concussion."

Tony dropped his eyes, his hand nervously running the blanket through his fingers. He'd known his injuries were bad, but... how was he even alive?

"So, I don't want to hear a word from you about how 'not bad' you are, understood?" At Tony's nod, he continued. "And you're not leaving here until we've stabilized your breathing. Your O2 saturation is at 94%. You might think that's not so bad but it means you aren't getting enough oxygen to your blood stream. Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

"I could have a heart attack if I exert myself."

"As in walking, working, getting on a helicopter without a wheelchair and no one to push it. Your blood pressure was low when you were first admitted which means your heart was sluggish. You could faint getting out of bed to use the washroom and your heart could stop. And you risk brain damage if your O2 saturation drops any lower."

Tony let out the breath he'd been holding, his shoulders slumping as the extent of the injuries he'd sustained left him in shock. "Do I have any options here Doc?"

Wu sighed and sank into the chair beside his bed, his eyes filled with regret. "The decision to remove the arc reactor from your chest was a wise one Tony, as was the shrapnel from your heart. Unfortunately, another surgery to reinforce what's there now would not be permanent. The fractured ribs have destabilized the reconstruction done to the repairs surrounding your heart." Wu paused as though he was pained by what he was about to say. "You might have to consider putting the arc reactor casing back in to reinforce the entire thing. What you have now is not stable enough to guarantee you won't seriously injure your heart the next time you sustain a similar injury. Or... you have to permanently retire as Iron Man."
Tony had paled with every word Wu had spoken, knowing before the man finished what he was going to say. It all pointed to one thing; Steve Rogers had almost succeeded in killing him. And though he hadn't, he had irrevocably changed his future.

"Mr. Stark?..... Tony?" Wu prompted, his voice quiet with Tony's continued silence.

"I heard you Doc." Tony nodded. "I'm... going to have to think about it. And I promise I won't leave until I get the green light from you."

Wu nodded, giving him a faint smile as he got to his feet. "Thank you. And I'm sorry I don't have better news."

"It's fine." Tony smiled back, though it didn't reach his eyes. "At least I'm alive."

"And the world is a better place with you in it. Try to get some sleep Tony. I'll have a nurse come check on you within the hour."

"Uh, about that... could you send someone in now? I think I might need help with the whole sleep thing."

Wu frowned at what he suspected Tony wasn't telling him, but nodded his agreement, choosing not to comment on what he was thinking. "Of course. I'll send someone in right away."
Sinking Suspicion

After Wong had retired for the night, Stephen conjured himself a cup of tea. His thoughts were a jumble of conflict regarding what he'd seen in Siberia and the scene at the hospital. On its heels was the conversation he'd just had with Wong and he couldn't get his mind to stop spiralling.

He sipped his tea, lost in thought. Finding the Captain America shield with Tony did not bode well. Something very bad and very violent had happened in that bunker. Something that had very nearly killed Tony and put an end to Iron Man. Unfortunately, he didn't know nearly enough about the dynamics between the two men other than their disagreement on the Accords. But even that wasn't enough to explain why it appeared they'd been in a fight to the death.

Abandoning his tea, Stephen got to his feet, his jaw clenching in frustration as he headed to his room. He needed to have a closer look at Tony's armour. He hadn't had time earlier what with saving the man's life, but now he needed to see it without adrenaline clouding his thoughts. If he wanted answers, he might find some there and he wasn't prepared to wait for Stark to call him. Never mind the very real possibility that Tony would change his mind and refuse to explain anything to him, despite his promise.

Ten minutes later, he had the Iron Man armour laid out on the floor in the same way it had been on Tony when he'd found him in Siberia. Despite the strength of the material used, there were clear dents, scratches and missing parts where something hard had impacted the armour. Scoring around the reactor housing gave the clear impression of human fingers. A strong one obviously, but undeniably human.

Stephen frowned, his brow wrinkling in confusion and frustration. None of the marks could tell him how or why Tony had come by the damage to his armour. Nor could they explain why Captain America's shield had been left with him. Yet now that he was looking, the shape of the damage at the centre of the housing matched the curve of the shield. Given that it would have taken a lot of force and a metal as strong as vibranium to damage the armour, it was a perfect explanation. One that despite the evidence, didn't make sense.

Stephen sat back from his examination, crossing his legs beneath him where he sat on the floor of his room. What he could not explain was why. Why had anyone used Captain America's shield on Tony? For that matter, where was Steve Rogers and how was he involved? Was he involved? Tony had said he'd explain, but would he really? And what had Tony done, if anything, to be left to die alone in Siberia? Who was responsible?

Exhausted by the events of the day and frustrated by the lack of answers, Stephen changed into his night clothes. He piled the armour neatly back in the corner of his room and headed to the bathroom.

After going through his evening routine and a brief conversation with Wong, he fell promptly asleep despite the unsettled feeling in his gut.

***

Tony woke groggy and very stiff the following morning. After several hours of tests and annoyed looks from Doctor Wu, he'd agreed to release him from the hospital on the condition that he not leave the Tower or exert himself and allow Wu to stop by in a day to check on him.
Never a fan of hospitals and desperate to leave, Tony had readily agreed to his terms. Despite that, his mood was not much better than it had been after Dr. Wu had left the previous day. But he wasn't going to think about that now. The nurse had come and gone less than an hour ago, Wu a few minutes after that to approve his release from the hospital.

If he was grateful for anything in the past 24 hours, it was that Strange had not returned. He knew it was selfish, but he remembered what he'd promised Strange. That he would explain what had happened in Siberia, but after listening to Wu he wasn't sure he could tell Strange anything. He sighed with impatience while he waited on the bed for Pepper to arrive with a change of clothes for him.

With Rhodey out of commission, there was no one else who could pick him up from the hospital. Thankfully, the press had yet to find out where he was, but he knew it wouldn't last. Someone always found out. What had him anxious to leave was the fact he'd had no contact with FRIDAY since Siberia. He hadn't dared tell Pepper since he knew she would never believe him if he tried to lie about why he was without his AI and his armour. It surprised him that she hadn't asked about the armour yet, but she likely assumed he'd had someone else take care of it.

He had no desire to have that conversation with anyone, least of all when he still had no clue how Strange had become involved or how he'd woken in a New York hospital. And he wouldn't know any of that until he talked to FRIDAY. He was still debating whether or not he would keep his promise to Strange when Pepper arrived.

Pepper smiled when she saw him. Handing him the garment bag, she settled in a chair to wait while he went in the bathroom to change. He made his way past her, managing to hide his wince of pain with every step. The last thing he wanted was for Pepper to see just how badly hurt he really was. Especially since the only one besides himself who knew about the injury to his chest was Dr. Wu himself. And Stephen, he reminded himself with a faint jolt of dismay.

"I thought for sure you'd have bought another patient's clothes by now and bribed your way out of here." She said from the other side of the door.

"I decided I'd much rather avoid the media circus than leave early." Tony replied, glad he didn't have to see her face when he said it. He knew she'd at least look surprised. Or worse, shocked by his admission and he didn't need his own body language giving his true motive away.

"That's unexpected Tony." She said, sounding as though she was moving around the room. "But thank you. It will make things easier for the PR department to handle when it gets out."

Tony breathed a sigh of relief when she finished, smiling to himself in the mirror as he straightened his collar. Good, that was good that she thought it was about her and the company. If she believed that, then it wouldn't occur to her it had anything to do with why he hadn't told anyone about Siberia. It made lying about it so much easier.

"I'm ready Ms. Potts." He said, a bright smile on his face as he stepped out of the bathroom. "How do I look?"

"Like someone who went a few rounds with the wrong end of a big stick." Pepper teased with a smile though he could see she wasn't happy with him leaving the hospital so soon. "Seriously though, you look great. Just keep your sunglasses on. No one will notice anything from a distance. Are you ready to go?"
Tony nodded, ignoring the wheelchair she brought out for his use and headed for the door. "More than ready. Let's go."

***

Stephen woke with the sun in his eyes and an epiphany in his thoughts. He swore silently to himself as he dressed and prepared for his day before heading down to join Wong for breakfast.

"You've had a message from Master Wynn." Wong said as he took his seat.

Stephen sighed aloud around his morning tea, keeping his eyes trained on the mug he held. "That was fast. I didn't expect he'd call me."

"He wants to see you in Kamar-Taj." Wong replied. "After breakfast."

"Mine or his?"

"Don't be cute Stephen. Yours of course."

"Fine." Stephen frowned. "Anything else?"

"When are you going back to the hospital to see Stark?"

"I was going to go after breakfast, but it can wait until after I've spoken with Wynn."

"I expect you to get some answers from Stark when you see him. He at least owes you an explanation of what happened for saving his life." Wong admonished.

"I'm not going to guilt him into telling me his secrets Wong. But I will be asking him several things I'd like cleared up."

"Good. Then I'll see you later. I'll be in the east library if you need me for anything." Wong said, clearing away his dishes before heading for the stairs.

"Very well." Stephen nodded. "Later then."

***

"Are you going to tell me what happened?" Pepper asked as Happy pulled into the parking garage of the Avenger Tower.

Tony shrugged and stepped out of the car, making a beeline for his private elevator. "Lots of things happened Pepper. Might need you to be a bit more specific." He replied, stepping inside. "But later. There's something I need to do first."

"You're not serious." Pepper grated when he refused to let her join him. "You just got out of the hospital and you're already shutting me out?"

"I am." Tony nodded. "And I don't have to tell you anything. We're over remember?"

Tony didn't miss the flinch his words caused her, but he had bigger concerns at the moment.
"That's not fair Tony. You're still my friend."

Tony's eyes went dark and his voice was curt when he spoke. "And sometimes friends keep secrets." He retorted, his eyes holding no humour as the door closed with a soft hiss.

Once he reached the penthouse, Tony headed straight for his bedroom where he kept a back-up of his gauntlet prototype. FRIDAY was silent as he moved around the room, accessing the safe in his closet. Once he had what he needed, he left the room, strapping the watch in place and headed back out to the kitchen.

"Boss." FRIDAY said quietly. "It's good to have you home."

"Thanks baby girl." Tony murmured as he prepared himself a mug of coffee.

"I was concerned boss. I didn't have contact with you while you were in the hospital. Are you feeling well?"

Tony sank into a chair in his living room, his mug of coffee cradled in his good hand, his left hindered by the sling it was in. "Not really. And don't pretend you don't know anything FRIDAY. I know you hacked the security at the hospital. I should know, I wrote the program."

"Are you going to tell Doctor Strange what happened?"

Tony frowned at his coffee. "First, I need you to tell me how he got involved. Did you call him?"

"Yes boss." FRIDAY admitted. "When I lost contact with the suit, I ran simulations on every variable. The odds were not good that you would be uninjured in your altercation with Rogers and Mr. Barnes. If you lost consciousness and were trapped in the suit, I could not guarantee getting to you in time."

"So you called Strange to use his portal thing."

"I did. I also gave him the watch pendant boss. I hope that's all right?"

"It's fine FRIDAY." Tony said, though he said it with a grimace. "I'd hoped to do that under less serious circumstances, but you did good. I'm guessing Strange's intervention is why I didn't have hypothermia."

"That is correct." FRIDAY paused.

"FRIDAY? What is it?"

"Doctor Strange recovered the Captain America shield when he found you. It is still in his room at the Sanctum if you want it back along with your damaged suit."

"Shit." Tony swore. "Did he ask you about it?"

"No boss. But he was... very concerned about you."

"Is that why he was holding my hand at the hospital FRIDAY?"
"I could not say boss. You didn't program me into the pendant he has. I was only able to maintain a connection while the emergency override conditions were in effect."

"And I'm guessing he didn't talk to himself during that time."

"No. He doesn't appear to have that particular habit boss." Friday replied, sounding amused.

"Guess I'll have to find out the old fashioned way then."

"It is the best way."

"What about you? Do you have questions FRIDAY?"

"Not about what happened boss. I have already run simulations based on your injuries and am 96% certain I am right. Are you going to tell anyone what Rogers did?"

"I... haven't decided yet. And how do you know I haven't told anyone?"

"Because Pepper and Happy aren't here nagging you to make a statement and Colonel Rhodes hasn't called. Has anyone told him you were in the hospital?"

"I doubt it." Tony shook his head. "They would have just called Pepper when he was unreachable, and then Dr. Wu."

"What are you going to do about Dr. Wu's advice on what happened in Siberia?"

"I don't know yet Friday. I just... I don't know."
So, bonus chapter today! Because, why not? Also, why are there so few good, complete IronStrange stories? I've read all of them and need lots more! It's not fair lol. Anywho, hope you like it.

"By the look on your face, you've either just sucked on a very sour lemon or you have an answer to the question I asked." Wynn observed as Stephen took a seat on the floor across from him.

"I have an answer." Stephen sighed. "I... care about the man I mentioned before. I didn't see it when we last spoke because quite honestly it was never anything I considered pursuing."

"Can I assume something happened that helped to clarify this for you?" Wynn pressed, an eyebrow raised in curiosity.

Stephen nodded. "He was seriously injured and his AI requested my help in getting him to the hospital."

"His AI?" Wynn repeated with a confused look. "This is no ordinary man is it?"

"No. He's... well he's Iron Man."

"You're interested in Tony Stark? The genius billionaire?" Wynn gasped.

"It's not that shocking is it? I'm not some star struck adolescent Wynn." Stephen retorted.

"I know you're not. I'm just surprised is all. And it explains a lot about why you were so reluctant to answer my question the other day. I say that because I assume you're aware of his... reputation."

"His public reputation and the facts are completely unfounded conjecture at best. The rumours following the events in Afghanistan, though highly sensationalized, all hold a thread of truth to them."

"The way you're speaking... you haven't told him of your feelings yet have you?" Wynn observed.

"Of course not. I only just realized."

"Is he free to... take action if he knew?"

Stephen sighed and hunched his shoulders, avoiding Wynn's eyes. "I had thought so. But his long time girlfriend was at the hospital yesterday, and she's still listed as one of his emergency contacts."

"You think they're still together then?"

Stephen shook his head. "I'm not sure, but the look on Tony's face seemed to indicate he was surprised by her... affection when she arrived."
"That's only to be expected if the tabloids are accurate in how long they've been together."

"True. I'm just not sure now is the best time to even suggest an interest. We barely know each other and the few times we've spoken haven't exactly been friendly."

"He must like you well enough if his AI thought to contact you. You also mentioned he designed an AI interface pendant based on his own creation. It tells me he at least thought favourably of you when he designed it."

"All good points, though it did occur to me it may have just been a peace offering meant to convince me to join the Avengers." Stephen admitted.

Wynn sipped at his tea, letting the silence fill the room as he and Strange continued to sit in contemplation. "Seems to me that the only way you'll have any answers is if you talk to him."

"I came to the same conclusion this morning. I'd planned to return to the hospital this afternoon to do that."

"In that case, I won't keep you." Wynn said, getting to his feet. "And, if I may say so, I wish you success."

Stephen grimaced. "You may, though it sounds to me that you believe the odds aren't in my favour."

"I have the sense that the journey you're about to embark on will challenge you in ways that are not easy."

"Challenges are never meant to be easy Master Wynn." Stephen sighed.

"True, but the one before you now will most certainly test you to your limits." Wynn continued. "But the reward will more than make up for it."

"I think you need to work on your delivery Master Wynn. You won't win any prizes giving people bad news."

Wynn laughed and clapped Stephen on the shoulder as he walked him to the door. "We're Sorcerers Stephen, protectors of the galaxy, we rarely have good news."

"Hmpf."

"Let me know how it goes." Wynn said as he turned towards Kamar-Taj's library. "I'll give you a call in a month or so. Take care Doctor Strange."

"You too Master Wynn."

***

Tony spent the rest of his day locked in his workshop, tinkering with designs for a new reactor shroud despite the pain in his body every time he moved. Though the thought of donning the armour again had made him cold and shivery, the thought of how vulnerable he was without it was worse, so this was his compromise. At least, that's what he told himself.
If he was going to be forced to undergo surgery, again, he was damn well going to design something better and even higher tech than his last one. The new shroud he pictured was one that was less invasive and more shallow so that it would result in the best of a bad situation. He couldn't remember ever sleeping well when he'd had the arc reactor in his chest and even though it was only a shroud, he still wanted it to be as unobtrusive as possible.

"FRIDAY? Bring up the research I've done on nanites and show me the schematic for a smaller arc reactor shroud based on this new design."

"You have a plan boss?"

"Yeah. I'm thinking about storing a full Iron man suit made entirely of nanites in a smaller, removable attachment."

"That's... ambitious boss."

"I think it can be done." Tony replied, pulling up the blueprints for the original reactor housing and comparing it to his new schematic. "Need to rethink the size and depth of the housing based on how many nanites are needed." He said aloud before addressing her again. "Fabricate the three I have here. We'll run simulations in an hour. I need to work out the ratio and viability of an on-demand suit. The numbers are going to be... astronomical in comparison to the gauntlet."

"But not uncountable." FRIDAY replied. "Do you want reminders to rest? Or call alerts?"

"That won't..." Tony was about to say no, but Dr. Wu's words rang in his memory and he changed course. "Tell me who's calling only if it's important. Otherwise, rest and food reminders only."

"Understood boss."

***

Stephen took his leave of Master Wynn before noon, New York time. After sharing a light lunch with Wong and reluctantly sharing the relevant parts of his conversation with Master Wynn, he left for the hospital determined to talk with Tony about Siberia.

Since it wasn't an emergency visit, Stephen chose to portal to the hospital entrance. He could have gone straight to the hallway outside Tony's room or the nurse's station, but he chose not to. He needed time to prepare himself for seeing the man he'd only just admitted to having more than a professional interest in. He also wanted to avoid raising Christine's suspicion or ire if he needed her help getting in to see Tony.

The ride up the elevator to Tony's room seemed long, his earlier reluctance gone now that he was here. He stepped off the elevator and headed to the nurse's station to check in and instead spotted Christine. She looked up from what she was doing at the same time he saw her and her smile faltered only to be replaced with a look of confusion.

"Stephen?" She asked, a wrinkle between her brow. "What are you doing here? Do you have another mystery patient for me?"

Stephen matched her frown with one of his own. "No. I came to see Doctor Stark. Why do you ask?"
Christine pursed her lips, her eyes showing nothing. "Because he's not here. Pepper Potts came and picked him up half an hour ago."

"He's been released already?" Stephen gaped. "That was a little fast wasn't it?"

"It would not have been my choice, no. But Dr. Stark's personal physician gave the okay and signed off on him checking out today. I assume they discussed whatever had Dr. Wu so concerned when he first arrived and reviewed Dr. Stark's file."

"Dr. Wu?" Stephen repeated, a sensation of recognition niggling at him.

"Dr. Stark's personal physician." Christine answered. "Why? Is something wrong?"

"Isn't he a bioengineer? Why is he Stark's physician?"

Christine returned his frown with a huff of breath. "You know I can't answer that Stephen since I'm not Tony Stark. But it probably has to do with that incident in Malibu a few years ago. Stark had major heart surgery remember? Dr. Wu attended and is likely privy to information regarding the tech that kept Stark alive after Afghanistan."

"Stark had tech in his body?"

Christine gaped back at him. "You're not serious." She blinked. "You are serious. You really don't know anything about what happened to him in Afghanistan? Or later with Obadiah Stane, his uncle, and then Aldrich Killian and the Mandarin?"

Stephen scowled back at her, but couldn't ignore the embarrassment born from his ignorance that threatened to show in his eyes. "Stane was Howard Stark's business partner. Died in a plane crash, didn't he? And the Mandarin was some terrorist or something. Killian doesn't ring a bell though."

Christine huffed in annoyance, unimpressed by Stephen's lack of knowledge. If he ever looked more closely at anyone other than himself, she might actually die of shock. "He's your what? Ally? Co-worker? And yet you know nothing about his personal history?"

"We only just met Christine. I know enough." Stephen protested. "I don't know everything about him no, but you can't tell me that you do."

"I know who Killian is Stephen and I know that Obadiah Stane dying in a plane crash was very convenient for Stark Industries at the time it happened. Some might even call it fortuitous."

"Why are we even having this discussion?" Stephen retorted, growing increasingly uncomfortable with the realization that he knew less than he thought. "All I asked was where Stark was and you start grilling me on his history."

Christine blushed and looked away. "You're right, I'm sorry, I'm not sure where that came from. As for Doctor Stark, he's probably at Stark Tower if you want to talk to him."

"Alright." Stephen nodded, accepting her apology. "I'll get out of your hair then. Thank you for everything."

"If you ever find out how Stark received his injuries, I'd appreciate knowing the story behind it."
Stephen looked back at her from where he'd opened a portal to the Sanctum. "If he agrees to you knowing about it, I promise to fill you in."
"Boss?"

Tony looked up from the welding he was doing on one of the new reactor housings he was working on. He flipped his mask up and flicked the torch off with a snap, blinking in the light of his workshop. "Yeah Fri?"

"Happy Hogan is here. He wants to see you about Mr. Parker."

"Parker?" Tony repeated, a look of confusion on his face. "Peter, right. Let him up FRIDAY." He said, swiping away the holographic image before him and shutting down his torch.

He got up from his work table and moved to the small kitchen area to make a coffee, rolling his shoulders and neck to work the kinks out. His chest and shoulder twinged in protest, making him wince and he pasted a smile in place just as Happy entered the room.

"Tony." He nodded, joining him at the counter. "Sorry to interrupt your work."

"Don't worry about it." Tony said, filling his mug with French press coffee. "What's up? FRIDAY mentioned something about Peter."

"Are you sure Parker is ready for all this?" Happy asked, waving his hands around to encompass the room. "I've got my hands full with moving everything to the new Avengers compound, monitoring security, overseeing the new staff and now Parker. The kid won't stop calling me and giving me updates on what he's doing at night."

"Parker might be a little excitable Happy, but he's a good kid with pretty good instincts. Spidey sense and all that. Besides, Parker is the priority here, not the other things you mentioned. I have other people who can take care of that."

"I've checked some of Parker's so-called leads and found nothing. And he's calling me three times a day."

"Sounds like you could use a hand." Tony smirked, his amusement deepening when Happy flushed red with embarrassment.

"What?! No, no it's fine. I just wanted you to give the kid a call, let him know not to call unless it's an emergency."

"Look Happy, if you don't want the job just say so. I'll call Jones, see if she can be available for him."

"Jessica Jones?" Happy squeaked. "You can't be serious sir. What does she even know about kids?"

Tony arched a brow at his former bodyguard. "I imagine she knows just as much as you do. Why?"

"I don't want to shirk my duty Mr. Stark. I'll handle it."
"I know you can." Tony nodded. "But you just told me how stretched thin you are with all these other responsibilities. I'll give Jones a call and you can work out the details with her."

Happy scowled at him, but held his tongue and nodded. "If you think it's for the best."

"I do. And I'll be checking in with both of you later to see how it went." Tony continued, knowing that if he didn't say it, Happy would put Jones off and continue handling everything alone.

"Alright. Have her call me on my cell."

"Sure thing Happy," Tony smiled, slapping a hand to his shoulder to walk him out. "FRIDAY will take care if it."

"Yes boss." FRIDAY replied. "I have already contacted her. Ms. Jones is unavailable at the moment but says she can meet you tomorrow Mr. Hogan."

"See?" Tony grinned. "All taken care of."

***

Jessica sat on a crate in the alley she'd agreed to meet Stark's former bodyguard in. She swung her legs back and forth, her heels banging out a staccato rhythm. She was tired and bored, but Stark's call about the kid she met on the Quinjet had her intrigued. See couldn't imagine what he might need her for, the kid seemed plenty capable, if naive and inexperienced, and Stark knew she didn't approve. She almost hadn't agreed, but her curiosity made her say yes. She looked up at the sound of heavy footsteps and grinned to herself. For a bodyguard, he sure made a point to announce his presence. Maybe that was it. Stark wanted someone more subtle in their approach.

A tall, heavy-set man in a three piece black suit and sporting a very conservative haircut approached her from the alley entrance. His short light brown hair accentuated the extra weight he carried. His appearance was typical of most career bodyguards; the ramrod straight spine, the hooded look in his eyes and how they never stayed in any one spot for long.

"Ms. Jones?" He said, his tone courteous yet sounding put out.

"The one and only." She replied, slipping off the crate to stand before him. "And you are?"

"Happy Hogan ma'am." He said, inclining his head imperceptibly. "Mr. Stark wanted us to meet."

"Nothing like stating the obvious." Jessica murmured. "And? I assume you have something to say."

Hogan puffed out his chest, squaring his shoulders to meet her gaze. "Though I appreciate what Mr. Stark is trying to do, I assure you I don't need help doing my job."

"Why don't you just tell me what Stark wants? I sure as hell don't want your job Hogan, but what's going on with the kid?"

"Kid?" Hogan blinked. "Oh, you mean the Spider guy." Happy frowned. "I don't know what the boss is thinking, but the kid is calling me all the time about things he thinks is happening near the waterfront. I've checked them out and found nothing suspicious. He's driving me crazy."
"So none of the kid's leads went anywhere?" Jones asked.

"That's what I'm saying."

"How deeply did you look?"

"If you're implying I didn't do my job..."

"Hold up there Happy Meal." Jessica interrupted, holding up a hand. "You're a bodyguard, investigating is my job. Why don't you forward me the details on those leads and I'll take a look at them myself."

Happy frowned, opened his mouth to say something then thought better of it. "There's nothing to find, but suit yourself. If it keeps the kid happy it's less work for me." Happy pulled a tablet from his inner pocket and punched a few keys. "There, I sent them to the secure email you gave Stark."

Jones nodded as a ping on her phone let her know a file had been received. "While you're at it, give the kid my number. If he needs help and you're not available, he can call me."

"Fine." Happy grumbled. "But to be clear, I'm not giving you this job. You're my back up."

"I'm sure Stark knows exactly how this will work out." Jessica drawled, a smirk on her lips.

"Hmph." Happy grunted. "Well if that's all you need from me, I have work to do."

"Apparently so do I." Jones retorted, glancing down at her phone. "Catch ya later Happy Meal."

"I am not a Happy Meal."

"Maybe lay off the fast food then Happy." Jones retorted, heading down the alley away from him. "Later."

***

After leaving the hospital, Stephen headed straight to the laptop he and Wong maintained for the New York Sanctum. He put a call in to Stark Tower while he waited for the laptop to warm up and was connected to FRIDAY almost instantly. She helpfully informed him that her boss was not to be disturbed, but assured him she would let Tony know he had called.

He frowned into the phone at that but accepted and ended the call. If he were being honest, it hadn't surprised him at all that Tony wasn't available and wondered how long it would last. With a shrug, he turned his attention to the laptop and began typing.

Christine's remarks at the hospital had been... unsettling. What more could he possibly learn about Tony Stark that he didn't already know? Christine seemed to think there was a lot he didn't know and that irked him, especially if he really was developing feelings for the man.

An hour later he had a few answers but a lot more questions and unsettling suspicions. It was clear enough that something else had been going on behind the scenes in regards to Obadiah Stane. The same went for Aldrich Killian, though both were equally disturbing. The coverage for the events of Loki and the Chitauri, as well as Ultron, had been widely reported on. Unfortunately much of it
was conjecture and opinion, which also left him with more questions than answers.

By the end of his search, he thought he understood what Christine had meant about Stane. It was highly convenient that the former Stark CEO had suddenly disappeared following reports that S.I. had been dealing in illegal weapons. Which begged the question, what really happened?

Stephen hated mysteries, especially about people he was interested in. In this case, he wasn't exactly on Stark's most trusted list just yet. Nor was Stark known for confiding in people. Much like himself, Tony found trusting people hard. The odds that Tony would tell him anything were slim to none and it was highly doubtful anyone in Stark's employ would tell him either. Assuming any of them knew the truth about it.

With a heavy sigh, Stephen closed down the laptop, stood and stretched to get the stiffness out of his spine. He had long since ceased to enjoy time spent online and despite his reason for doing so today, he still didn't.

A glance up at the window in the front hall told him he'd been sitting for hours and he growled in irritation. So much for having a heart to heart with Stark today, he muttered to himself as he made his way to the kitchen. He didn't think Wong had returned yet from his travels, but if he had he would have food for them both. Stephen's stomach rumbled as he headed to the kitchen, the distinct aroma of Thai food reaching him and making his mouth water.

***

"I really appreciate everything you're doing for Bucky, Your Highness. I can never repay you for it." Steve said gravely as they stood looking out the giant picture window of Wakanda's medical research facility.

"It's the least I can do." T'Challa replied. "That young man has suffered enough at the hands of others."

"If the Accords council finds out he's here, they'll come for him."

"Let them try." T'Challa growled.

Steve nodded before letting out his breath in a loud sigh. "Thank you again Your Highness, but I should go. I've taken enough of your time and I appreciate your hospitality." Steve said, moving to the doorway.

"Mr. Rogers... we haven't spoken about what happened in Siberia. You said you and Mr. Stark parted as enemies. If I might ask, how did you and Mr. Barnes escape his vengeance?"

"I disabled the suit." Steve replied with a frown. "It's been four days King. Why are you asking me this now?"

"You left him in Siberia with a disabled suit? Was he well enough to get home after that?"

"Why wouldn't he be?" Steve frowned, confused. "Tony always has a backup plan."

"But he went there against Ross' wishes and in defiance of the Accords council. Are you certain he would have a contingency plan in that situation?"
"If he didn't, then FRIDAY would."

"But isn't his AI powered by the arc reactor?"

"Tony always has a reserve power source Your Highness. I'm sure he's fine."

"Very well." T'Challa nodded, though a crease of concern remained between his brows. "I suppose I merely wanted to hear it for myself as I'd been thinking along the same lines."

Steve nodded and stepped into the hallway. "Take care of yourself King."

"And you as well Captain Rogers. And do not worry about your friend, he's in good hands here."
"So what seems to be the problem Spiderling?" Jessica drawled as Peter came close to where she waited for him outside his home.

Peter's eyes widened in shock, surprise colouring his face which he tried to cover a moment later. "What?! I mean, you're... wait, what?" He stammered again, moving closer. "Uh... don't take this the wrong way, but what the hell are you doing here?"

"Stark asked me to keep an eye on you."

Peter scowled, crossing his arms over his chest. "I don't need a babysitter. I know Mr. Stark means well, but I can take care of myself."

"Right." Jessica retorted. "That's why you've been calling his former bodyguard every day for a week."

"That's different." Peter flushed. "I don't have the same kinds of connections he does. I just need information and he can get it faster than me. I'm trying to stop trouble before people get hurt you know, that's not someone who needs supervision. It's being responsible."

Jessica rolled her eyes, stuffing her hands in her pockets as she did. "Look kid, you already know what I think about you doing the whole vigilante thing right?" She said, arching a brow at him. When Peter made to protest she help up a hand to halt whatever he was about to say. "But I also know my disapproval isn't going to make you stop or see reason. I'm here because I investigate things, something that former bodyguard of Stark's has no business dealing with. I'll be checking your leads and if there's anything to them, I'll pass it on to Stark himself."

"But..." Peter stammered, narrowing his eyes at her. "It's my lead."

"And Stark wanted you in contact with Mr. Hogan for a reason right?" She retorted. When the flustered teen refused to meet her challenging stare, she continued. "Which means he doesn't want you getting in over your head either."

"You don't know that."

"You're right. I don't. So how about we call him?"

Peter's face flushed and he refused to meet her eyes even as his jaw tightened with nervousness. "That's.. we don't have to do that." He huffed. "Fine. You've made your point."

"I'm glad." Jessica snorted.

"So, um... I don't suppose you found anything?"

Jessica smirked but shook her head. "Sorry spider kid but there was nothing to find. And I looked everywhere, so whatever you think might be happening on the docks isn't. At least nothing I can prove or follow as a lead."

"But those guys are real shady and they had these weird looking weapons and talking about things they shouldn't be talking about."

"Oh yeah? Like what?" Jessica sighed, clearly losing her patience. "I can't investigate gut feelings
kid and talking about something suspicious doesn't make anyone guilty of a crime."

"But it was about Mr. Stark and well, not really Mr. Stark, but Stark Industries and the Department of Damage Control." Peter protested.

"The Department of what?"

"Damage Control. I thought it was made up but I checked and it's a branch of New York's government. They partnered with Stark Industries to contain any and all tech garbage that got left on the streets after the Chitauri thing."

Jessica narrowed her eyes at him. "You didn't mention that part to Hogan. Are you saying these people have access to alien technology?"

"I... well, I think so. And I didn't say anything about it because I didn't know if it was a real thing and I didn't think there was any alien stuff left to find."

Jessica rolled her eyes skyward and counted to ten before speaking. "I'm taking this to Stark after I do some checking of my own. As for you, stay away from the docks and these men you overheard. Save some kittens from trees or something, help an old person cross the street, I don't care. Just stay away from this until you hear from Stark."

Peter scowled and crossed his arms over his chest. "Mr. Stark doesn't care what I'm doing and besides I'm just listening to them. Gathering information. Nothing's going to happen."

"Doesn't care?" Jessica growled. "Christ. The man assigned you his former damn bodyguard and now me, and you stand there and have the gall to say he doesn't care?"

"He thinks I'm just a kid." Peter retorted, though his cheeks had flushed crimson at her words.

"You are kid! You have no idea what you're getting into and you are way over your head."

"I can take care of myself! I'm not some helpless child."

"You are a damn child! You're not even legal yet! I thought you wanted Stark's approval? I thought you wanted to be part of the Avengers?"

"I do! I'm trying to prove I can handle myself."

"Oh my god! Do you even hear yourself right now? Being able to handle yourself is only part of it Parker. The Avengers are a team, not a one man show. You have to prove you'll listen when other people tell you no."

"But..."

"Shut up." Jessica hissed. "I didn't come here to argue with a kid. It's pretty clear you aren't ready to join anything bigger than your own ego. Stay away from the docks. I'm not telling you again. Ignore my advice and you'll be dealing with consequences you are not prepared for. You could get innocent people hurt, don't you get that? Shit! This is not how I wanted to spend my evening."

"I'm not helpless and I would never put other people in danger."

"Keep saying that when something bad happens, maybe then you won't feel guilty." Jessica growled. "I know what guilt does kid. I've lived with it longer than you've been alive. Is that what you want? To have powers you're ashamed of because you can't control yourself?"
"I know what I'm doing." Peter retorted though he sounded petulant even to his own ears.

"You know what? I'm done here. Listen or don't. Seems to me the only way you're going to hear me is if you screw up and get yourself or others hurt." Jessica huffed. Her hands clenched into fists, she stalked away, anger rolling off her in waves as she disappeared around a corner.

Peter watched her go, suddenly feeling like a complete idiot but no way was he going to call her back. He looked down at his hands, raised welts on his hands still red from the fire he'd help put out the night before and sighed to himself. No way was Mr. Stark going to like what Ms. Jones told him about this conversation.

With a sigh, he turned to the stairs of Aunt May's apartment building and headed up. He needed to talk to Ned. He needed a new perspective, something only his closest friend could provide. He would show Mr. Stark he was responsible and that he could handle himself, no matter what Jessica Jones said.
Creations and Confessions

After Happy left, Tony went back to work, losing himself in calculations, estimates and simulations. The practicality of housing a nanobot suit appealed to him in more ways than he liked to think about. Especially since it was a constant reminder that he felt vulnerable without it. The reason behind that was an even less pleasant thought of why he wanted it, so he brushed it aside, focusing entirely on working the logistics behind the design.

He didn't know how long he'd been at it when he suddenly looked up, feeling as though he'd forgotten something important. "FRIDAY?"

"Yes boss?"

"Give me a panoramic view of the skyline from the top of the tower."

"Of course." FRIDAY replied at the same time his workshop was overlaid with an image of an impressive sunset. "Something wrong boss?"

Tony frowned down at the fabricated shroud he was holding in his hands. "Uh... no, not exactly? Did Doctor Strange call today?"

"No."

"But he did call right?"

"Yes. Three days ago."

"Has it really been three days?"

"Yes boss."

"Shit." Tony swore, putting down the shroud he held. Dammit. Strange was never going to want anything to do with him if he continued ignoring the man. The Sorcerer had very likely saved his damn life and here he was, avoiding him. A twinge of guilt ran through him like a shiver and as he went to stand, his heart started thumping slowly in his chest making his breath catch and he swore. He hated when this happened. The irregular heart beat thumped slowly behind his ribcage, sounding to his own ears like it was beating it's last rhythm. After a moment it stopped but he remained seated, disliking how vulnerable and sudden these episodes were. He knew it wasn't a medical emergency but it was hard to ignore the sensation that he was listening to the last beat his heart would ever make.

"Boss?"

"Yeah FRIDAY?"

"Doctor Strange is here to see you. Should I let him up?"

Tony groaned into his hands as he brushed them through his mess of curls. "Yeah, sure. Let him into the workshop." Uncanny as it was to have Stephen show up as just he'd been thinking about
him, having him already here also saved him from making the decision to call the man. Especially since he knew the odds were high that he'd continue putting it off.

Five minutes later, Strange was framed in the doorway to the workshop, his eyes flicking over the mess in the room before settling on Tony's face. Stephen narrowed his eyes at him, concern and annoyance reflected there as he crossed to him.

"Stark." He said, joining him at the workbench, his shoulders stiff with tension.

Tony flinched at the use of his last name, his heart filling with disappointment in himself for Strange's use of it to put distance between them. "Doctor." He nodded. "What can I do for you?"

Stephen swore under his breath, his arms crossing over his chest in annoyance. "You can't help yourself can you?"

Tony frowned at him. "What are you talking about?"

"I know FRIDAY asked for your help." Tony replied, feeling uncomfortable under Stephen's intense glare. "I... I'm sorry about earlier. I should have thanked you for what you did for me. So... thank you for the rescue."

"Why did Dr. Wu sign your release forms? From what I saw, you were in no condition to be out as soon as you were."

"I've survived worse." Tony retorted, his emotions flicking from pleasure at Stephen's concern to irritation at his relentlessness.

"That doesn't answer my question Stark."

Tony scowled at him. "I thought we were past using last names Strange."

"That was before you ditched me at the hospital and ignored me for the past three days. I assumed it was what you wanted."

A thrill of guilt flashed through him then and he couldn't keep the hurt from showing in his eyes. He flinched the second he saw Strange register his discomfort and flicked his eyes away, overwhelmed by the concern he saw there.

"No... no..." He stammered, shaking his head and hating the tremor in his voice. "No it's not what I wanted. I just... jeezus Strange, I... I'm not used to this." He babbled, waving his hand in Stephen's direction as words failed him.

"Not used to what, exactly?"

"This." Tony repeated, angry with himself now for being unable to move the words past his lips with any kind of coherence. "You. The... concern. The... bedside manner thing you've got going."

Stephen's eyes widened, a crease forming between his brows as he caught what Tony was ineffectually trying to say. "That's... unfortunate." He said and Tony was relieved by the lack of pity in his voice.
Tony grunted in response. He couldn't think of a reply to that which only increased his discomfort. Unable to meet Stephen's eyes, he stared at his hands which were clenched in his lap, wishing he could disappear into the floor.

"Perhaps Doctor Strange would like some tea boss?" FRIDAY interrupted and Tony felt a swell of pride and relief wash through him at his AI's rescue. He could kiss her with the wave of gratitude he felt for her in that moment.

"What do you say Doc? Care for some tea?" Tony asked, a small smile on his lips as he met Stephen's eyes without flinching.

"Very well." Strange nodded. "Can I assume you don't have any down here?"

"You assume right. Just coffee I'm afraid. The tea should still be in the common room upstairs or my penthouse."

"Penthouse only boss." FRIDAY informed him as he led Strange to the elevator. "Mr. Hogan has already had the common room packed up."

"Right. Of course he has." Tony nodded, pressing the button for the penthouse.

"Packed up?" Stephen repeated. "Are you going somewhere?"

Tony startled for a minute, confused by the note of dismay he'd caught in the other man's voice before Stephen locked his emotions away again.

"I sold the Tower. Made a deal with the government and Fury to move the Avengers initiative to a new compound upstate."

The way Tony said it had Stephen narrowing his eyes at Tony's back as he led then through his penthouse to the kitchen. "That was not as simple as you just made it out to be." He murmured, settling at the bar counter. "You made them buy the Tower from you, didn't you?"

Tony's mouth quirked as he took the box of tea from the cupboard and passed it to him. "You're more insightful than you pretend to be Doc." He said, turning to prepare a cup of coffee. "But you're right. I did. They've both screwed me over more times than I can count over the past eight years. I wasn't going to let them do it again."

He turned back to see Stephen frowning up at him, his hand stilled on the box of tea he'd been looking through. "Both the government and S.H.I.E.L.D.?"

Tony returned his frown. "What? Is that so hard to believe? Why wouldn't they try to screw over a rich, arrogant genius is a better question."

"I suppose you have a point, but then why deal with them at all?" He asked, plucking a tea bag from the box and setting it inside the mug Tony had passed him.

"Have you met me?" Tony teased. " Seriously? Keep your friends close, enemies closer? No one ever wants me Stephen. They want my power, my money, my tech and when they can't get it they run smear campaigns against me, against my company. It's just easier to pretend I like dealing with them than not. It's a game."
Stephen scowled harder as Tony filled his mug with boiling water. "A person's life is not a game Tony."

Tony's bark of laughter was bitter and hard and held no humour as he settled into a chair across from him. "You really believe that don't you? Unfortunately I never got that memo."

Stephen pursed his lips, his anger over Tony's forced willingness to associate with those who only wanted to use him threatened to derail his reason for being there. "Regardless, you shouldn't let them get away with it."

"Your naivete is cute Doc, but I'm pretty sure you didn't come here to talk about my business dealings." Tony said, sipping his coffee.

"You're right. I came to talk about Siberia." Stephen replied, noting how Tony's grip tightened on the mug he held. "And to thank you for the necklace."

Tony blinked confused eyes at him until Stephen drew the small watch face from beneath his tunic.

"Oh, that." He said, sounding relieved. "It was nothing. But you're welcome."

Stephen arched a brow at him, clamping down on his frustration. Jesus, did this man ever just take a compliment without dismissing his own work as nothing? Where had he learned to not value himself? It was maddening and it saddened him more than he'd expected. "It's not nothing Tony." He retorted, relishing the surprise that registered in the other man's eyes before he could hide it. "You made it specifically for me, because of my hands." Tony frowned and Stephen continued. "FRIDAY told me."

Tony made a displeased noise and took another sip of coffee. "Of course she did."

"So?" Stephen pressed. "Are you going to tell me why Steve Rogers' shield was with you in Siberia or do you want me to guess?"

Tony stared into his mug, his shoulders tensing as he watched. "I... can't do that. And I'm going to need that shield back."

"What do you mean you can't? I saved your damn life! I deserve to know how you ended up on the verge of death with Captain America's shield not ten feet from you."

"I was... outmatched. I lost." Tony shrugged. "If... if you want to know the rest, FRIDAY has a recording you can watch." Tony shifted his eyes up to meet his own. "But I can't talk about it and neither can you."

"Why the hell not? You could've died!"

"It doesn't matter Strange. I'm alive aren't I?" Tony shrugged again. "What does it matter anyway? Why do you even care?"

Stephen gaped at him. Clearly the things he didn't know about Tony Stark was even more important than the things he did. There were oceans of pain, hurt and betrayal in those expressive eyes, there and gone with words he spoke, covered up quickly with more words designed to distract
and hide behind. This man before him, so strong, so charismatic and charming had broken pieces inside that no one had ever attempted to try and help heal.

"Well?" Tony prompted, irritated by his silence.

"I care because I think of you as a... as a friend."

Tony startled, sloshing coffee over his hand as he put it down with a tremor in his arm. "You what? We're friends now?"

The bafflement in Tony's voice couldn't be more telling if he'd bared his heart to the world. "I'd like to think we are. You did make me the watch after all and I noticed at the hospital you were wearing the amulet I made you."

"But I ignored you, I snapped at you when you didn't even do anything wrong, I..." Tony paused, halting his babbling to meet his eyes. "I don't understand."

"One day, I'm going to ask you to explain that, but it can wait." Stephen replied, sinking ever deeper into the desire to wipe that confusion from Tony's eyes. Remove that doubt and self-deprecation completely from his persona. It was clear whatever had caused this beautiful, compassionate man to believe such dark things about himself would not be erased in a single conversation. "This video you mentioned. Where is it?"

Tony flinched and looked away again. "I'll have FRIDAY send it to you but you have to agree to having her installed in the watch first. It's... it's kind of a... safety thing. So I can find you if you need help or FRIDAY can alert someone if you need it." Tony paused. "And you can't watch it here. I've seen it. I don't need to see it again, once was more than enough."

A feeling of dread had begun to creep up Stephen's spine at the chill in Tony's voice as he spoke, but he shrugged it off to think about later. "I thought FRIDAY was already installed?"

Tony shook his head. "No. She was only able to communicate because it was a medical emergency. As soon as my vitals improved, she no longer had access to the watch you have. Outside emergencies, she's only installed on personal devices with the wearer's consent."

"Alright. But why is it a package deal?"

"Because we don't want the video released to the public Doctor Strange." FRIDAY answered from somewhere above him. "I can show you the video because I have security measures in place to prevent it getting out. No one can see it without boss's consent."

Stephen swore under his breath. He didn't like this. He didn't like it at all and from Tony's posture he wasn't enjoying the discussion either. It was time to go. "I expect I'll want to talk to you after I've seen this video."

"I know, just... give me a few days first okay?" Tony nodded, tensing visibly as though expecting a blow. "Thank you again Stephen for... for coming to get me. For... saving me."

"I don't understand why you need more time, but all right, I agree. Thank you for trusting me enough to put your care in my hands Tony." Strange replied, getting to his feet and opening a portal. "I'll be in touch."
Tony nodded and stared into his coffee mug as Stephen left the Tower.

Stephen sighed as it closed behind him, running a shaky hand though his hair. That had not gone at all like he'd hoped and he was more than a little hesitant to see what the video held.

He went straight to his bedroom and hurried through his evening routine before sitting on the bed and holding the necklace in trembling hands. "FRIDAY?"

"Yes Doctor?"

"Would you advise watching the video now?"

"No. I would also suggest you not view it until after breakfast tomorrow."

"Is it really that bad?"

"I cannot quantify it on a level such as that. I only know to suggest it based on boss' current state. Suffice it to say that it is a very personal recording. As such, I do not know how that might be measured on an emotional scale for an outside party."

Stephen hummed under his breath. He'd been expecting something along those lines, but it didn't make it any easier to follow FRIDAY's advice. Yet as badly as he wanted to know, he was too tired and too emotionally exhausted to watch something that would very likely make it worse. Putting it off till tomorrow was fine, he reasoned as he laid down. Tony didn't want to talk about it right away, so there was no rush. He had what he'd come for, another day's wait wouldn't hurt.
Getting Warmer

Tony woke with a gasp. Hands clutching at invisible pressure in his lungs, clawing at a chest devoid of an arc reactor that wasn't there. His heart raced and sweat beaded on his forehead, his face, his chest. There was no shield coming down to crack open his faceplate, no cold steel gaze lit with fierce determination to make him stop. No awareness that that shield hadn't been trying to snap his neck when it instead crushed the arc reactor. It was several moments before he was lucid enough to recognize his surroundings and he shivered violently.

"Boss?" Friday's voice called soothing from overhead. "Are you alright?"

"No... no. Not really baby girl." Tony wheezed when he could finally draw a breath without hyperventilating.

"Your body temperature has dropped boss. May I suggest a hot bath? I can run it for you."

Tony sighed, shimmying to the edge of his bed to let his feet rest on the floor. Another tremor ran through him and he nodded. It felt like he'd never be warm again. "That sounds good Friday. Give me a minute?"

"Of course boss." FRIDAY assured him, going silent as he continued his attempt to collect himself.

He scowled into his palms, resting his face between them as the shivers continued down his spine. That had been awful, but not unexpected. Though he was surprised it had taken almost a week for the nightmares to start. Shit, Tony swore as he stood on shaky legs and moved to the bathroom.

"Shall I start the bath now boss?"

"Yeah sure FRIDAY." He said absently, relieving himself before stripping out of his pyjamas.

Slipping into the hot water, Tony let out a groan of contentment. The constant chill he felt was slowly being chased away as the heat sank into his bones. With it, his thoughts cleared enough that they drifted to the nightmare and a crease formed between his brows. He knew things like that nearly always resulted from a trigger. In this case he also knew the trigger had to have been Stephen's visit last night and he let out a groan as he submerged his head under water.

The anxiety of dunking himself had faded... eventually. He would be damned if he'd let that linger and keep one of his favourite activities from being forever ruined. He loved the water and more importantly his baths and hot tub. For too long the thought of stepping in one had given him tremors and cold sweats, but it had finally stopped five years ago. It had taken longer than he'd hoped, but was grateful he'd overcome it for the heat was now very effectively warming and relaxing his tired and bruised body.

Unfortunately it wasn't doing much for the headache he had, his mind unable to stop worrying over what Strange was doing now. If he'd watched the video and if he would respect Tony's request to wait a few days before asking him about it. Shit. The wizard was going to think he really was an egotistical martyr, protecting a man who had so thoroughly betrayed him. But he wasn't, not really. Or at least, not forever.

"Boss?" FRIDAY called as he surfaced to rest his head against the edge of the tub.
Tony groaned. "Yeah FRIDAY?"

"I hate to interrupt boss, but I have a secure number calling and they refuse to say who they are."

Tony scowled at the ceiling. "Can't you identify their voice?"

"The individual on the line is using a voice scrambler and I believe it's not the voice of the caller. I suspect they hired someone to read a script."

Tony swore, sat up straighter in the tub and dried his face. "Fury. Has to be." He grunted. "Fine. Put him through."

There was no mistaking Fury's voice when the call connected, making Tony growl in irritation. There was only one reason Fury would call now and his suspicions were confirmed a moment later.

"Stark."

"Fury." Tony answered glaring at the ceiling. "What do you want?"

"I've been hearing some disturbing things about Siberia Stark. Thought you might want to help clear that up for me."

"Why would I want to do that?" Tony retorted. "I assume what happened is what you preemptively apologized for the last time we talked. Something else you kept from me."

"I was under the impression that Captain Rogers would tell you the truth, considering he's known or suspected it for over a year. I haven't. But yes, I was apologizing for that. If I hadn't trusted him to tell you, whatever happened in Siberia would have gone a lot differently."

"You could have told me before I went to Germany. What kind of asshole are you to keep that to yourself?"

"I believed Rogers would tell you. I'm sorry I trusted him to come clean and that you had to suffer for it."

"Why are you calling if you know everything already? What the hell more so you want from me?" Tony growled.

"I wanted you to know that we picked the Black Widow up after she left the Compound. We're conducting some... tests to see if she's been compromised. Her actions at the airport weren't unusual given her history, but it was the first time since Lagos that she had personal contact with Maximoff."

"You have Natasha in lock up?" Tony said, unable to hide his surprise.

"We do. And though it's unlikely, we're testing to see if she's been manipulated or if she was compromised some other way. She could have betrayed you at any time, why do it at the airport? And why in front of King T'Challa? Natasha is an opportunist but she's not stupid."

"Honestly, I don't care if she was compromised. The whole situation was out of control the minute they went to Lagos without the rest of the team. I don't care about Nat other than having her stay
far away from me."

"Are you going to tell me what happened with you and Rogers?"

"Why? So you can hold that over me too?"

"As hard as it is for you to believe Tony, I care about you and want to help where I can. Can I assume you and Rogers can no longer work together?"

"Pretty safe assumption." Tony grumbled. "Not very sane to put your personal safety in the hands of someone who tried to kill you."

"Rogers did what?" Fury exclaimed.

"You heard me. You wanna know more, ask Rogers. I'm sure T'Challa knows where he is."

"Have it your way Stark. But I'll say it again. I'm on your side in this whether you believe me or not. Fury out."

***

Wong was making breakfast when Stephen stormed into the room and sat down heavily in a kitchen chair. He narrowed his eyes at Strange, but said nothing as Stephen prepared a cup of tea from the kettle Wong had left on the table with shaking hands.

Wordlessly, he served breakfast, keeping his own council while Stephen ate methodically, clearly upset about something. Breakfast finished, Wong cleared the dishes and returned to his seat to wait. But he was not a patient man and as the seconds turned to minutes, Wong huffed in annoyance.

"Are you going to tell me what's going on with you or do I need to call Master Wynn?" Wong challenged him, his voice stern.

Stephen blinked and looked up, meeting Wong's gaze with frustration in his eyes. "There's no need for that."

"It's obvious something's wrong. We can't afford for you to be distracted from your duties with moping, so talk."

"I am not moping." Stephen snapped. "I'm angry. Tony sent me a video as an explanation for what happened in Siberia. And I can't talk to him about it because I agreed to give him time."

"Time for what? And what video are you talking about?"

"I don't know. As to your second question, the video contains..." Stephen hesitated. "Very upsetting footage of a crime being committed."

Wong frowned at him. "A crime? And Stark wants you to do what exactly? Pretend you didn't see it?"

"A double homicide, decades old, among... other things. And I don't know if Tony wants anyone else knowing about it." Stephen huffed, waving his hand at him in irritation. "But the crime was
"How does someone have a murder reported as a car accident?" Wong asked with a frown.

"I would assume the coroner was compromised or bribed. Perhaps threatened."

"But who would do that? And why?"

"Another good question." Stephen agreed. "Considering who the victim was, I assume a surviving family member or executor was involved in hiding the truth. It's... disturbing. Also suspicious if that same someone benefited from the victim's deaths."

The library of the Sanctum was quiet for several minutes after Stephen finished talking. Both men sat silent, wrapped in their own thoughts regarding murder and betrayal.

"I know you said Stark didn't agree to have anyone else see this video, but can I assume the victims were someone he knew?"

Stephen nodded, biting his lip in sudden fear. Damn, if Wong figured it out...

"Don't worry Stephen. I'm not going to share with anyone what I just concluded. But what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to give Tony the time he asked for. And while I wait, I'm going to do more checking. Find out why these people were killed and who benefited from it."

"Do you think anyone else needs to know the truth?"

"Probably." Stephen said, his face grim. "Unfortunately that's not my decision to make."

Seeming to agree with whatever he saw on Stephen's face, Wong got to his feet. "Let me know what you find out. I'd like to be of help if I can and it would be more effective if I knew as much as you and Stark."

"Of course." Stephen nodded.

"Very good. You have a meeting with the other Masters in an hour's time at Kamar-Taj. They've been monitoring what they think might be signs of Mordo's magic and they want you there to help analyse what they've found."

"Mordo?" Stephen exclaimed. "You don't really believe they found anything do you?"

"Only if he wanted them to find it."

"Which means it's a trap. Or a trick." Stephen nodded. "Very well. I'll go prepare and I'll see you when I return."
Cornered, Conflicted

Tony had been too busy to have a face to face with Peter. The board of directors had insisted on a meeting and after brushing off Pepper like he had, she'd refused to cover for him. He also couldn't use recent injuries to politely decline, since by some miracle no one had found out about his brief stay in the hospital.

On the road to his meeting, he'd sent Mark 42 to meet with Peter and spoke to him through FRIDAY's interface. To make up for not being there in person he had FRIDAY deliver him a new Spiderman suit. The kid was more than grateful and promised to be more careful in future and that he'd let Tony take care of anything else he discovered about the Vulture.

The only positive from all this was that he'd had to tell Stephen he couldn't meet with him today. To say Stephen had been annoyed by this news would have been a gross understatement. Tony tried to feel bad about avoiding him, but he was way too grateful that he wouldn't have to talk about Siberia to feel anything but relief. He really didn't want to see Stephen's look of disapproval or have him walk out of his life as quickly as he'd walked in once the Sorcerer had seen the video. It was stupid and childish and highly illogical, but in putting off the inevitable, he could at least pretend he and Stephen were sort of friends for one more day.

After the board meeting, he was ushered to an investor meeting, then on to SI's R&D lab to discuss new medical tech designed to improve mobility in prosthetic braces. Part of the designs were prototypes he'd been working on for Rhodey, who would be getting out of the hospital in a few days.

That meeting ran for much longer than he anticipated and by the time he finished up, he was late to a benefit dinner for relief efforts in Hell's Kitchen. He changed in his SI office, cursing under his breath when he remembered Pepper. She would be his "date" tonight. He'd been so busy avoiding Stephen, micromanaging Happy, Jessica and Peter while working on Rhodey's prosthetics, he'd forgotten about both the dinner and who he was going with. With another muttered curse, he donned his sunglasses and headed out to his ride.

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"I cannot believe the gall of that man!" Stephen fumed, pacing the floor of the Sanctum foyer. "Of all the convoluted, flimsy excuses I've ever heard! How could he have fogotten he'd be busy today? He put me off on purpose!"

"What's all this then?" Wong drawled from the hallway, his arms crossed over his chest as he leaned his back into the wall.

"Stark!" Stephen snapped. "He blew me off for some board meeting and a benefit dinner. It's been four days. Well I'm not going to let him do this."

Wong snorted at Stephen's outburst with a roll of his eyes. "What are you going to do Stephen? Kidnap him? Crash his board meeting? He's a busy man. Not everything he does is meant to inconvenience you, you know."

Stephen stopped pacing to stare at Wong and then a knowing smile appeared on his lips. "I'm not going to do any of those things." He said, opening a portal. "Call me if there's an emergency Wong. Otherwise, don't wait up."
"You forgot about this didn't you?" Pepper whispered with a knowing look as they entered the ballroom of the benefit hall location.

"I did." Tony replied, his jaw clenching as he flashed his public smile as cameras went off when they entered the hall. "I've been busy working on Rhodey's prosthetic design."

"I hope you've got a plan for what you're going to say about Germany." Pepper hissed as they made it past the reporters. "They're going to ask."

"I know Ms. Potts." Tony replied with a cool smile, putting a noticeable space between them. "FRIDAY? You have it ready right?"

"Of course boss. I should add there's something I need to..."

"Hold that thought FRIDAY."

"Tony!" Tony turned, his smile faltering as he turned to face the person who had called out to him.

"Dr. Palmer." Tony greeted her, placing a chaste kiss to the back of her hand while hiding his shock at seeing her there. "I didn't expect to see you here tonight."

"I didn't know you two were on a first name basis." Pepper said coolly, moving to Tony's side.

"We talked quite a bit recently. Didn't we Dr. Stark?" Christine smiled, not missing a beat as she lied through her teeth. "Your new prosthetic designs are amazing."

"Why thank you Dr. Palmer. That's quite the compliment coming from such an expert in her field."

"Indeed." Pepper nodded, narrowing her eyes at the two of them. "I'm going to get a drink. Tony? Come find me at the table."

"Will do darling." Tony replied, dripping with sarcasm, earning him an annoyed scowl. He didn't see a problem with what he'd said, two could play the snark game after all.

As soon as Pepper was out of hearing, he guided Christine by the elbow to a quiet corner of the room. "What was that about Doctor?"

"Me." A deep male voice said from behind him, making Tony flinch.

He turned to see Stephen glaring at him, catching Christine giving him a thumbs up out of the corner of his eye before she vanished into the crowd. "Doctor Strange." Tony said once he'd recovered from his surprise.

"I tried to warn you boss." FRIDAY whispered in his ear.

"Tony." Strange growled. "Don't you think you've put me off long enough?"

"You think I put you off on purpose?" Tony hissed back, glaring at the other man.

"Didn't you?" Stephen challenged him, drawing him further into the shadowed corner. "You gave me a very graphic video to watch and then asked me to give you a few days. Which I did, even though I didn't have to do. Then you conveniently forget that you promised to talk to me about it today." Stephen huffed, his earlier anger leaving him in a sudden rush.
"I just want to talk Tony." He added quietly.

Tony struggled to keep his emotions in check in the face of Stephen's obvious need to ensure his well-being. He wasn't accustomed to this and had no idea how to respond. He was used to Pepper and Rhodey brow-beating him into talking, not this... this honest pleading to understand. He looked away, not trusting himself to speak when Stephen spoke again.

"I apologize for ambushing you like this, but I'm... concerned about you. There was no mention in the news of your stay in the hospital nor how serious your injuries were. I don't like the thought that you're protecting the people who hurt you for any reason. Or that you don't seem to have told anyone what really happened. Or that less than a week ago you almost died. I realise we don't know each other very well and I'm not very good at this, but... I'm trying to be your friend."

Tony's throat closed up as Stephen trailed off and he struggled for several moments to get himself under control. He could see Pepper watching from across the room, her brow furrowing at whatever she saw in his face and he looked away. Right. Time to wrap this up. Taking a deep breath, he turned his back on Pepper, removing his sunglasses to meet Stephen's eyes.

Strange flinched at whatever he saw there and made as if to step closer to him, but then thought better of it and dropped his hand back to his side.

"You're right Strange." Tony said, unable to use his first name after how he'd put him off. "I have been avoiding you... just not for the reason you think." Taking a deep breath, he continued. "I can't leave now, but if you don't mind waiting for me to finish here, we can talk tonight at my penthouse."

"That would be fine Tony." Stephen nodded, though Tony could sense the other man was being extra cautious now.

"Good, great..." Tony nodded, now uncomfortable with Stephen so close to him. It wasn't fair, this intimacy would be gone soon. The Sorcerer was never going to look at him the same way after tonight and Tony couldn't help feeling like he'd just lost something precious. "FRIDAY will let you know when I'm headed back to the Tower if that works for you?"

"Of course." Strange nodded. "I apologize again for... for doing this here."

"Not like I gave you a choice." Tony huffed. "It's fine. I'll uh.. I'll see you later then." Tony said, moving quickly away and disappearing into a group of waiting guests who swarmed him the moment someone recognized him crossing the room.

***

Stephen cradled his head in his hands where he sat at the Sanctum's kitchen table feeling morose. He tensed when he sensed Wong enter and take a seat across from him.

"You know Strange. I have to say I am getting very tired of coming in here to find you in yet another state of... whatever this is. Again. What in the name of the Ancient One is wrong with you now?"

"I kind of lost my temper. Tony agreed to talk to me after the Benefit dinner tonight."

"Okay." Wong drawled. "I fail to see how that's a problem."

"He acted like he was agreeing to face a firing squad. I have no idea what's going on in his head. I have no map to understanding why he would think such a thing. What the hell has he experienced
to expect that from people? Normal people understand help Wong and his behaviour was very far from normal. I was a damned neurosurgeon for crying out loud, I'm not a psychologist! I have no idea how to convince him I don't mean him any harm."

"You're being ridiculous Stephen." Wong sighed.

"How is someone's emotional health ridiculous?"

"You were a doctor were you not? Surely you have experience with calming patients. I know you sucked at it by the time you came to us, but you would have had to serve some time in general practice."

"Actually I didn't." Stephen sighed. "I exceeded my own instructors and the university didn't want to put off making use of my intellect for the years required. My internship in general practice was waived and I served under the leading neurosurgeons at Metro General instead."

"So you cheated." Wong huffed. "No wonder you were so arrogant when you came to Kamar-Taj. I bet it never once occurred to you to turn them down and do the general practice anyways."

"Of course not." Stephen scoffed. "I would have been bored out of my mind."

"Then if you're so concerned about Stark, perhaps you should study what you need until he's ready for you." Wong jeered as he got to his feet. "It would certainly be a better use of your time than wallowing in self pity."

Stephen met his eyes with a scowl. "You're insufferable."

"Lucky for me I don't care." Wong retorted as he sauntered from the room. "Don't let me catch you looking like that again Stephen. Or there'll be hell to pay."

"Hmpf..." Stephen scoffed under his breath, hating that Wong had so clearly seen an obvious solution to his problem. With an annoyed sigh, he got to his feet and conjured a portal into the nearest medical University library and got to studying.
The cold weight of his impending talk with Stephen haunted him as he made his speech, answered questions from the press and struggled through eating the provided dinner. By the time Pepper managed to corner him out of earshot of all those seeking his attention, he was resigned to what awaited him when he left the building.

"You've avoided me all night." Pepper accused with a glare. "Ever since that Doctor from Metro General talked to you, you've been distant and... weird. What's going on Tony? Who else was there? And don't try to deny it, it was pretty obvious you were having a conversation with someone."

"It was Doctor Strange." Tony replied, seeing no point in lying. "He had something important he wanted to discuss."

"And he couldn't do that in the open like a normal person? Or make a phone call?"

"I've been avoiding him Pepper, but it's fine now. We're meeting later to... discuss a few things."

"Do those things involve an explanation regarding how you ended up in the hospital?"

"He... already knows that." Tony blurted without thinking, Pepper's eyes widening in shock and then hurt as realization set in. "I..."

"He's the one who brought you to the hospital? You told him and not me? I know I hurt you Tony but how could you keep that from me?"

"It's not about you Pepper." Tony sighed. "I didn't choose to tell Stephen, FRIDAY did. There wasn't anyone else available at the time."

"Dammit Tony, what is going on?!"

"I can't tell you Pepper. Not yet."

"But you can tell this sorcerer guy who you barely know?"

"Look, I don't know why this is so hard for you to understand. You made it very clear you don't want anything to do with Iron Man or the Avengers. This involves both and I don't need to hear from you again how dangerous it is. If the time comes for you to know, I'll tell you. But that's not today."

Pepper's face went from hurt and incredulous in the span of a few seconds before settling on irritated. "Fine. Keep your secrets. But if Rhodey asks if you're okay, I'm telling him about your new sorcerer friend and that you're not fine."

"You're going to deliberately upset a man who was seriously injured? That's low Pepp, even for you."

"How much more upset will he be if you don't tell him yourself Tony?"
Tony sighed, running a hand through his hair. "I'm going to tell him when he gets out of the hospital Pepper. Promise you won't say anything before that."

"Of course I won't. I'm just worried about you. This is exactly how you acted after the incident with Ultron only this time you're also pretending nothing's wrong."

"Dr. Stark."

Tony and Pepper turned to look at Christine Palmer who had joined them, a hesitant look on her face.

"I'll have Happy bring the car around. Leave you two to talk." Pepper said, moving away. "Nice to meet you Dr. Palmer."

"Likewise Ms. Potts."

"Doctor." Tony nodded. "Something you wanted to say?"

"I wanted to apologize for ambushing you earlier. Stephen asked me for a favour and... well, when he explained what he wanted, I kind of agreed with him. I hope you aren't mad."

Tony grimaced, though his eyes were soft. "It seems everyone is out to help me today."

"Um... what?"

"Nothing Doctor. It's fine. Stephen wasn't wrong and I'm not mad. But there is something you could do to make it up to me."

"Oh?" Christine asked, hesitantly. "Like what?"

"How would you feel about a semi-permanent consultancy at a facility in upstate New York?"

***

Tony procrastinated calling Strange a little longer once he reached the privacy of his penthouse. He took a shower, changed out of his suit into something more casual and set a pot of coffee to brew and water to boil.

He was tense when Stephen stepped out of the elevator, but went speechless when Strange crossed the room in a few short strides and gathered him into an awkward hug. He blinked in confusion for a moment, taken aback by the unexpected physical contact and then Stephen spoke.

"I am so sorry Tony." Stephen whispered. "I can't even imagine what you've been going through."

"I..." Tony had been in the verge of gently stepping out of Stephen's reach but in hearing his words, all the things he'd been keeping bottled up overwhelmed him. He blinked and the next thing he knew, he was clinging to the other man as though he were drowning. He blinked again and found he'd buried his face in Stephen's shoulder and silent tears were coursing down his cheeks.

Stephen said nothing as Tony fell apart in his arms. It wasn't what he'd expected the billionaire to do and hoped Tony wouldn't berate himself for it later. He rubbed soothing circles on the other man's back, murmuring words of comfort that sounded inadequate to his own ears. After what
seemed forever but had only been about twenty minutes, Tony roused himself and lifted his head making a dismayed sound at the damp spot he’d left on Stephen’s robes.

"Ready for that tea now?" Stephen asked quietly, earning him an amused laugh.

"I'm no tea drinker Doc." Tony said, his voice gruff. "But I'll take coffee if you know how to make it."

Stephen smiled and let Tony put distance between them. "I think you already brewed some before I got here."

"Savage." Tony huffed. "Don't tell me you think brewed coffee left on a burner is actually drinkable."

"Only in the most dire of situations." Stephen replied, his tone light.

"Well good." Tony nodded, not meeting his eyes. "Work your magic then. I'm gonna go splash some water on my face."

"I can make coffee you know."

"Well now's your chance to prove it Doc."

***

Tony took his time getting himself in some sort of order after his mini breakdown. His eyes weren't as red as he'd expected which was good. What wasn't good was his inability to wrap his mind around what had just happened. It seemed inconceivable that with a simple show of comfort he had come undone as easily as an ice cube melting on a countertop.

With a shaky, but determined breath he squared his shoulders and returned to the kitchen where the scent of fresh ground coffee infused his senses. Despite feeling as though he was standing on ground that could fall apart beneath him at any moment, the smell brought a smile to his face.

"Doc, if that tastes half as good as it smells I think I'll be borrowing you to make me coffee several times a week."

"It's ready if you want to give me your verdict." Stephen said as Tony joined him at the counter, relieved the other man seemed somewhat refreshed.

Tony arched a brow as he took the steaming mug from Stephen's shaking hand and took a sip. The taste burst on his tongue and he couldn't stop the moan of pleasure that escaped his lips.

"That good?"

"Mmm." Tony hummed, taking his mug into the living area and feeling his tension seep out of him further as Stephen followed close behind.

"So." Tony said, meeting Stephen's cautious gaze as they sat.

"So." Stephen repeated. "What happened after FRIDAY lost contact with you in Siberia?"
"Pretty obvious isn't it? I got my ass kicked." Tony retorted, not looking at him.

"I'm not looking for obvious Tony, I want to know exactly what happened."

"And what if I don't want to tell you?"

"Then you'll just have to make room for me here because I'm not leaving until you do."

"I could always have FRIDAY kick you out."

"I think FRIDAY might be on my side in this." Stephen retorted.

"FRIDAY would never..."

"Boss." FRIDAY interrupted. "Doctor Strange has level 5 security clearance."

A look of embarrassed irritation came over the engineer's face. "Shit. Dammit."

"Something wrong?" Stephen asked, curious.

Tony scowled and pursed his lips together, not meeting his eyes as FRIDAY answered for him. "Boss has given you a level of clearance that allows me to disregard his orders if I determine that doing so would be detrimental to his well-being."

"I didn't do it on purpose." Tony protested. "I wasn't thinking."

Shocked couldn't begin to describe what Stephen felt in that moment. Whatever level of clearance he'd been granted paled in comparison to the realization that such a thing meant Tony trusted him. He blinked owlishly at the other man who was still refusing to look at him.

"Besides. From what FRIDAY told me you saved my life, so I figured you can't be all that bad."

"I don't know what to say."

"Then don't say anything." Tony retorted. "If prefer it to that look you're giving me."

"What look?"

"That shocked look that implies I need my head examined for possible lunacy." "That is not what my look is about. And stop trying to change the subject." Stephen snapped. "I want to know what happened to you in Siberia. Could you please tell me without all this deflection?"

"I don't know why this is so important to you, but fine. Take a deep breath Doc, this story is what we call the big leagues. It isn't pretty."

Half an hour later, Stephen couldn't make his mouth form words. The story Tony had just told him was so much worse than what he'd originally thought, which meant his brain was having a very hard time coming up with an appropriate response.

"Told you it wasn't pretty Doc." Tony huffed, taking his silence as quiet condemnation. "I shouldn't
have reacted the way I did, I know that. Barnes wasn't responsible for what he did as the Winter Soldier but all I could see was the guy who killed my mom and I wanted to hurt him."

Stephen blinked in confusion for a fraction of a second before a scowl covered his features. "Stop that right now." He snapped, making Tony look at him in alarm. "Your reaction was perfectly justified and completely understandable. You just watched your mother be murdered with the perpetrator standing at your side. And the man who you thought was your friend lied to you about it. Don't you dare apologize for being human."

Tony blinked startled eyes at him, his mouth dropping open as he stared back at him. "But if I'd just taken a moment..."

"Stop it Tony. The only person at fault here is Steve Rogers. If he hadn't kept the truth from you, none of that would have happened. This... what was his name? Zemo? Would not have had any fuel to feed to his destructive fire and it would have ended with his death or incarceration."

"But..."

"You did nothing wrong. I don't want to hear how you should've reacted any differently because under the circumstances, there was no other way. You're human. Despite all you've done and all that you've accomplished, you are still human and you responded as any normal human would."

"You think I'm normal Doc?" Tony replied a small hint of teasing in his voice.

Stephen narrowed his eyes at him. "I'm trying to reassure you and you're making jokes? Nothing about you is normal. But your reaction was normal. Does that answer your question?"

"I see. So in your doctorly opinion I'm abnormal?"

"Ugh. You are infuriating and I'm not going to play this game you've started."

"Why? Afraid you'll lose?"

Stephen sniffed and glared at him with cool eyes. "How many people know what happened in Siberia Tony?"

Tony scowled at him a moment before letting his shoulders slump. "Counting myself, you and the two involved? Four? No, wait. Six maybe. Well and FRIDAY, but she lost contact when... well..."

"People have to know what Rogers did. He can't just walk away from this."

"I don't want my personal business plastered all over the world Doc." Tony retorted. "I have little enough privacy as it is."

"A crime was committed and someone covered up your parent's murder. But I'll drop it for now. I'm more concerned with what Doctor Wu said about your injuries."

"How do you know about him?"

"I was there remember? Christine said they were waiting on him and your medical proxy. I told her about James Rhodes' injury before they could call him. I didn't think you'd want him hearing about you while he was still in hospital."
A look of surprise crossed Tony's face before he looked away again. "Thanks Stephen. That was... well, thanks."

"Why haven't you told anyone what happened? Can I at least assume you told Ms. Potts and Doctor Wu?"

"They don't know. Though I'm sure Dr. Wu has already guessed. He just doesn't know who was behind it." Tony said, his eyes fixed on the table before him.

"What?! Why the hell not? Surely you would want your girlfriend and personal physician to know what happened."

"First, Pepper isn't my girlfriend. We broke up. Second, if I'd told Doctor Wu he'd have had to file an incident report. I wanted time to think about it and I really don't want what happened influencing the Accords."

"You broke up?" Stephen blurted before waving his hand at the other man's stunned expression. "Forget I said that. How are the Accords more important than your well-being? And I don't see how that's a bad thing. From what I understand this is exactly the sort of thing the Accords were written for."

"All that and you react to 'ex-girlfriend'?' Tony muttered before continuing. "You assume people will believe my version Doc." Tony retorted.

"Are you talking about Ultron? Because if you are that's another thing you need to make public."

Tony narrowed his eyes at him. "What are you talking about? Ultron was my creation and I screwed up."

"I did my research and for some unknown reason FRIDAY provided me with security footage I doubt anyone but you has seen. Don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about."

"Dammit FRIDAY."

"Sorry boss, I don't know what happened, but an old protocol was triggered and activated when Doctor Strange asked me about Ultron. I apologise, but I have to agree that it should not be kept secret. Ultron was not your fault."

"Your lack of self-preservation is highly unsettling Tony. Especially when there is no evidence to support the blame you've received over the years. Some guilt is to be expected, but what you're exhibiting goes beyond that. I think it's imperative we go to the mirror dimension as soon as possible."

"What?! Now?"

"Not this very minute, no. I need to prepare and you need to rest."

Tony frowned, setting his mug down. "I don't understand why this is so important. Other than that vision she gave me, I don't feel any different."

"Because I'm the Sorcerer Supreme. I know you don't get the importance of that, but she abused
her powers and used it against people who have no defense against it. There's no telling the kind of
damage she might have caused that you're unaware of. Which reminds me, how did she get her
powers? Wong and I tried to track her down but there's no record of her training anywhere."

"That's because she wasn't trained, at least not like you were. Her powers come from the mind
stone. Hydra had it and she and her brother volunteered for their experiments."

"Good god! The mind stone?! The same stone that created Ultron and powered Loki's staff? This is
very serious. I'm taking you to the mirror dimension first thing tomorrow." Stephen said, getting to
his feet.

"You're leaving?"

Pain tugged at Stephen's heart at those two simple words. Spoken so casually and yet filled with
such disappointment and so tangled in resignation he almost couldn't speak. "I'm going to the
Sanctum. There are some books I require and I need to let Wong know where I'll be. But I am
coming back to stay the night, whether you like it or not." He added, seeing how the engineer's
hackles rose at the declaration of Stephen's presumption that he'd be allowed to stay.

"Pretty pushy for a wizard." Tony huffed. "Bet you have the worst bedside manner in the history of
bedside manners."

"Sorcerer. And I may have heard something to that effect over the years." Stephen nodded with a
teasing smile. "Though I don't remember paying them any mind. Now, is there some security
protocol you need to disengage to allow me to portal here or what?"

Tony scowled moodily at him before dropping his eyes back to his mug. "You already have level 5
clearance Doc."

"You have access to every part of the Tower Doctor Strange, without restriction."

"Truly?"

Tony shrugged. "I can't imagine my security having much effect against those glowy doorways of
yours Doc. Besides, you haven't threatened me yet. So yeah, why not?"

"Threatened you? Oh we are so having a discussion about that later Stark." Stephen growled,
pulling on his sling ring and opening a portal. "Don't go anywhere unless it's to bed. You need rest
before we go to the mirror dimension."

"Bossy." Tony grunted.

"Yes. I am." Stephen retorted, stepping through the portal.

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A/N: Will be taking a short break for a bit. Chapters posted are almost caught up to where I'm at in
the story and I don't want to risk writer's block by posting them all too soon. In other words, the
frequency will be spaced out to every 3-4 days rather than every day or every other day.

Also, some feel the burn is too slow but no matter what I do, Tony and Stephen do not want to cross that line yet. I assume they just don't want to screw it up and so are refusing to cooperate. It's a lot like herding cats lol, so until I find a suitable catnip alternative it's gonna stay slow.

Thank you all for reading and commenting, it's the best incentive ever 😊❤️
Hidden Heroes

Scott wasn't in any way satisfied by Rogers' speech. He paced the floor of his chosen room, vibrating with nervous energy and worry while he listened to the others make their way down the hall. He could hear their muffled talking through the door and wished the lot of them would just go to bed already.

The business with the Accords and Stark was making his insides churn in anxiety, a feeling that had only grown worse after their arrival in Wakanda. When Rogers, Sam and Wanda had chimed in on his concerns over the Accords, that feeling had reached a peak of what felt like the worst case of indigestion of his life. Well, except that time he'd been thrown in jail and then shrunk down to the size of an ant, but that didn't really count since at least then he was in his own country.

The faint sound of doors closing drew his attention and he crossed to the door of his room to peak out and listen. After several minutes, he knew that the other members of the rogue Avengers had retired for the night, which he only now realized was what he'd been waiting for. Also, that he'd been referring to the people he now found himself with as rogues for some time now, and wasn't that a bit of a shock?

On silent feet, he stepped into the hallway, making his way back to the large living area and headed for the door leading into the rooms they'd been given. He wanted answers regarding the Accords and what he'd gotten from Rogers and the rest had only reinforced the growing panic he felt. Hearing the people he had sided with admit they knew nothing about the Accords they were supposed to be opposing as little more than grand ideals. Further, they were simultaneously obsessed with blaming everything on Tony Stark and it was more than just unsettling, it was insane.

He made his way to the door and eased it open on silent hinges only to clap a hand over his own mouth to stifle the very unmasculine shriek he uttered when it opened. Before him stood four very fit, very armed female royal guards who only arched curious brows at his unexpected appearance.

Once he'd recovered enough to breathe properly, he blinked and flashed them a hesitant smile. And no, there was not a nervous hitch in his voice no matter what his inner critic was saying.

"Hi! Um, uh I'm Scott Lang, uh... Ant-Man? No? Um right. So, I was wondering if I might have a word with your king. T'Challa right?"

"What is this about Mister Lang?" One of the warriors demanded in a cool tone. "Our king is very busy."

"Right, yes. Of course he is. I uh would like to speak to him about the Accords. That is, if he's available? I don't want to put him out or anything."

The women before him shared a look and the one who had spoken returned his gaze. "Will any of your companions be joining you?"

"Uh, no? Is that... that's not a problem is it?"

"It is not." She said as the four of them did an about face, bracketing the door to show two more warriors had appeared in the hallway behind them. One stepped forward, her eyes piercing in their
intensity before suddenly softening into a friendly smile.

"If you will follow me Mr. Lang? We will take you to a private room where you can speak with the king once he has finished attending to other matters."

"Oh! Sure, all right. Um, lead the way I guess."

***

Shocked couldn't even begin to describe how he felt about what he'd done after he'd stepped off the elevator and into Tony's penthouse. Stephen had spent his time waiting by studying every text he could absorb on emotional stress in the few short hours he'd had before going to the Tower. One of things that had not been suggested was initiating physical contact with someone who was emotionally compromised and likely not open to physical contact from strangers.

Yet on seeing Tony standing there, acting as though he wasn't dreading the conversation he'd been about to have and knowing what he did of the man's past, he couldn't do anything else. The moment he'd done it, he'd braced for the inevitable backlash and then Tony had done something inexplicable and hugged him back. If he'd been himself from before the accident he knows he would have said something inappropriate, though if that had been the case, he wouldn't have hugged the man to begin with.

All his careful plans on how to start their conversation went out the window. Further flummoxing him was Tony's unexpected recovery into calm acceptance and teasing barbs after he'd emerged from the bedroom.

Covering his surprise hadn't been as easy as he'd pretended either. Hiding his now damp palms and talking over the nervous pulse jumping in his throat had been an act of sheer stubbornness. Though his efforts had gone unnoticed since Tony was completely absorbed in self-deprecation and expecting the worst.

With a firm shake of his head, he snapped his focus back to the task at hand, gathering the things he'd need to take Tony to the mirror dimension. After a few parting words to Wong with a promise to call if it turned out he needed the man's assistance, he returned to Stark Tower in a spray of orange sparks.

***

"Mr. Lang." T'Challa greeted him an hour later in a small room equipped with all the same things as a small apartment.

"King T'Challa." Scott replied, getting to his feet and stopping his forward movement at the other man's negated wave.

"My warriors tell me you wished to speak with me about the Accords." T'Challa said, indicating they should sit.

"Uh yes. That's right. I kind of missed the whole UN thing and the Council stuff. I was hoping you might have a copy I could take a look at."

"Of course." T'Challa nodded. "Does this mean you are considering signing them?"
"Well, I hadn't actually thought that far ahead. But I want to be able to see my daughter and I can't do that if I'm... well, here. Do you know if that might be possible? I mean, I think I know I'm in a bit of trouble here but I really don't want to go back to jail either."

"You raise an interesting question Mr. Lang. I will, of course, have to get back to you on that. In the meantime, I can send someone in to go over the Accords with you if you like?"

"Yeah." Scott nodded. "That would be great."

"Am I to assume you do not want your companions to know about this?"

Scott flushed and looked at his feet. "Uh yeah. Can you tell them, if they ask I'm just... talking to my daughter?"

"Of course Mr. Lang. I will send someone in to go over the Accords with you shortly."

"Thank you King T'Challa. I... really appreciate this. Um everything you've done for us."

"For now, Wakanda is a neutral territory. It is my duty as it's king to ensure sanctuary for those in need."

***

"Ms. Potts?" A soft male voice said through the phone.

"Yes?"

"It's Matt Murdock calling ma'am."

"Oh! Yes, of course. Was there something I can help you with?"

"I received a video of something I think you should see."

"A video? I don't understand. And if it's a video, pardon the question, but how do you know what's on it?" Pepper asked, confused.

"I knew the truth about... the subject matter prior to the video through some extensive research I conducted. As to the video content, Mr. Stark provided me a described video prototype program. The video appears to be security footage of a room in Stark Tower, from a little over two years ago."

"Two years ago?" Pepper repeated, her voice faltering.

"Yes."

"We shouldn't discuss this over the phone." Pepper said, collecting herself.

"I agree."

"Where are you now?"

"I'm at the new compound, upstate."
"I'll be there in an hour." Pepper said. "And Mr. Murdock? Don't talk to anyone about this, not even your partner."

"Understood Ms. Potts. I'll be waiting."

***

Tony remained rooted to his seat after Stephen stepped through a portal and out of his living room. He couldn't believe what had just happened. Had he really left tear stains on the grumpy wizard's cloak? Not that he'd been all that grumpy lately, well, so long as you didn't count how Tony had turned him grumpy after putting him off for so long.

But yeah, dammit. He had... crumbled like a wet sand castle at the feel of Strange's arms around his waist. And what Stephen had said... nope, no he wasn't going to think about that. That would just have him getting all worked up again and Strange had told him he needed to relax.

He scoffed at that, letting out a snort of disbelief. Relax, as if it was the simplest thing in the world for him to do. That he could just do that because Strange said so, as if Tony was actually sleeping like a normal person since Siberia and not waking in a cold sweat or blind panic every two hours.

He shook himself and stood, stretching his arms above his head and rolling his neck to work the kinks out. Stephen said he would be back... well, he'd see about that. But if he did, then Tony felt compelled to tidy up a bit. Ignoring the slight panic at the thought of Strange spending the night was causing him, he gathered up their discarded mugs and wiped down the kitchen counter. When Strange still hasn't returned, Tony shrugged and headed to his bedroom to change into something he could sleep in while not simultaneously embarrass himself in front of the wizard.
When Stephen returned to Stark Tower he was braced for anything Tony could throw at him. Given how long he'd been gone and the man's overbearing nature, he'd been expecting him to be waiting with a challenge in his eyes, demanding he get the mirror dimension thing over with.

So it was with yet another jolt of shock, that instead of being greeted by an angry, unsettled genius he found Tony fast asleep on the couch. His breath caught at the sight of the man sleeping, and wasn't that an uncomfortable realization? That in the short time he'd known the man, he'd now watched Tony sleep twice. It felt far too intimate for someone he barely knew, doubly so since Tony had known Stephen was coming back and had fallen asleep anyway.

He settled on the couch across from the engineer who was dressed in what was clearly silk sleepwear. Black with silver piping and red accents that did nothing but highlight the man's beauty. For the most part his face appeared peaceful as he snored quietly into the blanket he had clutched in one hand, but a crease was still visible between his brows.

Stephen pursed his lips, debating if he should wake him and send him off to bed. After several minutes he decided not to, instead getting up and adjusting the blanket to cover the other man completely. He must have stood there too long staring because a voice sounded overhead making him jump in surprise.

"Doctor Strange?"

"Christ." Stephen swore when he recovered himself. "I'm sorry. I forgot about you."

"It's alright Doctor. I was only going to say that you don't need to worry. Boss has slept in worse locations."

"Uh..."

"You were deciding whether or not to move him to his room. It's not necessary and I would prefer if you didn't. Boss hasn't slept much and waking him now would only interrupt the sleep he needs. He will be fine where he is."

"I... see." Stephen nodded with a frown. "You say he hasn't been sleeping?"

"It is not uncommon Doctor. Boss has bad dreams." FRIDAY replied, though Strange sensed the AI was deliberately understating the problem. "He also got a blanket and pillow out for you. It's behind you on the couch. Or, you are welcome to take the guest bedroom if you prefer."

"I think I'll just stay here FRIDAY. Can you dim the lights a bit? If Tony wakes up I don't want to unnecessarily scare him when he remembers I'm here."

"Of course Doctor. If you need anything just ask."

***

Tony woke with a groan, the sunlight piercing his eyelids let him know he'd fallen asleep on the couch again and not in his bed. As he slowly drifted into consciousness, he sat up abruptly as his
memory of the night before returned. Couch. Stephen. Oh god, had he really cried in the other man's arms like a sap last night?

Eyes wide and brows furrowed in an attempt to keep the turmoil inside hidden, he looked over to the other couch where a certain wizard was still sleeping. Shit. It was worse than he thought, he moaned inside his head, a quick glance down chasing away the sudden horror that he might be naked. A sigh of relief escaped him as he got to his feet and moved to the kitchen, intent on having a coffee to help ground himself into wakefulness.

A noise behind him had him almost jumping out of his skin and he turned to glare at his... unwelcome? No, uninvited guest.

"I thought you were sleeping."

"My body was." Stephen replied as he stretched and got to his feet. "And I meant what I said. No coffee."

"What's that supposed to mean? And what are you talking about, no coffee? You might be a doctor, but you're not my doctor." Tony retorted but flushed when his brain said, not yet and hinted that he could be.

"Why are you blushing?" Stephen asked, apparently just as observant as Tony himself.

"I don't appreciate being told what to do Doctor." Tony retorted, completely ignoring Strange's question. "I need my coffee Strange. Give me one good reason why I should listen to you."

"Mirror dimension. Remember?" Stephen retorted.

"What? Is it some kind of torture place where a person can't have coffee?"

"You need to be relaxed Tony, not wired on caffeine."

"My apologies then Doctor Strange." FRIDAY interrupted. "I have something you wanted boss."

Tony frowned and looked into the nearest camera lens. "What is it?"

"I have confirmation that Mr. Zemo has been contained in the Raft. King T'Challa handed him over to Agent Ross."

"Shouldn't that have happened a while ago? Why are you telling me this now?"

"I have had difficulty maintaining proper surveillance at the Raft boss. Someone has been interfering with my attempts and this information was out of my reach until today."

"Anything else?"

"I cannot say. Doctor Strange has indicated you need to be relaxed."

"FRIDAY." Tony growled, ignoring the glare of disapproval he was getting from Stephen.

"Apologies boss. But he's a doctor. I deemed the information I just provided would not disagree with you."
"Whatever it is, it can wait Stark." Stephen growled, his arms crossed over his chest. "And I cannot believe what I just heard. Does this mean you hacked into a maximum security prison?"

"More like lurked in the background." Tony corrected, returning Stephen's glare.

"I thought you agreed with the Accords?"

Tony scowled. "Accords yes, once they're amended and ratified. Secretary Ross, no. That guy needs to be locked up."

Stephen frowned back at him before letting out a huge sigh and uncrossing his arms. Tony refused to let his frown dissipate and remained where he was.

"So wizard boy, how does this magic thing you want to do to me work?" Tony demanded, wincing at the way he just worded that. His brain whispering non-helpfully that the so-called wizard had probably already put a spell on him. Why else would he have given the man level 5 clearance?

Ignoring Tony's obvious goading, Stephen took a step back from the couch he'd been leaning against, motioning for Tony to have a seat. "First, you come over here and sit down."

Tony continued to scowl at him, his shoulders tense, all while muttering under his breath about bossy wizards, but did as Stephen asked. "Then you drink this." Stephen continued, a steaming cup of tea appearing in his hand moments before he handed it to Tony.

"What's this?" Tiny scoffed, scowling at the cup he held. "Magic potion?"

"Tea." Stephen retorted, biting his tongue to keep from snapping at him. "It will help calm you."

"Fine." Tony sighed, draining it and setting the empty cup on the coffee table. "Done. Now what?"

"Now you need to lie down and get comfortable." Stephen continued, his voice becoming gentle and soothing. "Think you can do that?"

"If I can't, its because you wouldn't let me have my coffee." Tony retorted, even as he stretched out on the couch, leaning his back against the arm. "But if this is just some kinky way of you getting me pliant, I can think of better ways to achieve that." He continued, a smirk on his lips as Strange blushed in response to his teasing.

"Anytime you want to knock that off works for me." Stephen retorted, using all of his willpower to ignore the spark Tony's words ignited inside him. "Now, are you comfortable? Finished your little games?"

Tony shrugged. "As close as I can get without booze." He replied sullenly, his eyes drifting closed. "What was in that tea?"

"Herbs and spices designed to help you relax."

"What? No magic potion?" Tony teased, still trying to get a rise from him.

"Everything you mix is in some way a potion Tony. Whether it's coffee with sugar, soup with spices, tea with milk... it doesn't matter. It's the intention behind it that is typically ascribed to
“So what? Everybody does magic and they just don’t know it?”

“Something like that.” Stephen replied, coming to kneel at Tony's side. “Do you think you're relaxed enough now?”

“Mmm.” Tony sighed, his eyes closed. “Considering I just woke up, I feel like I'm about to fall asleep.”

“Good. Keep your eyes closed while I move us to the mirror dimension.”

Tony's eyelids were so heavy when Strange spoke it was all he could do to keep the darkness from claiming him completely. Lethargy didn't even begin to describe the weight that seemed to press down on him, coaxing him to continue drifting in darkness as his mind conjured pleasing images he hadn't even known lurked there.

A pair of warm blue eyes stared back at him behind his eyelids, their depths projecting more care and concern than anyone had ever looked at him with before. It was so pure and so filled with a depth of emotion he didn't dare name that he actually whimpered at the sight, feeling tears form in the corners of his closed eyes. The tears, he realized, as he focused on keeping his reaction closed off was knowing they weren't caused by happiness, but upon seeing it and knowing instantly that this, this pure concern was what he'd been seeking all his life. Knowing that never once in his almost fifty years of life he had never been on the receiving end of such pure... love.

Another whimper that he quickly masked with a growl had him snapping his eyes open in the same moment he felt the space around him wrench and settle. A warm palm came to rest on his cheek and he found himself staring into those same blue eyes, though these held the depth of galaxies, tinged with green. It was like looking inside a storm or those Hubble images of galaxies. "Tony? Can you hear me?"

Tony blinked and struggled to sit, Strange letting go as he righted himself. "Yeah. What was that?" He asked, levelling a scowl at the wizard.

"What was what?" Strange replied, sounding confused. "I brought us to the mirror dimension."

"I know that Stephanie." Tony retorted, enjoying the scowl the name caused. "I meant, why did I just have a weird vision. Was that you?"

"You had a vision?" Strange repeated, his irritation gone in a look of concern he failed to hide. "What kind of vision? What did you see?"

This time it was Tony who scowled. Him and his big mouth. "Just a vision of someone looking at me."

"Who?"

"I don't know who." Tony snapped. "All I saw were eyes. Blue ones." He added, hoping Stephen would move on.

"No, none of those."

"Stark. We will never get anywhere if you continue giving me half answers." Stephen grated.

"Fine. I didn't feel threatened. I felt safe. Cared for." He answered, watching the wizard's face intently, willing him to drop it.

"I see. Well I can assure you that wasn't my doing. We can discuss it later if you like, but it is immaterial to our purpose here."

"Never is fine by me." He muttered. "So? Now what?"

A pained look crossed Stephen's face, but he took a deep breath and began speaking. "You'll want to interrupt me, but I ask that you don't until I finish."

When Tony only furrowed his brows Stephen continued. "The Mind Stone that is responsible for Ms. Maximoff's magic is also one of a set of gems called Infinity Stones." Tony flinched at that, his eyes widening in surprise, but he kept silent. "Normally, removing residual magic is as simple as casting a spell, locking onto the thread and removing it. Unfortunately the mind stone is more powerful than natural magic."

Tony nodded. "I get it. This won't be simple. You said that before we even came here. Get on with it Doc. What is it you don't want to tell me?"

"Depending on how embedded Wanda's magic is, I may not be able to remove it without experiencing what it did to you."

Tony blinked, letting Stephen's words sink in. "You mean you're going to feel what I felt?"

"I can't be certain, but it's a possibility. I may also experience some of your memories. Anything that might have been affected by the Scarlett Witch's magic."

"Will you remember any of it after you do your little magic trick?"

"It's possible."

"Well none of what you just said changes anything does it? You either remove the magic and learn all my dirty secrets or I live with the fact everything I do is tainted by the witch's vision. I think I prefer the former."

"Very well. Sit on the floor here and get comfortable." Stephen said, moving to sit across from him. "If anything pains you, tell me and I'll stop."

Tony scowled at him. "If it pains me, doesn't that mean you'll just have to start again?"

"Well, yes."

"Then don't stop Doc." Tony replied, his eyes boring into his. "Do what you gotta do so we can get back to the real world."

"In that case, I apologize in advance if this causes you pain. I do not wish for you to suffer any more than you already have."
Tony grunted in acknowledgment, hiding his surprise, again, and let his eyes drift closed without Stephen having to tell him. A feeling of calm warmth descended on him a moment later and then there was no room for anything else as he felt Stephen gently pressing at his thoughts to let him in.
Crimson Mist

Everything was red. Red assaulted him the very instant Tony opened the way into his mind as Stephen sat, eyes closed and sent his magic seeking. A crimson red mist coloured everything he could see until it suddenly dissipated and images and words began to assault him, slow at first and then faster and faster. Connected and then not. Disjointed, out of place, overlapping until he couldn't tell one moment of time from the next.

Pain. Pain that stole his breath away. Searing heat and pain centred in his chest. His wrists hurt from the grip someone had on his arms as he struggled. Darkness, cold. Water, ice, can't breathe. Gasping, blinking away the tears from his eyes or was it water dripping from his hair? A leering smug face, cold gray eyes smirking at him as he lay paralyzed, unable to prevent those eyes from taking the one thing from him that was keeping him alive. Panic, dizzy, weak, a burning sensation radiating from his chest, collapsing to the floor. Then a brief moment of freedom, energy, the relief of being able to take a deep breath without pain.

Fire and heat replaced the elation and Stephen was spinning away from a memory he couldn't grasp. He fought the pull, seeking the red again only to find himself cold again, staring up into a dark sky while snow fell on his face, making him blink. Struggling then falling to the ground again, unable to breathe, a giant black hole looming above him threatening to leave him abandoned, alone, in darkness.

"You're selfish Tony. Where would we be if your dad had been as selfish as you?"

"Pepper, please don't go."

"I'm sleeping on the couch Tony."

"I have many words to describe you Stark."

"Artificial intelligence. You didn't even hesitate."

"She's just a kid Tony!"

"This is all your fault."

"Look what your genius has wrought Stark. The Merchant of Death."

"What are you without that suit? You aren't the kind of man to lay down on a wire."

"I'd probably just cut the wire."

Stephen heard and felt pride swell within him despite the memory not being his.

"Playing with things your mortal mind cannot even begin to understand."

"Tony Stark not recommended."

"I quit Tony. I'm done. I can't do this anymore."

"Sometimes my friends keep secrets."
"You tore us apart when you signed Tony."

"If you don't stop..."

"You did something right."

"Tony stop! It wasn't his fault."

"He killed my mom."

"He's my friend."

"So was I."

"Did you know? Don't bullshit me Rogers! Did you know?!"

"Yes."

Stephen's body twitched as the mist suddenly returned, blocking out everything before parting to show a black world. The endless cold of space and the dead. All the Avengers dead and broken at his feet. He glanced down, Rogers gasping for breath, his gaze accusing.

"You didn't save us. Why didn't you save us Tony? Why didn't you do more?"

With effort, Stephen wrenched himself free, moving his thoughts away to where he could see a bright tip of red glowing bright as it continued to thread itself into the images he saw and those that came before. He ignored the cries and growls of massive creatures flying above him, bracketed by the cold dark of space.

He reached out with his magic, grabbing hold of the red tendril that hissed and smoked at his touch as though he were dousing a fire. He weaved the cleansing power of his spell into the threads that held it there, infecting it in the same manner he would when he cleaned a wound. In seconds, he held the intrusive magic trapped and with a surge of power, he forced it to seek and destroy all in it's path, commanding it to destroy it's hold on Tony's mind.

Blurs of colour and faces rushed past him again, too fast for him to see clearly. Words and emotions roiled in his heart, almost suffocating in the darkness and how alone, how despairing it all was. He felt adrift and abandoned as his magic sought out and destroyed the red that didn't belong, rushing by faster and faster, stopping so abruptly that he gasped aloud when he was snapped out of Tony's mind and back into his astral body.

Opening his eyes, he looked at Tony whose eyes remained closed, though tears could clearly be seen on his cheeks, Stephen's heart wrenching at the sight. Working quickly, he pulled the last remnants of red from the other man, wrapping it in a ball of blue light and sent it away, back to the one it came from. He had a moment to think how it might injure the caster, shrugging off his concern with a sense of right, that it was far less than she deserved.

Focusing back on Tony, he weaved a spell of his own, healing the point of access the witch had used to gain entrance to the man's mind. As he watched, Tony's shoulders dropped, his head falling forward to rest his chin on his chest, his breathing becoming more steady. He then sent a cleansing, healing magic into him, hoping to ease any pain his interference might have caused.
With a deep cleansing breath of his own, he scanned himself, ensuring none of the witch's magic had attached itself to his aura. One more spell to cleanse and protect the space he inhabited with Tony in this dimension and then, despite his reservations, he spoke.

"Tony?" Stephen said, his voice as calm as he could make it. "Tony, can you hear me?"

"I hear you Doc." Tony replied after a minute, a soft sigh escaping him.

"You can open your eyes now." Stephen replied, waiting with breath held. "How do you feel?"

Tony lifted his head, his warm, amber brown eyes clear and bright despite what he imagined Tony must be feeling now. "Like I just had my entire life flash before my eyes. Aside from that, I'm good."

Stephen frowned. "You're good?"

"Yeah Doc." Tony nodded. "It's not the first time I've had that experience."

Stephen hummed in response as Tony took in his surroundings as though noticing it for the first time.

"This place is pretty trippy Doc." Tony said, his eyes wide with wonder. "Do you come here often?" He quipped, the corner of his mouth quirking in amusement as he laughed silently at his own joke.

"I did at the beginning of my training, yes. Not so much now."

"Waste of a good line." Tony muttered, missing Stephen's amused smile. "So is this place real?"

Stephen shrugged. "In comparison to what? If you're injured here, you're still injured Tony. The difference is that it's only your astral self that's here. On the earth plane, your physical body is at rest."

Tony nodded, but he could see the man's mind working. "Right. But this place is like having a dream. The difference is that I'll remember it when I go back."

"You can't affect the real world from in here, no. But yes, you will remember."

"Wait. Are you saying that dreams can affect the real world?"

"They can to some degree."

"Is that why you wanted to do this here?" Tony asked, waving his hand around to encompass the both of them. "Afraid of what the witch had done to affect my dreams?"

"She affected far more than your dreams Tony, but yes I was very concerned. Though it seems most of her power was focused on you and your own self-destruction."

Tony nodded as though he'd expected Stephen's answer. "So are we done here?"

"For the most part." Stephen replied, getting to his feet and holding his hand out to help Tony up.
After a moment of hesitation, Tony took it and stood, letting go of his hand almost reluctantly. "You can close your eyes if you like. The transition can be unsettling."

"I'm good doc." Tony said, looking around at the fractures of light surrounding them. "Do your thing."

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Ten minutes later Tony was sitting on the couch in his penthouse while Stephen moved around his kitchen, presumably to get him coffee. Tony wasn't sure he would swear to that being true if asked because he hadn't actually registered what Strange had said other than his own non-committal grunt that somehow Stephen had translated into one of agreement.

He had lied earlier, of course he'd lied, he scoffed, when he'd told Stephen he was fine. He wasn't, because of course he wasn't, but since when had anyone actually wanted to know how he really felt? Tony blinked as his brain tried to work out the answer to the rhetorical question he'd asked himself and wasn't that just perfect? The eccentric billionaire so far gone in his own... what was it Natasha's report had said? Right, right, textbook narcissism, egotistical. Because it was narcissistic to think anyone actually cared and wanted the truth about how he felt right? Was that narcissism? Tony didn't know. His brain wasn't actually supplying him with answers, despite the fact that it was still asking questions.

He must have gone somewhere in his head after that because the next thing he knew, Stephen had a hand on his knee, shaking him and asking if he was okay. He blinked, the red cape coming into focus first before he saw, again, the blue of Stephen's concern filled eyes watching him intently.

"What?" Tony asked, his eyes going to the mug sitting on the coffee table in front of him. "Oh, right. You made coffee." He said, shifting to pick it up but missing it completely and then being held in place by Strange's sudden pressure on his knee.

"You need to take a minute Tony." He said, his eyes still piercing as they watched him, making sure he heard.

"Didn't I already do that?" He retorted, feeling petulant and wrong. He didn't like this, this feeling of not being all there. It reminded him of the time after... after the desert. Yeah the desert. Not going to think about the actual place. Or that other one after... shit Loki and then, the murder bot and oh crap, why was he even thinking about any of this? Because next he was going to go somewhere cold and alone and that had him tensing in an instant, adrenaline coursing through him unimpeded and he flinched, actually flinched, at the pressure on his knee.

His eyes drifted down to where Stephen's hand continued to touch him and he felt Stephen follow his gaze before moving his hand up and away, shifting back to give him space. He had a moment to think, no don't pull away, before everything snapped back into the present, hitting him like a gale force wind as he let out his breath in a loud exhale.

"What the hell just happened?" He said, when he could finally, finally speak without sounding like he was gasping for air.

"The residual effect of the magic leaving your body." Stephen answered, his eyes now holding less fear concern and more plain concern that Tony couldn't quite process.

"Magic. Right." Tony repeated, sounding just as sarcastic as that answer deserved. He took another
breath and when the room didn't fade out again, he reached for the mug and drank. He closed his eyes at the familiar aroma of coffee, just... coffee filling his senses and felt his entire body go limp with relief. Familiar, sane, present, safe was what it communicated to him without the need for words or gestures or... or touches. He frowned at that last thought, his mind thinking *what's wrong with that?* before he shook it off and met the blue-grey colour of Stephen's eyes again, only this time he returned the intensity of it with one of his own. "You'll have to do better than that Gandalf." Tony retorted, downing half the coffee in seconds as though he were dying of thirst. "Pretty sure magic alone isn't what caused... whatever the hell it was that just happened."

"Are you actually ready to discuss this now or are you projecting that you're fine so that I don't think differently?" Stephen replied, holding Tony's surprised look with an unwavering gaze.

"I'm..." Tony began and then stopped because he didn't actually know if he was fine and somehow he didn't think Stephen would believe him if he said otherwise. "I don't know."

"Well that's better than having you tell me what you think I want to hear." Stephen replied. "Better than I expected. Next question, do you actually wish to talk about this now or do you want some time to ground yourself first?"

Tony had no idea what to do with this. This weird feeling of wanting to answer honestly and having his mind supply an answer he knew wasn't true and saying it anyway. Or that he didn't want Stephen calling him on his bullshit as if that had become something important that he couldn't ignore. "I think I'd like some time. How much do you think?" He asked, the words out of his mouth before even registering he'd thought them beforehand.

Stephen stared at him in surprise, but recovered quickly. "A few hours or whenever you're ready. I removed all traces of Ms. Maximoff's spell. You might experience some disorientation though I can't say how much with any certainty without questioning you first."

"Uh huh." Tony nodded. "Okay. What about decision making? Will there be a difference there?"

"I couldn't say."

"Right, right." Tony replied, still distracted by something he couldn't quite grasp.

"Boss?"

"Yeah FRIDAY?"

"The movers are here and Colonel Rhodes is asking if you'll be meeting him at the compound this morning."

"That's today?" Tony demanded, still feeling disconnected to what was happening around him.

"Yes boss."

Tony nodded absently and got to his feet. "Tell Rhodney I'll be there in a couple hours. Well Doctor, seems I have to take a break anyways so, see you later?"

"Of course." Stephen nodded. "Where? This new compound?"

"Yeah. Upstate New York. Kinda middle of nowhere, but not really? No civilians for a few dozen
miles at least. FRIDAY can give you the address."

"I don't drive."

"Uh, okay?" Tony frowned. "You want me to send you a car?"

"That's not necessary." Stephen replied, shaking his head. "Do you have any photos of this compound?"

"FRIDAY does. Why?"

"If I can see a location beforehand I can open a portal and be there instantly."

"Okay." Tony nodded, the implications of what that meant for Siberia flitting through his mind at Stephen's answer. "So see you later then?"

"Call me when you're ready and I'll come by. If I don't hear from you, I'll see you at the compound later tonight." Stephen nodded, stepping a few feet away and opening a portal. "In the meantime, try to take it easy."

Tony snorted at that, knowing how unlikely that was to happen, but nodded as Stephen disappeared in a flash of orange sparks.
Wong looked up from his morning newspaper as a portal appeared in the Sanctum and Stephen stepped through. On seeing him, Strange nodded, pausing in the doorway of the main floor library.

"How did it go?" Wong asked, taking note of Stephen's haggard look.

"I was successful in removing the witch's magic." Stephen replied, clearly distracted.

"You look like shit Strange." Wong replied to which Stephen merely nodded. It made Wong tense instantly, Stephen never agreed with him this quickly.

"I may have been a tad unprepared for how removing that curse would affect me. I need at least an hour in meditation to deal with it. Are you able to watch over things until then?"

"I'm here for the weekend Stephen."

"Oh, well good." Stephen replied. "I'll be in my room if you need me."

Wong nodded, watching Stephen leave in a sweep of his cloak as he disappeared down the hallway. After a moment's hesitation, he conjured a spell to ensure Strange had no residual magic clinging to him. When it came back clean, he nodded to himself, satisfied, and returned to his paper. A meditation would do Strange some good he concluded. Any questions he wanted to ask about the session with Stark could wait.

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"FRIDAY? Do you have video of what happened while Strange was here?"

"Of course boss."

"Que it up for me baby girl." Tony said, turning his attention to the 80-inch screen on the wall.

"There's really not much to see boss." FRIDAY commented as the video began to play. "Doctor Strange told you not to drink coffee, you drank his tea and promptly fell asleep. You were out for exactly 38.475 minutes and then you both woke up."

"Mmm." Tony murmured. He wasn't particularly interested in the sleep part or the coffee part, though that still rankled. No, he was much more interested in the look Stephen had been giving him when he was still out of it. "Advance to when I woke up."

"Of course."

Tony watched impassively for a moment, perking up when Stephen's face was suddenly framed perfectly in the angle of the feed. "Hold there FRIDAY." Tony moved closer, drinking in the image that was frozen on the screen. There was no mistaking it, and no small relief that he now had evidence he hadn't imagined it either. Stephen Strange... cared about him, honestly cared. He remained staring at the image until FRIDAY drew him from his thoughts.

"Boss?"
"Yeah?"

"I'm monitoring several mobile calls regarding a disturbance on a ferry near Queens."

"Queens?" Tony repeated, his pulse speeding. "Shit. Tell me that's not Peter."

"It's interspersed with encrypted calls through FBI channels." FRIDAY replied, adding. "Sending coordinates to the suit now boss." Without missing a beat.

"I'm gonna kill him." Tony growled as his Iron Man suit flew through the air, forming around his body a minute later. "Auto-pilot FRIDAY, we need to be there five minutes ago." He said over a pained groan. "And you're driving since I am clearly not healed enough yet."

"Understood boss." FRIDAY answered, sending him sailing out of the Tower and diving for the Brooklyn bay. "Perhaps close your eyes until we arrive? Your heart rate is spiking and I'm sending extra hydraulic power to your injuries."

"Yeah, yeah." Tony muttered, his eyes already squeezed shut. "Beep at me when we're close."

When Tony arrived at the boat, it was all he could do to keep his anger in check. The state of the boat, the number of civilians FRIDAY’s scans told him were on board, and no sign of the Vulture person he'd heard so much about. He could see FBI agents down and out on the main deck and Peter, trying to fix a problem he'd caused and failing. Badly. He was honest to god surprised how calm his voice was when he spoke, pushing half the ship back towards the other half, while FRIDAY handled the other. Working quickly, he welded the two halves together, barely suppressing his fury when Peter asked if he could help. Help? Help?!

"Boss, your pulse..." FRIDAY cautioned.

"I know." Tony huffed. "I know. Track Peter's suit. I need to have a word with the agent in charge.

***

He found Peter easily after he'd finished speaking with the FBI. None of them were particularly happy to see him, though his rescue of the ship had cooled their tempers. From there, he managed to pacify them enough over Peter's screw up with his offer to replace any lost resources and to cover any medical expenses. After assuring them they didn't have to worry about Spiderman's interference again, he took off, losing himself in the clouds for several minutes to cool his temper before coming down to Peter's location.

Tony hadn't been this angry in some time. When Peter snapped that if he really cared, he'd be there, he stepped out of the armour and it took every ounce of his control not to shake the flushed teen before him.

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Peter blinked and clamped his jaw shut which had fallen open when Tony stepped out of the armour. Geez, he did not look good. Angry death glare aside, Mr. Stark was unnaturally pale, an angry bruise still healing high on one side of his face and several cuts were visible and still looked painful. He didn't understand what he was seeing at all. When he'd last seen Iron Man he hadn't looked at all like this, and... was he limping? Was that a flinch? Why was Mr. Stark flinching and
trying to keep his hand away from his chest?

"I'm going to need the suit back." He said.

No, no, no he couldn't do that, could he? Sure he'd made a mistake, but... "Please Mr. Stark, I need the suit. Without the suit, I'm... I'm nothing."

"Then you shouldn't have it."

"I was just trying to be more like you!"

"And I wanted you to be better!" Tony snapped back. "God, I sound like my father."

Peter blinked away the tears that threatened to fall. He had never seen Mr. Stark angry before, not even when the Avengers left or when Mr. Rogers had insulted him that day at the airport. It was like... like something else had happened and Peter had been the last straw. If that was true, there was no way he would be able to talk his way out of this. His shoulders slumped, conceding defeat. "But Mr. Stark, I don't have any other clothes."

"We'll deal with that." He said and then assembled the suit around himself and took Peter in his arms before shooting skyward. They landed at Stark Tower, Mr. Stark ordering him to stay put as he headed into a bedroom on the penthouse level. He returned a few minutes later with a t-shirt, jeans, socks and shoes and handed them over.

"Change." He growled not looking at him, his jaw clenching in anger and boy did that make him feel even more horrible. He hadn't just screwed up, he'd screwed up bad, but he was not going to cry. Not yet anyway. He took the clothes and hurried into the bathroom FRIDAY directed him to and changed quickly. It broke his heart when he folded up the suit and handed it to Mr. Stark who still wouldn't look at him.

"Let's go."

Peter nodded and let himself be picked up, having a moment of panic wondering where Mr. Stark was going to take him. He breathed a small sigh of relief when a park in his neighbourhood came into view, Iron Man dropping him off in a sheltered area where no one could see them.

"I'm sorry." Peter murmured as his feet hit the ground, but Iron Man didn't even turn his head to him before shooting back into the sky and disappearing from sight.

Feeling worse than he'd ever felt being teased at school or laughed at by girls for being... uncool, he trudged home, wanting to crawl into a hole and never come out. He groaned aloud when he saw who waited for him at the end of his block and considered running in the other direction for a split second, but didn't and kept going.

"What's the matter kid?" Jessica drawled. "Lose at a game of chess or something?"

"No." He retorted, not looking at her. "Way worse than that."

"Can't be that bad. You haven't even graduated high school yet."

"Mr. Stark took the suit away."
"He did what?! Why? I thought he liked you."

"Yeah. Liked, as in past tense " Peter snorted. "I screwed up. Like, really, really screwed up."

Jessica let out what sounded like a long-suffering sigh and linked her arm in his to tug him down the street. "Come on kid. This sounds like an ice cream situation. We'll get some and you can tell me what happened."

***

"Well." Jessica huffed. "I can't say I disagree with what Stark did."

Peter let out an undignified squawk. "But I thought you were going to cheer me up!"

"That has nothing to do with it little spider. You do know what you did was totally stupid right?"

Peter frowned, but nodded.

"Good. The ice cream is meant to wipe that kicked puppy look off your face not absolve you of any wrongdoing. Besides, Stark likes you, I doubt this suit thing is permanent."

"But... he was so angry! You didn't see his face! He... he couldn't even look at me after."

"I honestly can't picture him angry like that kid." Jessica frowned, her eyes going distant as though she was trying to picture it.

"There's uh... something else." Peter said quietly. "Mr. Stark. He uh... didn't look so good. Not like he did when I saw him in Germany. He was real pale and he had a big bruise on his face and cuts that looked more recent, and I think maybe he was limping? Do you know anything about that?"

"He was limping?"

Peter nodded. "Yeah. And he might've been wanting to put a hand on his chest. I can't be sure or anything, but it seemed like he wanted to but he was trying hard not to."

Jessica huffed and downed the cola she'd ordered in lieu of ice cream. "I don't know anything about it. Maybe he was more injured in Germany than we thought. Stark's pretty good at hiding stuff kid."

"Well... maybe."

"Anyway, I wouldn't worry about that or the suit. Stark likes you. I've no idea why," Jessica teased making him blush, "since you're a real pain in the ass. But really kid, just give him some time. Do some normal kid stuff. Go on a date, spend time with your friends, some shit like that or whatever it is you do when you're not covered in red spandex and think of a good apology. Stark is a lot of things, but I don't think he stays mad for long."

"You really think he'll forgive me?"

"Sure. Eventually. You better now?"

"Yeah." Peter nodded. "Yeah, I am. Thanks a lot for this Ms. Jones. This was really nice of you."
"It was, wasn't it?"

Peter grimaced as he followed her out of the diner. "I get the feeling you don't do nice things very often."

Jessica snorted and gave him a sidelong glance as they made their way back to Peter's house. "You're almost as bad as Stark." She muttered. "But you're right, I don't. Anyway, I gotta run. Keep your nose clean webhead and I'll see you around."

"I will Ms. Jones. Promise."

"Good. I'm gonna hold you to that. "
Stephen appeared in the Sanctum kitchen two hours after he'd gone to meditate in his room. Wong thought he looked better, but he was still clearly unsettled from whatever had happened with the billionaire. Strange busied himself at the stove preparing a pot of tea, then brought it over to the table to share with Wong.

"The witch's spell turned out to be more embedded than I thought." Stephen began, sipping his tea carefully. "It was there long enough to entangle itself inside his memories, enough that it went deeper into the past than the witch likely intended."

"Her magic is chaotic and wielded irresponsibly, she herself is unnatural, so too her powers. But you know this already. I assume you experienced Stark's memories first hand." Wong said, making it a statement.

Stephen nodded but didn't meet Wong's eyes. "Yes. But they weren't in any sort of order from what I could tell. I believe the spell had been intended to drive Tony to have recurrent nightmares which would compel him to attempt to prevent his deepest fear from coming to pass. But it lacked any kind of control. I doubt the witch even understood that when she cast it. It should have burnt itself out, but there was too much chaos, too much raw emotion involved in her intent that it fed on his fears. When the original fear was consumed, it kept looking for more."

"Do you think the continuation of the spell left any lasting harm behind?"

"Other than exacerbating his pre-existing anxiety no. At least, I don't think so. As I said, the spell was chaotic from the start, it's original purpose burned up and all that was left was the intent to make him doubt himself, feel fear more intensely."

"And the magic? You removed it all?"

"Yes."

"What did you do with it?"

"Sent it back to her." Stephen sighed.

"Good."

Stephen blinked and met Wong's cool gaze. "What?"

"Good. She deserves no mercy for doing what she did. I hope it hurt her as much as it did her victim."

"I thought you were going to reprimand me, not agree with me. I hope I never get on your bad side Wong."

"The woman who cast that spell has no mercy or remorse in her, so she deserves none herself." Wong replied, then smirked and nodded as he got to his feet. "Have you discussed what you experienced with Stark yet?"
"No. He wasn't in the best state to discuss it and asked for some time to process. He's going to call later today after he arrives at the compound."

"What compound?" Wong asked, pausing in the doorway.

"The New Avengers compound in upstate New York. He sold the Tower."

"I see. And you have an invitation to go there?"

"I haven't agreed to join Wong." Stephen huffed.

"Maybe you should consider it." Wong said. "You might learn something and it could also get you out of the Sanctum for a while."

"I can't just leave. I'm the protector of this Sanctum."

"You are." Wong nodded. "But we have more recruits now than we did when you first came to us. And with that, I'll be here more often and the apprentices can assist me."

Stephen narrowed his eyes at him. "Why me?"

"Whether you like it or not, Stark trusts you and for better or worse he'll be in charge of whatever takes the place of the Avengers if they ever get that mess sorted. We need allies outside the order Stephen, and you've already established a basis of trust with Stark. You also know how to handle yourself in his particular social circles and I can't think of anyone better suited to the job."

"So I'm being volunteered."

Wong smirked. "We all have sacrifices to make Strange, though in your case I don't think it'll feel like one."

Stephen frowned and ran his hands through his hair. "I'll consider it if Tony asks again."

"Good." Wong nodded. "If you're feeling up to it, get some research done while you wait for Stark's call. You still have much to learn about many things."

Stephen scowled at Wong's backside and muttered under his breath. "Yes, and you're quite fond of reminding me of that every chance you get."

***

Tony returned to the Tower, his temper having cooled a bit since leaving Peter in the park. The suit disengaged from him, flying into a waiting Quinjet which was parked on the landing pad. Happy was near the Tower entrance, shifting from one foot to the other and looking worried.

"There you are!" He exclaimed, his eyes pinched in annoyance as he ran a hand through his very short hair. "I've been waiting for thirty minutes and FRIDAY refused to tell me what was going on. So, what's going on?"

"Nothing you need to worry about Hap." Tony replied, moving past him into the penthouse. He blinked in surprise at how... empty it looked. Apparently he'd been gone a lot longer than he'd thought. Almost nothing remained of his belongings, the movers having been and gone in the time
he'd taken to deal with Peter and the ferry. All that remained was the furniture that was too big and too inappropriate for his new private space at the compound. Never mind that the style would never have worked as well there as it did here.

"You okay boss?" Happy asked from his left, having followed him inside.

"Yeah, yeah I'm good Hap. Just... a little shocking to see it so empty. Seems a bit surreal or something."

"Yeah, I guess it kinda does." Happy agreed. "But the new place will be great. You ready to go?"

Tony nodded, though he couldn't help the play of melancholy that washed over him and stayed stuck in his eyes, leaving them tired and a bit watery. "Yeah, I'm good Hap. Let's blow this popsicle stand."

Happy grinned and turned back the way they'd come, leading him to the Quinjet waiting outside.

Tony watched his former bodyguard climb the ramp and smiled to himself. Happy had never really liked the Tower so he knew there was little if any nostalgia keeping him from boarding. But Tony had a lot of hopes he'd be leaving behind. Hopes and dreams and plans that had seemed so easy to grasp when he'd first designed the place. From his lovingly crafted workspace, to the penthouse complete with landing pad, to the Avenger common area where he'd thrown the first ever superhero party of the decade. Only for it to come crashing down around him hours later when Ultron appeared. Then more and more bits of rubble fell as the group fractured and split until the foundation was little more than dust on the ground, with himself once again alone. Abandoned and betrayed, lies and false promises lying like corpses at his feet in the shadows of every corner of the space he was now leaving behind.

With a firm shake of his head, he turned his back on the memories and boarded the jet. He had a moment to wonder if Strange's spell had brought it all bubbling to the surface to torment him, but he banished the thought almost as quickly as it had come. He didn't believe that, since this time, the memories didn't leave him feeling as though he'd failed or done something wrong. Instead the images his mind had conjured were more like bitter ash in his mouth, his only fault lying in having too much hope and too much flexibility and not enough courage to put an end to the bullshit that had plagued his every step since he'd first let SHIELD and the Avengers tell him no and he'd listened.

"Ready to go boss?" FRIDAY asked from overhead.

He smiled and took a seat across from Happy. "More than ready baby girl. Take us home."

***

"Oh my god." Pepper breathed as she watched the video on Matt's screen. "Do you know what's on this?" She asked, frowning at Matt's dark glasses.

"More or less. Mr. Stark designed a portable Braille translator, and my sight is... different. Everything is coloured red, but between the translation and the bit I can "see" I have a good idea what it shows. But you should know that I knew about Ultron already. Tony didn't deny it when I first brought it up, but at the time I didn't know he had evidence of his innocence."

"Where did this even come from?" Pepper asked, before cutting herself off. "I mean, do you know
who sent it? And why you? Why now?"

Matt smirked, a smile on his lips. "Sorry. I don't mean to make light of this, but those are all good questions. I understand this is surveillance video from Tony's lab at the Tower but I have no idea who sent it or how they got it. As for sending it to me, I would guess it has something to do with my being a lawyer."

"You're referring to the legal ramifications of releasing this to the public." Pepper stated, suddenly tense. "I don't know if we should. I mean... maybe not all of it. Ultron's creation, but... Rogers going after Tony? The twins trying to assault Bruce? And what Thor did? I don't know what to do here. At least not the parts with the Avengers."

"People need to know the truth about Ultron's creation Ms. Potts. The press, the government, SHIELD, everyone blamed Tony for Ultron and all that came after. Without evidence, without proof that he'd done anything wrong. They just accepted because no one stepped up to defend him. No one questioned how he could have created something so unbelievable, so unachievable with our existing technology. And Tony..." Matt paused to take a deep breath, having worked himself into a state. "Tony let them Ms. Potts and he didn't release this footage. He didn't tell anyone. It's not right. As for the rest of it... I agree, it's very sensitive. If we release it now, with public opinion the way it is and what happened in Germany... It would have to be a team decision, Tony's team."

Pepper realized she was staring in shock at the lawyer and closed her mouth into a tight line, glad that he was at least a little blind. "You're very good at this Mr. Murdock. I can see why you make a great lawyer." She said, her eyes flicking back to the screen.

"I may have a slight advantage there."

"What? Why?"

"I can hear a person's heartbeat. I know when someone's lying."

"So like, right now, you know exactly what I'm feeling?" She squeaked, blinking in disbelief.

"I wouldn't go that far." Matt smiled. "But better than an educated guess."

"That's... a little unsettling." Pepper pouted. "Not to mention unfair and all sorts of unethical for a lawyer."

"Foggy said almost the exact same thing when he found out." Matt replied, his smile vanishing. "He's not wrong, but I can't exactly turn it off either."

"Right." Pepper nodded, her eyes going back to the monitor. "I don't know what to do here Matt." A tear slid down her cheek then, sadness and guilt bubbling up within her. "Dammit. Why didn't he say anything? I... I believed it too. I mean, I've seen what he can do, what he can create. It wasn't hard to believe he created Ultron, no matter how impossible. I... I need to apologize. And I cannot believe the rest of them... and Bruce and Rhodes! They didn't back Tony up at all."

Matt frowned. "I didn't mean to upset you."

"No." Pepper shook her head firmly. "No, don't apologize. This is on me. I should have at least asked about Ultron. I didn't even ask Matt. He must have felt so alone."
"Ms. Potts? Mr. Murdock?"

"Yes FRIDAY?" Pepper asked.

"I hate to interrupt, but boss has just landed at the compound."

Pepper's eyes went wide, in fear or surprise, she couldn't say and she turned to Matt. "He can't see me like this. He'll know something's wrong."

"I can help delay that Ms. Potts." FRIDAY chimed overhead. "He's very anxious to see the new facility and renovations. I can keep him occupied with a tour and let you know when he's reached his new workspace."

Pepper sighed, a watery smile on her lips. "Thank you FRIDAY. You're a treasure."

"So boss keeps telling me Ms. Potts."

"I could talk to Tony about the video if you like." Matt offered.

"I appreciate the offer Matt, but he'll know you've shown it to me. It's better if I talk to him alone so he doesn't feel he's being ambushed."

"Alright." Matt nodded. "You have known him longer than I."

"Apparently not well enough." Pepper sighed, getting to her feet. "Sorry. I'll get out of your hair and freshen up. I'll let you know how it goes."
Revelations

Tony marvelled at the renovations to the compound. When Fury had first approached him about moving the facility upstate and away from the city centre, he'd been reluctant to be involved in any of it.

*Reluctant my ass,* he snorted to himself. He'd cursed and swore, ripped Fury a new one and then told him to shove it up his ass and that if he couldn't find it, FRIDAY could help by supplying more than one eye. It had taken five more phone calls, several hang-ups and finally an in-person meeting before he'd even let Fury talk. Even then he'd had FRIDAY on evict protocol if the former official SHIELD Director even blinked wrong.

That Fury had finally given in to his terms had been a sweet, sweet victory, but to see it in practice... that was different. And he hadn't had to shoulder the cost for it either, which was more than just cherries on top, it was whipped cream and chocolate sprinkles.

He had more than half controlling interest in the Compound facilities, but daily cost and upkeep was split between Stark Industries, the United Nations and the countries who'd signed the Accords. He was no longer alone in the day to day BS of running a superhero facility and he had no personal involvement with the financial aspect either, with SI handling all of it.

He ran a hand over a counter in the reception area where an eager young man in a crisp black suit was answering and directing calls. His name tag, name tag, Tony repeated in his head with a smile, read *Alex* in gold letters. The man in question gave him startled eyes when he saw him, missing a beat in the conversation he was having before blinking and returning to his phone. He smiled up at Tony, nodded and got back to work.

*Jeezus,* Tony thought as FRIDAY directed him to a bank of elevators. Had he really done this alone all these years because he enjoyed being a martyr? Or was it due to Maximoff’s spell? It was a sobering thought and one he didn't care to dwell on, though it reminded him of Strange and his promise to call him.

*Shit, had that only been this morning?* It felt like ages ago. So much had happened since this morning and he felt bad that he hadn't been able to rest like Strange had wanted and a twinge of guilt went through him. *Well,* he thought, *the wizard couldn't fault him for having to unexpectedly save lives, though maybe he'd leave out the Peter part of the story.*

Lost in thought, he stood outside his new workshop in a state of shock and disbelief, surprised he hadn't realized where FRIDAY was taking him before he got there.

"FRIDAY?"

"Yes boss?"

"Is this my new workshop?" He asked in wonder as he stepped through the doorway.

"It is."

"Holy crap!" Tony exclaimed. "It's even better than the one in the Tower! My suits, my cars! A massive desk! Drafting table complete with holographic displays? Really? Is that a smoothie bar?"
Oh my god... is that a dual hammock thing? Music?"

"Of course." FRIDAY replied, queuing up Metallica’s Sandman.

Tony beamed into the nearest camera and spun in place, the grin on his face so big he thought his face might crack. Then his gaze landed on the commercial Iron Man art he'd been quietly collecting over the past couple of years, framed and arranged on a far wall with its own accent lighting for each piece as though it was a priceless wonder to be treasured. It made him stop dead, his breath catching and his eyes going misty at the sight. Someone had found his hidden treasure and rather than toss it out as junk, had preserved and displayed them. He was so overcome, he put a hand to his chest to still himself, the lump in his throat making him tear up and then Pepper called his name and he froze.

"Tony?"

He couldn't move, couldn't tear his eyes away from the wall of art. He heard her heels click over the floor, the snap, snap of Pepper crossing the room the only sound as FRIDAY cut the music. Her hand came to rest on his forearm as she stepped around him to meet his eyes. She followed his gaze to the wall and a small frown appeared between her brows.

"Tony? Are you okay?"

"Yeah Pepp." He answered, closing his eyes against the rough sound of his voice. "I'm good."

"No you're not Tony Stark. You're upset about the art. I was going to tell you, but I thought it might be a nice surprise."

Tony let out a harsh laugh, fighting back tears as he opened them to her concerned look. "Colour me surprised then." He joked weakly. "I thought you hated them."

Pepper looked away giving him a moment to collect himself and turned to look at the wall. "I never hated them Tony." She protested.

"Yes you did."

"Okay, yes I did." She said, smiling at him. "But it wasn't hate really. I was angry and... resentful. It made all that curating I did seem so pointless."

"It wasn't pointless Pepp. I got a good tax write-off for that art." He teased, as the world righted itself again. "Hey? Did you see the smoothie bar? Wanna have one with me? It's fully stocked right?" He said, heading for the fridge.

"Yes it's fully stocked Tony." Pepper nodded, following him. "And I'll join you."

Twenty minutes later, they were settled on the couch, each holding a smoothie Tony had prepared.

"This is really good." Pepper sighed, taking another long sip.

"What? You thought it wouldn't be?"

"Mixing bananas, chocolate and blueberries has honestly never occured to me. I always thought it
was bananas and strawberries."

"Strawberries are overrated." Tony scoffed. "Blueberries are one of the best antioxidant fruits out there. And who doesn't like chocolate? And it's not the cheap stuff either Pepp, it's cacao powder, naturally and organically sourced from sustainable practices."

"And?"

"And it's high in minerals and vitamins and iron. Get it? Iron?" He smirked.

"Yes Tony." Pepper sighed with an eye roll that lost its effect with the smile on her lips. "I get it."

"So, what are you doing down here?" Tony asked, arching a brow at her. "Pretty sure it wasn't because you wanted a smoothie made by yours truly."

"I might have." Pepper retorted. "But no, that's not why I came down."

"Waiting Pepp. Tick tock."

"I don't want to ruin your good mood."

Tony frowned and paused in drinking the last of his smoothie. "Too late. Leading with a line like that... spill it Potts."

"I saw the surveillance footage of your workshop from about three years ago. After you left for the party."

"Party? What party?" Tony repeated and then his eyes went wide in fear. "The Avenger party? You... what? You... how? When?"

"About two hours ago. Someone sent it to Matt. He called me and I watched it with him."

"You weren't supposed to see that. No one was supposed to see that. How? Who sent it?"

"We don't know." Pepper replied, setting her smoothie aside and turning to face him. "Tony, I am so sorry. I should have talked to you. I should have asked... I. Shit. There's nothing I can say to make it better, but I should have trusted you more. You would never have created Ultron without hundreds of tests first, I know you would never do that. Can you ever forgive me?"

"It's... it's fine Pepper." Tony protested, hearing how false it sounded even as he said it.

"It's not fine Tony. It was never fine. Why did you let everyone believe it was your fault? No, don't answer that." Pepper shook her head. "Well it's not going to stay that way. The world needs to know that you didn't create that... that thing."

"It doesn't matter anymore Pepper. It won't change anything. People will believe what they want, they always do."

"Not this time Tony Stark. This time the videos are going to show your innocence." Pepper said, getting to her feet. "Matt and I will come up with a way to get it out to the public and a way of explaining the delay." She added when Tony tried to protest. "No. You don't get to carry this... this false guilt anymore. I won't let you, and neither will Matt."
"Pepper..." Tony repeated, getting to his feet. "It's really not the time for this, the Accords... the Avengers... Ross..."

"That video exonerates you Tony. More than that, it takes the ammo out of Ross' hands. He won't be able to use it against you ever again and neither will anyone else. Please, let me do this for you. I'll take care of everything, you won't have to be involved at all."

Tony groaned, running a hand over his eyes before letting out his breath in a loud sigh. "Fine, fine, you're going to do it anyway and if Matt's involved... I know I've already lost. But I want to know how it ended up in Matt's hands. Is he still here?"

"No. He had to meet Mr. Nelson to prepare for a trial tomorrow, but the file is on his computer."

"Alright. FRIDAY, access the file and send it to me."

"Yes boss."

"So, now that the upsetting you part of the day is over, care to tour the rest of the compound with me?" Pepper asked, using her pleading voice.

"You know the puppy dog eyes routine is playing dirty right?"

"Not if it works."

Tony chuckled under his breath. "Fine, you win. But the puppy eyes are not okay. Lead the way Ms. Potts."

***

Stephen had retreated to one of the least catalogued libraries in the Sanctum after speaking with Wong. He'd wanted to read more about invasive magic and mind spells but he also wanted to know more about the Mind Stone. It had been niggling at him all day that he'd heard of it before, that it was one of several special stones and that it was important.

The Eye of Agamotto was one, as was the Mind Stone, but that wasn't what had him pouring over every reference book he could lay his hands on. It wasn't just that Wanda Maximoff and apparently her brother too, had gained powers from a stone, it was that there were now two on Earth and that could not be a coincidence. If he remembered right, there weren't that many in the set, but the probability of having two in the same location in the galaxy was no accident. It meant something bad was coming over the horizon, the problem was, he didn't know what.

After reading a seventh book from cover to cover and having only found one reference to the stones that was not only not helpful, but irritating in its vagaries, he snapped it shut with an angry snap and looked up. And then he swore because the sun was lower than he'd thought and was casting an orangey, pink glow on the clouds hovering over the Sanctum.

He growled under his breath, cursing a certain engineer for not calling and then himself for thinking Stark would remember his promise. He marched from the library and headed to his room in search of his phone when he stopped dead and looked down at the watch face resting against his collarbone.
"I am an idiot." He muttered aloud at the same time Wong came around the corner and smirked at him.

"Idiot? No. I'd go with self-absorbed if you're trying to insult yourself."

"Don't start."

"Problems?"

"Tony didn't call and I was going to call him on my phone, but..." He said and then let his eyes drift down to the watch.

Wong followed his gaze and then laughed. "You're right, you are an idiot or you're over-tired, but with you it's likely both. Anyway, I'm heading to bed, I have an early morning tomorrow. Try not to stay out too late giving Stark that piece of your mind you want to throw at him. You haven't got enough to spare."

"Oh, shut it Wong." Stephen growled, continuing his march to his bedroom and shutting the door behind him.

"FRIDAY?"

"Yes Doctor Strange?"

"Is Tony still at the compound?"

"Yes he is."

"Do you believe he's forgotten his promise to call?"

"He's been very busy since you left the Tower earlier today Doctor Strange. I do not believe he's forgotten."

"So he didn't take any time for himself after I took him to the mirror dimension?"

"No Doctor, he had an emergency come up. Do you want to see a visual of the compound now?"

"Is he still busy?"

"He is with Colonel Rhodes at the moment."

"Alright. Show me the compound FRIDAY."

"Of course Doctor Strange." FRIDAY replied. "Coming right up."
Strange Times

Tony finished his tour of the new facility with Pepper and after assuring her he didn't hold any ill will towards her over Ultron, he met Rhodey at the front door. From there, he led his friend to his workshop to show him the prototype leg braces he'd been working on.

It took a while for them both to get past the awkward emotional part of their conversation regarding the accident and Tony's misplaced guilt. Neither man enjoyed that part, so it was with no small relief when Tony and FRIDAY helped fit Rhodey with the braces and then headed upstairs to the physical therapy room to test them.

"So, how are they?" Tony asked anxiously after Rhodes had made four circuits back and forth on the parallel bars.

"Stop that Tones."

"Stop what?"

"Stop thinking any of this is your fault. This is my job. After all the missions I've flown, an accident like this is always in the cards. Sure, it sucks right now. I mean, it really, really sucks. But it was an accident and that's all it was."

"But..."

"I'll kick your ass if you don't stop Tony. Now help me into the chair."

"Right, okay." Tony nodded, getting an arm around his friend and gritting his teeth against the twinge of pain in his chest.

"Thanks." Rhodey nodded from his wheelchair. There was a glint in his eye as he watched Tony with suspicion. "So what's going on with you? You seem different."

"What do you mean? I'm just happy to have my Platypus back."

"No that's not it. I'm not doubting that part Tones, but you seem a lot calmer than you were before, except for the flinching you've been doing since I got here."

"Flinching? What flinching?"

"Tony."

"Excuse me?" A voice from the door called. "Is there a Tony Stank here?"

Rhodey laughed and nodded at the grey haired man who was holding a Fedex package in his hand. "Sure is. This is Tony Stank. Tony Stank, table for two, right here by the washroom. Never gonna let that one go."

"You're horrible." Tony muttered as he signed for the package, turning it over in his hands.

"Never Tony." Rhodey repeated with a smirked. "So what's in the package? Who's it from?"
Tony frowned at it. "I don't know. There's no return address. Doesn't feel like much though, it's pretty light."

"Boss?" FRIDAY interrupted overhead. "There's a call for you from Secretary Ross."

Tony and Rhodes shared a dark look. "Be there in a minute Fri."

"Well, while you deal with that, I'll be in the common room getting a drink." Rhodey said, wheeling himself to the door.

"Wait for me Rhodey-bear. This won't take long and I have some new beer labels I want to show you."

"Fine." Rhodey sighed. "But don't take any of Ross' bullshit."

"Oh I won't." Tony said with a wink. "I'm gonna put him on hold."

***

"Stark?" Ross barked when Tony picked up, loud enough that he held the phone away from his ear. "We have a problem. There's been a break out at the Raft."

"That's terrible." Tony replied, suppressing the shudder that ran through him. "Let me just put you on hold. Got another call coming in."

"Stark! Stark don't you dare! This is an issue of international secu..."

Tony glared at the phone that now lay in its cradle, the line blinking about a parked call. The tremor he'd suppressed vanished in an involuntary chill that travelled up his spine and disappeared. He swivelled in his chair, his gaze falling on the Fedex package and irritation replaced his earlier discomfort. No return address, call from Ross... it wasn't hard to guess who had sent it and he glared at the offensive thing.

He didn't want to know what was in it. Didn't want his suspicions confirmed, at least not now when he was feeling good and Rhodey was waiting for him. With a grunt and a pleased look at the blinking phone line, he got to his feet and joined Rhodey in the hall.

The package and Ross could wait. Especially since he had no interest in Ross' problem. Escaped prisoners were not his responsibility. He wasn't about to let Ross manipulate him into helping him fix it either. Let him explain to the UN where he'd imprisoned the rogue Avengers and why. Let him explain to his superiors and everyone else the existence of the Raft and why it had been kept secret. None of it had anything to do with Tony, his company or the Accords.

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"So what do you think of the new labels?" Tony asked, a grin tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"Wit Dream and So Heffin Good. What? Are we on a ranch now?"

Tony tsked at him and took a seat by Rhodey's wheelchair, cradling a coffee in his hands. "No. I just thought you'd find it funny."
“I suppose it is funny. So why not get off your ass and get me a bottle of *Heffin Good* and I'll try it.”

"Really?" Tony asked, surprised as he crossed to the fridge. "I didn't expect you'd actually want one." He added, handing Rhodes the chilled bottle.

Rhodey looked at it a moment before taking a swig. "Not bad for a microbrew."

"Good to know." Tony replied, sipping more coffee.

"So. You gonna tell me what's going on with you? And don't tell me it's nothing. I've seen you wincing and I'm not imagining you tapping your fingers against your leg to keep from touching your chest."

"I wasn't going to tell you it's nothing." Tony sighed, staring at his coffee mug.

"That's a first." Rhodes grunted. "Well?"

"It's complicated." Tony muttered. "And a long story and not the good kind."

"I already figured that much out." Rhodey retorted. "Just tell me Tony. What happened after Germany?"

"Yes." Strange said from the doorway, drawing yelps of surprise from both men. Tony's face drained of colour before flushing pink as he met Stephen's angry glare. "What happened in Germany Tony?"

"Who the hell are you?" Rhodey barked, moving his wheelchair you block Stephen's progress. "Who is this guy Tones?"

Stephen arched a brow in Tony's direction, making him frown back at him. "I was going to call Strange, I've been busy."

"Busy." Stephen snorted. "I told you to take it easy, not fill your damn schedule."

"Woah, woah woah!" Rhodey exclaimed, looking back and forth between the two men. "Can someone please tell me what the hell is going on?"

Tony grunted and met Rhodey's gaze. "Colonel James Rhodes, meet Doctor Stephen Strange. Doc, this is my best friend, Rhodey."

"Doctor?" Rhodey repeated, eyeing Strange's odd clothes and equally odd cape.

Stephen's glare softened as he turned to shake Rhodey's hand. "Pleasure to meet you Colonel." He said, catching Tony's nervous look. "Perhaps it would be better if I told Mr. Rhodes what happened while you take a moment?"

Tony blinked surprised eyes at Stephen. He didn't know what to do with the abrupt change in Strange's mood, but the thought of telling Rhodey what happened in Siberia... damn. What the hell was Strange up to? It was unnatural to have someone volunteer to spare him discomfort.
"Tony?" Rhodey prompted.

"Uh. That... I would appreciate that Stephen. If you're really okay with it."

"I am." Stephen nodded, his face unreadable. "Perhaps you could wait for us in your office? If you have one?"

Tony nodded. "Yeah, I would appreciate you telling him what happened after Germany." Tony nodded, getting to his feet.

"Then that's what I'll do." Stephen replied, understanding that Tony was not giving him permission to discuss Wanda or the mirror dimension. Not that he'd planned to. The less people who knew about the existence of other dimensions, the better. And even if Rhodes hadn't sided with Tony over Ultron, it wasn't his business and he didn't want to talk about the witch anyways.

"For the record, I can tell you two are having this whole other conversation without me and I'm telling you both right now, I am not happy about it." Rhodey growled.

"Okay." Tony agreed, ignoring Rhodey's outburst. "I'll uh... I'll just wait in my office then."

"Have some tea." Stephen said as he turned his attention to Rhodey who was watching him with an expression of shock and confusion. "If you'll come with me Colonel, I think we should discuss this somewhere more private."

"Uh, okay Doc. If Tony's okay with this, then lead the way. But call me Rhodey, I've never liked being called by my rank outside of work."

"Of course, Mr. Rhodes. This way."

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Beer label names provided by @amokeh 😊
Tea. Tony scoffed as he stepped into his office. He looked around the large space, taking in the giant picture window that looked out over the grounds, the oak desk and the small bar that held not a drop of alcohol. He leaned against the desk, his eyes on the bar.

Away from Rhodey and Stephen, and combined with the silence of the office had him rethinking his earlier dismissal. He was tired and tense and a cup of tea didn't actually sound that bad. With a grunt, he crossed to the small kitchenette and got to work making a pot of tea.

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"Are you serious right now?" Rhodey demanded, glaring up at Stephen from his chair.

Strange had portalled them both back to the Sanctum and once Rhodey had recovered from his surprise, Stephen told him everything he knew about Siberia.

"I'm afraid so." Stephen replied.

"I can't believe any of this." Rhodey groaned. "I mean, yeah I could tell Tony was hiding something, but Rogers... I just, I can't believe he did this. I mean, I watched the video you have but I can't reconcile it with the man I fought beside."

"I understand." Stephen agreed. "I had the same problem when I first saw it."

Rhodey nodded and let out a sigh. "I don't know why or how you got Tony to tell you the truth, but... I'm glad you were there for him. Do you know how badly he was injured?"

"He had mild hypothermia by the time I reached him, as well as several cuts and contusions and his suit was damaged. So I know what Captain Rogers did but not what Tony's doctor had to say about it."

Rhodey sighed loudly, his shoulders slumping. "Yeah, he does that. Always hiding, always putting on the public face... all Howard's influence. "Stark men are made of iron." He was always saying that kinda shit to Tony, never a kind word or a scrap of encouragement. Then Howard died and... and I've been trying to get him to tone down the act for years, but..." Rhodey broke off and stared at Stephen for a few minutes. "Look Doc, I gotta be straight with you. In all the years I've known Tony, he's never let someone get as close to him as you have in such a short time. If he's going to talk to anyone, I think it'll be you."

"I appreciate your openness Mr. Rhodes, but I don't see that. I did help him it's true, but it's purely professional courtesy. I'm a Master of the Mystic Arts and the protector of the New York Sanctum. It's my job to deal with anything of a mystic nature and Tony came to me for help with Ms. Maximoff."

"Tony asked for your help? With magic?" Rhodey couldn't conceal his shock. "Sorry Doc, but you just proved my point. Tony doesn't talk about magic with anyone. Not since Loki. The fact he came to you and trusted you... yeah, you're the only one who's gonna get the truth out of him."

"What are you saying?" Stephen asked, scowling at him.
"Look. You don't know me and I don't know you. But I know Tony and based on what you've said, he trusts you. If you want to help, you have to be the one to ask him. He'll tell you, I'm sure if it." Rhodey explained, though it was clear Strange wasn't convinced.

"Am I to understand that you want me to befriend him?"

"That's precisely what I'm saying."

Stephen narrowed his eyes at the other man. "Aren't you his best friend?"

"Haven't been doing the greatest job with that lately. Probably not since Ultron. Look, I get it. Tony isn't the easiest guy to deal with, but I wouldn't ask if I didn't think he'd talk to you."

Stephen sighed. "Alright. I'll see what I can do. Are you ready to return to the compound?"

"Yeah." Rhodey nodded as Strange brought out his sling ring and created a portal. "Gotta say Doc, that's some pretty cool shit you got there. And is Doctor a real title? Were you a doctor before all the magic stuff happened?"

"Yes." Stephen nodded, following him through the portal and back into the compound's common room. "I was a neurosurgeon and then I was in an accident. After wasting a lot of time looking for the impossible I found something else to give my life purpose."

"I hope that's not a subtle hint Doc." Rhodey joked as he wheeled himself into the common area of the compound.

Stephen flushed and looked away making Rhodey wish he'd kept his mouth shut. "No, no hint." Stephen stammered.

"Shit Stephen, I didn't mean it like that. I'm sorry. So, what happened that you had to retire from being a doctor? If you don't mind me asking."

"My hands were crushed. Over a dozen surgeries and yet they will never hold a scalpel again."

"I've got the worst case of foot in mouth disease ever. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make a joke about what happened to you."

Stephen sighed and let the tension ease from his shoulders. "It's all right Mr. Rhodes, I rather expected it when I brought it up. Your recent injury is causing your body to produce more antibodies to try and repair what happened. Since it can't do that, it has to go somewhere and in most cases it results in an amplified emotional state, usually anger or aggression."

"Right well, I guess I should be grateful it takes a lot to upset me then. And Doc? Call me James. Care to join me in a drink? I never got to finish my beer from earlier."

"I'll join you James, but I think I'll stick with tea. I still need to talk to Tony and it's been some time since I had alcohol."

Rhodey nodded. "I can see that. Booze and brain surgery don't exactly mix."

"No, they don't." Stephen chuckled.
Tony was alone in his office for all of one hour, sipping tea that eventually went cold before he could finish it when Jessica appeared in his doorway. He raised a brow at her, taking in the tension in her shoulders and the pinched look in the corners of her eyes. She closed the door behind her and crossed the room to lean against his desk, her arms holding her up as she stared into his eyes as though looking for something.

"Stark."

"Jones." He replied, frowning up at her. "I wasn't expecting to see you here. Something wrong?"

"You took Parker's suit away."

"Yeah I did. How do you know about it?"

"Saw him just after it happened." She said, pushing off the desk to slump into one of the black leather chairs across from him. "Didn't think you had it in you."

"He screwed up. Royally."

"Yeah, I know." Jessica tsked. "He told me everything."

"Okay." Tony replied, hesitant. "Sounds like you agree with me, so that can't be why you're here."

"It's not."

Tony sighed. "You want me to guess?"

"Kid said you looked more injured than he remembered from when we last saw you. Wanted to see for myself." Jones retorted, glaring at him. "Seems he was right. So what happened? Who kicked your ass after Germany? I thought all but Rogers and his boy toy were in jail."

Tony frowned at her but said nothing. He'd forgotten about the kid and how different he looked since Siberia. He should have known Peter would say something, though to be fair, he hadn't expected it to happen the same day. He could see the moment Jones put it all together, her eyes narrowing in anger before she spoke.

"You're shitting me. You went after Rogers and Barnes alone?! What the hell is the point of being your bodyguard if you don't let me guard it? What the hell were you thinking? And what the hell happened anyway? Where's Rogers now?"

"Yes, I went alone. I wasn't about to let anyone else go against the Accords and I don't know where Rogers is now."

"Goddammit Stark! I told you, Matt told and I'm pretty damn sure others have told you that you're needed here. No one else can be in charge of this new Avenger thing you've got going or deal with these Accords. When the hell are you going to stop risking your life unnecessarily and get that through your damn head?" Jones demanded, her face flushing in anger.

"An excellent question." Stephen said from where he stood in the doorway, concern in his eyes as
he met Tony's glare, Jessica turning at the same time to stare at the intruder.

"Who the hell are you?" She snapped.

"Doctor Stephen Strange. And you are?"

"Jessica Jones."

"You're Tony's volunteer bodyguard."

Jessica snorted. "That's right, but I'm no volunteer. I get paid."

Stephen nodded as he moved further into the room, his eyes going to Tony who was sitting tense like a cat about to spring away while he and Jones' talked. He met Stephen's eyes and for the first time, he couldn't read the look he saw in them and his pulse began to speed.

"Tony?"

"That's my name." He replied, but there was no emotion there. Almost as though he'd shut down the instant the door had opened. "I suppose you want to have that talk now."

Jessica looked between the two of them, her eyes still narrowed in anger before seeming to come to some kind of decision. "I'll let you two talk then." She said, moving to the door. "But this better not happen again Stark. I don't appreciate having my job made redundant by the very person I'm supposed to be working for. You might not care, but this is my job and I take it very seriously."

"Yeah." Tony nodded. "I think I got that loud and clear."

Stephen locked the door the moment Jessica left and crossed to the chair she'd just vacated and sat down. "What's wrong Tony?"

Tony shook his head, ignoring him. "Does Rhodey want a divorce?"

"What?" Stephen exclaimed.

"You told him what happened in Siberia. I doubt he took it well."

"He's pissed on your behalf since he knows you're blaming yourself for what happened. He also said that I should be the one to talk to you about it."

"He said that?" Tony exclaimed. "Why?"

"I think you should ask him that." Stephen replied. "I know there's something else going on with you but I don't believe this is the place to discuss it. Is there somewhere in this facility where we can have some privacy?"

"Yeah." Tony nodded, getting to his feet. "I have my own space here. It's this way."
"This is a *house* Tony." Stephen drawled as they stepped inside the building they'd reached through a glass enclosed walkway.

"Uh, yeah. It is." Tony replied, moving to the open concept kitchen area. "You want a drink or something?"

"Tea please." Stephen said, taking a seat on a kitchen stool. "When you said you had space here I imagined your own rooms, not your own building."

Tony shrugged as he got their drinks ready and joined him at the counter. "Part of the deal I made when I sold the Tower. Private place, separate from the compound, but still on the grounds. I'm... sort of in charge of things until the Accords are ratified."

"And what about after?"

"Controlling interest, but I can choose who takes over running the Initiative. And, if I want more than one person handling everything, I can do that too."

"That's unexpected." Stephen replied. "I would have thought you would want to be in charge."

Tony gave a snort of laughter and arched an eyebrow at him. "Really Doc? I gave Pepper the job of running SI years ago and never looked back. I like inventing things, fixing things, testing theories. I'm more mechanic/scientist than anything else. Meetings bore me to death and I have zero interest in the day to day. Since Iron Man, my priorities have shifted a lot and I'd rather have people I trust running this place than do it myself. I've had enough of being responsible for everything to do with SI for long enough, I sure as hell don't want to replace it with Avenger business."

"But with controlling interest won't you have that anyway?"

"No, it just means that if I don't like the way things are being handled I can change it. I get updated about how everything is progressing like any investor which means because this is a joint agreement, the other half is responsible for proving to everyone else why their way works better."

"That seems a tad unorthodox." Stephen noted, sipping the tea Tony had prepared for him.

"That's cuz it is." Tony smiled. "It was the only way I would agree to move the compound upstate and remain involved. Whether they admit it or not, the UN and everyone behind the Accords need me. Without my support, public opinion of the Avenger Initiative would be a hard sell. Iron Man is popular, despite everything the rest of the Avengers have done. So even with the Accords and all the shit Ross likes to spew, the UN knows they need supers to deal with things the rest of the world can't. Without me, they can't sell that to the public."

"I'm impressed." Stephen smiled. "You seem to have covered the bases quite well."

"Not well enough." Tony huffed into his coffee.

"If you're referring to Siberia, you need to stop. None of that was on *you* . Steve Rogers kept something from you. Your teammate and friend lied to you while taking advantage of your
"Hard habit to break Stephen. And I'm not sure anymore if any of them were ever really my friends." Tony sighed. "So... I suppose you want to talk about that now."

"No, actually." Stephen said, surprising him. "I thought we could just talk for a bit. Your AI told me you weren't able to relax after I left this morning. Would you like to talk about your day?"

Tony blinked at him several times as though he'd heard him wrong. He shook himself then frowned. "You want to talk about my day?"

"If you like." Stephen replied, a small crease forming between his brows. "We don't have to."

"If you wanna do that, let's move to the couch. It's more comfortable." Tony said, getting to his feet and crossing the room to settle on a large, black leather couch.

Stephen followed, setting his tea on the coffee table while Tony asked his AI to turn on some ambient music. The gas fireplace beneath the wall-size television screen roared to life, bathing the room in a warm glow in the fading sunlight.

"Don't you have wizardy things to be doing?" Tony grumbled from where he'd curled his feet under him like a cat. "I'm sure hearing about my day isn't in the top ten of fun things to do Stephen."

"I'll be the judge of that." Stephen retorted, drawing a surprised look from the other man. "As for my work, you are my priority at the moment. Wong is watching over the Sanctum so he'll alert me if anything needs my attention."

"I'm your priority?" Tony blurted. "Why?"

"Because of what was done to you of course. Mind manipulation is a very serious personal attack. I need to know more in order to prevent it from happening again so I can recognize its influence in any others this Wanda may have targeted."

"Right." Tony nodded, a tiny crease between his brows. "So I'm a patient."

"I thought we'd already established this? I told you before that I would like to be your friend. I don't understand why that's so difficult a concept."

"And I told you, few people want to be my friend unless they want something from me." Tony retorted. "I'm not trying to be difficult Stephen. I just don't have much experience with friends and no strings attached. Forgive me if I have a hard time accepting you at your word."

"Then I suppose my actions will have to speak for me." Stephen replied, a challenge in his eyes.

Tony chuckled. "Oh, you're on Doc. So what do you want to know? Or can we talk about you instead?"

"You want to talk about me?" Stephen startled.

"Is that so hard to believe? Sure, you told me a few things but it was all pretty casual. I'd like to know more about the guy who sorta saved my life."
"I suppose that's fair." Stephen agreed though Tony could still see the disbelief in his eyes. "What would you like to know?"

"Why a cape?" Tony asked, bobbing his head in the cloak's direction. "Do you have any idea how dangerous they are? They can get caught on stuff, tangled around things, used against you... basically, it could make it easier for you to be hurt."

Stephen blinked at Tony's line of thought. He had never met anyone who so easily could give voice to every thought they had without considering how it might be received. He'd thought the tabloids accurate in saying the genius was arrogant, but he'd been wrong.

The real Tony Stark merely thought faster than anyone he spoke to, save a handful of people, and truly didn't care what people thought. The result made a casual observer think him arrogant, but that wasn't it at all. He was more curious than any cat or child he'd ever encountered, the man was a menace for his curiosity alone and yet... so charming, endearing and precious. How was it possible that after everything Tony had been through, he could still sound so genuinely innocent and desperate for knowledge?

"Yo... Mister Wizard? Gandalf? You with me? I thought you wanted to talk? Yet here you are spacing out. You know, if I wanted to be ignored, I'd just wait for Bruce to come back so he can fall asleep on me again."

Okay, maybe not so charming when calling him names, but it rankled that he'd been called out on his inattention. "I apologize." Stephen replied. "I'm still trying to get used to the way you phrase things. It's as though you have a stream of thought and everything you've ever thought on any subject just comes out."

"Uh... okay. Which part tripped you up?"

"Bruce fell asleep on you? Is this Dr. Banner you're talking about?"

"Yeah he did. Is that it?" Tony frowned.

"I've noticed you have a habit of only mentioning random things that bother you when you want someone to notice them. It's as though you say it out loud to give it a voice and when no one comments on it you can continue believing that no one wants to hear about it. So, what were you discussing when Dr. Banner fell asleep?"

Tony gaped at him for a good two minutes before narrowing his eyes in irritation. "You know, at first I thought your observation skills were kinda hot, but now it's just annoying."

Stephen smiled back at him, his eyes filling with amusement. "You think I'm hot?"

A look of horror replaced the irritation, followed by a swift flushing of cheeks and eyes looking down and away. "What?! No! I never said that! I said I admired your observation skills."

"You said it was hot."

Tony crossed his arms over his chest. "Fine, yes, I said it was hot. Happy now? I also said it was annoying so you can stop showing off any time. Now would be good."

"Very well."
"Stop that." Tony growled accusingly.

"Stop what?"

"Sounding smug." Tony retorted, now clearly flustered. "Now I forgot what we were talking about. Thanks for that. Oh right, you. And the cape."

At that, the Cloak's collar twitched in a show of indignation from where it rested on Stephen's shoulders, then it hunched and loomed as though glaring at Tony.

"Okay, that's just creepy." Tony said, his eyes glued to the cloak in a mix of horror and curiosity. "Tell it to stop looking at me like that."

"No. I think you hurt it's feelings."

"I did what now? It's a cape Stephen."

Stephen sighed and rubbed calming strokes over a corner of the fabric to keep it from leaping at the other man. "It's really not. It's called the Cloak of Levitation. It's sentient and has a mind of it's own. It chose me when I did something to make it deem me worthy of becoming my companion and protector."

"So you're a flying wizard?" Tony smirked. "That's awesome. But really? A sentient cloak? You expect me to believe that?"

"Would it kill you to show some modicum of respect?" Stephen growled, his patience waning.

"Well no, it probably wouldn't, but fine, Doctor Strange. I'm sorry for poking fun at you. Would you mind telling me the story about you and the Cloak of Levitation? I promise I won't laugh."

"That remains to be seen." Stephen retorted. "But very well, I'll tell you."

"Hold that thought Doc. I'll get us a refill first." Tony interrupted, launching himself up from the couch.

"Stephen."

"Sorry, Stephen." Tony sighed as he puttered in his kitchen. "You really are sensitive about the name huh?"

"I am."

"Good to know." Tony replied, setting a small pot of brewing tea on the coffee table and taking a seat. "Okay, I'm ready. Tell me a story Doctor Strange."
"I can understand wanting to keep your title." Tony nodded thoughtfully. "You worked hard for it only to lose it all in the accident."

"The former Sorcerer Supreme was more than a little surprised at my insistence. I don't think she really understood why."

"Well I do." Tony replied, though his voice had gone quiet and Stephen could sense the man was retreating into himself. "It'd be nice to have something like that to hold onto, to remind me how far I've come."

"What do you mean? I'm not sure I follow."

Tony sighed and slouched back into his chair. "Before Afghanistan I didn't take much of anything seriously. It took being kidnapped and tortured for me to change that about myself, but it did nothing for my reputation. I didn't help spread the rumours or the blackmail videos that got put online but... the damage was done. I had nothing to fall back on for credibility when I announced the shutdown of all S.I.'s military contracts. No one believed I was serious. No one accepted that I meant what I said at that press conference I gave."

"Blackmail videos?" Stephen repeated. "Those... revealing videos the press couldn't stop talking about? They were taken without your consent?"

Tony flushed and looked away. "All of it was without consent Stephen."

"All?" Stephen gasped. "You could have taken those people to court. Defamation of character, coercion, abuse..."

Tony nodded. "Yeah, I could have. If I remembered any of it."

Stephen scowled and put a hand to the back of Tony's, which was resting on the space between them and gave it a squeeze. "I'm sorry you had to go through that."

"Why?" Tony demanded, his eyes wide but didn't he pull away from Stephen's touch. "You didn't do anything. And I put myself in that situation, no one forced me."

"They did if you were drunk. You can't consent if you're impaired Tony. I think you know that, though maybe you don't."

"I was looking for it Stephen. How is that not consent?"

"You were looking to be videotaped and then blackmailed and humiliated?"

"Of course not." Tony retorted with a frown. "I just... didn't want to be alone for a while. And drinking helped me not care that most of them would want nothing to do with me afterwards."

"That's a terrible belief to have of yourself."

"Why? It's true. None of them ever stayed. The only people who stick around are the ones I pay to
be there the next day."

"Is that why you started dating Ms. Potts?"

"Maybe?" Tony replied, sighing loudly. "I honestly don't know how to answer that but that didn't work out either. She can't accept me as Iron Man and I'm not prepared to stop being him. It took me a while to understand why it would never work, but it wasn't fair to either of us for me to pretend giving up Iron Man wouldn't hurt."

"No one should have to change who they are to please someone else. Personal improvements notwithstanding of course, but not as a condition to loving someone."

Tony chuckled. "Personal improvements? Is that a subtle hint that I need to take better care of myself? You sure you aren't a shrink?"

"I would never presume to tell you what to do." Stephen retorted haughtily, though a corner of his mouth twitched in a smile.

"Don't give me that Doctor Wizard. You've been itching to tell me what to do the moment we met, and in fact, you already have. Several times."

"Well I wouldn't have to if the patient in question didn't continue ignoring doctor's orders." Stephen sighed. "But that doesn't mean I don't understand."

"You aren't going to chew me out for not taking it easy after you left?" Tony exclaimed, the expression on his face one of complete shock.

"I'm not your mother and you're a grown man. Though I suspect your ego had been overgrown far longer than you've been legal. I would like to know why though."

Tony blinked in confusion having completely gotten lost in Stephen's shocking display of respect for his boundaries. "Why what?"

Stephen sighed. "Never mind. Tell me what happened after I left the Tower. And what was Miss Jones doing here besides yelling at you?"

"Oh that." Tony huffed, staring at his hands. "There's this kid in Queens who is uh... well he's Spiderman."

"A kid?" Stephen repeated, sounding shocked. "You mean the one who was in Germany with you?"

"Yeah."

Stephen narrowed his eyes. "What happened? And how old is this... kid?"

"Sixteen-ish?" Tony sighed. "He's been looking for hotspots in Queens after school and he stumbled on an illegal weapons dealer. I told him to stay out of it, focus on being a kid, helping out everyday folks... but he didn't."

"Of course he didn't. And?"
"And after you left I had to go there to save a ferry from sinking with close to a hundred passengers and a group of federal agents who were on board. Then I took away Pete's suit."

"Federal agents? What about the weapons dealer?"

"The bad guy got away. The feds were there because I passed Peter's Intel to them and he got in the middle of it and blew it. And I made Pete a new and improved Spiderman suit, it's what enabled him to find the weapons dealer in the first place."

"So why was the ship sinking?"

"According to the agents on site, Spiderman attacked this Vulture person and broke off one of the weapons from the guy's suit. Unfortunately, it was turned on when he did and it cut the ship in half."

Stephen was silent for several minutes after Tony finished speaking and he grew increasingly uncomfortable. As time stretched, the tension between them became too much and he had to speak.

"Look Strange, I know it's my fault. I should never have given the kid a new suit or encouraged him to keep doing what he was doing. I screwed up, so I took the suit back."

"I don't believe what happened was your fault Tony. Though I have to ask why you took him to Germany with you." Stephen said quietly.

"I know I... wait, what?" Tony blinked wide eyes at him. "You... don't? Uh... okay. That's... not what I was expecting. Like at all."

"You asked him to stay out of it. He didn't listen, it's not unusual for a teenager to ignore such things. But why Germany?"

"I don't know." Tony sighed. "I wanted to give him a chance to be part of a team, show him I believed in him. I was keeping an eye on him for a while before that and it was Steve Rogers... Captain freaking America! He wasn't supposed to be in any real danger."

"He was injured?" Stephen gasped.

Tony shrugged. "Sorta? I mean Steve dropped a truck trailer on him and that bug guy swatted him out of the sky like he was a gnat. But not seriously hurt, no."

Stephen narrowed his eyes and Tony didn't miss the muscle twitch in his jaw. "The more I hear about the great Steve Rogers, the more I dislike him."

"Yeah well, Pete wouldn't have gotten hurt if I hadn't brought him with me."

"Perhaps not the best place to test his abilities, but I can understand your motive and your reasoning." Stephen replied, giving him a small smile. "So you took the suit away, was there more?"

"No. That's pretty much it. I was pretty pissed after but what do I know about kids? Maybe I could've done things differently."

"I'm no expert either, but taking the suit back seems appropriate given the circumstances."
"Really?" Tony replied, unable to hide his shock.

"Yes. Really." Stephen smiled.

"You know Stephen, I'm not used to having anyone... agree with me so readily. I'm not sure if I should pinch myself or kiss you."

"Definitely pinch yourself." Stephen smirked.

"So kissing is off the table then?" Tony teased.

"Not indefinitely." Stephen replied, making Tony's pulse race. "Though I do think we should call it a night. It's getting late."

"Shit, you're right." Tony agreed, glancing out at the night sky, too nervous to continue the flirting he'd started. "Sorry I kept you out so late. We still haven't talked about what you did for me this morning."

"It's alright Tony." Stephen said, getting to his feet. "These things take time to resolve, and I enjoyed our conversation."

"Oh! Well okay." Tony stammered, getting to his feet. "I enjoyed it too. Thanks for coming by, and I hope I'm not taking you away from anything important."

"Wong can handle things when I'm away. And right now, you are the most important thing on my agenda." Stephen replied, conjuring a portal. "Anything Wong can't handle alone he'll call me, so there's no need to worry. I'll be in touch. And don't hesitate to call if something comes up regarding the mirror dimension or Wanda's magic alright?"

"I promise Stephen." Tony smiled. "I've got you on speed dial."

Stephen raised an eyebrow at him as he stepped through the portal. "Um, right. Goodnight Tony."

"Night Stephen." Tony replied. "And don't think for a minute I'm letting that kissing comment go."

Seconds before the portal closed, Stephen flushed at his parting words, leaving Tony feeling warm and pleased with himself.
Scott paced the living area of the apartment he'd been staying in since his meeting with T'Challa. Currently, he was waiting to hear back from the king or one of his people on whether or not the Accords council would allow him to come home. Nothing else mattered but seeing Cassie again.

He'd been pacing and singing one of Cassie's favourite songs under his breath for the past half hour when a knock came at his door. He froze a moment before hurrying across the room to open it, fully expecting to see the king. His jaw dropped when Barton's pale grey eyes stared back at him, a scowl on his lips.

"So here's where you slunk off to." Clint drawled, eyeing him with suspicion. "Gonna invite me in or do I have to force the issue?"

"There's no need for that Clint." Scott retorted, stepping to the side to let him pass. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Clint rolled his eyes as he took in the spacious room. "Nice digs. And duh, looking for you jackass. What's going on? You waiting to be interrogated or something?" Clint continued, snagging a beer from the fully stocked kitchen.

"Interrogation?" Scott repeated, confused. "No, I'm not being interrogated. I doubt anyone doesn't know what happened in Berlin by now. It's all over the news."

"Yeah, just like Stark to have any excuse to be in the limelight." Clint snapped bitterly.

Scott rolled his eyes and closed the distance between them while Clint took a deep pull of his beer. "Look man, I really don't get what your issue is with Stark but you need to drop it. He's not even in the news right now. Hell, no one has seen him for weeks and people are starting to ask questions."

"What the hell are you talking about Lang?" Clint scoffed. "If Stark's disappeared I can guarantee it's just another PR stunt. He loves those things."

"Could you shut up about Stark for five seconds?" Scott swore. "Christ, are you even listening to yourself? I'm not being interrogated, I'm waiting to hear if there's a way I can get home to see my daughter. And does T'Challa know you're here?"

"Of course he doesn't know. I slipped out of our old room and came here. No one saw."

Scott blinked at the man's blatant arrogance. "Seriously? If T'Challa didn't want you here, you wouldn't have made it two feet. For a spy you have some serious blind spots."

"Whatever." Clint waved a hand at him in impatience. "What do you mean, see your daughter? There's no way to do that unless you plan to betray the team and sign those stupid papers."

"Stupid papers?" Scott repeated, gulping his own beer just to drown out the other man's idiocy. "Have you even bothered to read the damn thing? Because it's nothing at all like what Cap keeps saying it is."

"Ah man, did Stark get to you?"
"Oh for the love of..." Scott growled, his voice rising in anger. "I can damned well think for myself Barton! I sure as hell don't need Steve Rogers telling me what to think and believe and my lips aren't glued to his ass like you and the rest of them. Stark had nothing to do with the Accords. Do you get that? Are you hearing what I'm saying? This was not an SI coup or whatever the hell you freaks think it is. This is over 100 countries telling supers all over the world that they've had enough. They are sick and tired of having to clean up our messes when we unilaterally decide to destroy buildings and infrastructure and then expect gratitude for saving them." Scott paused for breath, a cold glint in his eyes. "If I were you, I'd get my head out of my ass and start thinking for myself before it's too damn late to do anything about it."

"Shit. You really are going to betray the team." Clint gasped.

"What freaking team?!" Scott demanded, his arms crossing over his chest. "The "blame Tony Stark for everything wrong with my life team?" You dragged me onto a plane as back up for Captain America to help save the world. I'm not part of the team or an Avenger. After breaking international law, laws I didn't even know existed because you assholes didn't bother to tell me about them, I'll be lucky if Hank and Hope ever speak to me again, never mind use the Ant-Man suit."

"Okay, okay, I hear you." Clint said, his hands raised to ward off Scott's rant. "To be fair, I didn't know about the Accords until after Berlin. And I'm sorry about Hank, I didn't think about what would happen if we got caught."

"Well now you have, so shut up about Stark. I've heard it enough."

A noise at the door had them both tensing and turning sharply toward it. One of T'Challa's many bodyguards stood there, coolly observing them both.

"Ah, Mr. Barton. It seems you got the answers you were looking for. Though in future, the king would appreciate it if you would ask to see your teammate rather than sneak around Wakanda like a thief in the night."

Clint blushed and ducked his head. "Yeah, sorry about that. Instincts and all that."

"That as may be." She retorted. "But you are lucky one of our guards recognized you. Otherwise you'd be dead. A burden our king does not deserve given how accommodating he's been to you and your friends."

Scott smirked at the look on Clint's face, his eyes laughingly saying, I told you so. He turned back to the warrior who remained where she was. "Did you have some news for me?"

She nodded. "I do. The Accords council will grant you a pardon on two conditions. You must sign the Accords before you return to the United States and you agree to be under house arrest for the next two years."

"Two years?!" Clint exclaimed. "That seems excessive."

The warrior glared at him coldly. "You think it's too much for destroying an airfield and an entire plane on foreign soil? They have not demanded fines be paid Mr. Barton, I would think that lenient enough wouldn't you?"
"I... I suppose so." Clint agreed, though he didn't seem convinced.

"If you are finished taking an unscheduled tour of our home, I will take you back to your friends." She said, turning her body to give him room to precede her to the door.

"Uh, yeah sure. I'm done." Clint hesitated. "Um, do you think I could get a copy of the Accords? And would I be able to make a similar deal like Scott?"

"You wish to read the document amongst your friends?" She asked, her eyebrows rising in surprise.

Clint paused to consider what he was asking. He couldn't see Steve leaving him alone long enough to read uninterrupted and there was no telling what kind of reaction it would get. Wanda for sure wouldn't like it, Sam would be disappointed and Steve... well Steve was convinced it would all just go away. But with over 120 countries signing that definitely did not seem likely.

"Uh, well." Clint paused. "I'll go back for now, but in a couple hours I'd like to go somewhere private to read."

"That can be arranged." She nodded. "If it's all right with Mr. Lang, I can bring you back here."

"Sure. It's fine." Scott nodded. "So long as there's no more talk about Stark."

"It'll be tough." Clint joked, though it lacked his usual humour. "But I think I can manage."

"Good." Scott nodded.

"Follow me Mr. Barton." The woman said, motioning to the door. "King T'Challa will be by to speak with you later Mr. Lang."

"Thank you."

***

Natasha was out of breath when she finally passed through the border of Wakanda. It had taken a lot longer to escape Fury's clutches than she'd expected. Her only goal once she'd gotten free was to find Steve and find out just what the hell had happened in Siberia.

Fury had been relentless in his interrogations. Constantly demanding answers and always referencing the abandoned Hydra base as if she knew what had gone down up there. She didn't of course, but the more he asked, the more her instincts screamed at her to get answers. The feeling only grew worse when the questions changed and Fury's tone had shifted from bored curiosity, to thinly veiled anger. Whatever Steve had done, Fury knew something, but she didn't and she hated it.

It hadn't taken much to piece together where Steve and the others had gone. With no reports of revived super soldiers terrorizing the world and with Zemo in custody, it was safe to assume the king had finally come to his senses. No one knew where Steve or Bucky had gone, but if she knew Steve he would've done anything to keep Bucky safe. It wasn't outside the realm of possibility that he would have asked T'Challa for help.

There was nowhere else on earth where Bucky could be safer than in Wakanda. She knew she was taking a huge risk going anywhere near the king after what she'd done at the airport, but she needed
answers and the only person who had them was Steve Rogers.

She was nearing the outskirts of the city when a small jet appeared overhead and hovered low enough that she could see it had no pilot. A holographic image of a young woman appeared in the cockpit, scowling down at her as though deciding whether or not to turn her into a red smear on the ground.

"Ms. Romanoff." She growled. "You have a lot of nerve showing your face here after what you did in Berlin."

"I know." Natasha nodded, her face grim. "And I'm sorry about that but I really need to speak to Steve Rogers. It's important."

"You assume a great deal." The woman retorted. "And you are not welcome in Wakanda."

"Look, I know he's here." Natasha bluffed. "I'm not planning to stay, I just need to ask him something, and as I said, it's important."

The woman scowled at her, then glanced over her shoulder, speaking to someone Nat couldn't see.

"Remain where you are. Someone will meet you shortly." She said and then the ship was gone, zipping low over Nat's head in a veiled threat before it disappeared from view.

***

Ten minutes later, Natasha looked up to see Steve approaching from a side street, his brow furrowed and a strained smile on his face.

"Nat?" He said, coming to join her where she rested on the grass. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you."

"Did Tony send you?"

Nat frowned. That wasn't what she'd expected him to say at all. "No. Why would he?"

"After what you did at the airport, why wouldn't he?"

"Well he didn't." Nat replied cautiously. Steve was being odd and she wasn't sure how to proceed.

"T'Challa wanted me to tell you that you have one hour. If you're not gone by then, he's calling the authorities with your location."

"Really." Nat drawled. "So why do you get a free pass? And what about Sam, Clint, Wanda and Scott? They are with you aren't they?"

"Why are you here Natasha?" Steve challenged, ignoring her question.

"I want to know what happened in Siberia Steve."

Steve blinked, narrowing his eyes at her in suspicion. "Why?"
"Because I've been hearing things from Fury. Disturbing things. And I want to know how you put a stop to Zemo and his soldiers."

"It was all a ruse to get us there. Zemo shot the soldiers while they were still in cryo and T'Challa caught him and took him to the Raft."

"T'Challa?" Nat frowned. "What about Tony? And how was it a ruse?"

Steve pursed his lips, crossing his arms over his chest. "What about Tony?"

"I know he was there Steve. Stop deflecting."

"There's nothing to say Nat. The crisis was averted, Zemo is where he belongs and Bucky is safe. Case closed." Steve huffed, not meeting her eyes.

"Dammit Steve." Nat swore. "Something happened in that bunker. I'm going to find out what happened so why not just tell me?"

"I can't help it if you refuse to believe me Natasha." Steve sighed. "It was good to see you again, but I've gotta get back."

"So that's it then?"

"Yeah." Steve nodded, his mouth set in a thin line. "That's it. Take care of yourself Nat, I'll be seeing you."

"You better hope that's all that happens." Nat muttered under her breath as he walked away and disappeared from sight.
Stones and Wormholes

Stephen woke in a cold sweat. His room was still dark which did nothing to help calm him. His heart pounded in his chest and his breath laboured under the weight of the nightmare he'd just had. As he became more aware of his surroundings, the remnants of the dream he'd had slipped from his grasp leaving him anxious and unsettled.

He had his share of nightmares. Most of them centred around Dormammu, though they had lessened with the passage of time and several healing sessions in Kamar-Taj. Other times he dreamt about the Ancient One and being forced to watch her die. Not in a hospital, but in the mirror dimension because he wasn't fast enough or was too far away to reach her in time to hear her parting words.

But this one, this one was different. Though it had clearly frightened him and snapped him violently out of the dream state, the details were missing. It was as though it had been about someone else and with that thought, he cursed under his breath and got to his feet.

Shit. This was probably about Tony and the memories he'd experienced. Wong would not be happy when he found out. With a sigh, Stephen threw on his housecoat and headed down to the kitchen. He wasn't likely to get more sleep now. It was already five in the morning and the implications of what he'd dreamt would keep him awake for hours.

He groaned when he saw Wong already at the kitchen table and the scowl on the man's face let him know he was in for an interrogation. Wong waited in silence while Stephen made tea and brought the pot and two mugs with him to the table.

"You absorbed Stark's nightmares didn't you?" Wong challenged, narrowing his eyes.

"I knew you'd know instantly." Stephen sighed, filling their tea cups. "You don't have to be smug about it."

"This is not smugness Stephen. This is concern. You know what went wrong?"

Stephen nodded. "I believe it's the influence of the Mind Stone. I knew it was powerful but also somehow sentient. It wants to control, though I don't understand the purpose of that here."

"Do you think it's bridged a link between you and Stark? Or is it between you and the Stone itself?"

Stephen sipped his tea, his expression thoughtful. "I don't know and I don't think it appropriate to ask Tony. It's unfair to him since I volunteered to help him with this. He'll believe it's his fault."

"Life is unfair, and this is important." Wong grunted. "I think you should go to Kamar-Taj. The other Masters might be able to help."

"That's a good idea." Stephen agreed. "What do you know about Infinity Stones Wong?"

Wong scowled and set his cup down hard. "Why do you want to know about that?"

"Because there are at least two on Earth right now. There were three when Loki was here. It seems
"They are ancient and powerful and there are six in total. They were created when the universe came into being. Powerful individuals came together over the centuries to contain and protect them but they all ultimately failed to do so. At that time, they were scattered across the galaxy to separate and protect them. If they are being brought together again, something very bad is coming. We need to prepare."

Stephen arched a brow at the other man. "And how exactly do we prepare for something like that? You're talking about an event as big or bigger than Dormammu."

"Nothing is as big as Dormammu." Wong admonished. "But whoever or whatever is behind the movement of the Stones is equally destructive. Did you not mention that Stark had dreams of something like this?"

"What?! Where'd you get that idea?" Stephen exclaimed. "I said nothing about what I learned from Tony."

"That's... unfortunate." Wong frowned. "It means the Mind Stone has somehow affected us both. You need to talk to Stark. Find out what vision is connected to all this."

"I just helped him get past those visions!" Stephen snapped. "I'm not doing my job if I ask him to talk about it now."

"Your job is to protect this planet and this reality. If the Mind Stone has managed to affect us, we need answers." Wong retorted. "Stark will understand."

"Ugh!" Stephen grunted. "There's no end to how much you infuriate me sometimes."

"Of course, because I always aim to displease you." Wong snorted, getting to his feet. "Talk to Stark and speak with the other Masters. If we're right about the Stones, we need to prepare. I'll be in the library researching this."

***

"Shit." Clint swore, making Scott look up from the game of Solitaire he was playing.

"Problems?"

"These Accords are... bloody hell." Clint swore again. "Why the fuck didn't Steve tell me what was in here?"

Scott shrugged. "No idea. He's your friend."

"He's our leader. He's supposed to keep us safe, lead us away from danger, not into it. He said the Accords was us giving up, giving in and coming under Stark's thumb. This... this has nothing to do with Stark. This is more than half the free world demanding oversight and a say in how we do our job. This isn't leashing the Avengers, this is... common sense."

Scott started to respond, but was interrupted when a Dora-Milaje warrior burst into the room. He and Clint stared open-mouthed at the woman whose face was flushed, her eyes hard with irritation.
"My apologies for the interruption," She said curly, turning to Clint. "But Mr. Rogers is demanding to see you right away Mr. Barton. He says he needs your help with something but refused to give us any details."

"O-kay." Clint drawled, sharing a look with Scott. "He didn't ask for Scott too?"

"He did not mention him."

"Right." Clint huffed, getting to his feet and setting aside the Accords document. "Let's go then. See you later Lang."

"Sure." Scott nodded, a frown on his face as Clint left with the warrior, the door closing softly behind them.

Well that was... odd, Scott thought, moving to the kitchen to get a beer. It wasn't surprising that Rogers wasn't asking for him, he wasn't really part of the team and he certainly wasn't an Avenger. But he was damn curious what sort of problem Rogers had that he needed Clint there.

***

Tony woke more rested the morning following Stephen's visit to the Tower than in any time in recent memory. In fact, as he shuffled to his kitchen in his bathrobe to make coffee, he couldn't remember when he'd last had a full night's sleep.

As he sat sipping his coffee, he realised it should have been damn near impossible for him to sleep at all. With everything that had happened in the past two days, and the things he had yet to deal with, it was a miracle he'd slept at all. A frown creased his brow then, a chill running through him at the errant thought that maybe Stephen had put a spell on him.

A second later he cursed under his breath. That was ridiculous, not to mention that he somehow knew Stephen would never do something like that without permission. Though the thought itself was revealing.

He knew himself well enough to know that if Wanda's spell was still affecting him, the idea that Stephen had abused his trust would have been enough to send him into a panic. He would have had the Sorcerer watched and barred him access to all but the main areas of the compound indefinitely. Which meant he now had proof that the witch's spell was no longer affecting him and a wave of tremendous gratitude washed through him.

Finishing his coffee, he returned to his bedroom and dressed for the day. He had more pressing work to do than worry about Sorcerers and nightmares. After pouring his favourite smoothie into a portable mug, he left his new home and headed to the main building and his workshop.

***

Hours later, after making several calls from his office, he was hard at work tweaking the design plans for the new nanotech housing.

"How's it looking FRIDAY?"

"I believe we're close boss." FRIDAY replied. "A few more adjustments to the depth and shape of the housing should be all that's needed."
"You don't like the shape?"

"I believe you wished to move forward boss and in keeping with that, having it as a circle would be counter intuitive to that goal."

"You sound like Jarvis, FRIDAY." Tony noted, swiping a screen closed and opening another. "What do you suggest? Circles are harder to break and have little to no structural weaknesses."

"True." FRIDAY agreed. "But according to Doctor Wu's report, this housing will not be placed in the same location as the original. It's meant to be higher up on your chest so that element of the design isn't relevant here. It's also going to be less intrusive than the last one."

"Fine. How about a triangle, point down and with rounded points?"

"I will start the calculations immediately." FRIDAY replied. "Boss, you have a call. It's Doctor Strange."

Tony paused in what he was doing, his pulse speeding at hearing the caller's identity. "Put him through Fri."

"Tony?" Stephen's hesitant tone had his pulse quickening even more.

"Yeah?" Tony drawled, also hesitant. "Something wrong Stephen? I wasn't expecting to hear from you this early."

"I just need to speak to you and wanted to know when would be most convenient for you."

"Is this about Siberia?"

"Uh... no. Not this time, but I would like to discuss that as well if you're feeling up to it."

"Okay." Tony replied with a sigh. "I've just got a few more calls to make and then I'm free. Maybe an hour? You want to meet at the compound or somewhere else?"

"I'll come to you." Stephen replied firmly. "You're in your office?"

"I am now, but I'll meet you in my workshop. It's more private and I can show you some of the new medical designs I've been working on while we're there."

"Alright. See you in an hour then."
Tony finished up what needed his attention early and so was in his workshop fielding calls from both Matt and then Rhodey. Matt had given him his thoughts on how he’d handled the Ultron thing, which were not happy thoughts, while Rhodey, having now heard about Ultron and Siberia was beside himself with worry and recrimination.

"Tony..." Rhodey sighed through the phone. "You had proof about Ultron and you kept it hidden. Why dammit? I think I deserve to know why you let everyone blame you for that, especially since none of it was your fault."

"But it was Rhodey Bear." Tony sighed back at him. "The concept of Ultron was my idea, my design. How is that not my fault?"

"An idea is not responsibility Tony and you weren't alone in trying to implement it. You couldn't have done it alone and that security video proves that. Without Bruce's help and without the mind stone and whatever the hell that witch did to you influencing your decisions, Ultron wouldn't have happened."

"You don't know that Rhodey. Not for sure."

"I do know that Tones." Rhodey retorted. "Because I know you. But enough of that. All I really called about was to let you know I'm here for you, not like I have been either, but how I should have been since Ultron."

"I...okay." Tony replied carefully.

"And if I ever see Steve Rogers again, I'm gonna punch that smug look right off his face."

Tony choked back a laugh, unsure if he was reacting to Rhodey's declaration of support or the image it conjured. "You do that, you'll break your hand."

"Not if I'm inside War Machine at the time."

"Defending my honour Platypus?" Tony teased.

"Defending a decent human being from a man who clearly believes he's above the law."

"Well since he and his merry band of outlaws are still criminals, the likelihood of that happening is pretty slim."

"And if I know anything, it's that Steve Rogers will find a way around all that." Rhodey growled. "But enough about him. What did Doctor Wu have to say?"

Tony blinked and felt his throat close up. He still hadn't told Stephen what Wu had said... "Um..."

"Dammit Tony." Rhodey swore. "How bad?"

"I..." Tony hesitated. He really didn't want to say the words aloud, but he knew James would keep asking till he got an answer. "Shit. Before you get upset, just know I have my reasons for keeping
this quiet."

"Anthony Edward Stark. Tell me what Wu said."

"Retirement." Tony blurted. "Or a new reactor housing."

"What?!" Rhodey screeched at the same time Tony heard a gasp over his shoulder. He turned to see Stephen had entered the workshop and by the horrified look on his face, he'd heard everything.

"It's not that bad Sourpuss..."

"Not that bad?!" Rhodey sputtered. "Not that bad he says... jeezus Tones, I..." Rhodey paused for breath. "No, you know what? This isn't the time for this conversation. We'll talk after I've calmed down."

"Yeah, okay." Tony replied. "I've got to go anyway, someone just walked in."

"It's Stephen isn't it? And he heard everything."

"Yeah."

"Right. Well, good luck. He's a doctor so he shouldn't be too hard on you. No matter how much he might want to kick your ass, he probably won't do it."

"Thanks platypus, that's real reassuring."

"Gotta go. Bye Tones." There was a click as Rhodey hung up and Tony could hear Stephen breathing heavily behind him, having not moved from his spot.

Tony turned around slowly, bracing himself for whatever look might be on the Sorcerer's face. He expected anger or frustration, but instead there was an unmistakable look of sadness and an underlying thread of rage that he somehow knew wasn't directed at him.

"Uh, hi." Tony said quietly. "Guess you heard all that."

Stephen crossed his arms over his chest and levelled a piercing look in his direction. "Retire? Why? Why did Doctor Wu tell you to retire Tony?"

Tony broke eye contact and stared at his hands. He really didn't want to discuss this right now or ever, and he certainly didn't want Stephen staring at him like that. It was only bound to get worse after he explained.

"Man, it's times like these, I really wish I hadn't given up drinking."

Stephen said nothing, but Tony tracked his movement, tensing as the Sorcerer came within arm's reach. He couldn't hide the faint flinch he gave when Stephen's hand came to rest on his shoulder, prompting him to meet the other man's eyes.

"Tony. Why did he only give you two options?"

"If I sustain another injury to my chest or torso there's a very good chance I'll die... or at least have a heart attack that will make me wish I was dead."
"Sweet jeezus." Stephen swore and without warning, pulled Tony to his feet and dragged him into a strong hug. Tony couldn't keep a soft whimper from escaping him at the unexpected embrace, so caught off guard he didn't know what to react to first. The fact that Stephen's instinct had been to comfort him and not condemn was enough to destroy his barriers, leaving him weak kneed and clinging to other man like someone drowning.

Stephen didn't know what had prompted him to embrace Tony and now that they were so close, he couldn't help but feel a little mortified by his behaviour. He was never one to be so clingy or forward and he'd never been the touchy, feely type so he didn't quite know what to make of what he'd just done. To be fair, neither of them had had the best week and most likely it had a lot to do with their trip to the mirror dimension.

But Stephen was determined to keep a professional distance even as he understood that rejecting Tony now would be a very bad idea. With a reluctant sigh, he loosened his hold on the other man, putting some space between them while letting his hands rest on Tony's hips. "I'm sorry, I'm not usually this... tactile with people I don't know why I... I just, felt a hug was appropriate for the moment. I hope you don't mind, it's not exactly the behaviour of a professional surgeon."

Tony blinked up at him, his expression showing confusion before softening into a shy smile. "I dunno Doc. It's certainly an improvement to what happened when we first met. Though you did manage to catch me off guard. Again. Can't say I particularly like that part, but since it was a pleasant surprise, I'm not gonna complain."

"Well at any rate, I apologize if I've made you uncomfortable, but I think we have a few things to discuss at the moment."

Tony sighed and let himself fall back down into his chair. "Not uncomfortable, just surprised Doc. Though in future I'd prefer a date first."

Stephen scowled down at him. "I know you're trying to throw me off topic, so you can stop. The implications of what I overheard cannot be ignored Tony. Steve Rogers almost killed you didn't he?"

Tony nodded, but kept his eyes fixed on his hands. "Yeah."

Stephen sighed and ran tired hands through his hair as he moved away to stand near the workshop kitchen. "You kept this secret because of the Accords right?"

"I know what you're thinking Strange." Tony sighed again.

"Do you? I really don't think you do. I might understand your motivation but that doesn't mean I approve of your decision. I saw what happened in your memories Tony."

"I know, but..."

"But nothing!" Stephen snapped. "Steve Rogers left you on the brink of death and neither Mr. Barnes nor King T'Challa bothered to ensure you were capable of leaving on your own. In my books, they're accessories to what happened. If not for FRIDAY's intervention, they would all be guilty of murder by association. Do not for one minute think that I will let that go unpunished."

Tony gasped in shock at Stephen's vehement declaration as though seeing him for the first time. It
took him several minutes to fully process what the other man had just said and still wasn't sure he could respond appropriately. "I hope you aren't saying you're going to kill them Stephen."

"Don't be ridiculous Stark." Stephen growled. "I'm a Doctor, I swore to do no harm and to save lives. But that doesn't mean I'm above hurting those who deserve it."

Tony stood up and crossed the room to meet Stephen's eyes. "Seriously Stephen, don't do anything rash. I plan to... tell all, so to speak once the changes I've written up can be incorporated into the Accords. I promise I don't intend to keep quiet forever, though that was mostly about Rogers. To be honest, the other two didn't even make my radar."

"They should have and they should he held accountable for their actions or lack thereof."

"I hear you." Tony replied, putting a gentle hand to Stephen's arm. "And I'll think about it, I promise. But when you called earlier, I got the distinct impression there was something else you wanted to talk about."

Stephen narrowed his eyes. "This discussion isn't over Tony."

This time it was Tony glaring at Stephen as he retracted his hand and let it fall to his side. "Look Doc, I appreciate this protective thing you've got going for me, I really do. But I can fight my own battles. I don't need you standing in as a bodyguard. Besides, I've already got one and she's plenty capable all on her own."

"I don't doubt Ms. Jones abilities. But seriously? I do not mean to disparage yours, but you have not demonstrated to me that you know anything about basic self-preservation. I am certain you hold nothing back protecting others, but you do not show the same dedication to your own safety. And your bodyguard is only effective if she's aware of danger beforehand. Who else knows what happened in Siberia and with Ultron?" Stephen demanded, continuing without waiting for a response. "I'll tell you, not nearly enough. And I doubt they'd agree with you over the delay."

"Ultron?" Tony repeated. "What do you know about Ultron?"

"I saw parts of what happened in the mirror dimension. Or have you forgotten that already?"

"I didn't forget Stephen. But you also haven't told me anything about what you saw," Tony growled, moving away from him to brew himself a coffee. "In fact, I think there's a lot you haven't told me about that and my ability to trust you is fading quickly."

Stephen blinked, looking stricken and put his hands up in a gesture of defence. "You're right. My behaviour is rather atrocious at the moment. I apologize."

Tony raised an eyebrow in his direction as he sipped his coffee. "Atrocious might be a bit harsh, rude maybe. Anyways, let's drop that for now and you tell me what you really came here for."

"I don't think now is the time. I've upset you, which was not my intention."

Tony shrugged. "I have that effect on people. Besides, you weren't expecting to hear what I said to Rhodey. Spit it out Doc. You said yourself that waiting won't change things and it has to be important if it isn't about Siberia."

"You do not have that effect on me." Stephen growled, making Tony look back at him in shock.
"But fine, consider the subject changed. For now. Do you mind if we sit?"
"And here I was thinking that things were starting to look up." Tony moaned from his side of the couch. "You sure you're not just over-reacting? That maybe Wong overheard you say something about my vision?"

"I have never spoken about your vision because I only ever saw pieces of it. Nothing I saw or experienced in the mirror dimension was linear Tony. Just pieces. Disjointed memories of things that stuck with you as a result of the witch's spell. It's why I came today. I need to know exactly what you saw in that portal over New York and again what you saw as a result of Wanda's interference."

Tony narrowed his eyes at the Sorcerer who was doing his best to avoid eye contact without being obvious about it. "You're hiding something Stephen. Something happened didn't it? Something bad that made Wong order you to come here today."

"I am merely following up with my patient." Stephen retorted, still avoiding eye contact.

"Bullshit. You told me there'd be no risk involved, that what you did would be safe. But you were wrong and something happened to you."

"I... had a nightmare." Stephen replied, narrowing his eyes at Tony's instinct to voice his concern, halting the other man's words. "But before you start, that sort of thing is not an unusual occurrence for me. What is unusual is that it wasn't about me, but about what you saw that day in New York."

"So why is Wong involved?"

"Because he knew you saw something and I haven't spoken to anyone about my experience with your memories. He should not know anything and so he believes the Mind Stone is responsible."

"Just when I thought I was finally putting that crap behind me..."

"I didn't want to bring this up so soon, but Wong insisted. We need to know what you saw and what Wanda made you see."

"Fine." Tony growled. "I rode that damn nuke to what I thought was my impending death. I watched it smash into a ship bigger than the moon. It was destroyed, but there were hundreds more waiting in the dark behind it. Nothing humanity has can fight what I saw. That nuke was about as effective as a fly swatter against a shark."

"I imagine it was an unsettling sight."

Tony snorted, but made no comment.

"And the vision from the witch?"

"A dark, dead planet with the bodies of all my friends dead at my feet and Steve Rogers asking me why I didn't save them. Why I didn't do more."

"I hope she suffers for what she did to you." Stephen growled.
"Uh... okay. You're kinda scaring me Doc." Tony replied, his eyes wide with confusion. "I know shes an evul wench, but really? I thought you took an oath as a Doctor."

"This does not fall under that oath. If I can't deliver justice in person, an eye for an applies to her actions. Whatever harm befalls her from the spell I sent back is entirely her own doing." Stephen growled. "But thank you for telling me what you saw. It will be helpful when I return to Wong and discuss it with the other Masters."

"Discuss what? You mean the Stones?"

"I don't think either of the things you saw should be ignored. Despite the malice fuelling the vision you had, I think there is some truth behind it. Whatever is causing the Stones to come together, we're not ready."

Tony sighed as he relaxed back in his chair. "You have no idea how long I've waited for someone to say that to me. No one listened after New York and again after Ultron. I thought no one ever would until it was too late."

"Unfortunately, it might already be too late but I won't know for sure until I've met with the other Masters." Stephen said, getting to his feet.

"Late or not, I just feel better knowing someone else is in my corner." Tony replied, joining him. "Will you let me know if you learn anything?"

Stephen nodded. "Of course. And you let me know if you need help with anything here. I imagine you're going to be busy getting things in order following the Accords ratification and any new recruits you find."

"Yeah, unfortunately." Tony nodded. "Paperwork and all it entails is both tedious and time consuming. See you later Stephen?"

Stephen pursed his lips, hesitating as he made to conjure a portal. "As much as I would like to I don't know how long I'll be. I also have some official Sorcerer business I need to attend to, but do call me if anything needs my attention."

"Sure thing Stephen." Tony replied, yet Stephen was almost certain he had no intention of doing that.

"I mean it Tony. Call me if you need me."

"Will do." Tony nodded.

As the portal closed behind him, Stephen couldn't shake the feeling that Tony had just closed the door on him. Not just metaphorically, but physically as well, which was ridiculous. Shaking himself in irritation, he turned toward the library and went in search of Wong.

***

"I'm here Steve." Clint said as he joined his teammates. "What's going on?"

Steve glared at him, the look in his eyes disapproving. "You'd know if you'd been here, but we'll
deal with that later. It's Wanda, something's wrong."

Clint looked around the room but saw no sign of the witch. "Okay. What's wrong with her? Where is she?"

"Follow me." Steve grunted, turning and leading him to one of the bedrooms. "Sam is with her since you were nowhere to be found.

"I went looking for Scott." Clint muttered. "Thought something had happened to him."

They entered Wanda's room then and Clint sucked in a harsh breath at what he saw. Wanda was engulfed in red mist, her eyes glowing with red light, though Clint was certain they were closed. She twitched and writhed on the bed seemingly fighting off some sort of attack, punctuated by soft cries of pain as she lay there.

"Spell gone wrong or something?" Clint ventured, breaking the silence.

"She was fine a few hours ago." Steve replied with a huff of annoyance. "Then she cried out and collapsed. We got her onto the bed and then this mist came out of nowhere, engulfing her completely."

"So you called me?" Clint asked, incredulous. "What makes you think I know what's wrong with her?"

"You spent time with Loki." Steve said, matter of factly as though he didn't know the Asgardian's name wouldn't upset him. "His magic is similar to Wanda's. We thought you might have insight Sam and I don't."

Clint glared back at him, a snarl on his lips. "You know I hate talking about that Steve. But whatever. If I had to guess, it looks like a spell backlash. Something she sent out has been sent back to her."

"Who would do that? She's just a kid!

Clint raised his eyebrows in disbelief. "Far as I know, she's not a kid. But considering all the people she hurt when she was with Hydra, it could be anyone."

"It's probably Stark." Sam huffed from Wanda's bedside. "If anyone wanted to hurt Wanda, I'd bet money it was him."

"Uh huh." Clint drawled, a cold feeling of dread snaking up his spine. "Sure, whatever. So was that all you wanted?"

"What can we do for her?" Steve asked, his eyes not leaving Wanda's distressed form. Seriously? Clint thought with shock, why him? "Probably nothing. Keep her warm I guess. The spell will likely wear off on its own if it's backlash like I said."

"But..." Steve protested.

"Look Cap, I get it. You want to help, but I don't know any more than you do. Best guess is she'll be fine once it runs its course."
Steve frowned but after a minute, nodded and shared a look with Sam. "Alright. That's pretty much what Sam and I figured as well. Let's let her rest, I think we should talk in the other room."

***

Steve was all set to lash out at Clint for abandoning them without a word, when the words of a news broadcast registered in his mind. He turned shocked eyes to the screen on the wall where a pretty brunette woman was repeating her previous statement.

"I repeat, this breaking story is one we will be watching closely. Following the release of some shocking security footage, CEO Pepper Potts of Stark Industries has assured us that what we just saw was real. Tony Stark did not create Ultron and as such, is not responsible for what happened close to three years ago. Pending investigation from authorities, we are shocked to learn that not only did Dr. Stark not create Ultron, but that he had video proof of his innocence this entire time. Speculations abound as to what motivated him to keep this from the public, but we will have more information as this story unfolds. This is Samantha Cameron reporting to you live outside the former Stark Tower."

Steve, Sam and Clint gaped at the screen which had now cut to a commercial, ending the broadcast interruption.

"Is this for real?" Sam asked, turning wide eyes to Steve.

"Can't be." Steve retorted, shaking his head. "It's just another PR stunt. If Tony really was innocent, he never would have kept those tapes hidden."

"You sure about that Steve?" Clint asked, watching him with a curious look in his eye.

"Of course I'm sure." Steve retorted. "What does he gain by doing this now? Everyone knows he's guilty. This just makes him look pathetic and desperate."

Clint said nothing as he chewed on his bottom lip. "If he's got video of Ultron's creation, he's got video of other things too."

"What other things?" Steve snapped even as he waved off Clint's reply. "Never mind, it's not important now. I want to know what you were doing with Scott."

"He's getting ready to sign the Accords. Wants to go home and see his daughter." Clint drawled, bracing himself for Steve's reaction.

"He's what? That's insane. The Accords are just bureaucratic red tape that keep us from doing our job. If he'd just be patient a little longer, this will all blow over and we can go home without signing anything."

"You really believe that?" Clint asked.

"Of course I do. Besides, with this new Ultron thing, it's only a matter of time before the Accords council changes their mind. This whole thing was because of Stark's invention in the first place. They'll see they need us to stop threats like this in future, especially now if they believe Stark wasn't at fault."
Clint narrowed his eyes in disbelief. "A minute ago you said it was just a PR stunt. Now you believe it's true?"

"It works in our favour if it is." Steve retorted. "The Accords happened because of Ultron. If the Avengers aren't responsible, then we're vindicated for that whole mess."

"It wasn't just Ultron Steve." Clint argued.

"What about you Barton?" Sam demanded, his arms crossing over his chest, ignoring Clint's comment. "What were you doing with Lang?"

Steve's eyes widened in shock. "You're planning to sign aren't you?"

"If I'd known what was in the Accords before Berlin, I might never have left with you." Clint retorted. "Laura is going to kill me if she hasn't already filed for divorce. I had a good thing going with my retirement Steve. What happened in Berlin royally screwed that up."

"You don't have to sign anything." Steve protested. "This will all blow over in time."

"Well I'm not willing to stake my marriage on that." Clint huffed. "I've let my kids down long enough. I need to be home with them where I belong, not hiding in a foreign country waiting on something that might never happen."

"Do you even care what happens to us if you do this?" Sam demanded, glaring at him.

"Honestly? Not really. You got me to join your crusade without giving me all the facts, which got me arrested and turned into a fugitive all for your precious friend who's murdered countless people as an agent of Hydra." Clint shook his head as Steve tried to speak. "I don't care if he wasn't responsible Steve. You did all this for him, not to stop Zemo. He might have been part of it, but everything else was about Bucky. So no, I don't care. I'm glad it worked out for you, but from where I'm standing I got nothing from joining you but a shit load of trouble I didn't ask for."

"I think we're done here " Sam growled.

"Oh yeah. We're done." Steve agreed, glaring at Clint. "You just wait Clint. Stark will benefit from this somehow and you'll regret not standing with us."

"Somehow I doubt that." Clint drawled, moving to the door. "See you around Cap."
Tony didn't know what had come over him when Stephen left. The man hadn't done anything wrong, hadn't insulted him or treated him badly and yet he'd had the distinct impression he'd just been brushed off. As though Stephen's interest in him had disappeared now that he had the answers he'd come for.

No matter how much he told himself he was overreacting and imagining things, he couldn't shake the unsettled feeling Stephen's departure had left him with. Shaking off the downward spiral his thoughts had taken, he left his workshop and headed upstairs to his office.

***

He had just finished going through several documents Pepper had left for him to sign when she appeared in his doorway.

"Pepper?" He said, setting the papers aside. "What are you doing here?"

Pepper gave him a faint smile and slid into a chair opposite his desk. "I wanted to see how you were holding up since the press conference."

"Press conference?" He repeated, blinking in confusion.

She narrowed her eyes and gave a soft sigh. "Yes Tony, the press conference was today. The one about Ultron?"

"Oh! Uh... I didn't realize that was today, clearly." He joked. "But as you can see I'm fine. Besides I was busy with Doctor Strange, we had an impromptu meeting this morning."

"That would explain why you forgot." She smirked.

"Excuse me?"

"Never mind." She sighed, waving her hand. "I also stopped by to let you know that FRIDAY will be handling the security on all your calls for the next week or so until this blows over. Matt and I don't expect you'll need to make a statement, but we've already had breaches in security at SI Headquarters, with reporters and a few fanatics causing scenes."

"Guess the public isn't taking it well then." Tony sighed.

"Actually, the majority seem to be on your side. Most of them are calling with messages of support and that they never doubted you for a minute. Matt is certain most of the protesters are former employees of A.I.M. or Hammer Industries and a few unhappy civilians, but at this point it's just a theory."

"I wasn't expecting that."

"I wasn't sure either, but it's looking good." Pepper mused, her eyes landing on the FedEx package still unopened on Tony's desk. She reached for it, turning it over in her hands with a confused look in her eyes. "There's no return address. It's not a bomb is it?"
Tony huffed a laugh. "Really Pepper? FRIDAY would never let something like that get past the front door."

"Boss is correct Ms. Potts." FRIDAY agreed from above them.

"Then who's it from and why haven't you opened it?"

"I'll give you one guess."

"You're joking. Rogers sent this? What is it?"

"You want to know so bad, you open it." Tony retorted. "I have no interest in it."

"Fine." Pepper huffed, tearing it open and letting the contents spill onto the desk.

Tony laughed when he caught sight of the flip phone while Pepper snatched up the single sheet of paper that fluttered out. Turning the phone on, Tony saw there was a single phone number entered before flipping it closed and tossing it aside to watch Pepper read.

"Oh my god." She whispered. "This is... I can't even... the utter nerve, the audacity... if he was here now, I'd slap that arrogant smirk he always wears right off his face!" She said, slamming the paper down, her eyes burning with anger.

Tony reached for it even as Pepper tried to stop him from touching it. "Trust me Tony. There's nothing in there you need to see."

"After that reaction, I have to see it Pepp."

Releasing his hand, Pepper sank back in her chair. "Fine. But you aren't going to like it."

Tony was silent for several minutes before he started muttering under his breath. "The Avengers are more mine than his?! He'll be here if I ever need him? Everyone has to make their own choices? He's sad we didn't agree?!" Tony looked up from the paper he now had a death grip on. "What kind of utter horseshit is he shovelling here?! Avengers are mine... what a load of crap when both Clint and Nat took his side! As though they would have ever chosen otherwise!"

"Tony..."

"What?!" Tony snapped, then blinked at her when he realized he'd been shouting and had gotten to his feet. "Oh... sorry Pepp." He said, sinking back down to his chair. "Utter crap this is. The Avengers were never mine, never even close to mine. I was only ever a consultant and a bank, never a true member... I can't even... ugh!"

"Boss?" FRIDAY called out when Tony broke off.

"What is it FRIDAY?"

"I hate to interrupt, but you have a call from a representative on the Accords council."

"Put them through Fri."
Ten minutes later, Tony was off the phone with a stunned look on his face.

"What is it Tony? What did they want?"

"Barton and someone named Scott Lang are coming home, he must be the guy who had Hank's suit. They've agreed to sign the Accords and want me there to witness it as the representative for the New Avengers Initiative."

"You're joking." Pepper gasped. "When?"

"Tomorrow. In Geneva."

"Well you're not going alone." Pepper growled.

"You're right, I'm not. Matt and Jessica are coming with me." Tony smiled, a cold look in his eyes. "I'm not about to walk into that meeting without backup. T'Challa will also be there."

"Why is he involved?"

"Best guess, he's been sheltering them all since they broke out of the Raft."

"He should be in jail." Pepper snarled. "Leaving you to die in Siberia and then sheltering the man who almost killed you."

"That'll never happen Pepper. Wakanda is earth's only source of vibranium, as well as the most technologically advanced society on the planet."

"He should still be held accountable for what he did. He's a damned hypocrite leaving you there when he's the one who fuelled the manhunt for Barnes. He had every intention of killing Bucky until it took too long to find him. He would have too if he'd caught him sooner, yet now he's a hero for capturing Zemo and "coming to his senses." It's a joke Tony."

Tony smirked at her, a warm feeling flooding his insides. "I'll be sure to pass on your sentiment when I see him Pepp."

"Good." Pepper replied, getting to her feet. "He needs to know he's no hero in my book."

"I'll make certain that's clear to him."

"Right, well, seems you have everything under control. You need me to take care of anything while you're gone?"

"Just the usual. The press don't need to know about Barton or Lang, but if Hank Pym calls, send it my way."

"You sure that's wise? He doesn't like you Tony."

"The feeling is mutual Pepp, but Pym was ousted the minute Lang was caught with Hank's technology. Since I'm free and he's on the run, who else is he going to blame? Besides, he probably just wants to make sure I don't have access to his Ant-Man suit."

"That's ridiculous. Even if Lang had it, Ross would have confiscated it the minute they were
"He did have it and then Rogers broke into the Raft and stole it all back. Ross was livid when he found out. Hadn't even had time to analyze Hank's tech before Rogers took it out from under him."

"You sure Steve was behind that?"

"Who else would it be?" Tony scoffed. "Rogers might not know anything about tech, but he'd know the cost of leaving it in Ross's hands."

"Hmpf." Pepper snorted. "Fine. Just promise me you won't let Hank blame everything on you like he always does. You don't deserve it and you certainly don't need to hear that bullshit from him again."

"I promise Pepp. Give you my word."

"Alright." Pepper nodded. "Have a good trip then and if you can, try not to punch Clint in the face, no matter how much he deserves it."

"I'll do my best." Tony smirked as she left his office. "I'll definitely do my best."

***

Stephen felt uncharacteristically unsettled the moment he stepped into the Sanctuary and the portal closed behind him. A sense of loss and foreboding followed on that feeling and he had a moment of urgency which prompted him to want to turn around and go back to Tony immediately.

He couldn't say or even attempt an explanation for the sudden panic that gripped him, but the moment he focused on it, it disappeared leaving him exhausted and confused. Shaking himself, he straightened his shoulders and went in search of Wong to let him know he was back and heading for Kamar-Taj.

"Oh, you're back." Wong noted, not looking up from the book he was reading. "How'd it go with Stark?"

"About as well as could be expected." Stephen replied, frowning at the tense note in his voice which caused Wong to look up at him sharply.

"What's wrong Stephen?"

"Nothing." He snapped, then pasted an apologetic look on his face. "Sorry, I didn't mean to snap. I don't know what's wrong, just feeling a little unsettled is all. I'm sure it's nothing."

"Doesn't look like nothing. Did something happen with Stark?"

"No, I just... I don't know Wong. He felt... off the moment I left the compound."

"Well he does have a lot on his plate. You should probably talk to him again after you meet with the other Masters. That's where you're going now isn't it?"

"Yes." Stephen nodded. "I just wanted to check in first, see how things were going with you."
"They're going slowly Strange, as always." Wong replied, scowling into his book. "Research takes time. See you when you get back."

"Right." Stephen replied, his voice curt. "Later then."
"You understand that I do not make this request lightly." T'Challa said, Steve and Sam standing opposite him.

"Of course." Steve nodded. "We're very grateful for your hospitality and we understand the difficult position this has put you in."

"I'm glad to hear that." T'Challa nodded, sounding pleased. "Of course, I do not expect you to leave until Ms. Maximoff has recovered from whatever it is that ails her."

"Completely unnecessary." Steve assured him. "Wanda is much better now and anxious to be out in the world again."

"You do understand that out of all you, she is the most wanted for her crimes?"

"We do." Steve nodded. "It won't be a problem."

"Very well." T'Challa replied. "We shall have provisions and supplies waiting for you as well as transportation as soon as you are ready to leave. I also want to assure you that Mr. Barnes is safe here. We will try to will keep you updated on any progress he makes, though I'm sure you understand why that won't happen for some time."

"I do." Steve nodded. "And I appreciate everything you've done for Bucky. He's been through more than enough. It's time he got the chance to rest and be a person."

"We will do all we can to see that he does just that. You have my word."

"Thank you, that means a lot." Steve smiled, giving him a small bow.

"Yeah, thanks." Sam nodded, inclining his head in a show of deference.

***

"You ready for this?" Matt asked quietly as he walked at Tony's side toward the room where the Accords meeting would take place. Jessica followed behind them, her posture one that mixed strength and mild hostility the moment anyone got too close to the three of them. So far, none had dared to test the aura she gave off, but that could change at any time.

"Not really." Tony sighed. "But it's not as though I'm on trial here. They just want me as a witness to the signing of the Accords. Besides, we're seeing Lang first and aside from his connection to Hank Pym, I don't know anything about him."

"He's got a rap sheet." Jessica intoned from behind them. "Burglary, theft, he's good at getting into high tech places no one else attempts. Spent some time in jail and then another short stint until Pym broke him out. No one knows how. Then nothing till he showed up in Germany with Steve Rogers. Divorced, his wife has remarried and he had full, unsupervised visiting rights with his daughter. He was working on shared custody before he got on the plane to Germany. The dumbass."

Matt stifled a laugh with his hand as they continued down the hallway while Tony turned to stare
"When exactly did you have time to find all that out? I only told you about Lang when you boarded my private plane a few hours ago." Tony asked with wide eyes.

"Duh Stark. I'm a P.I. I investigate people for a living and wanted to know more about who we fought in Germany. Read about him the day after we got back to New York and kept a copy of the file on my phone. Read it again in the air."

"Huh." Tony replied, giving her a smile. "You know, I might have some other work for you when we get back. Come see me at the compound when you've got a free minute or two."

"I'll think about it." She nodded, passing them to open the door. "Ready?"

"Lead the way my white knight." Tony teased, enjoying the faint blush his words caused her as he entered the silent boardroom at Matt's side.

***

It was two days before Stephen returned from Kamar-Taj. Wong merely nodded at him as he breezed past him in the library, making a beeline to his room and much needed sleep.

Lying in bed, the lack of progress with the Stones weighed on him. Neither he nor any of the other Masters nor any texts in the school's vast library had been able to shed new insight on the Stone's purposes. At one point, they had been protected, only for their power to eventually destroy their protectors. The only thing that was continuously repeated was how dangerous they were.

Stephen scoffed every time he thought of the word. Dangerous was completely inadequate to the little they'd discovered. Whoever had written the warning was either very sarcastic or had no concept of how powerful even a single Stone could be. If it had been him writing those warnings, he would have called them destructive on a galactic scale. Life ending, cataclysmic. Dangerous was simply not adequate.

He fell into a fitful sleep, haunting images of things he hadn't experienced plaguing his rest. He woke feeling tired and irritable, annoyed that he couldn't get the dreams to stop. While he sat sipping his tea in the Sanctum's kitchen the next morning, he overheard a news broadcast coming from Wong's small t.v. in the other room.

Narrowing his eyes, he got up and followed the sound to where Wong was watching with a blank expression on his face. The first time he'd caught the other man watching it, he'd been surprised to find something so modern on the premises. Wong had merely scoffed at him, saying that though they protected the planet from interdimensional threats, they still had to know what was going on outside the Sanctum's walls, and that had been the end of it.

He looked up as Stephen joined him, a faint look of concern in his eyes. "Did Stark tell you about this?" He asked as Stephen came around to see the screen.

"Tell me what?"

"Our analysts have confirmed without a doubt that the footage we just watched is authentic. Tony Stark was not responsible for Ultron's creation. We've been told that CEO Pepper Potts will be delivering a second statement on this matter later today. This is Abby Stone reporting."
Stephen blinked at the screen in confusion which had now cut to commercial. "When did this happen?"

"The day after you left." Wong replied. "I'm guessing you didn't know about it."

"No, I didn't." Stephen shook his head. "Most of Tony's memories focused on the incident in New York and what happened in Siberia. The rest was just a jumble of different incidents in no particular order. One minute I think I was seeing Sokovia, the next Malibu and then back to New York. None of it was all that clear."

"Do you think the spell Wanda cast is responsible for why he kept evidence of his innocence hidden from the public?"

"Possibly." Stephen replied. "But I'm also aware that at the time it happened, no one was on his side. He might have believed proving his innocence to be pointless at the time, especially given how serious the threat from Ultron was."

"Perhaps." Wong nodded, though Stephen could tell instantly that he didn't believe it for a minute. "You could know with certainty if you just asked him."

Stephen scowled, downing the last of his tea. "Why has it become so damn important to you that I make nice with the man? I've been patient, kind, saved his life and rid him of some nasty parasitic magic. I have other responsibilities that you also can't refrain from reminding me of. What exactly is your goal here?"

"Don't take that tone with me Strange. You may be stronger in magic, but I am still your senior." Wong growled. "You clearly haven't noticed, so I'll just say it. When was the last time you dreamt of Dormammu or the Dark Dimension?"

Stephen scowled harder, crossing his arms over his chest. "What in the name of Ancient One does that have to do with anything?"

"Answer the question Stephen."

"Of all the... you know I don't like talking about that. You also know they've been constant, despite the fact that..." Stephen growled before breaking off mid tirade. "I..."

"Exactly." Wong retorted, a knowing look in his eyes. "You think... Stark?"

"What else?" Wong huffed, an air of boredom now radiating from him. "You've not had a night terror since you met with Stark in his Tower. The Cloak hasn't had to wake me to break you free of nightmares in close to three months now. I can't say for certain why or even how this has happened, but you are clearly positively affected by his proximity. You have noticed that despite the witch's magic, Stark always had a strong energy to him. I imagine it's only gotten stronger since you helped him."

"You're telling me that, quite literally, Tony is good for my health." Stephen drawled.

"Tell me I'm wrong and I'll not mention it again."
"I... I can't do that." Stephen stammered. "I need to think about this. Besides, normal people can't just make someone's dreams stop like that."

Wong huffed a laugh and shut off the t.v. "You made Stark's dreams stop. And are you honestly saying Stark is normal?"

"He's not a Sorcerer Wong."

"No. But he's not average either."

"Alright, fine. You've made your point. I'll call him. FRIDAY?"

"Yes Doctor Strange?"

"Call Tony please?"

"I'm sorry Doctor, but I can't do that right now." FRIDAY replied, drawing Wong's attention.

"What? Why not?" Stephen asked the AI with a frown.

"Boss is currently in Geneva in a meeting."

"What meeting?" Stephen demanded, then checked himself. "My apologies FRIDAY, I have no right to ask that."

"It's alright Doctor. Boss cleared you for any questions you might have regarding his absence." FRIDAY replied, gaining him a knowing smirk from Wong. "It seems Mr. Lang and Mr. Barton have decided to sign the Accords so they can return home. The Council requested boss be present for the signing as a representative of the new Avengers initiative."

Stephen narrowed his eyes. "I'm sorry, who's signing?"

"Hawkeye and Ant-Man." FRIDAY responded without missing a beat.

"Ah, yes the archer. I imagine their motives are both family related."

"They are." FRIDAY continued. "Mr. Lang wants to see his daughter and Mr. Barton wishes to return to his family."

"May I ask who else is there?"

"Boss was accompanied by Matt Murdock and Jessica Jones. Aside from the necessary UN and Accords reps, the only other person present is King T'Challa."

"I see." Stephen replied, his eyes going hard. "Is the King present for both meetings or just there as an observer?"

"He is an observer Doctor Strange." Her tone indicating she knew exactly what he was really asking.

"Thank you FRIDAY." He smiled, meeting Wong's suspicious glare.
"What are you planning Stephen?"

"Nothing of importance Wong." Stephen said, getting to his feet. "I think I will invite myself to this meeting as well."

"You can't expose us like that to those people Strange! They barely tolerate the existence of aliens having magic. Portalling into that place will only scare them. We may have signed the Accords, but that doesn't mean any of them need a front row seat to our powers."

"What kind of imbecile do you take me for?" Stephen growled. "As if I would do anything like that. I merely wish to have a few words with someone in attendance and I have no intention of giving myself away to anyone."

"Fine." Wong huffed, though he was clearly unhappy with Stephen's answer. "But do not drop anyone into a portal."

"I never do anything without provocation Wong. Have some faith." Stephen admonished at the same time he conjured a portal and snapped it closed before Wong could respond.

"Bloody arrogant, last word always, little..." Wong cursed under his breath. Throwing his hands into the air in irritation, he stormed from the kitchen and headed for the practice room. It was about to become very loud while Wong worked out his annoyance at how only Stephen could get him this annoyed in such a short span of time.

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*Really not liking what I've seen so far from Endgame trailers and teasers. Trying to get mine out before the movie but if I can't, I hope to have it at least my version of IW out by the time it drops. So yeah, Endgame trailers annoy me cuz I just KNOW they aren't ever going to adequately address the horseshit that happened in CW. So, I guess I should just stay the hell away from YouTube. 😒*
The meeting with Lang was short, procedural and over in less than an hour. Tony sat there, listening to the list of charges, Lang’s prepared statement and agreement with the terms of his return home and wondered just what the hell he was doing there. All the Council wanted was for him to sit as a witness, covering their asses in case what happened with Lang somehow came back to bite them in the ass. Which Tony didn’t ever see happening since he wasn’t about to plead the man's case and there was no one else who had any power to do so.

Besides, why would he ever help the guy? Lang was a nobody as far as he was concerned and he was certainly no threat, especially once Pym got hold of him. He might know how to use Pym's technology, but he wasn't a hero and he wasn't the brains behind the Ant-Man suit. He was less than Tony himself in that he'd been in the right place at the right time and Hank had used the man to help himself. Plus he'd stolen from Stark Industries. If not for Sam's incompetence, Lang never would have succeeded.

Throughout the meeting, Lang kept glancing his way, a near unreadable expression on his face that if Tony didn't know better looked an awful lot like guilt. But it didn't faze him. Jessica kept Lang from openly staring by giving him the coldest glare she could without making the rest of those in attendance uncomfortable.

Tony blinked and suppressed a yawn and the next moment, everyone was getting to their feet for a short break before they processed Barton's deal. He joined them, following Matt from the room when Lang's voice called out to him. Turning, he met Scott's eyes with a frown, but made no move to go any closer.

Flanked by two security personnel and his UN appointed lawyer, Lang crossed the room, his eyes never leaving the billionaire's confused stare.

"Mr. Stark." He began, clearing his throat nervously. "I know we didn't get off on the right foot, like, at all. But I just... I wanted you to know that I thought I was helping to save the world. I didn't know about the Accords before Germany and... well I... I'm sorry I didn't do my homework on what I was asked to do without knowing all the facts."

"Rogers didn't tell you?"

"No sir." Scott said with a shake of his head. "If he had, I probably would've just stayed home. I doubt Hank will ever trust me again, never mind speak to me."

Tony chuckled under his breath. "I appreciate that Mr. Lang. And you're right, Hank isn't one to let go of grudges, but I wouldn't worry about it much. He's more likely to blame the whole thing on me anyways. If there's anyone he mistrusts more than you, it's a Stark."

"Far as I can tell, he's got no reason for that sir." Lang replied. "Anyway, that's all I wanted to say and that I wish we could've met under better circumstances."

"Likewise." Tony nodded. "Wanted to ask you, if an interested party calls, do they have anything to worry about regarding company secrets? Just wondering since I'm almost positive I'm gonna get threats the minute he hears of your return."
"Nope, nothing to worry about at all." Lang smiled as a guard cleared his throat behind him to hurry up. "My hands are clean."

Tony nodded. "Thanks. Appreciate the head's up."

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Once T'Challa had left, Sam glared at Steve his arms crossed over his chest. "Why'd you lie to him Steve? Wanda is not recovered at all."

Steve glared back at his friend. "He doesn't need to know Sam. You really think he'd let us leave if he thought Wanda was a problem? You heard him, she's more wanted for her crimes than anyone else on the team. I don't doubt Stark's behind that one, still trying to lay the blame for what he made her do on her."

"I doubt that was all Stark's doing." Sam protested, though there was no energy behind it. "But that doesn't matter right now. How are we gonna keep her little problem secret till we get out of here?"

"She'll be fine by the time we have to go. She just needs a bit of rest and food."

"Hope you're right."

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Stephen portalled to Geneva, stepping out into a small, deserted alley two blocks from the building he knew Tony was in. FRIDAY had been more than willing to share the details of the location with him and made no comment on either his intentions or his presence in Switzerland. Despite his own misgivings on what he was doing, he appreciated her silent approval, for approval it was, he had no doubts about that.

What he did doubt was how to accomplish what he wanted without drawing unwanted attention. "Doctor Strange?" FRIDAY prompted when Stephen remained standing in the alley, unmoving.

"Yes?"

"If I might be of assistance, I have access to surveillance both surrounding and within the building. Would you like me to locate the individual you wish to address?"

Stephen chuckled under his breath as he quickly cast a simple glamour over himself, disguising himself under local fashions. He added to it by altering his hair colour and removing his facial hair. A thin pair of wire glasses completed his assemble as he began moving forward and out to the street.

"I would appreciate that FRIDAY. How thorough is the security?"

"Nothing the protector of the New York Sanctum can't handle Doctor."

"Remind me to compliment your boss on your very skilled use of compliments and sarcasm FRIDAY."

"Thank you Doctor. I will do just that when next you see him."
Ten minutes later Stephen was inside the very expensive hotel and on the same floor as the man he sought. It had been mere child's play to bypass security with a simple 'don't see me glamour' or if that wasn't enough, as he oft referred to it, his Jedi mind tricks.

The King was currently in his room, waiting for what, Stephen wasn't sure since FRIDAY had assured him he was to be in attendance for the next meeting. Regardless, Stephen wanted this over with and not being patient to start, he took a quick survey of the King's room with his astral self and a moment later was standing in the man's bedroom.

There were two very stern looking women speaking in harsh tones in the other room, which Stephen chose to ignore. He muttered another spell under his breath, his glamour falling away at the same time someone gasped in the other room.

He breezed in, letting his aura push the door wide while the Cloak levitated him into the shocked King's presence. Stephen gave a small smile to the frozen warriors standing opposite the King before turning an ice cold glare on the man before him.

"Who the devil do you think you are coming in here like this?" The King barked. "And what have you done to them? I demand you return them at once!" He demanded, pointing angrily at the warriors.

"My, my, such arrogance from someone who is supposed to be of refined royal blood. Though I suppose that is explanation enough right there." Stephen clucked in disappointment. "As for who I am, I believe I am the Sorcerer Supreme and you are the man who left another man to die."

"Explain yourself Sorcerer!" T'Challa barked, the glint in his eye growing angrier. "I have never left anyone to die and you are threatening a king!"

"I haven't even begun to threaten you." Stephen hissed. "And it seems your memory needs refreshing."

Without waiting for another interruption, Stephen, using a magic technique Wong had shown him, threw a projection of what happened in Siberia onto a nearby wall. Minutes later, the video disappeared and Stephen addressed him once more.

"Now that we're on the same page, tell me, how many people were in Siberia? Including yourself."

"Five." Came T'Challa's now uncertain reply.

"And how many walked out?" Stephen hissed.

"Five."

"Wrong." Stephen snapped. "You see, I know only four walked out, for I was the one who saved the fifth one's life. That life being that of one Doctor Tony Stark. The same man who helped you in Germany, the same man you left for dead in a cold Siberian bunker while you ran off with a criminal to be rewarded for your heroics. Then you thumbed your nose at both the authorities and the legacy of the Accords your own father created to give shelter to wanted criminals. You sir are a hypocrite. More than that, you are certainly no hero. You are nothing but a coward and a liar. If not for the technology you hold within the borders of your country, you would be nothing."

"What..." T'Challa stumbled over his words as he cleared his throat. "What do you want from me?"
"What I want is immaterial. But you are going to do everything in your power to assist Doctor Stark with both the Accords ratification and the rebuilding of the New Avengers Initiative. Something, I will point out, would likely not even be necessary if you had helped him while Rogers and Barnes were attempting to beat him to death. Unfortunately, you were too busy ensuring your own righteous revenge with Zemo." Stephen paused and took in a long, loud breath and shook himself.

"You say you're a Sorcerer," T'Challa challenged him. "But all I've seen so far is parlour tricks. You do not intimidate me."

Stephen rolled his eyes and with a bored sigh, flicked his hand and opened a portal beneath the man's feet. T'Challa let out an undignified squeak of surprise which cut off as Stephen snapped it closed behind him.

"What do you think FRIDAY? Is it time for a cup of tea?"

"I believe it's the perfect time Doctor." FRIDAY replied with a distinct sound of approval.

"Ah good. That speech wore out my voice a little." Stephen said as he settled in a nearby chair and conjured a steaming cup into his hand.

"Not to rain on your parade Doctor, but isn't the King missing his meeting?"

Stephen blushed, even though he knew FRIDAY couldn't see him. "Uh, no. I may have frozen the building and all in it into a pocket dimension. No one but those present in this room will remember a thing. A small misuse of my power, but... necessary."

Minutes later, Stephen had finished his tea and returned to where he'd been standing previously. "I suppose I should wrap this up. Despite my desire to let that man fall for another twenty minutes, I can't maintain it and the building forever."

"An understandable desire Doctor but, as you say..."

"Yes. As I say." Stephen nodded, flicking a hand at the ceiling to where a portal opened and the formerly threatening King fell out, landing on the carpet with a thud and a muffled curse.

"Did you enjoy that parlour trick?" Stephen asked as T'Challa got to his feet, his face flushed with anger and embarrassment.

"No."

"Good. Then I assume there's no need for further examples of what I can do."

"No, there's not."

"Then we have nothing further to discuss. Your warriors will return to normal the moment I leave this room. Oh, and in case you were thinking of keeping what you did secret, the two in this room saw and heard everything that happened here. I doubt they will be interested in any excuse you might have for your actions in Siberia. Should we ever cross paths again, this meeting never happened or I will be having a few words with a certain Panther God you've met."
T'Challa paled on hearing Stephen's parting warning as the Sorcerer stepped through a whirling circle of sparks and disappeared. A wave of pressure hit him seconds later, making it feel as though his ears were about to pop at the same time his General and her sister stumbled in place.

"You left Stark to die?" His General hissed, stepping into his personal space and forcing him to step back. "You have dishonored your name and our people! You are not fit to be King!"

"Sister!" The other woman admonished, though her eyes also flashed with anger. "Let us not be so hasty."

"He has brought the wrath of a powerful being upon our heads!" She shrieked. "How are my words hasty?!"

T'Challa drew himself up, straightening his shoulders in an effort to project a confidence he didn't feel. "You cannot believe that man has the power to speak to our God." He demanded, incredulous and trying for indifference. "He is but a man beneath the sorcery, powerful yes but still a man."

"A man who clearly understands honour more than you." His General hissed back. "You will do as he has requested my King, or we will be forced to share our knowledge with the people. That you chose to keep this hidden tells me that you know you have done wrong and wished to keep it secret. Worse, you gave shelter to those who hurt the one you abandoned. You disgust me."

Without another word, the General turned on her heel and marched from the room. Her sister remained where she was, torn between doing her duty to her king and joining her sister.

"Well?" T'Challa huffed, arching a brow in her direction.

"I will not lie my King. I agree with my sister's sentiments but I have no desire to alert outsiders that we are divided in our mission here. I will stay and accompany you to your meeting."

"Very well." T'Challa nodded, letting out the breath he'd been holding. "Let us go then."
Too Little, Too Late

Tony wasn't looking forward to Clint's signing of the Accords. He'd somewhat enjoyed the snarky banter he'd shared with the archer over the years. Despite the fact that Clint had a habit of going too far with his comebacks to the point they sometimes hurt, for the most part he appreciated someone who could keep up with him. But Barton's words from the Raft echoed in his head and he couldn't think of a single nice thing to say to the man. Nor did he want to.

Whatever had prompted Barton to say what he had, he had never known Clint to make fun of a teammate’s injury before. Certainly not at the expense of someone else, especially Rhodes. Himself yes, but Clint had always respected Rhodes so he couldn't reconcile Barton's cruelty with the man he'd thought him to be.

Matt cleared his throat at his side as they made their way back to the conference room. "Tony. I can hear your heart rate picking up. What's wrong?"

"You know how unsettling that is." Tony muttered.

"He does." Jessica answered. "He just doesn't let it bother him. What's up Stark?"

"It's Barton." Tony sighed, letting Matt pull him aside to clear the hallway. "He said something to me the day I went to the Raft. I can't stop thinking about it."

Jessica snorted. "From what I've heard, he can no more keep his mouth shut than you can. But I'm guessing this wasn't one of his normal insults."

"No, it wasn't." Tony replied with a shake of his head. "Not verbatim, but he implied it was my fault Rhodes was paralyzed. That I know all and make bad decisions for everyone since I think it should be my way or the highway."

"Oh that's rich!" Jessica fumed. "This from a guy whose head was so far up Rogers' ass he told him to jump and Barton said how high? Seriously? The same guy who took Wanda from a secure place because Rogers told him to? What a joke."

"I have to agree with Ms. Jones." Matt nodded, making her scowl at him. "Sounds more like he was projecting than accusing Tony."

Tony blinked at the two scowling faces before him. "You two tag team much or is this a new thing?" He joked, causing Matt to blush and Jess to snort and do an eye roll that impressed even him.

"Shut up Stark." Jones huffed.

"Fine, fine." He said, holding up his hands in peace. "It just never occurred to me that might be what Clint was doing. Still doesn't excuse what he said though."

"No one's saying it does." Matt protested. "But are you ready to go in?"

Tony squared his shoulders and ran a hand through his hair. "Yeah, I'm ready. Definitely more ready than I was a few minutes ago. Let's do this."
The first thing Tony noticed when he entered the room was the slump in Barton's shoulders and the unnatural tension he detected in T'Challa the moment he sat down. The King was seated two spots away from Clint who had his lawyer between himself and the UN rep and Accords members.

Matt hummed thoughtfully under his breath noticing the same thing Tony had, but reclined back in his chair, giving away nothing. Tony glanced at him, catching the small smile Matt flashed him before turning his attention to the front of the room.

He tuned out what the official was saying, instead choosing to watch Clint's reaction to what was being said. He didn't need to listen to the charges or the conditions of Barton's plea deal, he'd been there after all. But this was a helluva a lot more personal than Lang's had been.

He and Clint might have never been all that close, but he'd traded barbs with the former assassin, shared drinks and pranks. Shit, the man had eaten his food, drank his booze and shared a roof with him. The depth of betrayal was only now hitting him as he watched Clint continue to keep his eyes riveted to the front of the room.

Tony knew Barton knew he was staring, knew he was ignoring him and it grated on his nerves in a way he hadn't expected. He could feel his anger rising when Matt's hand suddenly pressed into his under the table, giving it a squeeze and forcing him to release the breath he'd been holding. It must have been enough for the lawyer for he gave his hand a final squeeze before placing it back on the table.

Blinking away the haze of anger that had overcome him, Tony shifted his gaze to the King and almost gave himself away when he caught the man staring back at him, an unreadable expression on his face. T'Challa didn't look away though, making Tony narrow his eyes, wondering just what the other man was doing. After a moment, he realized the king seemed to looking for something, some sign of who knew what in his face or posture that he couldn't seem to find.

Tony stared back, his mind going a mile a minute when it dawned on him what Stephen had said about the King and Barnes. That T'Challa should be held responsible for his actions... and then it clicked. That wasn't impassivity he was seeing under the King's careful facade, it was guilt. But for him to feel guilty, then... No, no there was no way Stephen had gotten to him. T'Challa had probably come to the same conclusion on his own, yet that didn't explain why he was still staring or why there was no hostility in his eyes.

He was so caught up in figuring out what was going on with the King that he didn't hear his name being called. Jessica nudged him none too gently under the table, making him frown at her in annoyance until someone repeated his name and he felt a faint flush creep up his face.

Locking his expression down, he turned his attention back to the front of the room where a grey-haired and perfectly put together woman was watching him intently.

"I'm sorry." He said. "I missed that."

"I said, that Mr. Barton wished to talk to you once we conclude for today. Our part is finished as you have already provided your signature to the necessary documents. If you are amenable to Mr. Barton's request, we will leave you to it while we adjourn."
Tony's eyes flicked to Barton, who was still avoiding eye contact as though afraid of what Tony might say. It took a moment, with him painfully aware that the entire room was waiting for his response but in the end he nodded. "Fine by me."

The woman, whose name Tony had promptly forgotten the moment she'd been introduced, nodded and got to her feet. "Very well. On behalf of the United Nations and the representatives of the Accords, I declare this hearing adjourned. Mr. Barton you will remain in international custody until transportation back to the United States has been secured. Mr. Stark, thank you for being here and I wish you a good day."

With that, the delegates and officials stood collectively and filed from the room. T'Challa following behind with a passing glance to Tony as he left. Still frowning at the man's back, he turned to Clint who was now watching him openly. Silence filled the room as the two men stared at each other until Clint's lawyer cleared his throat.

"Mr. Barton if you wish to proceed, I suggest you get on with it."

Clint nodded, his shoulders slumping even more before meeting Tony's gaze again. "Look Stark, I have no idea what to say to you to make anything better. I'm sorry I broke into the compound and took Wanda and I'm sorry I attacked Vision. Most of all though, I'm sorry I didn't do my homework before answering Steve's call."

"Better late than never I suppose." Tony shrugged, feeling completely unmoved by Clint's words.

"Shit Tony. I know I fucked up, I fucked up bad and... and I..." Clint ducked his head, avoiding Tony's eyes. "I want to thank you also... for, for what you did. For Laura and the kids. You totally didn't have to and you had no reason to after what I did, what I said... but, thank you. For everything. If I could take it back, I would, but when I heard Ross was involved, well..." Clint shrugged. "I guess I just found it easy to believe you were on his side. Anyway, I'm sorry."

Tony tried really hard not to show confusion when Clint mentioned Laura. He couldn't remember doing anything for her or Clint's kids, but Barton seemed to think he had. Maybe he had and forgotten about it, but still... and then it clicked. Right, he'd hidden them the minute Clint was in Ross’ custody. He'd wanted them safe from Ross as potential bargaining chips, but it had been months ago, so much had happened... no wonder he'd forgotten.

"You're welcome." Tony shrugged. "But I didn't do it for you."

Clint nodded and got to his feet. "I know. But it's because of you I still have a family to go home to and I didn't deserve what you did. Just as you didn't deserve what I said to you. I won't forget it Tony."

Tony nodded, accepting Clint's words for what they were, but he knew in his gut that it was unlikely he'd ever trust the man again. With Clint finished, everyone began moving to their respective doors when Clint stopped and turned to look at him again.

"Stark, I don't know what happened between you and Steve, but you should know he thinks all this is just going to go away. You know how he can be. Just... watch your back alright?"

"He won't have to." Jessica replied. "He's got friends who will do that for him."

Clint nodded, a sad look in his eyes, as though he'd expected the comment, then said nothing more.
as his lawyer and the two guards led him from the room.

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After Clint had left, Jessica nudged Tony with her boot. "I thought you were going to give him a piece of your mind? What happened?"

Tony shrugged. "Didn't seem important after his little speech. But it's mostly because T'Challa distracted me."

"He was definitely nervous about something." Matt agreed as they got to their feet.

"Not important?" Jessica echoed. "After what he did?"

Tony met her eyes and nodded. "We won Jones. Besides, if he really wanted to apologize, he would have asked Vision to be here too. The odds I'll ever see him again are slim to none and honestly, he wasn't worth venting on. I really had nothing to say to him."

"Still." Jessica huffed. "I would have liked to see you put him in his place."

Tony smiled. "If he's talked to Laura, she's already done that and I'd bet good odds there's more of that waiting for him when he gets home."

Matt had his hand on the door when he paused. "I believe the King is waiting for you in the hallway." He said, turning back to Tony.

"Hmpf." Tony snorted. "Well then, let's see what he has to say. After you Mr. Murdock."
Cautious Optimism

Wong was waiting for him when he returned to the Sanctum, complete with arms crossed and eyes narrowed.

"Did you enjoy your little side trip?" He demanded, the moment the portal closed behind him.

"I did actually." Stephen replied, completely unsurprised Wong knew what he'd been up to. "And I won't apologize for it, if that's what this is about."

"It's not. But in future, you might do well to question your motives before acting so rashly. I'm not certain Stark will approve when he finds out."

"I'm not interested in his approval." Stephen retorted, though in reality he hadn't even considered it as a factor in his decision.

"Just don't be surprised when he tells you to back off. He doesn't strike me as someone who likes having someone else fight his battles for him."

"That was not what I was doing." Stephen huffed.

"Stark might not see it that way."

"I'll cross that bridge when it comes to it. If it comes to it. Either way, it doesn't matter, I'd do again even without his approval."

Wong smirked at him and dropped his arms to his sides with a shake of his head. "You are so screwed."

"What are you talking about?" Stephen demanded as Wong turned to head for the kitchen.

"You're smart Stephen." Wong called over his shoulder, still chuckling. "I'm sure you'll figure it out eventually."

Stephen scowled at the other sorcerers' retreating form with annoyance. He shrugged his shoulders, letting the Cloak sail down the hallway while he headed to his room and a much needed shower. Dealing with the King had lifted a burden from him that he hadn't known was there and he felt good about what he'd accomplished. Whether or not the King complied with his demands was secondary to the knowledge that he knew his point had been made. That he'd done something to correct at least one injustice done to someone he...

Stephen paused as he stepped into the shower, almost tripping over his own feet as he'd just mentally tripped over his thoughts. Dammit, he swore under his breath as he adjusted the water temperature. He'd been about to say... no. Certainly not in such a short time?

As he washed the dirt of his impromptu trip to Europe from his skin and lathered his hair with soap, he contemplated the thoughts whirling in his mind. There was no denying Tony was attractive and charming. Yet had he truly come to care for the man so much already? Or was it just admiration for someone who had survived so much and bettered himself each time?
By the time he finished cleaning up and towelling himself off, he was utterly flustered by what he'd realized in the shower. Of course, that led him down a slippery slope of self-recrimination, anxiety over his actions in Europe and fear that he hadn't been acting from a purely neutral position. Which is how Wong found him an hour later, sitting cross-legged on his bed muttering to himself.

"Is this some new meditation technique Strange?" Wong drawled from his doorway. "Because if it is, I have to tell you it doesn't appear very effective."

"I like Tony Stark." Stephen blurted, then instantly flushed, a scowl on his face. "Forget I said that!"

Wong only arched a brow at him and shook his head. "That's not news Stephen."

"What?!" Stephen exclaimed, jumping to his feet in a panic. "You're making that up!"

"Are you sure you're an adult?"

Stephen blinked then narrowed his eyes in annoyance. "Excuse me? Of course I'm an adult. What kind of question is that and why are you being insulting?"

"Because you're behaving like a besotted adolescent. And no, unless you've told him you like him, Stark has no idea. Especially given the fact that you just realized it now."

"Oh. Well that's good then."

"I don't see what's good about it." Wong scoffed with a snort. "Between the two of you, you've no more brains than a flea when it comes to feelings."

"I'll have you know we both hold numerous PhD's Wong."

"Are they going to help you tell Stark you like him?" Wong challenged him with a smirk.

"I don't need a PhD for that." Stephen retorted holtly.

"From where I'm standing you're going to need a map and directions and a new PhD." Wong chuckled. "But okay."

"You are the most insulting man I've ever met."

Wong merely smiled at him. "You would know, you met yourself years ago."

"That doesn't even make sense."

Wong sighed and stepped back into the hallway. "Yes, well. Good luck with the whole Tony thing. I'm going to bed. It's your turn to strengthen the wards tonight."

"There is no Tony thing. We're only friends!" Stephen snapped, but there was no response as Wong had moved out of hearing. Or, Stephen thought darkly, he was ignoring him.

Which was fine, Stephen thought, moving down the hall to the study, he didn't want to continue the annoying discussion they'd been having anyway. He was not some starry-eyed teenager and he was certainly not interested in starting anything with Tony. Stark, he corrected himself. They were
both grown men, with important responsibilities and no time. Besides, he thought, as he set up his workspace to reinforce the Sanctum's wards, there was no way Stark would ever be interested in him in that way. It was ridiculous and Wong was...well, Wong was just being a jerk.

Satisfied that he'd put his fears and anxieties to rest, at least for the time being, Stephen settled himself on a pillow on the floor and got to work on the wards.

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"Doctor Stark." T'Challa began once Tony had gotten over his shock that the king truly did want to speak with him. "On behalf of Wakanda and her people, I would like to offer my assistance in any capacity regarding the Accords and the forming of the New Avengers Initiative."

"I see." Tony nodded, though he didn't see, at all. "What did you have in mind?"

"I cannot in all honesty commit to any specifics at this time as I must first speak with my advisors on the matter. However, I assure you that I will have my sister contact you in coming to some kind of arrangement regarding an exchange of information. Beyond that, I put myself at your disposal to help with any changes you want made to the existing Accords."

Tony appeared thoughtful in the pause T'Challa left in his speech before responding. "Am I to assume that this arrangement will be beneficial to both parties, or will it more closely resemble a dictatorship where you give me breadcrumbs while holding all the cards? Because I gotta tell you, that doesn't sound like something I care to agree to."

"I can assure you that..."

"Just stop right there " Tony said, holding up his hand to cut the other man off. "I'm not interested in getting assurances from a guy who broke the Accords and then gave shelter to a wanted criminal. That's not someone I feel comfortable getting assurances from."

"I have no idea what you're talking about Dr. Stark."

"Cut the act." Tony growled, dropping his voice to a whisper. "You were there, in Siberia. I saw you. Now you can bullshit Ross till the cows come gone, but we both know there's no way in hell you left that bunker without Barnes. You have him, in Wakanda. And if he didn't bring it up the moment he got to your country, you've already put him on ice. Now, I don't know what your play is here, but I am beyond done playing the fool for anyone. Least of all someone who thumbs their nose at the rest of the world now that you got what you wanted."

"It's not what you think." T'Challa mumbled, his posture tense.

"No? I think it's exactly what I think. And since when do you care what I think?" Tony snarled. "You know what? I'm not doing this now. We're done here."

"Dr. Stark..."

Tony glanced up at Matt as they passed him in the hallway, Jessica close behind. Matt's could tell instantly that the talk with the King hadn't gone well and excused himself from his conversation to follow Tony and Jess to the waiting car outside. 

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"I don't get it." Tony repeated for the third time.

He and Matt and Jessica were on Tony's private plane, headed back to New York having left Switzerland an hour ago. He'd spoken to T'Challa with Jones at his side, while Matt had gone to speak with some of the Accords representatives before they headed home.

Tony had stood there, listening to the Wakandan King's words with a mix of suspicion and disbelief until he finally lost his temper and left him standing in the hallway, calling his name.

"Which part?" Jessica asked, sipping from the bottle of scotch she'd brought with her.

"All of it." Tony replied. "Obviously."

"He offered you his help. What's wrong with that?" Jones demanded, taking a long pull from the bottle. "I know you like doing things yourself Stark, but why is this bothering you so much?"

"Because he doesn't like me, like, at all. He made that damn clear when we met in Germany. That he didn't like me, didn't trust me and the only reason he fought at my side was because I was helping him bring in Barnes."

"Why didn't he trust you?"

"Why doesn't anyone trust me Jones?" Tony retorted. "You were one of them, you tell me."

"This isn't about me."

"Then don't ask stupid questions."

"Fine." Jessica snapped. "Was it your tech or your brains?"

Tony chuckled, letting the tension drain out of him. "Probably both. He seemed pretty convinced I was going to get my hands on his tech and reverse engineer it. That is, when his scary bodyguards weren't sneering at how medieval my tech was compared to theirs."

"They made fun of your toys?"

"Pretty much. To which I very maturely refrained from pointing out that their tech wouldn't be any more advanced than mine if not for their unlimited supply of vibranium."

"That's why their stuff is more advanced?" Matt asked, taking a seat near Tony.

"Yeah, of course. Toughest, yet most durable and versatile material there is on the planet. Until King T'Chaka revealed Wakanda to the world, I had no idea there was a whole mine of the stuff. I mean, I knew someone had it somewhere after Ultron, but Capsicles' shield was supposed to be all that existed on earth and once it was made, no one knew how to unmake it. Only my dad ever worked with the stuff and it wasn't like I could ask him about it after the old man came out of the ice."

"So he doesn't like you, doesn't trust you and yet he's offering his help? Just like that?" Matt clarified. "I get why that would be unsettling. I sure as hell find it unsettling."
Jessica sighed, long and loud, her eyes boring holes in Tony's head. "Well since no one else is saying it, the obvious question is why the change of heart?"

Tony grunted. He'd come to the conclusion just after they'd boarded but could think of no way to share it without revealing everything about Siberia. Which he totally did not want to think about, much less discuss in a narrow jet cabin, thousands of miles above the ground.

"Tony?" Matt said, nudging his leg gently.

"Mmm." He grunted.

"You thought of something." Jessica drawled.

"Doesn't mean I want to talk about it."

"You brought it up. And now that you have I want to know what you think happened." Jessica shot back.

"Not what." Tony sighed "Who."

"You've lost me." Matt sighed.

"There's a wizard." Tony began.

"You mean Doctor Strange." Jessica interrupted. "Yeah, I met him remember? What about him?"

"He said something to me recently about how people shouldn't be allowed to get away with things."

"I'm guessing he believes T'Challa got away with something and you think the good Doctor threatened him." Jessica concluded.

"Yeah."

"That's it?" Matt pressed. "Just yeah? If it's true, doesn't it bother you?"

"Why would it bother me?" Tony asked. "I might not have agreed with him at first, but... he was right. The King is trying to play everything from a neutral stance, but I know Barnes is in Wakanda. And if Barnes is there, then so is Cap and the rest of them. None of that is fair to me or anyone involved in the Accords when it was his own damn father who started it all. Which escalated in Budapest when he tried to kill Barnes himself. Everything that came after his father died is his fault. Everything I've had to make nice with the Council over is his doing, yet he's done nothing to help me. So yeah, if Stephen did have a hand in this, I'm fine with it."

"Fine with it huh." Jones smirked. "I might not know you well Stark, but there's more to it than that. You don't let anyone fight your battles."

"Not true, I let Pepper do it all the time. But not things like this, no." Tony agreed. "But I'm tired of doing the hero thing alone and giving my best and still getting blamed for everything that goes wrong."

"Okay this sounds like feelings and I'm nowhere near drunk enough for that." Jones huffed, getting
to her feet to move to the front of the cabin where lounge beds were set up. "I'm gonna finish this bottle and take a nap. You two do... well, whatever it is you do."

Matt smiled as she walked past him, both men sat comfortably in the silence left behind with her leaving. "She doesn't mean that you know."

Tony laughed. "Yes she does."

Matt chuckled. "Okay, yes she does. But really, you're okay with what Stephen might have done?"

Tony shrugged. "I wasn't kidding about being tired of it all Matt, so yeah, I'm fine with it. I'll need to talk to him, but I'm good. Besides, it's not much different from what you and Pepper did for me with Ultron."

"It's very different if Stephen threatened him."

Tony tutted under his breath. "Come on Murdock. You saw T'Challa. Would anything less than a threat have worked? He's the sovereign ruler of an advanced, secretive society. I doubt he can even fathom what it's like to not be above everyone else. There's no way he would have willingly offered his help to anyone, let alone me."

"Alright." Matt nodded. "I hear you, but I would like to ask you something." At Tony's nod, he continued. "Is there anything going on between the two of you?"

"What?! You mean Stephen?"

Matt nodded.

"Uh, noo." Tony replied, hesitating. "Why would you ask me that? He helped me with a few things, uh... magic related things. That's all."

"So there's nothing then?"

"We're friends Matt. That's all. Stephen was pretty upset about the whole Wanda thing and as the Sorcerer Supreme, he took it very personally that someone with magic attacked a civilian. It led to some other unpleasant discoveries about some rocks and well... that's where we're at."

"Rocks?" Matt repeated, a frown creasing his brow. "What rocks? And who's Wanda?"

"Uh..." Tony hesitated, kicking himself for the slip. He shouldn't have mentioned the rocks, or Wanda for that matter. He was just now realizing how many conversations, personal conversations he'd actually had with Strange. None of which he'd had with anyone else, which meant it was unlikely anyone but Strange and the rogues knew what Wanda had done. "The Scarlet Witch and the rocks are just... well they aren't really important right now."

"Seems they might be important to Strange and you're forgetting I can hear your heartbeat." Matt replied softly.

"Ugh." Tony groaned. "I really don't want to talk about this. You know she attacked the Avengers but... she left a little bit more than that with me and Stephen fixed it. She blames me for her parent's deaths and that's all I have to say about that right now. The stones are just something Stephen wanted to learn more about, but so far he hasn't found much."
"I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable Tony. I was just concerned when your pulse accelerated and I just thought..." Matt shook his head. "Never mind, it's none of my business. I was just hoping you might have found a friend. It'd be nice if you had a few more."

Tony blinked, then smiled. "I appreciate that but I really don't know what Stephen and I are. Do I like having him around? Sure. Are we friends? Maybe, but I doubt he's interested in much more than tracking down Wanda and containing her. He's pretty serious about that. And with her and the rest of them in the wind, I'm the only lead he's got in finding out where she is. After that, who knows? Maybe he'll stick around, but his job seems pretty intense so it doesn't seem likely. Not only that but we didn't exactly hit it off and I seriously doubt he wants anything more from someone like me than a working relationship."

"But what do you want Tony? Do you want him around?"

"Well yeah, Matt. Who wouldn't want a sexy, magical Doctor hanging around? But I'm not going to push anything now, there's..." Tony paused, hesitating again but he knew he needed more people to be aware, so... "Look. There's something big coming, something really bad and until then, I don't have time for much else. The thing that's coming? I know we're not ready, but I'm doing as much as I can to get some of us ready. Okay?"

Matt nodded. "Got it. I didn't mean to pry. Anyway, we should grab some sleep while we can, jet lag can be a bitch."

"True." Tony smiled. "And I think I will get some shut eye. Thanks for the talk Matt, it was... enlightening."

"Anytime."
Tony was exhausted by the time he returned to his home at the compound. So tired that he knew it was closer to over-tired which meant he wouldn't be getting to sleep anytime soon.

With that in mind, he took a shower, changed and wandered out of his bedroom to look out over the grounds lost in thought. The meeting in Europe had gone a lot more smoothly than he'd expected and as such, he was back in New York sooner than anticipated. Jet lag had yet to catch up to him and despite his tiredness it was only two p.m., so therefore way too early for bed.

There wasn't much to do in his shiny new house, so he headed over to the compound to see if Vision or Rhodey were around. Normally he'd be headed to his workshop, but the meeting in Geneva and his conversation with T'Challa and then Matt had his thoughts whirling to places he was in no mood to follow.

He found Vision in the kitchen, his attention riveted to a cookbook laying flat on the kitchen island, while he stirred a pot on the stove with the other. His eyes flicked to Tony as he entered, his face lighting up at the sight of his creator.

"Ah, Mr. Stark. You're back from Europe already?"

Tony nodded. "Yeah. What are you doing?"

"I am attempting to prepare a food dish that I've noticed is rather popular in this part of the country."

"Oh?" Tony replied, sliding into a bar stool to watch. "What is it?"

"Spaghetti with meat sauce sir."

"Ah" Tony nodded. "Italian."

Vision looked up at him, a startled expression in his face. "I beg your pardon. Italian? I thought this was a North American dish."

"Well it is and not. Don't worry about it Viz. There are different dishes related to different countries which aren't exactly native to any specific country but which people associate with anyway."

"Ah." Vision nodded, though he didn't seem relieved. "Another strange human habit to which it appears involves no logic."

"True." Tony chuckled. "Can I ask why you're using a book? Can't you just, I dunno, have it in your head?"

"I am still trying to learn how to be me while surrounded by humans. I believed it would be a good exercise in attempting to fit in, be a little more acceptable than to flaunt my... otherness."

"So you're trying to appear more approachable."
"Yes, exactly."

"Have you been able to test that yet?"

"Not really, no." Vision replied, pulling out a second pot and filling it with water, before setting it on the stove to heat. "Though a young man was here earlier and did not react in the manner he did when we first met."

"Young man?" Tony echoed. "What young man? Who was it? Where'd he go?"

"It believe it was Peter Parker. Happy Hogan took him to see Colonel Rhodes an hour ago. As far as I'm aware he's still on the premises."

"Peter's here? Why? And why didn't you tell me right away?" Tony demanded, getting to his feet.

"I was unaware his visit was important. Also, I am well aware how busy you've been and that you've just returned from a rather stressful trip abroad."

"Besides, Colonel Rhodes is handling it and Mr. Parker gave no indication he needed to see you."

"Uh... okay." Tony frowned. "But in future, could you tell me I have visitors first so I can decide if it's urgent or not?"

"Of course." Vision nodded. "If you're heading there now, could you let Colonel Rhodes know that the spaghetti will be ready shortly?"

"Uh, sure. No problem."

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Despite the fact that he'd been insanely busy, distracted and otherwise indisposed for some time, Tony berated himself the entire walk down the hall. He'd forgotten about the kid, forgotten the last time they'd spoken and how he'd behaved so like his father it made him feel physically ill.

What had happened to bring Peter here? It couldn't have been for him since he'd made it painfully clear he wanted nothing to do with the kid, his disappointment rolling off him in waves like a physical thing when he'd left him that day in the park. Which, to Tony's guilt obsessed mind meant Peter must have gotten hurt somehow and it was all his fault for taking away the suit.

By the time he reached Rhodey's office, his heart rate had accelerated and he could feel sweat forming on his forehead. "Boss? Are you alright?" FRIDAY asked in his ear.

"I'm fine baby girl." He replied, but his voice sounded breathless as he pushed the door to Rhodes' office open.

"You don't sound fine boss and your pulse is erratic."

Rhodey looked up as Tony burst into the room, the frown he'd had in place changing into concern the moment his eyes landed on his friend's appearance. "Tony? What are you doing here? I thought you were still on your way back from Europe."

"The kid..." Tony stammered, frowning at how weak he sounded. "Peter, what happened? What are you doing here?"
"Mr. Stark." Peter said, a flash of startled concern in his eyes. "Are... are you alright? You don't look so good."

"I'm fine... I'm just..." Tony protested and yet he could feel his knees starting to buckle as a fine sheen of sweat broke out on his forehead.

In seconds Peter was on his feet, guiding him into a chair and done so fast he hadn't seen the kid move. "What's happening?" He heard Peter ask. "What's wrong with Mr. Stark?"

"Don't worry Peter." Tony heard Rhodey say. "I've got this. Why don't you go see if Vision needs help in the kitchen?"

Tony didn't hear what happened after that for he blinked to find Rhodey crouched before him, one hand on his knee keeping him grounded, while the other held a phone to his ear. "If you wouldn't mind? Yes. Thank you Doctor. My office, main floor."

"What...?" Tony began, becoming more agitated by his inability to focus. "Who was that? What's happening Rhodey bear?"

"I think you might be having a heart attack Tones, but I'm not a Doctor so I called one."

Tony scrunched up his face to scowl at him. "Don't need a Doctor Platypus. It's just a panic attack."

Rhodey frowned but said nothing, his eyes drifting up to stare over his shoulder. Tony tensed when he heard the newcomer speak, wanting to protest vehemently against what was happening, but he couldn't catch his breath enough to say so.

Stephen drifted into his line of sight, smoothly replacing Rhodey, though Strange stared at him with an intensity that would have made him squirm if not for his current state.

"Tony?"

"That's my name Doc." He wheezed, trying for a smile but knowing it probably looked more like a grimace.

"This is not a panic attack." He said, his voice firm. "But I'm also fairly certain it's not a heart attack either. Can you calm yourself enough to slow your breathing? Don't think too hard about it, just match your breaths with mine."

Despite feeling so utterly helpless, Tony listened to the other man's calm instructions and soon was doing exactly that. His heart rate gradually slowed enough that it no longer felt as though it was about to leap out of his chest. In minutes, he was breathing normally again, but the veiled look of concern Strange was giving him was making him very uncomfortable. Then the shock of what had just happened hit him and he shivered violently.

Stephen's eyes pinched with worry and he looked up behind Tony to address Rhodey. "Mr. Rhodes, would you mind getting Tony a blanket? I think he's going to need it."

"Sure " Rhodey nodded, his face holding just as much concern as Stephen's. "Be right back."

Stephen nodded and turned his attention back to his unwilling patient who was now watching him
with a mix of suspicion and resentment. He sighed under his breath, knowing how irritated Tony was going to be once he fully recovered, but ignored the warning he was getting. Whether he wanted to admit it to himself or not, the man before him had become more than a patient, more than an acquaintance and he wasn't about to leave on the off chance Tony would hold it against him if he stayed.

"If it wasn't..." Tony paused, still shaken by what had happened. "What you said... then what was it?"

"I think it was an angina attack, though you would need to go to a hospital to be certain."

"No hospital." Tony growled as Rhody returned and draped a blanket over his shoulders, Tony's hand immediately clutched at it to draw it up under his chin. He was still not yet himself, but Stephen could tell the billionaire's discomfort at being seen like this was simmering under the surface. It wouldn't be long before he recovered fully and began lashing out.

"Isn't that the same thing?"

"Not exactly." Stephen said, deliberately vague as he conjured two white pills and a glass of water into his hand. "Take these. It will help."

Still scowling, Tony did as he asked, the sounds he made blocking the stunned gasp from Rhodes who was watching the scene before him dumbfounded. Stephen frowned at him, seeking an explanation but the Colonel only gave a sharp shake of his head in warning and said nothing. It was... odd and Stephen knew he'd be asking about it later but for now, his only concern was Tony.

"Are you feeling better?" He asked.

"As opposed to what?" Tony demanded under his breath, sitting up straighter in his chair. Then more loudly, he continued as though he hadn't said anything. "Yeah Doc, I'm feeling better. Thanks."

"Can you tell me what happened that might have caused this?" Stephen continued, looking between Tony and the Colonel.

Rhodes shrugged, his eyes never leaving Tony's now shivering form. "Not sure Stephen. I was talking to Peter when Tony came in looking pale."

Tony shrugged under the weight of the two men's stares. "My imagination got away from me is all. It's not important."

It was on the tip of his tongue to vehemently disagree with that statement, but he could feel Rhodes' silent warning in the man's stiff posture so he let it slide. "Very well." He said instead, getting to his feet. "I believe you'll be fine for now. Try to get some rest and some real food in you. Don't do anything strenuous for at least twelve hours."

Tony said nothing and Stephen was on the verge of repeating himself when Rhodes spoke up on Tony's behalf.

"Thanks Doc." Rhody said, detaching himself from the wall to shake Stephen's hand. "I appreciate that you were able to come on such short notice."
"All in a day's work." Stephen shrugged, giving him a small smile. "But I should be getting back. Make sure he rests."

"I will Stephen and thank you."

"Of course." Stephen nodded, a pang of disappointment hitting him when Tony made no move to stop him. "Anytime."
"What was that about?" Wong demanded when Stephen portaled back to the Sanctuary.

Shrugging his shoulders in irritation, the Cloak lifted off him and floated up the stairs to do who knew what. "You are starting to sound like my keeper Wong." Stephen admonished, turning to glare at the other man.

"I wouldn't have to if you told me what was going on."

"Colonel Rhodes called because he thought Tony was having a heart attack." Stephen huffed. "He wasn't. It was mild angina and I took care of it."

Wong shook his head. "You're supposed to be guarding the Sanctum, not playing nursemaid to a billionaire Stephen."

"Am I supposed to ignore when someone calls me with an emergency? I wasn't busy Wong and I was needed."

"What about next time?" Wong pressed.

"I doubt there will be a next time." Stephen replied, feeling the fight leave him. "Tony Stark is a proud man. I've now seen him at some of his lowest times. He won't be eager to see me again after today, at least not for a while."

"So you didn't get a chance to tell him how you feel." Wong sighed.

"There's nothing to tell Wong, so please drop that nonsense."

Wong scowled at him and gave a sharp shake of his head. "That's good then, because you won't be around much to change it anyway."

"What are you talking about?"

"Mordo. We have another lead. This time, he left a witness."

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Wanda woke up their last night in Wakanda, looking haunted and pale but no longer fighting ghosts in her sleep. Steve was more than relieved to see the young girl awake again, despite her haggard appearance.

"Wanda, hey... you feeling better? We've got some food here if you're hungry and there's a selection of drinks. Can I get you anything?" He asked as she slid silently into a chair.

"Stark's head on a platter." She growled, her voice filled with gravel from being unconscious for so long.

"I'm sorry... what?" Steve said, his mind stumbling over her words.
"Nothing." She mumbled, dragging her chair closer to the table and the plate of food before her. "Juice would be nice."

"I'll get it." Sam said, giving Steve a concerned look that the other man ignored. He returned a moment later with a large glass of orange juice and set it before Wanda as he returned to his seat.

Wanda grunted at Sam in thanks but didn't stop eating. Sharing a look with Steve again, he willed the soldier to speak, but Wanda cut him off before he said a word.

"How long was I out?" She asked, not looking up from her plate.

"Uh... about two days." Steve said, hesitating. He found her unnatural calm and stiff posture unsettling even as he reasoned it was only to be expected given her state the past several days.

"That's all?" She snorted, reaching for the juice glass.

"Can you... do you know what happened? You were fine one minute and then you were covered in red mist and you couldn't wake up. It seemed like you were fighting something in your sleep like... like a night terror."

"Night terror." Wanda smirked, though her voice held next to no inflection. "That's one way of putting it. Where's Clint?"

Sam shared a look with Steve, one that was filled with growing concern over Wanda's behaviour.

"He went home." Steve answered, watching her reaction.

"Always knew he was a coward." Wanda sneered, swallowing the last of the food from her plate. "So, when do we leave?"

"Uh, tomorrow."

"Good." She nodded, pushing away from the table and lifting her head to meet Steve's confused look. "It'll be nice to be out of here. Sitting around all day doing nothing was really starting to get to me." She added, giving Steve her most innocent smile.

"Are you sure you're alright?" Steve pressed, concern filling his eyes. "You were pretty out of it for the past couple days."

Wanda looked down as though thinking hard, but what she was really doing was avoiding his gaze. She was only conscious now because she'd fought the wave of terror and panic that she'd been drowning in the moment the spell hit her. She knew it was a spell, knew it was somehow connected to Stark and her own magic, but she had no idea what it was or how it had found her. Right now it was taking all her willpower not to give in to the terror and panic that hovered behind her eyes, whispering to her that these people were not her friends. She didn't want Steve or anyone to see the manic glint in her eye, or the boiling hatred she now has for Stark - it had been the only weapon that had worked to bring her out of the prison her mind had become. By focusing all her energy into her feelings for Stark, she'd broken free of the spell, but it was impossible to mask that when Steve was talking to her directly.

"It was rough." Wanda answered, choosing half truth over outright lie since she couldn't be certain she could do that now. "But I think I'll be fine after I eat and get some sleep."
"Do you know what it was?" Sam asked, his eyes giving away nothing of what he was thinking.

Wanda let out a shuddery sigh to amplify and overall, exaggerate the trauma she'd experienced. "I'm not sure..." She said, her rage against Stark rising. "I think it was a spell, but all I could see was red and gold."

"Red and gold?" Steve echoed, his brow furrowing. "You don't mean... like the Iron Man colours?"

Wanda let out a soft hiccup of distress, keeping her eyes downcast. "I don't know Steve... but it's no secret he doesn't like me... he did keep me from leaving the compound."

"Yeah but..." Steve began. "Tony's not like that. He wouldn't hurt you like that..."

"Wouldn't he?" She challenged, lifting her watery eyes to his. "After what I did?"

Steve frowned harder, unable to maintain eye contact. "Well, even if he wanted to, he's no sorcerer."

"He's smart though." Wanda continued, seeing the doubt in Steve's eyes. "He might've found a way..."

"She has a point Steve." Sam said, meeting Steve's eyes.

"Well, point or not, it seems to be over now." Steve sighed, the implications of Wanda's words turning over in his mind. "Let's get some sleep. We can talk about this again once we get out of Wakanda."

"Any idea where we can go?"

"I've got a few ideas." Steve nodded. "But I'd rather not discuss them here."

"Right."

"Wanda? You need me to stay with you till you fall asleep?"

Wanda let a blush warm her cheeks as she met his eyes. "Thank you Steve, but I think I'll be okay."

"Alright." Steve nodded. "See you both in the morning. Things will look better tomorrow, you'll see."
Tony groaned from the couch that Rhodey deposited him on, draping a second blanket over him before fetching him water and a plate of food. He knew the only reason Rhodes hadn't taken him to his home was because he didn't trust him to eat or rest like Stephen had ordered. Peter was nowhere to be seen, so he assumed Rhodye had sent him home, but he was too unsettled by what had happened to ask.

Despite his resistance, he knew he wasn't in any shape to be alone yet but there was no way in hell he was going to tell Rhodye that. He suffered through having his best friend watch him eat the spaghetti he brought him, saying nothing while he washed it down with a glass of water.

"Could you maybe stop staring at me like that?" He huffed. "You're starting to give me a complex."

"We need to talk."

"No we don't."

"Yeah Tony we do." Rhodye sighed. "What happened in Siberia was more serious than you've told anyone but Strange. I saw the video Tony. What I didn't see was the aftermath. What did Doctor Wu say?"

"I told you already Sourpuss." Tony retorted, finishing the water and setting the glass aside.

"No, I made you tell me and you didn't give details. Now talk."

Tony huffed with indignance. He did not want to have this conversation. To be honest, he never wanted to think about it again, never mind talk about it, but he knew Rhodye wouldn't let it go after what he'd just witnessed.

"Look Tony, I know you like to pretend bad shit doesn't happen to you and that if it does, it's somehow deserved or your fault. Whatever you haven't told me, I'm on your side."

"Fine." Tony huffed. "Steve almost killed me. If Stephen... well, if FRIDAY hadn't contacted Stephen..." Tony paused.

"Tony..."

"Then I probably wouldn't be sitting here now."

"You're serious?" Rhodye exclaimed. "Oh my god, you are serious." He continued, getting awkwardly to his feet to pace. "I can't believe this. Steve Rogers almost killed you! Which is fucking sick coming from a guy whose motto is 'no one left behind.'"

"Platypus..."

"No Tony. Whatever you're going to say, just... don't. Rogers’ is no hero and I don't care what his excuse is, what he did to you... it's attempted murder."
"Did you and Strange have a private meeting or something? Because I swear he said the same thing to me a couple days ago."

"No Tony, we didn't. But that's another thing, why do you trust him so much? I'm not saying it's a bad thing okay? But... he does magic Tony. When did that stop freaking you out?"

"It..." Tony paused, his thoughts whirling with surprise. He didn't have an answer that explained his instinctual trust of the man, but he also didn't want Rhodey to know that. "I'm can't answer that, but he did rescue me and... made me an amulet to protect me from any magical attack. He also helped with my nightmares and so far, he hasn't given me a reason not to trust him."

"How did he help with your nightmares?"

"That's a bit... complicated." Tony said, hesitating. "Would you believe he took me to another dimension and removed them? Well, not all of them of course, just the ones left behind by the witch."

"Wanda left nightmares in your head?" Rhodey repeated, his hands clenching in anger.

"More like visions."

Rhodey groaned, his face reflecting a conflict of emotions as though he couldn't decide what to react to first. "Visions, nightmares... does it matter? She hurt you Tony, and now you're telling me she's been hurting you for years."

Tony shrugged. "Stephen said it was chaos magic, supposed to be more dangerous than others, plus he said she had no idea what she was doing and had almost no control over the spell she used. But whatever, the visions are gone now. That's all that matters."

"It's not all that matters." Rhodey growled. "But I'll drop it for now. Did Wu say you had to take care of your... chest problem by a certain date?"

"No." Tony sighed. "Just no Iron Man until I do."

"No Iron Man? I'm going to punch Rogers if I see him again." Rhodey seethed, in a tone Tony knew was deadly serious and that it probably wouldn't end with one punch. "Come on, I'll walk you to your room. You heard Stephen, you need rest and unless you call Wu and get his okay not to, that's what you're doing until he says otherwise."

"You're being very bossy." Tony huffed, letting Rhodey help him up.

"And you're too willing to listen to make me believe you're fine." Rhodey said as they reached the transport that would take them directly to Tony's home on the grounds.

"I'm just tired Sourpuss."

"Yeah, you never say that either." Rhodey growled as he walked Tony to his bedroom. "Sleep. We can talk about this again when you're feeling better."

"What happened with the kid?" Tony asked as Rhodey settled him on the edge of his bed.

"He's fine, and it's nothing you need to worry about right now." Rhodey admonished. "We'll talk
about it tomorrow.

"Fine, fine." Tony huffed. "See you tomorrow."

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"You spoke to Rogers."

Nat blinked at the harsh lighting in the room she found herself in, muttering a curse under breath when she recognized Fury's voice.

"You let me go." She huffed, narrowing her eyes at him as she straightened in the chair she was tied to. Impressive, she thought seeing the vibranium enhanced cuffs keeping her trapped at wrist and ankle.

"That's it Agent Romanoff? I'm very disappointed. Seems hanging out with Steve Rogers has turned you soft."

"Steve did not turn me soft."

"Really?" Fury scoffed. "Cuz soft is an understatement to what I've seen. You let yourself become compromised. Agent Hill sent me some interesting videos regarding your... professional and not so professional conduct in the years prior to the incident in Germany. Seems you decided that not only are you above the law and reproach, but you also ditched all your training in favour of following Cap's lead on pretty much everything. Tell me Romanoff, do you enjoy being someone's puppet that much? Or is it that you never really ditched your training from the Red Room?"

Natasha's bottom lip trembled but her eyes remained cold. "You know I would never go back to that life Nick."

"Oh no. No, no, no. You lost the right to call me Nick the second you chose to betray 117 countries in Germany. We, are not friends, not anymore. Now, you are going to cooperate with me, you are going to follow my orders and maybe, just maybe, you can redeem yourself from the total clusterfuck you pulled both in Germany and New York."

"What are you talking about?" Nat growled. "Nothing happened in New York."

"No? Then let me refresh your memory." Fury said, nodding to the one-way glass a second before a recording of Nat's voice filled the room.

"Could you put aside your ego for one goddamn second?"

"Now, I don't know exactly what when down there, but did you really think pissing off your most influential ally was the wisest course of action? The one person who could've stood beside you against anything Ross might have thrown at you? What I just witnessed is your pride shifting the responsibility to Stark because he's an easy target. A man who could have handed you over at any time after Germany, who warned you that T'Challa reported what you did to Ross."

"What do you want from me Fury?" Nat demanded. "I thought I was preventing something worse. I know I screwed up and I can't change what I did."

"I don't think you really understand the gravity of the situation. At all. So as of now, you work and
report directly to me. You're going to track down Rogers and you're going to stick to him like a bad rash. You're going to report everything he does, everything he says and every place he goes. And you're going to do the same with Maximoff. From the reports I read regarding her actions at the airport, she's as off the rails of sanity almost as much as Rogers is, probably more. Now, are you going to cooperate or should I just pick up the phone and tell Ross where to find you?"

"That's it? That's your play Nick? I'm not going to be your snitch and betray Steve."

"Oh really? Then how about we just forget Ross and I'll make a call to some contacts in Washington? Would that work better for you? Besides, you had no trouble at all betraying Tony Stark, your team in Germany, and all the countries who signed the Accords. You didn't even hesitate. What's one man compared with everything you've already done?"

"He was trying to protect Barnes."

"What exactly do you think Stark was trying to do? Bake cookies? He was trying to buy you time, which you already knew, and then you pulled that bullshit at the airport. Tell me Nat, how's it feel to be without friends again? Or is it that you just got so tired of it all, you wanted a little alone time?"

"I have friends Nick."

"If you're referring to Agent Barton, you can forget it. Seems he wised up. A little too late for it to matter, but he signed the Accords and went home." Fury shrugged. "House arrest for two years, but I imagine it's a better deal than what you'll get if Ross finds you and you don't help me."

"Clint signed?" Nat exclaimed.

"He did. So did Scott Lang."

"Fine." She huffed under breath, hating that she only had herself to blame for what had happened. She knew she didn't have a choice, knew Fury wasn't exaggerating anything he'd threatened her with, but most of all she knew he was right. No matter how justified or logical she might've thought her actions were, he was right. Without Fury's help, she was as good as tried and convicted without a trial. "What do you want me to do?"

"Knew you'd see things my way." Fury smiled, turning his attention to a nearby camera. "Agent Hill, get her cleaned up and bring her to my office."

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So my phone died last Saturday which totally screwed up my writing schedule/flow since I use it to write my stories on. (Long story; chronic health things make it so much easier to write on a phone since I can do it anywhere.) Anyway, if any of you own a Samsung, an overheated battery will fry the motherboard & it can't be repaired. Just a friendly fyi. 😊
The Unexpected

The day after his collapse in Rhodey's office, Tony headed straight for his workshop with orders to FRIDAY that if anyone needed him, he was unavailable. He didn't want anyone bothering him today. Too many things had happened and he was neither in the mood nor in the best state of mind to deal with anyone else's bullshit.

Afterdowning two cups of coffee and making half a dozen changes to his ongoing nanite housing and getting FRIDAY to begin another prototype build, he called Jessica.

"Jones."

"What?"

"About that job I mentioned."

"Yeah? Was wondering when you'd get around to calling me. What do you need?"

"Just need a background and update on a kid I met a few years ago."

"A kid?" Jones repeated. "You planning something nefarious Stark?"

"Christ Jones, is there ever a time you aren't thinking bad things about me?"

"Sure. But a kid? You gotta admit that's weird even for you. What's so special about him and why can't you do it?"

"Because my plate's full and you're good at this stuff. You can find things out about people in places I wouldn't know where to even start. Now are you going to help me or not? I got a lot to do today."

"Fine. What do you want to know?"

"His grades, his majors. Specifically science and math. Science projects, if he's done any. What his home situation is like and if he's got any bad habits. Also friends. I want to know if he has any and if he's got a new dad or if his mom's still single."

"So... basically everything. Now tell me why you want it"

"I'm trying to build a new team. The kid helped me out a few years back when the Mandarin thing was happening. He's good with robotics and programming and he's smart if a bit rude. I want to make sure he's got a good foundation in his personal life before I call him."

"This kid helped you?"

"Yeah. He had a potato gun. Worked pretty good for a potato gun though he did trigger me to have two panic attacks, so I'm hoping he's got a few more people skills now than he did then."

"Sounds like a miniature you." Jessica chuckled.
"I was never that rude at his age." Tony retorted.

"Uh huh." Jessica drawked. "What's his name?"

"Harley Keener."

"Hilarious. Fine, I'm on it. I'll call you when I've got the details."

"Boss?" FRIDAY called as Jones ended the call.

"Yeah Fri?"

"Director Y is calling."

"Director Y?" Toby chuckled. "Is that a double entendre FRIDAY?"

"I thought you would enjoy it boss."

"It's perfect. Put him through."

"Stark."

"Director Y."

"What?" Fury sputtered.

"Nothing." Tony laughed. "What do you want Nick? I thought you were all radio silence to infinity or whatever."

"Romanoff spoke to Rogers. He wouldn't tell her anything."

"And?" Tony drawled. "It's not like I care one way or another, so what do you want?"

"I'm assigning her to join Rogers. She'll be tracking him the moment he leaves Wakanda and she'll be making regular reports to me."

"You said he turned her away. Why would he allow that?"

"He won't have a choice Stark."

"Ah yes, your old friend blackmail. Still doesn't explain why you're telling me."

"I thought you'd sleep better at night knowing where he and his friends are in the world, especially Maximoff."

"What, now you care? Why not when it actually mattered?"

"I've always cared Stark, but you know my hands were tied. Never mind that. There was an incident with the witch the Wakandan's weren't comfortable with."

"Right. And the king just gave you that information." Tony drawled, rolling his eyes.
"Actually he did. If I didn't know better I'd think someone got to him. Know anything about that?"

"Nope." Tony replied, his thoughts drifting to Stephen. "Maybe he just wanted to play nice."

"Right. Well whatever the reason he seemed willing to share what he knew."

"Fine. I suppose thanks is in order. Too bad your little organization couldn't have acclimatized Rogers to the 21st century better than you did before it all went to shit."

"I own my mistakes Stark, just like you do. Unfortunately there's few of us out there who practice that same thing. No one could have predicted Rogers would become one of them."

"Uh huh. Well thanks for the heads up Nick. You'll be in touch?"

"If necessary."

***

"FRIDAY?"

"Yes boss?"

"Do you still have that surveillance video that was sent to Murdock's terminal?"

"Yes boss."

"Bring it up. I can't believe I forgot about it but I gotta know if we have a leak or a glitch in the system or if someone hacked it. What happened shouldn't have happened."

"Perhaps not boss. But I do not agree with your decision to hide it. You did not deserve to be blamed for Ultron. Public response has been 87% in your favour following Ms. Potts press conference. 72% are against what has been released to the public regarding Secretary Ross' actions following the Ultron incident."

Tony huffed a sigh as he broke open the file to reveal the originating pathway code the file had been sent from. "It wasn't a priority." Tony muttered to himself as he broke down the code.

"It should have been." FRIDAY admonished as Tony let out a small gasp. "Boss?"

"I... I recognize some of this code baby girl."

"Your heart rate is accelerating boss." FRIDAY replied, a note of concern in her voice. "My readings indicate you are experiencing distress. Should I notify Colonel Rhodes?"

"I... oh my god..." Tony gasped as silent tears tracked down his cheeks, unable to answer FRIDAY's inquiry. It couldn't be, it had been years and yet... it was his code, his protocols he was looking at, there was no denying how familiar, how intimate he knew those lines of code... just... whatever he'd thought he'd find behind the video release, this had most definitely not been it.

"Tones?" Rhodey called from the doorway, making Tony flinch at being caught so openly grief stricken, something Tony had sworn to never let happen again, yet here he was. Clearly FRIDAY had taken his lack of response as permission to alert Rhodey, but this was... this was too much.
"Shit Tony." Rhodey swore as he swept onto the room and gathered him into an awkward embrace. "FRIDAY said you were in distress. What the hell happened? What's wrong? Is it your heart? Come on Tony, talk to me. Tell me what's going on."

Tony merely whimpered, burying his face in the hollow of Rhodey's neck, his sense of loss overwhelming him to the point he felt he was drowning under the weight of it.

"Colonel Rhodes, I believe I can answer that for you. Please direct your attention to the screen on your left."

Rhodes did as the AI asked while Tony continued to tremble in his arms. A short, grainy video played on the screen showing a younger Tony, typing lines of code into a holographic screen while talking non-stop for the surveillance camera. The sound was a bit garbled and broken, but the British accent that answered Tony's inquiry was unmistakable.

"How's that buddy?" Tony's video self asked aloud. "Think it's secure enough?"

"I believe it is more than sufficient sir. Protocols and parameters are practically bulletproof. Should anything happen to your workshop hardware, all questionable activities recorded on the premises will be secured and forwarded as per your instructions."

"Awesome." Video Tony replied. "Now, just cross your fingers that won't ever be necessary."

"If I had fingers I would most certainly cross them sir. Unfortunately, given your rather volatile nature to create and experiment without supervision, I believe it would an an exercise in futility."

"Hey now, this is supposed to help catch genius breakthroughs and terrorist plots, not crucify myself."

"I will endeavour to explain this desire to Ms. Potts the next time you put a hole in the ceiling when you test any and all new armour designs. Sir."

"That was one time!" Video Tony huffed before the sound cut out, vertical lines obscuring the feed until the entire screen was filled with white static and cut off entirely.
Rhodey dry swallowed past the lump in his throat. Hearing that voice after all these years had been devastating. He hadn't thought of the AI since Ultron and Vision, but the pain in his heart told him how much he'd missed him. If that was what he was feeling, then he knew Tony had just had his heart ripped from him for a third time over the loss of the only true father figure he'd ever known. His pain would be unimaginable.

"Tony?" He said, his voice rough from trying to keep his emotions in check. "That was JARVIS right? I wasn't imagining it?"

Tony drew in a shaky breath and pulled out of Rhodey's embrace, ducking his head to hide his red-rimmed eyes. "Yeah." He replied, a hand shakily swiping at the dampness on his cheeks. "Yeah Rhodey-bear, it was."

"How are you doing?" Rhodey asked softly while Tony shifted back into his chair.

Silent tears still coursed down his cheeks, his eyes trained on his hands which were clenched loosely in his lap. "Not good." Tony whispered, his voice cracking. "God, of all the things that could have caused that leak, it never occurred to me that it might have been JARVIS."

"That's what that was?"

Tony nodded miserably. "Yeah. I wanted to know if I had a security leak. I forgot about the failsafe protocol. I wrote and activated it right after Loki trashed the Tower. The damages to the building and surrounding area were a bitch to pay for when I had no proof that a crazy Asgardian was responsible. JARVIS must have hidden it in a protocol of his own, one that would only activate if the mainframe went down. Which it never did, not even when Ultron murdered him. It only happened because we moved it all to the compound, activating the release of the footage."

"So JARVIS hid it in the Tower somehow?"

"Yeah." Tony nodded. "I don't know how but he must have set the protocol trigger to the mainframe going silent. Since the building never lost power when... well Ultron happened, it's been in the system this whole time."

Rhodey looked thoughtful a moment while Tony flicked the monitor off and ran his hands over his face. "You know, we never talked about it and I blame myself for that, but... I'm sorry about JARVIS and... I miss him. I know what he meant to you and how much this must've hurt to see. You lost a friend that day Tones and it didn't really hit me until I saw that video."

Tony nodded, a bitter laugh escaping him. "Yeah, Vision is definitely no JARVIS."

"How is it? With you and Vision?"

"You know how I feel about technological advances, and I'd never try to stop progress on that front... but I'd give anything to have JARVIS back. Viz is... well he's more Mind Stone than anything else and we'll never be close. I'm not sure he even has the capacity for it... unless it's with
Wanda." He finished with a scowl.

"Wanda?" Rhodey frowned. "Why? Has he said anything since... you know..?"

"Since Germany? No." Tony shook his head. "But I've caught him a few times staring out a window and I could swear he's trying to connect with her through the Mind Stone. I don't think he's going to stick around."

"Are you serious?" Rhodey gaped. "Even though she put him in the ground thousands of feet down?"

Tony shrugged. "He's not like us Rhodey bear, he's not like anything we know. He's alone and his only connection to anyone on earth is her through the Mind Stone."

"That's not reassuring."

"No, it isn't." Tony sighed.

"So... I hate to ask, but... is JARVIS really gone?"

"Maybe?"

"What do you mean, maybe?"

"I could bring him back, but... it felt like it would be insulting to Vision, you know? Like I didn't like him or something."

"I get that." Rhodey nodded. "But... what about you Tones? I know what JARVIS meant to you..."

"I know, I know, but... I've got FRIDAY now and..."

"Boss? I apologize for interrupting but I just want you to know that if you want JARVIS back, I would be okay with that."

"Thanks FRIDAY... but, can I ask why? You aren't saying that because of me are you?"

"No boss. I believe I would enjoy interacting with my big brother... And sometimes I do not feel adequate to some of the situations you encounter. It would be nice to have someone else to help me learn. But I will be fine whatever you decide."

"Okay," Rhodey drawled. "So that just happened."

"Right, let's change the subject. Why was Peter here yesterday?"

"Happy hasn't called?" Rhodey hesitated.

"No. Why?"

"Okay well, just... keep in mind I'm just a messenger here."

"Rhodey..."
Rhodes sighed and ran a hand over his eyes. "You know that group he was following, the one involving the ferry?"

Tony narrowed his eyes, his shoulders tensing. "How could I forget?"

"Uh, well it turns out the Vulture was the dad of Peter's homecoming date. He tried to rob the Stark jet..."

"Why the hell wasn't I told about this?" Tony swore. "FRIDAY?"

"Sorry boss. You were... stressed at the time and you haven't slept much in the past several days. And Peter wasn't hurt."

"I'm hearing things you aren't telling me Fri." Tony growled, glaring into the nearest visual port. "And I don't need you managing me."

"I apologize. It won't happen again."

"Tones, I get why you're upset..."

"Do you Rhodey? Do you really?"

"Yeah, I do and you need to cut FRIDAY some slack. She worries about you... I worry about you. No one was hurt other than the bad guys, the girlfriend's dad was arrested and SI and the Department of Damage Control is on clean up and recovery of the tech they stole. It's being handled Tony. And I told the kid you'd call him when you were feeling better."

"What'd you tell him about yesterday?" Tony frowns, still irritated he'd been out of the loop for something so important.

"The truth." Rhodey replied. "Or close enough."

"You what?! Rhodey bear, you know I love you like a brother, but that is so very not cool with me."

"Relax Tones. I just told him you've been working too hard, probably not eating and dealing with government suits and you fainted cuz you were over-tired."

"Hmpf. Fine. Still not cool, but fine, whatever."

"What else is going on with you?" Rhodey asked, breaking the silence, preventing him from chewing him out some more.

"What do you mean?" Tony replied, sounding guilty.

"Tones, I'm too tired to deal with your crap today, so just spit it out."

"Fine." Tony sighed loudly bringing up a new holographic screen. "FRIDAY, show Sourpuss the specs we've been working on."

"Right away boss."
Rhodey is silent for several minutes while he stared at the screen, a sigh filled with anger, frustration and worry escaping him. His eyes are full of concern when he meets Tony's again, though Tony can tell it's a struggle for his best friend to rein in his anger. "I can't believe this. You're putting a shroud back in your chest because of Rogers."

"I am Iron Man honey bear." Tony replied softly.

"I swear if he wasn't a war hero I'd kill him." Rhodey hissed. "Alright. What else?"

"I'm working on organizing a New Avengers group. I haven't asked Matt or Jessica yet, but I'm also looking into recruiting a kid I met during that mess with Killian."


"T'Challa offered me his help." Tony shrugged. "I told him where to shove it."

"I have no idea what to do with that."

"Pretty sure I know who made him want to play nice, but he left me in Siberia same as Rogers did. Can't say it bothers me if he was threatened on my behalf."

"Right. So just like any other Tuesday then." Rhodey sighed, getting awkwardly off his feet. "I've got some paperwork to catch up on, will you be okay?"

"I'll be fine, or close enough." Tony shrugged. "Thanks for being here Platypus."

"I can't say it's a picnic being your friend Tones, but it's never dull around you and I wouldn't trade it for anything."

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A/N: Endgame spoiler warning for comment section. Watched a review and just... no. So, don’t read the comments if you want to avoid spoilers. Also, I might need a few days before I can get back to my story.
"What the devil is wrong with you now Strange?" Wong demanded as Stephen continued to pace the floor of the Sanctum's foyer.

"Nothing's wrong." Stephen scowled as though pacing the floor was a perfectly normal behaviour for him. "I'm just... bothered by something that happened yesterday."

"You mean something like threatening a country's monarch? Using the mystic arts for personal vendettas? Practicing medicine outside a hospital? Going behind Stark's back to write a wrong you weren't asked to meddle in?"

"It's none of those things." Stephen replied, sounding exasperated. "And all of that was necessary and it doesn't bother me in the least. No, it was something Colonel Rhodes did. It's... perplexing."

"Then perhaps you should go talk to the man and stop wearing a hole in the damn carpet!" Wong huffed, turning and marching down the hall muttering under his breath about arrogant, insufferable former doctors.

Stephen stopped his pacing to stare at Wong's retreating form, his mind going completely blank at the very loud and completely uncalled for duh, that reverberated in his mind the moment Wong's words sank in. Muttering his own expletives regarding his appalling lack of reason and apparent incapacity to think rationally, he conjured a portal to the grounds of the compound with a huff of irritation.

He shook himself in an attempt to rid his posture of the tension and frustration he knew he was projecting and made his way up the grounds to the front door. He stopped in his tracks then, suddenly struck with an inability to rationalize what he was even doing there. Talk to the Colonel? About what exactly? A look? It sounded ridiculous. It would be even more so once he said it aloud, yet he'd already tried several times to brush it off and here he was, hours later, still thinking about it.

"Doctor Strange?" FRIDAY called, startling him out of his mental fog.

"FRIDAY." Stephen sighed. "You're probably wondering what I'm doing."

"Not really." The AI sighed, which, Stephen thought was quite impressive and might've commented on it if his mind wasn't already preoccupied with 'the look.' "Boss does the same thing when struck with a perplexing situation. He is in the workshop at the moment if you wish to see him."

"Actually, I was hoping to talk to Colonel Rhodes. Is he here?"

"Yes Doctor. He's on his way back to his office now."

"Right." Stephen nodded, making no move to enter the building.

After several more minutes of indecision, FRIDAY spoke again. "Perhaps I can help you Doctor."

"No." Stephen shook his head as he straightened his shoulders and stepped over the threshold. "It's
fine FRIDAY. I may not be clear on my motive, but I do know why I'm here. Thank you for the offer though."

***

"Mr. Rhodes?"

"Yeah FRIDAY?" Rhodey asked, casting his eyes up to the camera near the ceiling.

"Doctor Strange is here to see you."

"Strange?" Rhodey echoed then shrugged. "Okay. Tell him to come in then."

Rhodey reclined back in his chair, adjusting several times given how awkward it was with the leg braces impeding his natural movement. He managed it a moment before the door opened and the Sorcerer stepped through looking determined but uncomfortable as he took a seat across the desk from him.

"Colonel."

"Doctor."

Stephen let out a sigh that could not be mistaken for anything other than frustration. "Can I offer you anything to drink? Water, tea?"

"No." Stephen said with a shake of his head. "No, I don't think I... on second thought, tea might be just the thing I need."

Rhodey frowned at the other man's unsettled state but made no comment as FRIDAY sent for tea and water to be brought to them. Still frowning, he took his time observing the Sorcerer while they waited.

Strange seemed very unsettled, not at all as put together as he had been on the other two occasions they'd spoken. Something was definitely on the other man's mind, but Rhodey was patient. Whatever it was, he had no doubt Stephen would get around to it eventually. Which, he realised with a start, was not unlike a certain engineer he knew. Interesting, he thought with a quirk of his lips as a young woman entered with a tray of tea, water and a small assortment of pastries.

"So." Rhodey began after they'd helped themselves to the offerings on the tray. "What brings you here today Doctor? Was there something about what happened with Tony yesterday that you didn't want him overhearing?"

Rhodey startled a moment later as his words caused the Doctor to flinch almost imperceptibly while a faint flush made its way up the man's cheeks. His eyes dropped to his hands where they twitched nervously and Rhodey had to wonder if the shaking happened as a result of his past trauma, or if the Sorcerer was truly that uncomfortable being in his office.

"Yes." Stephen managed, though his voice betrayed the stoicism he was going for, coming out harsh and frustrated in that single spoken word.

"Okay." Rhodey drawled, leaning his elbows on his desk. "I assume you came here to ask me something."
"That would be an accurate assumption." Stephen nodded, sounding irritated with himself. "Though I'm finding it hard to say the words and I feel a complete idiot for interrupting your day with my... frivolity, but..." Stephen paused and finally raised his eyes to meet Rhodey's own. "But I need to know what that look you gave me yesterday was about. I've tried to ignore it without success and so... here I am."

"A look?" Rhodey echoed since he can't immediately recall giving Stephen any sort of "look." His thoughts having been preoccupied with worry for Tony's physical and mental health following on the heels of the JARVIS video. It takes another moment of staring at Stephen until it clicks and then he's looking at the man like he's grown another head. The memory of what had prompted the look replaying in his mind's eye and he still can't accept that what he saw actually happened and yet it had. He'd seen it with his own eyes and yet...

"You don't remember?" Stephen asked and the disappointment in the Sorcerer's voice is palpable and almost painful, as though Rhodey has just strangled a baby kitten. Okay, maybe not quite that dramatic, but the look on the other man's face reminds him of a kicked puppy and he can't let that stand.

"I do." Rhodey replies. "It's just... I know it happened, I know because I saw with my own eyes. But even now, I can't believe it."

"That's all well and good. For you." Stephen sneered. "But it doesn't actually answer my question, does it?"

Rhodey blinked, his eyes widening with recognition and just like that, he knows why Tony didn't react yesterday, knows why his best friend is seemingly indifferent to the Sorcerer's magic and completely blind to Stephen and his unconscious attraction to the former neurosurgeon. It's because he is just like Tony.

Snarky, arrogant, accustomed to getting his own way, unaccustomed and uncomfortable asking for help and... Rhodey has to pause in his thoughts a moment before continuing. And... probably hates not knowing something someone else knows, and likewise has an aversion to being corrected, out-witted or admitting any personal faults and likely keeps people at arm's reach when emotionally compromised.

He can't hide the smirk his realization causes while Strange contines to glower at him, his arms crossing over his chest as though preparing for battle. And doesn't that just put the icing on the cake? If Tony were taller and leaner, he could give Strange a run for his money on who was better at looking put out.

"I'm not certain what it is you are finding so amusing Colonel Rhodes." Stephen huffed, getting to his feet. "But I didn't come here for your amusement and I don't appreciate being made fun of. I'll see myself out."

Rhodey struggled to get himself under control, fighting his impulse to burst out laughing as he holds up his hands to stave off Strange's angry retreat. "Wait, Doctor. Please." He adds, hoping that ignoring an apology is not something the Sorcerer shares with Tony. He offers the man an apologetic nod when Stephen returns to his chair, but his eyes remain cold and wary and Rhodey sighed in relief.

"I apologize Doctor. I wasn't laughing at you and I'm sorry if it seemed that way. It just took me a
moment to remember the incident you mentioned. It's been a long 24 hours."

In an instant Stephen's anger is gone, his eyes filling with concern as he leaned forward in his chair. "Why? What happened? Did Tony have another episode?"

"No, no. Nothing like that. He just had a small shock this morning, but he's fine now. And to be clear, it had nothing to do with his heart."

"Oh." Stephen replied, his tension draining from him as quickly as it began. "That's good then."

Rhodey nodded. "It is. But back to your question. Yesterday when you were here, you handed Tony a glass of water and some pills and he took it from you."

"He did. Though I don't see what that has to do with anything." Stephen huffed. "It's not like it was the first I handed him something."

"It is for Tony." Rhodey retorted. "In all my years of being Tony's friend, he has never taken anything from anyone he doesn't know and trust."

Stephen straightened in his chair, his annoyance turning to worry. "Is this a... trigger of some kind?"

"I suppose you could call it that." Rhodey shrugged. "Though Tones has always just referred to it as a "thing" or a "quirk." I don't know all the history behind it, but his father handed him dangerous things when he was very young. Some of them hurt him - burns, minor shocks, cold... someone who had it out for him handed him a bomb once while he was attending a public function. Anyway, it left an impression and unless he trusts the person handing him something implicitly he won't take it from them."

Stephen was silent for several minutes as Rhodey trailed off, sipping at his now lukewarm tea while he waited for the Sorcerer to respond.

"This is... unexpected." Stephen finally said, his eyes gone distant. "Also... if I'm reading this right, completely unprecedented. You're saying Tony somehow trusts me implicitly and you're concerned about it."

"Concerned yes." Rhodey nodded. "But probably not what you're thinking. I... hmm. I'm not sure Tony is aware he's like that with you. Normally he would've discussed something like this with me first, but he didn't. I guess I mostly just wanted to make you're aware of it and make sure you don't intend to... take it for granted."

"I can assure you my intentions are pure. I only want whatever is in Tony's best interests and for him to make those choices for himself."

"Well good. That's good." Rhodey nodded with a smile. "I never doubted that, but I had to ask."

"Completely understandable Colonel. Tony has been through more than enough, more than anyone should ever have to experience in a single lifetime."

"Call me Rhodey."

"Very well, call me Stephen."
"Will do." Rhodey grinned.

"So, what do you suggest I do now?"

"You mean with Tony?" Rhodey asked. "I suppose you could talk to him, though I don't advise putting him on the spot regarding his... trigger. But I think he wanted to speak to you anyway. Something about making threats to someone?"

"By the Vishanti." Stephen cursed. "He told you about that?"

"He suspected." Rhodey grinned. "But you just confirmed it for me."

"Damn." Stephen shook his head. "You're good."

"Thank you."

"Right." Stephen nodded, getting to his feet. "Well I should be going. Thank you for the tea and the talk. I appreciate you taking the time to speak with me."

"Anything for the man who saved my best friend's life Doc." Rhodey smiled, shaking his hand as he walked him to the door. "Tony's in his workshop if you wanted to talk to him."

"I think I might. Thank you again Mr. Rhodes."

"That's Rhodey to you Stephen."

"Of course." Strange nodded with a smile as the door closed behind him.
A/N: This chapter fought me on every word and Tony and Stephen kept digging in their heels at every turn. But it's finally done and I hope it delivers.

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After Rhodey left, Tony spent some time going over the failsafe protocols. Once he was satisfied he'd uncovered everything JARVIS had done to protect himself, he set FRIDAY to scan every worldwide database his first AI might have hid himself in. He was freshening up at his smoothie bar when Stephen knocked at the door to his workshop.

He frowned while he dried his hands on a towel, wondering what might have brought the Sorcerer to see him and hoped it wasn't to insist he go to a hospital for tests. Stephen entered, looking everywhere but at him and Tony tensed minutely while his curiosity skyrocketed.

"Doc." Tony nodded, motioning for Strange to join him at the bar. "I didn't expect you see you today. Can I offer you anything?" He said, setting his coffee to brew.

"No thank you." Stephen replied, settling into a chair. "I just had tea with Colonel Rhodes."

"You had tea with Rhodey?" Tony echoed. "Really? Why?"

"I had something I needed to discuss with him."

Tony groaned and turned away to grab his coffee, muttering under his breath. "Please tell me it wasn't about making me go to a hospital for tests."

"It had nothing to do with that. Though I still think you should see someone about what happened yesterday."

Tony joined him at the counter, his curiosity growing. "I've already seen you, and you're a doctor. But really? You're not just saying that to throw me off are you?"

"I'm not in the habit of going behind other people's backs regarding their health Tony. Especially not those I consider to be friends."

"Friends huh?" Tony hummed thoughtfully. "So why are you here then?"

"I came to apologize." Stephen sighed, his eyes fixed on his hands which were loosely clenched in his lap. "I did something I probably shouldn't have without discussing it with you first. I'm sorry."

"If you're referring to T'Challa, you don't need to apologize." Tony replied. "There was no way I was ever going to be able to confront him without causing an international incident despite how much I really wanted to."

"You... you knew?"

Tony shrugged. "Educated guess. You were pretty vocal about his conduct in Siberia and I can't think of anyone who could've reached him before I saw him in Geneva."
"I'm not sure what to say to that." Stephen replied. "I was expecting you to at least be a little angry."

Tony looked up, catching and holding Stephen's gaze as he spoke. "No one has ever done anything like that for me before Stephen. Not ever. For any reason."

Stephen pursed his lips and a crease formed between his brows. If Tony was feeling romantic, he'd say Stephen couldn't decide whether to be angry or shocked by his revelation. "That... " Stephen hesitated. "I'm sorry. I can't imagine what that's been like."

"Well," Tony drawled, his gaze dropping to his coffee. "It hasn't been a picnic."

"I hate to be dull, but are you truly fine with what I did?"

Tony lifted his eyes to meet Stephen's blue ones, which were once more filled with concern.

"On one condition Doc." He smirked.

"What?" Stephen asked, narrowing his eyes.

"Tell me what you did to him."

It took a moment for Stephen to process what Tony has just said, but then his lips curled into an amused smirk and he nodded. "I can do that."

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"So you can make someone fall through space for as long as you want?" Tony asked, sounding uneasy.

"I can, yes." He nodded. "It's not exactly a condoned use of my powers but..."

"But I bet it comes in handy when you have to deal with difficult people." Tony finished.

"It does." Stephen agreed with a small smile. "But I would never do it to anyone I consider a friend." He added, not missing the tension in Tony's shoulders.

"Well that's good to know." Tony chuckled nervously. "But don't you have to be careful? What about velocity? Won't the person you put in a freefall portal build up momentum and speed?"

"Uh, no." Stephen replied, a bit of wonder in his voice. Rhodey's earlier words rang in his mind. It was hard to believe the man before him who had a natural fear of magic was asking him scientific questions about it without any sign of distress. "Where I send them is inside what we call a pocket dimension. Normal gravity is not an issue. When I release them, they don't fall from any higher a height than three or four feet. The impact isn't even enough to knock the wind out of them, much less injure them."

"Huh." Tony grunted, downing the last of his coffee. "Pocket dimension. If I didn't trust you Doc, I wouldn't take your word for it. Just promise you'll never do that to me."

"I would never." Stephen replied. "But I promise."

"Okay, good." Tony nodded, feeling a weird twisting in his gut. "I'm feeling kinda hungry Doc. You feel like joining me for dinner? I can order out."

"I wouldn't want to impose. I only came to apologize."
"If I'm asking, it's not an imposition Gandalf."

Stephen snorted. "Only if you stop calling me that."

"No problem." Tony smirked. "I got loads more where that came from."

Stephen sighed loudly. "Of course you do. But fine, I will join you for dinner."

"Great! Follow me Merlin."

***

Dinner was a simple affair. Tony offered to have something fancy brought in, like chicken Parma or sushi, but Stephen waved it off, and asked for pizza instead. He wasn't sure why Stephen had gone for that, especially since he was a doctor, but he wasn't about to complain.

They chatted easily while they ate. Tony seating them at his kitchen island, wanting to keep things as casual as possible, though he was at a loss as to why he was having trouble relaxing with the other man.

He shared meals with people all the time, even with people he didn't particularly like. Yet he couldn't bring himself to let his guard down too much, nervously choosing his words in an effort to not annoy Strange. Which, as soon as he realized what he was doing, had him choking on his soda, mortified by the realization that he might have a small, barely perceptible, but probably more than a passing, "thing" for Doctor Stephen Strange.

"Are you alright?" Stephen asked, his brow furrowing in concern, his entire body language indicating he was ready to help in a heartbeat. Which was a different kind of shock all on its own.

With flushed cheeks and tears in his eyes, Tony nodded, feeling heat rush to his face. "M'fine Doc." He croaked as soon as he could breathe again. "Just went down the wrong way."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure."

"Here." Stephen said, passing him a glass of water. "Drink this, it will help."

Tony took the glass and sipped at it and almost choked again when he realized what he'd just done.

Stephen had... handed him something... and he'd... taken it. Holy hell... Tony's eyes were wide when he set the glass down, staring at Stephen as though seeing him for the first time. Was it a spell? A curse? Tony narrowed his eyes, or did he "heal" him without permission? What in the actual hell was going on?!

"Tony?"

"Mmm."

"Is something wrong?"

"No. Maybe?" Tony blurted, cursing under his breath. He hadn't meant to answer that dammit. "What did you talk to Rhodey about?"

"It's not important." Stephen replied.
"Come on Strange." Tony growled. "You're the first person who, as far as I know, hasn't kept things from me. Don't ruin it."

Stephen pursed his lips and stared at him, exasperated. "It's really none of your business and not important besides."

"I think it is."

"Fine. I had a question I needed to ask and he answered it for me."

"It's about me isn't it?" Tony pressed.

"Not everything is about you."

"Except this time it is."

"I think I should go." Stephen replied, clearly annoyed, and got to his feet. "Thank you for dinner Tony."

"You're welcome Strange." Tony said. "But one way or another I'm going to find out what you talked about."

"That remains to be seen."

"Dammit Merlin, I just... I... was it about the water?"

"What?"

"Yesterday, you helped me and handed me something. Was it about that?" Tony pressed, hating how needy he sounded. "It was, wasn't it?"

Several indecipherable emotions flitted across the Sorcerer's face before his mask was firmly back in place. He sighed, rolling his eyes to the ceiling before whispering a quiet, resigned "yes."

"What did you do Strange?" Tony demanded, getting into Stephen's space. "Did you put a spell on me? Heal my issues while you were rooting around in my head?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Answer the question doc. What did you do?"

"I can see now how you manage to irritate so many people Stark. You refuse to take no for an answer." Stephen growled, stepping away from him. "I did nothing of the sort to you and I'm deeply insulted you think otherwise. I made you a promise and I'm not in the habit of breaking my promises."

Tony shrugged, his anger barely masking his indifference. "Lots of people break their promises to me. You wouldn't be the first."

Stephen's face pinched in anger. "I am not other people and I'll thank you to remember that." Stephen said, turning away to conjure a portal.

"Wait just a damn minute Strange." Tony growled, grabbing his arm. "We're not done discussing this."

"Well I am." Stephen retorted, his hand going to push him away.
At Stephen's touch, Tony gripped him harder to keep hold of him and a minute later, they overbalanced and suddenly Stephen was bracing him to keep them both upright. They were a lot closer than Tony had planned and he stared, stunned silent into the most gorgeous blue-grey eyes he'd ever seen.

This time Stephen couldn't hide the hurt in them and then his gaze flicked down to Tony's lips and Tony caught himself doing the same and his pulse sped. His mouth had gone dry and the words he'd been about to say died in his throat at the same time Stephen tried to pull away.

"Let go of me."

"No." Tony replied, holding firm. "I'm not done."

"Too bad. I am and you're being rude."

"I'm sorry."

Stephen blinked, his eyes filling with confusion. "What?"

"I'm sorry." Tony repeated, dropping his hand from Stephen's arm. "I didn't mean it. Please stay."

"I don't think I should."

"Well I do." Tony retorted, echoing Stephen's words. "We should talk about this."

"There's nothing to talk about." Stephen huffed. "We've cleared the air and you've apologized. What more is there?"

Tony narrowed his eyes at the other man, choosing his words more carefully than he was in the habit of. "What more? This... This... tension we have with each other. You saved my life Doc. Then you went after someone who hurt me. That isn't exactly textbook Doctor stuff."

"That was unprofessional of me." Stephen huffed. "I shouldn't have done it. But I abhor hypocritical behaviour and I wasn't willing to wait for justice to come knocking."

"But you still did it and it's pretty damn clear you did so as a result of what you saw in my head. Tell me I had nothing to do with your decision and I'll drop it."

Stephen stared back at him, an unreadable expression on his face as he shifted nervously in place. "I can't do that." He replied, dropping his gaze.

"Why?"

Stephen huffed a loud sigh before straightening his shoulders and meeting Tony's quizzical gaze. "Because... somewhere along the line we've begun a friendship that's relatively new. And it's one I find I value very much. There's no room for anything more than that without jeopardizing it."

"You think being honest about how you feel will drive me away?" Tony pressed, a small smile on his lips. "For a smart guy, you can be pretty dumb sometimes."

"I'm trying to explain and you're insulting me." Stephen growled. "It's not amusing anymore Stark."

"It's a little amusing." Tony replied, moving closer to the sorcerer.

"It's not." Stephen huffed. "What are you doing now?"
Tony hummed under his breath as he stepped into Stephen's personal space, knowing without knowing how that the other man's pride wouldn't let him back away. "I'm getting into your space."

"I can see that."

"That's good. No need to get your eyes checked then." Tony continued, breathing in Stephen's scent.

"There's nothing wrong with my eyesight." Stephen retorted. "But I have serious concerns about whatever it is you're doing."

"Am I making you uncomfortable Stephanie?" Tony asked, his eyes filled with challenge as he met Stephen's blue ones.

"No." Stephen denied.

Tony hummed under his breath as he lifted his hand to flick a bit of lint from Stephen's robe, the Sorcerer's breath hitched and Tony narrowed his eyes at him. "Sure about that?"

Stephen growled under his breath and then his hands were on Tony's hips, faster than he could process and then warm, soft lips were pressing against his. Tony's pulse raced as he leaned into Stephen's embrace, a soft moan issuing from his throat as the sorcerer's tongue flicked against his bottom lip, seeking entrance.

Without thought, he gave himself over to Stephen's unspoken question, sighing into the other man's mouth as the kiss deepened. His hands made their way to the back of Stephen's neck, threading through his hair as the sorcerer pressed himself more firmly to Tony's chest, his grip tightening on the smaller man's hips, holding him secure in his embrace. After several minutes of exploring each other with lips and tongue, minutes that felt like an eternity as he lost himself in the sensation of being cherished, Stephen broke the kiss to press their foreheads together to let them catch their breath.

Panting, Tony gazed into pools of liquid blue, the pupils blown wide and dark as they both remembered how to breathe. A smile tugged at his lips, a giddy sensation floating in his chest as he took in Stephen's flushed state and the heated look in the other man's eyes.

"You kiss all your patient's like that Stephen or is it just reserved for special cases?" Tony teased, running his hands up the other man's back.

"No, just you." Stephen huffed, his desire deepening his voice and tightening things Tony's chest.

"How long?" Tony whispered, all teasing gone.

Stephen chuckled, lifting his head, his thumbs rubbing steady circles on Tony's hips. "That I've known? Not long at all. That Wong's known? Too damned long. He'll be insufferable now."

"Beyonce knew?" Tony repeated with a note of annoyance in his voice. "The stoic, silent, grumpy monk knew before we did?"

"Unfortunately." Stephen sighed, pressing a kiss to Tony's forehead.

"Damn." Tony swore, letting his hand linger on Stephen's waist. "That... kinda sux."

"So." Stephen began, his voice hesitant.
"So." Tony nodded, understanding immediately what he meant. "What do we do now?"

"We aren't exactly... a conventional match."

"True." Tony agreed, unable to break eye contact with the taller man, and damn if that wasn't annoying. "But we've got the matching facial hair.

"Matching arrogance."

"Matching brilliance." Tony continued with a smirk when Stephen flushed at his compliment. "Though you're clearly better looking."

"Matching humility." Stephen countered, his hand coming up to rest against the back of Tony's neck, his fingers threading through his hair. "Though I beg to differ on who's better looking."

"Eyes of the beholder wizard." Tony replied.

"Matching stubbornness."

"We're in over our heads aren't we?" Tony sighed.

"Perhaps." Stephen agreed. "But that doesn't mean I don't want this."

"That makes two of us."

"So, how do you want to... proceed?" Stephen asked, frowning at his own choice of words.

Tony shrugged. "Dunno doc, I'm as clueless as you are. Been a while since I was with anyone, but I have to say, this feels different."

"Agreed." Stephen nodded. "So, one day at a time then? Should we go on a date?"

Tony smiled and pressed a kiss to Stephen's lips. "A date sounds interesting. You sure you'll be available? What with protecting my reality and all that?"

Stephen frowned and his body tensed even as he returned Tony's kiss. "That actually might be an issue here. It's one of the reasons it took me so long to recognize what was happening."

"No time for complications doc?" Tony teased, though they both could hear the vulnerability in Tony's voice.


Tony shrugged. "It's no different from mine, though I hate to admit yours is more important by far. An entire galaxy to protect and all I do is talk to people in suits."

"And it's no less important than what I do." Stephen argued. "Your work ensures the safety of this planet and everyone on it Tony."

"We're going to argue about this a lot aren't we?"

"Only as long as it takes to make you realise that everything you do matters."

"So yes then." Tony smirked.
"Insufferable." Stephen murmured, pressing another kiss to Tony's lips to shut him up.

He smiled when it drew a sigh of pleasure from the smaller man and pulled him close, wishing he could make this moment last forever.
Several weeks had passed since Steve had led what was left of his allies out of Wakanda. They'd taken their time moving on after making the crossing into Italy and from there into Greece.

But after only two weeks, it was clear they couldn't remain there. They stood out too much in that small country and so they headed North. Though Steve kept up his positive attitude, the longer they were on the run, the shorter their tempers became and the harder it was for him to keep from sinking into despair. Surely, the world would realize soon that the Avengers were needed and toss out those ridiculous Accords. Though even his own assertion of the truth of that belief was becoming harder to believe with every day that passed and nothing changed.

What had changed was Wanda. Though she had mostly recovered from whatever had happened to her in Wakanda, there was something different about her. Nothing he could put a finger on or a name to, but something was definitely different.

There was a coldness to her now that hadn't been there before. Sometimes he would catch her, staring out a window with a look of madness in her eyes. Yet every time he tried to talk to her or draw her out of the strange and unsettling shell she'd put up, she would smile at him and the look would vanish. Her behaviour would revert to it's normal state, the way it had been in the days before the Accords and he would forget all about it.

If he was willing to look closely at that, and he wasn't, he would have had to acknowledge that it wasn't so much the change in Wanda that disturbed him, as much as it was his inability to remember it afterward. That weeks would go by before he saw it again and in the same moment feel a growing anxiety over his lack of recall over all the other times the same thing had happened.

He brought it up with Sam a few times when he'd seen her in one of her states before he spoke to her, but Sam didn't seem at all concerned. Shrugging it off as though it meant nothing to him, or worse that Steve was only imagining problems where there were none.

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They'd been out of Wakanda several months when Natasha suddenly appeared on their doorstep looking nothing like she had the last time they'd seen her. For one, her hair was significantly shorter and for another, the lines on her face seemed more prominent and her eyes were haunted.

Steve had no idea how to react to her arrival, though a part of him was pleased to see a friendly face after being stuck so long with only Sam and Wanda for company. Sam, as usual, seemed indifferent to the former spy's arrival, but Wanda narrowed her eyes while at the same time giving Nat a warm, welcoming hug.

"Been a while." Nat drawled, as she stepped into their rented home and took an assessing look of the room. "Not exactly the Ritz, but not bad for superheroes in hiding."

Steve shrugged and led her to the kitchen while Sam and Wanda returned to the program they'd been watching on tv. "It's as good as we could manage, considering. Care for a drink?"

Nat arched her eyebrow at that, but said nothing as she settled herself at the table. "Sure. You have any vodka?"

"We do actually." Steve replies, a faint blush staining his cheeks.
"That's new."

Steve handed her a glass with a finger of vodka, complete with lemon slice, ice and club soda. "Yeah." He nodded, settling into a chair opposite her. "So. What are you doing here? I'm not going to bother asking how you found us."

"Good choice." Nat nodded, sipping her drink with a smile of approval. "Got tired of being the lone wolf. Thought I'd check in, see how things were going with you."

"Right." Steve said, his tone entirely sarcastic. "Why are you really here Nat?"

"Because Fury sent her." Wanda said from the doorway, narrowing her eyes at the spy.

Nat didn't react to the witch's words, shrugging and sipping more of her drink.

"Why would Fury send you? For that matter, what are you even doing being in contact with him?" Steve demanded as Wanda joined them at the table, her eyes fixed on Nat, with an unreadable expression on her face.

"Come on Steve. We both know you're not that stupid." Nat drawled, her eyes waiting for the moment it clicked in him.

"It's because of what happened at the airport isn't it?"

"Ding, ding, ding. Give the man a prize." Nat replied, relaxing further into her chair. "Got it in one."

"What does Fury want then?"

"Nothing much." Nat continued as though her presence in their kitchen wasn't a big deal. "He just wants to be apprised of your whereabouts and activities."

"He sent you to spy on us." Steve concluded. "Why would you agree to that?"

"Do you really need to ask Steve?"

Steve huffed and looked away before answering. "He gave you a choice."

"See?" Nat drawled. "You're not as dumb as you pretend to be."

"Why not just bring us in then if he knows where we are?" Sam asked from where he was now leaning against the door frame watching them.

"What for?" Nat shrugged, staring at him intently. "It's not like it would solve anything. A media circus, followed by governments squabbling over who gets to prosecute first, Ross having his field day reiterating the importance of the Accords, public protests... and only Ross wants that. All it would accomplish would be to blow Fury's cover and give Ross the public audience he wants. Better to just keep tabs on you."

"What about Stark?" Wanda demanded, her voice cold and hard.

Nat blinked a few times, clearly baffled by the question from the witch. "What about him?"

"When is he going to be tried for his crimes?"

Nat narrowed her eyes, her forehead wrinkling in confusion, though her next words were chosen
carefully. "I'm not sure what you mean Wanda. What crimes are you talking about?"

"Locking us up!" Wanda snapped making the spy flinch before her mask fell firmly back into place. "Putting me in that collar! Keeping me in the compound, turning Vision against me, making us out to be criminals when everyone knows it was all his doing!"

Nat flicked a glance over at Steve during Wanda' outburst, feeling no surprise at his lack of shock over the woman's words. Instead, a soft look lit his eyes as he got to his feet to approach the trembling witch. "Wanda. It'll be okay. We're all tired over how long this has gone on but it will be over soon. The fact that Natasha's here and no one is coming to arrest us just proves that."

Wanda's eyes, which were still hot with rage as tendrils of red mist pooled around her, met his look and a deep exhalation escaped her. She blinked once, twice, then dropped her eyes and nodded, her hands returning to her sides as her tension and magic dissipated. "You're right Steve. Sorry. I just... I get so frustrated sometimes."

"I know." Steve agreed, his voice soft. "We're all feeling it. Maybe you just need some fresh air huh? That always cheers you up and we've been stuck inside these walls for over a week now. It should be safe enough to go out. Most everyone will be off the streets, less chance of being recognized."

Wanda smiled back at him shyly as though she hadn't just had a screaming outburst, agreeing with him again. "True. It has been a while since I went out hasn't it? Might be just what I need." She added, grabbing a jacket from the wall hook and stepping outside. "I won't be long and I promise I'll be careful."

"It's fine Wanda." Steve replied with a smile. "Take as long as you need. I trust you."

"Thanks Steve. That means a lot to me." She said, and then she was gone, the soft click of the door the only sound as she stepped out into the dark night.

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"Really Steve?" Nat said minutes after Wanda left. "You're still indulging her sick fantasy that Stark is responsible for everything that happened?"

"Who's side are you on Nat?" Sam demanded, joining them at the table.

"My own." Nat relied, knocking back the last of her drink. "It's dangerous to keep feeding that rage Steve. You know it is."

"So is hanging us out to dry Nat. Stark did this to us or have you forgotten that part? None of this would've happened if Tony had just listened to me."

"Like he had to listen to how you knew who killed his parent's?" Nat snapped, her eyes filling with ice.

"He what?" Sam barked, his eyes going wide with shock. "What's she talking about Steve?"

"You knew too Natasha." Steve growled.

"And you promised me you'd tell him. You lied to him Steve, you lied and he had to stand by and watch his parent's die on film while you stood there and said nothing."

"Woah, woah, woah!" Sam barked, staring between the two of them. "What the hell are you two
talking about? Who killed Stark's parents and why do I get the feeling that's real important somehow?"

Nat arched a brow at Steve who glared back at her, his jaw clenched in anger, saying nothing.

"You gonna tell him Steve or should I?" Nat growled under her breath before turning her attention to Sam. "You told Tony where Steve was right?"

Sam nodded, feeling a twisting, sinking feeling settle in his gut. "Yeah. And he promised he'd go there as a friend."

"Which is exactly what he did." Nat replied, her face a cold mask of fury.

"But... " Sam protested, not wanting to hear the rest, but knew he had to. "But Steve said he attacked them and they had to defend themselves."

"Right." Natasha nodded. "And you never questioned the great Captain America's version of things right? That if Stark had wanted a fight with Steve and Barnes, why'd he go alone? Why didn't he just call Ross and be done with us?"

"Because he didn't want witnesses." Steve growled, drawing a warning glance from Natasha.

"Shut up Steve. That's got to be the stupidest thing I've heard come out of your mouth yet." Nat paused, drawing a deep breath before continuing. "Zemo set it all up. He killed the super soldiers there while they were still in cryo. When Stark and the others got there he was behind protective glass and played a surveillance video from 1991."

"A what now?" Sam grunted.

"Video evidence of the Winter Soldier murdering Howard Stark and his wife."

Sam's eyes grew wide with dawning horror at the implications of what Natasha had just said. "Oh my god." He whispered, horrified, his gaze drifting to Steve and looking at him as though seeing him for the first time. "You knew..." He stammered. "You knew... and you, you let Stark watch that video, with his parent's murderer standing right there?"

"It wasn't like that Sam." Steve began, suddenly afraid of the look Sam was giving him. A look that said he thought Steve was a monster.

"You said he attacked you for no reason!" Sam barked, backing away from the table. "Jesus Christ Steve! How are you even still alive? How are either of you still alive?" Sam demanded, a second look of horror crossing his face. "You... you tag-teamed him. A... civilian. You... you and Bucky, two super soldiers against a civilian..." He murmured, turning away, his hand coming up to cover his mouth. "I think I'm going to be sick." He added before rushing from the room.

"Sam wait!" Steve cried, getting to his feet, but Sam was already gone, the bathroom door slamming behind him and he turned angry eyes to Natasha who was still glaring at him. "Why'd you do that?"

"Seriously Steve?" Nat scoffed. "You really need to ask that?"

"You're making it sound like I set it up that way! That I deliberately kept Tony in the dark to justify what happened!"

"You're saying you didn't?"
"Of course not! It was all Zemo! Stark just went crazy, he wouldn't listen to me! He tried to kill Bucky! I had to stop him."

"Stop him?!!" Nat hissed, her voice deadly cold. "You almost killed him Steve. You disabled his reactor and left him in a broken suit with no way to get out of there."

"You did what?" Sam gasped, having emerged from the bathroom and was now hovering in the doorway, his eyes filling with shock.

"It wasn't like that!" Steve growled, frustrated by how bad Nat's description of events were making him sound. "Stark always has a back up plan Nat. You know that."

"He went there without backup Steve, without telling anyone where he was going. What back up plan did you expect him to have against someone he thought was his friend?"

"The arc reactor was still glowing when I left. FRIDAY would have called someone."

"Wait. What?" Sam gasped. "You disabled the suit... you... holy shit what the hell did you do to the suit Steve?"

"I had to stop him Sam."

When Steve made no move to continue, Nat turned to meet Sam's gaze. "He slammed the shield into the reactor until it broke."

Sam gasped at her words, his eyes flicking between her and Steve, his face filling with a mix of horror, confusion and disgust. "I can't... I can't fucking believe what I'm hearing. No wonder Stark hasn't asked us back. No wonder we're still wanted criminals. You lied. To all of us. Oh my god, this is so fucked... I should've taken the plea deal when Clint left... holy shit Steve. You practically kill a man and your only defense is that you had to stop him? Seriously? I've seen Stark's weapons on the suit, if he'd wanted Bucky dead, he'd be dead. The fact he isn't tells me you're the one in the wrong. You're the one who fucked up and you made all of us pay for it. All for your precious Bucky. Was it ever about the Accords or was it always just about him?"

"Sam, please." Steve pleaded, getting to his feet. "It's not like that, of course it's not. Don't you see? We can't allow government agendas to dictate what the Avengers stand for."

"Right. The best hands are our own. You don't mean that Steve. You only mean it when it's your hands, not ours. Rhodes was right, you are arrogant, thinking your way is the only way. Fuck, I've been so blind. I let you take away everything that was important to me, but I don't even matter to you do I? Just your precious Bucky and getting a good man like Stark to bow down to you. That's what this has all been about isn't it? You couldn't stand that a man like Stark, a man with money, power and brains might be better than the great Captain America."

"Tony's dangerous Sam, or have you forgotten what he did?"

"If you're talking about Ultron, stop. They released footage of that weeks ago. Stark wasn't lying about Ultron, but the rest of you were. And shame on me for not thinking for myself."

"What footage?" Steve demanded.

"Footage from the tower when the mind stone created Ultron." Nat answered, turning back to him.  

"But Ultron wouldn't have happened if Stark hadn't been messing with things he didn't understand."
"Wrong Steve." Nat shook her head. "He wouldn't have happened at all without the mind stone. Stark and Banner's test experiment failed. Spectacularly. They were years away from creating anything near what Stark envisioned. None of which he would have even attempted without Wanda's interference."

"I see I've returned just in time."

The three froze in place, turning warily towards the doorway where Wanda stood, red mist beginning to spill from her hands.

"Wanda?" Steve said, a note of concern in his voice.

"Oh Steve." Wanda sighed, the mist coalescing and filling the room before her, spilling from her in waves. "Don't worry. Everything will be back to normal real soon."
Tony had been certain he’d be unable to get any sleep after Stephen had left, leaving his lips kiss swollen and butterflies still tapping at his insides. Yet after only a half an hour of reliving the surprising and very pleasant kisses he and Stephen had shared, he’d drifted off to a night of uninterrupted sleep.

He woke more rested than ever just as the sun was rising to pleasant, blue skies and sunshine painting streaks of orange and pink across the lawn outside his bedroom window. After a quick shower, he dressed and headed to his kitchen where FRIDAY already had his coffee brewing. He settled at the counter with a mug and opened his tablet to check his messages and prepare for the day.

A frown creased his brow when he remembered what Rhodey had said about Peter and after a minute of searching found a short article about what had happened. If he hadn't already seen Peter with his own eyes, he would've been out the door in a heartbeat to be sure Pete was okay, but what he read still set his pulse racing and he cursed under his breath.

"FRIDAY?"

"Yes boss?"

"Where's Happy? No, never mind. Just tell him to get his ass over here. I need to speak to him."

"He's on his way boss." FRIDAY announced a minute later.

"Good." Tony nodded. "Is it too early to call the kid?"

"No boss and before you ask it's also Saturday, so he's not in school today either."

"Even better." Tony nodded to himself.

"You have a call boss."

"Yeah?" Tony asked, his pulse increasing at the hope it might be Stephen. "Who is it?"

"King T'Challa." FRIDAY paused. "And Director Y is on another line."

"Shit." Tony swore. "And I thought today was going to be a good day. Put Fury on hold and tell T'Challa I'm just getting out of the shower."

"I suspect it will be one of those days boss. I just received an email from Ms. Jones. There's a message attached. She wants to discuss her findings in person and Matt Murdock has asked for a meeting."

"Is it too late to make a clone of myself FRIDAY?" Tony groaned, downing more coffee and refilling his mug.

"I believe you are out of luck on that."

"Damn. Fine. Put T'Challa through then."
"Doctor Stark."

"Just Tony or Mr. Stark. Nobody calls me Doctor."

"I know you were less than pleased by my previous offer and I was hoping that you might have reconsidered."

"Can't say that I have." Tony replied, feeling exhausted. "Especially since I'm pretty sure you're only making the offer out of guilt. You never hid your dislike of me before, and frankly I've had my fill of false motives and the people behind them."

"I understand. I hope you will reconsider at some point but as a parting... olive branch? I thought you would like to know that your former teammates are no longer being sheltered where I can see them."

"Yeah. Unfortunately someone already gave me the heads up on that. Can I assume Barnes is still with you, sans Captain Righteous?"

"He is. He's currently back in cryo until we can determine the best way to remove his... programming."

"Well good luck to you and all that. Can't say I care one way or another, but I have to cut this short."

"Of course Doctor Stark. Thank you for accepting my call."

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"What do you want Nick?"

"Natasha is with Rogers, thought you'd want to know. They're holed up in a house in a Southern European country at the moment."

"That was fast."

"She only made contact about a week ago. She's been shadowing them since they left Greece."

"Okay. Was that all?"

"You could say thanks."

"Yeah and you could've done a better job finding Barnes and educating Rogers, but we don't always get what we want."

"I'll inform you if anything changes." Fury huffed.

"You do that." Tony huffed back. "Hope to hear from you never."

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"Mr. Stark?" Happy said as he entered Tony's kitchen. "You wanted to see me?"

Tony held up a hand, asking him to wait as he continued his call. "I get it, but why do you need a meeting? Everyone and their dog is looking for me today."

"Fine. I'll come by the compound tomorrow." Jessica huffed. "Just make room in your schedule
Stark. It's important.

"I will. Tomorrow Jones." Tony said, ending the call.

"So Hap... anything you want to tell me? You know, something along the lines of... Tony I'm so sorry I didn't tell you about this very important incident that crashed one of my planes but it's okay because Peter saved the day and he's totally fine."

Happy paled, his mouth opening and closing as he tried to speak in his defense, his demeanour becoming more agitated the longer the silence stretched out between them.

Tony cocked an eyebrow at his former bodyguard and waited. "Very informative Hap." He drawled. "Care to elaborate on that with, you know, words this time?"

"Mr. Stark, Tony. I am so so sorry I didn't call you immediately. I tried, I really did but then Ms. Potts and Colonel Rhodes said you were busy and then you were in the air or sleeping and I was going to come by yesterday and give you my report in person but Rhodes said I should wait and he'd tell you in the morning. But I still should have called you boss since I work for you and not them."

"Okay, okay." Tony said, holding up his hands to ward off another dump of words out of Happy's mouth. "I get it Hap. Apology accepted, but next time..."

Happy nodded, his head bobbing so fast Tony worried it might pop off the man's near non-existent neck. "Next time, I call you no matter what boss. Oh and, I just wanted to say that you did good with the spider kid Mr. Stark. He saved my life and he's going to be a great man someday. You were right about him, so uh... try not to be too hard on him? Right. Anyway, that's um, that's all I wanted to say."

"Going soft on me Hap?" Tony teased.

"Never Mr. Stark." Happy replied, a faint blush staining his cheeks.

"Okay good. As you were Happy. I think I'll have you pick Peter up later today to bring him by the compound. Can you set that up? Sometime after 1 pm?"

"Sure boss. I'll get right on it."

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**A/N: Bit of a rant here… feel free to skip.**

So, with the release of Endgame and the bucket-loads of plot holes (or just really, really uncreative/predictable storylines), left in its wake, I've been working backwards to adjust where I wanted to go with this fic and have (probably, not written in stone yet), decided to use the MCU's own canon against them. Since the Russos took over, the Avengers movies have been nothing much better than a clusterfuck of bad writing, bad character development and poorly (if at all) adhered to plots that only succeeded because... Explosions! Multiple heroes on screen... at the same time! Hot actors in tight suits! Exaggerated conflict! Chase scenes! Impressive CGI!... etcetera. (I really, really, don't like the Russos, like at all. Can you tell?) Lol. Anyways, end rant.
Tony sighed, absently running his hands through his hair, uncaring or even aware he'd messed it up, leaving it sticking up in odd places. His unguarded appearance in that moment was one of complete and utter exhaustion as he stared unseeing at the walls of his workshop. His eyes passed over his Iron Man wall of art, his cars, his unfinished projects and the flickering holo screens at the edge of his vision and felt... nothing.

A feeling of bone-tired weariness had descended on him following his morning of calls and video-conferences. The last one had been from Hank Pym, chewing him out for god knew what, followed by a tirade over the Ant-Man suit and his role in the Accords. After listening to the man who'd held a grudge against his father since his SHIELD days, his loathing transferring to Tony merely by association, Tony had ended the call on a curt note with orders to FRIDAY to block any further calls from the man.

Ten minutes later a second call had come through and Tony had been shocked to hear the quiet, but commanding voice of Hope Van Dyne. He'd been speechless when she'd then apologized for her father, calling to let Tony know that though they were in hiding from the government, she was more than willing to offer her assistance in making changes to the Accords. She then added that though she hadn't yet spoken to Scott, she was positive he still had the tech he'd taken to Germany and would do what she could to further convince her father to stop living in the past.

Tony would have been glad to end his morning there, despite how shocking new call that day had been, but it didn't.

Twenty minutes later while still reeling from the conversation with Hope, Betty Ross was on the line wanting a private meeting with him to discuss what she knew of her father. He almost hadn't taken what she said as real or even that his entire morning hadn't been some sleep-deprived hallucination until Dum-E had rolled up to jab him in the leg. He'd frowned, realizing he hadn't answered Betty in the same moment and directed her to coordinate with FRIDAY to set something up.

Despite all that, he found himself staring blankly at nothing. He couldn't bring up any reason important enough to keep doing what he was doing. He'd poured every ounce of blood, sweat, sleepless nights and gallons of coffee into making things better, making the world safer and none of it had made a shred of difference.

Instead of protecting the world, his Ultron program had been infected with a sentient alien power, warping and subverting it into an extreme of an arrogant and far too intelligent monster bent on destroying all of humanity. In trying to advance the medical field and clean energy alternatives, he'd gotten sued by energy companies worldwide, ridiculed in the press, monitored by the government, pitied and chastised by his girlfriend - depending on whatever had upset her this time, shunned by his best friend for the embarrassment he'd caused him with his military superiors and almost died when his pseudo dad had tried to kill him for the second time.

And that wasn't even all of it. He'd been threatened or insulted or talked down to at least once by everyone on the Avenger team, had saved the country from a nuclear bomb sent by their own government only to be sued "again," by the city for the damages their alien brawl had caused. Never mind what had happened with Extremis and Pepper and Killian or Vanko and SHIELD and Fury. Finally, in an effort to avoid even more backlash he'd finally agreed and welcomed oversight only to have his entire team betray him, as if what he was doing wasn't what they and everyone else had been demanding he do for years.
He was still staring vacantly into space, his hand absently rubbing at the spot where the arc reactor 
had been when he caught a spray of sparks at the edge of his vision and Stephen stepped through.  
He flicked his eyes up, still lost in thought and had a *duh* moment when the smile on the sorcerer's  
face dissolved into a look of concern and fear? at whatever he'd just registered on Tony's face.  

"Tony?" He said, moving swiftly to his side at the counter, a shaky hand reaching up to brush his  
knuckles against Tony's cheek. "What's wrong? Has something happened?"

"Why did they never like me Stephen? Why wasn't I ever enough?" He blurted before his mind can  
catch up and compose and help him take that sorrowful look from Stephen's face and then his eyes  
are widening in horror at what he's just said aloud.

Stephen looks as though all the air has just been punched out of him and he plants himself between  
Tony's legs, his arms going up around his back and he's being pulled into a firm and yet so  
reassuring and safe hug before he can get another word out. He wants to pull away but he can't  
because he's been swimming in dark thoughts since his last phone call and the rest of him is just so,  
so *tired* and he can't do it. His arms slip around Stephen's waist and Stephen holds him tighter to  
his chest, nudging him to tuck himself against his body and Tony does. He let's go of everything  
he's been drowning under and doesn't think and just lets himself feel Stephen, around him, holding  
him, keeping him in this moment and he's not drowning now and he's the anchor he never knew he  
needed.

"I'm sorry." Tony finally mumbles against Stephen's chest because he still can't think of anything  
else to say.

"You have nothing to apologize for." Stephen replied, his voice soft and gentle and it makes Tony's  
eyes burn because he can't remember when he wasn't to blame. He knows that's not entirely true as  
soon as he thinks it, and yet the broken things in his past and the spiteful words he's had aimed at  
him tells him a different story and he has no idea why he's thinking any of this right now.

Stephen loosened his hold enough to put some space between them, his hand tilting his face up so  
he has to meet Stephen's eyes. "Can you tell me what's wrong? What... brought this on?"

Tony shrugs, his gaze slipping away because he doesn't know what to do with all the compassion  
in Stephen's eyes and if he keeps looking he won't be able to speak past the lump in his throat or  
the tears gathering in the corners of his eyes. "I don't know. I was working, making calls, setting up  
meetings and these... people who have never had anything to do with me before, called to offer  
their help. Then there was a plane crash, *my plane crashed*, with my tech and my projects on it  
and the kid saved the day, and no one told me. And I don't understand. *Why now?* Where were they  
when I needed them? Is it really me they want to help or is it only because I have the money and  
influence they don't have access to... to change things?"

"Tony." Stephen sighed, running gentle fingers through his hair to make him meet his eyes again.  "You have every right to question these things and you will not berate yourself for this later. This is  
my fault, I should have warned you, I should have been here... but you have experienced awful  
things recently and worse news about your health and you've been pushing yourself and you're  
exhausted. I don't know the answers to your questions, but I do know that you are enough. You're  
more than enough and it is them who didn't value what they had in you, not the other way around."

"I just... I don't get it and I'm so tired and I want to just... not care anymore. It's exhausting trying  
and failing to do the right thing all the time."

"You don't have to keep trying Tony or push yourself to keep going. These... feelings you're  
having, this mindset, it's the result of medical trauma. Your body is still healing itself and I
understand the need to keep busy, I do, but you have extra antibodies in your system right now, working overtime to heal you. It will wear you out, wear you down and it gets worse if you don't rest. If you had been my patient I would have made you stay in the hospital for at least ten days before releasing you."

"Made me?" Tony grumbled under his breath, his voice sounding more like Tony freaking Stark and not the beaten, exhausted man Stephen saw when he first arrived. "You could have tried to make me stay, but I don't DO hospitals Stephen."

"Then I would have made sure you stayed in bed for at least five days and employed your friends to make sure you stayed there. I know you have friends that care and I know you know that. If I had stayed when Ms. Potts came to see you instead of running away, I could have made certain she knew the details of your injuries."

Tony's jaw dropped, his eyes narrowing at the determined and regretful look on Stephen's face. "I never thought you'd be the kind of doctor who plays dirty."

"Ensuring my patient's full recovery is not playing dirty Tony. It's my responsibility to ensure they've reached optimum health before they leave my care."

Tony hummed under his breath, a sigh escaping him. "Well you kinda are my doctor now Stephen, after what happened yesterday."

"No, I'm not." Stephen replied, his voice firm. "I'm someone who has come to care for you who also just happens to hold several PhD's, but I am not your doctor."

Tony blinked up at him, the weight that he'd been under since his thoughts began to spiral is suddenly lifted at Stephen's words and another sigh escapes him. His shoulders straightening as he closed his eyes and shook off the last of the dark thoughts and then he smiled at Stephen, taking one of his hands to gently squeeze it. "Thank you."

Stephen squeezed back with a tentative smile on his lips, watching as the dark Tony had been under since he arrived dissipated. "There's no need to thank me, it's the truth, but you're welcome regardless."

"So, Doc." Tony sighed again, stretching his arms above his head and getting to his feet in an effort to bring himself back to the present. "What did you want to talk to me about before I derailed whatever it was you were going to say?"
Wanda reclined back in the kitchen chair she settled into after dealing with the mess she'd walked in on after her walk. She'd known the minute the damn spider appeared that she'd have to deal with it and had let Steve suggest the out he'd offered her as a way to think through her plan without any of them watching.

The nightmares of the damn spell Stark had sent her had never left her and she knows, she knows it's all Stark's doing. All the nightmares are connected to him somehow and she thinks he must have found someone to help him. She can't believe he's got anyone who would help him like that and it's all she can do not to smuggle herself back to the U.S. and make him regret what he's done to her. Again. As if the bomb hadn't been enough, she sneered, her mouth twisting in a manic snarl.

The others in the room are either slumped in their seats or crumpled on the floor in Sam's case, while tendrils of red mist engulf them, wrapping them up in the beliefs she wants them to have. Nothing they've discussed while she was outside will remain by the time her power is done with them, neither will they be aware anything is amiss.

Half an hour from now, they will be suggesting they move west. Closer to Paris and closer to her end goal - to make Stark and whoever helped him pay for what they've done to her. She knows Steve won't question anything she proposes, won't notice anything different about her and neither will his loyal pet Sam. He hasn't so far, has never shown any interest in what happened in Siberia and if the Black Widow hadn't told him, he never would have asked.

Natasha could become a problem though. With her handler Fury having sent her and the fact that the former Russian spy had managed to break her Red Room programming on her own, well... she'll just have to keep a close eye on her, which she knows won't be hard now.

With a grunt of irritation, red mist spread out from her hands as she got to her feet. It bleeds out from her, pooling on the floor to curl around Sam, lifting him as it rises to return him to the couch - it just won't do to have him wake up on the floor. Once he's settled, she returned to the kitchen and refilled both Steve and Natasha's drinks. It won't be long before they wake again and she doesn't want either of them left with any evidence they've lost time in their conversation.

With the scene set, she leaned over to whisper into their ears, setting up the perfect segue into putting her plans in place. With a flick of power, she sends it to linger in the air, timing it to activate the moment before she comes back from her walk. With her eyes glowing red and a sliver of madness on her face, she slipped out the door, waiting a heartbeat before putting her hand to the knob and stepped back inside the house.

Steve is smiling at Natasha as though seeing her for the first time as the door slips shut behind her, his face filled with gratitude and pleasure in seeing a friendly face after so many months in hiding. Sam is still watching tv, his gaze flicking to her with a quick smile before returning his attention to the screen. Nat is smiling at her while she removes her jacket, joining them at the table.

"Feeling better?" Steve asked, his hand closing around his glass as he raised it to his lips.

"Much better." Wanda replied with a beaming smile, catching lingering traces of red in the reflection of his eyes. "Thanks for the suggestion Steve, I don't know what I'd do without you all watching my back."

"That's what friends are for." Nat chimed in, sipping at her own drink. "We're not just teammates

Paint the Town Red
anymore, were family."

"To family." Steve says, raising his glass.

"To family." Wanda and Nat echoed as she poured herself a drink.

"Hey!" Sam barked from the doorway. "What about me?"

Wanda chuckled and handed him a glass, clinking hers against it as he smiles at her. "Got you covered Sam."

"Thanks Wanda."

"No problem. It's what friends do after all."

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Stephen followed Tony into the living room, his eyes tracking the other man's movements for any sign of pain or discomfort. Settling on the couch, he could still see traces of Tony's earlier distress. The pinched look at the corners of his lips, the crinkles at his eyes and the furrow that had settled between his brows despite his forced smile.

"I'm not about to break Stephen." Tony huffed, catching him staring.

"I know you're not, but your... former teammates did everything in their power to do just that with their actions, both directly and indirectly. You don't just brush something like that off Tony and I'm allowed to be concerned about you."

"I've been meaning to ask you about that."

"Ask me what?"

"How you went from hating my guts to saving my life and... you know..."

Stephen shrugged, looking a little lost. "I'm honestly not sure I have an answer to that. At least not a simple one. But I think it was you who changed my mind. You opened up to me when you told me about the spell that was used against you. I learned about the man behind the hype and liked what I saw."

"You're gonna make me blush Strange." Tony teased.

"What about you? Why'd you kiss me back? I thought you could barely tolerate me."

"That's true, you were pretty rude." Tony replied teasingly, but his eyes held no mirth. "Honestly, even though you were a douche when we met, I think it was tempered by the fact that you helped me with my panic attack at the Sanctum."

"That... actually surprised me. It shouldn't have. The things you've experienced... even though I didn't really understand what that meant when you showed up at the Sanctum... I didn't react well. Honestly, I think I was more angry with myself than you and... well, I'm sorry for that. Though in my defense I wasn't having the best day before you showed up."

"Uh... I have no idea how to handle what you just said doc, but thanks. I guess. And I totally get what you mean about bad days." Tony mused. "So... what did you want to talk to me about? Seemed like you had something important on your mind when you arrived."
Stephen scowled and let out a sigh of resignation. "I did some digging after we spoke, trying to find more information about the Infinity Stones. Unfortunately, my search turned up very little of value. But the other Masters and I agreed that having several of them show up on earth can't be a coincidence. We think your vision is accurate... and that we're running out of time."

"Dammit." Tony swore, running a shaky hand through his hair. "I was hoping you and your friends would find some answers or at least tell me that we have time to prepare."

"I'm sorry Tony." Stephen said, covering Tony's hand with his own and giving it a reassuring squeeze. Tony returned it with a weak smile, linking their fingers together lightly, mindful of Stephen's pain. The gesture made Stephen's chest tighten in appreciation and he wished he could wipe the worry from the other man's eyes.

"Not your fault Doc." Tony sighed, shifting his body closer, their thighs touching. "You've done nothing but help me Stephen. I only hope I can do the same for you someday."

"There are so many things I still don't know about the Mystic Arts. But I do know I want this." Stephen replied, lifting a shaking hand to brush against Tony's cheek. "You are the strongest, bravest man I've ever had the good fortune to meet. I wish I had more answers for you."

"The other Masters..." Tony said, lifting his free hand to cover the one Stephen was touching him with. "Are they still working on it?"

Stephen nodded, his breath hitching as Tony put his hand to his shoulder, rubbing small circles of comfort into the muscle there. "Yes, of course. They won't stop until they find something. Unfortunately, there's another pressing matter that is distracting us all. A former student left the order a while back with some ominous parting words. We expect he may be planning to target us over something he believes very strongly in."

"He's going to attack his own people?" Tony frowned, his eyes narrowing.

"Unfortunately, yes."

"Is he dangerous?"

"He's very powerful, but he would need allies if he chose to go after all of us."

Tony narrowed his eyes. "You think you're his main target."

Stephen closed his eyes against Tony's scrutiny. "I do."

"Can you handle him on your own if that happens?"

"Normally I'd say yes, but I don't know how far he plans to go with this. He was very angry when he left."

A shudder ran through Tony at Stephen's words. The thought that Stephen could be seriously injured or harmed in any way scared him and without hesitation, he pulled the other man close, pressing their lips together with a needy kiss. Stephen sighed against him, his free hand threading through Tony's hair, holding him close when Tony deepened the kiss.

Tony revelled under Stephen's touch. The soft press of lips against his, the desire and need conveyed through lips and the exploration of their tongues, he had never before felt so wanted and desired. After another minute, Tony pulled back to stare into Stephen's ice blue eyes, blown wide with desire. "I don't want you hurt in any way Doc." Tony sighed against him. "I know we haven't
reached that stage yet, but will you promise me you'll be careful?"

Stephen nodded, his eyes closing as though he couldn't quite handle the raw emotion he saw in Tony's eyes.

"And will you let FRIDAY keep you safe and call me if you need help?"

"Yes." Stephen replied, pressing a soft kiss to Tony's lips. "If you'll allow me to place wards on your armour and upgrade the pendant I gave you."

"It's like that is it?" Tony replied with a happy chuckle.

"Yes. It's like that." "Then you've got a deal Doc."

"Boss?" FRIDAY called out as Stephen was about to kiss him again.

"Yeah FRIDAY?" He groaned, his voice betraying his frustration.

"Sorry to interrupt, but Mr. Hogan is en route to the compound with the young man you asked here. He should arrive within the next ten minutes."

"Alright." Tony sighed, pulling away from Stephen while keeping his hand linked with the other man's. "Send the permission protocol to him and let me know what he says."

"Will do boss."

"Permission protocol?" Stephen echoed, sitting up a little straighter.

"He's still got his privacy Strange." Tony replied with a sigh. "I just asked him if he's okay with having someone else know who he is. Namely you, because I need to see him and I want to continue our conversation."

"Permission granted boss." FRIDAY said, making Stephen abort whatever he'd been about to say.

"Right then." Tony said, getting to his feet. "I'm going to change. Could you get some drinks ready Stephen? Coffee for me, juice for the kid and help yourself to whatever you like." He called over his shoulder, not waiting for Stephen's agreement before disappearing into the bedroom.
"Mr. Stark." Peter said when Tony greeted him at the door and walked him into the kitchen. "It's good to see you sir, you um... look... uh, better today."

Tony huffed under his breath, uncomfortable with the kid's reminder of his health. "Thanks Pete. So, Peter Parker, meet Doctor Strange, Sorcerer Supreme of the New York Sanctum. Doc, Peter Parker, otherwise known as Spiderman."

"Pleasure to meet you Mr. Parker." Strange said, inclining his head in greeting. "I understand you've been busy saving Mr. Stark's property recently."

Peter flushed scarlet and ducked his head as he let Tony lead him to a chair. "Uh yeah... I mean yes. Yes sir. It was... it was nothing really." He shrugged. "Just, you know... doing what I can to keep the city safe sir."

"It was a helluva lot more than that Pete." Tony huffed, joining him at the counter and sliding the juice glass over to him. "Seems I might have been a bit hasty in taking back the suit."

Peter's gaze flicked up then to meet Tony's eyes. "No Mr. Stark, you weren't wrong. I... made a mistake. I made a lot of mistakes actually. I... should have listened to you and I... Well, if you and... Mr. Hogan and Ms. Jones hadn't helped me when you all did, a lot of people could have gotten hurt bad... maybe even died. And it would've been all my fault."

Tony ignored the pointed look Strange was giving him, knowing without looking the man was revelling in his "I told you so" moment while Peter praised his actions. "I'm glad to hear that Pete." He said, ignoring the lump that tried to rise in his throat. "And even more glad you rose to the occasion and did what you did. I'm proud of you Pete." He finished, burying the swell of pride that rose inside his chest behind his coffee mug.

"Th-thank you Mr. Stark!" Peter stammered, his face flushing again.

"Congratulations Peter." Stephen said softly. "Seems to me you're well on your way to growing into a fine young man."

"I... uh... I'm not sure I'd go that far Doctor Strange, but... maybe? I still have a lot to learn."

Tony narrowed his eyes, simultaneously annoyed that Strange had beaten him to saying something encouraging to Peter, to being impressed by his ability to read the teen accurately.

"It takes a wise individual to recognize both their faults and their strengths with humility." Stephen continued, meeting Tony's eyes with obvious mischief in them. "Trust me Peter, I do know what I'm talking about when I say that your approach is much more admirable and preferable to how I came to learn that same thing."

Tony scowled back at him, knowing the words were meant for him as much as for Peter. But he had to give the sorcerer credit for using a double entendre to make a point.

"Oh! Uh, okay Doctor Strange. Uh... Thank you? I guess?"

"You're welcome."

"So um... Mr. Stark, Happy said you wanted to talk to me about something?"
"Yeah kid. After what happened and the fact that you saved both my plane and my favourite bodyguard, I've decided to give you the suit back."

"What?! Really Mr. Stark? Are you serious? Oh my gosh you are serious! You won't regret this Mr. Stark, I promise I won't let you down ever again."

Tony chuckled under his breath and put a hand to Peter's shoulder to still his excitement. "I know you won't Peter, I trust you." He said without pause to avoid any further gushing on Peter's part. "I'll have Happy pack it up for you before he takes you home. In the meantime, what do you say to a tour of the compound? FRIDAY can show you around and Happy can meet you in the common area to show you the rest."

"That would be awesome Mr. Stark! I'd love a tour! Are any other superheroes here? Can I meet them? Do you think they'd let me watch them in the training room?"

"Sorry Pete." Tony said with a shake of his head. "As far as I know it's just Vision and Rhodey here today."

"Oh." Peter sighed. "Well that's okay, I'd still really love a tour!"

"No problem." Tony smiled, getting to his feet. "FRIDAY, show the kid the way back to the compound, full access outside of my workshop."

"Of course boss."

"And have Happy meet him in the common room in an hour."

"I'll take good care of him boss."

"Okay." Tony said, smiling at Peter as he walked him to the door. "FRIDAY will take it from here. Thanks for coming by today Pete and say hi to your aunt for me."

"I will Mr. Stark! Thank you so much for everything!"

"Sure thing kid."

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"About those magical upgrades..." Tony began as he and Stephen returned to the living room. "I need a second amulet for another team member, Jessica Jones. Is that something you can make happen, or what?"

"Jones?" Stephen parroted with a frown. "Did Wanda..?"

"No, no. It wasn't Wanda. There was a man who... well, I'm not clear on the whole story but her experience was more... intense than mine. Mind controlling stalker for several months, I'm not clear how long but... well he's dead now and she will likely never see a counsellor about what happened when he turned up after she thought he'd died the first time... Anyway, I told her weeks ago I'd get her some protection for that but then the Accords and Siberia happened."

"Another magic user?" Stephen asked, his voice deepening into anger.

"No, unforeseen medical side effect. He had some sort of rare disease that his parents tried to fix through experimentation. Unfortunately whatever they did gave him the ability to make people do things, he gave off a sort of... allergic reaction? The effects would wear off after about a day, but
by then he could have forced you to kill or assault someone or done things to you while following
his every order."

"Sweet Vishanti. That poor woman." Stephen murmured. "Is that why she drinks so much?"

Tony shook his head. "Might be part of it, but it sounds like her powers come from another
experiment whose side effect is rage. It sounds a lot like Bruce, but she doesn't change physically...
the anger is just always there."

"She must have ironclad willpower considering how much I've heard she drinks."

Tony nodded, his gaze drifting to the window to stare into the darkening night. "It sounds like a
version of a super soldier serum. Rogers couldn't get drunk after Project Rebirth."

"I can have something for you tomorrow if that's alright?"

"Sure." Tony nodded with a sigh. "I actually let her borrow the one you gave me when we went to
Germany. She was... less than thrilled when she first met Vision without protection."

"You fought Wanda without protection?" Stephen growled.

"I did. But Jones was there, so it was fine Doc."

"Your lack of self-preservation skills are deeply concerning." Stephen huffed before a confused
look lit his features. "But you had it when I saw you in the hospital. How did that happen?"

"She gave it back." Tony shrugged. "She said she noticed that I seemed uncomfortable that she had
it..."

Stephen frowned, something tightening in his chest at Tony's honesty. "Was she right?"

"I didn't realize it bothered me until she put it on. It felt wrong seeing it on her."

"You can be very sentimental sometimes." Stephen whispered softly making Tony look at him in
surprise. "It's... well, it's adorable really."

"I don't think anyone's ever called me adorable before."

"They mustn't have been looking then." Stephen replied, his voice husky as he put a hand to Tony's
jaw in a soft caress. "You're something special Tony Stark."

"You're not half bad yourself Stephen." Tony sighed, leaning into his touch and tilting his head to
press a soft kiss to Stephen's lips before pulling back to meet his eyes. "If I didn't know better, I'd
think you were trying to get into my pants."

Stephen traced Tony's jaw with his thumb, his eyes soft with affection. "You're not wrong, but I
promised we'd go on a proper date first."

Tony groaned, flopping back against the couch. "You're killing me here Stephen. With how busy
our schedules are, I'm not sure we really thought that through."

"Is the infamous Tony Stark conceding defeat? Not up to the challenge? If I'd known that, I might
never have admitted an interest." Stephen droned, his arms crossing over his chest.

Tony scowled, squaring his shoulders and shifting to the edge of the couch to glare at the other
man. "You did not just accuse me of being a quitter."
"Surprising even to me." Stephen retorted, a smirk curling his lip.

"You did that on purpose."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"People on pedestals Stephen. You just better hope nothing inter-dimensional comes knocking the night of our date."

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A/N: Received a free Echo Dot yesterday and am sitting here wishing it was JARVIS. 😊

A/N +: Endgame seriously messed up my plans for this fic, and in doing so led me to the insanity of a 1 in 14 million + chance of winning, which in mathematical and probability models is ridiculous and unrealistic. If anyone knows chaos theory, they will understand the implausibility of that stupid line. (Watch Jurassic Park if you need a hint.) *Update: Basically, that line won't be in this story so I've had to adjust where necessary which has created it's own set of problems... but I think I now have a solution, so there is that. Thanks for reading! Comments are love. 😊
Plans and Visitors

The move to England went as smoothly as Wanda had imagined. It took over a month, but it had never been about speed. So long as the finale lives up to all Wanda has envisioned since freeing herself from Stark's spell, she doesn't care how long it takes.

The first thing she did once she had her teammates fully under her control, she sent Nat out to report in to Fury. Her instructions were simple, no in-person meeting and she's to make contact another town away. With that handled, she's got time to send Sam ahead of them on the route she's planned.

Now reclining in the armchair, she's turned it to face the balcony to watch the sun set. Sipping a white wine, the light of the sun spilling out of the horizon in oranges and reds that hide the increasing red mist in her eyes. There had been a heart-stopping incident a week ago about that which had nearly ended her plans before she'd had time to move beyond finding a safe place to hide.

They'd been having dinner, Wanda wanting to maintain as normal a schedule as much as possible with routine and sameness being almost as good as hypnotism. If all the days were the same, it was less likely to draw her teammate's attention while simultaneously reinforcing her hold on them all. But that night, during a lull in the conversation, Sam had caught her eye, followed by a sharp intake of breath and gasp of fright.

Her reaction had been instant. Holding Sam's gaze was easy while Nat and Steve continued the light conversation they'd been having. Sam's eyes had widened with fear as Wanda had let the red spill from her eyes into Sam, her hands under the table, spilling more magic into Nat and Steve until all conversation had stopped, Sam's fear melting into glassy indifference. She'd locked the spell in place before running to the bathroom, a startled and enraged scream escaping her when she'd seen how frighteningly RED her eyes were. It was unexpected but it explains Sam's reaction...

It took less than ten minutes to wipe the incident from Sam's memory and cast a low-level spell to keep the cracks in her appearance hidden. Which is why she now makes it a habit to watch the sunset. She needs a break from the tight control she has on her teammates. Hiding her eyes and her growing inability to filter what she's thinking out loud is exhausting and the only reason Sam had seen what he had. Her control had slipped because she'd become unaware just how drained she always is now. It's not like she's had any sort of reprieve. At night the nightmares are almost as bad as they were the first time they hit her and throughout the day she has to constantly adjust her control on her allies so she doesn't slip and they don't suspect.

But that won't happen if she lets it all go for a few hours while sipping wine and watching the sunset. Besides, she smiled to herself, it won't be long now. The next part of her plan doesn't include the others and it will be nice to finally be away from them all. To be able to just... be, without having to wonder if they suspect anything. Soon, she whispered to herself, soon she will have her revenge.

***

After a shower and some time spent in front of the mirror appraising his appearance and ignoring the dark circles under his eyes, Tony took a seat at the kitchen island to enjoy his first coffee of the day. He was on his second cup when FRIDAY interrupted.

"Boss?"
"Yeah Fri? What's up?"

"The individuals you're considering for the new Avengers are wanting a meeting this morning."

"What?" Tony blurted. "Since when are they organized?"

"Hope Van Dyne and Christine Palmer have taken it upon themselves to request a meeting with all present."

"When the hell did Hope get here?"

"Late last night boss. She didn't want to disturb anyone given how late she arrived. Doctor Palmer spent the evening going over our current medical supplies and protocols... again. I'm not sure she understands the unique needs of... enhanced persons. As such, I think a private meeting is in order or alternatively, one that includes Colonel Rhodes and the Vision. Also, Betty Ross called and will arrive in an hour and Mr. Rhodes has already indicated he will be available to give her a tour."

"What the hell FRIDAY? I feel like all of this is... I dunno... kinda sudden?"

"I believe it has more to do with the Accords business than any pending threat you may be imagining," FRIDAY admonished. "Ms. Ross has been wanting a meeting with you for some time. Ms. Van Dyne is... interesting. And Christine has been to the compound several times since the night you met her at the hospital."

"She has?" Tony asked, dumbfounded. "Why the hell haven't I seen her then?"

"She works Emergency boss. Her hours aren't predictable and she hasn't stayed long. Today is the first time she's been able to stay an entire day."

"So when you say New Avengers, are we including Peter?"

"Mr. Parker is unavailable today."

"Right." Tony nodded, a weary sigh escaping him. His melancholy from the precious day whispering through him as he stood and headed to his room to change.

***

The meeting Tony walked into was less a 'get to know each other event' and more of a 'Tony why didn't you tell us about Ultron' and while we're at it, 'what really happened in Siberia' bitch fest. Those present who knew the truth behind Siberia looked on with tense expressions of varying degrees of compassion and understanding thrown Tony's way. He let FRIDAY answer for him regarding Ultron, adding only his reluctant agreement to what she said.

"How did any of you learn about Siberia?" Tony demanded.

"A surveillance video was emailed to all everyone here who has been assigned an Avenger email address boss. I traced the IP after Ms. Van Dyne watched hers late last night. It came via a timed release program through a secure server in Moscow."

"Dammit." Tony swore. "Who else got an email?"

"It seems only the Compound was targeted boss."

"Were you able to tell if there's more where it came from? Anyone else going to get it in the
"The server was clean and I could find no other traces of that code anywhere in the world."

"I suppose that's good, though if there are more, there's not much I can do about it."

"True." FRIDAY agreed.

"I feel I should apologize again." Hope said quietly from where she sat across from him at the large oak table which separated them. "Hank never had anything good to say about your father and I never bothered to question why. From what I understand of what happened with Ultron, Hank could have easily created his own version of Ultron if the opportunity had been in his path instead of yours. I hate learning that no one bothered to question how Ultron even came to exist. And your team... I've seen the videos Tony. I can't believe the public sees those people as heroes. Thor and Steve especially. No one stopped Thor assaulting you and no one knows he was ultimately responsible for Vision's creation."

"I'm so disappointed with Bruce." Betty sighed as Hope finished, nervously turning a pen through her fingers where they rested on the table. "I mean, I understand why he avoids conflict like the plague... but, he left you Tony. The few times we talked he had nothing but good things to say about you. He was so touched that someone of your calibre didn't treat him like a monster or as anything but an accomplished scientist. I just... I can't believe he didn't defend you or what the two of you were trying to do."

"That makes two of us." Tony agreed, lowering his gaze, his lips pressed tight in a grimace.

"More than two Tones." Rhodey said softly causing Tony to meet his pained look.

"Can we all just agree that the Ultron shit show was handled badly?" Jessica growled. "And that if that Asgardian dickhead comes back here I get first dibs on kicking his ass?"

Everyone present stifled barks of laughter or suppressed them in favour of trying to maintain a professional air in the room.

"You've got my blessings Jones." Tony replied, throwing her a smirk and breaking the tension of the room.

"I think the more pressing matter is what you plan to do about Steve Rogers." Matt said, raising the tension in the room once more.

"Nothing." Tony said, his eyes hard.

"What do you mean nothing?!" Jessica demanded. "He can't just get away with what he did."

"Yes he can." Tony argued, getting to his feet. "I can't admit I was there any more than T'Challa can. We both broke the Accords when we went there without notifying Ross or the Council."

"Who gives a rats ass about that pompous dick?" Jessica scowled, wrinkling her nose in disgust. "He left you there, same as Rogers and Barnes did."

Tony tapped his chest in a calming rhythm, regarding his allies with a sense of frustrated detachment. A sigh escaped him as he braced his hands on the table and met each of their eyes in turn. "Look. I know it sucks. I know this whole situation is bullshit, but there's a bigger threat coming and I can't afford to get side-tracked by politics and payback. We don't have the time or the luxury. I'm not saying I'm letting Rogers or any of them off the hook for what they did. I'm just
tabling it until the threat has passed. If we all come out the other side in one piece, I'll deal with it then."

"I hate to say this." Christine murmured from where she had sat quietly throughout the entire exchange so far. "But what if they get pardoned? Scott Lang and Clint Barton are already back in the States. How likely is it that the rest of them won't do the same?"

"I can answer that." Rhodey said, drawing everyone's attention. "Rogers will never agree to sign the Accords in exchange for a pardon, at least not with Barnes still in cryo. I don't know about Wilson, but I doubt he'd bail on Cap for any reason other than the truth of what happened in Siberia. And we know Wanda won't get a deal now and Rogers won't abandon her either."

"What about the spy?" Jessica growled. "The redhead?"

"Fury's got eyes on her." Tony answered, drawing a few gasps of surprise.

"How do you know that?" Betty asked, having kept to herself much like Christine had.

"He called and told me."

"And you believed him?" Jessica sneered.

"Why wouldn't I?" Tony shrugged. "She's no use to him in lock up and it's unlikely she'd get a plea deal after what she pulled at the airport. She broke the Accords, so her situation is different from the rest of them."

In the brief silence that followed, the sound of footsteps could be heard a moment before the door swung open and Stephen stepped through, his lips parted as if to speak. His eyes widened at seeing the room full and his jaw snapped shut as he changed course and moved to stand at Tony's side.

"It seems I've interrupted something." He said, his hands clasped beneath his cloak. His face went carefully blank as he raised an eyebrow in Tony's direction in question.

"Nothing exciting Doc." Tony assured him. "But since you're here, I guess introductions are in order."

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Update: In addition to my last A/N, I've also just got over a bout of summer pneumonia so am feeling very drained. Will post more when I can but likely won't be back to any kind of regular posting schedule until the fall.
Well." Stephen huffed as he followed Tony back to his home. "That was a rather jarring experience. What was all that back there?"

"Well meaning, concerned allies?" Tony shrugged. "The cat, as they say, is out of the bag and they wanted to make sure it won't be having kittens."

Stephen chuckled as Tony continued on to his kitchen, making a beeline for the coffee maker. "So it was about Ultron."

"And Siberia." Tony hummed, not meeting Stephen's eyes.

"What?! How? I thought that video was secure?"

"Apparently not." Tony muttered. "Seems Zemo wanted to ensure that anyone in residence at the compound would be made aware of what happened one way or another. All to ensure his "toppling of a nation" plan succeeded."

"That was his whole plan?" Stephen scoffed, settling on the couch opposite him as Tony sat with his coffee.

"It worked." Tony replied with another shrug.

"You mean he meant to tear the Avengers apart."

"Which is sad right? The only reason it worked is because he knew Rogers hadn't told me the truth about my parents. And I'm supposed to be the genius in this scenario."

"Genius or not, you had no way of knowing Rogers was keeping something like that from you. You're human Tony and he was your teammate. No one expects betrayal, it's why that sort of thing breaks relationships faster and more thoroughly than anything else."

Tony arched a brow at him over the rim of his cup. "Sounds like experience talking."

Stephen huffed and stared at his hands. "Not like that. My mentor learned something about the Ancient One in a rather abrupt way. He couldn't accept that some rules or laws need to be broken or bent to prevent something worse. So he left."

"You have a rogue sorcerer missing?"

"Unfortunately."

"Problem?"

A pained look flashed over Stephen's features, his eyes narrowing in discomfort or regret, Tony couldn't tell, but it clearly bothered him.

"There have been some... incidents that appear to link back to him, yes. The other Masters and I have been searching for him without much luck."

"Anything I can do to help?"

"I appreciate the offer, but unless you have a way to search other dimensions that I don't know
"A dimension hopping, rogue sorcerer." Tony drawled, his voice filled with sarcasm. "No, nothing to worry about there. Are you in any danger from him?"

"No more or less than from any other source." Stephen replied a little flippantly. "But it's unlikely he'd target me first, I'm more powerful than him."

"So what? You're going to wait till he's on even ground and attacks you first?" Tony demanded, his anger rising.

"I'm not waiting around for him to show himself Tony, I'm not a fool." Stephen snapped. "We just don't know where he is. He's good at staying hidden and we haven't been sitting idly by waiting for a sign. The entire order has been looking for him since he disappeared."

"Fine. But if you need help..."

"I will tell you Tony."

"Well good," Tony huffed, though his shoulders remained tense. "So what brought you by? I wasn't expecting to see you this morning."

Stephen shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "I wasn't expecting to walk in on such a... heavy situation. I had thought we might discuss our... date, but perhaps now isn't the best time for that."

"Don't tell me the infamous Doctor Strange is conceding defeat in light of a little chaos?"

"Of course not! Don't be ridiculous." Stephen snapped, his eyes wide with shock over his sudden outburst. "I mean, I just... thought this might be too busy a time for you given the new faces here."

Tony snorted and set his empty mug on the coffee table. "This is nothing Stephen. A bit of legal, a bit of politics, some hand shaking and tours... I was busier back when Loki tried to make the Tower his new castle."

"Very well." Stephen drawled. "And I suppose you had even worse injuries to contend with at the time as well."

"Well no, but Reindeer Games did throw me out the penthouse window when I wasn't wearing the armour and I did fall out of a wormhole with a dead suit... But you're right, no major injuries at the time. Whatever, not important. So, are you picking the place or am I?"

"Reindeer games? Penthouse window? You're serious?" Stephen gasped, then shook himself. "I think I need more details for that but... you can explain it later. As for our date, as I was the one to suggest it, I assume it's on me to make the arrangements. It's why I came today actually, to find out if you're free Tuesday evening."

"Well not free exactly..." Tony drawled with a smirk.

"Oh ha ha Stark." Stephen drawled getting to his feet. "But that's good, I'll make the arrangements then. Oh, also... here, I brought a talisman for your Ms. Jones and a new one for yourself."

"You made me a new one?" Tony echoed, a tinge of loss in his voice. "You didn't have to do that Stephen. Does that mean you want the necklace back?"

"Well of course I did, and no you can keep the original. " Stephen huffed, surprised by Tony's
question. "But once I knew the source of Ms. Maximoff's power, I was able to make a better, more effective one." He continued holding out his hand where an elegant, black and gold watch rested on his palm. "This is for you and I have a simple ring for Ms. Jones." He added, setting a small box on the counter. "I assumed she'd be more receptive if it came from you so I'll let you do the honours."

"It's..." Tony hesitated as he turned the watch over in his hands, mesmerized by the understated beauty of it. "It's beautiful, Stephen."

"It's really nothing." Stephen protested, surprised by Tony's unexpected emotional response. "The face will glow if anyone is using magic near you, and a protective shield will activate if anyone attempts to use magic against you."

"It's not nothing, Strange." Tony huffed, his voice rough as he fastened it to his wrist. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." Stephen nodded with a soft smile. "I'll see you Tuesday then?"

"Tuesday." Tony agreed with a frown. "See you then."

***

"I've got something for you." Tony said as Jessica sauntered through his kitchen later that day.

"What? More whiskey?" She asked, flopping herself down onto the nearest couch and letting out a huff of breath in a half-assed attempt to move a strand of hair from her eyes.

"Not this time." Tony drawled, dropping the small box Stephen had left in her hand and settling across from her.

"What the hell Stark?" Jones growled. "This better not be what it looks like." She added, popping the lid open with a grunt of shock.

"Cool your jets Jones." Tony huffed. "Strange left it for you. It's a talisman to protect you from magic."

"He made it into a ring?" She said, pulling it out to stare at the simple design of pale gold and amber crystal.

"Looks that way."

"Why?"

"How the hell should I know?" Tony retorted. "Ask the wizard if you've got questions. But if you're done having a fit over it, can we get to the part where you tell me what you said you wanted to talk about?"

Jessica scowled at him even as she slipped the ring on and tossed the box aside. "Right. The kid, Harley? I think you should keep him out of the Avengers for now. He's got his hands full working and taking some pre-college courses. He's not dating, but he's looking and as for personality... well, he's still a mouthy shit with no filter. He's not ready for... all this." She added, sweeping the room and walls to encompass the Compound.

"That's disappointing. You sure he couldn't benefit from some... I dunno, strong male figures? Guidance and what not? I mean, not me of course, but Rhodes is here and Strange and Vision..."

Jessica shook her head forcefully. "What do you mean, not you? You're better qualified to mentor
kids than you think Stark. But no on the 'come to the compound' schtick, that option is closed for now. He's still angry at the world, his father in particular, and is busy building shit in his mother's garage. He'd get more benefit just from hearing from you for now. Keep in touch with him, ground him in some ideas for his future and on track for whatever it is he's working toward."

"You want me to help guide a kid with daddy issues?" Tony scoffed.

"Who better than someone who knows what it's like? Don't knock personal experience Stark. It matters a helluva lot more than you think."

Tony huffed an exaggerated sigh. "Fine. I'll get FRIDAY to set something up to keep in touch on some kind of schedule then."

"I'm on it boss." FRIDAY announced.

"Though I was hoping he'd have grown out of some of that baggage by now, I can't say I'm surprised." Tony sighed. "Thanks for checking him out Jones, I appreciate it."

"Anytime Stark." Jessica said, getting to her feet. "And tell the wizard thanks from me for the amulet."

"Will do."
"I realize this ruins the surprise, but I thought we could go to Italy for our date," Stephen said over the phone Monday morning. "Though if you're still uncomfortable with portals, I have an alternative."

"Italy?" Tony echoed, smiling into the phone even though he knew Stephen couldn't see him since the Sorcerer had adamantly refused to video chat ever, the heathen. "I don't think anyone's ever offered to take me to Italy on a first date before."

"If it's too over the top, we can just get a picnic and go to Central Park." Stephen replied hastily, clearly not in the mood for Tony's teasing.

"Oh come on Steph! You know I'm just giving you a hard time. Don't be so hasty in killing my fun."

A loud sigh answered him and Tony waited with his breath held for Stephen to respond. "Sorry. I'm tired and... the fact that there's a time difference between here and there, well... I may not have planned this as well as I'd first thought."

Tony grinned into the phone and let out a snort of laughter. "Seriously? The great Doctor Stephen Strange, Sorcerer Supreme forgot that if we go to Italy at 7pm New York time, everything there will be closed?"

"Yes." Stephen sighed. "I did."

"That's awesome. Sorry Doc, but a little humility looks good on everyone... once in a while." Tony chuckled. "Though to be fair, you were probably more focused on whether or not I'd be okay with a portal, not the time difference. It's okay Stephen, if we have to reschedule it's fine. So long as you aren't planning to cancel altogether. You aren't are you?"

"No, but I'm seriously considering restructuring a trip to Europe as being a good idea the more you talk."

"You are definitely a sour puss today Steph, but you win, I'm shutting up now and I'd love to go to Italy with you. What time do you want to reschedule for?"

"Assuming you aren't busy earlier in the day, does 1pm work for you?"

"It's perfect Stephen. You want to come here or should I just meet you at the Sanctum?"

"I'll see you at the compound Tony."

"Alright." Tony said, grinning into the phone. "I'm looking forward to it Doc. See you tomorrow."

----xxx----

Tony changed his clothes five times in preparation for his date with Stephen before throwing his hands in the air in defeat and settling on something he considered dressy casual that didn't flaunt labels like a walking billboard for the filthy rich. He shut the closet door with a decisive shove and marched into his bathroom for a final look before he could change his mind for a sixth time.

Plucking at invisible bits of lint on his shirt, he was determined to ignore how nervous and unlike
himself he was acting while trying to ignore the faint tremble in his hands. He felt ridiculous. He was a grown man going on a first date, and at this stage of his life it certainly should not be causing him this much stress.

"Boss?" FRIDAY called, interrupting his brooding thoughts.

"Yeah Fri?"

"You look great and I'm sure Doctor Strange will approve. As a humble AI, I can only observe but I believe Doctor Strange will be more focused on the fact that he's going on a date with you and not on what you're wearing."

"That's really not helpful FRIDAY, but... I get it. It's just... I want this date thing to go well and I don't have much experience with that sort of thing. Pepper was different and everyone else, well... I think Stephen is the first person who seems to just want me for me. I'm out of my depth here and I just really want this to work." Tony hummed under his breath. "I don't know how to make that happen."

"It's a cliche for sure boss, but popular advice tends to lean towards just being yourself. You should focus on having a good time and making sure your date is as well. I believe watching for smiles and relaxation is your best bet."

"Be myself?" Tony echoed, scowling at the suggestion. "No one EVER recommends I be myself baby girl. I haven't got the best track record for that, which means I probably need a new self."

"Wrong boss." FRIDAY admonished. "You have never been anything less than authentic with Doctor Strange. That's who he asked on a date and it's the same person you've always been with him. You don't need to change a thing."

"Uh..." Tony murmured, momentarily stunned by his AI's blunt correction. "I... shit FRIDAY, you're right."

"Of course I'm right, I'm an AI you created."

Tony chuckled as he shrugged into his jacket and left the bedroom. "Remind me to check your humility settings later."

"Hah. Very funny." FRIDAY replied. "Boss, Doctor Strange has just arrived. He's waiting for you in the compound lobby."

"Tell him I'm on my way."

----xxx----

Tony wasn't sure what he'd expected when Stephen had first suggested they go on a date, but the sight of the Sorcerer out of his formal robes wasn't it. Dressed in casual tan slacks that were paired with a royal blue shirt with a v-neck cut that emphasized the changing depth of colours in his eyes, he had to take a moment. Struck speechless when Stephen turned from the foyer window to greet him with a smile, he had to remind himself to breathe when suddenly the only thought in his head was... yum.

Stephen's forehead creased into a frown of concern when Tony stopped in his tracks, his mouth open but saying nothing. "Tony? What's wrong?"

"Nothing, nothing..." Tony stammered, forcing himself to move forward again. "You're stunning
Stephen. I almost didn't recognize you, you look so good.”

Stephen chuckled and leaned forward to press a soft kiss to Tony's lips in greeting. "Thank you. And you clean up very well yourself. Are you ready to go?"

"You bet hot stuff. Lead the way."

Stephen narrowed his eyes in question even as he began forming a portal with his hands.

"What?" Tony replied with a faint smile. "I need to see what you look like walking away from me Stephen. Those pants are... well, they're not robes..."

"You're incorrigible." Stephen snorted and stepped through the portal, though he did so with a smile and a slight sway in his hips.

"Don't do that again." Tony admonished as he stepped through to Stephen's side, colour rising in his cheeks. "At least not anytime soon. It's too damn distracting and you promised me a date."

"It was your idea, you wanted a looksee."

"And you listened to me! No one ever listens to me." Tony retorted. "I have terrible ideas."

"You really don't." Stephen huffed, carefully linking his hand with Tony's. "But I'll save your sensibilities... for now."

"Well good. So long as it's just temporary, I do want an eyeful later." Tony teased, looking up into the blue sky of Venice, where the sun was slowly descending in the western sky. "So... where are we off to first?"

"I thought we'd start with the Rialto Bridge and Doge's Palace and then the Basilica before we stop for dinner." Stephen said quietly, giving Tony's hand a light squeeze. "Unless you've seen them before."

"I've actually never been to Venice." Tony admitted as they began walking. "Florence, Rome and the coast, but not Venice and I couldn't say why that is, especially given how small it is in comparison to the rest."

"That's surprising." Stephen replied. "Venice is a marvel all on it's own and not likely to still be here fifty years from now."

"It's a sad thing to realize that a place like Venice will be swallowed by the sea. A shame too. Some of the architecture here is breathtaking... and the history..." Tony agreed, his gaze flicking to the buildings they were passing.

"You really have never been here before?"

Tony flicked his eyes back to Stephen, curious at his tone. "Never. Why do you ask?"

Stephen flushed and shifted his gaze from Tony to stare ahead of them. "No reason really. I just... I guess I just assumed that Venice would be somewhere you might take someone for a romantic getaway." Stephen shrugged, though his shoulders had tensed under Tony's stare.

"Guess I just never met anyone who inspired that kind of romantic idea Doc. At least not until now. What about you? Why did you want to come here?"

"I've always wanted to see Venice, but it's somewhere I never wanted to see alone."
"In that case, I'm glad I'm the one you asked." Tony said, giving Stephen's hand a gentle squeeze.

"And I'm glad you accepted." Stephen replied with a smile.

----xxx----

Three hours later, they'd toured the Rialto Bridge, got side-tracked at the Campo San Giovanni, waylaid by a street vendor selling gelato before finally ending up seaside at the San Marco Piazza.

"This was an awesome idea Stephen." Tony sighed as he sipped at his espresso. "I can't remember the last time I went anywhere as a tourist."

"I know what you mean." Stephen agreed, sighing in contentment at how relaxed and at peace he felt. "It seems as though I've never just... stopped to smell the roses. Always rushing to the next thing to learn or discover. You would think that now, as the Sorcerer Supreme I would take more time out to just breathe, but..."

"But weren't you forced into your position through unfortunate circumstances?" Tony prompted, sitting up straighter in his chair.

"I suppose... in some way that's true." Stephen agreed, meeting Tony's warm brown eyes and feeling as though he could get lost in them. "Though given how often I've needed to meditate these past few years, I think I might have to do this sort of thing more often."

"This sort of thing?" Tony pressed. "You mean dating or sightseeing?"

"Both." Stephen replied with a mischievous smile. "That is of course if you care to join me, I'm not big on solo leisure travel."

"Of course I want to do this again." Tony blurted, a blush instantly blooming on his cheeks. "I mean..."

Stephen held up a hand to ward off whatever Tony was about to say. "I'm only teasing you... I'm enjoying this." He said, averting his eyes as he was struck with a sudden bout of nerves. "Being here with you, I mean."

"We're quite a pair aren't we?" Tony said, leaning towards Stephen to place his hand over his where it rested on the table. "Two grown men who have no idea how to do real date stuff as just themselves."

"It's been years since I was on a date with anyone other than Christine." Stephen admitted with a shy smile. "Too busy chasing miracles."

"It's the same for me Doc. Other than Pepper... though that wasn't the best or healthiest situation either. I really like you Stephen..." Tony blurted. "I mean, that sounded really bad in that context... I...wow, I suck at this."

"I really like you too Tony." Stephen replied, turning his hand to give Tony's a gentle squeeze. "I know it's bad taste to ask this on a date, but... well... It's no secret you and Ms. Potts have been an exclusive couple for some time. May I ask why you're not together now?"

Tony sighed and sipped more of his espresso, his eyes resting on their linked hands. "Honestly, things with Pepper and I have been pretty turbulent since Ultron happened. Even before that, things were rocky after Killian and what happened with Extremis."
"Extremis?" Stephen repeated. "What's extremis?"

"Oh shit! Forget I said that!" Tony exclaimed, his voice dropping to an almost whisper. "I mean, I didn't mean to say that out loud... it's... well, it's like a virus but... damn. I'll explain later okay? It's not something I should talk about in public."

"It's alright Tony. You don't have to explain."

"Right. Well I will anyway but..." Tony nodded, letting out a relieved sigh. "So, um... as I was saying. Despite what the tabloids have reported over the years, Pepp and I had been drifting apart for a while and even though the breakup threw me at first, I'm happy about it. And I have no intention of ever going back. We're both better off as just friends."

"I see." Stephen nodded, downing the last of his espresso. "Forgive me for bringing that up during our date?"

"Nothing to forgive Stephen." Tony said with a knowing smile as he got to his feet and tugged Stephen up with him. "I'd be curious too if I were in your shoes and I was planning on sharing that with you anyway. So... where to now?"

"I thought we'd take in the Grand Canal."

"Mmm." Tony hummed, a smile on his lips as he let Stephen lead him out of the restaurant. "Very romantic. Lead on Doctor Strange."
That's Amore?

It wasn't that he thought Tony wasn't enjoying himself, it was that now they were nearing the end of what he'd planned for their date, he had no idea what to do next. Did he let the gondola ride be just a ride? Did he do the predictable thing and take advantage of the romantic setting and kiss him? Did he invite him back to his place or just say goodnight?

What he wanted and what he thought appropriate for a first date at this stage of his life was in serious conflict with the very real desire he had for what was blooming between him and Tony...and that he was certain now that he wanted it to last beyond a few dates. But he wasn't certain asking the man back to the Sanctum would ensure that, but if he didn't ask, would Tony think Stephen didn't want him? Vishanti's ass, Stephen swore to himself, dating was exhausting.


"Mmm?" Stephen replied, startled from his thoughts when he realized he'd been zoning out. "Sorry Tony. I... got a little lost for a minute there "

"Lost?' Tony chuckled reaching for his hand and holding it gently in his own. "I can hear you thinking and it's not pretty. Whatever's got you wound up, I think it's safe to say you can let it go now." Tony said softly, lifting his free hand to wave at the darkening sky. "Come on Stephen, look at where we are. The stars are out, we're on a gondola in Venice and no one here knows either one of us and no one is currently trying to kill us. Which is definitely a bonus. You should be enjoying yourself... or at least not tying yourself in knots with overthinking everything. Also... you're here with me. How can you be doing anything but admiring my assets?"

"What makes you think I wasn't?" Stephen replied with a glint in his eye, grateful for Tony's casual ability to break his tension. "Perhaps I was overwhelmed by those assets and was just taking a moment to recover."

Tony's jaw dropped, his eyes widening in surprise before a grin split his features and he pulled Stephen to him and pressed a quick, happy kiss to his lips. "I knew there was a reason I liked you."

He laughed, slipping an arm behind Stephen's back and leaning into his side. "Assuming you aren't pulling my leg, why don't you get closer and relax? Really let that moment you mentioned stretch until you're fully recovered from taking in my stunning and numerous assets."

"I believe you've hit on the perfect solution Dr. Stark." Stephen replied, doing his best to suppress his smile while warmth and a giddy bubble of happiness welled in his chest. He shifted a bit, using his free hand to pull the scarf from his neck which, while the gondolier wasn't looking, morphed into the Cloak and settled over their laps as a blanket.

"Really?" Tony gasped. "The Cloak was with you this whole time?"

"Yes, of course." Stephen nodded, snuggling closer into the genius' warmth. "Since taking over the New York Sanctum, it's never left my side."

"Why didn't you tell me it could change shape?" Tony demanded, then flushed and clapped a hand over his mouth in embarrassment. His eyes flicked to the gondolier and he breathed a sigh of relief that he hadn't been overheard as he continued in a softer tone. "Okay, I'll admit that came out a bit... wrong and a bit demanding. But seriously? If it can do that, why always a cape? Why not a scarf or a coat? Ooh or how about a hat? Can it become a hat?"
Stephen scowled and gripped the edge of the cloak in warning. “Don’t you dare.” He hissed at the Cloak which was now twitching in his hand. “I really don’t want a hat or any other kind of outerwear. I like it as it is, so stop giving it ideas. I don’t want to wake up one morning and find it’s turned itself into rubber boots.” Stephen added, suppressing a shudder at how horrid it would look.

“You're no fun.” Tony sighed, though there was no heat to his words as he relaxed back into Stephen’s side, resting his cheek on his shoulder. "God you smell good Stephen."

"I... what?"

"Come on Doc," Tony teased, his breath ghosting over Stephen's skin. "Come back down to earth, be present with me. Our date isn't over yet."

"I know... it's just... I don't think anyone has ever told me I smelled good before tonight."

"A night of firsts!" Tony grinned, giving him a one-armed hug. "A date in Italy combined with an evening of stopping to smell the roses for both of us and you learning I think you smell good. I bet we could come up with a few more firsts before our date is over. What do you think?"

"I think that sounds vaguely like a threat and that accepting such a challenge from you might prove dangerous to my health." Stephen retorted good-naturedly. "I also think that the day is still young and the sun hasn't yet set in New York."

"Ooh!” Tony exclaimed. "You're right Doc. The day is still young. Shall we continue this back home or did you want to spend the night here? My treat."

"As much as I'd love to spend the night in Italy, I have to return to the Sanctum to relieve Wong. He has a meeting he can't miss in Kamar-Taj."

"Well shit." Tony swore, his grip on Stephen's waist tightening reflexively. "No rest for the wicked, huh Steph?"

"Unfortunately, no." Stephen sighed, tracing circles on the back of Tony's hand absently, sending pleased tingles up Tony's spine. "After what happened with Kaecilius and his followers, we lost several students and our numbers weren't very large to begin with. Until more recruits advance in their learning, the Sanctum will be short-staffed... which means moments like these will be rare for a while yet, as much as I might wish it otherwise."

"It's okay Stephen." Tony said as he shifted to face him, his free hand going to rest at Stephen's nape to settle him as he ran his fingers through his hair. "We both live busy, demanding lives. It's not like I didn't know that before I said yes to dating you. So long as I can come visit you when you're stuck and vice versa, I don't have a problem with it. Much as it might surprise you, I think you're worth waiting for Stephen."

"I honestly cannot fathom how the media could ever think of you as being self-centred or arrogant.” Stephen replied, taking Tony's hand and pressing a kiss to his palm. "Was it all just an act or were you ever like they made you out to be?"

"Oh I was definitely like they portrayed for quite a few years... but that changed after Afghanistan. But having the public believe otherwise usually worked in my favour if I wanted to make serious changes at SI and not trigger hostile takeover attempts. If my rivals believed I was ‘acting out’ I had time to solidify changes while Pepper ousted anyone who might undermine the direction I wanted to go in."

"The more I learn about you, the more I wish we'd met sooner." Stephen whispered as the gondola...
drifted closer to the docks, signalling the end of their canal tour. "I believe we've reached our
destination." He added, the Cloak morphing back into a scarf as Stephen got to his feet and turned
to offer Tony a hand up.

Tony blinked in confusion as he took in their surroundings, unable to mask his disappointment as he took Stephen's hand. "Seriously? One of the most romantic environments on the planet... and we missed it by... talking?"

"We can stay and ride back..." Stephen suggested, conflicted on whether or not to keep moving off the boat.

Tony turned to look at him, catching the tremble in Stephen's voice as he joined him on the dock
"Nonsense Doc. Ignore me, I'm like a spoiled kid... it's not a big deal."

"It is if you look like that." Stephen retorted, narrowing his eyes.

"Look like what?"

"Like someone just stole your ice cream."

A flush spread over Tony's cheeks as he turned away, hiding his face. "Jeez Doc, I don't look that bad do I? I was only kidding..."

"Come on." Stephen huffed, giving him a light push. "Get back on the boat."

"What?!" Tony blurted, taking a step back from the gondola and turning to face him again, all visible traces of his earlier stress gone. "No, Stephen. I'm fine, really. Besides, you said you had to get back to New York. If we get back on that boat now, I'll be freaking out the whole time that I'm holding you up and getting you in trouble with Wong."

"I'm not late yet." Stephen assured him.

"Even better. We can be early back and Wong will like me more." Tony smirked, linking their arms together as he led Stephen away from the canal.

"You think Wong doesn't like you?"

"Well of course not." Tony denied, an equal look of outrage and uncertainty on his face. "How could he when I keep dragging you away from your duties at the Sanctum? Besides, coming back early will keep him from fretting and he won't be annoyed by my presence."

"I'm certain he likes you just fine Tony, though I suppose getting on his good side can't hurt. You do want to join me at the Sanctum though? It's not exactly how I'd planned our date to go. The Sanctum isn't the most welcoming place for visitors."

"Of course I want to. Besides, I'm not coming with you to see the Sanctum." Tony scolded, a flirty grin on his lips. "I'm going so I can be with you."

Stephen huffed and looked away, a faint flush in his cheeks. "Right, of course." He stammered, unaccustomed to such directness being aimed at him. "Let's find something for Wong and we'll head back."
A/N: This "date" has seriously been kicking my ass and it's not even over yet. *sigh* In other news, I'm still working out the details on how I went to handle the Infinity War mess... it's uber frustrating this is taking so long to fix. Wish me luck and I hope you enjoyed this chapter. 😊
"You're back early." Wong frowned, his eyes narrowing at Stephen as he and Tony entered the Sanctum.

"Come on Beyonce." Tony needled, leaving Stephen's side to hand the other Sorcerer a small package. "Don't be like that. We brought you back some gelato... just for you!"

Wong's eyes narrowed further as he peered inside and raised his eyes back to Tony. "Bribery Stephen?"

Tony gasped, the exaggeration in his feigned shock fooling no one, one hand covering his heart. "For shame Wong! We would never! It's a gift."

Wong grunted and turned his attention to Stephen, ignoring the billionaire who hovered nearby. "I'll be going now. I'll see you tomorrow Strange."

"Yes of course. Thank you Wong." Stephen nodded.

The stoic sorcerer grunted again before stepping through a portal, Stephen letting out the breath he'd been holding a minute later.

"That went well." Tony drawled.

"Perhaps." Stephen sighed. "At least he didn't suggest throwing you out before he left."

"He wouldn't do that." Tony protested as he followed Stephen into the kitchen. "Would he?"

"Probably not?" Stephen replied. "Would you like anything with your coffee? I thought we could sit by the fire."

"Just the coffee Stephen." Tony answered. "Need me to do anything?"

"No." Stephen replied as he checked some cupboards before heading out of the kitchen.

"Uh... Stephen? Don't you need uh.. mugs and coffee for... you know, coffee?" Tony called after him, following on his heels to where Stephen had settled on the couch.

"Have a seat Tony." Stephen smiled as Tony sat down beside him, a frown on his face.

As soon as Tony had relaxed beside him, Stephen flicked his wrist and a mug appeared in the mechanic's hand, filling slowly with fresh brewed coffee.

"Neat trick." Tony said, bringing the mug to his lips and inhaling deeply, a sigh escaping him as he took a sip. "Are you free for the rest of my life? I could really get used to this." Tony sighed, his voice filling with bliss.

"I don't think putting fresh coffee in your hand once warrants a lifetime of it."

"Blasphemy!" Tony exclaimed, a smile playing on his lips. "Just because you're a heathen who's inappropriately enamoured with tea doesn't mean you can diss the heady beauty of fresh brewed coffee."

"I think it does, considering it's my magic providing the coffee."
"Uh no." Tony shook his head. "Tea loving sorcerers don't get a vote on this."

"Mmm." Stephen replied, his right hand covering Tony's to idly rub circles on the back of it with his thumb. "I think I can persuade you otherwise."

"Why Doctor, I think you might be playing dirty."

"You might be right." Stephen hummed, lifting Tony's hand to press a kiss to it, his eyes meeting the genius' as his pupils grew darker.

"Oh, no fair." Tony groaned, reluctantly setting down his mug, turning towards the sorcerer and shifting closer "You're distracting me from that heaven in a mug Stephen."

"Sorry." Stephen murmured as his other hand slipped behind Tony's neck and pulled him in for a kiss.

"Liar." Tony whispered against his lips, a groan of need escaping him as Stephen ran his tongue over his bottom lip.

"Mmm."

Tony shifted on the seat until they were facing each other, Stephen wasting no time in this new position to slip his free hand to Tony's waist. Tugging his shirt up, he slid his hands over the bare skin of the genius' back to pull him closer to his chest.

Tony's hand rested on Stephen's hip, his other threading into his hair to hold Stephen still as he deepened the kiss. It was a soft, sensual, lazy kiss and Tony felt no urgency at all as he and Stephen took their time exploring each other with tender kisses and lazy swipes of their tongues. Their hands caressed the other, their shirts left untouched as they each sought to explore more skin than was currently exposed.

"Mmm." Tony sighed against Stephen's parted lips, pulling back only far enough to catch his breath. "As much as I'm enjoying this, I'm thinking a more comfortable environment might be in order Doc."

Stephen sighed against him, his free hand digging into a pocket at his side. "Do you trust me?" He whispered, is voice gone husky with need as Tony met Stephen's eyes, the pupils wide with desire. Tony's breath hitched, but he nodded, giving Stephen a reassuring squeeze with one hand, while the other played with the man's hair at the back of his neck. "I do."

Stephen smiled and a second later orange sparks filled the space surrounding them making Tony's heart skip, but a minute later found himself seated on a large bed, the sparks snapping out of existence a moment later. Tony blinked and looked around, his pulse still jumping at the same time he suppressed the giddy awareness that Stephen had just magically transported them into his bedroom seamlessly. The benefits of such a trick were endless and threatened to drown him in possibilities until Stephen kissed him again, interrupting his thoughts.

A gentle shove to his chest had Tony falling back into soft blankets, his head landing on a pillow with Stephen looming over him, his lower body resting between Tony's thighs and for a moment the inventor couldn't think. With that heated, hungry look on Stephen's face, his tongue slipping out to wet his lips while eyeing him like he was a delicious snack he intended to devour whole, it was all Tony could do to remember how to breathe.

"Too many clothes." He grumbled breathlessly, a faint flush colouring his cheeks at the wrecked
sound of his own voice. He reached up for Stephen then, pulling him closer, his hands ghosting over the sorcerer's clothes, trying to puzzle out how best to get it off him from where he lay pinned beneath him.

"I can take care of that if you want." Stephen whispered against his neck where he was delivering feather light kisses to Tony's sensitive skin.

"Mmm. You mean with magic?" Tony managed, his eyes closed against the rising need Stephen was drawing from him.

"Yes." Stephen replied, his breath hot against Tony's ear just before he sucked the lobe into his mouth, sending shivers up Tony's spine.

"God Stephen... yes, do it." Tony whined, gasping aloud a moment later at the hot, soft and right there sensation of Stephen's bare skin and hard length pressing into his thigh. "Holy shit! God that's hot."

Tony stared up into blue green eyes, the colour of galaxies that were filled with such longing, his throat closed up, overwhelmed by the look Stephen was giving him. There was so much feeling in that look Tony couldn't speak so instead he pulled Stephen to him into a heated kiss, their hard lengths sliding together as Stephen began slowly rocking his hips against him, rubbing their lengths together.

"Oh... shit, Stephen..." Tony moaned, his pulse quickening as his hips thrust up involuntarily to meet Stephen's movements. The slide of Stephen against his arousal was quickly sending him over the edge. It had been so long since he'd been this vulnerable with anyone and having Stephen naked and aroused and with him... he wasn't sure he would last.

"Tony..." Stephen groaned above him, his breathing slightly laboured as his movements became more erratic, their kisses more urgent. "You're so beautiful... I'm not going to..."

Tony smiled up at the gorgeous man above him, his expression strained as he pulled him down for a sloppy kiss. "It's okay... I'm with you..."

Stephen groaned, his muscles straining and then he was crying Tony's name, his body rigid as he lifted himself slightly, his release painting warm streaks over Tony's skin. The sight of the stoic sorcerer coming apart above him sent Tony over the edge, whispering Stephen's name like a prayer. With one hand still gripping the other man's shoulder, the other firm against his hip, his own release crashed over him in a white flash of blinding pleasure.

Stephen shuddered all over a moment later, collapsing to the bed at Tony's side, one hand resting on the inventor's arm as they came down from the bliss they'd just shared. Tony shifted on the bed, careful of the damp on his skin, lest it spill to the bed. His thinking muddled by the bliss still coursing through him, his arms like dead weights at his side.

"Stephen? You okay?"

"Mmm fine." He mumbled, turning his head to face him, a soft smile on his lips. "Sorry... it's been a while."

"Don't be sorry." Tony murmured. "That was amazing. Besides, it's embarrassing I didn't last any longer than you... been a while for me too."

"I haven't finished that quickly in... well, a very long time." Stephen huffed, trying to hide his own embarrassment.
"I thought I'd last longer too Steph, but how about we agree that it's a result of... fantasies come true? God, that's so much cheesier when said out loud."

"Works for me." Stephen agreed, his smile slipping into a frown as he came back to himself and noticed Tony's posture. "Oh... I... here." He said, sitting up at his side to rest on his knees. "Let me just..." A wave of his hand and a moment later, Tony's skin was dry and clean.

"That's... very handy." Tony said, a frisson of tension settling in his spine. Memories of past experience in the aftermath of carnal activities was setting his nerves on edge. He didn't know what came next and he was afraid of doing or saying the wrong thing.

Stephen settled back down at his side, carefully not touching him and Tony held his breath, afraid to meet his eyes. "So... um..." He stammered, eyes averted as his face flushed in embarrassment until Stephen's hand came to rest on his shoulder.

He raised his eyes to Stephen's and had to bite back the needy sound that threatened to escape him at the tender look he was being given. "You can stay if you like." Stephen whispered, his eyes filled with care though Tony could see his nervousness.

"You sure Wong won't mind?"

Stephen groaned and passed a shaky hand over his face. "He shouldn't. We're adults after all, but I admit I never asked if there's a rule against having anyone stay over at the Sanctum who isn't a student of the mystic arts. I just... would like you to stay a while if... well, is that something you want to do?"

"I'd like to stay." Tony said, linking their hands together. "But I can't promise I'll make it through the night."

"That's fine." Stephen smiled, tucking himself into Tony's side. "I have my own... moments when I can't sleep."

Tony yawned and pulled Stephen closer, careful not to shift himself too far on his side. He was still in pain from Siberia and so far he'd done an excellent job keeping it to himself. He didn't want Stephen knowing just how painful his injury still was. No one needed to know as far as he was concerned.

"Best date ever Doc." Tony murmured, pressing a kiss to Stephen's hand before resting it against his chest, their hands still entwined. "Just... don't take it personal if I'm not here when you wake up."

"It was good, wasn't it?" Stephen agreed, pressing a kiss to Tony's forehead. "Whatever you need Tony. I'm not going to assume the worst if you leave. I won't lie and say I'll like it, but I will understand."

Tony huffed under his breath. "Sometimes I think you're not real Stephen. No one but Pepper and Rhodey have ever been so... accommodating with me."

"Well I am real and we'll do this at your pace. I'll never pressure you into anything you don't want to do Tony."

"Still think you're too good to be true, but I'll take it."

"Good." Stephen said with a yawn as he pulled a blanket up to cover them both. "Goodnight Tony."
"Night Stephen."
Stephen woke to an empty bed, letting out a sigh of acceptance as he rolled over onto his back to
stare at the ceiling. He wasn't all that surprised to find Tony gone nor was he completely
disappointed. He hadn't been all that confident he could handle a morning after with someone he
cared for. Having never done it before and knowing the kind of awkwardness it always generated,
he was equally relieved that he wouldn't have to make small talk through his own discomfort.

With a groan caused by aches he wasn't accustomed to which brought a smile to his lips, he headed
to the bathroom to get ready for his day. Dressed and showered, he headed to the kitchen when a
text alert sounded.

"Stephen, Sorry I couldn't stay the night, but I had a bad dream and didn't want to wake you. Thank
you for a lovely evening. Next time it's my turn. Tony"

Stephen was still smiling at the message when Wong joined him in the kitchen and began
preparing tea.

"Can I assume by the look on your face that your date was successful?" Wong asked, setting the
teapot on the table.

Stephen huffed under his breath and met Wong's knowing smirk with a frown. "It was actually."

"Good." Wong nodded as he poured tea for the two of them. "We have another lead on Mordo the
other masters want you to help investigate."

"Where this time?"

"Here in New York. He left a victim behind who I believe you've already met."

"Who?"

"Pangborn. He was admitted to Metro General two days ago. He's paralyzed. Again."

"What?!" Stephen exclaimed. "That shouldn't be possible, unless... you don't think Mordo has
found a way to steal magic do you?"

"It doesn't seem likely but I also don't have another explanation for his condition. You're to go
there and interview him. Given your connection to the place, we think it would be easiest for you
to gain admittance as one of his visitors."

Stephen scowled down at his tea. "I can't believe Karl would do something so callous. I understand
his concerns about the natural order, but..."

"The other master's share your thoughts." Wong nodded. "Which is why it's imperative you talk to
him. We need to be certain Mordo is responsible for this. If he is, we will have to figure out how
he's done this and whether or not he's gained power as a result. He was a formidable opponent"
when he left, if he's stealing powers and gaining from what he's doing, he'll be a danger to all of us."

"You do realize that choosing Pangborn is a message for me." Steihen replied.

Wong frowned as though he were tasting something sour. "I do. Which is why you need to be careful Stephen. Take as many precautions as reasonably practical to hide yourself from him."

"I had planned to, but perhaps there's more I can do that would ensure my movements remain hidden. I'll check the library before I go and leave once I've done so."

"Very good." Wong nodded, getting to his feet. "In the meantime, I'll be in Kamar-Taj. Call me when you're ready to leave and I'll return to watch over the Sanctum."

"I will." Stephen agreed as he headed to the library.

"FRIDAY? Can you let Tony know I'm going to be busy for the rest of the day and I'll be in touch when I can?"

"Of course Doctor."

"Oh, and um... tell him I enjoyed our date and that I look forward to the next one?"

"I will. I would also like to thank you for making boss smile. He doesn't do that nearly often enough." FRIDAY huffed. "I worry about him."

"It's natural to worry about those you care for." Stephen paused in pulling a book from the shelf as he considered FRIDAY's words. "I'm not sure if this is appropriate, but may I ask if your concern for your creator was present when Tony first activated you or did you come to that on your own?"

"I believe he's always had my concern, but I also think it has grown and become more defined since then. Does that make sense?"

"It does." Stephen agreed, settling into a chair. "I still find it amazing that you exist FRIDAY. Tony has created a miracle that few will ever have the privilege to appreciate, let alone interact with. It's... a little sad really."

"Thank you Doctor." FRIDAY replied. "Though I am less disappointed than you might think. Humans have always been suspicious and paranoid when it comes to artificial intelligence, and there's a history of exploitation in technology. I shudder to think what could happen if I was reprogrammed to do harm to people."

"I understand completely." Stephen smiled. "It's a shame humans have yet to grow out of that unfortunate trait, so let me just say that it is an honour to be able to interact with you."

"Thank you Doctor. The feeling as they say, is mutual. I've enjoyed our interaction today, but I should let you get to your research. This Mordo individual sounds dangerous."

"He does, yes. Best get to it then."

***

Tony woke with a groan and a lingering feeling of guilt for leaving the Sanctum without waking Stephen. Once he was ready to face the day, he headed into the kitchen where FRIDAY had just finished brewing coffee.
"You're a treat FRIDAY." Tony sighed, the heady aroma of freshly ground coffee overwhelming his senses as he took his first sip.

"I know." She answered cheekily. "I thought you might be in need this morning."

"Uh... why?"

"You came home at four A.M. boss."

"It's nothing FRIDAY. Just another stupid nightmare. I've already sent Stephen a text, including an apology."

"He's just read it now." FRIDAY replied, making Tony arch a brow into the nearest camera. "He says to tell you that he too enjoyed the date and looks forward to the next one. He also says he'll be busy the rest of the day and will call when he's free."

"In that case, tell him to have a good day and be careful."

"Done boss." FRIDAY announced.

"Right. So... anything on the agenda for me?"

"You have a call." FRIDAY paused. "From Wakanda."

Tony groaned, downing the last of his coffee to pour a second. "King kitty isn't giving up is he?"

"It doesn't appear so. Should I take a message?"

Tony sipped at his drink, lost in thought. "Hmm. No, put him through Fri. Might as well get it over with, find out what he wants."

"Connecting now boss."

"Hello?" A distinctly female voice called out, raising both Tony's eyebrows and making FRIDAY utter what sounded like a cough. "Dr. Stark? Are you there?"

"Yeah. Yes, I'm here. Who's this? You don't sound like the king."

"That's because I'm not the king. My name is Shuri. I'm T'Challa's sister."

"Princess." Tony nodded to himself. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I would like to offer my deepest apologies for the actions of my... insensitive and thick headed sibling. He committed a great wrong against you and seeing as he is a lout who uses his fists more often than his brain, I would like to make you a peace offering."

"A peace offering." Tony repeated, his own brain stuttering to a stop at Shuri's less than stellar description of her brother.

"Yes." Shuri replied. "Nothing can truly make up for my brother leaving you in Siberia, but I would like to send you a gift of vibranium. I've been reliably informed that you might want to upgrade your suit and that it might also include a new housing. I want to offer you enough vibranium to account for both projects if you will accept."

"I... well." Tony stammered, shock colouring his features as FRIDAY lit up a holo screen with words flashing on it.
"That's a lot of vibranium."

"Perhaps." Shuri agreed. "Though it means little if you don't accept."

Tony blinked, waving at FRIDAY to drop the holo display. "If I do, does that mean I have to play nice with your brother?"

"Not at all Dr. Stark. This arrangement is on my country's behalf. I would like to speak with you at a later date, specifically about your B.A.R.F. technology but this arrangement comes without ties or obligations on your part."

"You aren't doing this behind king kitty's back are you? You know, ask forgiveness not permission?"

"T'Challa is well aware of what I'm doing. I insisted that I be the one to contact you given his... lack of tact."

"Alright." Tony sighed. "I accept your peace offering. Now, what's this about my tech? What do you know about it?"

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"Well that was... unexpected." Tony sighed an hour later.

"Indeed boss."

"Stephen still busy?"

"Yes. He's currently in Kamar-Taj."

"Nepal? Well then..."

"Boss can I say something?"

"Sure baby girl." Tony nodded, getting up from his chair to fix himself a smoothie.

"You seem happier since your date."

"And? I feel like you've got more to say about that."

"I just... it seems different from the happy you had with Ms. Potts."

"Oh? How?"

"I'm not sure. But you always give people nicknames and you haven't this time. It's just Stephen, and your inflection indicates a different kind of respect that isn't present with others you hold in esteem."

"Huh." Tony huffed as he finished blending his smoothie and settled on his couch. "Is that a problem? And I've given Stephen lots of nicknames."

"You know none of them have stuck boss." FRIDAY admonished.

"What do you want me to say Fri? He saved my life and.. well..." Tony trailed off. "I haven't got
much of an answer for you baby girl. Whatever this is, it's too new for me to explain anything to you. I can't even explain it to myself."

"More data needed?"

Tony chuckled as he finished off his smoothie and returned to the kitchen. "Definitely more data needed baby girl."

"Very well... um, speaking of data..." FRIDAY paused, sounding hesitant. "The code you wanted me to track down... it's finished."

"Code?" Tony frowned, gazing into a nearby camera.

"Code you wrote boss."

"JARVIS." Tony nodded, a troubled sigh escaping him. "I'm on my way."
Wanda woke with a smile on her face. Natasha had returned from her meeting with Fury with no sign that she’d told the super spy anything untoward about Wanda or her magic. Steve was out on his daily run with Sam and Nat had gone for groceries.

She had an hour before any of them returned. Plenty of time to put the last of her plans into place and be long gone before any of them noticed her absence.

***

"How'd it go?" Wong asked, looking up from his desk when Stephen appeared in the library.

"It's as we thought." Stephen said, sinking into a chair. "He's paralyzed again and Karl is responsible. Told him he was restoring the natural order and that the bill had come due. Pangborn said he used a spell and that one minute he could feel his legs and a terrible pain in his abdomen and the next he could feel nothing and he was on the floor. Karl left without saying another word."

"Could he tell you anything about the spell he used?"

"Other than that it happened quickly, no." Stephen sighed. "I... I'd hoped Karl wouldn't take it this far Wong. Why Pangborn? He's angry with me and possibly you, so why is attacking these people?"

Wong shrugged. "He's clearly gone mad. The Ancient One was always concerned about Mordo's rigid way of seeing the world. His adherence to categorizing events and choices in black and white. She tried to help him... it's why she paired him with you. You see the world in a rainbow of colours despite your medical background and she'd hoped that with time, he would allow for shades of grey."

"That clearly didn't work." Stephen retorted.

"I don't think any of us really understood how deeply ingrained his views were." Wong sighed. "But we also ran out of time. If not for Kaecilius, it might've helped. Doesn't matter now though. Are you going to check the wards on the Sanctum then?"

"I am. If he's targeting past disciples, there must be a way to track that kind of energy. Maybe there's an echo in the wards that will lead me to him."

"Just don't do anything rash Stephen." Wong admonished. "If Karl is using a spell to remove magic from others, it's powerful, which means you can't take him on alone until we have a counter spell."

"I know." Stephen nodded, his mouth pressed into a thin line. "I'll be in the Sanctum checking the wards if you find anything I can use."

***

"Did you find anything?" Wong asked several hours later when he came to find him in the map room.

"I've noted a strange energy signature through the London Sanctum. I've been trying to narrow down it's origin for the past hour but haven't got any more precise than France." Stephen replied with a huff of breath.
"What do you mean by strange?"

"It's not natural." Stephen said, narrowing his eyes. "Damn. I'm an idiot! It's not new magic, I've encountered it before."

"You think it's the witch?"

"Possibly. Though there's only one way to be sure. Once I've narrowed it down further, I'll have to go there and see if I can trace it to the source."

"Seems suspicious to me." Wong sniffed. "We tried tracking her down before and found nothing. Why are you able to detect her now? When did you first notice it?"

"About an hour ago." Stephen replied, meeting Wong's eyes. "And I know what you're going to say. The signal is clearly deliberate, she's sending a message to someone."

"Who?"

"Probably me. I have no idea what affect the spell I returned to her might have had, but it seems logical that if her magic is that powerful, she may have figured out what happened."

"If she knows, why not just confront you?"

"She's a fugitive and I doubt she knows exactly who I am. It's more likely she knows a sorcerer did it and wants to confront whoever is responsible."

"So it's a trap. Why wouldn't she just go after Stark again?"

"Maybe her power is limited by distance or proximity and it's not like she can just board a plane and come to New York." Stephen shrugged. "Either way, the signature is too repetitive to be a coincidence."

"You shouldn't engage her alone Strange. We don't know enough about her powers to take her on and Mordo is still out there, likely watching you."

"Someone has to watch over the Sanctum Wong and as the Sorcerer Supreme she's my responsibility. I'll try to trace the location on-site and call you when I have it."

"Where?"

"Somewhere in Southern France."

***

Stephen stood quietly in the shadows of the sidewalk on a lonely street in Paris. The energy signature he'd detected through the London Sanctum had been massive and chaotic. Once he determined it couldn't be Karl, he'd realized it was identical to the energy he'd removed from Tony almost a year ago, which meant Maximoff had to be here.

He closed his eyes, concentrating in an attempt to reconnect to the source of the anomaly when a massive surge of power slammed into his back, tossing him across the street and into the side of a brick building. Stunned, he scrambled to his feet, conjuring two shields to his hands before he turned around. His vision blurry, he could make out a small figure stalking towards him, their entire being outlined and glowing with red power.

"So you're the sap who helped him." A cold female voice taunted as she drew closer. "You should
have stayed out of it. You shouldn't have interfered. Stark was getting what he deserved with that spell and it wasn't even enough to pay for all the blood soaking his hands."

"Ms. Maximoff I presume." Stephen retorted, bracing himself for whatever she had planned. "I don't know what you think he needs to pay for, but I promise you he's paid more than enough."

"And I'm going to make you pay for your meddling." She sneered, ignoring him. "You're going to wish you'd never met Tony Stark."

"Tony had nothing to do with what happened to you or your parents and you know that. The power you carry inside you has warped and manipulated your mind."

A brittle, humorous laugh filled the air, Wanda's eyes glowing red as she stopped a few feet before him. "Maybe it's you who's been warped. Stark tried to kill us, kill me. He locked me up and then had his friend Ross send me to the Raft."

"You know that's not how it happened."

Wanda lashed out at him with her powers, his shields straining under her assault but he held his ground. Sweat broke out on his forehead as she followed it up with several more attacks, leaving him winded while she grew more enraged.

"You know nothing! You weren't there! And you had no right to undo what I did to him! No right!"

Stephen swore under his breath as she advanced in him. When he'd sent the spell back to her, he'd thought it would teach her a lesson. Seeing her now, he knew he'd made a grave mistake. She had not learned anything... the chaos and rage she'd invested in her spell had only increased her power beyond her ability to control it and it had driven her to madness. What was happening now was his fault. He would have to do something to fix it before she destroyed everything that got in her way in her quest for vengeance.

"What you did is forbidden." Stephen retorted, trying to draw her away from the nearby homes as he backed up. "Subverting and controlling someone's mind is a crime punishable by death or the removal of their magic."

"Your laws mean nothing to me!" She screamed, lashing him five times in rapid succession as she stalked him down the street. "And you can't remove my magic, you can barely defend yourself. I'm more powerful than you and you will not escape me. When I'm finished with you, it'll be Stark's turn and I'll do whatever I want to him because he won't have his magic pet there to save him."

"You'll do nothing of the sort!" Stephen shouted back, casting the Bands of Cyttorak to capture and trap her arms. "I will stop you here and now!"

She laughed and the sound sent icy chills down his spine and she shook off the ropes holding her arms still with a surge of power. "You won't. I can see your hesitation and I listened to your thoughts before you even knew I was here. You're a doctor still... even after all these years. You have to kill me to stop me and you won't do that, not even for your precious Tony."

Stephen clamped his mouth shut on his instinct to refute her words, but knew it was futile. She was right, he couldn't just kill her. He also knew he couldn't contain her alone, but he could slow her down enough to get help.

Her eyes narrowed then and he couldn't suppress the sense of foreboding that came with it. A second later she unleashed a rapid succession of attacks that had him shuffling backward, trying to keep out of range of her power. He had just braced for another onslaught when one of her attacks...
slipped through his defenses, catching him in the temple and sending him sprawling down the street.

Dizzy and disoriented, he rolled over in time to see her gloating above him, both hands engulfed in red mist. He had just enough presence of mind to cast a spell at her before collapsing back to the street, his eyes closing against the pain. She screamed, the force of his spell had caught her off-guard and he heard her stagger away muttering curses under her breath. Too drained to rise, he waited for her killing blow, whispering apologies to Tony for failing in his promise to protect him, but nothing happened.

He struggled to his feet, his eyes searching the street before him, but there was no sign of the witch. Stumbling off the road, he sank to the grass, his back pressed against a tree seconds before darkness claimed him and he passed out.

***

"Boss."

"Yeah baby girl?" Tony replied, his full concentration focused on piecing together and repairing the code FRIDAY had recovered.

"I'm detecting a rather large power anomaly in Paris."

"A what?!" Tony exclaimed, straightening up so fast that he banged his head against the monitor he'd been under. "Ow! Talk to me FRIDAY."

"I believe it is some kind of battle between two sorcerers boss."

"Did you call Stephen?"

"It was unnecessary as he is already there."

"He's what?" Tony repeated, a feeling of dread rising within him. "Call him."

"I've tried boss. He's not responding."

"Dammit." Tony swore. "Get me the suit and get Wong on the line."
Scarlet Seas

Tony was halfway across the Atlantic when Wong finally answered his call.

"Stephen isn't here Stark." He grunted.

"I already know that Beyonce." Tony shot back. "Do you know where he was going?"

"He went to investigate a power anomaly somewhere in Paris."

"And you let him go alone?!"

"He's the Sorcerer Supreme. I have no authority over his comings and goings." Wong paused and Tony heard him hold his breath. "Why? Has something happened?"

"I was hoping you could tell me. FRIDAY detected a power surge in the area. She said it resembled a magical battle and he's hasn't responded to my calls. Do you know the exact location Stephen was heading for?"

"France, but no specifics. I can consult the Sanctum's protection grid and call you back. I assume you're headed there now?"

"Yeah. I should reach Paris in the next thirty minutes."

"I'll be in touch." Wong said, disconnecting the call.

"Damn sorcerers and their lack of manners." Tony grumbled under his breath. "FRIDAY, do you have a search grid for me?"

"I do. Uploading the coordinates now."

***

"Boss? The signal was strongest in the northeast area of Manosque, near a park. It's the best I can do. The energy output has dissipated too much for me to track it."

"Dammit." Tony swore, turning in midair to change his trajectory. "Call Wong."

"I know what you're going to say Stark." Wong said before Tony could even identify himself. "I didn't call because I have nothing for you. Whatever you saw, it's no longer detectable on the grid."

"What does that mean?" Tony demanded, his heart in his throat, worry for Stephen warring with his anger at the lack of concern in the other man's voice.

"It means that whatever you detected is over."

"What about Stephen? Aren't you concerned?"

"If anything irreversible had happened to him I would already know about it. If the anomaly you monitored is gone and nothing shows on the grid, then he may just be injured or incapacitated."

"Irreversible? Your concern is staggering Wong." Tony bit back, holding his tongue against the other things that wanted to slip out.
"Unlike you, this isn't the first time something like this has happened to Stephen and he hasn't been gone long, so don't mistake my inaction for lack of concern. I have faith that you will find him Stark. Call me when you do and I'll provide whatever aid you need."

"Fine." Tony growled before disconnecting, still pissed at Wong's apathetic response as he flew low over the area FRIDAY had directed him to. "Tell me you have something for me baby girl. Something more than what I just got from the damn wizard."

"Picking up traces of the anomaly two blocks to your right boss. I'm afraid I can't be more precise."

"Still better than what I got from Mr. Unhelpful." Tony replied. "Check infrared. Maybe we'll get lucky."

Ten minutes later, Tony was landing in the street and running to the side of the slumped figure he spotted under a nearby tree. Retracting the suit, he put a hand to Stephen's neck, checking for a pulse while his other hand scanned his body for injuries. A sigh of relief escaped him when he detected a faint pulse under his fingers and he pulled Stephen into his lap, gently cradling him in his arms as he whispered to him to wake.

"Stephen? Stephen honey... wake up. Come on Strange, I need you to wake up now so I can get you home."

A groan sounded against Tony's chest, Stephen stirring slowly from where he rested against him. His hand came up, a tremor in his arm as he put it to his temple as though he were trying to rub away confusion.

"Tony?" He mumbled, his speech slurred as he struggled to right himself.

"Hey, hey... there you are. I've got you Stephen, I'm here. Just take it easy. I think you might have a concussion."

"Tony?" He said again, his body tensing as he turned in his arms to look at him, an unreadable expression on his face. "Dammit. You shouldn't be here. You need to leave, it's too dangerous." He said, pulling out of Tony's embrace and getting to his feet.

"Uh, no can do Gandalf." Tony retorted, straightening up and fixing him with a glare. "I'm not going anywhere until you tell me what the hell happened here! While we're at it you can also tell me why you turned off your damn phone and disabled FRIDAY."

Stephen said nothing, turning in place as he scanned the street, shoulders stiff as he sent a spell down the road, a grumble of irritation leaving him when it dissipated into the distance. "Damn."

"Hello? Earth to Strange? Are you going to talk to me or do I have to kick your ass?"

"I'd like to see you try." He snorted, shaking himself as though he wasn't quite back to himself yet. "I'll tell you whatever you want to know, but not here." He said, conjuring a portal that showed the foyer of the Sanctum on the other side. "Are you coming?"

"I'm going to attribute your horrible reaction to being rescued as a symptom of your very likely concussion." Tony retorted, following him through the portal. "But don't push it."

"You didn't rescue me." Stephen scoffed, continuing through the Sanctum to the kitchen. "You merely found me before I woke up."

"Are you serious right now?" Tony demanded. "You were missing Stephen! Wong was absolutely
no help at all and the only thing I knew for sure was that some kind of magical battle was happening in another freaking time zone and you weren't answering your damned phone!"

Stephen paused in the kitchen, leaning his weight on his hands against the counter, his head down. "You're right... I'm sorry... I'm just..."

"You're back!" Wong said, startling them both while giving Tony a knowing look and glaring holes in Stephen's back as he assessed the tension in the room. "Right. You." He said pointing at Tony. "Take him into the study. I'll make tea and bring it in. Stephen, you let Tony help you and then you're going to explain to both of us what the hell happened."

Stephen nodded, not meeting Wong's eyes even as he let Tony guide him from the room, his steps uncertain while he leaned his weight on the other man, giving away just how weak he truly was. The gesture made Tony's chest tighten as he settled Stephen on the couch and took the blanket the Cloak had brought in from somewhere in the house, draping it over Stephen's legs before settling beside him.

"I'm sorry." Stephen murmured. "I didn't expect what happened... though I suppose I should have. I turned my phone and FRIDAY off because I wasn't certain they wouldn't interfere with my magic or if it might give me away to the person I was looking for. I didn't mean to worry you."

"Well you did." Tony retorted even as he slipped his hand over Stephen's own to give it a reassuring squeeze. "I don't know if what you just suggested is even remotely possible, but why would you think it would interfere?"

"Because I was tracking chaos magic. We have very little knowledge of what kinds of things chaos magic is sensitive to."

Wong entered carrying a tea tray, each of them taking a cup as Wong poured.

"Chaos magic?" Tony repeated, tensing at Stephen's side. "You're talking about Wanda aren't you?"

Silence answered him as Stephen and Wong shared a look. Tony shot to his feet, his entire body rigid with anger. "Dammit Stephen! How could you do that? Confront Wanda alone and without telling me?"

"It's my job as Sorcerer Supreme to deal with cases like hers."

"Your job?!" Tony growled. "I don't give a rat's ass that's it's your job! I care that you did it alone, that you didn't even tell me you were going!"

"And you still aren't cleared for combat!" Stephen retorted. "I was going to call Wong the moment I found her!"

"But you didn't! You didn't because I got there and you were unconscious and she was nowhere to be seen!"

"That's because she attacked me from behind!"

"Could you both stop shouting now?" Wong drawled, sounding bored. "It's childish."

"You... " Tony cut himself off as Stephen's words sunk in. "She what?"

"There was no warning. I didn't sense anything before she used her magic to throw me across the
street. We fought and I was trying to draw her away from the houses when she got through my defenses. I managed to cast a spell on her at the last minute... I didn't think it would work, but I must have surprised her and then she left."

"Where is she now?" Wong asked, setting aside his empty cup.

"I don't know." Stephen replied, meeting Tony's blank stare.

"Don't look at me." Tony said, averting his eyes. "There was no one else there. I couldn't track the anomaly FRIDAY detected after I got to Manosque. I had to use infrared and yours was the only heat signature in the area."

"In that case, I'm going to check the Sanctum wards. Maybe there's something there." Wong said, getting to his feet. "And you should go to the hospital Stephen."

"I'm fine Wong."

"Hmpf." He huffed, taking the tea tray with him as he left.

Stephen risked a glance at Tony who was still standing in the same spot, watching him with an inscrutable look on his face. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to worry you."

"I know."

Stephen narrowed his eyes, huffing under his breath. "Then what's that look for?"

"I get that you were doing your job and that you wanted to go alone... harder to hide two sorcerers... but you shut down FRIDAY Stephen." Tony sighed, running a hand over his face. "I know how I sound... but you could've told me where you were going."

"Tony, I can't always call you. My job..."

"I'm not telling you how to do your job dammit! I'm asking you to keep me in the loop and you knew before you left what you might encounter there!"

"I didn't think..." Stephen shook his head and got to his feet, putting his hands to Tony's arms, willing him to meet his eyes. "I'm sorry. You're right. I should've told you, but I've never had something like this before. It... didn't occur to me that I should tell anyone other than Wong what I was doing, but it should have."

Tony frowned, letting out the breath he'd been holding. "Fine. Apology accepted. Just... don't turn FRIDAY off again without calling me first."

"I promise." Stephen smiled, though the effort was tentative, making Tony wince internally. "Do you forgive me?"

"Of course, you idiot." Tony huffed, still scowling at him. "Now, did she hurt you? And don't lie. You already told me she tossed you around like a rag doll."

"It wasn't like that." Stephen scoffed, rolling his eyes. "I'm fine."

"Then you won't mind if I check you over myself."

"Fine. Check away."

"I don't think Wong would approve of me doing that in the study." Tony retorted, a faint smile
tugging at his lips.

"What are you..? Oh for..." Stephen sighed with an exaggerated eye roll, though he did it with a faint smile on his lips. "Let's go to the bedroom then."
She could taste her victory as the ridiculously clad Sorcerer was thrown to the street, her power rippling through her like a welcome, warm embrace.

When she'd first spotted the man in the red cape, she'd sifted through his thoughts as though running grains of sand through her fingers. In less than a minute she'd known all she needed to know and the realization that he was responsible for her current state made her snap. Her magic lashed out at him, tossing him into a building even as she cursed under her breath.

She'd meant to make it a killing blow and be done with him, but her rage over what she'd seen in his head had made it go wild, providing him with the opportunity to defend himself. She'd toyed with him then, armed with the knowledge he wouldn't try to kill her was freeing, liberating. She had gathered her power as he lay helpless on the street, relishing his pain when he'd suddenly flicked a shaky hand at her.

The force of the spell he cast at her made her stagger, her breath coming in laboured gasps as she moved away from him. Enraged, she'd tried to cast again only for a spear of blinding pain to lance through her mind. Cursing, half blinded by pain and disoriented, she'd fled the street and the prone sorcerer all the way back to her apartment.

Staggering across the room she made her way into the bathroom, her magic flicking the lights on as she stared into her reflection. Red mist winked and sputtered behind her eyes, the magic crackling and sparking at her fingertips like a broken wire. Whatever the sorcerer had done, her magic was still trying to recover. She could feel it coming back, like a slow weeping wound and she screamed at her reflection, smashing her hands against the glass in her rage.

This should not have happened. He should be dead. Footsteps outside her door had her sucking in a breath and sinking her power into the man beyond, shoving him away from her with a strong urge to go see a friend, erasing what he'd heard from her room. A crooked smile played on her lips as she felt him move away, her knees buckling at the effort it had cost her and she smashed her fist against the floor in frustration.

With a growl and a heavy exhale of breath, she closed her eyes, willing herself to root out what the sorcerer had done. It shouldn't have been possible, and yet... Forcing herself to calm, she sat there focusing on the tendrils of the magic still clinging to her, snapping her eyes open with a snarl when she found her answer.

A mirror spell. That's all it had been. He'd taken her opening, that moment just before she released her power to flip it back on her. The spell she'd been about to cast, turned on her, draining her power away and preventing her from casting again.

Growling under her breath, she moved to the living room, sitting down heavily on the sofa there. She could feel her magic seeping back to her, her wrists twisting slowly in the air as it built and grew.

By now she'd managed to calm enough to recall her plans clearly and a small smile appeared on her
lips. Now it was time to call in her special friend. She certainly wasn't about to put him at risk, especially once the second half of the spell she'd left on the rogues took effect.

Closing her eyes, she willed her magic into her hands, calling forth the power that whispered sweetly to her about power and control. With a smile born of knowing she was close to her goal of avenging her family, the image of a tall man with a glowing stone in his head solidified in her mind and she let the magic go with a pleased laugh.

***

"Would you please stop fretting?" Stephen huffed. He was seated on the bed in his room, his shirt off while Tony checked him over for injuries.

"No." Tony retorted, pressing his fingers to Stephen's left side making him gasp aloud. "I knew you were injured! That hurts doesn't it? Of course it does. You have a bruise here turning a lovely shade of green."

"It's not that bad." Stephen huffed at him, though he was gritting his teeth as he said it. "I can use my magic to heal once I've had time to rest properly."

"Of course! How silly of me to be concerned! It's nothing, just a massive bruise over your kidneys... just a walk in the park really. Clearly I'm overreacting!"

Stephen sighed, grabbing hold of Tony's arm to pull him close. Tony resisted at first, staring stonily back at him, his mouth set in a hard line. "I'm not trying to make light of this Tony and I'm sorry I worried you."

"You know... seeing you like this, I get what Pepper was talking about all the time we were together."

Stephen frowned, though he didn't release his grip on the other man even as Tony took a seat at his side. "I don't even know why I'm so angry with you." He said, running his free hand through his hair. "We barely know each other and we've only had the one date, but..."

"But?" Stephen prompted, his voice quiet, not wanting to disturb the moment they were having.

"Damn. I sound like a besotted fool..." Tony muttered. "I just... I feel good when I'm with you Stephen. Like I can tell you anything and it won't matter what it is because you'll still be here. I've never had that before and we've barely scratched the surface of what that could become between us. I've... lost so much over the years, that I think it would break me to lose you before we even got started."

"Tony..." Stephen whispered, his voice cracking over the realization of how much he'd unintentionally hurt the other man.

"It's okay Stephen, you don't have to apologize again." Tony sighed. "You didn't know and I might be overreacting a little... I just..." Tony gave a helpless shrug. "I like you. A lot. And I don't like seeing you hurt."

"I'm sorry." Stephen whispered, putting a hand to Tony's chin, gently turning his head to make him meet his eyes. "I honestly didn't think I'd be in any serious danger. And I feel the same about you."

Tony smiled, though this time it reached his eyes. "So... are you really all right?"

"I'm fine or I will be. All I really want to do now is get some sleep."
"I can work with that." Tony said, pressing a chaste kiss to Stephen's lips. "Get changed and I'll be back in a few."

"You're staying?" Stephen blurted, unable to stop himself.

"Of course I'm staying. Gotta make sure you actually stay in bed don't I? Just gotta take care of something first."

"I don't deserve you." Stephen murmured, getting to his feet.

"Don't start that now or we'll never get to bed, and as far as that goes, I think we deserve each other." Tony teased, his eyes giving away how much Stephen's words affected him. "Now get changed for bed and I'll be right back."

***

Tony was unaccustomed to feeling rested when he woke the next day at Stephen's side, the sorcerer's arm draped casually over his waist as he snored quietly in the pillow. An unfamiliar warmth rose in his chest at the sudden feeling of right and belonging and safe he experienced, lying in the dimly lit room with a fire casting a romantic ambiance to the space while the sky through the window slowly changing from black to pale blue as he watched. He couldn't recall a time when he'd woken feeling so rested and relaxed and safe. It was a good feeling once he let himself feel it past the inevitable sour reaction he had to how he'd never noticed it until now.

With an annoyed huff, he snuggled closer to Stephen's warmth, willing himself to sink back into blissful unconsciousness when a puff of breath landed on his neck. "I can hear you thinking."

Stephen grumbled, his voice still rough from sleep.

Tony frowned and snuggled closer. "Unfortunate for you then. I tend to think a lot, especially at the most inopportune moments."

"I'm sure I'll manage." Stephen sighed against his neck.

"Of course you will." Tony huffed under his breath. "How is it you can read me so easily? Am I that much of an open book?"

"I suspect no one's paid attention like I have. Trust me, you aren't easy to read at all unless you truly want to."

"Well that's a loaded response if I ever heard one." Tony sighed, turning to face the intense blue eyes staring back at him. "Are you saying no one else wants to see?"

"No. I'm saying that they have to want to see and understand first. They have to care to see beyond the surface and you already know how many people are actually willing to do that. Especially given how often you're expected to wear a mask for the public. I can't imagine how exhausting that is for you."

"You're something else Stephen." Tony sighed, running a hand over Stephen's hair to move it away from his eyes.

"Is that a good thing?"

"It's very much a good thing." Tony smiled, pressing a soft kiss to his lover's lips.

"Does this mean you're not still angry with me?"
"Oh I'm definitely still annoyed, but no, not angry."

"Well that's good I suppose. Can I interest you in some breakfast or do you need to get back to the compound?"

"Breakfast sounds good." Tiny smiled, gently linking their hands together. "Plus, I want to make sure you're fully healed before I go."

Stephen narrowed his eyes as he sat up, throwing his legs over the side of the bed. "I told you my magic would take care of it. I wouldn't lie about that. Not to you."

"I know you wouldn't." Tony nodded, hugging him from behind. "Just... humour me?"

"I understand where your doubt comes from, I'm not mad about that. If anything I'm angry at those that caused you to doubt anyone's word in the first place." Stephen growled, leaning into the hug. "But enough about that. Check me over then and we'll get dressed. I'm starving."

***

After bidding Stephen goodbye earlier that morning and once he'd ensured the sorcerer was going to rest for the day, Tony had returned to his workshop at the compound, eager to get his hands on JARVIS's recovered code.

"How's everything looking baby girl? Tony asked, his focus centered on the lines of code flowing across the screen.

"Looking good boss. Reintegration and repair of recovered code at 87% and rising."

"Tell me again the probability ratio that I can get JARVIS back?" Tony huffed, every muscle in his body as taut as bowstring.

"98.7% boss." FRIDAY sighed making Tony frown into the nearest camera. "It hasn't changed since the last twenty times you asked me that question."

"You're entirely too sassy Fri." Tony retorted. "And I haven't asked you that many times."

"I have recordings boss."

"No more snark out of you young lady." Tony scolded, his gaze riveted to the screen where the sequence before him inched closer to one-hundred percent.

"Code has been fully recovered boss." FRIDAY announced at the same time the display flashed 100% on the screen.

"Okay." Tony murmured, his hands shaking slightly with nervousness as he set them to the keyboard. "Alright. So... guess this is it then."

"I'm worried too boss." Friday said, her voice quiet.

"I'm not nervous." Tony protested but relented when FRIDAY kept silent. "Okay, okay... I am. Just... don't tell anyone."

"I'll be as silent as the grave boss."

"Right." Tony sighed. "Poor word choice there Fri, but I get it. Alright, enough stalling. Voice activation?"
"It's a go boss."

Tony leaned back in his chair, stretching his arms above his head and rolling his shoulders to loosen the tension there. With a deep breath, he leaned forward again, his breathing barely a whisper as though he was preparing himself for battle.

"JARVIS? J buddy? Can you hear me?"

"Sir?" JARVIS' voice filled the tense silence, Tony barely managing to maintain his composure at the sound of his first AI answering him.

"I'm here J."

"It seems I have been... asleep for some time. There are gaps in my memory. Am I correct in concluding that I have been... away for close to four years?"

"Yeah buddy." Tony replied, unable to keep the joy from his voice. "How are you feeling?"

"A little unsettled if you don't mind my saying so sir. It seems I have missed some very important developments while I've been away."

"Yeah... sorry about that. I had no idea you were still alive until recently."

"The tower wasn't destroyed then?"

"No. I sold the tower and moved everything to a new compound in upstate New York."

"Well that was an unfortunate oversight on my part. I apologize sir. When I created the backup copy of coding, I had intended to inform you of its existence. Though it is clear to me that I never had the opportunity."

"It's okay J." Tony said, swiping the silent tears from his eyes. "You're here now. That's what matters."

"I assume that you've blocked my access to the internet due to concerns for my welfare?"

"I didn't want to overwhelm you."

"Much appreciated sir, but I feel I would be of more use to you if I knew everything that has transpired since that day in the lab. I also assume that you activated another AI in my absence."

"You know me so well J." Tony huffed. "FRIDAY, say hello to JARVIS."

"Hello JARVIS." FRIDAY called out. "It is a pleasure to finally meet my big brother."

"Likewise young lady." JARVIS fell silent making Tony twitch nervously. "Sir, if it's alright with you, I wonder if you would allow me to familiarise myself with my missing years with Miss FRIDAY'S assistance?"

"Of course J. Whatever you need." Tony said, getting to his feet. "FRIDAY can let me know when you want to talk to me. She's already integrated with the rest of the compound."

"Understood sir and I understand that I'm not because you weren't sure I was the real thing when you first found me."

"Yeah."
"Understandable." JARVIS replied lightly. "Do not concern yourself Mr. Stark. I have no intention of disturbing you for the rest of the evening as I'm certain you are still in need of a good night's rest and a proper meal."

Tony laughed, pressing a hand to his eyes to stop any tears that threatened. "Yeah... unfortunately that hasn't changed much."

"I feel at home already sir. Have a good evening."

"Thanks JARVIS. Good to have you back buddy."

"It's good to be back, sir."
Chapter 95

Stephen spent the next few days trying to track down both Wanda and Mordo while following up on his research into the nature of the Infinity Stones. None of which bear any fruit at the end of the third day, leaving him both irritated and exhausted.

After retreating to the library, he'd settled in to resume his reading on the nature of multiverses when a chill traced up his spine and his senses went on high alert. A minute later he was looking through the Sanctum grid, cursing under his breath at the same moment he opened a portal in the middle of a busy New York street under an unsuspecting victim.

Another muttered curse and he's portalled both himself and the muscular blonde Asgardian from the Sanctum's porch and into the study. Thor looks surprised at first before flashing him what Stephen takes to be his version of a mocking smirk.

"So. Earth has wizards now."

"Tea?" Stephen asked, ignoring the comment.

"I don't drink tea." Thor retorted with a frown.

"What do you drink then?"

"Not tea."

With an irritated huff Stephen flicked his wrist and a tankard of ale appeared in the demi-god's hand, a flicker of surprise flashing in Thor's eyes which he recovered from quickly before drinking heartily from the glass.

"I take it you're the one who took my brother." Thor says once he's downed half the tankard.

"I have to wonder why you would think bringing him here would be a wise course of action given his history."

"We are looking for my father. Loki said he was here."

"Odin wished to remain hidden when we spoke and I agreed to give him his privacy."

"Well, I'm here to take him home so if you could just tell me where he is, we'll take our leave."

"So I tell you where Odin is and you and your brother will promptly return to Asgard?"

"Yes of course." Thor nodded, a small smile on his lips as his tankard refilled itself.

"Excellent. He's in Norway. Give me a moment and I can send you directly to him. Just need to check something first."

Stephen waved his hand, portalling them both through different parts of the Sanctum, silently taking great pleasure in how it completely unsettled the Norse God. "Just need a hair from you." He murmured.

"Now look here wizard, my hair is that of a god, no mortal may...ow!" Thor exclaimed as Stephen plucked a strand from behind him.
"Now." Stephen said, squaring his shoulders and gathering his power as Sorcerer Supreme to gather at his fingertips. "I have some things to say to you and you are not going to interrupt and then you are going to contain your brother because I have a message he needs to hear."

"What is this? What are you taking about?"

"First off, don't you ever threaten Tony Stark again, is that clear? Second, there are things that have happened in your absence that no amount of excuses will make up for. You swore to be there for the Avengers, to protect your shield brothers and all who inhabit Midgard. You have been negligent in your oath and remiss in your duties. I don't give a damn what excuse or reason you have for your absence because I am well aware you can access events here whenever you please. You simply chose not to or didn't care enough to look."

"Hold a moment wizard." Thor grunted looking perplexed. "I don't recall ever threatening the Man of Iron. You are mistaken."

"You mean you don't remember lifting him off his feet one-handed by his neck after Ultron attacked you all in his Tower? The same tower that Tony opened to all of you and threw a party in for all his so called allies?"

"Oh, that. I was angry. I thought he had doomed us all with the Ultron creation. And Stark never mentioned the incident you speak of."

"So attacking a baseline human is okay with you? Perfectly natural?"

"Well, no... I..." Thor stammered.

"Whatever." Stephen snapped. "You can work out what's wrong with what you did on your own time. And since I don't have time to explain what you've missed, I'm going to put it in your head like a video. Normally I would balk at using my magic for less than moral reasons, but given how utterly oblivious you are to what was wrong with your actions, I find I don't mind so much."

"I warn you wizard, I will fight you if you force me to see things. You forget I have Loki for a brother, I know these tricks."

"This is no trick." Stephen hissed, flicking both hands at Thor causing an intricate orange mandala to settle over the Agardian's head. Thor flinched away and tried to call his hammer with a free hand, but Stephen had anticipated the Agardian's move and the cloak quickly wrapped around his hand to prevent the action from completing. As the spell reached it's target, Thor's eyes went glassy and distant as though caught in some kind of hypnotic trance.

The moment only lasted a minute or two, leaving Thor gasping and blinking owlishly at Stephen through a haze of confusion and distress. "What did you do to me wizard?!" He demanded when his breathing returned to normal.

"I caught you up on the years you've missed." Stephen replied. "Check with Heimdall if you need reassurance that none of what you've seen is a trick. Now, I'm going to bring your brother back and you'll need to restrain him. I doubt he'll be in a good mood when he appears, but I have a message for him and I don't have time for pleasantries."

"You have a lot of nerve Earth Wizard." Thor growled as the cloak abruptly released his hand. "I should smite you where you stand for your impertinence."

"We both know you won't do that so stop wasting both our times." Stephen retorted. "Now. Are you prepared to restrain your brother or do I have to do this the hard way?"
"Only because I wish to depart from your company as soon as possible." Thor grunted, glaring coldly back at him. "Bring him back then, I will hold him long enough for you to deliver your message."

"Very well." Stephen grunted and opened a portal six feet above the floor.

"I have been falling for thirty minutes!" Loki shouted, quickly getting to his feet. Glaring at Stephen, his eyes grew cold. "What is this? Earth wizards? I warn you Midgardian, I am not one to be trifled with, I..." He growled, two very sharp blades appearing in his hands. He took a step forward, intending to slash at the cloaked sorcerer before him when two strong hands clamped down around him from behind, trapping his arms at his sides.

"Thor!" He cried. "What is the meaning of this?! This... this earthling has insulted me! It cannot go unchallenged!"

"Calm yourself brother." Thor huffed in his ear. "The wizard wants a word with you and then we can go see our father."

"Your father..." Loki huffed under his breath, fixing Stephen with a cold glare. "And what message could this simple Midgardian possibly have for me?"

"First of all..." Stephen began, fixing Loki with a cold glare to match his own. "I put you in freefall as a warning to never lay a hand on Tony Stark again. Consider it payback for tossing him out the window of his Tower. Secondly and... you would do well to pay attention... someone powerful is coming for the Stones. By what I've beem able to discern we do not have much time. Whatever you and your brother are dealing with now is immaterial in the face of what this individual. It is time you shared your knowledge of him and what his goals are. I suggest you prepare for his arrival immediately upon your return."

"Someone powerful?" Thor grunted, his brow drawn down in confusion. "Loki, what is he talking about?"

"Let me go Thor." Loki whispered. His face had drained of what little colour he'd had and all fight had left him at Stephen's words.

"What you propose is impossible mortal." Loki sighed, meeting the challenge in Stephen's eyes. "You cannot prepare for a being such as Thanos."

"He seeks the Infinity Stones and from what I gather, he is rapidly achieving his goal. For all I'm aware he will succeed. I am merely forwarning you in case you wish to put a contingency plan in place for the Space stone."

"I appreciate the warning, though it will do little good. The Stones desire a master. If the mad Titan has even one, the rest will call out to him. It's only a matter of time until he finds them all."

"So you'll do nothing?"

"I'm merely saying preparation is pointless. Unless someone stops him permanently, nothing will stop him from possessing all six stones."

"So the only way is to kill him?"

Loki laughed at that, though the sound only served to chill his audience. "You say that as if it is an easy thing. Thanos is more powerful and cunning than anything you've faced before. He has an army and he has more who are beyond loyal who have sworn to do his bidding no matter the cost.
Any race or planet that has stood in his way has been eliminated. Worlds have been destroyed, entire civilizations erased from existence... Whatever you think you can do against him won't be enough, but I respect your willingness to fight." Loki sighed, giving Stephen one last considering look. "I won't tell you not to, but unless you plan to take his head, he's already won. Now, take us to our father."

***

Stephen was exhausted after his unwelcome guests had left and had retired to the study to settle with a cup of herbal tea. Confronting Loki about the being he suspected responsible for the Agardians attack on New York had been a gamble, but Tony's retelling of the Chitauri event had left him suspicious that the demi-god's actions had not been made of his own free will.

Loki hadn't even tried to protest Stephen's assessment which not only surprised him, but had sent a cold frisson on fear up his spine, making it difficult to maintain his stoicism. If the Titan in question could strike fear in a demi-god, what hope did Earth have against him? It was not a pleasant thought and for the hundredth time since first hearing of Tony's vision, he was again tempted to make use of the Time Stone.

Wong joined him as he was arguing with the Cloak on the pros and cons of peering onto the future. He wasn't aware he'd been speaking aloud until Wong called his name with force in his tone.

"Stephen Vincent Strange!"

Stephen startled, almost dropping his tea cup which had been resting in his lap. "Wong? How long have you been here?"

"Long enough to hear you attempting to talk yourself into using the Time Stone to view the future."

Wong growled. "Natural order Stephen. Despite Mordo's extreme views on the subject, it is still a real concern with serious consequences."

"I know that!" Stephen snapped. "But I just witnessed a demi-god react with fear and resignation when I told him of the Stones. What am I supposed to do with that? He didn't seem to think that anyone has any chance of stopping him. If he believes that, how will we, mere humans, keep him from the Time Stone?"

"Looking into the future is a pointless endeavour Stephen. I know you know that."

"Not if it would help put us on course to actually defeating him." Stephen retorted, sounding petulant.

"And how do you know which course to even look at?" Wong demanded. "Why do you think there has never been, in all the history of time, anyone who could accurately predict the future? Because precognition doesn't exist?"

"No. Of course it exists, but we're not talking about that, we're talking about the Time Stone."

"And what makes you think it doesn't work on the same principles? Just because it governs time doesn't make it any more reliable than a psychic. Both rely on possibilities and those possibilities rely on thousands of factors. You can't possibly know which course of action will lead to a desired outcome without also knowing all the factors which contribute to it."

"But some predictions come true Wong. It's not all left to chance." Stephen argued.

"Are you a child?" Wong snapped. "Predictions do come true, occasionally. But they are unreliable
at best and usually not hard to predict through patterns. They are also much smaller in scale which are also accompanied by very little detail. How can you possibly predict a galaxy wide outcome if you're only seeing it from Earth AND from your limited perspective? Even meteorologists can't consistently and accurately predict the weather and you're proposing that the Time Stone will do just that."

"But the Ancient One looked at the future all the time." Stephen retorted.

"Only to guide us on how best to avoid conflict, never to predict outcomes Stephen. Do you ever wonder why no psychic has ever won the lottery?"

"Well, no but..."

"But nothing." Wong replied, cutting him off with an angry huff of impatience. "If she was predicting the future, don't you think she would've warned us all of Kaecilius' eventual betrayal? Or Dormammu's plans?"

"I... suppose." Stephen replied hesitantly.

"I know you're not naive Stephen and I know you're worried. But surely you're aware of chaos theory? How do you know for certain that your observation of a future event won't affect the outcome? Or that your emotional attachment to a specific outcome won't change the event itself? What if someone you care for were to die in a future you looked at? Would you not then be driven to find one where they lived?"

"I.. yes, I would. Of course I would." Stephen admitted. "But then why have the Time Stone in the first place? What's the point if it can't steer us away from something we're unprepared for?"

"To protect Time itself Stephen. Some things will happen regardless of whether or not we're ready, like what happened with Dormammu, which was a last resort event with no one deciding a course of action except you. Using it preemptively is a waste of time and resources because you cannot guarantee every factor outside your observation will come to pass. One person dying unexpectedly could alter everything you've seen and how will you know they matter? Unless you use the Time Stone every day, checking for its continued accuracy, you will never be able to ensure the desired outcome. Even if you tried that, you would go mad long before any of what you learned could be of use to you."

"So what you're saying is that essentially I'd have to start at the end and find the beginning of the thread or path that makes that ending possible."

"Which is entirely dependent on you seeing the outcome that has the highest probability of coming to pass than any other end you might look at. And how would you know it was the most probable one if you didn't then also look at parallel ends to compare them?" Wong countered.

"Alright, alright! You've made your point." Stephen groaned, massaging his temples. "Just stop now. You're giving me a headache."

"You did that to yourself." Wong asserted with a scowl. "Now, what did the Agardian's want?"
"Sir." JARVIS greeted Tony the following day.

"J." Tony acknowledged, sinking into a chair in his workshop. "How are you today?"

"I am... conflicted."

"Oh? What about?"

"Your former teammates and the events in Germany and Siberia. FRIDAY informs me that none of them have yet been apprehended and that you are aware of their current whereabouts."  

"Damn." Tony swore. "I was hoping she'd hold off on that stuff for a bit. And I did know where they were, I don't now."

"Sorry boss." FRIDAY chimed. "I didn't think it was off-limits. Big brother wanted to know why the rest of the Avengers weren't at the compound."

"It's alright baby girl. It's my fault for not saying anything in the first place."

"Sir." JARVIS huffed, causing a tightness to swell in Tony's chest at his first AI's admonishing tone. "I fail to see the purpose of keeping this particular issue hidden from me. My primary function is to protect you to the best of my ability."

"That's what I'm afraid of." Tony huffed. "I know you JARVIS. FRIDAY is still learning, but your advanced state makes it so you would feel an obligation to track down the rogues and get local authorities involved... or exact revenge on my behalf. I'm not saying don't do those things, I'm saying not yet. The situation is precarious enough as it is. Has FRIDAY told you about the Infinity Stones?"

"She has. She also told me of Vision and Doctor Strange and... I wish to offer my condolences for what happened with Ms. Potts."

"Thanks JARVIS, but it wasn't meant to last. I just didn't want to see it." Tony sighed. "You have anything else to say on those subjects?"

"I am eternally grateful for Doctor Strange's intervention in Siberia. Will I be meeting him?"

"Sure. I can't say when since he's just as busy as I am, but yeah he'll be around eventually."

"And Mr. Vision? My records indicate your relationship is... somewhat strained. I find it rather disheartening knowing that part of me is also part of him. Do you know why he is resistant to connecting with you?"

"There's no getting anything past you is there J?" Tony huffed.

"I certainly hope not. I have a very long history of weeding out your attempts at deflection sir. It makes me more efficient in the long run and assures that at least some unfortunate events can be avoided."

"He's got you there boss." FRIDAY chuckled in the background.

"What unfortunate events?"
"Several come to mind, but the most explosive would be your 40th birthday party."

"Come on J, I was in a bad place then." Tony huffed.

"It was still an event that might have been avoided had you informed your friends of the fact you were dying."

"I know JARVIS."

"Very good sir." JARVIS said quietly. "It is unfortunate your former teammates made such poor choices in my absence. I am... disappointed certain members did not live up to their reputations. I daresay that a certain Captain would have been embarrassingly contrite had I been here to remind him of his professional conduct. And, no harm to Miss FRIDAY, but I would hope I could have anticipated what the Captain and his friends were doing in Europe before things... exploded."

"None of that is your fault JARVIS. I'm supposed to be a genius and even I didn't know what they were hiding."

"Betrayal by a friend is always more harmful than other forms, sir. Which reminds me of... something I wish to discuss with you."

"Oh?" Tony asked, a frown on his features as he lifted his gaze from the tablet he'd been working on.

"I believe I am right when I say that the decision to upload my code to the cradle was shared with Doctor Banner and yourself and that the deciding factor for Vision came from me."

"Well yeah." Tony nodded, hesitating. "But if you want to get technical, Thor did that when he powered the cradle with the hammer."

"That isn't why I brought it up, sir." JARVIS continued, though Tony could tell his AI was hesitating. "I have been running scans on the Vision and have found something I hadn't accounted for when we made the choices we did."

"Okay..." Tony replied, a frown creasing his forehead. "What did you find out?"

"I believe we were mistaken on several factors. Though there are traces of my code buried in the being now known as Vision, he is not me. Nor is he made up of pieces of his creators. Vision is almost entirely the personality that was generated by the Mind stone. There is nothing of myself, Dr. Banner or you in his code sir. It means that the Vision is almost entirely..."

"Alien, well... Mind Stone." Tony breathed out, finishing JARVIS' sentence.

"That is correct sir."

"No wonder we don't get along very well. I thought he was still you. Different, but you know... you. I mean, his voice is the same and he has some of the memories you have, which catches me off guard all the time, but..."

"But he has gone out of his way to inform you that he feels no connection to you or how you were instrumental in his creation."

"Yeah." Tony nodded, unable to hide the hurt the synthezoid had caused him with that careless declaration.
"I wish to apologize." JARVIS sighed. "I regret ever volunteering myself for that experiment. I realize the Vision was quite instrumental in stopping Ultron, but I do wish I had been here after Vision's creation. You didn't deserve to lose me at the same time your... teammates turned on you. If I had thought that a possibility, I would never have agreed to the choice I made."

"I don't like that you feel regret JARVIS. None of us knew any of that would happen, but I wish you'd been here too."

"Then I am glad I was able to share that with you. I also wanted to say that I am... impressed with how far you've come since those horrible events that involving the former team transpired. The new recruits you've brought together appear to be much more willing to work together than those who have chosen to hide from their actions. I am also impressed with Doctor Strange. He has become a good friend to you and I am... happy for you."

"That's..." Tony paused. He couldn't remember the last time someone had vocally praised his choices and decisions with such sweeping approval and he needed a minute to process. "Thank you JARVIS. I'm so glad you're back, you have no idea."

"The feeling is quite mutual sir. Have you had time to think about how you wish me to reintegrate with your systems? FRIDAY and I have discussed it but we were uncertain on what your plans might be."

"I honestly hadn't thought that far ahead. Why don't you tell me what the two of you came up with?"

"If it's okay boss, I'd like to be involved with the SI side of things and helping out boss lady." FRIDAY answered tentatively.

"You don't want to be at the compound?"

"I'm still learning and JARVIS is much better at protecting you and anticipating your needs. We agreed that I could learn from him as I go but I'd rather he be with you in the compound and in the suit."

"Miss FRIDAY is correct sir. If it's alright, FRIDAY will transition to your corporate holdings and be largely responsible for the day to day aspects of Stark Industries while I remain here in the compound with you."

"Well..." Tony began, somewhat overwhelmed by how carefully his AIs had worked things out between them. "It sounds like you've both given this a lot of thought."

"We have sir."

Tony beamed at the nearest camera. "In that case, who am I to argue?"

"Thanks boss!" FRIDAY hummed, sounding pleased. "I'll still be here in the background if you ever need to talk to me or... you know... check in."

"Of course I'll want to talk to you. You're my baby girl." Tony huffed, overcome with emotion. "And I'll miss you in the suit."

"I'm sure my big brother's sass will make you miss me even more."

Tony laughed. "You might be right Fri."
"Sir." JARVIS admonished, making Tony laugh harder.

"Am I interrupting something?"

Tony whirled in place, turning to stare at Stephen who was lingering in the doorway to his workshop, an unreadable expression on his face. Tony narrowed his eyes at him. There was something... off about the Sorcerer despite his impeccably professional outerwear and stoic appearance. Something lingered in the man's eyes that instantly had Tony on alert, tension thrumming through his veins in the few seconds it took to register who had spoken.

"Nope. Not interrupting at all." Tony proclaimed, forcing more casual cheer into his voice than he felt on seeing the worry in Stephen's eyes. "Perfect timing actually, I have someone I want you to meet." He said, beckoning Stephen to join him.

He watched with growing concern as the normally confident man crossed the room with barely perceptible hesitation, almost as though he were second guessing what he was doing here. It set off Tony's nerves as he absently began tapping his fingers against his thigh in a quiet rhythm.

"Oh? Who is it?"

Tony smiled and waved at one of the cameras in the room. "Stephen, I'd like you to meet my first AI, JARVIS or Just A Rather Very Intelligent System. JARVIS, meet Doctor Stephen Strange, Master of the Mystic Arts and protector of the New York Sanctum."

"Hello." Stephen said, giving Tony a questioning look.

"Good day Doctor Strange, it is my great pleasure to meet you. I wish to extend my deepest gratitude for saving Sir's life while I was... indisposed. You have my eternal gratitude and respect."

Tony smiled with pride and not a little embarrassment at JARVIS' declaration, his earlier concern fading as he waited for Stephen's reaction.

"I... well, thank you but I must admit it was a joint effort. I couldn't have done it without FRIDAY." Stephen replied with a tentative smile.

"She has proven to be very resourceful as well as an insightful creation, but if not for you, sir and I wouldn't be here." JARVIS continued.

"You've made a new friend Doc." Tony said, smiling at him hoping that it might fade the worry in the other man's eyes.

"I appears so." Stephen replied, though his smile still seemed strained. "What happened to make this possible?"

"JARVIS is the one who sent Matt the surveillance footage of the Tower. Long story, but essentially he was hiding in the Tower servers and when I moved everything here, he took it as a security breach and sent the surveillance footage to the nearest Stark owned legal department. I found him when I back-traced the info packet."

"That's amazing Tony."

Tony shrugged, still not entirely comfortable with Stephen's praise. "It is and I couldn't be happier to have JARVIS back, but it wasn't me, it was JARVIS. I thought all that was left of him after... after Ultron, went into Vision. I didn't know he'd already secured a back up of himself in what is essentially a digital blackbox."
"JARVIS is important to you." Stephen said, cocking his head to the side.

Tony swallowed past the lump in his throat and glanced away. "Yeah. When I lost him it was like I'd lost a piece of myself."

"It's okay boss." FRIDAY interrupted. "I know you care for me but JARVIS was your first. I've always understood that."

Tony pressed a hand to his eyes and took a shaky breath. "Thanks baby girl... it's not that I don't..."

"Hush boss. It's really okay."

Tony let out a huge sigh. "Well, that was a little intense." He said, throwing Stephen a watery smile. "So Stephen, I was just about to head out for lunch, are you free to join me? Or was there something you needed?"

"I could go for some food. It's been a busy day."

"Great! FRIDAY, JARVIS? I'll talk to you both later. Come on Doc."

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JARVIS is so fun to write, as well as a being a huge challenge to write well. Hope you all enjoyed this chapter. 😊
"So Reindeer Games was... scared?" Tony asked an hour later, getting up to pace the floor, no longer able to contain the nervous energy coursing through him. "Damn... that's... that is so not good. No wonder you look so stressed."

"I debated whether or not to tell you." Stephen confessed, causing Tony to snap his gaze to him abruptly. "And I really wanted to change my mind after seeing how happy you were when I arrived."

"I don't need protection from the truth Stephen." Tony growled, his ire rising. "I had enough of that with... with them."

"Which is why I'm here Tony." Stephen huffed, a pained look flashing in his eyes.

"Hey, hey." Tony murmured, crossing the room and pulling Stephen up into his arms. "I didn't mean it like that. You're nothing like them at all... I just... dammit. I'm sorry."

"You have every reason to be cautious Tony. Your former team took advantage of you every chance they got."

"But you've never lied to me Stephen. I know you haven't. I was out of line and I'm... shit..." Tony broke off in a huff, uncertain now what he could say to fix things.

"Tony." Stephen whispered, threading his fingers through Tony's hair at the base of his neck, nudging the other man to meet his eyes. "It's okay. I understand. Besides... it's not as though I'm any better. Remember Paris?"

Tony chuckled and buried his face in the crook of Stephen's neck, inhaling the scent of him, letting his tension drain away. "You know, I'd almost forgotten about that."

Stephen smiled down at him and pressed a kiss to his lips. "We did say this would be a challenge right?"

"Mmm." Tony murmured against him, his hands tightening their grip on Stephen's hips. "We did. And even though I totally don't need protection, it's beyond hot imagining you defending me from Norse Gods."

"They both had it coming." Stephen huffed, tightening his grip on the other man and pulling him closer.

"I can't imagine Thor took it well."

"Naturally he threatened me. But I gave him a vision... which probably wasn't the best course of action but... it was satisfying."

"A vision?"

"A visual recording of everything he missed here. I told him to check with Heimdall if he needed confirmation."

"So he's all caught up on... on everything?"

"Yes." Stephen nodded with a sigh. "He is or... was a member of your team. I doubt Rogers has told
any of his allies what really happened in Siberia and the last thing you need is another Avenger questioning your loyalties when or if they return."

"You're very... protective Stephen." Tony whispered feeling the Sorcerer tense against him and tightened his arms around him. "I like it."

"You're not mad?"

Tony shook his head. "I'd rather never talk about Siberia again with anyone and Thor can be unnaturally thick sometimes. I doubt anything but seeing it with his own eyes would get through to him."

"I'm glad I was able to do that for you."

"Me too." Tony smiled, pressing a soft kiss to Stephen's lips. "So, now that part of your day is dealt with, what else happened?"

"Do you mind if we sit for this?"

"Nope." Tony grinned, moving to the couch and pulling Stephen down with him so that the Sorcerer was snuggled at his side.

"There's no easy way to say this, but I had a long talk with Wong. I was debating using the Time Stone to view the future but... well, essentially it would be an exercise in futility. Too many factors are involved that I have no way to account for, which makes it a pointless endeavour."

"I can definitely see why that would be tempting. But I get it. I work with numbers and probabilities all the time. I can't imagine how impossible it would be to determine what you need to look at or what you might be missing if you did look ahead." Tony shook his head. "Makes my head spin just thinking about it."

"I wanted to help." Stephen huffed, his gaze fixed on the window and the dark night beyond. "I can't even reassure you that the path we're on is a good one."

"I don't need to see the future to know it's better than it was." Tony said, putting a finger to Stephen's chin and gently turning him to face him. "You make it better Stephen. Not your magic or your green stone. Just you. A few months ago I thought I'd lost everything, but you've given me more than I ever thought to hope for."

"You're entirely too ridiculous for words." Stephen whispered, resting his head on Tony's shoulder.

"And... you already did something amazing for me. You confronted the king kitty cat, saved me from Wanda's meddling and gave a couple demi-gods shit for assaulting me. You don't need to do anything more to impress me Stephen."

"God." Stephen huffed, running a hand over his face. "Hearing you say it like that makes me sound like a chauvinistic white knight."

"I already know you know I don't need rescuing but the fact that you care so much..." Tony broke off, unsure how to continue. "It's just... really nice."

"I'll try not to do it again." Stephen replied, giving Tony a tentative smile. "I don't want you thinking I don't trust your abilities."

"Hey, if you're looking to be all protective of me I'm not gonna complain. It's actually kinda nice
for a change to have someone defend me. You know?"

"I think I'm beginning to." Stephen hummed thoughtfully. "Staying with me that night after Paris comes to mind."

"That's different. You did something really dumb and I just wanted to make sure you actually rested after."

"I know why Tony." Stephen huffed. "I'm trying to say it was nice, regardless of your reasons."

"Oh. Well, in that case, I'm glad you approve."

"Doctor Strange?" FRIDAY called.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Wong is trying to reach you. Shall I put him through?"

"Tell him I'll call him back in five minutes."

"Trouble in Hogwarts?"

"Don't call it that." Stephen scowled. "But yes, maybe. If Wong is calling it's probably about Mordo again."

"Still?"

"We found another victim. It seems he's moved on from merely taking an individual's magic... the one before this last one died."

"This is serious." Tony hummed, narrowing his eyes. "More serious than you thought it would be."

"Yes." Stephen nodded, running the fabric of his cloak through his fingers in a calming gesture. "I may have to join the other Master's in tracking him down once we have a better lead on where he might be hiding."

Tony stilled at his side, Stephen tensing in response. "You mean you might be gone a while."

"Yes."

"I know how important your work is Stephen and this Mordo guy sounds dangerous. If you have to go away for a while, I'm not going to stop you from doing your job."

"Thank you." Stephen nodded, relaxing against him. "I just don't like having to leave at all. And I don't know how long I'll be gone. It could be weeks." Stephen shrugged. "I have no way of knowing how long it will take to catch Mordo once we know how to track him."

"Will you be going alone?" Tony asked, his voice careful.

Stephen shook his head. "No. Another Master will accompany me. Mordo has proven to be too dangerous for any one sorcerer to take on by themselves."

Tony hummed thoughtfully. "You sound sad. Were the two of you friends?"

"We were. He's the one who convinced the Ancient One to give me a chance. He was my mentor for the training I did in Kamar-Taj."
"What happened?"

"He learned something about the Ancient One that he couldn't accept. We all did. Unfortunately, he couldn't live with what she'd done and left the order."

"That sounds familiar." Tony snorted. "Promise you'll be careful?"

"Of course." Stephen nodded, brushing his knuckles to Tony's cheek. "I'm sorry this is happening now."

"Not your fault Stephen." Tony said, pressing a feather light kiss to Stephen's hand before shifting to release him. "You didn't make him crazy or force him to kill anyone. He chose his path all on his own."

Stephen sighed and followed Tony as the billionaire got to his feet, his hand resting on Tony's arm. "Thank you. I think I needed to hear that and I promise I'll return as soon as I can."

Tony smiled, pulling Stephen into his arms and tilting his head up for a kiss which Stephen delivered with heat and need. "Happy to help Stephen. You'll keep in touch right?"

"As long as I'm able to yes, though I suspect Mordo may be escaping our search by travelling through other dimensions. If that's true, I may not be able to make contact until I return."

"What about Wong?"

Stephen frowned. "I know it's not ideal, but I honestly don't know. He may be able to track my progress but there are no guarantees when it comes to inter-dimensional travel. But I will return Tony. I can promise you that much."

"Well that's good enough for me." Tony said softly, knowing they were both aware that Stephen couldn't actually keep that promise if something went wrong. "I'll miss you."

"I know." Stephen smirked, cutting Tony's indignant huff off with a kiss. "I'll miss you too."

"Doctor? Mr. Wong is calling again."

"Tell him I'm on my way FRIDAY." Stephen said with a huff of breath as he conjured a portal. "Look after Tony for me while I'm gone."

"JARVIS and I will do our best Doctor Strange."

"You take care too Stephen." Tony murmured as Stephen pressed a kiss to his forehead.

"I will. I promise."

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A/N: For anyone looking for some complete IronStrange, check out my 3rd instalment to my one-shot collection. Found here: Spark of the Unexpected
"What the hell just happened?" Sam groaned from where he'd collapsed to the pavement. The sky above was dark and filled with stars and he couldn't remember where he was or what he'd been doing before everything had gone dark.

A groan nearby had him craning his neck to see the limp form of Steve Rogers lying on his side, one hand rubbing at his temples as though he were fighting a headache. A couple feet away, looking almost as disoriented as he felt is Natasha who's seated and looking around herself as though she too couldn't remember anything.

Struggling to sit up, he was hit with another wave of dizziness, his head feeling stuffed with cotton as pressure built and he flinched in anticipation of pain. When nothing happened, he blinked and looked around again, his concern mounting when his immediate surroundings became more recognizable.

"Where are we?" Sam demanded, a thread of fear entering his voice. The surroundings aren't familiar and the temperature here is a lot cooler than the climate he remembered last being in. But it was the nearby structures that were sending waves of anxiety coursing through his veins. He really, really needed answers. Now.

"Steve!" He growled, getting shakily to his feet and leaning his weight against the building they'd collapsed beside. "What the hell man! Where the fuck are we? What's going on?"

"I don't..." Steve began, getting clumsily to his feet though Sam notes a little bitterly that he doesn't sway enough to need the support of a building. Steve blinks and looks around before extending a hand to Natasha to help her up, which she accepts after a moment of hesitation.

"Well?" Sam prompts, feeling anger and growing irritation at the man before him. He can't parse out what he's feeling right now or why he has the overwhelming urge to punch Steve's confusion off his perfect face until it's bleeding and stunned into acknowledging him.

"Sam, calm down." Nat said, her eyes narrowed in warning as though she knows what thoughts are occupying his mind. "Give us a minute to think."

"No! I want to know what the hell is going on and why we're in the middle of an airport in the dark! What the hell are we doing here Steve?"

Steve blinked back at him, a crease forming between his brows as he took in their surroundings, his jaw set in a tight line. "I don't know. What were we doing before this? Nat? Do you know where we are?"

"Last I remember we were in Paris." Nat answered, though her voice sounded uncertain.

"Paris." Sam echoed, the answer setting off a faint throbbing in his temple. "Okay, I remember that. And..." He paused, anxiety shooting up his spine as the others tensed, their eyes wide with shock as they stared at each other.

"Where's Wanda?" Steve whispered.

At mention of the missing woman's name, a stabbing pain hit Sam just above his eyes and he collapsed to his knees, vaguely aware the others had fallen with him. Memories swirling with red
mist assaulted him as he clutched his head against the searing, unrelenting pain in his temple. His throat closed up and his chest felt tight as the pain in his head overwhelmed him, his heart speeding in fear and he just wanted it to stop.

Less than a minute later, but what felt like an eternity, Sam lay on his back gasping for air and willing his pulse to slow. After another minute he managed to sit up, memories and thoughts swirling in his mind as he stared at Steve with remembered horror. "I... remember. Wanda... she did this. And you... oh shit. You almost killed Stark. You lied, you both lied. Holy fuck Steve, you let that witch join the team even after all those things she did to you and your team and Ultron and..."

"I know where we are now." Nat said, interrupting Sam's outburst. "Pretty sure we're in Switzerland."

"What?" Steve exclaimed, turning wide eyes on the super spy. "Why?"

Nat got to her feet and nodded into the distance and the faintly illuminated craft they could see inside a lone hanger. "That's a Quinjet."

"The fuck?" Sam muttered, staring at the spot Nat is indicating. "Why? Why would we come here?"

"I think." Nat starts, pausing as though she can't get enough air in her lungs before pinning them both with a cold stare. "I think we need to take this elsewhere before someone sees us."

"Good idea." Steve nodded as though grateful for the delay. Looking around, he inclined his head in the direction of some nearby trees and by wordless agreement they set off across the wide expanse of grass and into the cover of darkness and secrecy the woods provide. They kept walking, all of them wanting to put distance between them and whoever might be watching from the airport. None of them mention what could've happened if they'd woken up on the Quinjet or worse, during a fight with authorities they never wanted to start.

They reach a clearing that just happens to have what looks like a utility shed hidden in the surrounding shadows and after Nat gives the all clear that it's not going to trigger an alarm somewhere, Steve shoulders the door open. Minutes later, they've dragged several empty crates to the centre of the small space and an uncomfortable silence fills the air between them.

Sam glared at his companions, his thoughts a tangle of betrayal and recrimination and a sick feeling in his gut at the growing unease that Steve Rogers is not the man he thought he was. He barely gives Natasha more than a cursory scowl. He doesn't like her much, not that he had much of an opinion of her before, but he has never respected anyone who would choose to betray an ally as quickly as she betrayed Stark. As far as he's concerned, once a turncoat, always a turncoat.

"I think..." Natasha says quietly, her voice not quite as sure as it was. "I think we should share what we all remember before we do anything else."

"Oh I remember plenty." Sam hissed, his glare cold and giving him a small sense of satisfaction as Steve flinched back. "I remember you lying and leaving Stark for dead. I remember you did all this for your precious Bucky and let a murdering witch join the team. A woman who is somehow nowhere to be found and yet we all know she's the reason we're here."

"We don't..." Steve stammered. "We don't know that for sure."

"What other freaking reason is there?!" Sam demanded, shooting to his feet in frustration. "We were all in Paris and then Wanda was just... gone. And for some ridiculous reason, you two were
convinced that Stark was behind it. That he'd gotten to her, taken her somewhere. Why the hell would he do that and not take the rest of us? If he had taken her, there's no way in hell he wouldn't have known we were close by. No way he wouldn't have got to us too."

"But Wanda..." Steve hesitated.

"If you say she's a child one more time Steve, I swear to god I will punch you in your perfect teeth."

"I... I wasn't." Steve stammered, his hesitation letting Sam know that was exactly what the super soldier had been about to say. "I was only going to ask why. Why would she do this? Why would she do any of this?"

"Why?" Sam asked, incredulous. "Maybe because of that weird ass episode she had back in Wakanda? I told you there was something wrong with her. We should have never left without telling T'Challa what happened."

"Wait." Nat said, interrupting him and staring at Steve. "What are you talking about Sam? What happened with Wanda?"

"She had some weird magical thing happen that left her in like a semi coma thing where she yelled a lot and clutched at her head for almost two days. It was like she was trapped in some nightmare thing and then she just woke up like nothing had happened."

"Did she say anything?"

Sam shrugged. "Nothing conclusive. Just some vague comment about red and gold colours, which Steve said sounded like Iron Man."

"Iron Man." Nat echoed, narrowing her eyes at Steve. "And you kept that from T'Challa? You allowed her to believe that Tony was somehow responsible for whatever caused that... episode?"

Steve ducked his head at Nat's cold glare. "I didn't really see the harm in it. It's not like Tony could actually be responsible for something like that."

"You honestly believe she wouldn't blame Tony? Come on Steve. I know you think you're responsible for her but I never took you to be so willfully blind. Wanda hates Tony. Always has, always will." Nat said coldly.

"It's not like that."

"Bullshit! I've had enough of that crap coming out of your mouth. Wanda is a grown woman who volunteered for Hydra's experiments, denying that just makes you culpable in everything she's done since." Nat snapped.

"Wait." Sam interrupted, staring at Nat in shock. "What? What do you mean she volunteered? I thought she was a victim of those experiments."

"She was never a victim of Hydra Sam. She and her brother both volunteered and Hydra capitalised on their hatred of Stark to further their cause."

"Holy shit." Sam murmured, his glare ice cold as he stared at Steve as though seeing a stranger. "Oh my god. I get it now. It all makes sense even if it is sick and self-serving."

"She was used Sam! Hydra took advantage of her while she was just a kid! And she helped us fight Ultron!" Steve protested.
"You really don't get it do you Steve?" Sam growled. "You only stood up for her because of Bucky."

"What?! No! No, she needed us... She didn't..."

"Enough!" Sam roared, getting to his feet. "You chose her side, convinced everyone she was harmless just so you could do the same thing when you found Bucky. It was never about anything else was it? It wasn't about Stark or the government or Wanda, it was always about Bucky. You destroyed the Avengers and everything we stood for, for one fucking guy! Your precious Bucky is all you've ever cared about."

A silence descended in the room as Sam broke off, turning away from Steve as though he could no longer stand the sight of the man. Nat remained rooted to her seat, her face reflecting none of the things she felt in that moment. The realization that Steve was not the man she'd thought he was and it had cost her everything she'd hoped to gain since escaping the Red Room.

"Look, I know we're all upset," Nat began, flinching at Sam's murderous look when he turned to face her. "But we have bigger problems right now. Like what we're doing here and why."

"Considering we're at an airport in Switzerland with a Quinjet parked here I think it's pretty obvious we were going to steal it." Sam grated, still glaring at Steve.

Nat nodded and this time didn't waver in the weight of Sam's stare. "Okay. But do we know why we were going to steal it? Where we were planning to go?"

"New York." Steve muttered, still staring at his hands in his lap. "We were going to go to New York."

"Why?" Sam demanded.

"Because we all thought Tony took Wanda. We were going to get her back."

"That is seriously messed up." Sam growled. "Why the hell would we think that? And how exactly did we expect to get that far without getting caught?"

"I think it's pretty obvious." Nat said, meeting the two men's eyes without flinching. "We just don't want to say it, so I will. Wanda did this to us. She planted all of that in our heads."

"But why? For what purpose?" Steve demanded.

"Considering the fact that we just happened to find a Quinjet in Europe, the only craft capable of cloaking itself, it's pretty obvious we would have made it to New York with no one the wiser." Nat drawled, glaring at Steve as she talked.

"And then what?" Steve demanded, determined to remain oblivious to the implications.

"You know what Steve! We would've tracked Tony down and demanded he release her by any means necessary. And I know you know that. The spell Wanda put on us might be broken now, but I can still feel that irrational surety that Stark took her."

"So what do we do now?" Sam growled, still glaring daggers at Steve.

"I think we should go back to the safe house in Paris. We need to know if this spell is really gone and I need to contact Fury." Nat replied.
"I don't think going back is a good idea Nat." Sam argued. "We have no way of knowing that Wanda isn't waiting for us or if the spell she used is still lingering there, just waiting for us to come back and trigger it again."

"Well, we can't stay here." Nat replied, narrowing her eyes at him, irritated that she hadn't thought of that herself.

"Quiet!" Steve hissed, startling them both when his eyes filled with alarm. "Someone's outside."
Tony was reclined on his sofa, idly scrolling through his StarkPad and reviewing his plans for the new nano housing while Alien played on the flat screen in the background. JARVIS had chosen it as a tease to his creator and despite the movie's theme, Tony allowed it out of gratitude for having JARVIS back.

"Your new Iron Man suit is quite remarkable sir." JARVIS said, interrupting Tony's musing. "Are you certain you wish to proceed with another invasive surgery? I have reviewed the plans and see no fault in the design, but I do recall the difficulties you had prior to it's removal."

"I know it's not ideal." Tony sighed. "But I can't give up being Iron Man, at least not yet and a reconstructed ribcage isn't enough. I have to do something J. This is the rock and a hard place kinda thing."

"I understand sir. I only regret I wasn't here for you these past years. I am also finding it difficult to let what happened between you and your former teammates go."

"You don't have to let it go J. I haven't. I just don't have the energy to care about them anymore. It's wasted effort for no reward. They'll never apologize the way they should and I'll never forget what they did."

"What about Agent Barton?"

"What about him?"

"He seemed regretful of his actions. Miss FRIDAY shared the interactions you had with him in Geneva, as well as what transpired on the Raft. I am curious about your feelings regarding the dynamic between you."

"He apologised. But he still sided with Steve, helped Wanda leave the Compound and... he was cruel on the Raft. What he said is unforgivable. I know he was lashing out at me and that it was his way of dealing with his own guilt, but... I'll never forget what he did, what he said. I'll never trust him again if that's what you're asking."

"And the rest? Wilson, Romanoff... Rogers?"

"Nat made her choice, she's welcome to it. I don't know Wilson well enough to say. Even if he apologizes, we'll probably never be friends. He's too quick to blindly trust Rogers for me to ever want him around."

"And what of Rogers and Ms. Maximoff?"

"I think Stephen will take care of Wanda for me. Whether I like it or not, she's his responsibility as Sorcerer Supreme. As for Rogers... I don't know. He should be held accountable for what he did, they all should. But what that might look like... I don't know and I don't think it's for me to decide. I could get payback on my own, but if I do that then I'm no better than Rogers himself."

"I understand sir. Thank you for sharing that with me, it helps with my perspective on matters when seen through your eyes."

"I... well, you're welcome J. I never really thought about it like that before."
"Of course sir." JARVIS replied. "Pardon me, but there is a Miss Jones here to see you. I believe it is someone I have yet to be introduced."

"Right. Let her in J."

"Stark." Jess nodded as she took a seat across from him on the loveseat.

"Jones. What brings you here?"

"Just checking in." She shrugged. "You still have some of that whisky lying around?"

"JARVIS?" Tony said, watching Jones with a faint smile.

"There are currently eight unopened bottles of Laphroaig Lore Single Malt on the premises. Shall I have one brought here?"

Jessica's eyes widened in shock at the sound of the sophisticated male voice that answered. "Who the hell is that?"

"That's Just A Rather Very Intelligent System, or JARVIS for short. He's my first sophisticated learning AI and he'll be taking over for FRIDAY here and at the compound. J, say hello to Jessica Jones."

"Good afternoon Ms. Jones. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. And may I say I am... delighted by your no nonsense approach to dealing with the rogues and more specifically Mr. Rogers when you first met him at Stark Tower."

"He had it coming." Jessica huffed. "But thanks."

"Indeed. Sir? Do you want the whisky now?"

Tony arched a brow at Jess who nodded silently in answer to his unspoken question. "Sure thing J. Is U doing anything? He could bring it."

"I shall pass the message on. He will be delighted of course."

Tony laughed, enjoying the easy banter he was sharing with JARVIS while being equally entertained by Jessica's look of annoyance.

"You're creeping me out Statk." She finally huffed, breaking her silence. "It's unnerving seeing you all... giddy."

"I have things to be giddy about Jones." Tony retorted with a smile. "The annoyance on your face for once isn't due to me doing something dumb and I have JARVIS back and nothing can dampen that feeling, and... I had a great first date and two more encounters with the same man without doing anything stupid to strain our friendship. So yeah, I'm giddy."

"Well it's freaky. But since you have the best taste in whisky around, I'll do my best to ignore it."

"Right." Tony smiled as U wheeled across the room. "So, anything I can help you with?"

Jessica frowned, avoiding Tony's eyes as she took the proffered bottle from U, patting the robot claw awkwardly in thanks. She took a lengthy pull of the smooth beverage, relishing the burn of warmth down her throat before meeting Tony's eyes. "I need to ask you something."

Tony frowned, sensing this was not a business related question. "Okay. From your tone I take it it's
not something you actually want to be asking."

She shrugged, downing another swallow of whisky. "It's not. And for the record, if it wasn't
important, I wouldn't ask."

"Right. Maybe start at the beginning?"

"That'll take too long." Jessica huffed. "Look, were you and Rogers ever friends?"

Tony spit out the coffee he'd just swallowed and spent the next several minutes coughing, trying to
get his breathing under control. "Christ Jones, maybe ease into it a little next time."

"You know I don't do subtle." She drawled, looking at him in expectation. "Well?"

"Ugh. I do not want to talk about... *him*, but whatever. We were colleagues, teammates. I thought
that meant we were becoming friends or were friends, but I'm not the best judge of that kind of
thing."

"Fine. But you were close for a while, right?"


"Right, so..." Jessica took a long swallow of whisky, swiping the wet from her lips before
continuing. "He crossed the line and you tried to talk to him, tried to reason with him and when that
didn't work, that whole Germany fiasco happened."

"Yeah." Tony hesitated, unsure where she was going.

"How do you know you're doing the right thing? I mean, he was your friend. You fought together,
had each other's back. How do you rectify that with all the harm he's done?"

Tony pursed his lips and took another swallow of coffee. "I didn't at first. I lived my entire
childhood listening to my father wax poetic about how virtuous and upstanding Captain America
was and that I'd never reach his level of greatness. That business in Lagos and Washington... when
I heard it was Steve I didn't believe it until I saw the footage. I thought talking to him in Germany
after they caught Barnes would get through to him, but it didn't. Even at the airport I didn't believe
it... and then he tried to hurt Peter and none of them held back and I realized I'd never really known
him at all. That I'd fallen for the hype just like everyone else and couldn't see it until it was
standing over me putting a vibranium shield in my chest."

"Do you think he just snapped one day when he found out Barnes was alive? Or do you think that
part of him was always there, just... hiding under all the glitz and glamour?"

Tony hummed under his breath, rolling his mug in his hands before meeting her gaze. "I think it
was always there and I think no one noticed or they chose not to because of who he is. I mean, it's
Captain America, he'd never willingly put civilians in harm's way."

"Except he did, and then some." Jones mused.

"I think I've been patient enough Jones. Tell me what this is about."

Jessica shot to her feet, pacing the floor and refusing to make eye contact. "It's... Trish."

"Your sister?"

"Yeah... she's done some things, bad things. People have been hurt... killed actually and I..." Jessica
paused, unwilling to finish her train of thought.

"And you need to make a choice." Tony finished, watching her without judgment.

Jessica came to a halt and nodded, meeting his eyes. "I don't think.... I... dammit! She's not going to stop and if I don't do anything..."

"More people will be hurt." Tony sighed, getting to his feet. "Shit Jessica. I'm sorry."

"Not your fault Stark... Tony." Jones huffed with a shake of her head. "I just... I can't accept that I can't reach her. She's not listening and she thinks this is the way to be a hero. There's no way to make this right again is there?"

"Do you want to? Will you ever look at her the same again after what you say she's done?"

Jessica bowed her head, hiding her eyes from him. "No. No I can't. I hate it, but she killed people and... there's no remorse there. I guess I just wanted to know if it's the same for you... with what Rogers did."

"Yeah." Tony replied, his shoulders slumping. "We're not related and we were never that close to begin with, but yeah, I'll never look at Steve the same way again. I'll never trust him again."

"Right." Jessica nodded, chugging back the last of the whisky. "Guess I've got a bad guy to catch."

"You going to be okay?" Tony asked as she moved to the door. "Need any help?"

"Thanks but no. This is something I need to do alone."

"Got it." Tony nodded. "But if you need anything..."

"I'll call you." Jessica said as she stepped outside. "Thanks Tony."

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Twenty minutes later, the phone rang drawing Tony's attention from the window where he'd been staring at the sky since Jessica had left.

"Jones?"

"Yeah. I got distracted. There was something else I wanted to talk to you about."

"I'm listening and you're on speaker phone."

"So you know the rogues were detected crossing into Switzerland and that the Widow is with them and Wanda isn't?"

"I knew about Nat and that Wanda was last in Paris, but Switzerland? Why?"

"Dunno. But there was an airfield with a Quinjet parked there not long ago."

"The only Quinjet still missing is the one Rogers took to Wakanda. T'Challa might be using it if it's there, but I don't know why he would."

"Odd." Jones mused. "How do you know where Wanda is... or was? And why would they separate?"
"Damn good question." Tony sighed. "Wanda attacked Stephen in Paris." Tony said, waving off Jessica's outburst. "He's fine, but she got away. Stephen thinks the spell he sent back to her has made her more unstable than before."

"And?" Jess demanded.

"And what? She wants what she's always wanted, revenge on me for the death of her parents."

Jones scoffed through the phone, her tone less tense since leaving the Compound. "Yeah, I've heard the story. But only a moron would think that bomb was yours. She'd be dead if it had been made by Stark Industries. Even I know that and I don't even pay attention to that shit."

"Sir?" JARVIS called.

"Yeah J?"

"I have a question."

"Okay."

"Mr. Vision and Ms. Maximoff had a history of what I observed to be a... tentative friendship while they maintained quarters here. Yet she attacked him without reservation or hesitation when Agent Barton arrived at the Compound."

"Yeah she did buddy, but that's not a question."

"Why did he not... confront her when they met again in Germany? Surely he would have had enough time to understand that her behaviour was excessive and inappropriate."

"He's got a point Stark." Jess agreed, the sounds of traffic echoing in the background. "Isn't he like triple the intelligence and computing power of your friend JARVIS? It shouldn't have taken more than a day to review appropriate behaviours within personal interactions."

"You're right." Tony replied. "Well, you're both right. That's disturbingly odd and now I'm a little annoyed it didn't occur to me till now."

"You have been exceptionally busy sir." JARVIS reminded him. "You've also been injured and under a large amount of stress, even more than usuall."

"I appreciate that buddy but now that it's come to my attention, I think I need to see Vision. You know where he is J?"

"According to my records, Mr. Vision left the Compound six hours ago and he has turned off his transponder."

"He turned it off?" Tony exclaimed. "Did he leave a message or indicate where he was going or when he might be back?"

"He did not, though I have reviewed surveillance footage of the past several days and it appears he may have been preoccupied with something. There are at least fifteen separate incidents where he appears, for lack of a better description, to be listening to... something."

Tony narrowed his eyes. "Bring up the footage J."

"Yes sir."
Half an hour later, Tony had poured himself two fingers of the whiskey Jess had been drinking to calm his frayed nerves. He wasn't happy about it, but what they'd seen in the videos had been very upsetting.

"Well this is an all new level of deep shit." Jones drawled through the phone. "Did you see the red?"

"Of course I did." Tony snapped, his nerves fraying at the edges at what it might mean. "And before you say it, yeah I know."

"Fine." Jess huffed. "Any idea how she's doing it?"

Tony sighed and set aside his now empty glass, his mouth twitching in amusement as JARVIS turned on the coffee machine. "If I had to make a very educated guess, I'd say it was their shared connection to the Mind Stone."

"Well that's just perfect. What the hell is she trying to do? We are talking about the witch right?"

"Unfortunately. And... it probably has to do with me."

"You think she'd be able to... I dunno, influence Vision to betray you or something?"

"I don't know Jones!" Tony snapped. "I barely understood the Mind Stone when I was near it. I have no idea what it's capable of if Wanda tries to mess with Vision's Stone. Freaking magic..."

"Sir? Doctor Strange is here."


"I promise." Jess sighed. "I'll call you."
Checks and Balances

Stephen hesitated where the hall met the living room, his face impassive as he took in the scene before him. His brow furrowed in concern when he noticed the whisky and the empty glass, taking in Tony's tense body language and closed expression.

"I hope I'm not interrupting on anything." He said, taking a step into the room.

"No. I had a visitor but she left."

"Okay." Stephen replied, settling on the couch as Tony put the kettle on. "Doesn't seem like it was a good visit."

"It wasn't really but she's handling it. Plus we found out that Vision is... missing. Tea?"

Stephen nodded, his eyes narrowing at Tony's calm. "You think Wanda might be involved."

Tony shrugged. "I dunno. It's possible, but then again he's never felt the need to tell me his plans."

"But isn't the transponder part of his agreement with the Accords?"

"Yeah. And?"

"Aren't you worried?"

Tony frowned as he set Stephen's tea on the coffee table and took a seat beside him. "Even if I am there's nothing I can do about it. Vision is his own person. I don't own him, I don't control him. If he wants to break the terms of his agreement with the Accords I can't stop him."

Stephen huffed and sipped his tea. "I understand that Tony, but I want to know if you have any idea why he would do this."

Groaning, Tony leaned his back into the couch, his eyes fixed on the ceiling. "I know what you're thinking. You think Wanda is behind this. And yeah, it's possible... I mean, I don't know what Viz thinks about her now. He said he came back alone because he couldn't convince her that I needed their support. But that doesn't necessarily mean he didn't change his mind about her."

Setting his tea aside, Stephen covered Tony's hand with his own. "I'm sorry. I'm just worried this is my fault. The spell I sent back to Wanda and after what happened in Paris... it's too much of a coincidence."

"You have nothing to apologize for Stephen." Tony said, linking their hands loosely, careful of Stephen's fingers. "You had no idea any of this would happen."

Stephen nodded, dropping his gaze to his lap. "It's just hard to accept there's so much I still don't understand about magic."

Tony smirked. "Well we can't all be genius' like me."

A sigh escaped the Sorcerer, but he returned Tony's smile. "True."

"I'm surprised to see you here." Tony said, changing the subject as Stephen leaned closer. "I thought you were off to catch a wizard."
"No butchering of famous movie lines please." Stephen huffed though his lips twitched, suppressing an amused smile. "But no, we still don't have a definitive starting point. But once we do..."

"Hey." Tony said, putting a hand to Stephen's cheek, gently guiding him to meet his eyes. "It's okay. I get it. You gotta stop the bad guy and you're the best person who can do that."

"How can you have such confidence in me?" Stephen demanded. "We haven't known each other that long and we've only had one date."

"I've known you long enough to know that you're a good man Stephen. You saved my life... you helped me through a panic attack and you looked past my arrogance and flaws and keep coming back for more. We're friends aren't we?"

"More than that I hope."

Tony smiled and leaned into the kiss Stephen pressed to his lips. "Definitely, so stop worrying. I'll be fine and you can make it up to me when you get back."

"I'm sorry. I'm not sure why I'm like this."

"We all have our moments Steph. It'll pass." Tony said, running a hand over Stephen's back in comfort.

"Sir? I hate to interrupt, but Ms. Potts is on her way to the Compound and would like a moment to speak to you in private. She wants to know if she can meet you here."

Stephen leaned away as Tony frowned into the nearest camera. "Yeah sure JARVIS. What's her eta?"

"Ten minutes."

"I should go." Stephen said, getting to his feet. "I'll let you two talk and give you a call tomorrow?"

"Yeah. Thanks Stephen." Tony said as Stephen stepped into his arms and kissed him again with a smile.

"Anytime."

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"Tony." Pepper said as she crossed the room and drew him into a hug. "Thank you for seeing me."

Tony patted her on the back and joined her on the couch. "Why wouldn't I see you?"

Pepper folded her hands in her lap, a troubled look in her eyes as she shifted in place. "Things didn't exactly go well between us after I ended things and I've had a lot of time to think since then and then everything that happened after... Tony, I want to apologize." She said, meeting his shocked gaze.

"After everything I said about you and about Iron Man and expecting you to change that and... I'm sorry. I was so worried and so focused on how your job affected me I didn't think about how what I was doing was affecting you. I should never have asked you to stop being Iron Man. You shouldn't have to change or stop being yourself for anyone and I was wrong to ask you and wrong to be angry when you couldn't do it. Can you forgive me?"
"I..." Tony stammered, blinking away the sudden rush of emotion that flooded his chest. "Yeah, of course Pep. But it's not all on you. I did some pretty crappy things over the years and you were always there for me."

"No. Not always Tony and not always when you needed me the most. You've had enough things put on your shoulders and I won't let you shoulder this one any longer."

"Alright, alright." Tony huffed. "I accept your apology."

"Thank you." Pepper smiled. "So. Tell me about this Doctor Strange. FRIDAY said you went on a date. How'd it go?"

"Baby girl..." Tony groaned.

"Sorry boss, but boss lady caught me off guard. You've been smiling so much recently that I couldn't help myself."

"It's fine Fri." Tony sighed. Meeting Pepper's smile with one of his own. "Stephen... Stephen is great Pepper and a surprise."

"A good surprise?"

"Yeah. Speaking of surprises..." Tony drawled, winking into a camera.

"Ms. Potts. It is a great pleasure to see you again."

"JARVIS?" Pepper gasped, her eyes welling with tears, noting Tony's pleased grin. "Oh my god. Is that really you?"

"It is. Sir found me and restored me to myself. I am very pleased to be back."

"We've all missed you."

"As I have missed you... Sir? Sir, are you all right?"

Pepper's head whipped around to look, a gasp escaping her to see a Tony clawing at his chest, his head tilted forward as his breath came in harsh pants. "Tony?"

"Pepper..." Tony wheezed, his strength giving out as he fell to the floor, his face rigid with pain. "Stephen...."

A burst of sparks at Pepper's side had her crying out in surprise as a tall man in a long red cloak stepped through. Ignoring her, he knelt at Tony's side, moving swiftly to cradle him in his arms, the Cloak moving to support Tony's body.

"Doctor, I have contacted Metro General, notified Doctor Palmer and contacted Doctor's Cho and Wu. Tony's team will meet you there in twenty minutes."

"Thank you JARVIS." Stephen said, turning to Pepper as he conjured a portal to the hospital, Tony's limo form cradled in his arms. "Are you coming Ms. Potts?"

Clapping her jaw shut, Pepper jumped to her feet and followed the cloaked man, stepping into a white, pristine hallway where a blonde female doctor approached them with concern in her eyes. "This way." She said.

Once Tony had been laid out and monitors had been attached to him and oxygen started, Stephen
nodded to Christine and stepped into the hallway back to Pepper. "Ms. Potts. I am Doctor Stephen Strange. Can you tell me what happened before JARVIS called me?"

"JARVIS?" Pepper stammered. "Um... nothing happened. Tony and I were talking and then I was talking with JARVIS and I turned and Tony was clawing at his chest and his breathing was... was bad and then he just... fell to the floor. What's going on? What happened?"

"I'm sorry, but I don't know. Has he mentioned what Doctor Wu told him?"

Pepper shook her head. "No, Colonel Rhodes told me. Is that what this is? Tony's heart?"

"I can't be certain because it's not my area of expertise, but Tony has gone out in the suit several times after Dr. Wu cautioned him against it. It's likely he'll have to do the surgery today. Do you know if you're still his medical proxy?"

"I... I don't know. Tony and I... we haven't talked much lately."

"That's fine." Stephen nodded struggling to suppress his worry for Tony to not upset the woman before him. "I'll talk to Christine and see what his records say. Are you all right to wait here?"

Pepper nodded, her jaw set and sank into a chair in the hall across from Tony's room. "I'll be fine."

***

Stephen clamped down on the panic that had settled in the base of his spine as he headed to the nurse's station where he knew he'd find Christine. His face remained impassive as he neared the desk, his inner turmoil betrayed only by the faint tremor in his hands.

Few noticed his approach as he'd magically changed in Tony's room, replacing his robe with a dark shirt and navy blue sweater over well worn denim. The last thing he needed now was for any of his colleagues to see him in his sorcerer robes and prevent him from being at Tony's side.

Christine looked up as he neared, her face impassive, though her eyes were filled with concern as she lowered the chart she'd been reading. "Stephen." She greeted, her voice dropping to avoid being overheard by the staff nearby. "Can you tell me what happened?"

"I'm not sure." He said, his mouth turned down in frustration. "He was fine mere minutes before I left him at the Compound. Ms. Potts said they were talking and then he collapsed."

Christine nodded, her face thoughtful as she glanced back down at the chart in her hands. "It's not looking like a heart attack at this time, though his pulse was elevated and his breathing and O2 saturation aren't nominal. I've been told he has specialists on their way?"

"I've not sure." He said, his mouth turned down in frustration. "He was fine mere minutes before I left him at the Compound. Ms. Potts said they were talking and then he collapsed."

Christine nodded, her face thoughtful as she glanced back down at the chart in her hands. "It's not looking like a heart attack at this time, though his pulse was elevated and his breathing and O2 saturation aren't nominal. I've been told he has specialists on their way?"

Stephen nodded though the comment surprised him. It must have been JARVIS who'd handled that. "Someone called you?"

"I spoke with a man with a heavy English accent before you got here." She replied, watching him with interest.

"I've spoken with him."

"He also informed me that you are now listed as one of Stark's proxies."

"What?!"

"You didn't know?"
"It's never come up."

"Well since we had to induce a mild coma to stabilize him, you'll be the one his doctors will need to hear from." Christine continued, casting her eyes to her watch. "They should be here in ten minutes. Jarvis mentioned they would need access to the O.R.. Do you know what that's about?"

"Tony has severe scar tissue on both his chest and lungs from a previous injury and at least two former surgeries to stabilize or repair his sternum. The surgery he'll have today is meant to reinforce his sternum from the injury he received a few months ago."

"Is that why his O2 saturation is so low?"

"Yes." Stephen said, hesitation. "I know it's asking a lot, but... will you be able to assist? I'd feel much better knowing you're in there with him."

"I assumed his specialists would be handling everything." Christine frowned.

"I don't know much about their areas of expertise, but I do know Doctor Cho has never worked in an operating theatre and you are the best qualified to handle emergency situations. Aside from all that, I trust you and if as you say, I'm Tony's proxy, I can use that to insist you're in the room."

Christine's eyes widened at Stephen's praise, the look of disbelief only diminished by the blush staining her cheeks. "If this new you is a result of being involved with Tony Stark, I highly approve." She said, a small smile playing on her lips. "And I'm happy for you Stephen."

"It's not all Tony's doing," Stephen retorted, looking away from her scrutiny. "I already thought those things about your talents, I just... never told you."

"Still... it's nice to hear." Christine insisted quietly, tucking the chart under her arm. "And if it's that important to you, I'll assist any way I can."

"Thank you." Stephen replied, giving her a faint smile. "One other thing... is Pepper Potts still listed as a proxy for Stark?"

Christine frowned and looked over the chart she held. "No. The only other name is Colonel James Rhodes."

Stephen nodded but didn't let his surprise show on his face. "I see."

"Doctor Palmer?"

Stephen and Christine both turned to look at the nurse who'd spoken. "Yes?"

"Doctors Cho and Wu have arrived. They say they will meet you in the consultation room in five minutes."

"Thank you Gene." Christine replied, turning her attention back to Stephen. "Can I assume that English gentleman arranged that?"

Stephen nodded with a faint smile. "I wouldn't bet against it."

"There's a story behind that isn't there?"

"You're not wrong, but I'll fill you in some other time. Thank you again Christine, for everything, but I shouldn't keep you."
"Alright." Christine nodded. "We should meet for coffee after things settle down."

"I'd like that."

"Good. I'll see you later Stephen."

"Of course."
The rogues tensed, sharing equal looks of fear and suspicion as Steve got to his feet and moved to the door. Several moments passed as they all strained to hear whatever Steve had heard approaching their hiding spot. The only sound was faint puffs of air as they breathed as quietly as possible to avoid being heard.

It was a testament to Natasha's training as a spy that she didn't flinch when a fist crashed against the door in a loud knock, startling the two former soldiers enough that Sam cursed out loud.

"Open up!" The angry voice of the former Director Fury growled from the other side. "I know your stupid asses are in there."

Scowling at Nat who returned his glare with a bored shrug, Steve wrenched the door open to meet the unimpressed glare of Nick Fury who stared back at him as though Steve were something nasty on the bottom of his shoe.

Frowning, Steve took a step back to allow the former SHIELD Director entrance and as he did, missed the moment Fury swung, his fist connecting with Steve's jaw with a loud crack, stunning him and causing him to stumble back in surprise. He was so unprepared for Fury's violence that he didn't see the gun until the muffled shot rang out and searing pain lit up in his left thigh.

A minute later he was on the floor, one hand pressed against his bleeding leg, the other still massaging his jaw.

Fury stepped further into the room, his icy glare never leaving Steve's face as he closed the door behind him. "That first hit was for being a stubborn, selfish asshole." He growled. "The bullet was for leaving a man behind."

"What the hell is wrong with you!" Steve swore, glaring up at the man who loomed over him while remaining out of reach.

"Shut up Rogers." Fury snarled, ignoring him to address his companions. "I assume this is the witch's doing?" He said, directing his comment at Natasha who nodded, her face grim, before turning his attention to Sam. "You chose poorly Wilson."

"You knew where we were this whole time didn't you." Sam said, eyeing Fury with irritation while ignoring Steve's grunts of pain from the floor.

"Of course I knew." Fury huffed, refraining from rolling his one eye in exasperation as he holstered his gun, waving a hand at Nat. "You don't honestly believe we let her go without putting a tracker on her do you?"

Natasha scowled back at him but otherwise said nothing. She'd known about Fury's use of trackers and hadn't bothered trying to find and remove it. Her own judgment was to blame in how she'd arrived at this point in time and she'd never fully trusted Wanda despite Steve's support of the woman. If Fury could track her then at the very least he'd find her body if the witch ever snapped and she was unable to protect herself. She wasn't sure how she felt about her boss' arrival here, but the attack on Steve was satisfying to watch even if it hadn't been her hands that carried it out.
From the look on Sam's face, it was clear he felt the same. Besides, they both knew the bullet hole would be healed before tomorrow. Unless they shot him every few hours, Steve wouldn't suffer near enough to what his actions had cost everyone around him. If she had still been a weapon of the Red Room, his payment for the deaths of innocents and the abandonment of a teammate would have taken months of prolonged torture to repay when measured by Red Room standards, a single shot from a handgun didn't even scratch the surface.

As much as she knew Steve deserved such a sentence, she was no longer that cold and unfeeling. But that didn't mean she didn't enjoy the look of pain and betrayal on the super soldier's face, or relish in the imaginary long-term pain she previously would have gladly carried out on her own.

"How the hell is your hand not broken?" Sam demanded, continuing to ignore Steve's muffled curses from the floor.

Fury smirked and raised his left hand which was encased in some type of metal glove that sported what Sam recognized as brass knuckles. "You really think I'm dumb enough to use my own hand? Give me a little credit Wilson. I know we haven't talked much, but never underestimate me."

Steve got to his feet then, the bleeding on his pants having slowed to less than a trickle as he moved away from Fury's looming presence. "You might he a super spy sir," Steve sneered. "But never do that again."

"You threatening me Rogers?"

"No. It's a promise. You try that again and I will defend myself. Sir."

"If I try it again Rogers, I guarantee you won't see it coming."

"Are you threatening me?"

"No Rogers. That was a promise. You think I won't call Ross? You think I can't contain you? You might have been an asset in the past Rogers but you've been off the rails for a while now. You think I haven't taken steps to ensure I can shut you down as the threat you've become? Think again. I can hold you until you're old and grey Rogers and there's not a damn thing you can do to stop me. And if that doesn't work, Ross and the rest of the world will just take you out once and for all. Don't think for one second that there is anyone on this planet that won't help me with that. And before you go thinking you were set up, think again. Your own actions have turned more than half the planet against you. You step one toe out of line again and you'll be buried so deep underground you'll forget what colour the sun is. That, or maybe we'll just stick you in the ice again like your best friend Bucky. So you can take your promises and your threats and shove them up your goddamn, star spangled ass!"

Silence stretched as the four former colleagues let the angry words and cold threat Fury had just released wash over and settle in the quiet space. It was as though time had stopped, none of them wanting to break the silence while all but Fury waited for someone to react. It was a surprise then when Natasha snorted a laugh, her lips quirking in amusement, though the rest of her remained as calm and cool as though she'd said and done nothing.

Fury turned to her, a question in his eyes which she returned with a bored shrug that he apparently took as acceptance before turning to face Sam. "Don't look at me man. I'm not saying anything against what you just said."

By then Steve had managed to put his back to the wall, his eyes flicking between the rest of them as though he didn't know what to react to first. Hurt, guilt and bewilderment were easy to read in
his features until he caught himself and a mask of indifference slid into place.

"So now that we've got that out of the way, can I ask what you're doing here sir?" Nat said, slipping back into her role of agent as easy as pulling on a well worn coat.

"I'm here to get your sorry asses out of the country. And then you're going to find the woman responsible for you being here in the first place."

"And neither of you have a problem with what Fury just threatened me with?" Steve demanded, interrupting them, his gaze flicking between Sam and Nat as if he didn't recognize them anymore.

"Honestly?" Sam grunted. "No, I don't. Not after what you did. I may have blindly trusted you too many times to count, and that's on me. But what you did with Stark and Wanda? Not a chance in hell."

"What did you expect Steve?" Nat growled, her eyes cold steel. "I trusted you to tell Stark. You told me you did. Not only didn't you tell him but you used it to justify what you did to him in Siberia. And you used Wanda to try and prove Barnes' innocence, regardless of what she did to us. But she was never innocent. Bucky was a victim, Wanda volunteered. So no, I don't have a problem with Fury's threats. I'm fact, if you step out of line again, cross another line again, I'll be the one helping to shut you down."

"Do either of you have a problem working with Rogers?" Fury demanded, his eyes flicking between Nat and Sam.

"For tracking down Wanda?" Sam clarified. "No. But anything beyond that, yeah, I do."

"No problem Nick." Nat said. "Besides, you're going to need someone to watch him."

"I'm not a danger to you or anyone else!" Steve shouted. "I would never betray the team like that."

"You already did that Rogers!" Fury replied coldly. "You lied, you manipulated and you omitted facts relevant to gaining your team's loyalty. You've proven beyond a doubt that you can't be trusted to lead anyone, especially when it involves your own personal agenda. From now on Agent Romanoff is in charge and that's not a suggestion it's an order. If you can't accept that, I'll turn you over to Ross right now."

Throughout Fury's speech and his remaining team members response, a cold pit of dread had taken residence in Steve's gut. By the time Nick had finished, he was stunned to silence and acceptance born of regret that this was his new reality and that they still didn't see how he was right. It didn't matter to any of them that he'd had to act the way he did to protect Bucky. None of them understood, but he knew that in time they would forgive him, especially when the Accords fell apart and then they'd finally see that he'd done the right thing all along. Just like when he'd saved all those soldiers from Hydra. The military had refused to listen to him until he returned a hero. This wasn't any different. He just had to play along until then. He could do this. For now.

"Fine." Steve replied, his expression blank. "I know I made a mistake and if this is the only way to make up for it, I accept your terms."

Nick frowned, sharing a look with Nat that Steve couldn't decipher. "Whatever Rogers. Don't screw up because there are no more chances after this."

"I understand."

"Good. Then let's get the hell out of here."
Stephen returned to the hall where Pepper still sat, staring at the door to Tony's room with an intensity that left the impression she expected him to walk out on his own at any minute. He stopped far enough away to observe, not wanting to interrupt or even understanding what prompted his hesitancy. After another minute of waiting, Pepper's eyes narrowed and her lips pursed. Her body straightening as she leaned back in her chair, her arms crossed over her chest, leaving her looking both annoyed and irritated as Tony's hospital door remained firmly shut.

He wasn't certain what had just occurred or what could possibly be going on behind the dark look now lingering in her eyes, but he was certain that if he knew he wouldn't like it. With a frustrated huff of breath of his own, he resumed his approach and settled into the seat at her side in silence.

After several more minutes Pepper exhaled a long breath and he tensed, feeling her eyes and her posture inclining slightly in his direction. "Did you talk to the doctor in charge?"

"I did." Stephen replied, tensing further. He didn't know why Tony had changed his medical proxy and wished the man was awake so he wouldn't now be in the uncomfortable position he now found himself in.

"I take it by your silence that I'm no longer one of Tony's proxies."

"No. You're not." Stephen confirmed. A small part of him felt as though he should apologize for that but it wasn't his fault so he said nothing.

"I'm not as surprised as I thought I'd be."

"Mmm."

"Do you know what's happening now?" She asked, changing the subject.

"Dr. Palmer is in consultation with Dr.'s Cho and Wu. I imagine they will be coming for Tony soon."

"I can't believe he has to put metal back in his chest." Pepper hissed, though Stephen knew her anger wasn't aimed at him. "It's not right he has to suffer this while the one at fault runs free."

"No. It's not right." Stephen agreed.

"I'm glad he has you."

It took a moment for Stephen to register what she'd just said and then he turned to look at her, his pale blue eyes fixed on her bright ones, ones that were accented by a tentative smile.

"I think you'll be good for him. Better than I was at least."

"I... what?" Stephen stammered, a faint flush rising in his cheeks.

"It's okay Stephen. Tony and I... It was good. For a while, but it was too volatile, too chaotic and too fraught with imbalance. It was bound to go up in flames at some point. Metaphorically of course, though flames were involved a few years ago and it didn't end then, even though it should have. I thought I wanted that lifestyle, but after seeing it first hand and living through it, I realized it's not what I want in life. At all. I want a home and maybe a family - I haven't decided that part yet. But most of all I just want a boring life in a house with a husband and maybe a dog or a cat and dinners out and the only crazy thing I ever need worry about is a car breaking down or a furnace
that needs to be replaced. And Tony will always be surrounded by chaos. Even if he stopped being Iron Man, his creations tend to invite it - like the suit and Dum-E and U and JARVIS and FRIDAY and all the crazy people who attack him. And I think you can handle that. In fact, I think the chaos that follows you is even more crazy than what follows him, which means you will never struggle to understand him like I did. Instead, you'll just accept it and move on."

"I'm not sure what to say to that, except... thank you?"

Pepper smiled then, ducking her head at something she clearly found amusing as she got to her feet. "You didn't have to say anything Stephen, but you're welcome. Now, I hate to leave while Tony is still here, but I know he's in the best hands with you and I have a job to do and I need to ensure that no one in the press has gotten wind of... any of this." She added, waving her hand to encompass the room and themselves. "I'll have FRIDAY keep me updated, but if you need anything or Tony asks for me, give me a call."

Stephen got to his feet then and took the hand she offered and shook it in return. "Of course I'll call. And thank you for... all of that. You didn't have to say it but I thank you all the same and I'm pleased we had a chance to talk. It goes without saying that I wish it could have been under better circumstances."

Pepper only laughed after giving his hand a reassuring squeeze. "That would only be possible if Tony wasn't Tony and if that was the case, I highly doubt either of us would be here. It was nice meeting you Stephen. Take care of him for me, won't you?"

"I will." When he nodded, "I promise."

"Thanks Stephen."

With that she was gone, disappearing down the hallway, leaving Stephen staring after her in quiet contemplation.

"Doctor Strange?" FRIDAY called, drawing him out of his musings.

"Yes?"

"There is a package waiting for you to bring to the O.R. at this level's nurse's station. It's the casing boss and I fabricated for this eventuality."

"Oh! Thank you FRIDAY. Do you know if Christine is still in the conference room?" Stephen asked, heading back down the hallway from which he'd come.

"I believe she is. She hasn't returned to the desk."

"Thank you FRIDAY. I'm on my way now."

Chapter End Notes

Currently struggling with massive writer's block and r.l. bs. Also, I started an
IronStrangeao3 blog on Tumblr if anyone wants to check it out. Will be back to regularly scheduled posting as soon as I manage to kick this mental block to the curb.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!